

## **Disco Demolition Night: An Autoethnography About the “Death” of Disco**

By Marty Isenberg

### **Why I Hated Disco**

I first learned about Disco Demolition Night when I was 15 years old while watching *I Love the '70s* on VH1 after school. I came of age in the 1990s and early 2000s, at a time in which music television curated a culture of loud and rebellious content for our generation. Shows like *Total Request Live* ranked the votes of teenage super fans to determine the top 10 songs of the day. This democratic competition thrived on a sort of culture war between teenagers who felt like outsiders and wanted to express their anger and mistrust through rock, and teens who were mesmerized by the glamorous fantasies and emotional vulnerability of pop stars. VH1 offered cultural commentary in a less serious way than its sister channel MTV. Its shows like *I Love the [insert decade]* featured comedians, musicians, and other commentators recalling their recollection of important pop culture moments. It was a silly, entertaining show that allowed sheltered suburban minds like mine to race through history and imagine yourself standing at the precipice of big cultural moments like Woodstock, the rise of hip-hop, or going to CBGBs to see the Sex Pistols for the first time. Yet the moment I remember from this show that has remained stuck in my mind is Disco Demolition Night.

Disco Demolition night was a radio promotion led by Steve Dahl at Chicago's Comiskey Park in 1979. Anyone who brought a disco record to the stadium could get into the game for just 98 cents. The gimmick was that during the 7th inning stretch, Dahl would set fire to the records. This led to a near riot on the field as young teenagers were so excited by the destruction. I

recently found this episode of *I Love the '70s* on YouTube and decided to rewatch it.<sup>1</sup> The segment concerning Demolition Night was much shorter than it loomed in my memory. They interview a few comedians, rockers, one gay commentator, and intersperse it with footage of the record-burning mob getting out of hand on the baseball field. Comedian Ian Black says, “you have the option of not listening to the music. That’s fine too. But they were so angry at the music, they thought, let’s literally destroy music.” The one unnamed gay commentator says, “The general public had this idea that disco was cheesy, and inauthentic, and not a valid form of creative musical expression. And of course they were right, and that’s what was great about disco.”

Watching this at 15, I thought it was a moment in which good music had overcome bad music. I hated disco. I also hated the music that was popular with most of my peers. I was a fan of *real* music. Authentic music, not bubblegum garbage like Britney Spears, NSYNC, or the Backstreet Boys. I loved rock music of the 1960s, gothic new wave and underground music of the 1980s, jazz, minimalism, avant-garde movements from free jazz to noise music and so many other forgotten periods and subcultures. The excitement was in the discovery; hunting for records and finding something cool and rare allowed me to feel that I was myself a cool and rare person, not a freak for failing to feel the same way as my peers. They were the freaks. At 15, I was also a very scared, very depressed closeted queer teen.

I sought solace in music to help repair my self-esteem and identity. The boy bands and female pop stars that were popular while I was going through puberty projected an over-

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<sup>1</sup> VH1 - I Love the 70s - Volume 2 - 1979, uploaded by ILoveTheVH1 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ntc5U9u0z8Q&t=1231s> accessed 12/01/21.

produced hyper-sexualized vapidness. What could these ‘artists’, hand picked by business executives for their symmetrical features, know about pain and creativity? Their highly choreographed performances were not art but entertainment aimed at the lowest common denominator of music fans. Their music had no discernible message. It was just sex appeal and teenage emotions written by a team of adult songwriters. But, if I’m honest, there was also something frightening to me about their music because it forced me to look at my own sexuality. That was their power, to be the Id of society. To push the questions: what is sexuality? What is desire? Who are you? I hated them for subjecting me to this line of inquiry. Looking back, the realization that I was projecting my sexuality crisis onto their music draws into question my entire musical criticism of their creative work.

Today I identify as bisexual, and my struggle with my own queerness has been a challenge throughout much of my adult life. I was too attached to my conception of masculinity, and that created friction in my exploration as a queer person. Through most of my life, I had a stubborn resistance to a lot of tastes that are culturally gay. In my time since coming out (which happened late in life for me), I have sought to form an identity that embraces queerness while retaining personality traits of the straight/masculine identity that once felt like armor to me. However, in focusing on that masculinity, I had previously rejected parts of queer culture that felt too "feminine" to me. Ultimately, I've learned that holding onto my outdated concepts of gender have hurt the people I care about and hindered my own personal growth.

This realization of internalized homophobia is why I’m fascinated by the sudden rise and fall of disco, a music born out of Black artists and the gay nightclub party scene in the 1970s. In this historical moment in which young angry teens like my younger self rushed the metaphorical

ramparts of their culture war, I see two of my own identities in direct conflict with one another in society. I want to understand what this moment at Comiskey Park meant. Was it an act of racism or homophobia? Did the rock ‘n’ rollers at Comiskey Park hate disco for the same reasons I did? In this essay, I will explore what it is about disco music and culture that instilled that feeling in me, and I will dissect whether those same qualities led to the cultural death of disco.

### **The Disco Scene**

One of the most important musical trends to emerge from the early 1970s is the emergence of DJs and the technological advances of sound systems. In her book *Hot Stuff*, Alice Echols describes what it felt like to dance at the Rubaiyat, a disco club in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

What the Rubaiyat offered instead was the experience of being blasted inside of one’s body. This effect was achieved through mega-decibel levels and the sound system’s determined emphasis on the music’s resonant lows —so throbbing that it felt as if the beat had taken up residence inside of you.<sup>2</sup>

A DJ could take a recorded album and play it through a sound system to create a live music event without the need for a band. Dance music did not start in the 1970s, but with the DJ taking over the role of performer, the audience themselves became the stars of the evening rather than a band. DJs pioneered a way to mix records together and could create a continuous play of songs over the course of a long night. Economically, this was very advantageous to nightclubs. Whereas before, they might have had to hire several bands to fill out a billing, now they just needed one person who could spin records all night.

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Alice Echols, “*Hot Stuff: Disco and the Remaking of American Culture*,” (W.W. Norton and Company, 2011), 77.

In the early years, DJs would spin basically anything you could dance to, including rock music like Led Zeppelin. But predominantly they played Soul and R&B top 40 playlists (in other words, Black radio). The label of “disco” wasn’t a genre of music, but rather referred to a discotheque, which was really just a nightclub. Until 1971, it was illegal for gay men to dance with each other in New York City. They were often subject to harassment and sting operations by the police. Most of the gay bars that existed at this time were owned by organized crime syndicates, who viewed their clientele with disdain. But after the Stonewall Riot in 1969, the gay rights movement began to assert their power to combat repressive laws. During this time organizations like the GAA (the Gay Activist Alliance) would sponsor dances, which would serve as a safe place for gay people to congregate as well as organize for political action. The once forbidden public act of dancing with each other was now at the center of gay cultural life and led to an explosion of new gay discotheques in cities across America. As Echols describes it:

Once homosexual sociability was effectively decriminalized, gays became a desirable demographic, and the crime syndicates gradually lost their stranglehold on gay bars. Gay men forged a new relationship to public space, bold instead of furtive. If their new boldness grew out of gay liberation protests at City Hall, it also grew out of new post-Stonewall bars and discos.<sup>3</sup>

There were invite-only dance parties, at the Loft for example, hosted by David Mancuso, as well as the beginning of more glitzy discos like the Sanctuary in Greenwich Village. Sharing these collective dance spaces actually sounds kind of bohemian: a mixing of race and sexuality at a time when it was absolutely not safe to do so. Like all cool scenes, eventually they started to draw more and more attention from the general public. As Echols points out, straight America

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<sup>3</sup> Echols, *Hot Stuff*, 52.

had not been curious about gay life since the roaring '20s, and their interest was piqued by many magazines writing about the new "Gay Chic."

We need to dispel the notion, however, that disco was a progressive safe place for all marginalized groups. In the same way that the women's suffrage movement did not stand up for Black women, the gay liberation movement was largely centered on white, attractive gay men who met certain expectations. Gay discos became spaces motivated by the promise of exclusivity, ostensibly to keep them as safe places for gay men to be free to be themselves away from the judging eyes of straight people, but many shared a fear of Black men. Gay discos could be particularly cruel to drag queens and effeminate gay men as well, by not allowing them to share in this newly claimed gay safe space. Discotheques had a business model of exclusivity; a model that would be emulated by the straight discos as well, most notably Studio 54 (which opened in 1977). Men that attended these discos were known by some as clones, because of the ubiquitousness of their style and "lumberjack masculinity." By turning the consumers into products, club owners created a social network that people were envious to be a part of. Mark Fleischman, the owner of Studio 54, would insist on keeping long lines outside of his club even on days the club was less than full capacity.

DJs were at the forefront of shaping the disco experience in nightclubs and dance parties, which made *spinning* (creating a musical experience with records) an iconic part of the gay clubbing experience in the '70s. Many of these DJs were themselves gay, and so were other key figures in the disco industry such as promoters. Because of this, disco music is inherently tied to gay culture. While disco created a new wave of liberation for many Gay men, the industry of disco still suffered from many of the same bigotries, and elitist business practices that permeated

1970s American society. This is not to discredit the cultural importance of disco but rather to note the pervasive nature of prejudice. As I wrestle with my own feelings about disco, and try to understand the motivations of the disco demolition teenagers, I'm reminded that even amongst the victims of prejudice, bigotry exists.

### **The Disco Sound**

To understand the disco sound and where it came from, it's helpful to understand the forces in music and culture that were leading up to the '70s. From the beginnings of recorded music, Black musicians have pioneered musical styles that were later appropriated by white musicians who receive wider success and credit for their music. For most of music's recorded history up until the 1970s, the recording industry segregated Black and white music by genre. In the 1960s, Motown records was the first Black record label to create music and artists that had crossover success in the white marketplace. The "Motown sound" combined soul with pop music appeal. It utilized pop production techniques such as orchestral string sections, horn sections, and complex arrangements. It was as much a producer's music as it was driven by the personalities of the artists, with a team of in-house songwriters featuring the great Lamont Dozier and Brian and Eddie Holland. You also had the evolution of funk music pioneered by James Brown. His career had begun as a gospel and R&B singer in the 50s, but by the mid 1960s, Brown had created the stripped-down, rhythmic and infectious repetitive grooves of what came to be known as funk.

The 1960s brought political upheaval in the form of the civil rights movement, and the protests of the ongoing Vietnam War. The counterculture hippie movement espoused ideals of free love, sexual liberation, mind expansion, and unity between races. However, by the 1970s,

economic conditions had begun to worsen. All the optimism of the '60s was being eroded by the backlash to the civil rights movement, causing race riots. The continuation of the Vietnam War and the assassinations of Martin Luther King, JFK and Malcolm X took their toll on society. Other problems throughout the '70s such as the Watergate scandal and inflation left the youth culture with a sense of disillusionment and hopelessness. In other words, it was the perfect time to dance.

As I mentioned, from 1970-1973, disco did not refer to a musical style. DJs were pulling records from multiple genres to make their sets, but they also began pioneering their own artistic agency by mixing records together to create their own collages of sound. And thanks to their ability to create continuous play, dance parties could last all night. The contribution of DJs helped shape the sound of disco and other dance music, such as house music, that would follow in later decades.

As for the recorded music that was finding a home in discos as the movement was progressing, in the early years it was predominantly Black male artists such as The O'Jays, Barry White, Harold Melvin, The Sound of Philadelphia, and MFSB. There was a little bit of lingering hippie sentiment in the culture of these early disco hits. Dancing at discos wasn't about dancing with your partner; it was about freestyle dancing, and that ultimately led to a room full of people dancing together. The song "Love Train," a proto-disco hit, highlights this credo with the lyrics: "*People all over the world / Join hands / Start a love train, love train.*" Remarkably, some songs that were played at discos, but not on radio stations, charted on the Billboard 100, demonstrating the power of the disco consumer. Still, it took a few years for the record companies to capitalize



on the trend because of their hesitancy to see the value of music that was associated with Black and Queer people.

I'd characterize the early disco hits as having a few similarities. They were rooted in a propulsive repetitive rhythmic groove (derived from James Brown), combined with sweet, soothing, yet somewhat saccharine harmonies and melodies often utilizing orchestral strings (derived from Motown production techniques). The songs are longer than a traditional 3-minute format because they were meant for dance clubs. The lyrics are fluffy, usually about love, and/or getting down on the dance floor. For male crooners, there's also a bit of softening of their masculine presentation. Whereas '60s artists from Mick Jagger to James Brown sang about being pleased by a woman, Barry White sings with a "pillow talk"-like intimacy about pleasing his woman. We also see some mixed-race outfits such as KC and the Sunshine band start to emerge, further integrating the dance scene. When drummer Earl Young created the signature drum groove on "The Love I Lost" with Harold Melvin and the Blue Notes in 1973, disco started to find a replicable sound. From its inception, it was campy and easy to listen to.

By 1974, disco started to enter the mainstream once record companies realized the power of the disco consumer. The first disco stars were emerging, and they were predominantly Black women. Disco shared a porous border with funk music. Funk artists like Earth Wind and Fire or Labelle also notched hit songs on the disco charts. But funk and disco were distinctly different genres, with different gendered aesthetics. Disco was a diva-driven music with stars such as Gloria Gaynor and Donna Summer. It was produced in a way to smooth over all the rough edges, whereas funk contains all the rawness of "real" Black music performed by (mostly) Black men.

Alice Echols writes:

Mindless, repetitive, formulaic, and banal were more typical epithets directed at disco. Nonetheless, from very early on the idea of unnaturalness hovered over the discourse about disco. Disco did favor the synthetic over the organic, the cut-up over the whole, the producer over the artist, and the record over live performance. And if you believed that authentic soul music was raw and unpolished, then disco's preference for silky sophistication was further evidence of its inauthenticity. The fact that many of its most committed fans, deejays, and remixers were gay men encouraged this view that disco was not the real thing.<sup>4</sup>

This question of authenticity that Echols raises is central to understanding how we as a society prioritize value in art and entertainment. The concept of authenticity, of being true to yourself and expressing your own individuality is ingrained into the American ethos. But authenticity is difficult to quantify. You know it when you hear it or feel it; it's subjective. What kinds of authenticity are welcome in society also changes through history. In the preceding decade, fans perceived white rock stars as elevating popular music as an art form. These performers directly challenged society by experimenting with their music. To the innovators of this era, a record was not a collection of songs but a piece of artwork. Their music was a conversation with the art world as well as the social movements of the era, and the performers themselves spoke their minds freely, embracing political concepts that were radical at the time. Society, especially young people, celebrated their bravery and their authenticity. But they were white, and they were men. Their whiteness allowed them privilege to experiment with conventions and be called innovators and risk-takers. Their masculinity made it more palatable for them to thumb their nose at authority, because we admire strength in men, but expect submissiveness from women.

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<sup>4</sup> Echols, *Hot Stuff*, 11.

Genres driven by minorities have to be more subtle in their criticism of society's ills. But often they contain a "hidden transcript:" a subtle and obscured resistance to oppression. Disco was distinctly politically averse, which naturally opened itself to the criticism that Black music had given up on its radical revolutionary messages of the '60s. There may be a myriad of examples in which protestation bubbled under the surface of disco's campy exterior, but its true radicalness is that the music sounds and feels gay and feminine, even if the lyrics are just about boogie-oogie-oogie-ing.

Disco was a reflection of the nation's changing views on masculinity and female subjectivity. It fused Black musical genres into a new style centering the music's producer as the auteur, thanks in part to the evolution of studio production techniques. Disco's lack of radical language was a reflection of Black America's tentative and cautious upward mobility. The seemingly banal lyrics allowed disco to reach a wider white audience but made it vulnerable to accusations of being called inauthentic.

### **Music as an Identity**

I began this essay by saying I don't really care for disco, and I had intended for this research to help me process why. A simple assessment would be that it sounds gay and represents a period of gay culture, and I'm uncomfortable with gayness. Thus, I must conclude that to eradicate my own self-hatred, I must learn to love disco. But that's not really how taste works, is it?

Disco borders on music I really like. I love '70s funk bands like Earth Wind and Fire, and I love some of the music that evolved out of disco like Chaka Khan and Michael Jackson. Many

of my straight musician colleagues surely feel the same way as I do. They may not share my discomfort with disco (or perhaps they do), but it's not as aesthetically pleasing to us. So where do our musical tastes come from?

Scientific research has shown that an individual's taste in genre can be determined by factors like socioeconomic background, where a person grew up, and how they wish to be perceived by others. Musical taste is a deeply personal expression, but it is also a social one. Your musical taste is a reflection of your values and social status. Personality traits do also factor into our taste. A 2003 study by Peter Rentfrow and Samuel Gosling from the University of Texas at Austin found that if you broke down music into four categories: reflective and complex, intense and rebellious, upbeat and conventional, and energetic and rhythmic, listeners that fell into one of these categories shared some noticeable similarities in personalities and values.<sup>5</sup> There is also the quality of an individual's thinking style that influences our taste in media. Whether you are someone who is a more empathic thinker or a more systematic thinker also influences taste.

I'm beginning to think about identity as the triangulation of communities one chooses to belong to. Some communities we are born into, some communities we form based on similar traits, values and experiences, and some communities we are motivated to be a part of for social and/or status reasons. Our relationship to these various communities may change throughout life, and our identities will reflect that change. Since the most significant identity formations happen

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<sup>5</sup> Peter J. Rentfrow and Samuel D. Gosling, "The Do Re Mi's of Everyday Life: The Structure and Personality Correlates of Music Preferences.," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 84, no. 6, (2006) pp. 1236-1256.

during adolescence, it's often the experiences and tastes we develop as teenagers that stick with us throughout our lives.

As a queer person who came out later in life, I wonder how my tastes might be different if I hadn't always sought to be part of communities that were culturally masculine. Finding music and the arts as a teenager certainly made me feel more free than the years I spent on sports teams. Yet I still sought the security of being around other straight men. The jazz culture I experienced as a student had an element of hyper-masculinity to it. The emphasis on soloing, though it's a beautiful form of intuitive creativity and self expression, creates an atmosphere of competition. The music gives every performer the opportunity to step boldly into the spotlight and show the world what they have to offer, like a peacock showing his proud feathers. In the expert hands of a seasoned musician, that moment can be an expression of any number of vulnerable human experiences and emotions. But in the hands of teenage boys, soloing is about who can play the fastest, the loudest, the highest. Like many activities, it became (for myself and my peers) about showing how manly one can be.

It's a gross oversimplification of the art form of jazz to say that it's primarily about proving one's manhood. As a grown professional jazz musician, it brings me great joy to express all of my humanity through the music as best I can. But jazz education does exist within the patriarchal framework of our society. Certainly as a student of music I didn't just want to fit in with my peers for their social acceptance; I wanted the approval of my professors and peers of my creative work as well. The lessons I learned shaped my creative process and artistic aesthetic. I learned at the New School that authenticity meant being *unafraid* to be yourself. I remember being told in a classroom that those of us that got the best grades probably would not be the ones

to go on to be the most influential musicians. When I was a graduate student at New York University, I brought in a chart by Esbjorn Svenson Trio, and the coach kind of rolled his eyes, smiled at me and said sarcastically, “I think you might be a fag.” ’And we both laughed heartily. Because I knew he was doing that thing that men do to tease each other, and I didn’t want to show weakness. All these little lessons I learned—being “unafraid,” (which I translated to never *admitting* that I was afraid,) rejecting the conformity of my own institution, and not being seen as weak—are about being an artist that is culturally masculine. These were the incentive structures I grew up with. I can’t change their influence over me. The gay music that I create will always be layered with elements of my culturally masculine aesthetic, and that is what is authentic about my music. It is a representation of the many layers of my identity.

### **Disco, Depicted: *Saturday Night Fever***

Of all the interesting twists and turns of disco’s relatively short existence, the idea that the film *Saturday Night Fever* has come to embody disco culture has to be one of the weirdest parts of this story. I can’t think of disco without thinking of its campiness, yet *Saturday Night Fever* is not a campy film. It’s an incredibly dark story, and kind of a disturbing one at that.

At this time in film’s history, the movie industry had not fully understood or embraced the potential profitability of using popular music to bring audiences to the theater. The first producer to see this potential was Robert Stigwood. Having recently brought two musicals to the silver screen (*Tommy* (1975), and *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973-), his next move was to sign a young television actor, John Travolta, to a three-picture deal for the at the time unheard-of price of one million dollars. The genesis for the movie was an article in *New York Magazine* by Nik

Cohn called “Inside the Tribal Rites of the New Saturday Night.” Years later, the author admitted he made up “Vincent,” the main character of his article. Cohn had traveled to several discos in the city, and the Odyssey 2001 was a real place in Bay Ridge populated by a working-class clientele, but Cohn never set foot inside the nightclub. When we later discuss the cultural implications of rebranding disco as a white working-class art form, it is fascinating to consider that the origin of this white centering is completely fictitious. However, Robert Stigwood bought the rights to the story on the day of its publication.

The film itself is the story of Tony Manero, played by Travolta, a disillusioned youth trapped in a dreary working-class life, whose one talent is dancing. My first impression of watching this movie was abject shock. Tony Manero, while performed peerlessly by Travolta, is vulnerable and charming at times, but he’s also an irredeemable villain of a person. I don’t get the sense the filmmakers intended the audience to see him as a villain, but rather as the troubled hero of the story. Early in the film, he harasses a gay couple for beings “fags.” He attempts to rape his love interest because he’s feeling sad. Moments later he is sitting in the car while his friends all gang rape a girl he has an on-again, off-again relationship with. And while he doesn’t directly participate in this rape, (which, ok good I guess..?) after it’s over and they are alone in the car, while she weeps quietly he tells her, “Are you proud of yourself? Did you get what you wanted? Good, cuz that makes you a cunt.”

Despite my initial shock, I’ve been trying to see this movie through the lens of history, and not judge it solely through the cultural standard of 2022. Through reading some critical

analysis of the film, I think one could make the case that this an antiracist, anti-social hierarchy film, that depicts racism, homophobia, and misogyny for what they are, which is ugly.<sup>6</sup>

Tony Manero is a kid with no upward mobility living in a post-industrial New York City outer borough. The idea of masculinity is ever-present in the film, which, for a film embodying disco culture, kind of makes sense in a weird way. Tony's masculinity is different from that of his father, because he's focused on his appearance, which his father considers to be feminine. His father is a menacing presence in his life, but mostly because he too feels emasculated by the fact that he lost his job. The film depicts Tony's misogynistic behavior and gang mentality to demonstrate the downward pressure men feel when their masculinity is challenged.

When considering the film's overt homophobia, one has to decide whether to accept the ugliness depicted as an intentional storytelling device, or see it as a film that is itself homophobic. I have mixed feelings as to what is the correct response, but it can be argued that the fact that gay themes are bubbling below the surface reinforce the ugliness of social hierarchy. There are some notable slow panning shots of Travolta in his underwear. Centering his male beauty is a subversive filmmaking choice.

There is also a very well-hidden queer character in Bobby, a member of Tony's gang, who is always a little less cruel and aggressive than his peers. The only clues the film provides is that he hides from a fight the gang instigates, and throughout the film, he is desperately trying to

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<sup>6</sup> See also: Echols, *Hot Stuff*, 159-194.

J. Kupfer, "Stayin' Alive": Moral Growth and Personal Narrative in "Saturday Night Fever," *The journal of popular film and television*. (2007) 170-178.

Chris Jordan, "Gender and Class Mobility in Saturday Night Fever and Flashdance." *The Journal of Popular Film and Television* 24, no. 3. (2010) 116-122.



find someone who can help him get out of marrying a girl he got pregnant. In his final moments in the film, before falling off a bridge (perhaps on purpose) He cries at Tony that “You never called, you said you would call.” The implication is that Bobby is queer-coded, and his idolization of Tony may also be romantic in nature. This inclusion of a queer-coded character is significant, but it is interesting how painstakingly hidden the clues about Bobby’s queerness are. How the filmmakers are so cavalier about one taboo subject (rape) and yet scrupulously careful about another says a lot. It would seem that unfortunately misogyny is so prevalent that rape is not actually taboo to these creators at all.

Again, that this movie came to represent disco culture is mind-boggling. For instance, a colleague of mine, Ray Anderson, is from Chicago, so I asked him if he remembered anything about *Disco Demolition Night*. He had moved away from Chicago in the early '70s and never really got into the disco scene, so he couldn't add much insight, but unprompted, he said that he remembered *Saturday Night Fever*. What I find unfortunate about the ubiquitousness of this film is that it redefined disco as a straight and white culture. The film told a story about the pressures and changing perceptions of masculinity, but the consequence of this straight white centering was to erase and replace what the meaning of disco was. Disco was not about competitive dance moves. For gay men, it was about the freedom to be yourself. It was about claiming one's personhood by congregating and creating gay spaces. It was about validating the expression of feminine emotions in mainstream culture. It was a reaction to patriarchal oppression.

In the aftermath of *Disco Demolition* night, when many of the records burned were the Bee Gees *Saturday Night Fever* soundtrack, the Bee Gees responded bitterly by saying:

“We’re not really a disco group. We do all kinds of music. What happened with *Saturday Night Fever* is we had to write the music and we did so. And they used the film as a disco film, and we weren’t aware that is what they were going to do. And I think the songs stand on their own apart from disco.”<sup>7</sup>

Everything in that statement is true, and I can understand the desire of any artist not to be pigeonholed, but it’s an old story for white artists to claim ownership of a musical style they didn’t pioneer for as long as it is convenient for them, and then claim independence from the genre once it becomes oversaturated (mostly as a result of appropriation).

For me, the film does serve as a landmark, and an authentic examination of all the prejudices and anxieties that permeated the disco era. In its depictions of homophobia, misogyny, and racism, it touches on subject matter that is highly relevant to the disco movement, and introduced the question of how to define masculinity. What fascinates me endlessly about popular music in a multicultural, democratic, and capitalist society, is how much the music is a signifier for the values of the time period: the society’s views about sex and gender. The fears and the desires of the collective unconscious of those who were on the scene and those who were consumers. It’s so meaningful, but it’s also a complete Rorschach test. Tony Manero’s disco was a new masculinity: tough, but flashy and inviting of the female gaze. For others, disco was the sound of gay liberation. And for the music’s detractors, it was hedonism. Even looking at music from a historical perspective, I can’t help but project some of my sensibilities. While it’s impossible to ascribe one definition of what a music genre is, by looking at the whole picture, we can get a sense of how the fractured society felt, and that is the actual story of the music.

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<sup>7</sup> *Mr. Saturday Night*, Directed by John Maggio (Home Box Office, 2021)

As a result of the film's success, disco culture greatly expanded across suburban white America from 1977-1979. It was during these years that the backlash to disco and the 'disco sucks' movement really began to gain steam. One of the leading spokesman for this movement was a charismatic radio personality from Chicago named Steve Dahl.

### **Steve Dahl**

Steve Dahl was a rock radio disc jockey from Chicago. Friends describe him as a somewhat shy person, who needed alcohol to unleash his larger-than-life radio personality. Looking at photos, he is slightly chubby, and wears large frame glasses. He bears a resemblance to the actor Jack Black. One can sense that his appeal to the self identified 'nerds' was not insincere and a part of his own cultural identity as well. In 1978 he was working for WDAI, a Chicago rock station, as a radio personality when he was abruptly fired right before Christmas so that the station could change to a disco format. Because of the success of *Saturday Night Fever*, radio stations were changing formats at breakneck speed all across the country. When Dahl found a new job three months later at a lower salary, he started his "disco sucks" campaign on-air.

I've read a lot of criticism about Steve Dahl. His on-air verbal fusillades at disco were vitriolic. In the podcast, *You're Wrong About*, podcast hosts Sarah Marshall and Michael Hobbes frame these attacks as coded racist and homophobic. He's quoted as calling disco "the dreaded musical disease" and stating that it represents "a cultural void." Sarah Marshall pontificates:

“This is just dawning on me now, but it seems like cultural criticism is such a great way of just being racist, and it’s just incredibly violent rhetoric we are allowed to get away with by being like ‘I just have very specific tastes in songs!’”<sup>8</sup>

I will not defend everything that Dahl has said. In fact, I’d like to acknowledge that I think his rhetoric was really playing with fire. By using such hyperbolic rhetoric, he knowingly or unknowingly was playing with racist, homophobic, and misogynistic tropes. His act at Disco Demolition night would be to blow up records in front of an audience, which was courting the kind of riot that ensued. However I thought it was important to attempt to understand Mr. Dahl in his own words, so I read his autobiography, *Disco Demolition: The Night Disco Died*. The introduction unexpectedly is written by one of my personal heroes, Bob Odenkirk.

Most people know Odenkirk from his dramatic acting in *Breaking Bad* and *Better Call Saul*. But I will always remember him for the sketch comedy show *Mr. Show with Bob and David*. For an essay about disco, I won’t go into all the things I loved about this show as a teenager (although I could), except to say that his offbeat absurdist comedy brought a nerdy kid like me endless enjoyment. Bringing the voice of a comedian I admire into an essay about queer theory and disco culture may seem superfluous but I think it demonstrate a conflict I have, and perhaps that of others like me. The conflict of building one’s identity around media figures who aren’t themselves queer. Odenkirk’s comedy is a reflection of my own humor, and humor is as much a fundamental part of my identity as my queerness. So Mr. Odenkirk’s words have weight with me. In the introduction Odenkirk writes:

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<sup>8</sup> Marshall, Sarah & Michael Hobbes. “Disco Demolition Night.” *You’re Wrong About*, 08/03/2020 Apple Podcast. <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/youre-wrong-about/id1380008439?i=1000487011024>.

Growing up in the Catholic family with the alcoholic dad (yawn), I loved anyone who was saying, ‘This garbage you see all around you? You got it right, it’s all garbage.’ When you’re a teenager, the bullshit detector is fresh out of the box and the batteries are charged full. Steve laughed at pop culture, and his favorite people were my favorite people: John Belushi, Bill Murray, Joe Walsh, funny people with one eyebrow raised at the world.<sup>9</sup>

He continues.

“Why did we hate disco? Well, I’d like to start by saying that I also hated Bob Hope and his smarmy double-entendre weirdness, Dean Martin and his phony “I’m a drunk and I don’t give a shit” act (believable though, on both counts), and all of that late seventies co-opted hippy culture.”

“Don’t trust a teenager who isn’t angry. Maybe being angry about the pop culture movement of the moment is an overreaction, but when I watch footage of Disco Demolition, I still feel a connection to that group of teenagers and what happened that night. It was bigger than anything my generation of Chicago kids had seen. And no one expected it. Even if you loved baseball, it was so fun to see something so big and official like a pro baseball game go off the rails. Steve in that army helmet, Jimmy Piersall losing his mind, and those kids—they looked like me and my friends—all those kids walking around in the clouds of lingering smoke, laughing, sliding into base, being stupid and reckless and wild.”<sup>10</sup>

When you separate out the white privilege of that statement - that white teenagers are allowed to rebel and destroy property with minimal repercussions whereas Black teenagers are killed or otherwise suffer lifelong consequences for their youthful transgressions - I completely understand the sentiment. If I had the opportunity as a teenager to join with other teens who felt disillusioned with the social hierarchy of high school and rebel against popular culture, I would absolutely take part in it. And I understand Odenkirk’s lasting feeling of righteousness in that moment. We can look at it from the adult perspective that this was a childish futile display. A

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<sup>9</sup> Steve Dahl et al., *Disco Demolition: The Night Disco Died* (Chicago, IL: Curbside Splendor Publishing, 2016). 12.

<sup>10</sup> Bob Odenkirk, “Introduction” in *Disco Demolition: The Night Disco Died* (Chicago, IL: Curbside Splendor Publishing, 2016). 12-15.

mess that working class adults had to clean up. But it can also be a reminder of the uncompromising passion and purity of rebelling. That's something adult life constantly grinds away from you as you have to make career, financial, and family choices that compromise your convictions. It's the ethos of rock 'n' roll. To be uncompromising. To flip off the man and not care about the consequences.

The problem with that narrative is multifaceted. Firstly, rock is also a commercial art form, just like disco. Secondly, knowing what you're rebelling against requires a whole lot of nuance! In 2022, there are endless avenues for grifters and communities based around exploiting the passions of this feeling. The fear of "feminization" fuels the conservative right. The fear of displaying male attractiveness and women's autonomy is what created the "incel" (involuntary celebrates) community. Anti-corporate and anti-government sentiments can drive one to conspiracy theory communities and other dark ideologies. Rebelling requires us to blame the cause of our angst on something external. Truthfully, we live in a world that is full to the brim of inequities and corruption. But it requires education to aim that agita at the right target. Social movements are community-driven, which often create echo chambers.

Dahl was one of the first ever "shock jocks." He angled himself as an avatar for southside Chicagoans averse to late night clubs with red ropes. "Kids in T-shirts with ripped jeans who wanted their music rough and loud." He writes:

Then Tony Manero was created. He was born from an article by a British writer who identified the disco world as the 'new Saturday night in New York.' [*Saturday Night Fever*] was a smash, the soundtrack exploded. The principle of crossing from being a nobody to a somebody, as pictured in the film, seemed to demand a repudiation of all things rough—like rock 'n' roll and bar nights. Chicago kids liked their Saturday nights just as they had been experiencing them. Dress up? No. Dance lessons? No.

Cover charge? Hell no. The Bee Gees had popped out a bouncy album, and the girls were ready to dress up, twirl, and be twirled. The storyline seemed to demean the ordinary life that kids inhabited in favor of Manhattan glitz. No.

“If anything, the pushback from disco saturation was an act of self-preservation. No kid, just figuring out who he was and where he was going, would be prepared to have his assimilated rock ‘n’ roll identity stripped from him. If the resistance was furious, it was because they were not prepared to shuck the uniform that sheltered them in their transition from kid to adult.<sup>11</sup>

Later he writes:

“I never wanted to mount or lead a social movement. I wanted to entertain and to provide a release for kids who had too little money and too much awkwardness for the dance world. I wanted to say, The music you revere is great, and you are okay just as you are.”<sup>12</sup>

There was naturally a feedback loop between Dahl and his fans, which probably propelled him to test boundaries in order to give his audiences what they wanted. From what I can gather, there are largely two categories that Dahl and his supporters’ gripes with disco fall into.

The first category is inarguably misogyny; not always in the sense of hating female empowerment, but certainly fearing it. Dahl complains about men having to “dress up,” and having to take dance lessons in order to take part in the Saturday night ritual (of trying to get laid). There’s a real fear and discomfort here with both the concept of dressing up and a fear of being on display. The idea that someone “has to dance” comes from a fear that you’re not going to be good at it. The thought that you could be laughed at and rejected, while imaging dancing can be a metaphor for sex, is pretty humiliating. Seeing men sexually objectified (like in

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<sup>11</sup> Dahl, *Disco Demolition*, 15.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

*Saturday Night Fever*) can both challenge your own sense of sexual identity or inflict one with feelings of jealousy and insecurity. It also wasn't just disco that Dahl despised. Rock was also careening towards the soft masculinity of embracing "talking about your feelings." Bands like Styx and the Eagles were singing power ballads. The lyrical content of a lot of disco songs Like "I Will Survive" or "We Are Family" were not aimed at the straight male consumer.

The second category is a rejection of commercialism, and yet one could argue this category does also tie into misogyny. Corporations have always aimed the marketing of fashion and glamor towards women. Women are held to a higher beauty standard, which allows corporations to more easily capitalize on these unrealistic standards. Rejecting corporations for creating insecurity and then selling consumers back their confidence through clothes and products makes sense to me. But it's hard to know if rock consumers were really rejecting capitalism or just rejecting the marketplace of products that challenged their own identities. They were, after all, buying rock albums and clothes that reflected their rebellious attitudes. Businesses have always profited by fueling the identity culture wars. Forming your identity around one commercial art form in opposition to another makes you a better consumer, because supporting that media financially feels like making a statement rather than just consuming entertainment. There is an evangelical aspect to American culture and capitalism. An artistic movement or fashion trend that stagnates, that doesn't continue to recruit more followers, is eventually replaced by the next movement that goes viral. There is a finite amount of space in mainstream culture for all of the vast competing cultures. When a rock station changed formats to disco, that is one less rock station that exists. So die-hard fans *must* support their media and recruit others as well.



By the late '70s, the record labels and corporations had been trying to sell the word “disco” in every product they could. They created disco cereal, disco toys, and disco fashion. Disco music was played at malls, and shopping complexes. The steady stream of campy disco records oversaturated the market. You had songs like “Disco *Star Wars*,” “Disco Duck,” and disco “Rasputin.” In this light, I have sympathy for Dahl’s point of view and that of his loyal fans like a young Bob Odenkirk. It’s not surprising that people find community around the idea of hating something. Even though I try to unpack my feelings about pop culture in an enlightened way, I still always feel a sense of camaraderie when I meet someone who dislikes the same things I dislike. All I have to hear is “I sure do hate Ed Sheeran” and I know they, like me, stood around awkwardly at their middle school dance thinking everyone else was better than them, and I instantly bond to that person. Musical identities are a placeholder for the emotions we associate with them, which I think is what Dahl was getting at. Rock fans were kids who felt like the rejects of their limited social hierarchy. They congregated in basements, drank beer, and listened to loud music. To these kids, disco was the pretty girl who rejected them. It was the bully who made fun of their appearance. These men who hated disco were ironically dealing with the same pressures that Tony Manero dealt with through dancing in *Saturday Night Fever*. The downward pressure on having your masculinity questioned.

Disco began as underground gay dance music. It became a platform for Black creators, specifically Black women. It was a reflection of America’s shifting relationship to masculinity, sexuality, and politics. Its cultural influence grew until its meaning was diluted by countless imitations—and then arrived July 12th, 1979: the night disco died.

## **Disco Demolition Night**

The night Steve Dahl hosted Disco Demolition Night at Comiskey Park was a double header for the Chicago White Sox. Comiskey Park was on the South Side of Chicago, and attendance for their games in 1979 was usually undersold. Attendance for this night was in excess of 50,000, record-breaking attendance for the park, and security was insufficient. Dahl refers to the night as “the most successful radio promotion event in history.”

After the first game of the double header, Dahl greeted his fans on the field and began blowing up piles of records with explosives. Shortly thereafter, things got out of hand as teenagers rushed the field. The second game had to be canceled, and the White Sox had to forfeit the game. No violence took place, other than damage to the field. The event gave Steve Dahl a national spotlight, and he went on to have a long successful career in radio broadcasting.

Did disco really die that night? Well, in a sense, the word “disco” did. Shortly after demolition night, WDAI (the radio station that had fired Dahl) changed formats back to rock, along with hundreds of other stations. The music and fashion had reached its peak and everyone found something to hate about it. It was simultaneously too girly, too commercial, too gay, too corny, too white, and too Black.

However, unlike the rockers who were desperately afraid of the death of rock, the disco-faithful seemed unconcerned with the supposed demise of disco. It was probably a relief to not have to listen to the ill-informed masses talk about it all the time. Radio stations changed, but the gay discos around the country didn't close. They remained an important center of the gay community up until the AIDS crisis in the mid-80s. The music that was popular throughout the

1980s was heavily influenced by disco, and, in my opinion, more creative now that form could be experimented with. The '80s embraced the synthetic sound the '70s had introduced, but there was an exciting rawness in how artists explored the use of new technologies like synthesizers and drum machines. Even today, disco's influence is prominent in popular music some 40-50 years later.

One of the central questions I wanted to explore in this essay was whether or not Disco Demolition Night was a homophobic and racist event. When I began this research, I suspected much of what I disliked about disco would be rooted in internalized homophobia, but I think identity is a little more nuanced than that. I've come to understand musical preferences are a complex cocktail of personality traits, values, and social influence. Identities are formed around feelings, and the necessity to belong somewhere. Whatever we feel is a part of our reality. Undoubtedly, internalized homophobia and misogyny are influences in the forming of my identity, but even though I believe I've outgrown some of those biases, my musical tastes haven't really changed. What I dislike about disco might have started as a resistance to perceived femininity or flamboyance in my closeted teens, but my aesthetic preferences are as mysterious as falling in love is. We can't help what we love, or whom we love.

So to the question of whether Disco Demolition Night was born of racism or homophobia I have to conclude; yes it was. But the scale of that bigotry matters as we discuss it. The ascendance of disco did prompt an organized anti-gay conservative movement led by people like Anita Bryant and Jerry Falwell. They, of course, saw disco as the nefarious tides of a secret gay agenda. However, Dahl never associated himself with anyone from that ideology. I've outlined what I think is problematic about the logic behind the "disco sucks" movement, but Dahl and

many of the accounts I've read fervently deny that the Demolition Night was about homophobia and racism. I think this distinction matters, even if we acknowledge that it's likely he and his followers had internalized aspects of bigotry. We don't have to fully buy this denial, but we can put it into context of the greater picture of one's intention and identity. While some of Dahl's criticism of disco was coded racist and homophobic, and while some of the teens who took part in the riot may very well have been overtly racist or homophobic, the target of Dahl's attack was disco, not Gay people or Black people directly. One could argue that culture wars are often fought with music and culture as a proxy for race or sexual orientation. But to be charitable, someone hating jazz does not necessarily mean they hate black people. There is not a 1:1 relationship between hating disco and overtly hating Gay people. I don't want my conclusion to be misconstrued as handwaving away racist and homophobic behavior. This topic was an attempt to explore the biases in myself and in society at large. The conclusions I'm drawing are political in nature, and the kind of politics I practice are charitable and measured because that is how I believe you build coalitions and impact change. I choose to practice forgiveness and understanding towards those that may cause harm through their words if I deem them to be not wholly expressed to cause damage. I also understand that not everyone in a marginalized community can feel the way that I feel about it. Despite having struggles in my life, it is perhaps the privilege of being able to pass as a straight white man that programs me to defend those in the majority. Regardless of my doubts, I can't help but see this event as the collision of sheltered kids rebelling against invisible foes, not understanding the realities of a complex world. They had seen the world purely through the white centering media they had absorbed. To most of them, Tony Manero and his white polyester suit was disco. In one account I read, a teenage boy

who brought a Marvin Gay record to burn had grabbed it from his sister's collection just to have something to bring.<sup>13</sup>

We can't always choose the aesthetic preferences we have, but we can choose how we talk about them. All aesthetic preferences are embedded with cultural bias, which will more than likely include some inherited bigotries. It's worth examining the cause of these preferences, and you may even learn to outgrow some of your preconceptions, but you may continue to prefer music that sounds masculine, or feminine, or to dislike a genre of music. Yet we should always treat these preferences as preferences and not ideologies. It's fun to argue about what music we love and what music we hate. To try and put words to the feelings music draws out of us is a beautiful way to connect with others and better understand yourself. But music only has the meaning we give it. No one's music has supremacy, and we wouldn't want it that way even if they did. There's something to be learned even from the music you find the most irritating. If you're curious enough to examine your feelings, the history of that music, and its creators, you may find it's hipper than you gave it credit for in the first place.

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<sup>13</sup> D.S. Racer, *Aethlon: The Journal of Sport Literature*, (Vol. 35, Issue 2).

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