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too black,
too gay
the disco inferno

TIM LAWRENCE

*Love Saves the Day: A History of American
Dance Music Culture, 1970–1979*

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The event that supposedly announced ‘the death of disco’ is almost certainly better known than any event that marked its more obscure, subterranean beginnings. The July 1979 ‘disco sucks’ riots in Chicago’s Comiskey Park saw rock fans flood the sports ground and ritually burn their spurned disco records. Radio stations and clubs soon abandoned the sound in droves, declaring themselves opponents of ‘plastic’ and ‘mindless’ musical tastes. What was it about disco—ostensibly just another musical subculture—that elicited such an unusually public and virulent backlash? While the Comiskey Park spectacle has become one defining visual picture of the period, another more generic set of images, repeatedly endlessly since on TV, film, and in advertising, is the *Saturday Night Fever*, flares, Abba ‘n’ Bee Gees version, which has now achieved a status almost beyond cliché.¹ Disco, as made instantly stylistically identifiable by the media industries, caught the mainstream American public imagination for only perhaps two or three years. It saw a deluge of identikit fashion, cash-in films and *Studio 54* paparazzi shots. The disco fad burned so brightly, and then turned to ash, the story goes.

In *Love Saves the Day*, Tim Lawrence faithfully documents the accurate record of an exciting musical and subcultural journey, rescuing it from any diminished status as either an unfortunate glitch in the rock ‘n’ roll journey, or hokey nostalgia. From the late 1960s, weekly parties in David Mancuso’s Soho Manhattan loft saw Blacks, Italian-Americans, and Latin-Americans—mostly male, mostly gay—dancing to soul and funk records at all-night parties

that would reach a kind of frenzied nirvana. Mancuso would scour record stores for seven-inch Motown, Salsoul, and Stax/Volt soul and funk singles, and intersperse them with anything from classical preludes to African percussion records. He was also obsessed with fine-tuning the various elements of his parties—the lighting, decorations, refreshments and, most of all, the sound system—to maximise the powerful atmosphere of the event. Where for decades the jukebox had been the default record selector, the 1970s underground scene initiated the now-familiar idea of the DJ as part shaman, part superstar. As DJs competed to be the best, innovations were introduced, on an almost party-by-party basis. They were soon spinning two copies of the same single to extend the playing time, using records with a strong and heavy groove. DJs then started preparing their own extended versions of tracks with longer introductions, added instruments and a stronger bass drum. The effect was electric; converts increasingly came to base their waking lives around the parties, and friendly competition saw new parties established in otherwise disused spaces around New York.

One of the difficulties in writing a history of a phenomenon that has now become a well-worn facet of popular culture nostalgia rests with how to effectively evoke a sense of how the events at the time felt open and undetermined. For all its efforts to describe the excitement of the scene, *Love Saves the Day* has a curious lack of suspense. This is forgivable; we know roughly what was going to happen, the most interesting part is *how*. Yet, this topic of the underground-overground dynamic, which

is of particular interest for cultural studies theorists writing in the area of music subcultures, is one that Lawrence could have more thoroughly explored. He is not able to clearly explain how a movement that began with secretive, exclusive events could quickly come, by the mid-1970s, to apparently appeal to almost everyone (the evidence is the proliferation of mobile discos, sports club discos, office party discos, and even church discos). Particularly when we consider that the parties challenged many basic American social norms concerning sexuality, musicianship, drug use and forms of bodily interaction, we might expect Lawrence to consider whether dancing all night in a non-partnered format represented, for more mainstream audiences, a form of subversive escape, or perhaps an unleashing of dormant urges.

Lawrence explains the burgeoning popularity of disco as a result of, first, the irresistible appeal of certain key records pushed by the DJs and, second, a zeitgeist that was both economically depressed (dancing and cheap pills made for an inexpensive evening) and increasingly accepting of polymorphous sexuality and self-expression (particularly in the form of 'dressing up'). In the sections where Lawrence does attempt a more interpretive cultural analysis, the results are hit and miss. For instance, his suggestion that hauling boxes of records may have felt culturally familiar for Italian-American DJs, since their immigrant ancestors once did the same with their luggage, feels a little forced. (58)

More illuminating is his (brief) mention of the significance of how public gatherings of

those with alternative lifestyles moved from the fields and streets in the 1960s to behind closed doors in the 1970s. The conservative backlash against demonstrations and public militancy by the end of the 1960s (given the events at Kent State and Jackson State Universities, or the Altamont Music Festival), along with a more general feeling of disillusionment that 'the revolution' would not be forthcoming, meant that liberation became an increasingly private, personal affair. Interestingly, most of Lawrence's interviewees downplay the significance of the anti-police riots in the West Village, centered on the Stonewall Inn. This, in turn, causes Lawrence to muse whether the tentative public acceptance of gay lifestyles in the 1970s had less to do with activist organisations like the Gay Liberation Front, and more to do with trendsetters who were able to subvert dominant heterosexual masculinity through stylistic changes in popular culture. (184) This section of his discussion also valuably points out that, in contrast to most of those involved with 1960s countercultural movements, gay Black and Latino men had 'nothing to drop out from'. For them, disco was not something that explicitly protested in some kind of countercultural fashion, but was an affirmative statement.

Disco (or 1970s dance music, Lawrence's preferred tag) has not received anywhere near the same attention from cultural studies scholars as rock music (and punk in particular, with which it cohabitated). As a musical and subcultural form it certainly deserves increased attention, in the first place simply because DJ culture, remixing, and dancing all night had never come together in the same way, or with

the same intensity, previously. Second, greater attention to non guitar-rock musical forms would provide a corrective to the 'rockist' tradition that has emerged in cultural studies. While Lawrence offers no comments on the biases of scholarly popular musical criticism, another author, Reebee Garofalo, has acknowledged the importance of disco, which he states, 'may have scored a larger political victory than punk', because people of all colours were on the dance floor together.² Given that scholarly work on rock 'n' roll has tended to rely on a combination of lyrical analysis and the semiotics of key 'rebel figures' (even when focusing on issues of gender and sexuality),³ disco seems to offer critics fewer cues or angles with which to capture the movement—unless it is characterised through mindlessness, or abandonment. In the hope of casting some sort of fresh angle on the age-old question of what the music 'means,' it is better to ask: if music can mean, *where* does this meaning occur? In this case, meaning occurs in the formation of new, hybrid forms of community that came to be based, recursively, around knowing what *dancing to this music meant* (and investing one's sense of self in it). Given his subject matter, it is disappointing that Lawrence fails to discuss the 'politics of dancing' as it differs from the 'politics of rocking'. By foregrounding the body-of-dancers in context, a more nuanced understanding of identity and resistance (of the kind developed by Angela McRobbie) could result.⁴

Compared to other musical subcultures, where the music being heard spurred fans to do-it-themselves, the disco scene was very much concerned with doing what was needed

to create the vibe. Although the DJs competed by making new edits and remixes of their music, these weren't available for others to own, nor did they even wear the name of their creator. In other words, the party—not the record—was the product of which they were proud. The original musicians behind the records, for their part, tended to be established funk groups who worked with studio engineers, who were joined by a new breed of European studio producers (most notably, Kraftwerk). Increasingly, from 1976, record companies hired producers to make profitable 'disco mixes' of artists on their rosters. From Rod Stewart to Barry Manilow, anyone could receive the 'disco treatment'. Between the original DJs, who were heavily influential but largely obscure, and a later commodified band of musicians and movie stars (Village People, John Travolta), no pivotal and authentic disco icon has emerged whose body and performance can be held up for semiotic scrutiny (in an analogous way to, say, Elvis Presley, Sid Vicious, or Madonna). Yet *Love Saves the Day* does cast its focus on two key figures: David Mancuso and Nicky Siano. One was a free-spirited guru-like leader at the Loft, who warmed up with classical music and birdsong, did not mix his records, provided a fruit breakfast, and still holds his parties to this day. The other was a dress-up star who pioneered new mixing techniques, played joyous diva tunes, and burnt out with heroin addiction. These represent two coexisting strands of the same scene: one is associated with the music as a conduit for a journey into one's own mind; the other with the music as a glamorous way to show off sexually. That they

operated in the same scene, and did so cooperatively, points to do the productive tension between the cerebral and the sensual, or between tuning in and tuning out, that continues as a key dynamic of today's dance music scene.

Considering that Lawrence originally came to this project wanting to write a history of the (already far-better documented) 1990s rave scene, it is perhaps surprising that he focuses greatly on 'key players'. After all, disco provided the template for 1990s dance music, the analysis of which has focused as much on the experience of everyday dancers, as that of producers, promoters, or club-owners. Apart from the devoted disciples who attended the Loft, the Gallery, Reade Street and the Paradise Garage, we gain little sense of how others experienced the subculture—such as those on the fringes, those who dipped in and out, or why some found it too challenging, and why others were simply alienated. Indeed, this leads me to a criticism of the book's structure and focus. For the uninitiated, *Love Saves the Day* is thick on detailed descriptions of the music, the most influential DJs, and the discotheques in which they worked and lived. Lawrence clearly enjoyed speaking with many of the originators (conducting over 300 original interviews!), perhaps to the extent that he became caught up with the gossip and personality politics of the scene. The trajectory of these stories tended to be linear rather than thematic: a DJ, musical sound, or club would capture the imagination of a select set of SoHo/West Village tastemakers; for a while it would enjoy growing popularity; then a newer, younger or fresher alternative

would arrive; all the while the mainstream would catch on, steadily enlarging the influence of the 'in' DJ/scene/club. Such repetition may accurately describe the chain of events that unfolded, but scarcely allows room to pause and analyse how and why the scene developed this way, and not in some other way.

Love Saves the Day is exhaustively researched and generally written in a lively manner. Although it serves more effectively as a documentary record than a critical analysis, Lawrence's moments of interpretation are mostly lucid and thought-provoking. Although he concludes his story at the end of the 1970s in a generally pessimistic tone, most readers will be aware that disco would have its revenge in the techno and rave scenes that exploded little more than a decade later. (As a parting note: a big club hit in 2003 came from producers called Presser, whose track '2 black, 2 gay' is built, in an ironic fashion, around a sample of those chanting 'disco sucks' at Comiskey Park).

1. A separate line of inquiry would also ask why, apparently more than any other location, mainstream disco music and fashion has remained enduringly popular—ironically or not—in Australia.
2. Reebee Garofalo, *Rockin' Out: Popular Music in the USA*, Allyn & Bacon, Boston, MA, 1997, p. 305.
3. See, for instance, Simon Reynolds and Joy Press, *The Sex Revolts: Gender, Rebellion, and Rock 'n' Roll*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1995; and Sheila Whiteley (ed.), *Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender*, Routledge, New York, 1997.
4. Angela McRobbie, 'Shut Up and Dance: Youth Culture and Changing Modes of Femininity', *Cultural Studies*, vol. 7, no. 3, 1993, pp. 406–26.

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