The Rise and Fall of Disco

“Everyone here knows that 1979 will go down in history as the year Disco became the biggest thing in pop since Beatlemania and possibly since the birth of rock & roll.”

-- Music critic Stephen Holden
Roots of Disco - Music

• Disco emerged from urban night clubs where owners were looking for something to take the place of live acts
  – DJs started playing discs, or records to get a more electronic sound that audiences could dance to.

• Disco was a fusion of funk, soul, R&B, Motown, jazz and swing.

• It is characterized by a pronounced dance beat and electronically produced rhythm.

• Unlike some of the darker rock songs and meaningful folk songs being produced in the early 1970s, disco was upbeat, carefree and danceable. Lyrics were designed to tease the listener (sexually suggestive in nature.)
Roots of Disco – Audience

• Youth
  – “We had been reminded too often that we were just not with it. Where [hippies] had long hair and Woodstock, we had nothing to clearly call our own. We needed a kind of shared activity, scorned by our elders, which would bring us together as a group. At the disco, we have forged a generational banner. It’s great to feel special at last.”

• Suburban middle class & working class
  – Sophistication, but still in reach
  – Had to dress up, pay the admission but then they could live in a fantasy world for the night
  – Ability to mingle with the upper class

• Homosexuals, women, and African-Americans
  – After the social movements and countercultural rebellion of the ‘60s, all 3 groups enjoyed wider acceptance in media/public life in the ‘70s.
Roots of Disco – Social Changes

• Gay Liberation Movement
  – Early disco clubs were a space for gay men to safely come together and dance (first discos opened in 1971 in NYC and revolutionized the club scene. Before this, gay bars were in constant fear of raids, like Stonewall.)
    • “Disco provided the anthem for gay men celebrating the triumph of their struggle against self-hate and denial.”

• Women’s Movement & Civil Rights Movement
  – New opportunities (legal/social) in the ‘70s - disco offered a home and voice to women and African-Americans.
    • Mainstream music up to the mid-’70s was very white male dominated – disco broke that mold.
Roots of Disco – Economic & Political Changes

• How did the troubled economy/politics support the rise of disco? (THINK)

• Disco provided an escape from what Roger Ebert called “the general depression and drabness of the political and musical atmosphere of the ‘70s.”
Disco Moves into the Mainstream

• Mainstream radio started playing disco in the mid-1970s
  – By Dec. 1978, 200 disco-only shows aired nationwide. By June 1979, there were 250 disco-only shows
• Popular disco artists included:
  – Kool & the Gang
  – Donna Summer
  – Diana Ross
  – Gloria Gaynor
  – The Bee Gees
  – The Village People
• By 1979, even Frank Sinatra, Dolly Parton and the Rolling Stones had recorded disco tracks.
• At its start, disco was an expressive outlet for the gay subculture & women. **By the mid-1970s, disco was sanitized and commercialized and targeted at heterosexual working class youth.**
Disco’s Mainstream Appeal

“Inside the giant disco hall, the young working-class boys and girls, recent high-school graduates who plod through their jobs all week, saving up for this night, give themselves over to the music... They dance the L.A. Hustle, in pattered ranks – a mass of dancers unified by the beat, stepping together in trancelike discipline... it gets at... the need to move, to dance, and the need to be who you’d like to be. Nirvana is the dance; when the music stops, you’d return to being ordinary.”
Saturday Night Fever

- Saturday Night Fever made John Travolta famous (previously known for his role as Vinnie Barbarino on the tv show, Welcome Back Kotter)

- The film centers around the life of Tony Manero, a working class 19-year-old from Brooklyn who finds local stardom as a dancer at a neighborhood discotheque.
  
  - Message of hope in Tony’s search for self-identity and a better life.

- Saturday Night Fever helped solidify disco’s popularity in mainstream, heterosexual culture. HOW?
“[Saturday Night Fever] is a dark tale about a dead end kid who seeks glory on the dance floor… This movie kinda shook free from the general depression and drabness of the political and musical atmosphere of the ‘70s and remembered that was what music was really about... It’s having a good time, going out there, and dancing. It’s Saturday night.”

- Robert Ebert
DISCO

Derived from the French term “discothéque”, disco referred not only to a type of music, but also to a type of dance club decor, a way of dressing, a style of dancing & an attitude towards sexual promiscuity and night life.
Music

“Shake Your Groove Thing,”
Peaches & Herb
Music

“Stayin’ Alive,” The Bee Gees
Donna Summer, 
\textit{The Queen of Disco}

- Born in Boston in 1948
  - Attended the Jeremiah Burke school in Boston. Troublemaker as a teen
  - snuck out to parties to avoid her parents’ strict curfew.
  - At 18 she auditioned for \textit{Hair: The American Tribal Love-Rock Musical} and flew to Germany to perform.

- 1975 wrote and recorded “Love to Love You Baby” – 17 minutes long, featuring her moaning and suggestive lyrics which led many radio stations to refuse to play the song.
  - The song became an overnight sensation

- Went on to release 2 more albums in 1976 and 1977.

- Her 1978 single “Last Dance” won the Academy Award for Best Original Song. Other notable hits included “Bad Girls”, “Hot Stuff” and “She Works Hard for the Money.”
“Love to Love You,” Donna Summer
“Bad Girls,” Donna Summer
The Village People
• **The Village People**
  
  – *Named for NYC’s Greenwich Village*, an area with a large gay population and where the modern Gay Rights Movement started with the Stonewall Riots.
    
  • Group was created to attract gay audiences while also poking fun at some of the major stereotypes of gay men
  
  – Known for their popular songs, “YMCA,” “Macho Man,” and “In the Navy.”
  
• How do they reflect common stereotypes about gay men?

• What impact did the success of the Village People have?
“YMCA,” The Village People

How do they reflect common stereotypes about gay men?
“In the Navy,”
The Village People

The Village People were one of the few groups in the ‘70s to shoot music videos for their singles (which were popular in Europe – pre-MTV!)

The success of YMCA led a Navy spokesperson to contact the band asking for a similar song (since that song had done so well for the actual YMCA.)
  – Village People wrote the song in praise of the US Navy (free advertising!)
  – Song was shot on the deck of the USS Reasoner in San Diego. Navy leant its full support, including equipment & personnel.
  – Commercial got scrapped because conservative taxpayers balked at the idea of such a controversial group advertising for the Navy. (Remember, it wasn’t until 2010 that gay people were allowed to serve in the military – “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy.)
What impact did the success of the Village People have?

- It was said that “with its successes, the band introduced the themes and the gay male disco subculture into the mainstream of American popular culture.”

- Like Saturday Night Fever, the commercial success of the Village People helped to make disco more accessible & mainstream all while incorporating aspects of gay culture in the mainstream of American life.
Dancing was at the heart of the music. It was said that “what set disco apart [from pop music] was that it was not only music for dancing, but also music about dancing.”

- Popular dances: The Bump, The Hustle
Let’s dance!
Like the music, disco fashion was an expression of differences and diversity in the ‘70s.

- **Acceptance of various styles of dress**
- **Emphasis on individualism**
- **Clothing was a form of expression, less concern with fitting in**

It was said that discos are “nothing if not a fantasy world, where you can change your identity by changing your costume.”

Styles included platform shoes, Polyester, bell bottoms, jumpsuits, halter tops, feather boas, jumpsuits, and bright colors and loud prints. Sequins and glitter shimmered well under club lights as did metallic and shiny fabrics. Lycra held up well for dancing.
The DJ was transformed into a quasi-high priest

“There is no question that a real DJ can shape a night of music with his personality, style and spirit, magically turning a string of records into a spontaneous symphony.”

Characteristics:

- The mirror ball
- Synchronized lights
- Smoke machines & dry ice
- Pin spot light
Studio 54

- Among the many celebrities present during opening night: Mick and Bianca Jagger, Liza Minnelli, Mikhail Baryshnikov, Salvador Dali, Brooke Shields, Cher, Debbie Harry, Robin Leach, newlyweds Donald and Ivana Trump, and other well-known party-goers.
  - Some celebrities, including Warren Beatty, Woody Allen, Diane Keaton, Henry Winkler, and Frank Sinatra were unable to get in, in part due to Studio 54's elusive doorman.

- At the nightclub's prime, Steve Rubell, the owner, became widely known for hand-selecting guests from the always-huge crowds outside, mixing beautiful "nobodies" with glamorous celebrities in the same venue.
"Studio", as it came to be called, was notorious for the pleasure-seeking that occurred within it; the balconies were known for sexual encounters, and drug use was rampant.

"Sundays at the Studio" catered to a homosexual clientele and Saturday nights were the hot disco nights.

During December 1978, Rubell was quoted in the New York newspapers as saying the Studio had made $7 million in its first year and that "only the Mafia made more money."
Backlash - Criticisms

• By 1979, disco seemed to be more a product of producers and promoters than artist-produced.

• Some commented that disco seemed to lack talented musical performers found in other genres.
  – Electronically manipulated sounds took the place of the bass, drums & guitar found in rock songs
  – In live performances, disco stars relied heavily on recorded tracks and off-stage musical support (The Village People kept their backup singers entirely out of view of their audience)
  – Disco relied on the radio to reach average music consumers rather than record sales to die-hard fans.

• Disco became VERY commercialized and marketed.
  – Burger King ran a commercial with the Burger King dancing to disco in a restaurant, songs like Disney’s “Disco Duck” climbed the charts, and albums mixed well-known classical music hits with a disco beat.
Disco Demolition Night
July 12, 1979, at Comiskey Park
Anti-disco rally organized by DJ Steve Dahl in 1979. Anti-disco fans burned more than 100,000 albums at Detroit’s Tiger Stadium. Protestors’ rioted, ultimately forcing cancellation of game 2.
Decline of Disco

- In 1979, disco dominated the airwaves but by 1981, the disco boom was a bust.

- Backlash against disco’s commercialism, cheap sentiment, and overt sexuality led to the emergence of other more “authentic” expressions of youth culture = punk & heavy metal.