

In Which Yet Another Pompous Blowhard Purports to Possess the True Meaning of Punk Rock

Lester Bangs

All the shit they play on the radio today—it lacks the true meaning of rock, which is sex, subversion, and style. Rock 'n' roll is pagan and primitive and very jungle, and that's how it should be. The moment it stops being those things, it's dead.

—Sex Pistols manager Malcolm McLaren (Kohut and Kohut 1994, 18)

The kids want misery and death. They want threatening noises because that shakes you out of your apathy.

—John Lydon of the Sex Pistols (Kohut and Kohut 1994, 101)

Lester Bangs is the most celebrated critic in the history of rock. A wild man and visionary armed with a pugnacious attitude and original writing style, which he claimed was based on the sound and language of rock and roll itself (Bangs 1987, ix), he was an early champion of punk rock. According to Bangs, punk means rock "in its most basic, primitive form," and it has thus been around from the beginnings of rock 'n' roll. Here he expounds upon what he sees as the true meaning of not only punk, but of rock itself, delivering a manifesto for both: the essence is passion. Rock must be first and foremost "a raw wail from the bottom of the guts."

Punk rock was hardly invented by the Ramones in Queens, NY, in 1974–5, any more than it was by the Sex Pistols in London a year or so later. You have to go back to the New York Dolls.

The truth is that punk rock is a phrase that has been around at least since the beginning of the seventies, and what it at common means is rock & roll in its most basic, primitive form. In other words, punk rock has existed throughout the history of rock & roll, they just didn't call it that. In the fifties, when rock & roll was so new it scared the shit out of parents and racists everywhere, the media had a field day. This stuff was derided mercilessly, it was called 'unmusical', it was blamed for juvenile delinquency, sexual depravity (well . . .), if not the demise of Western civilization as a whole. It was said that the musicians could not play their instruments; in large

part, by any conventional standards (what they used to call 'good' music), this was true. Does that matter now to the people who are still listening to those classic oldies twenty years later? It was said that the singers could not sing, by any previous 'legitimate' musical standard; this was also true. It was written off nearly everywhere as a load of garbage that would come and go within a year's time, a fad like the hula hoop.

Is any of this beginning to sound vaguely familiar?

The point is that rock & roll, as I see it, is the ultimate populist art form, democracy in action, because it's true: anybody can do it. Learn three chords on a guitar and you've got it. Don't worry whether you can 'sing' or not. Can Neil Young 'sing'? Lou Reed, Bob Dylan? A lot of people can't stand to listen to Van Morrison, one of the finest poets and singers in the history of popular music, because of the sound of his voice. But this is simply a matter of exposure. For performing rock & roll, or punk rock, or call it any damn thing you please, there's only one thing you need: NERVE. Rock & roll is an attitude, and if you've got the attitude you can do it, no matter what anybody says. Believing that is one of the things punk rock is about. Rock is for everybody, it should be so implicitly anti-élitist that the question of whether somebody's qualified to perform it should never even arise.

But it did. In the sixties, of course. And maybe this was one reason why the sixties may not have been so all-fired great as we gave them credit for. Because in the sixties rock & roll began to think of itself as an 'art-form'. Rock & roll is not an 'art-form'; rock & roll is a raw wail from the bottom of the guts. And like I said, whatever anybody ever called it, punk rock has been around from the beginning – it's just rock honed down to its rawest elements, simple playing with a lot of power and vocalists who may not have much range but have so much conviction and passion it makes up for it ten times over. Because PASSION IS WHAT IT'S ALL ABOUT – what all music is about.

In the early sixties there was punk rock: 'Louie, Louie' by the Kingsmen being probably the most prominent example. It was crude. It was rude, anybody could play it, but so what? It'll be around and people everywhere will still be playing it as long as there's rock & roll left at all. It's already lasted longer than *Sgt Pepper*! Who in the hell does any songs from that album anymore? Yet, a few years ago, some people were saying *Sgt Pepper* will endure a hundred years.

Seventies punk largely reflects a reaction against the cult of the guitar hero. Technical virtuosity was not a *sine qua non* of rock & roll in the first place and never should have become. Not that brilliant rock hasn't been made by musicians whose technical chops were and are the absolute highest. But see, that's JUST THE POINT. Just because something is simpler than something else does not make it worse. It's just the kind of hype a lot of people started buying in the late sixties with the rise of the superstar and superinstrumentalist concepts.

There was punk rock all through the sixties. The Seeds with 'Pushin' Too Hard'. Count Five 'Psychotic Reaction'. 'Talk Talk' by the Music Machine. And many others. It was simple, primitive, direct, honest music. Then, in 1969, Iggy and the Stooges put out their first album. Throughout the seventies, that and their subsequent two albums became cult items with small groups of people all over the world,

who thought these records were some of the greatest stuff they had ever heard. They were also some of the simplest: two chords, a blaring fuzztone, Iggy singing lyrics as simple as 'Can ah cum ovah to-nat? Can ah cum ovah to-nat? Uh said uh we will have a real cool taam – to-naaat! We will hayuv-a reeal cool taam! To-naat! Get it? It was, as Ed Ward wrote in *Rolling Stone* when it appeared, 'A reductio ad absurdum of rock & roll that might have been thought up by a mad DAR General in a wet dream.' Except where he was being sarcastic, I thought that was a compliment: the Stooges' music was brutal, mindless, primitive, vicious, base, savage, primal, hate-filled, grungy, violent, terrifying and above all REAL. They meant every note and word of it.

Enter the Dolls. They might have taken some cues from the Stooges, but who they really wanted to be was an American garage band Rolling Stones. And that's exactly what they were. Everything about them was pure outrage. And too live for the time – '72-3-4 mostly. They set New York on fire, but the rest of the country wasn't ready for it.

I was talking to a guitarist friend, and the subject of the Dolls came up.

'God,' she said, 'the first time they were on TV, we just couldn't believe it, that anybody that shitty would be allowed to do that! How did they get away with it?'

I felt like throwing her out of my house. They didn't 'get away' with anything. They did what they could and what they wanted to do and out of the chaos emerged something magnificent, something that was so literally explosive with energy and life and joy and madness that it could not be held down by all your RULES of how this is supposed to be done! Because none of 'em are valid! Rock & roll is about BREAKING the form, not 'working within it'. GIVE US SOME EQUAL TIME. Let the kid behind the wheel. Like Joe Strummer of the Clash says, 'It's not about playin' the chords right, for starters!'

The Dialectic of Disco: Gay Music Goes Straight

Andrew Kopkind

Disco is the word. It is more than music, beyond a beat, deeper than the dancers and their dance. Disco names the sensibility of a generation, as jazz and rock—and silence—announced the sum of styles, attitudes, and intent of other ages. The mindless material of the new disco culture—its songs, steps, ballrooms, movies, drugs, and drag—are denounced and adored with equal exaggeration. But the consciousness that lies beneath the trendy tastes is a serious subject and can hardly be ignored: for it points precisely where popular culture is headed at the end of the American '70s.

Disco is *phenomenal*—unpredicted and unpredictable, contradictory and controversial. It has spawned a new \$4 billion music industry, new genres in film and

theatre, new radio stations, a new elite of promoters and producers, and a new attitude about the possibilities of party going. It has also sparked major conflicts: "Death to Disco" is written on SoHo walls and "Disco Sucks!" rises from the throats of beleaguered partisans of rock, punk, or jazz who find their cultural identity threatened by disco's enormous commercial power.

Scenes from disco wars erupt across the landscape. Gangs of rockers and hustlers (the dancing kind) fight furiously in the streets outside disco clubs in provincial cities. When Mick Jagger or Rod Stewart "goes disco" (with "Miss You" and "Do You Think I'm Sexy?" respectively), their cultural conversion is debated in hip salons as well as in the *New York Times*. The rock critical establishment still treats disco music as an adolescent aberration, at best; many cultural commentators look on the whole sensibility as a metaphor for the end of humanism and the decline of the West.

The sense of the '60s provided coherence, contest, and validity to rock, when the critics of an earlier era proclaimed such sounds to be junk. Rock was "our music": only "we"—whoever we were—knew that it was good and what parts of it were best. The music was riding an historical tide; it was the sound of the politics, the expectations, the explorations, and the institutions of an era. It was the background music as well as the marching melody for civil disobedience, sexual liberation, crunchy granola, and LSD. The Buffalo Springfield's "For What It's Worth" was perfect music-to-avoid-the-FBI-by. "Street Fighting Man" was made for trashing draft boards. "Mr. Tambourine Man" was for smoking dope. "Up the Country" was for dropping out of the city. "Let It Be" was for letting it be.

History hardly stops. Disco in the '70s is in revolt against rock in the '60s. It is the antithesis of the "natural" look, the real feelings, the seriousness, the confessions, the struggles, the sincerity, pretensions and pain of the last generation. Disco is "unreal," artificial, and exaggerated. It affirms the fantasies, fashions, gossip, frivolity, and fun of an evasive era. The '60s were braless, lumpy, heavy, rough, and romantic; disco is stylish, sleek, smooth, contrived, and controlled. Disco places surface over substance, mood over meaning, action over thought. The '60s were a mind trip (marijuana, acid); Disco is a body trip (Quaaludes, cocaine). The '60s were cheap; disco is expensive. On a '60s trip, you saw God in a grain of sand; on a disco trip, you see Jackie O. at Studio 54.

In describing "camp" in her influential essay 15 years ago, Susan Sontag remarked that "a sensibility (as distinct from an idea) is one of the hardest things to talk about." It is "not only the most decisive, but also [the age's] most perishable, aspect. To name a sensibility, to draw its contours and to recount its history, requires a deep sympathy modified by revulsion."

The performance and production of disco music creates a technical and economic foundation on which the intangible aspects of culture and sensibility develop. The ways in which the sounds are chosen, the records produced, the performers packaged, and the cultural artifacts marketed will profoundly influence the styles we see.

Disco, first of all, is not a natural phenomenon in any sense. It is part of a sophisticated, commercial, manipulated culture that is rooted exclusively in an urban environment. Disco music is produced in big cities and its fashions are formed in big cities, at considerable expense, by high-priced professionals. Almost as an afterthought is the product then disseminated to the provinces. All the sparkle, speed, cynicism, and jaded irony associated with metropolitan life is attached to disco. It is far from wholesome. Provincials may either envy or abhor it. But it belongs to the city.

"Disco is a New York thing. It happened here," says Kenn Friedman, the 26-year-old promotion wizard of Casablanca Records. "And it still happens here." Of a week-

end evening in the city, Friedman may commandeer the label's limo—or slip out on his own—and make the rounds of the hottest New York clubs: Infinity, Flamingo, Les Mouches, Studio 54, 12 West. He holes up with the disc jockeys in their sound booths, then quickly moves out onto the dance floors, soaking up the spirit of the music and catching the response of the crowds. He and his crew are eminently successful (Casablanca is the new miracle mogul in the disco record business) because he can feel the hits.

"I know what will be number one, what the hottest record is going to be on the street this weekend," Friedman told me matter-of-factly. At the time we spoke he predicted it would be James Wells's "My Claim to Fame"; and sure enough, when I went round to the clubs the next Saturday, it was the song that provoked the peak excitement of the night. "I can't tell you exactly how I know, but it's because I'm part of the culture, I love to dance, I love the music."

Dancing is what does it. Last week at Casablanca's "Casbah"—the company's New York digs in an arabesque townhouse on 55th Street—I found Casablanca's top disco director, Marc Simon, boogying excitedly in Friedman's cramped office. Just back from the world record industry's annual congress in Cannes, Simon was effusive about the "completely new sound" his label will introduce as its 1979 line later this month. The first group making this as-yet unknown music is called Nightlife, and Simon says he's banking his business (\$100 million last year) on his intuitions.

"I heard a different producer's sound every 15 minutes, five hours a day, all the time I was in Cannes," Simon said coolly, "and I picked the ones I felt were going to be the *dance* hits. While the sounds of disco are highly synthesized, the hits cannot be completely determined. Nobody dreamed up the whole disco promotion campaign in the first place. "In the beginning we used to dance to the best rhythms from Motown and other rhythm-and-blues records," Simon recalled. "There was nothing called 'disco' back in the '60s—just Diana Ross, Freda Payne, the Temptations." Then the producers in Philadelphia—Gamble and Huff—started making a specific disco sound, with the familiar heavy beat and the modified samba rhythm.

By reckonings, the first big disco hit—as *disco*—was Gloria Gaynor's 1974 top-of-the-charts "Never Can Say Good-bye." Others pick "Love's Theme," by Love Unlimited Orchestra. But the record companies seemed bewildered by what they had, and promo people continued their quirky disregard of the disco category in their portfolios. Instead, they inflated passing fancies into seismic cultural events: Peter Frampton, reggae, and punk, for example. Not that some of those sounds or stars lacked merit; certainly Springsteen, Bob Marley, and the best of the New Wave deserve seats high in rock and roll heaven. But disco would soon swamp them all, and nobody was watching.

There are real differences in disco numbers that those who have learned to appreciate the music—and dance to it—can easily distinguish but may be missed by others. "All disco sounds alike" is commonly heard among rock fans; it is a bit like Caucasians saying, "All Chinese people look alike." Certain features of disco songs hardly vary from one tune to another (compare: flat noses or epicanthic folds). If you look for continuous changes in beat or for nuances of poetry in the lyrics, you will find few differences among disco songs. But the lengthy *construction* of a disco record (more than a "song") and its emotional *intensity* are highly changeable aspects, and may account for success or failure.

Or they may not. The fact is that while disco is racing to new levels of sophistication and elaboration at high speed, there is yet no reliable test for a hit. The reason is that the disco phenomenon has turned the pop industry upside-down, as no development has since the advent of '60s rock.

First, the disco wave crashed on unseen shores, catching producers and musicians without adequate cultural or commercial bearings. There were few critics to say what was good or bad—that is, what their readers or listeners should buy. There were no researchers to test the market; no one knew what questions to ask. The one or two music writers who dove into disco—notably the *Voice's* frequent contributor, Vince Aletti—often felt overwhelmed by the legitimacy and power wielded by the rock establishment, and they hid their opinions under barrels or in closets.⁴

Second, the primary sales medium of popular records changed, from radio for rock to dance clubs for disco. The shift entailed no small change: billions of dollars had come to rest on the "airplay" system of marketing music. Consumers heard their tunes on the air and rushed to their dealer for the vinyl version. Now, there were no stations, AM or FM, playing disco music as a regular feature of their format.

The third major change that disco wrought in the industry was the concentration of performance. For all its New York and L.A. stars, rock was a decentralized popular form. It carried provincial and suburban values with it as it came up the river from Mississippi, or down the slopes from Colorado, or down the pike from Greenwich. Any four young people with axes and amps could start a band in the hinterlands, playing local clubs with a repertoire of original songs and "covered" hits of national stars. Some groups would work their way up to regional fame (J. Geils in Boston, the Allman Brothers in Atlanta) and then make it big in the continental markets.

But disco must be produced in a few studios in the urban centers—here and abroad. If there is talent in the small towns it must travel to the big city *before* that process begins; and in so doing, the performers must shed their innocent attitudes and naïve notions before they open their mouths. Donna Summer began in Boston and in Germany and Austria (singing pop and folk opera, as well as other genres) before Casablanca launched her record career as a cosmopolitan sex siren.

"People don't want local bands anymore," says John "T.C." (for Top Cat) Luongo, an impresario in MK Promotions, one of the country's leading disco promotional companies (it is largely responsible for the success of the *C'est Chic* album). "They'd rather hear the stars on records over sensational sound systems than listen to the local rock band play third-rate versions of old hits."

Many of the disco "stars," of course, are nonpeople—interchangeable studio musicians who shuttle between group names, from one album to the next. MFSL, Love Unlimited, and many of the Philadelphia bands of the mid-'70s were composed of the same people, give or take the odd sideman. Salsoul, the Ritchie Family, and other current hot groups are wholes that add up to less than the sum of their parts. Only recently have genuine musicians broken through disco anonymity into stardom: Donna Summer and the Bee Gees, for better and worse, are the best example of the new personalized wave.

Fourth, disco facilitated the birth of a lucrative subcategory of record sales—the new 33 rpm 12-inch "disco mix" or "long version." The Salsoul group, originally an Hispanic manufacturer of ladies' lingerie, made a more substantial fortune by turning from *schmatas* to the sounds of the Latin Hustle; Salsoul brought out some of the first big disco-mix 12-inches six years ago. The industry yawned. Now a 12-inch disco single can sell 17,000 copies in New York City alone, and the companies carefully regulate the availability of the various versions of a hit song to maximize sales. For example, Atlantic put 200,000 copies of the "Le Freak" disco mix on sale to stimulate

4. Aletti, cited earlier for his insightful early article on disco, eventually became involved in running RFC Records, a label devoted to disco.

interest in the *C'est Chic* album—then withdrew the long 12-inch single to eliminate competition for the high-priced package and the mass-volume 45 rpm versions.

Finally, the music business has been jolted by the sudden prominence of the record *producer* which the technical requirements of disco now entails. The European producers of the suave, lush "Eurodisco" sounds are perhaps the brightest lights: Giorgio Moroder, Cerrone, Alex Costandinos, Roger Tekarz. Many of them use their own names instead of their performers' to identify albums; thus, the latest album produced by Cerrone is called, simply, "Cerrone IV." Moroder uses the name "Giorgio" both as an album title and also as an advertisement for his productions; a sticker slapped on the new Three Degrees album announces "Produced by Giorgio," as rock albums feature the most familiar cut.

Today, the disco record industry is a mammoth \$4 billion enterprise—bigger than television, movies, or professional sports in America. "Disco accounts for about 40 percent of all the 'chart activity,'" Friedman estimated. By the end of the decade, half the top 100 songs on *Billboard's* lists will be disco numbers. Disco radio stations are sweeping the country. New York's WKTU is a story in itself: in nine months of disco programming (it used to send out "mellow rock") it has gone from the dregs of stations too low to rate to the number one broadcaster in the country, either AM or FM—beating out the gargantuan WABC. Boston's WBOS was miniscule before it went all-disco; it now tops the biggest FM rock stations in America's hottest "youth market." And there are 20,000 disco clubs in the U.S., earning \$6 billion annually.

What all this means is that a sizable hunk of capital in the entertainment industry is now in the hands of the disco elite—a mixed breed of newcomers, switchovers and fast dancers who had the sense to accommodate themselves to the sensibility of the '70s.

The new disco elite has its own vocabulary and its own values, and they are quite different from those of the rock entrepreneur. For one thing, the disco people have to feel like dancing—not autistic, explosive fits of movement but the more controlled, stylized dancing of the disco clubs. And for another, they have to be able to mingle and mix in gay discos as well as straight ones, for the locus of the emerging disco culture is pointedly in urban male homosexual society.

"There is a big cultural difference between rock and disco," Kenn Friedman said firmly, "and it's gayness. Some people don't like to talk about it, but it's true. Disco began in gay clubs. At first, it was just a case of speeding up the gap between records on the juke box. But that's how the concept of continuous music began. The disco club was the first entertainment institution of gay life, and it started in New York, as you would expect."

Disco promoter John Luongo agrees. "In the beginning, there was the gay audience for disco. The 'primo' disc jockeys were gay. Gays couldn't find any rock bands to play in their clubs, so they had to make records their own form of entertainment."

Not long ago, Kenn Friedman took John Brody around to several clubs on his Saturday night rounds, and Brody gave me this report:

"The intensity was different at Infinity, which is predominantly straight, and at 12 West, which is mostly gay. At Infinity the energy was lower, there was less emphasis on dancing. At 12 West everybody was dancing, and it was a kind of sexual thing. It was very powerful. There was a strong smell of poppers—amyl nitrate—in the air, and I guess a lot of people were high on whatever. That must be part of the mood. But the gays seemed a lot less hung up in their environment than the heterosexuals seemed in theirs. At 12 West, I looked at these people dancing at four in the morning; it looked like the last night of their lives."

Even so, Friedman did not take Brody to Flamingo, the most intense and emotionally powerful gay disco in New York. "I didn't think he could handle it," Friedman joked.

What Brody would have seen was this:

Flamingo is an enormous loft on the edge of SoHo, undistinguished by signs or lights. Members (who pay \$75 a year plus a substantial fee for each visit) start wandering in well after midnight on Saturday nights, the only day of the week the club is regularly open. By 3 A.M., several thousand people, almost entirely men, mostly shirtless and universally stoned, are dancing feverishly to the most imaginatively mixed, most persistently powerful music ever assembled in one continuous set. One wall of the danceroom is paneled with colored lights, which flicker and race at appropriate intervals in harmonious correlation to the music. Along another wall, a dozen or so men dance by themselves on a raised banquette, acting as erotic cheerleaders to the swirling crowd. The fume of poppers is overpowering.

Many Saturday night dances at Flamingo have a theme like a senior prom. Late last month there was a "Western/Tattoo" night, which featured a raised platform in the lobby where party-goers could be tattooed in their moments of relaxation from dancing. Another annual feature is the "Black Party"—named not for the race of the customers but for the suggested color of attire, the decorations, and the mood of the evening. Last spring's black party was one of the final Saturdays of the season—before Flamingo closes for the summer while its thousands of members repair to Fire Island for whatever adventures await them in dunes. Now this was some senior prom. In the entrance hall there were cages, platforms, and theatrical sets where various happenings were in progress, all in accordance with a vaguely S&M, "black," leather-gear theme. Some of the goings-on were semimentionable: people (actors?) were in chains, under the whip, groveling and groping, disheveled. Other attractions were unmentionable, and getting more so as the evening wore on. There were more people in the loft at 6 A.M. than there were at 1. When *do* these people sleep?

A strange fascination kept me at Flamingo past my bedtime, and I have returned many times in the months since then. Most often, the mood is lighter than on that black night (the "White Party" is coming up later this month), but the extravagant sense of theatricality is maintained. The throbbing lights, the engulfing sound, the heightened energy, and the hyperbolic heat of Flamingo gives me the sense (which I have heard that others share) that the world is enclosed in this hall, that there is only *now*, in this place and this time. It can be extraordinarily assaultive; I have felt trapped forever in a theater of sound, of flesh, like a character in Bunuel's *The Exterminating Angel*, unable to leave a party even after its positive appeal has fled. But what is worse is the prospect of a chill gray Manhattan dawn outside. Leaving is more depressing than staying: the disco beat is like a life rhythm, and to stop would be to create a killing thrombosis.

Danae—it's his *nom de disco*—is a well-known disc jockey on the New England and New York circuit. I asked him what he does to make the special blend of music that distinguishes the disco club sound from just "playing records":

"The mix starts at a certain place, builds, teases, builds again, and then picks up on the other side. The break is the high point. It's like asking a question, repeating and repeating it, waiting for an answer—and then giving the answer. That is the great, satisfying moment."

In practice, a "hot" disco mix in a dance club is a sexual metaphor; the deejay plays with the audience's emotions, pleasing and teasing in a crescendo of feeling. The break is the climax.

"That's the rush," Danae says. "The dancers cheer, they pump the air with their fists, they wave and shout. It's very exciting. I played at 12 West last Christmas, and it was one of the best nights I've ever had. After a while, someone came up to me, all excited, and said, 'You were fucking me with your music! Do me a favor, fuck me again with your music.' I took it as a great compliment."

"There's gay disco and straight disco, although there's overlap between the two," Danae continued. "Straight disco is heavy-duty funk, the driving sound, that has all the power without much of the emotion. Gays like to hear black women singers; they identify with the pain, the irony, the self-consciousness. We pick up on the emotional content, not just the physical power. The MFSB sound was gay; Barry White was a gay sound, so is Donna Summer, Gloria Gaynor. We knew the Tramp's 'Disco Inferno' was a great song years before it got into the *Saturday Night Fever* soundtrack. To me, the epitome of gay disco this year is Candi Staton. She's all emotion, you can feel it when she says, 'I'm a victim of the very song I sing.'"

There are contradictions within contradictions in the sexual implications of disco. Consider The Village People, the singing group that claims to hail from Greenwich Village and parodies the macho styles of its homosexual culture. One of the members is dressed as a leather biker, another as a construction worker, a third as an Indian, a fourth as a cowboy, and so on. They perform songs that extend the parody—notably "Macho Man" and "YMCA." For gays, the line "I want to be a macho man" from the mouths of these butch impersonators is a bit like "I want to be white" if it were sung by Stevie Wonder for a black audience.

Gays are amused by The Village People, but the group is finding its biggest fans among straights. "YMCA" is never heard at Flamingo. Kenn Friedman, whose Casablanca label produces the group (one of the most profitable in his stable) agrees:

"'Macho Man' did not happen in gay clubs but in straight ones. The Village People is the first gay-to-straight 'crossover' group, a group with an originally gay image and following that's made it in straight discos. The funny thing is that straights don't really believe the group is gay. They love 'em in Vegas and in tacky suburban dinner theaters in Midwestern shopping centers. Did straights ever catch on with Paul Lynde? With Liberace? People will protect their identity at all costs, they'll pretend to the last possible minute that it's all an act."

Gay activists have protested that Casablanca is deliberately closeting The Village People to make the act "safe" for straights. A Casablanca PR functionary says that producer Jacques Morali (who reportedly picked all the members except possibly the accomplished lead singer because of their tough good looks rather than their musical talent) became visibly upset when a *Newsweek* interviewer began probing into the gay issue. But the group is coming out, as it were, with ever more outrageous lyrics and postures. Their biggest hit to date is "YMCA," which concerns a young boy who comes into the big city, looks around for a place to hang out, and lands in a hostelry that is legendary in the gay community as a cruising spot. What did Middle America think it all meant when The Village People sang that number, with all the appropriate gestures, at the height of the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade on national television?

There are two levels on which The Village People's campiness works: the first is with the "knowing" gay audience, the listeners who are in on the joke, the images, the allusions (Fire Island, the bushes, Castro Street, Key West, the Y). The other is with the "naive" straight audience, the listeners who either don't know (or mind) what's going on in the lyrics, or else think it is all theatrical drag.

In much the same way, disco music as a whole appeals to a "knowing" audience that sees what Friedman calls the "cultural gayness" in it, and a naive audience that simply likes the fashion and the beat.

"The straights don't see the gay culture, they've only seen what they've made—the styles," Friedman says. Just before Casablanca's disco movie, *Thank God It's Friday*, opened across the country last year, Friedman took a short segment of it to several cities and showed it on videotape to selected audiences. Casablanca boss Bogart was worried that straight Americans would be offended if they detected the goings-on in the background of one sequence on the tape: two men were dancing together and sniffing amyl nitrate.

"I interviewed hundreds of people, showed it to thousands, and as far as I know not one straight person ever saw the men dancing, even after I showed the segment to them two or three times," Friedman reported. "And yet the gay viewers saw it immediately."

One more example: Paul Jabara's song, "Disco Queen," on the TGIF soundtrack, concerns a "queen" who is "known from L.A. to San Francisco to the Fire Island shore." She "even sleeps with her tambourine." She flirts with a handsome young marine. The chorus asks: "Where does she get her energy? Where does she get her energy?" *Really*. The images in the song are all attached to male homosexual styles. This queen is certainly a queen. But I'll bet heterosexuals never even consider the possibility that the disco queen is not a woman. To them, it's just another nice dance tune; which it is.

Disco became the theme music of gay culture in the '70s (not only in America but in Europe and Latin America as well). Of course, the straight audience now far outnumbers the gay one, but the music still has a special meaning for gays: if '60s freaks could say that rock was "our music," gays now say the same for disco. It is the background music for the activities and institutions of the burgeoning urban gay culture—for the shops, the bars, the restaurants, and the offices where gays go about their business. It is music for sex, for dancing, and for looking at the straight world go by. It is reassuring and supportive; in an important way, it is the sensational glue that unites a community.

But disco has deep roots and strong attachments in other cultural groups as well. Disco is, after all, a mixture of certain black rhythm-and-blues sounds, Latin forms, and an African beat.

New York's first major disco station was WBLS, a "black" radio outlet. Many of the best disco performers are black—while rock is bleached and white. For years disco suffered several disadvantages to total acceptance: major disco artists were black or Latin, many were women, the principal white audience was gay, and the nongay white audience was located in the urban ethnic working class—all reasons for cultural disability.

Saturday Night Fever illustrated the class aspect of disco for urban whites. While rock was infused with middle-class attitudes (although often downwardly mobile in its aspirations), disco was originally proletarian. One clue: the "weekend" theme reappears in disco lyrics, as in "Thank God It's Friday," "I Just Can't Wait for Saturday," "Funky Weekend," and, of course, in the film title *Saturday Night Fever* itself. Working-class kids toil all week and wait for their one big shot at fun, escape, and dreams on the weekend; they dress up, get drunk, and play out sexual fantasies in a community context.

Quite the other way with the rock culture: hippies hang out all week and can't tell Saturday night from Tuesday afternoon. They don't do much dancing, and when they do, they do not care much for dressing up, spending money, having dates, and controlling their movements on the dance floor.

There are certain immutable characteristics of rock culture: it is white, straight, male, young, and middle class. The exceptions to those rules prove them. For example, female stars and their songs must conform to male sexual fantasies—Linda

Ronstadt, Christine McVie. Black musicians must be chlorinated to make it up the rock charts—Jimi Hendrix, Stevie Wonder, Chubby Checker. What may appear to be lower-class images in rock usually turn out to be middle-class myths and fantasies: punk violence, “Working Class Hero” radicalism, dropout dreams. And performers who tinker with sexual stereotypes must remain determinedly “ambiguous” or turn up with partners of the opposite sex from time to time, to beard their offensive nakedness: Bowie with Angie, Jagger with Bianca, Elton John, Alice Cooper, the Kinks. Jagger may French kiss Ron Wood on *Saturday Night Live*, but it’s fortunate that he can lose a paternity suit with, figuratively, the same breath. Sexual deviation (like gender, class, and race aberrations from the norms) must be playful and let’s pretend: it cannot seriously threaten straight identity.

For a time, it appeared that disco culture might change those rules to a degree, particularly in the case of sexual identity. It now looks as if the dominant demands of American society will prevail, to no one’s great surprise. The past year has seen several disco stars or groups achieve the necessary “cross-over” effect, bringing the music out of the subcultural ghettos into mainstream life. The Bee Gees were crucial to that passage; they made disco safe for white, straight, male, young, and middle-class America. What Elvis Presley did for black rhythm and blues, and Diana Ross did for soul, and Elvis Costello did for punk, the Brothers Gibb have done for disco. Now all Nassau County is lining up for disco lessons. ‘60s survivors who steadfastly resisted disco because it was apolitical, or dehumanized, or feminine, or homosexual, or too Bay Ridge, are suddenly skipping to the beat. They have found what Gladys Knight calls out, in one of the best songs of the season: “It’s *better* than a good time.”

The rise of disco music occurred alongside the decline of rock, but whether there is connection between these two aesthetic events is not at all clear.

“Rock and roll is at an all-time low in creativity,” promoter John Luongo fretted. “It’s all rehashed material, there’s no freshness. I love rock,” he insisted, “and it’s where I started. But the music has let people down. There was a big hole, and disco filled it. There’s no other form of music that offers the power, the excitement, the party atmosphere of disco.”

Disco is the word, as grease was the word. It is a handle on the ‘70s, as the other was a metaphor for the ‘50s, for in the extraordinary cultural and commercial success of disco several of the new elements of this generation can be identified. Disco has many functions, but one of the most essential may be as a drug: it feeds artificial energy, communal good feelings, and high times into an era of competition, isolation, and alienation. As drugs go, it is not egregiously harmful, but it is easily abused, quickly tolerated, and naggingly addictive.

Sensibility is dialectical—which is to say that it grows from the material of history and the experience of society. It does not descend from the heavens of invention or corporealize out of thin air. The ‘70s sensibility emerged from the achievements and excesses, the defeats and triumphs of the years before. Our end is *always* in our beginning, and we are, as Candi Staton croons, the victims of the very songs we sing.

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