Crisis Makes the Identity, Identity Makes the Crisis

Disco was a child of circumstance. It had one parent in the postwar fifties' legacy of repressive norms and another in New York's agitated body of repressed creative energy, each of which was desperately trying to divorce the other. As wartime manufacturing subsided in the fifties, the scramble to deindustrialize New York City led to an exodus of workers. Without the frantic industrial clutter, a vacancy opened for artists, musicians—all manner of creative and disillusioned—who brought with them a generative energy and a genuine hope for societal change. There was a feeling that the "non-capitalist, democratic, utopian" forces might actually win, and the "computerized world might be a utopia, not a dystopia" (Lawrence & Gilbert, 2021). By the early seventies, these energies had combined to create the club spaces known as discotheques. Socially and sexually progressive, these spaces broke away from traditional gender roles and gave voice to New York's long-disenfranchised minorities. Yet our modern memory of disco reflects nothing of this progressive excitement. In fact, modern Americans have collectively turned up their noses at what they perceive as disco's shallowness, overindulgence, and artifice. It is not surprising that disco strayed from its origins; a child seldom becomes exactly what its parents hope for it to be. But the nature of that journey—*how* it becomes what it does—is surprising. In this paper, I uncover disco's identity transformations as it grew out of the uncertain conditions of its birth and became a named, recognized entity, and ultimately an inadequately remembered cultural phenomenon.

Like any newborn, early disco was malleable. It didn't know what it *was*, only what it was *not*: part of the mainstream. Thus, disco's first action in the world was protest; it resisted convention in every way it could, and this began on the dance floor. Disc jockeys tended toward not what records sold best but rather unfamiliar sounds "whose defining criteria was their functionality, not their profitability" (Lawrence, 2003, p. 155). There were no rules, except that the tracks needed to sustain a constant, almost-dizzying dance pace on the floor. As a result, early disco was not itself a genre but a synthesis of many genres, all of which had either been deemed too feminine or too sexual for the cultural moment. Songs

with heavy Afro-beat influences such as Jingo Lo Ba were especially popular on the floor. They held no pretense about their masculinity, modesty, or social appropriateness. At the same time, the increasingly diverse identities that populated the floor ousted the dominant dance arrangement of the time: heterosexual partner dancing. The influx of gay men dancing together in discotheques was a clear assault on social norms that, until the 60s, had made it illegal for two men to dance together (Lawrence & Gilbert, 2021b). Prior to disco, men of every sexual orientation were tethered to women: "if you wanted to go dancing you had to have a girl with you. Women were very much a part of the picture, whether you wanted them or not" (Lawrence, 2003, p. 189). It goes without saying that this also worked the opposite way. Women were tethered to men. But the progressive tides of disco made quick work of this, too. In the 1960s, popular and sexually provocative dances like the Twist could be done as single dances, no partner needed (Brewster & Broughton, 1999).

A key feature of the early 70s discotheque was a rare mix of racial, social, and economic backgrounds. In places like The Loft, one of New York's earliest disco scenes, the mix of identities present in the club was a fundamental part of how the space operated. The Sanctuary, another highly influential early discotheque, was "the first totally uninhibited gay discotheque in America" (Brewster & Broughton, 1999, p. 146). As Andrew Holleran once put it, "[The crowd] lived only to bathe in the music, and each other's desire, in a strange democracy whose only ticket of admission was physical beauty—and not even that sometimes" (1978, p. 40). The operative word here is democracy. Disco did not always know what it was or what to call itself, but through a largely unspoken democracy formed between DJs and clubbers, it eventually found some loose language to describe what it wanted to be: sexually free, barrier-breaking, sonically inventive, and at its core, pleasurable.

To anyone present in the disco scene at its inception, the discotheque experience was multifaceted. It was the site of a burgeoning revolt against—and liberation from—the oppressive economic and social conditions of the period. It is puzzling, then, that disco is remembered primarily for its simple, reckless hedonism. But one must remember that disco was conceived in resistance to the

mainstream—it was not *for* the masses, it was for *escaping* them. It should then be no surprise that disco, which intentionally operated under the radar, was misrepresented: the disco that met the public eye was the disco the public eye wanted to see. In 1977, the big-screen release of *Saturday Night Fever* set off disco's meteoric rise. Set around a Brooklyn disco, the movie stripped disco of anything that might've made it unpalatable for conservative middle Americans. The movie "deleted any trace of the downtown night network: out went Manhattan's ethnic gays, black funk, drugs, and free form dancing, and in came suburban straights, shrill white pop, alcohol, and the Hustle" (Lawrence, 2003, p. 307). What resulted was a saccharine distillation of disco, a feel-good story wrought with all the best-selling tropes sidelined by an ego-centric dance style not even slightly representative of actual club experiences.

But how does it go again? Art imitates life? No. Life imitates art.

Saturday Night Fever sent out the first "mass-market template for disco," and with that, "an impassioned audience left the cinemas, headed toward their local discotheque, and did their best to imitate Stephanie and Tony, blissfully unaware that their moves had been choreographed in fantasyland" (Lawrence, 2003, p. 307). The 'disco' that sprang to popularity following *Saturday Night Fever* was not truly disco, but a weak imitation that had adopted disco's name. Nevertheless, disco's newfound fame afforded it extraordinary money-making potential, and business owners scrambled to open their own 'discotheques.' By 1978, there were an estimated fifteen to twenty thousand discotheques operating in the United States (Lawrence, 2003, p. 315). Unsurprisingly, it was impossible for every one of these to devote itself to crafting the rich, democratic atmosphere of early discotheques. Thus, the discotheques birthed in this boom were numerous, but bland and formulaic. The same could be said for the music they played. *Saturday Night Live*'s film soundtrack went on to become one of the best selling albums of all time, selling over sixteen million copies. Its sugary, cohesive sound was a poor representative for the diverse genres that early disco used, but it was nonetheless replicated and mass-produced to the delight of movie fans. Whereas the original taste-making DJs had taken advantage of unregulated creative freedom to produce genuinely inventive tracks, new DJs suddenly adopted the previously-nonexistent Disco Bible,

a publication dedicated to evaluating records solely by rhythmic pace. These DJs mixed records "not for their lyrical or sonic compatibility but their beat-on-beat mixability—an all-but-irrelevant criterion according to earlier DJs" (Lawrence, 2003, p. 335). This new generation of DJs adopted increasingly arbitrary standards in a space that had once been intentionally unregulated. Disco emerged from this period with the confidence of a well-marketed consumer product.

This watered-down version of disco is what Americans have retained in popular memory. There is no misunderstanding about what this version of disco was; to call it shallow and disconnected would not be entirely incorrect. A problem only arose when the disco name still tried to bear the weight of the social movements it previously represented. With its commercialization, disco was in an awkward stage: it had become a powerful social force, but for several competing interests. It began as a loud, musically explorative expression of gay liberation, women's liberation, and sexual exploration. With its popular reimagination in *Saturday Night Fever*, it also began to operate as an "acceptable dating agency for straights" (Lawrence, 2003, p. 307). Disco had awoken as a protest to mainstream norms, but with the ever-widening umbrella of groups it claimed to serve, it faltered.

As disco reached the masses, the ever-present mass of quiet critics that had always existed became not-so-quiet. Appalled suburbanites denounced disco as "superficial" and "artificial," which, according to Lawrence, also happened to be derogatory euphemisms for gay. In 1979, popular talk radio host Steve Dahl led the Disco Sucks movement composed largely of "middle-class white suburban boys and families with their kids" in blowing up a twelve-foot pile of disco records chanting "disco sucks," For Lawrence, a question hung in the air: "Disco sucks...what?" (2003, p. 377). Just as collective action had emboldened disco to expand, embrace, and project its values outwardly, the growing distaste for the sexually-tinted proclivities of the now-dominant subculture became similarly vocal. Once the Saturday night fever had somewhat subsided, disco had to deal with the question of how to exist in an economic environment hostile to its principles. The song "YMCA" by the Village People, an upbeat anthem of generic hope, is an interesting case of this struggle. Although the group had found its initial success by

playing up macho-gay stereotypes, they were hard-pressed to admit this to a new demographic, an audience hostile to any signs of sexual liberation. To skirt this problem, "[the Village People] subtly sidelined the risky subject of sexuality as they moved into the spotlight;" in other words, they dodged the issue altogether. "I'll tell the gay press I'm gay," said Felipe Rose of Village People. "If the straight press asks, we tell them it's none of their business." Disco had gone from targeted expressions of support for particular marginalized communities to nondescript dance tracks that told its listeners to simply "pick yourself off the ground" (Village People, 2008). With money at stake, "disco had become artificial, stylized, disengaged and apolitical, emphasizing texture, sensuous surface, and style at the expense of content" (Lawrence, 2003, p. 333). In its late age, disco grew weary of the shiny ideals it had so self-righteously championed in its youth. It became, like many late in life, detached, cynical, and, as Lawrence writes, apolitical.

Disco had always been inherently political; it was born as a response to an undesirable political reality. What happened to the "non-capitalist, democratic, utopian" forces that would change the world? The easy answer would be to say that capitalism quashed them. But disco *did* change the world, in a sense. Perhaps the changes that occurred didn't live up to the radical upheavals its early participants envisioned, but little by little, disco helped edge in a new cultural paradigm. Just after the release of *Saturday Night Fever*, Truman Capote expressed admiration for Studio 54: "this is the nightclub of the future. It's very democratic. Boys with boys, girls with girls, girls with boys, blacks with whites, capitalists and Marxists, Chinese and everything else—all one big mix!" (Lawrence, 2003, p. 309). Still, it's fair to express disappointment. Some of the critical elements that had allowed disco to exist vanished together with our optimistic memories of disco's early promise.

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