

# WHY DISCO HAPPENED

*Love it or hate it, disco music will always be associated with the 1970s. But did it all begin and end in that decade? Not by a long shot—it actually had its roots in World War II Paris.*

## L E RÉSISTANCE

When you think of disco, what comes to mind? Probably polyester, mirror balls, and lines of dancers doing the Hustle. But surprisingly, the seeds that would one day grow into disco were first planted by the Nazis.

During their brutal occupation of France in World War II, the Germans outlawed any form of art and music that they deemed “impure.” The American jazz movement, which had experienced a renaissance in Paris in the 1930s, was high on the Nazis’ cultural hit list. In 1940 Hitler’s army began to shut down any cabaret that featured the “rhythms of belly-dancing negroes” and sending offenders to internment camps. (At the same time, however, the Nazis formed their own jazz band called Charlie and His Orchestra to broadcast taunting, satirical propaganda songs to the Allies over the radio.)

## THE BEAT GOES ON

Unwilling to give up their beloved jazz, partying Parisians formed secret nightclubs that required passwords to get in, changed locations frequently, and tried to stay as quiet as possible. And without any jazz bands left, their only choice was to play records. The most famous club, Le Discotheque (French for “The Record Library”), opened on rue de la Huchette in 1941. With a *discaire*, or disc jockey, spinning jazz records all night long, the main attraction was dancing. Thumbing their noses at the occupying Reich, Le Discotheque and other underground clubs opened their doors to blacks and homosexuals, the same groups who would first embrace disco music 30 years later. The main ingredients that would result in disco in the 1970s were now in place.

## LET'S DO THE TWIST!

When the Twist dance craze swept the United States in the early 1960s, it drew thousands of patrons to nightclubs like the Peppermint Lounge in New York City and the Whiskey a Go-Go in Los Angeles. Nightclub owners realized what the French had already figured out: As long as they played music that had the right beat, people would turn out in droves to dance. They also realized that it was cheaper to hire a deejay to play records than to pay a band (and deejays were far less temperamental). By 1965 more than 5,000 discotheques had popped up in the United States.

As the 1970s began, the innocence and idealism of 1960s counterculture had mostly been quashed by the escalating war in Vietnam and a conservative president in the White House. But the newfound sexual freedom that had begun in 1967's "Summer of Love" had blossomed with the first widespread use of the birth control pill in the early 1970s. The sexual revolution was now in full swing, and it was about to find its perfect partner: disco.

## DO THE HUSTLE!

Just like in 1940s Paris, minorities and homosexuals were welcome in American underground dance clubs of the early '70s, and quickly became their primary patrons. While the Twist and similar dances featured two partners who danced without touching each other, the dancing in these new clubs was much more intimate—especially after salsa dancing spiced things up. Salsa, a style popular among Cuban immigrants on the Miami club scene, eventually blended with swing in a new dance called "disco swing," which spread around the country, one discotheque at a time.

In the Northeast, the dance was dubbed the "New York Hustle," later shortened to the Hustle (and then treated with many variations in the late 1970s). But each style shared the same elements: the couple moved side to side, then back and forth, while swiveling their hips and rotating around each other.

By 1973 the word "disco" was being used to describe both the discotheque scene and the music most often played there. The term entered the mainstream when *Rolling Stone* repeatedly used it in an article titled "Discotheque Rock '72: Paaaaarty!" But which record, exactly, was the first true disco song isn't quite as clear. Some music historians cite 1973's "Soul Makossa" by Manu

Dibango. “Law of the Land” by the Temptations is another strong candidate, as is Gloria Gaynor’s 1974 megahit “Never Can Say Goodbye.” And still others cite the song “The Hustle” by Van McCoy, released in 1975, as the first song to truly have that “disco sound.” But what exactly is the disco sound?

The simple answer is a combination of beat, tempo, instrumentation, and song length. The disco beat typically has four beats per measure, with equal emphasis on every beat: BUMP BUMP BUMP BUMP. Rock and funk beats typically have four beats per measure as well, but with emphasis on the second and fourth beats: ba BUMP ba BUMP. Disco is also much faster paced than most rock or funk, sometimes up to 120 beats per minute. The faster, the better.

### ADDING MOULTON TO THE MIX

But what about that other staple of discotheques, the “long dance mixes” that kept people on their feet for hours? That idea was mostly the work of pioneering record producer (and occasional fashion model) Tom Moulton. During a photo shoot at a Long Island nightclub in 1971, he was amazed by the energy on the dance floor. “I got a charge of it, all these white people dancing to black music.” The only problem was that the songs were usually three minutes long and had slightly different beats, making it difficult for dancers to stay in a groove. Inspired, Moulton went home to his studio and spent 80 hours remixing and editing soul songs together, over and over, altering their speeds to keep a continuous beat going. Result: a 45-minute tape of nonstop, thumping dance music. His tape was a hit at the Sandpiper Club in Fire Island, New York, and as word of the extended mix spread, budding disco artists wanted “Tom Moulton mixes” of *their* songs.

That led to another problem: The 7-inch single (45 rpm), which was common at the time, could only hold four to five minutes of music, not nearly enough to make an extended dance record. So Moulton experimented with larger formats, and created what would become the disco deejay’s favorite: the 12-inch single. In 1974 Moulton was given the chance to extend a single called “Do It ’Til You’re Satisfied” by B.T. Express from three minutes to nearly six. The extended dance song was a huge success, peaking at #2 on the Billboard pop chart.

He was then brought in to mix Gloria Gaynor's debut album, *Never Can Say Goodbye*. With the focus on making the best dance record possible, Moulton filled side one of the album with a non-stop 18-minute dancing experience. Each of the three songs smoothly segued into the next, and the vocal sections were limited to one minute at the beginning of each track, allowing melody and beat to carry the rest of the song. Record executives were skeptical about the experiment, but Moulton proved his case when *Never Can Say Goodbye* became a huge hit on dance floors across the country. It solidified the golden rule for disco deejays and recording artists alike: Keep the beat going.

### **BIG BOYS WON'T TRY**

Although disco scored a few early hits, for the most part, radio steered clear of it. The songs were often too long for airplay, and they needed thumping bass speakers to sound their best. As the large record companies ignored disco, dozens of independent labels cropped up, some only to produce one single before folding. But these small record companies fueled the growing dance scene: Labels like WestEnd, Prelude, and SalSoul were in high demand, producing a library of disco music with thousands of dance tracks. "Disco is the best floor show in town," reported writer Truman Capote. "It's very democratic, boys with boys, girls with girls, girls with boys, blacks and whites, capitalists and Marxists, Chinese and everything else, all in one big mix."

By 1976 the beat, the sound, and the underground dance-club scene—all of disco's components—were firmly in place. But a Hollywood movie was about to infiltrate that big mix and take disco to worlds where no disco dancer had gone before.

*Shake that thang all the way over to page 451  
for the story of disco's rise...and demise.*

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**Roundball rock.** NBA players who've released rap albums: Kobe Bryant, Allen Iverson, Jason Kidd, Shaquille O'Neal, Gary Payton, David Robinson, and Tony Parker (in French).

# WHY DISCO DIED

*One of the shortest-lived phases in American musical history, disco took the nation by storm in 1977 and was declared “dead” just three years later. (For part I of the story, go to page 177.)*

## SATURDAY NIGHT POSERS

When most people think of “disco music,” they think of John Travolta in *Saturday Night Fever*. But most die-hard disco fans scoff at this. True disco, they maintain, was the underground dance-club scene of the early to mid-1970s, frequented primarily by gays and minorities, and fueled by deejays and independent record labels. So what’s the problem with the 1977 film about a troubled Brooklyn kid named Tony Manero (Travolta) who goes to the discotheque every Saturday night? A lot, it turns out. “That movie was about a group of straight, homophobic, racist, Italian-American twenty-somethings in New York who went dancing wearing odd-looking clothes and probably too much aftershave lotion. They looked nothing much like people I saw or knew in gay discos.” That review comes from disco historian Dennis Brumm, who’s been active in the dance scene since the early 1970s. And many in the disco community feel the same way.

## FROM FRAUD TO FAD

The idea for *Saturday Night Fever* came from a 1976 *New York* magazine article about the New York disco scene, written by British journalist Nik Cohn. Cohn later admitted that he made the whole thing up: He’d just arrived in the United States, and had no clue what the real “scene” was like when he was assigned to write about it. So he completely fabricated the character that eventually became Tony Manero.

Nevertheless, the film came out the next year, and the public ate it up: It earned \$74 million, the third-highest gross of the year (after *Star Wars* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*). The soundtrack, featuring disco songs by the Bee Gees, was even more successful. It quickly became the highest-selling movie soundtrack ever, and was the highest-selling pop album until Michael Jack-

son's *Thriller* eclipsed it six years later. Almost overnight, disco went from a fringe movement to a mainstream fad. And just as suddenly, the major funk and R&B record labels took an interest in the craze and began cranking out disco hits for all ages.

But in their book *Saturday Night Forever: The History of Disco*, Alan Jones and Jussi Kantonen try to set the record straight—that real disco was *not* the Village People, K.C. and the Sunshine Band, and Gloria Gaynor: “For every chart hit pounded into the public’s consciousness, 50 far superior tracks from all over the world were being played at some hard-to-find basement club.”

## DISCO SUCKS

Disco started showing up everywhere:

- In 1978 the State of New York declared one week in June “National Disco Week.”
- On television, *Dance Fever* and *Soul Train* were ratings hits.
- Film scores to popular movies like *Star Wars* and *Superman* were re-released in “disco mixes.”
- Even Disney got into the act with the 1980 album *Mickey Mouse Disco*.
- Established rock artists added some disco elements to many of their songs in the late '70s, further angering die-hard disco fans—and alienating their own longtime listeners. Examples: the Rolling Stones (“Miss You”), Wings (“Silly Love Songs”) and even the Grateful Dead (“Shakedown Street”).

Slowly, a counter-movement began to spread throughout the United States. In the popular movie spoof *Airplane!*, audiences cheered when the doomed plane knocked down a disco station’s antenna. And on the sitcom *WKRP in Cincinnati*, rock deejay Dr. Johnny Fever regularly wore his “Disco Sucks” T-shirt. It was becoming cool to hate disco.

## THE DAY THE DISCO DIED

On July 12, 1979, the anti-disco sentiment reached a fever pitch when the Chicago White Sox held “Disco Demolition Night” during a double-header at Comiskey Park. The event was the brainchild of Chicago radio deejay Steve Dahl, who had lost his previous job when his station went to an all-disco format. Now

working for a rival station, Dahl wanted revenge. The rules for Disco Demolition Night: Fans who brought their unwanted disco records to the game only had to pay 98 cents to get in. Bonus: After the first game of the doubleheader, Dahl promised to blow up the records on the field. White Sox officials hoped for an additional 5,000 fans—but nearly 60,000 showed up, most of them with little interest in baseball. During the first game, drunk fans started flinging their disco records at each other and at the players on the field. After the game ended, Dahl put on an Army helmet and drove a Jeep around the field while the crowd chanted “Disco sucks! Disco sucks!” Then crates filled with more than 1,000 disco records were detonated in the outfield, ripping a hole in the grass. While players ran for cover, fans jumped the fences, stole the bases, toppled the batting cages, and tore up the infield. The White Sox were forced to forfeit the second game. And another nail was hammered into disco’s coffin.

### CONSPIRACY?

But was the “Disco Sucks” campaign just a natural backlash to a popular fad, or was there something more sinister behind it? Some claim the whole protest was manufactured by the executives of rock record companies, who secretly paid deejays to bad-mouth disco. Gloria Gaynor, known as the “Queen of Disco,” sees no other way to explain the sudden outburst of hatred: “It was started by someone who felt that the popularity of disco was dipping into their pockets,” she said. “Because, let’s face it, young people...were buying my music instead of somebody else’s. Certainly some record companies or producers may have been getting miffed, and I always believed that that whole thing was started by them.”

So far, the theory’s never been proven. But whether disco was murdered or died a natural death, it was still a target years later. Even in 1989, 10 years after the height of the backlash, the *Penguin Encyclopedia of Popular Music* defined disco as “a dance fad of the 1970s with a profound and unfortunate influence on popular music.”

### JUST KEEP ON DANCING

Yet to say disco “died” isn’t completely accurate. Disco evolved into the mainstream dance music of the next two decades, such as house, drum and bass, and techno. All were more or less stripped-

down versions of disco. Full orchestras were replaced by synthesizers, drum sets were replaced by programmed drum machines, and musical breaks were added by sampling pieces from funk, soul, and—appropriately enough—disco songs. All of these recording methods began in disco studios in the early 1970s and would flourish in years to come in dance, electronica, and even rap music.

### GLAMOROUS GRAVEYARD

Meanwhile, true disco music never really died, either. It quietly went back to its underground roots, where it lives on at dance clubs today—even more so after the popularity of disco-fueled acts of the mid-1990s like Cher, Erasure, and the Pet Shop Boys. And like most fads, a couple of decades later, disco started to become cool again. Says Gloria Gaynor: “I always say that disco music is alive and well and living in the hearts of people all over the world. It simply changed its name to protect the innocent.”

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### COSTA RICA’S PRISON ANTHEM

In 1852 the U.S. and Great Britain recognized the independence of the Central American nation of Costa Rica and notified them that diplomats would be arriving for a formal recognition ceremony. But there was a problem: Costa Rica didn’t have a national anthem. What would they play at the ceremony? President Juan Rafael Mora summoned Don Manuel Maria Gutierrez, director of the Costa Rica national band, to quickly write an anthem. Gutierrez refused. He was a band master, he said, not a composer. Mora threw him in prison...but had the cell stocked with a desk and writing material and told Gutierrez he would be released as soon as he composed a worthy song.

After a few days of incarceration, Gutierrez suddenly discovered that he could write music after all, and, after a few more days, completed his task. On June 12, 1852, at the welcoming ceremonies for the arriving diplomats, “The Star Spangled Banner,” “God Save the King,” and, for the first time in its history, “Hino Nacional de Costa Rica” was performed in public. (Don Gutierrez, who had been released from prison, was thanked for his work and returned to his position as director of the national band.)