

WILEY

Music, Image, Dance



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and Arabella Stanger

Afterword

Disco! After the Dance

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Thinking with the remains, or the afterlives, or even the discontents of a thing continues to encourage a shared melancholic predilection among researchers in popular culture. This makes sense: we think carefully about conditions of exchange that shape at least a generation of lives through popular culture expression. In the process we realize how incredibly limited our analytic tools arrive in relation to questions of form and desire. What makes an aesthetic or cultural formation cohere? Why do we bother to mourn the passing of a thing, when clearly other things have become available in the wake of the thing before? Why do we need disco to do work of an oceanic feeling that might connect us among each other even as we retain ego, if that was a thing we ever cared about?

Why Study Disco?

Thinking with disco, we gather several strands of analysis and wonder at a mosaic of desire carefully meted out across media and expressive gesture. But we tend to be a bit sad at our labor, I think, because we recognize that thinking with popular culture means modulating a wish for *something else* that might be possible to prolong engagement with the form. We write toward disco because we love it, and also because we know it is gone or reshaped, a ghosting of affect that might never have been the things we explore now. And aftermaths, like afterwords, seem reflective and a bit blurry; the emergence from the swirl of the night and its possibilities, now rendered as a memory that solidifies in something that was, but surely isn't, anything the same as it used to be. Melancholic, in the retrospect of things not available any more, as our needs and desires shift—as they always must.

As the many chapters of this volume attest, disco was a proposition of entanglement more than anything else. Yes, it had sounds, and looks, and movements; it emerged across the planet at different times; and it did slightly different work in each manifestation. Disco always suggested an ethic of liberation, weirdly, from norms of “good behavior” through predictable sexual identities or proper amounts of alcohol as an aspect of social lubrication. Disco entangled straightness with peacock-like garishness and brought queer flamboyance forward; disco encouraged excesses of speed and coke to keep the party going. Disco resisted any manner of carefully crafted musical form or the dances of political advancement that had accompanied the civil rights movement. Instead, disco tilted toward a hedonistic refusal to move in memory of cultural responsibility or finely honed aesthetic craft. It might be fair to claim that disco never aspired to be great in any direction. Like hip-hop, disco formed as a potentiality of its own inevitable volition. But unlike hip-hop, disco had no political grounding beyond the marketplace. Its siting of a glamorous *ersatz* amalgamation that could combine desirous movements with shiny, reflective metallics and exceedingly simple musical structures created a temporary alternative to other ongoing social structures. Disco pulled things together briefly, always aware that the dispersal at the end of the night mattered too. Disco did not build itself to last, but to bridge among other politicized ways of being.

Music

To call disco music simplistic is to take seriously its ambition as a binding agent among dancers committed to feeling through moving. The sounds of disco raid the storehouses of any number of idioms or sonic cadencing available in the 1960s, casting them all as accomplices for an inevitable dancing. Musically, disco arrives at the end of an era of new live musical form even as it was rarely performed live. Typically, disco performances placed singers and some rhythm musicians against tracks of recorded symphonic arrangements that had been crafted quickly to suit the song at hand. The cyborg nature of this assembly was not lost on the various musicians creating disco recordings, and playing disco live tends to feel like a goof, a frothy silliness that remarkably does its work to encourage physical expression. As functional sound, rather than expressive gesture of its own merits, disco music tended to succeed or fail according to whether DJs and dancers picked up its contents.

As the chapters in this volume affirm, disco music enables some recognition of political gesture through its lyrics, and mostly pulls physical expression through its construction as dance-sound. Like other forms of ritual music, disco intends to provoke physical response; how it does that matters less than its achievement through lyrical wit, rhythmic and harmonic manipulation, and "sitting in the pocket" with bass and drumkit aligned. This might be disco's rampant strength: that its sound knows itself to be utilitarian and expressive at once. Disco artists made musical work quickly; orchestral arrangements tended toward the most simple possibilities, and singers often tell stories of one-take recording sessions. None of this makes the sound illegitimate so much as quickly drawn. Like other fast foods, disco didn't imagine itself to be for-the-ages as hopefully of-the-moment. And like fast food, disco arrived emphatically designed for its marketplace: a rising assembly of locations where disco-ing could happen.

This alignment of form with function that includes the expression of the group and the satisfaction of a market-desire is entirely indebted to Black Life: the ability to operate within and beyond capital simultaneously and unironically. Disco music intends to encourage a shared dance, an assembly of expressive desire cast explicitly within the marketplace, as our Black bodies had been so long ago. Disco might have felt fake as music to many, including its musicians, because of its comfortable complicity with marketplace desire simultaneous to the creation of a collective engagement with dance. Like the blues, the intentionality of disco music as a call to dance within the idea of a site designated for its practice (even if that was a temporary formation of a basement or a school auditorium or an exclusive nightclub) confused those more accustomed to musical form that traveled with the individual's psychological and intellectual musings. Disco follows Black life in its ability to embrace capital even as it is rejected for its particularity by that very system of exchange. Disco's demise as a musical form was predicted by its aesthetic disinterest in individualistic elaboration. Rock music might have wanted to build up a raft of white men who sweatily made a claim for their singularity as performers. But disco produced divas, always expected to be sacrificed for the good of the group. Like Black life, disco music exists to move the group inexorably toward something collective, a dancing that could embrace global exchange through its availability, but as sound that could flourish without recourse to Western aesthetic criticality.

Image

Disco looks flashy, shiny, and reflective; it contains the shimmer of an extra-corporate elaboration of fashion toward skin, body, and sweat. Fake materials, synthetics found nowhere in nature, structure the revelation of body in tight-fitting or barely-there clothes. Makeup and jewelry that emphasize sparkling, otherworldly ways of being dominate disco imagery. The machine-made materials emphasize cheap availability, and encourage a replaceable aspect of disco gear. Anything shimmering might be replaced easily by something else; a leisure suit could suffer the discarding of its jacket to become rayon bellbottoms that are enough for dancing. Disco fashion arrives at once everyday and elaborately unusual in its lustrousness.

This could be a bit like how Black people arrive in the world. We are hypervisible and extraordinary in white contexts of global thought and global capital, of course, and we are everyday to ourselves and those we love and who love us. Black beingness as fashionable elaboration created templates for disco imagery in the Tom of Finland macho man mold (think auction block physique) as well as the extraterrestrial shiny spandex and feathered look (think Carnival and funk-band elaborated excess). Disco brought Black style to a general public where it caught hold as venturing toward a common denominator: looks available to those with the fewest civic resources (Black people) became looks preferred by the commons of disco-goers. The relaxed, "let's go out in something flashy and available" vibe of disco aligned it again with Black beingness in the context of the US: early fast fashion established the basic look of disco.

Disco also arrived as an integrated space; an eventing that made no sense without Black and Brown people included in the often mostly white mix. The visuals of disco then always included Blackness within its frame, as foundational to the aesthetic looks, in its sounds, and in the presence of Black party-goers and musicians entirely necessary for disco to cohere. While skin as presence might seldom be productive as a useful progressive analytic, the fact of Blackness being necessary for any rendering of disco alerts us to its essential hailing of Black life, whether on the stage, on the dance floor, as the DJ or as security, or still excluded by racist door policies to white clubs. For a moment, disco brought together disparate commons of people to make a temporary party that knew it couldn't last.

Dance

The movements of disco are under-researched as the embodied place of excitement for researchers curious about its continued presence. Disco inaugurated the public “do your own thing” line dancing that is ubiquitous fifty years later; the “bus stop” and the “hustle” and of course the “electric slide” all hail disco as accelerants to their joining into global popular culture. In this, the Africanist aesthetic imperative to explore individuality within a group context brought disco its legions of adherents and devotees in dance. Disco never offered a single dance movement or even a preferred mode of elaborating rhythm in its practice. Instead, disco offered a container for sweaty, durational pulsing and vibrating among others.

Disco dances respond to the steady pulse (“four on the floor”) underlined by a backbeat led by an open-and-closing hi-hat. These two qualities of percussion predict the grounded-floating of disco dance: a weighted thumping of the body with the feet, maybe, accented by a shimmying and shaking upper body buoyed up by the endless watery stream of hi-hat metallics. Almost any movement could be accepted in disco dancing, so long as the dancing continued throughout a song and into the songs that followed; disco dancing predicted a continuous movement for a time limited only by the individual’s energetic desire. Drugs and alcohol often amplified a disco dancer’s willingness to play in movement, creating an expanded physical palette of unexpected spins and shakes to share among the dancing crowd. Expert dancers explored movement combinations from jazz dance classrooms or popping and locking just coming into popularity simultaneously with disco. And hand dancers moved elaborate couple formations that had been carefully rehearsed onto the social dance floor.

Because disco arrived as a hedonistic oceanic, practiced with full complicity to a global marketplace, its dances achieved little status as remnants of a coherent cultural moment, or even a particular place or time. Disco dancing is still considered to be a sort of fake gyrating of sorts, a bumping and weaving among others to the steady musical pulse, without corporeal particularity or provenance. Disco dance moves aren’t easily related to ritual movements or social dance formations of earlier generations. Disco dancing did indeed absorb pretty much anything: roller disco, aerobic disco, erotic disco, and family-friendly line dancing all claim space as disco’s physical vocabularies.

In this, we can again recognize amalgamation as a structuring logic of disco, and its reliance on a temporality of occasion, or occasionality, for its realization. Disco comes for a time, bridging to a fantasy place where many are welcome, any sort of movement might be celebrated and accepted, shiny surfaces like rayon or sweaty skin confirm an extended time of transformation, and simple, euphoric musical motifs insist on continuous motion. In disco we should be happy, dancing for ourselves among others in a fantasy where much will be allowed. That fantasy built on upward mobility for Black Americans eager to participate in a rhythmic social commons, one that took the marketplace as its starting device. Paying in order to party in a mixed-racial, mixed-sexual, mixed-age, and (pre)-mixed musical environment confirmed an arrival for Black citizens into urban structures of commerce and the ever-elusive leisure time that even working-class whites seemed to enjoy a generation before. And the disco offered a temporary citizenry of sorts for club-goers of color in white spaces. The discos needed dancers of color to stabilize their authenticity as spaces of social evolution: the good life could, disco said, be available to some version of all of us.

Maybe this fantasy of a potential social progress through partying becomes a source of our maniacal return to disco as a site of academic inquiry. The dance is done, and yet we are not done with the dancing. We remember disco reverently and consider its possibilities more carefully now. That we could have gathered briefly to sweat together creatively without continuous reference to our asymmetries beyond the dance floor encourages us to return to these former ways of being. And of course, disco never died; it dispersed as it always knew that it must. Every media finds its niche. In the US, Black people replaced disco with house; disco moved around the planet to do its work of fantastical elaboration variously. Disco for the populace was largely replaced by drag and vogue for the adventurous—musically, the rampant availability of disco music as simplistic sounds that intended to produce the effect of dancing lost popularity.

The afterlives of disco are this fantasy of a party that continues in a temporary “safe space” and somehow accepts us in our variety from moment to moment. We shift and shimmer, and the disco ball reflects our fragmentations, coherent in its formation and allowing us to dissemble in a sheen of sweat. Not really dancing to not-really music, looking unreal or at least as unusual as we can. Born of the bridge economic moment before Reagan’s privatization, when social mobilities seemed possible (in the US, at least), disco predicted

diversity as a strengthening agent to social communion. Not primarily a diversity of race, which would be far too simplistic and crass, but a diversity of self: desirous, ambitious, elaborated, changeable, forgetful of pasts that seemed to lock in identity. Disco wanted us to enjoy our participation in a commons of Black life recast as a party: rhythmic and always aware of global capital and the distensions of racism, the difficulties of work, and the unfairness of everything beyond the dance floor. In disco, Freud's oceanic begins where it always has, in the bowels of the slave ship, now remodeled as a shared capacity to bounce with pleasure in a temporary structure that could suspend social consequence. Disco arrives ersatz indeed, reflecting the impossible condition of social diversity embraced by a dancing public willing to unknow a dominant social order.

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