



## The Hottest Year in Disco: 1978

By JOHN-MANUEL ANDRIOTE

Nineteen seventy-eight, the hottest year in disco, opened with Donna Summer's new two-disk, four-"act" concept album *Once Upon a Time* being hailed by *Rolling Stone* as perhaps "the *ne plus ultra* of disco albums." The "eroticized space music," said the magazine, was "another technological triumph for Munich-based producers Georgio Moroder and Pete Bellotte."

As for the "chameleon-voiced" songstress herself, *Rolling Stone* said Summer "emerges as both the Diana Ross and the Bette Midler of disco and as one of pop culture's all-time camp divas." Featuring Summer on its March 23, 1978 cover, the ten-year-old rock and roll magazine asked in the headline, "Is There Life After Disco?"

By then, the soundtrack of *Saturday Night Fever* had bumped Fleetwood Mac's *Rumours* from its thirty-three-week reign in the top slot as the nation's number-one album. "None of us expected it to be so big," said Maurice Gibb of the Bee Gees, who wrote seven of the album's songs and performed six of them.

Each day, from 175,000 to 200,000 *Saturday Night Fever* eight-tracks, cassettes, and LPs were being sold across the country, according to Al Coury, president of RSO Records. The Bee Gees were everywhere, suddenly the world's most famous disco artists.

Reviewing the *Saturday Night Fever* soundtrack in *Rolling Stone* in March 1978, Susin Shapiro said, "The Bee Gees have everything going for them: lyrics that don't insult, a band that can open up and utilize each and every electric and/or acoustic possibility without sounding overproduced, great harmonies, and superb dance music." She added that the single "'You Should Be Dancing' comes as close to disco perfection as anything I've yet heard save for Harold Melvin and the Blue Notes' 'Bad Luck' and Labelle's 'Lady Marmalade.'"

Within six months of its release, the *Saturday Night Fever* soundtrack had already surpassed any other album in the history of the recording industry. Its success illustrated perfectly what it meant to be in the right place at the right time. Disco was *it*. Barry Gibb of the Bee Gees said, "People don't want to hear about how bad times are. I think they are far more interested in dancing and enjoying themselves now. The important thing in life is you're supposed to have a ball."

### The rising disco tide

*Billboard* estimated that in 1978, thirty-six million Americans stepped out at one or another of the country's twenty thousand discos. Disco was everywhere, from disco proms to disco cruises to a

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Dubuque, Iowa, club offering a disco wedding service complete with a smoke machine and light effects. Even the federal government in 1978 managed to shake its own substantial bootie to the disco beat. The Buck Stops Here, a fitting name for a Washington disco that opened that year, was paid for with \$750,000 in federal funds.

With billions of dollars being generated, specialty publications, its own music charts, and savvy marketers trying to push disco into every American home, disco maven Albert Goldman noted, “the new beat for the feet is sending up all the familiar signals that betoken a new wave of mass culture.”

The cultural wave became a tsunami once radio and television got seriously involved in 1978. Like other trends in American popular culture in the age of the airwaves, the broadcast media provided literal channels through which disco was pumped into the mainstream. *Billboard* noted that 1978 “was the year disco became legitimate in the eyes of the media.”

With the surging popularity of disco music, radio finally responded. After years of avoiding disco music in any larger quantity than the few hits that crossed over to the pop charts, radio stations across the country embraced disco in late 1978 and early 1979 after one New York station struck gold with an all-disco format. WKTU-FM was a New York City “mellow rock” station on the verge of bankruptcy, with a paltry 1.3 percent share of the area’s listening audience. With a bit of surgery from “radio doctor” Kent Burkhardt in the summer of 1978, the station switched to an all-disco format.

WKTU-FM was quickly catapulted to the top of the Arbitron charts—becoming the most listened-to station in the U.S. Within weeks, almost every station in the country with flagging ratings was shifting to a disco format. Doug Hall, *Billboard*’s radio and TV programming editor at the time, noted, “Disco is rolling across radio, pushing aside other formats in an upheaval perhaps not seen since the Top 40 came on the scene more than twenty years ago.”

Network television was struck hard by disco fever during the summer and fall of 1978. NBC was the first to climb on the disco bandwagon with *Le Disco* hosted by none other than *American Bandstand*’s Dick Clark. The show featured the Spinners, Village People, and a segment taped at Studio 54. CBS’s *60 Minutes* devoted an entire segment to disco. CBS also remade the previous year’s *Disco ’77* into *Disco Magic*, a two-episode special with live acts such as the Village People, Evelyn “Champagne” King, Jimmy “Bo” Horne, and Enchantment. Earlier guests had included the Trammps, the Spinners, Lou Rawls, Silver Convention, Linda Clifford, Odyssey, Vickie Sue Robinson, and Al Green. In the works were episodes with Andy Gibb, Samantha Sang, and the Average White Band. Patrons at the Fort Lauderdale discotheque where the show was filmed provided the show’s “live” atmosphere.

Even the venerable children’s show *Sesame Street* caught the fever. In 1978, the Cookie Monster, Oscar the Grouch, Big Bird, and the other *Sesame Street* characters cut their own disco album. Andy Gibb, younger brother of the Bee Gees, helped out on *Sesame Street Fever*. Because the show had brought so much pleasure to him and his children, Gibb waived his performance fees and asked only that his kids be allowed to meet the *Sesame Street* bunch. Joining forces with “Ice Follies” and “Holiday on Ice,” *Sesame Street* promoted its disco album through children’s institutions, playgrounds, and shopping centers throughout the country.

### **Boogie fever sweeps America**

Hearts racing and hopes rising as they primped for a Saturday night out at the disco, tens of millions of Americans in 1978 almost overnight had caught an acute case of boogie fever.

Whether working at a carwash or in a Wall Street office, the snappy tunes from *Saturday Night Fever* playing on the radio—and the flood of disco songs that followed in the movie’s wake—put a strut in the step of many a Tony Manero wanna-be. Newspapers and magazines featured photos of celebrities stepping out for a night (and not only Saturday nights) at Studio 54—Cher! Farrah! Brooke! Breathless gossip titillated the American public, giving disco a glamorous new allure.

Disco had finally burst into the mainstream. Suddenly disco music was everywhere. Young and old alike sported the “disco look,” bought the records, grooved on the energy of the music, and found the release they sought in the thousands of discotheques that sprang up in big cities and small towns throughout the country.

Writing in *Esquire* in June 1978, Albert Goldman noted, “In just one short year, disco has exploded from an underground scene down on the New York waterfront or out in the heavily ethnic naves of Brooklyn and the Bronx into a vast international entertainment industry. Today, disco is right up there with spectator sports and tennis and skiing as one of the ideally contemporary forms of recreation.”

But disco was a distinctly participatory sport: “Don’t be a drag . . . participate,” as Chic put it in “Good Times.”

Suddenly all sorts of people were joining the team who only a year earlier would have mocked disco music, the disco scene, and those who actually liked them. Even disco dancing was changing to a more freestyle approach, replacing the choreographed dances like the hustle. Now, anyone able to move to the beat could be part of what *Time* described as disco’s “Cinderella world of self-stardom.”

Disco provided a chance to escape life’s problems and even experience a physical catharsis. Whether it was an actual answer or merely an escape from the questions, the disco scene provided what many, many people wanted. Filling the emotional and spiritual chasm in the heart of America that was one of the legacies of the turbulent sixties, nostalgia for “lost innocence” was a major theme of the seventies (as it has been a recurring theme in American history). The 1950s were revived in romanticized images as a time when Americans seemed surer of themselves, of one another, and of their country. High school-age kids twisted to the soundtrack of *American Graffiti* and emulated the ever-cool “Fonz” in TV’s *Happy Days*. Parents sighed wistfully for their own young days.

But the new beat for the feet was disco. The young and not-so-young alike found their feet shifting, their fingers snapping, to the disco beat.

### **Disco divas and divos**

*Saturday Night Fever* made disco “safe” for the white, middle-class mainstream. With the Bee Gees putting a white face on what was essentially black music, it was suddenly “okay” to admit publicly that one liked disco. What grist for the wheels of popular culture it became! From fashion to television shows to Hollywood movies, the culture of the disco was commercialized almost beyond recognition.

Donna Summer assumed the throne as the uncontested disco queen in 1978 with her starring role in *Thank God It’s Friday*. A year later *Bad Girls* was released, rising quickly to number one. Critics hailed the album as the best fusion of rock and disco to date. *Rolling Stone* said that despite “ultraschlock ballads and side two’s erratic rock-disco cuts,” it “still ranks as the only great disco album other than *Saturday Night Fever*.”

Summer appeared on the cover of *Newsweek* in April 1979 with the headline “Disco Takes Over.” In June of that year, Summer set a record as the first solo entertainer to hold two of the three top chart positions simultaneously with “Hot Stuff” and “Bad Girls.”

Because of the crossover appeal of disco, new songs by black artists were played as readily at white clubs as at black ones. One of them was Gloria Gaynor’s “I Will Survive.”

By a poll of deejays, Gaynor had been crowned “Queen of the Discos” back in 1975 after her number-one remake of the Jackson 5’s “Never Can Say Goodbye.” But it was “I Will Survive,” in 1978, that gave the world a disco anthem that would live on. The “B” side of a single was Gaynor’s personal song of determination after having just lost her mother and had back surgery. The song was broken out in Studio 54, and it went all the way to number one.

In the summer of 1978, the prime of disco’s life at center stage, disco acts were crossing over into the nation’s pop charts, giving exposure to disco artists far beyond their original dance-floor fans and generating substantial album sales. Enjoying this crossover success were Evelyn “Champagne” King, A Taste of Honey, and Rick James. Larkin Arnold, vice president and general manager of Capitol Records’ soul music division said the *Saturday Night Fever* soundtrack had “spread disco music to middle America.” He added, “It’s conducive to tunes like ‘Runaway Love,’ ‘Shame,’ and ‘Boogie Oogie Oogie.’ That’s why they’re happening pop.”

Half of *Billboard*’s 1978 year-end selection of “artists of the year,” were disco-related. The influential trade magazine selected the soundtrack of *Saturday Night Fever* as the album and soundtrack of the year. By that point it had become the bestselling album in the history of recorded music, with sales already approaching thirty million copies. No one was surprised when Donna Summer was picked disco artist of the year. The Bee Gees were picked the group of the year. Brother Andy had the year’s top single (“Shadow Dancing”). And disco-making Earth, Wind & Fire were collectively named soul artist of the year.

Even rock-loving *Rolling Stone* picked the Bee Gees’ “Staying Alive” as the top single of 1978. The brothers also shared the *Rolling Stone* 1978 Critics Award for producers of the year because of their work on “all their hit singles,” as the magazine put it. These awards had special significance because *Rolling Stone* was never fond of disco music. Its tentative embrace of the genre was evident in a year-end review of Donna Summer’s *Live and More*, released in September 1978.

The album included the number-one hits “MacArthur Park,” “Last Dance” from *Thank God It’s Friday*, and “Heaven Knows”—three of Summer’s best-known and most successful songs. Tom Carson’s review said, “If disco weren’t such a limiting genre, Donna Summer might have already been recognized as the Diana Ross of the Seventies.” He praised her “fine, dramatic voice, immense charm, and unusually tasteful technical control.” Like Ross, he noted, Summer had what he described as “an erotic, bitchy sullenness, perpetually threatening to break through the slick pop surface of her music.” But because she was seen as a disco act, Summer’s superstardom was dismissed.

Despite the condescension of rock critics, the disco music of 1978 cleaned up at Grammy Awards time in the winter of 1979. The recording industry’s most prestigious awards heaped yet more praise on the soundtrack of *Saturday Night Fever*, naming it album of the year—the first time a soundtrack ever had that distinction. Billy Joel’s “Just the Way You Are” took the Grammy for record of the year, though the Bee Gees were expected to win the award. Still, the group managed to take away no less than five

Grammys, including best vocal arrangement for “Stayin’ Alive” and best pop group for the second year in a row. They were the first group to repeat that particular award since the Carpenters had done it in 1970-71.

### **Defining an era**

Nearly thirteen hundred delegates turned out for *Billboard*’s fourth disco forum in New York City at the end of June 1978. The three-day meeting included seminars aimed at every level of the disco world, from innovations in disco fashions to technology. “[The year] 1978 will long be remembered as the era when millions of Americans got back on their feet,” said Casablanca Records president Neil Bogart in the forum’s keynote address. “The disco phenomenon is real,” he added. “It is more than just the sale of millions of records. It is more than the sound that’s sweeping through discos and radio stations all over the world.” And, Bogart predicted, the crest of the disco wave was yet to come.

By the end of 1978, disco was a cultural phenomenon international in scope. For the first time, the recording industry acknowledged in a slew of Grammy Awards that something important was going on, that this dance music called disco was just what people seemed to need and want at the tail end of the seventies.

Tens of millions of records had by now been sold, and tens of millions of people were making the disco scene. Even television and radio had succumbed, convinced at last by the audience share to be gained from disco-oriented programs. *Life* magazine proclaimed in its November 1978 cover story, “DISCO! Hottest Trend in Entertainment,” by Albert Goldman.

Reflecting disco’s arrival at the peak and center of the cultural mainstream, *Billboard*, the recording industry’s newspaper of record, accorded what had been the business of “the discos” the ultimate status in the world of pop culture and celebrity: a one-word name.

Beginning in 1979 *Billboard* symbolically changed the name of its own news division covering “the discos” to, simply, “disco.” The small shift in language was clear evidence that something more than just a change in popular musical tastes was underway.

In fact, an era was being defined.

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