

The History of Rock and Dance Music: 1970-1975

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Disco-music 1975-80

(These are excerpts from my book "[A History of Rock and Dance Music](#)")

Funk 1974-78

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The foundations of funk music had been laid in the second half of the 1960s by James Brown, the MG's, Sly & The Family Stone, the Meters, Dyke & The Blazers, etc. The syncopated polyrhythm, the groovy bass line, the metallic guitar timbre, the falsetto wail were all introduced in the 1960s. However, funk music had to wait until the age of re-alignment before it became a genre on its own. The white Detroit band Rare Earth, with Dino Fekaris' *I Just Want To Celebrate* (1971), War, the old group founded in Los Angeles by British vocalist Eric Burdon, with *Spill The Wine* (1970) and *The World Is A Ghetto* (1972), and the [Jackson Five](#) (featuring the young Michael Jackson), with *I Want You Back* (1970), *ABC* (1970), *The Love You Save* (1970) and Berry Gordy's *I'll Be There* (1970), took it to the top of the charts, while starting a dance mania that had not been seen since the twist of the early 1960s. Discos opened just to play funk music.

[War](#), one of the few multi-racial groups, were the most innovative of the commercial funk groups with their lengthy fantasies: a Cuban-tinged *Fidel's Fantasy* on **War** (? 1970/? 1971 - apr 1971), the infectious dance ditty *The World Is A Ghetto* and the proto-disco jam *City Country City* on **The World Is A Ghetto** (? 1972 - nov 1972). They further promoted the Latin-funk fusion with *The Cisco Kid* (1972) and especially *Low Rider* (1975).

By far the most creative artist (and cult figure) of early funk music was [George Clinton](#), whose bands, Parliament (3) and Funkadelic (2), featuring keyboardist Bernie Worrell (who in 1978 pioneered the synthesized bass lines) and James Brown's bassist William "Bootsy" Collins, adopted the ethos of the psychedelic counterculture, the satirical attitude of the freaks, a sound that mixed jazz, soul, Jimi Hendrix and acid-rock, and lyrics that bordered on porno, horror and science fiction. Their eccentric vaudeville had no rivals: Funkadelic's **Funkadelic** (? 1969 - mar 1970), **Maggot Brain** (? 1971 - jul 1971) and the

gargantuan **One Nation Under A Groove** (apr 1978 - oct 1978), as well as Parliament's **Clones of Dr Funkenstein** (? 1976 - sep 1976), the visionary **Mothership Connection** (? 1975 - dec 1975), the superb **Funkentelechy Vs The Placebo Syndrome** (? 1977 - dec 1977) and the surreal **Motor-Booty Affair** (? 1978 - dec 1978), made Clinton the Frank Zappa of funk music.

Funk music was the soundtrack of the mid 1970s, embraced by combos such as: Ronald Bell's [Kool And The Gang](#), the most faithful to Sly Stone's model, from *Funky Stuff* (1973) to *Celebration* (1980); the vocal trio [Labelle](#), featuring Patti LaBelle (Holt) and Nona Hendryx, who blended rhythm'n'blues and rock'n'roll and adopted a glam image for Bob Crewe's and Kenny Nolan's *Lady Marmalade* (1974); the Commodores, led by tenor saxophonist Lionel Richie, with the electronic instrumental *Machine Gun* (1974); drummer Maurice White's jazz-soul-rock fusion concept Earth Wind And Fire, with *Shining Star* (1975) and *Serpentine Fire* (1977), Philip Bailey's effeminate falsetto, Larry Dunn's sleek keyboards, and a Stax-like horn section; the percussive Ohio Players, with *Fire* (1974) and *Love Rollercoaster* (1975); Harry Wayne Casey's and Richard Finch's exuberant K.C. And The Sunshine Band, from *That's The Way I Like It* (1975) to *Baby Give It Up* (1983), that coined the quintessential "Miami sound"; Larry Graham's Graham Central Station, with *The Jam* (1976), the sound of funk music to come; Larry Blackmon's [Cameo](#), the only veterans to dominate in two decades, from *Funk Funk* (1977) to *Word Up* (1986); and, in Britain, the Average White Band, with the instrumental *Pick Up The Pieces* (1974). Ex-Labelle vocalist [Nona Hendryx](#) fused funk, soul and hard-rock on her **Nona Hendryx** (? 1977 - ? 1977). [Tina Turner](#), Ike's wife, who had been the sexy pillar of their revue, capitalized on a tiger-like vocal style with the solid funk-boogie groove of *Nutbush City Limits* (1973). Betty Davis (Miles' wife), was sexually aggressive and vocally gruff on **Betty Davis** (? 1973 - summer 1973), featuring Sly Stone's rhythm section and the Pointer Sisters, and pioneered a look that bridged the psychedelic era and the disco era.

Miami's percussive and Latin-tinged soul was best represented by White songwriters-producers Richard Finch and Harry Casey, who penned George McCrae's *Rock Your Baby* (1974) and formed KC & The Sunshine Band, one of the most frequent chart-toppers of the era with *Get Down Tonight* (1975), *That's The Way I Like It* (1975), *Shake Your Booty* (1976), *I'm Your Boogie Man* (1977), *Please Don't Go* (1979) and *Baby Give It Up* (1983).

Another Zappa-esque visionary, [August Darnell](#) (2), formed the comic and exotic [Dr Buzzard's Original Savannah Band](#) (? 1976 - oct 1976) and penned the trilogy credited to [Kid Creole & The Coconuts](#), whose best installment was the tropical musical and satirical odyssey **Fresh Fruit In Foreign Places** (? 1981 - jun 1981). Both ventures envisioned a chaotic collage-like multi-ethnic format that was equally at ease with swing, cha-cha, soul, salsa, calypso, reggae and rock.

Lipps Inc, the solo project of Steven Greenberg, marked the transition to fully electronic funk music with *Funkytown* (1980).

Disco-music 1974-78

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Funk music opened the doors to the disco subculture. There was a reaction,

particularly among New York's gays, to rock music's domination of the airwaves. People still wanted to dance, but the counterculture had demonized dance music. Funk music served an audience that was tired of guitar solos and boogie rhythms. Black people used to organize dance parties. Persecuted by the public opinion and by puritan sects, gays had created social islands within the metropolis. Their night clubs were as segregated as the black churches in the 1950s. Gays took the same idea of the black dance parties and used the same music for their parties that shared the same private clubs, soon to be known as "discos". Discos became so successful that they transformed rapidly from marginalized, discriminated and underground phenomenon to a chic craze for the yuppies. Far from being agents of the Establishment, gays adopted several trademarks of the hippy culture (free-form dancing, psychedelic lights, colorful costumes, hallucinogens). New York's gay community rediscovered a new facet of human psychology that had been well known to ancient cultures: "depersonalization" due to collective ecstasy enabled and fostered freedom of expression. The cathartic and regenerative function of disco-music accounted for the lightning speed with which it spread around the world.

While funk music was booming, three events added impetus to the discos. Orchestral soul reached a new apex with Barry White's scores and sexy postures: the languid sensual ballads *Can't Get Enough Of Your Love* (1974) and *You're The First The Last My Everything* (1974), as well as the Love Unlimited Orchestra's instrumental *Love's Theme* (1973), off their **Rhapsody in White** (? 1973 - jan 1974). That same year, Kraftwerk's *Autobahn* became the first hit single entirely played on electronic instruments and boasting an electronic rhythm. Finally, in 1975 Robert Moog introduced the Polymoog, the first commercial polyphonic synthesizer, which greatly reduced the cost of producing electronic music.

The first articles on "disco music" appeared in 1972, and the invention is credited to a Cameroon-born and Paris-based jazz saxophonist, [Manu Dibango](#), who in that year released *Soul Makossa* (1972), an exciting mixture of funk-jazz saxophone lines and hypnotic African beats. Other pioneers of the concept, such as the Equals, a racially mixed British band fronted by Guyana's vocalist Eddy Grant, with *Black Skin Blue Eyed Boys* (1970) and War with *City Country City* (1972), exhibited the same multi-racial and cosmopolitan foundations. The catalyst, though, was the black homosexual audience, particularly in New York. A little later, Philadelphia's veteran soul producers Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff wrote *Love Is The Message* (1973) for MFSB (its core being the human rhythm machine of drummer Earl Young and bassist Ron Baker), the blueprint for the early disco hits. Another pioneering record was released by the Hues Corporation, Wally Holmes' *Rock The Boat* (1974).

However, Italian-born German keyboardist and producer [Giorgio Moroder](#) (1), who had been manufacturing dance singles since the late 1960s, is the man who can be credited with wedding Kraftwerk's robotic music (a very European and elitist artifact) with soul/funk music (a very USA and grass-roots genre). Moroder understood the power of electronic keyboards both for "singing" the melody and for "beating" the rhythm. His first experiment was USA soul diva Donna Summer: her *Love To Love You Baby* (1975) co-invented disco-music and launched the idea of the extended "disco mix", while *I Feel Love* (1976) basically marked the birth of synth-pop. Moroder's production masterworks were his own solo albums, notably **From Here To Eternity** (jun 1977 - ? 1977). A similar style was being refined in France by [Jean-Marc Cerrone](#), particularly

with the two lengthy electronic suites *Love In C Minor* (1977), one of the first side-length tracks that was merely the extended version of one song, and *Supernature* (1978).

Other German stars of the disco years include Silver Convention, the brainchild of producers Silvester Levay and Michael Kunze, with *Fly Robin Fly* (1975) and *Get Up And Boogie* (1976), and Boney M, the brainchild of producer Frank Farian, with *Baby Do You Wanna Bump* (1975) and *Rasputin* (1978).

Van McCoy's *The Hustle* (1975) set the standard in Manhattan, centering the harmony around the hypnotic beat of the rhythm section. The fad of the 12" singles began when Walter Gibbons released an 11-minute version of Double Exposure's *Ten Percent* (1976). Black and gay disc-jockeys resurrected old, obscure rhythm'n'blues songs, added a pulsing beat and extended their duration (a technique imported from Jamaica) in order to make people dance for as long as possible. Disco-music became a producer's music, and a studio-oriented music, propelled by artificial instruments, the exact opposite of rock music, which emphasized the live experience and was played with electric instruments. The difference was more than just technical: rock music was a macho, straight, aggressive happening, whereas disco-music was a sensual, effeminate, languid affair.

The [Bee Gees](#), the veteran Australian brothers led by songwriter Barry Gibb, who had been stars of the Sixties (*A Message To You*, 1968), converted to keyboards-oriented funk music with *Jive Talking* (1975) and *You Should Be Dancing* (1976), and then scored the soundtrack for the film **Saturday Night Fever** (? 1975/? 1977 - nov 1977), that, thanks to *Staying Alive* and *Night Fever*, launched a world-wide fad for disco-music.

The Trammps were among the first soul groups to benefit from the new fad, thanks to *Disco Inferno* (1977), written by veteran Philadelphia keyboardist Ron Kersey.

[Chic](#) (a quintet led by black virtuoso bassist Bernard Edwards and guitarist Nile Rodgers) promoted the most abused stereotype: minimalist funk rhythm propelled by machine-like drumming (Tony Thompson) and embellished with strings and female singers. Their classic formulation of the dogma can be found in *Dance Dance Dance* (1977), *Le Freak* (1978) and *Good Times* (1979), three anthems of the sociopolitical decadence of the era. Rodgers went on to become one of the most distinctive producers of dance music.

The female aspect was much more relevant in disco-music than it had ever been in rock music. Several of the early disco singles were sung by women, establishing a primacy that would endure through the years.

The female gay iconography owed a lot to Jamaican model [Grace Jones](#), whose glacial, androgynous, futuristic, panther-like looks and monotonous vocals redefined the concept of elegance for the disco masses. *I Need A Man* (1977) was the hit that created the cult. She represented the terminal point of a disease that had spread from the Lulu of the expressionists to Marlene Dietrich to decadence-rock.

The prototypical "disco divas" were Gloria Gaynor, who pioneered the extended mix with the Isaac Hayes cover **Never Can Say Goodbye** (? 1974 - fall 1974), largely the invention of Tony Bongiovi, a former Motown producer who in New

York fused the lush orchestral arrangements of Philadelphia-style soul music and the upbeat energetic Motown style (with drummer Alan Schwartzberg setting the standard of the relentless high-hat cymbal propulsion) and whose *I Will Survive* (1979), composed by Dino Fekaris, remains one of the era's quintessential anthems, and Thelma Houston, whose greatest hit was a cover of Kenny Gamble's and Leon Huff's *Don't Leave Me This Way* (1977), but also veterans like Shirley Goodman (of Shirley & Lee), who sang *Shame Shame Shame* (1975), a song composed by another veteran, Sylvia Robinson (of Mickey & Sylvia).

Far from being mere "bubblegum" hits, many of these productions employed top-notch instrumentalists from both the rhythm'n'blues and the jazz scene. The production system was, in fact, very similar to the Motown or Philly hit factories, with the advantage that New York offered readily-available jazz musicians.

At the end of 1976 Blondie bridged the gap between disco-music and punk-rock, the two genres that were advancing dramatically on western civilization. In 1977 the film "Saturday Night Fever", by promoting disco-music beyond gays and blacks, launched the disco fever around the world. Millions of kids stopped dreaming of becoming guitarists and started dreaming of becoming acrobatic dancers. Those who were not punks, were disco addicts.

At the same time that disco-music was becoming a mass-market phenomenon, a few clubs kept setting the standard for innovation. In 1977 the disco "Warehouse" opened in Chicago and Frankie Knuckles became its resident disc-jockey, and in 1978 the disco "Paradise Garage" for black gays opened in New York and its founder Larry Levan became the first superstar disc-jockey.

The sound of disco-music began to change after (1978) Dave Smith (of Sequential Circuits) introduced the "Prophet-5", the world's first microprocessor-based musical instrument, thus ushering in the age of digital synthesizers, which replaced the voltage-controlled (analog) synthesizers. The year before Roland had introduced the first rhythm machine for the masses, and in 1978 Roland introduced the MC-4 sequencer, the first sequencer for the masses. Sequencing, drum-machines and the new synthesizers came to characterize the sound of the disco era.

As white (and often European) producers began to compose suites inspired by classical music and easy-listening music, employing batteries of drum-machines, string sections and horn solos, disco-music became less and less "black" and more and more "white".

The golden era of disco music basically ended in 1979, the year of the anthems, notably the Village People's *YMCA* (1979), produced by Jacques Morali, and Sister (Debbie) Sledge's *We Are Family* (1979), written by Chic's Edwards and Rodgers, which both celebrated the disco community from the inside. Just like the self-celebrations of the hippy civilization announced the commercialization of psychedelic-rock, the self-celebrations of gay civilization announced the "commodization" of disco-music.

This was evident, for example, in the gospel-infected singles crafted by producer Richard Perry for the [Pointer Sisters](#), that would become increasingly upbeat, from *He's So Shy* (1980) all the way to *I'm So Excited* (1982), *Jump* (1984),

Neutron Dance (1984).

Symbolically, disco-music returned to Africa with *Discolypso* (1979), an electronic calypso-tinged dance song by Sierra Leone's Mack Bunny (Cecil MacCormack), and later with *Rikiatou* (1982) and *African Typic Collection* (1983), dancefloor makossa numbers by Cameroon's Sam Fan Thomas.

The kings of pop 1975-79

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The 1970s were the decade in which pop music turned black, as the charts traditionally defined as "white music" came to be dominated by black singers. Basically, soul music took over pop music.

[Michael Jackson](#) (1), who became independent in 1979 under the tutelage of rhythm'n'blues and veteran jazz producer Quincy Jones, released the greatest album of all times (if sales define greatness), **Thriller** (apr/nov 1982 - nov 1982). Like its predecessor, **Off The Wall** (dec 1978/jun 1979 - aug 1979), and its successor, **Bad** (jan/jul 1987 - aug 1987), this trivial collage of pop-soul cliches and dance beats, elegantly and masterly orchestrated by Jones employing state-of-the-art technology, was complemented by the deliberate construction of a surreal persona, a sort of fairy-tale figure, half child and half man, tenderly insecure and slightly hysterical, sex-neutral, race-neutral and age-neutral, readily identified by his mask, his costumes and his moves.

Minneapolis' multi-instrumentalist [Prince](#) Nelson (4) was Jackson's intellectual counterpart. This licentious androgyne, specializing in quasi-porno ballads, not only wrote his songs but even played all or most of the instruments. His favorite format was the concept album, not the hit single. His fusion of pop, soul and rock was driven by sheer libido. Prince basically transformed the moaning and screaming of copulation into a style of singing, a neurotic, delirious falsetto that continuously referenced sexual pleasure. If the fundamental elements remained the same throughout the decade, the emphasis shifted from the purely self-celebratory **1999** (? 1982 - oct 1982) to the epic **Purple Rain** (aug 1983/mar 1984 - jun 1984) to the self-indulgently baroque **Around The World In A Day** (jan/dec 1984 - apr 1985) to the semiotic, post-modern clockwork of **Sign ? The Times** (? 1982/? 1986 - mar 1987). Each album was both an erotic and a stylistic tour de force. His career as a whole was both a lascivious act and a pop encyclopedia.

Prince's songwriting skills, also displayed in the Bangles' *Manic Monday* (1986) and Sinéad O'Connor's *Nothing Compares* (1990), belonged to a white tradition that harks back to the Brill Building and runs through Brian Wilson and Todd Rundgren.

A similar funk-rock-pop hybrid was concocted by Rick James on **Come Get It** (? 1977 - apr 1978), who then perfected the idea for **Street Songs** (dec 1980/jan 1981 - ? 1981).

Another black singer and songwriter, Lionel Richie, was the master of the sentimental ballad, first with the Commodores, mainly *Three Times A Lady* (1978) and *Still* (1979), and then solo, for example *Lady* (1980), *Endless Love* (1981), *All Night Long* (1983), *Say You Say Me* (1985), and the humanitarian anthem *We Are The World* (1986).

Lionel Richie's solo hits *All Night Long* (1983) and *Say You Say Me* (1985) continued the ballad format he had coined with the Commodores' *Three Times A Lady* (1978) and *Still* (1979).

Other black competitors in the romantic-ballad genre were Billy Ocean, Teddy Pendergrass and singer-songwriter-producer [Luther Vandross](#).

At the turn of the decade, soul music was buried under the ever growing technological sophistication of hip-hop and the noise of techno, but still managed to produce talents worthy of the classics, notably Anita Baker, who set a new standard for the classy romantic ballads with *Angel* (1983), *Sweet Love* (1985), *Giving You The Best I Got* (1988) and *Body And Soul* (1994).

Luther Vandross' **Never Too Much** (? 1980/? 1981 - aug 1981) and Bobby Womack' **The Poet** (? 1981 - ? 1981) were influential albums for the future of the pop-soul ballad.

Among white pop fluff, Bette Midler sang Amanda McBroom's *The Rose* (1977), and Barry Manilow, Bette Midler's arranger, sang his own *Mandy* (1974). Both became household names and the latter became the only artist after Frank Sinatra to have five albums at once in the Billboard charts (1978). Olivia Newton-John was, by far, the best-selling white artist of the decade, thanks not so much to her lame country-pop hits (starting with *Let Me Be There* in 1974), but to John Farrar's nostalgic duets *You're The One That I Want* (1978) and *Summer Nights* (1978) for the movie **Grease** (whose soundtrack was recorded in 1976 and released in jul 1978) and to the mega-hit *Physical* (1981), composed by Steve Kipner and Terry Shaddick, and produced by John Farrar, for another movie soundtrack. Debby Boone had the other massive hit of the time, Joe Brooks' *You Light Up My Life* (1978), also from a movie soundtrack. These hits by Olivia Newton-John and Debby Boone were the first hits since the Sixties to truly dominate the charts after a long period in which hits came and went rather rapidly.

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