1

I Hear a Symphony

BLACK MASCULINITY AND THE DISCO TURN

You should see this whole Roxy Music thing. It's so elegant and cool and -fashionable.

—Nile Rodgers to Bernard Edwards, cofounders of -Chic

Disco snuck up on America like a covert operation. This wasn't how it had been in the sixties, when shifts in popular music—the arrival of the mop-headed British Invasion bands, Bob Dylan's galvanizing electric turn, the emergence of psychedelic rock—were unmissable cultural events immediately accorded the status of milestones. The rock "revolution" of the sixties, like the Vietnam War and the protests it provoked, was the object of intense media coverage. *Newsweek*, *Life*, *Time*, and all the rest pounced on the story with prairie-fire speed. In a blink, whole new publications, including that soon-to-be arbiter of countercultural taste, *Rolling Stone*, emerged to chronicle the music, personalities, and culture of rock. The major labels may have been bewildered by the scruffiness, long hair, and druggy vibe of groups such as Big Brother and the Holding Company and the Grateful Dead, but they barely paused before racing to sign them up, even when they were little known outside of San Francisco's hippie enclave, Haight--Ashbury.

Six years later, when another musical revolution was taking shape, record companies opened neither their arms nor their coffers, with the result that disco developed slowly and at first largely off the official map. By the time Vince Aletti wrote about what he called "party music" and "discotheque rock," in a fall 1973 issue of *Rolling Stone*, gay men had been dancing in discos for three years. It would take another year before *Billboard* magazine began keeping track of "hot dance club" cuts, and two more before the major labels began to take the music seriously. One reason that disco lingered below the radar was that the clubs in which it incubated were predominantly gay and, with the exception of the glitziest, initially relatively unknown to the larger population. Discos were not nearly so invisible to music business insiders, who began hearing about crowded clubs where danceable R&B or soul records played continuously rather than in between musicians' sets. When Motown's Frank Wilson learned that Eddie Kendricks's "Girl You Need a Change of Mind," a 1973 track he produced, was popular in New York's discos, he was "shocked. That was not what we were going for," he recalls. "We were after radio." Disco's multiracial, largely gay clientele was not one that the music industry seemed eager to court. To industry executives, the dance crowd represented a mere sliver of the demographic they craved, and, one imagines, a rather unwelcome one at that, given the prejudices of the -time.

While the invisibility of the scene kept disco culture underground, the music operated in a more complicated fashion. Indeed, another reason disco registered so feebly during its formative years was that much of the music that club deejays played was anything but underground. Early discos weren't like Bill Graham's Fillmore, which at first featured groups playing freak rock that had yet to find a home on the radio. Although disco deejays sought out and sometimes made clubland hits of less well-known records such as "Soul Makossa" by the Cameroonian-born saxophonist Manu Dibango or "Woman" by the Spanish group Barrabás, many of the tracks they played were staples of R&B radio. Millions of Americans were listening to the same records by the O'Jays, Temptations, and ex-Tempts that were heating up disco dance floors. In a curious twist, disco's reliance on popular soul hits provided the emerging scene with a kind of camouflage. After all, to most consumers, George McRae's "Rock Your Baby" was soul, not disco—a word barely even in circulation outside of industry circles. The fact that disco

playlists leaned so heavily on R&B, including that emerging subset of percussive, polyrhythmic, danceable R&B called funk, also meant that record company executives could think that they were supplying discos with plenty of product. At the same time, the lesser status of R&B in the world of popular music exacerbated disco's marginality. By 1971, a third of what was played on Top 40 radio had migrated there from soul radio. Yet even with increased Top 40 radio play and a growing chunk of record sales, R&B lacked the prestige and the capital—cultural and actual—of rock -music.

In fact, the first disco track to become a number one pop hit, 1973's "Love's Theme" by Barry White's Love Unlimited Orchestra, would have landed in the dustbin had it not been for the intervention of two enterprising New York club deejays. Spying the record with other "dead albums" about to be chucked at White's label, 20th Century Records, the deejays prevailed upon a promotional staffer to give them copies. Their success in breaking the song persuaded 20th Century to distribute free copies of the record to the city's other leading club deejays. Steady disco play created so much demand for the track that, by the beginning of 1974, "Love's Theme" was swept into the pop Top 20 without radio support—something that rarely happened, and that suggested the potential power of club -deejays.

White's single was remarkable for the way it upended the conventional wisdom about the marketing of music, and, like his recent R&B hits, it also underscored a trend in soul music away from the gritty and the raw. White's "Love's Theme" wasn't so much a Wall of Sound as it was a wall of strings that cloyingly swooped and swelled while the beat chugged on . . . and on. To Britain's leading rock critic John Peel, it was a "stunningly dull tune" that sounded like a cross between two movie soundtracks—the Percy Faith Orchestra's 1960 hit "The Theme from *A Summer Place*" and Isaac Hayes's recent smash "Theme from *Shaft*." About the only sonic element that made "Love's Theme" legibly R&B was its wah-wah chank, what Peel called its "obligatory Shaft noises."

Millions loved White's music, including daytime TV host Dinah Shore, who devoted an entire show to White and his music. However, if you were what rock critic Robert Christgau called a "white soul conservative," this was precisely the sort of schmaltz that likely had driven you into the arms of Atlantic and Stax Records in the first place. And then there was White's ingratiating self-presentation, so squishy soft it seemed light years away from the insistent "got-ta, got-ta" masculinity of iconic sixties' soul men. In contrast to James Brown, whose funk tracks featured lots of call-and-response guy talk, White made a point of addressing himself to the ladies. While Brown rapped, "If you hear any noise, it's just me and the boys," White moaned, "Whatever, whatever, girl, I'll do." Gone as well was the sweaty athleticism that powered the performances of so many other soul greats. In concert, White's languid pillow-talk raps and his baritone crooning did the trick for hundreds of women, who tore off their panties and threw them his way. White's pitch consisted of the very "baby, baby, baby songs" that Stevie Wonder had recently declared African Americans "as a people are not interested in . . . anymore." James Brown may have been all over the map politically (eventually embracing the Republican Party), but at least he championed black pride and power, whereas White operated in a register devoid of racial politics. After attending one of White's concerts, rock critic Lester Bangs declared that he had never seen "anything quite so immaculately vacant."

For Bangs and other fans of old-school soul music, 1974 brought little hope that there would be a turnaround. Among music critics, there was a growing sense that the sound of R&B was shifting. Writing about ex-Temptation Eddie Kendricks's single "Keep On Trucking," John Peel wrote, "We have a crying need for a new word to adequately describe that sort of popping, chucking sound that forms the basis of much of the music wending its way to us from Black America." His suggested term, "snatting," did not take, but it captures the hissing hi-hats so prominent in this new music. Vince Aletti described the new music as "Afro-Latin in sound or instrumentation, heavy on the drums, with minimal lyrics, sometimes in a foreign language, and a repetitive, chant-like chorus." Writing in the summer of 1974 about "the new genre of black rhythm and blues music," New York journalist Mark Jacobson offered the most compelling description of the changing soundscape. "The new songs are like big barroom fans that sweep the air around you as you dance."

Certainly that was true of Gloria Gaynor's cover version of the Jackson 5's 1971 hit "Never Can Say Goodbye," yet another disco record that the music business chose to snub, even after Elton John talked it up. Like "Love's Theme," Gaynor's 1974

record highlights disco's growing distinctiveness from traditional soul music. "Never Can Say Goodbye" is an intoxicating dance-floor romp, but the song's galloping arrangement and Gaynor's strutting vocal go a long way toward stripping the song of its anguish. Another record that demonstrated the growing sonic divide between old-school and new-style R&B was *Love Is the Message* by a band with the anonymous-sounding name of MFSB. Philadelphia International Records, an independent label formed by veteran R&B producers Kenneth Gamble and Leon Huff, released *Love*. By 1974 PIR was already on its way to becoming the Motown of the seventies, in part because of its house band MFSB. *Love Is the Message* contained the propulsive "TSOP (The Sound of Philadelphia)," which became the theme song for the popular TV show *Soul Train*, and won the Grammy for Best R&B Instrumental Performance. While Barry White's "Love's Theme" was still perched in the pop Top 10, *Love Is the Message* stormed the charts, and quickly became the bestselling album on the R&B music chart. "TSOP" catapulted *Love Is the Message* to the head of the class, and it was enormously popular at discos, but the album's sleeper cut, "Love Is the Message," proved much more influential in shaping what became understood as the disco sound. What many disco deejays and dancers found most irresistible about "Love"—its "lush fluidity"—was what set it apart from so much sixties' -soul.

There are other records from 1974 that illuminate the difference between old-style soul music and disco, including Jamaican-born Carl Douglass's reggae-tinged "Kung Fu Fighting," which made its way to the number one position on both the pop and R&B charts. Another tropically inflected song, George McCrae's "Rock Your Baby," suggested that sweetness was trumping not just soul-man swagger but even the slinky sexiness of Al Green. The dreamy-sounding "Rock Your Baby" was McCrae's only disco hit, but it emerged from TK Records, a Florida company whose "Miami sound" became an important strand of disco. Singer and keyboardist Harry Wayne (KC) Casey and bassist Richard Finch, who wrote, arranged, and produced "Rock Your Baby," were already recording for TK as members of KC and the Sunshine Band, an interracial outfit known for their "tropical funk." Within a few months they would simplify their sound and begin churning out "bubblegum funk" that topped the pop, disco, and R&B charts. In no time, David Bowie, Elton John, and the Average White Band joined KC on the R&B and pop charts, and they all appeared on *Soul -Train*.

The success of white musicians on the R&B chart pointed to a potentially troubling shift. What if disco, which was taking shape as a genre equally hospitable to black and white artists, squeezed black artists off the R&B charts and off black radio? This was not an unreasonable concern. By the midseventies, WBLS, New York's largest black-owned radio station, stopped claiming that it offered "the total black experience" and began boasting that it offered "the world's best-looking sound." WBLS's increasingly colorblind music—its shift from soul to suave—was pioneered by celebrity deejay and programmer Frankie Crocker, who increasingly took his cues from New York's leading disco deejays, particularly Larry Levan. According to one *Village Voice* writer, Crocker's racial ambiguity over the airwaves had some listeners wondering, "He sounds black, but is he?" This trend toward colorblindness was happening elsewhere, including Detroit, where radio deejay Electrifyin' Mojo played Queen and the Stones as well as the two Georges—funk impresario Clinton and smooth jazz guitarist -Benson.

It was the apprehension that soul music was surrendering to pop imperatives, content to stake out a place for itself in the commercially fertile but artistically barren and soulless territory of schmaltz, that most upset music critics. Of the Hues Corporation's 1974 disco hit "Rock the Boat," British music critic Mike Flood wrote, "your mother will probably love . . . its hoopity-boopity soulless soul." His colleague Rob Mackie wrote wistfully of a time when soul was "still exciting." To some, disco seemed a crazy reversal of all that the black freedom movement had fought for. After all, it had seemed to many, as Elton John put it in 1973, that "black people are just beginning to do their own thing and it's no longer just five men in a row in satin suits." It was as if the movement's insistence on black pride and self-determination was being thrown over in an effort to take up that most embarrassing of white cultural forms, schlock. "What happened to the days when black music was black and not this . . . pretentious drivel?" lamented a reviewer in Britain's *New Musical -Express*.

Through 1973 the people most responsible for the new symphonic soul were veterans of the R&B scene. Like Motown producer Frank Wilson, they saw themselves making music for the radio, not for clubs. But beginning in 1974, the dictates of

the dance floor started to shape the sound of this new-style R&B. This wasn't any old dance floor where people were content to stand around during those awkward seconds between the end of one jukebox song and the beginning of the next. This was the newly liberated gay dance floor, which, as Chapter Two explains, boasted a continuous mix of deejay-spun music. "People would kill a DJ who stopped between songs," recalls gay clubber Mel Cheren. Yet mixing this new disco music so the segues between tracks were not jarring was daunting, especially given the primitive resources with which deejays at first had to make do—three-and-a-half-minute 45 rpm singles, turntables that lacked a variable speed mechanism, and often no mixers whatsoever. In Detroit, deejay Marty Ross connected a foot pedal to his amp so he could easily switch from one turntable to the other, but it did not allow him to do beat-on-beat mixing. As a consequence, deejays played whatever danceable music they could get their hands on—James Brown, the Doobie Brothers, even the Doors—none of which was produced with them in mind. This is in large measure why early disco was so -heterogeneous.

However, beginning in 1974, as a few record labels began to wake up to the disco market, club deejays began to exert their influence, and in ways that widened the distance between old-style and new-style soul. The first deejay to produce a remix for a record company was Tom Moulton, a model known to New York's fashionable gay crowd as one of the Marlboro Lights men. He soon became even more famous for his impeccably mixed disco tapes, which played at Fire Island's Sandpiper disco. Moulton was among the first deejays to mix in such a way that dancers did not at first know that one song had ended and the next begun. But Moulton's influence would extend far beyond the Sandpiper, first as the author of *Billboard*'s new column on disco, and then as a much-sought-after remixer. Frustrated by the limitations of available disco records, particularly their brevity and timid bass levels, he began a one-man campaign to get record companies to adjust their product for the dance floor. It is no accident that Mel Cheren, who also worked as a production executive at Scepter Records, was the first to hire Moulton to remix a record. As a habitué of some of the city's hottest gay discos, Cheren understood that these records could be enhanced for maximum -danceability.

Moulton's remixes of records such as the B.T. Express's "Do It ('Til You're Satisfied)" created the model for the 12-inch, extended-play disco single—the pounding bass, the stark percussive disco break, and extended instrumental passages, which doubled the length of a record. For those who had never heard tracks of music mixed together, Moulton's remix of Gloria Gaynor's 1975 LP set the standard. Moulton remixed it so that the whole first side moved almost seamlessly from "Honey Bee" to "Never Can Say Goodbye" to another Motown cover, "Reach Out I'll Be There." In an era of primitive mixing technology, this was a treat for dancers and deejays alike, who for eighteen minutes were spared any embarrassingly bumpy -transitions.

Moulton did more than just segue the cuts; he transformed each track into a "suite" with distinct movements. After studying a record, Moulton asked the recording studio to eliminate certain tracks so he could hear the recording's "hidden" material. Working in a truly deconstructive fashion, Moulton altered the record's instrumentation by building upon this hidden or repressed material. By looping back, he was able to bulk up a record's instrumental passages. Dancers and deejays loved the embellishment and elongation that Moulton created, and that came to characterize disco. However, as deejays tinkered with the music, the priorities of the dance floor and its deejays began to prevail over everything else. Gradually songs with a steady 4/4 thump that clocked in around 120 beats per minute and featured extended instrumental passages—in other words, songs that were easy to mix in and out of—began to dominate deejays' playlists. And as the dance floor took precedence, singers found that their vocals were no longer the defining feature of a song but rather just one element. "I don't sing much" was Gaynor's wounded response upon hearing Moulton's final mix of her LP. Dismayed, Gaynor asked, "What am I supposed to do when we perform the song?" To which Moulton replied, "You learn to *dance*."

Gaynor was among the first vocalists to come up against the brutal exigencies of disco, which mandated that the dance floor, and therefore the rhythm section, take precedence. Veteran R&B singer Loleatta Holloway had an even ruder awakening several years later when she discovered that deejay Walter Gibbons had excised the first two minutes of her vocal and *all* of her verses from "Hit and Run." The B.T. Express scored a hit in 1974 with Moulton's remix of "Do It," but they disliked the way their music was being chopped up and reassembled for the dance floor. When the group heard Moulton's stark remix, which

foregrounded the drummer's hi-hats and cymbal crashes and de-emphasized their vocals, they "hated" it. Moulton remembers the group complaining that "it wasn't the way they recorded it, and that it was unnatural."

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. Chuck D of Public Enemy called disco "the most artificial shit I ever heard," music that was "sophisticated, anti-black, anti-feel," not to mention gay, and upwardly -mobile.

The demands of the dance floor left their mark on disco. That said, black producers and musicians were the leading architects of the disco sound. The idea that disco involved a renunciation or, worse, a perversion of black music does not do justice to the complexity of R&B. Yes, disco staked out new sonic territory, but it drew on a long-standing tradition within both R&B and jazz of sweet vocal and instrumental styles. Without the sweet soul music produced by Motown there simply would have been no disco. And long before Giorgio Moroder began producing Donna Summer's hits, Isaac Hayes's cinematic soul broadened the sonic palette of R&B. Even though disco was not a man's man's man's world, James Brown's musical innovations proved to be critical to its development. The point is that disco did not arrive on American shores courtesy of Giorgio Moroder, the Bee Gees, and Abba. It developed through ongoing transnational exchanges, whose point of origin, while not exclusively American, was nonetheless more American than -not.

So how did we get from James Brown to Barry White? This shift is, of course, about music, but it is also about larger cultural shifts that are inextricable from disco. Usually disco functions as an easy trope for the era's narcissism and hedonism. However, I want to examine less familiar cultural concerns, ones that animated black communities but registered only faintly, if at all, in the glitzy, celebrity-studded world of Studio 54, the most common model for disco nightlife. Disco, and the music that anticipated it, provides a partial map of black America's shifting relationship to masculinity, upward mobility, and politics in the post-civil rights era. Although disco had its message music, it put forward its critiques slyly, favoring so much indirection and disguise that one could argue it operated according to what one anthropologist calls a "hidden transcript."

What follows is not a seamless narrative that unfolds gracefully, like those smooth mixes that galvanized dancers of the era. Mapping both the aural and the larger cultural shifts entails some rough transitions and bumpy segues. Even without my stereographic approach—with one eye on the music and the other on the culture—this chronicle would prove daunting, because disco was not monolithic or reducible to one sound, a handful of performers and producers, or one -demographic.

Complicating any effort to map a genealogy of disco is the murkiness of its history, which curiously remains more hidden than that of the more ostensibly "underground" punk. Critics may disagree about which continent gave rise to punk or whether certain musicians, such as Patti Smith, were really punk, but these are definitional problems. Because punk, on both sides of the Atlantic, assumed an explicitly rejectionist stance towards established rock, and was confident of its own significance, it took on the quality of a movement. Like most movements, it has left a vast archive and an impressive critical literature. Disco's history, by contrast, can be difficult to trace. Pop music is nothing if not a neverending series of borrowings, but the men and women who made disco—both in recording studios and in the deejay booths—were particularly promiscuous in their musical appropriations, refusing national boundaries as well as the snobbish purism that disdains the popular. As one peels back the layers of sound that make up disco, one discovers some unlikely sources and curious -syncretisms.

"I HEAR A SYMPHONY" is the title of a Supremes record, and it was Berry Gordy's dream. At Motown Records, Gordy assembled a group of artists, musicians, songwriters, and producers who made music that often sounded like those "thousand violins in the air" that the Supremes invoked in their 1965 hit. Motown's violins, propulsive bass, and pounding beat created a

sound both sweet and urgent, and it provided the aural template for disco. Perhaps the best indicator of the Motown–disco connection is how effortlessly so many of the label's hits were discofied in the late seventies. Like the music that would supersede it, Motown's was producer-driven and followed the logic of the assembly line. Indeed, when an interviewer asked founder Berry Gordy to respond to the criticism that his label was producing a sound rather than songs, Berry was unfazed. "You probably haven't any voice," he told the journalist. "But there are probably three notes you can sing. I can take those three notes and give them an arrangement and some lyrics. That makes a song. And your song will sell." Ten years later disco producers would say much the same thing about their -music.

Crucial to the Motown sound was its beat—so insistent and whomping that Beatle John Lennon once asked a member of the Four Tops if their drummer "beat on a bloody *tree*" to get such a loud backbeat. Actually, Lennon was not far off. In order to achieve the heavily accented backbeat on the Supremes' hit "Baby Love," the musicians rigged up two-by-fours hooked together with springs, which someone stomped on. To some, Motown's rhythmic assault was unsubtle, even un-black. Isaac Hayes, who worked at rival Stax Records, regarded Motown's pounding beat somewhat cynically, as part of the company's calculated crossover approach. "Now it was the standard joke with blacks, that whites could *not*, cannot clap on a backbeat," recalled Hayes. "What Motown did was very smart. They beat the kids over the head with it." Hayes claimed that this wasn't considered "soulful" at Stax, but, as he emphasized to journalist Gerri Hirshey, "baby, it *sold*." And not just to rhythm-impaired whites; Motown was massively popular among African Americans, -too.

Disco's indebtedness to Motown was more than simply aural, and included Gordy's audacious crossover ambitions. Gordy was committed to creating what he called the "Sound of Young America." Rather than making music that would circulate largely within the charts, radio, and venues of black America, he set out to make music that would take its seat at the front of the bus. In the process, Gordy upended the usual racial dynamics of popular music. Critics have often argued that Gordy's mainstream ambitions resulted in watered-down soul rather than the industrial-strength variety advanced by James Brown, Otis Redding, or Sam and Dave. In his elegiac *Sweet Soul Music*, Peter Guralnick excluded Motown on the grounds that its music was "so much more popular, so much more socially acceptable, so much more arranged and predictable, so much more white." Gordy's strategy did involve compromises. He initially opposed Stevie Wonder's plan to cover Bob Dylan's "Blowing in the Wind," which he considered too controversial. And he went so far as to establish the separate Soul label for records like Junior Walker and the All Stars' "Shotgun" that he (wrongly) judged too raw for -Motown.

But if Gordy was sometimes a prisoner of the very racial categories his company was tearing down, that doesn't nullify what was truly radical about Motown: that is, the claims it made on the musical mainstream and American culture more broadly. His artists would no longer be in the background covering pop standards for a much smaller black audience. Nor would they find their own songs covered much more profitably by white artists, as repeatedly happened to early R&B stars such as Ruth Brown and Little Richard. Motown's artists would own pop music. And they pretty much did. Of the 537 singles the company released between 1960 and 1970, a remarkable two-thirds were hit records. Certain records, such as Martha and the Vandellas' "Dancing in the Street," not only seized the airwaves but also seemed to expand the realm of the possible, particularly for African American listeners. Martha Reeves and the Vandellas weren't singing about dancing at a sock hop, but in the streets at a time when streets were sites of protest, and when urban riots were extending the literal meaning of the song. Reeves denied the political import of the song, but, as cultural critic Gerald Early points out, most black people at the time regarded it "a metaphorical theme song for black unity and black revolution."

Philadelphia became the epicenter of disco music, but Motown was hardly out of the picture in the early seventies. With its illustrious songwriting and production trio Holland–Dozier–Holland having abandoned ship to set up their own label in 1967, Motown began drawing upon other talented writers and producers who started experimenting with new sonic textures. Frank Wilson produced Eddie Kendricks's startling 1972 track "Girl You Need a Change of Mind." Although "Girl" didn't burn up the charts, it was enormously influential within the emerging disco scene. Two qualities distinguished the cut from the label's

usual sound: Wilson's inversion of Motown's four-on-the-top beat and his deployment of the gospel break, which emptied the track of most instrumentation and then gradually built it back up. This technique became so standard in seventies' dance music that it came to be called the "disco break." Just as important as Wilson's track with Kendricks was the work of Norman Whitfield. A young, ambitious songwriter-producer, Whitfield was further modifying the Motown sound, particularly in his work with the Temptations, who had been made over to seem more relevant to a younger generation. Whitfield's atmospheric funk on tracks like 1972's "Papa Was a Rollin' Stone," which was a hit for the Temptations on the pop and R&B charts and in discos, was widely copied, especially by the musicians at the recently formed Philadelphia International Records. Whitfield devised a dense, polyrhythmic texture made up of subtle conga fills, skittering hi-hats, and hand claps. He would use much the same rhythmic architecture in 1973's "Law of the Land," only this time it was undergirded by an unwavering, bass-driven 4/4 beat—the disco thump that the musicians at rival Philadelphia International Records were starting to employ. Whitfield's influence at the company is undeniable, and within a year another Motown record—the Jackson 5's "Dancing Machine"—was enjoying great success with -clubgoers.

Motown artists sometimes scaled the disco charts, but the label's greatest significance to disco was foundational. Motown's unprecedented success ratcheted up the expectations of black artists, including disco's future hit-makers, who felt that the mainstream was now theirs for the taking. Many of the black musicians and producers who were in the forefront of disco, particularly Leon Huff and Kenneth Gamble of Philadelphia International Records, were looking to extend Motown's success and its sound. They set about challenging Detroit with what amounted to an updating of the Motown sound. "The Philly sound was a take-off of Motown, only more sophisticated," says Vince Montana, vibraphonist of MFSB, the house band of PIR. The Philadelphia sound worked the highest end, the sweetest registers of soul music. With its sumptuous, swelling strings, Latin-tinged percussion, and horns (often a French horn and flugelhorn or something even more obscure rather than R&B's familiar sax and trumpet) that were "brassy and up" rather than down and dirty, Philly soul achieved a sound considerably more lush than Detroit-style -soul.

Thom Bell was a key architect of Philly soul, both on his own and in collaboration with Gamble and Huff. The Jamaican-born pianist was an important producer, arranger, and songwriter, who racked up an armful of hits including the Delfonics' "La La Means I Love You," the Stylistics' "You Are Everything" and "You Make Me Feel Brand New," and the Spinners' trio of hits, "I'll Be Around," "Could It Be I'm Falling in Love," and "One of a Kind (Love Affair)." Bell's signal achievement was to bring together what one critic calls the "sophisticated compositions and orchestration" of Burt Bacharach with the "smooth vocalizing" of old-style R&B groups like the Platters. The Stylistics' lead singer, Russell Thompkins Jr., even sounded like a more high-pitched version of Bacharach's favorite vocalist, Dionne Warwick. Bell was hardly the only black record producer and arranger listening to -Bacharach.

Thom Bell pioneered the lush instrumentation of disco, but it was up to others to show how all that swollen orchestration might really heat up a dance floor. Although it is tricky to pinpoint the one group of musicians who created disco's distinctive rhythms, MFSB is often credited with "turning the beat around" and creating what became known as the disco beat. Besides vibraphonist Vince Montana, MFSB featured Norman Harris on guitar, Ronnie Baker on bass, and Earl Young on drums. These were the musicians playing on Harold Melvin and the Blue Notes' 1973 hit record "The Love I Lost," a track that disco historians often credit with establishing what became known as the disco sound. To writer Peter Shapiro, the cut's "hissing hi-hats, the thumping bass sound, the surging momentum, the uplifting horns, the strings taking flight" and vocalist Teddy Pendergrass's "gospel passion" are the quintessence of disco. Key to the foundational sound of "The Love I Lost" was the drumming of Earl Young, who claims to have come up with the idea of inverting Motown's usual rhythm. "Motown used four-four on the snare—khh, khh, khh, khh—and the heartbeat on the bass—dmm-dmm, dmm-dmm, dmm-dmm, dmm-dmm—and they also used four-four on the tambourines," recalled Young. "I would use cymbals more than the average drummer, and I realized that if I played the four-four on the bass I could work different patterns on the cymbals." That pattern would become the signature rhythmic pattern of much disco, from MFSB's own "TSOP" to Harold Melvin and the Blue Notes' "Bad Luck"

and the Trammps' "Disco Inferno."

The Motown–PIR connection was pivotal to disco, but there was another important current that shaped its sound, and its creator was James Brown. Beginning with his epochal "Papa's Got a Brand New Bag," Brown hijacked soul music and took it deep into the territory of the rhythmic. As critic Dave Marsh has argued, just at that moment when the Motown juggernaut made "comparatively ornate records seem the wave of the future," Brown "invented the rhythmic future." With his 1965 chartbuster "Brand New Bag," Brown, who heretofore had found himself mostly confined to black radio where he was the "scream at the end of the dial," achieved an unlikely crossover to the pop world. Even Brown seemed a little awed by what he had accomplished, explaining to one interviewer that the track was "a little beyond me right now . . . It's—it's—it's just *out there*." But with James Brown, "Everything came out of his mind brand new."

Brown's hit record demoted melody and chord changes to such an extent that, in the words of music journalist Robert Palmer, the "rhythmic elements *became* the song." Every voice, every instrument was deployed for its percussive effect. With Brown, the percussive emphasis was on the first downbeat at the start of each bar, or what he called the "One." Dissecting Brown's sound, Palmer notes "the horns played single-note bursts that were often sprung against downbeats. The bass lines were broken into choppy two- and three-note patterns," which, as Palmer notes, was hardly a novelty in Latin music, but was less typical of sixties' R&B. In another innovation, his rhythm guitarist "choked his guitar strings against the instrument's neck so hard," writes Palmer, "that his playing began to sound like a jagged tin can being scraped with a pocketknife."

Repetition was the other critical quality in Brown's sound. From his early days as the lead singer of the Flames, Brown had acquired a name for himself by "crawling the floor and crying out the one essential word of their hit song, 'Please, Please, Please,' over and over again." Once Brown made the rhythmic turn, his vocal contributions sometimes consisted of little more than "uhn"s, "huh"s, and falsetto "eeeaaayowww"s. Brown's voice was never ancillary, but it was very much in service to the overall rhythmic assault, with the result that his vocals sometimes resembled percussive punctuation. Critics (and Brown himself) have often contrasted Brown's supposedly naturalistic funk to the soulessness of mechanistic disco, and yet the Father of Funk was not techno-averse. As music historian Brian Ward points out, before releasing "Brand New Bag," Brown remastered and sped up the original recording to give it more kick. The resulting record was, Ward maintains, the product of "inspiration, contemplation, and technological manipulation." Finally, Brown stretched out songs into jam-band length. Brown's funk upended the conventions of pop music in ways that disco musicians and producers would -exploit.

Brown laid much of the groundwork for disco, but he did not prosper during the years of its hegemony. Most histories position Brown as too raw and too "black" for disco audiences. It is true that Brown's house-wrecking stage style, so explosive it left audiences "completely fucked up," was at odds with the smooth style of much seventies' disco. And the music Brown was best known for—his tense, staccato funk, with its unpredictable breaks and bridges—has a ruptural quality different from the plush, tightly seamed, 4/4 steamroller of disco. But Brown's biggest problem with disco wasn't its polish and sophistication. After all, the Godfather of Soul recorded any number of highly orchestrated ballads, including his monster hit "It's a Man's Man's Man's World." Brown's problem was that he never melded the funky and sophisticated within one track, but rather kept them sequestered. Melding these qualities inside a cut was the genius of disco, which Brown's arranger and trombonist Fred Wesley recognized. "Disco music," Wesley wryly observed, "is funk with a bow tie."

Other funk artists, which is to say those who followed the trail the Godfather blazed, worked the contiguous territory of funk and disco better than Brown. Sly and the Family Stone, who owed their success to their ability to "bridge the gap" between psychedelic Jimi and the tuxedoed Temptations, had largely fallen apart by the time disco hit big. Nonetheless, the group's musical hybridity and its initial optimism in songs like "Everyday People" and "Everybody Is a Star" prefigured disco's universalism. The composition of the band itself, a multiracial outfit in which women played instruments rather than only singing backup, underscored the band's commitment to breaking through established conventions and hierarchies. The group's 1968 hit "Dance to the Music," with its lines "Beat is getting stronger / Music's getting longer too," proved uncannily prescient, and modeled a sound that powered future disco hit-makers KC and the Sunshine Band. 1971's "Family

Affair," which topped the pop and R&B charts, anticipated the mellower sound of disco. "Family Affair" featured a primitive drum machine that played a bouncy, featherweight rhythm that was echoed in two early disco hits, George McCrae's "Rock Your Baby" and the Hues Corporation's "Rock the Boat." In 1978, with Sly's best days behind him, his record company tried unsuccessfully to capitalize on the disco craze by rereleasing some of his biggest hits with a standard disco beat instead of the original rhythm -tracks.

The success of James Brown and Sly and the Family Stone in the late sixties and early seventies resulted in a funk surge within R&B. Earth Wind and Fire, the Ohio Players, B.T. Express, Rufus, War, Kool and the Gang, and the Isley Brothers were among those galvanizing dance floors and racking up hit after hit on the pop and R&B charts. Records such as "Love Rollercoaster," "Once You Get Started," "Hollywood Swinging," and "City, Country, City" smoothed the edges of Brown's angular funk, which probably accounts for their popularity. Another case in point is "Express," a chugging, largely instrumental single by the New York group B.T. Express that became one of 1974's biggest R&B and disco hits. "Express" moved James Brown's funk into such monotonous territory that Brown's own band (with trombonist Fred Wesley at the helm) recorded a satirical cover, "(It's Not the Express) It's the JB's Monaurail," which mocked the track's easy-listening funk. Brown was exasperated by his imitators' commercial success, and when he wasn't trying to score a dance-floor hit he often criticized disco for capturing only the "repetitious part" of his -funk.

However, the line between authentic funk and so-called fake funk—or, as others might construe it, between funk and disco—was not always discernible. George Clinton, who presided over a funk conglomerate that included the bands Parliament and Funkadelic, described the latter's disco-ish single "One Nation Under a Groove" disparagingly as "P-Funk for passives." Funkadelic recorded it, he said, because they needed a hit and bet that with disco's popularity the track might do well on the dance floor. Yet "One Nation" proved so prodigiously popular in black communities that it topped the R&B chart for six weeks in 1978. *Jet* magazine even named it the song of the year, which suggests that, whatever Clinton's intentions, for plenty of African Americans the record successfully worked the overlapping territory of funk and -disco.

Writing funk into the history of disco entails calling into question some of the shibboleths about black-authored popular music. Specifically, it means challenging the view that disco was bourgeois and funk was street, that disco represented an attenuated version of "black" music and that funk was its authentic expression. Writers continue to make these claims, but they never rise above the level of sheer assertion. Pitting disco and funk as antagonists denies the way they rubbed up against each other on the dance floor, on the radio, and in the recording studio. For example, Houston Baker has written dismissively of Johnnie Taylor's 1975 hit "Disco Lady," which he argues was one of the first R&B singles to be marketed to a white audience. Yet the record got heavy disco play and topped the pop and the R&B charts, perhaps because its sinewy sound owed a lot to the musicians playing on it—members of Funkadelic. Like so many disco records, these tracks were massively popular, and not just among rhythm-challenged whites and the upper stratum of black -America.

This is not to say that disco and funk were indistinguishable. Disco was fonder of the 4/4 beat than funk, whose growing preference for a thwacking beat (as always "on the one") is audible in the Commodores' "Brick House" or Zapp's "More Bounce to the Ounce." Musicologist Charles Kronengold draws our attention to another difference: in a funk song a single detail might animate the whole as "the heartbeat," whereas the details in a disco record are not nearly so anchored to its sonic architecture, but rather come and go. Finally, disco was more attentive to female desire than funk, which tended toward the guy--centric.

The shift away from James Brown's male-centered sexual politics ("the way I like it is the way it is") to something more reciprocal owes a lot to another key figure in disco's prehistory, Isaac Hayes. A songwriter and musician at Stax Records, Hayes helped to define and popularize hard-edged Southern soul with songs such as "Soul Man" by Sam and Dave. However, Hayes's 1969 solo effort ***Hot Buttered Soul*** was utterly out of genre—a cross between lounge music, movie soundtracks, and R&B. Hayes favored lush instrumentation, but in contrast to the architects of Philly soul he had a penchant for the truly offbeat. Years before the arrival of extended disco mixes, Hayes broke out of the two-and-three-quarter-minute straitjacket of R&B

radio. His cover of country artist Glen Campbell's recent Top 20 song "By the Time I Get to Phoenix" clocks in at a bloated eighteen-plus -minutes.

Critic Ken Tucker observed that Hayes wanted "to make soul music as a jazz artist might, lengthening and improvising on a single idea." The owner of Argent Studio, where Hayes recorded the album, says that the songs were so long that he would have to "walk out onto the studio floor while the band was playing and make a motion with my hand so that Isaac knew to either figure out how to end the song or let us start another reel." Hayes explored the possibilities of repetition, which he considered the key to getting "real deep into a listener's head." For Hayes the point was "to keep at it until even if the head was stubborn, the body couldn't resist." Hayes also experimented with minimalism in his stark cover of Dionne Warwick's "Walk On By" (one of three Bacharach tunes Hayes would cover) as instruments crescendo and then drop out. Indeed, Denise Chapman of the disco label Salsoul Records claimed that Hayes's "By the Time I Get to Phoenix" was the inspiration for deejay Walter Gibbons's stripped-down mix of Loleatta Holloway's "Hit and Run." Hayes's orchestration moved between the lush and the spare—a style that disco producers would pounce upon. And his eagerness to transform others' music—no matter if it was the sophisticated pop of Burt Bacharach or the country of Glen Campbell—suggested that anything was fair game for -discofying.

In its repetitiousness, suavity, outsized tracks, orchestration, and audacious covers of unlikely songs, *Hot Buttered Soul* anticipated disco, but it doesn't sound much like it. However, Hayes's 1971 mega-hit for Gordon Parks's blaxploitation movie *Shaft* was a different story. The rhythmic architecture of "Theme from *Shaft*"—those tireless 4/4 -hi-hats—was the prototype for disco's 4/4 thump. A perfect mix of the funky and the cool, the earthy and the synthetic, with Hayes's understated rap floating on top of it all, "Theme from *Shaft*" was wildly popular. The single sold a million copies, and from 1971 through 1972 it was a staple of Top 40, black, and jazz radio. And it was popular in the earliest discos. "Theme from *Shaft*" went platinum, won a Grammy, and the soundtrack from which it was drawn earned Hayes an Oscar, making him the first black composer to win that award. Decked out in flowing African robes, Spandex tights, and elaborate gold chains across his chest, Hayes toured with a twenty-piece tuxedo-clad orchestra in front of audiences that could not get enough of -him.

Hayes enjoyed outsized commercial success, but music critics routinely savaged his music. One *Rolling Stone* reviewer called his follow-up LP *Black Moses* "dull, enervated and . . . pretentious." Another attacked Hayes for substituting gimmicks for "the *native* sensuality of black music" (italics mine). And Vince Aletti indicted him for churning out "black Muzak" that transformed good material into "a drowned and bloated body washed ashore after weeks at sea: pathetic, grossly misshapen, dead." Hayes was by no means the only artist to find himself bashed by critics for ditching his roots in authentically "black" music. Critics also dismissed as too sweet and insufficiently funky the symphonic soul of Thom Bell, Leon Huff, and Kenneth Gamble. The conventional wisdom among critics was that musicians like Hayes had fallen victim to the seductions of the white, bourgeois -mainstream.

In pushing past the accepted borders of soul music, it is possible that Bell, Hayes, Gamble and Huff, and all the others *were* moved at least in part by their own upward mobility. It could also be that their fascination with sophisticated symphonic soul reflected what longtime R&B record producer Ahmet Ertegun characterized as African Americans' musical orientation towards the future—"what's next." For these musicians, "what's next" may have meant exploring the freedom to move beyond stultifying racial categorizations that consigned them to a particular kind of R&B—raw, straightforward, and unadorned. Stevie Wonder certainly made music that spoke to the dreams and disappointments of African Americans, and yet he categorically rejected the label "black musician." "That's putting me in a particular box," he insisted, "and saying . . . stay . . . right . . . where . . . you . . . are!" Over the years, Philly producers Kenneth Gamble and Leon Huff have positioned themselves differently when questioned about the "blackness" of their music. In early 1973, Gamble argued that black artists no longer had to go through a "whitening process" because the black market was now large enough to sustain them. (Certainly PIR produced any number of socially relevant songs geared to black listeners.) He also said that he and his partner "never thought along the lines of a black music thing," and on yet other occasions that they thought "green." But the critical disparagement of PIR's sweet soul (mostly at the hands of white critics of rock music) infuriated the two producers. Huff went so far as to complain that these critics

"cannot really hear black music" and find it difficult "respecting black cats without patronizing us."

The critical commentary on the new soul music was often patronizing and, frankly, obtuse. Critics often could not grasp that to black audiences Hayes, for one, was breaking new ground in all kinds of ways, not the least in his self-presentation. For starters, he made sure that the cover of *Hot Buttered Soul* was designed for maximum provocation, unlike the covers of most R&B albums, whose sole design requirement seemed to be maximum innocuousness. Instead of a conventional photograph of Hayes either performing or posed smiling at the camera, the from-above shot on the cover of *Hot Buttered Soul* captured little beyond the top of Hayes's shiny, clean-shaven head, his shades, and the hefty gold chains around his neck. Although Hayes recalls the photo starting as a "joke," he says that he and the others involved in the shoot quickly came to appreciate how "different and out front" it was. By 1969 when the Afro was just beginning to become as much a matter of style as a signifier of militance, Hayes's gleaming Afro-free head suggested a shift in the sixties' hair wars. Maybe, as Hayes put it, "bald was as black as you could get."

Likewise, Hayes's bare-chested-gold-chains look, which became de rigueur in hip-hop circles some twenty years later, was another signifier of blackness. Hayes's chains and the African robes he often wore tagged him a militant to some whites, including TV station managers who were known to eye him nervously when he arrived to perform. To many African Americans, Hayes was the quintessence of black pride and black power. The image of Isaac Hayes at 1972's Wattstax Festival, an event often dubbed the black Woodstock, shaking off his cape to reveal his buff black chest and gold-chain vest is, as one historian has argued, perhaps the most powerful representation of "the impact of Black Power in America." Like the "black private dick" John Shaft about whom he sang, Hayes represented black people winning. This was the crucial element that most critics missed about both blaxploitation and the nascent disco sound: they represented black people getting -over.

However, the critical establishment at rock-oriented publications such as *Rolling Stone* favored more overtly political music, of which there was much in early seventies' R&B. Indeed, the critical drubbing of Hayes and the other architects of disco reflected in large part an apprehension that this new soul music marked an abrupt move away from political engagement toward embourgoisement and political apathy. It's true that many of the soul records topping the R&B and pop charts from the summer of 1970 until 1974 were what critic Greil Marcus called music of "worry," in which disenchantment and disillusionment loomed large. The Temptations' "Ball of Confusion" and "Papa Was a Rollin' Stone," Stevie Wonder's "Living for the City," Edwin Starr's antiwar anthem "War," Marvin Gaye's trilogy "What's Going On," "Inner City Blues," and "Mercy Mercy Me," the Undisputed Truth's "Smiling Faces," Sly Stone's *There's a Riot Goin' On*, Curtis Mayfield's *Superfly* soundtrack, the O'Jays' "Backstabbers" and "For the Love of Money," and War's "Slippin' into Darkness"—all were staples of Top 40 and R&B radio in this period. And this trouble music heaved its last gasp in 1975 with the Isley Brothers' uncompromising "Fight the Power," which after several weeks topping the charts gave way to KC and the Sunshine Band's disco number "Get Down Tonight."

To critics and observers it seemed obvious: the dance floor and the bedroom were trumping politics. Most attributed the turn away from politics to black America's resignation or capitulation. Critic Greil Marcus thought the new soul reflected the black community's "drift into accommodation," which he blamed on persistent racism, internal fragmentation, and the unraveling of the black freedom movement, largely through government repression. Most histories have echoed Marcus's downbeat assessment. In his book on Philadelphia International Records, John Jackson likewise stressed the negative, particularly the growing racial divide in the country. African American studies scholar Mark Anthony Neal also viewed the seventies as a time of "deterioration," when blackness was reduced to a commodity, and black middle-class flight from the inner city intensified the decline of black public life. And Brian Ward argued that with the rise of disco and funk, black Americans "were dancing to keep from crying."

Without question, there's much truth in these assessments, but they either disregard or diminish the important cultural transformations that were the legacy of civil rights. Affirmative action, growing black electoral muscle, greater and occasionally less caricatured representation in TV, film, and music, and the elimination of restrictive covenants created more opportunities (and some new conundrums) for African Americans. These changes were complicated by the depletion of the black freedom

movement, stagflation (a combination of economic stagnation and inflation), growing class fissures, and continued police brutality in black communities. Equally important was the growing unemployment fed by the rust-belting of the Northeast and Midwest, which wiped out large numbers of unionized factory jobs of the sort that had been the traditional path out of poverty for poorer Americans. These were unsettled and unsettling times, but they were not characterized by unmitigated gloom. It was a period when the imperative was to "rock steady" because the ground was "shaky."

The focus on defeat and accommodation as *the* defining experiences of African Americans in the seventies has blinded critics and historians to the heightened sense of possibility that also characterized those years. Funk historian Rickey Vincent's belief that "black folks could go anywhere (almost) in America by 1970" is too optimistic, but he is right to emphasize the mobility—psychic as well as physical—that came with desegregation. The focus on black accommodation and capitulation misses the exhilaration of hearing Isaac Hayes have his way with pop standards just as John Shaft did with white cops. It fails to take into account the glee of watching the Oscars ceremony where Hayes, ("my weird black self") dressed in a fur-trimmed tuxedo, rose, Black Moses–like, on a pneumatic platform to perform "Theme from *Shaft*." It overlooks the sense of pride and power engendered by the success of Funkadelic's "One Nation Under a Groove," a song that championed a united, unstoppable people. And it ignores the triumph that black musicians and producers felt about breaching the racial boundaries of American -music.

For black musicians, claiming the mantle of sophistication was a thrilling proposition, even if the end result sounded like schmaltz and looked like a sellout to some. Even James Brown felt the lure of sophistication. J.B. bandleader and trombonist Fred Wesley recalled how in the seventies he and Brown went "harp crazy, trying to put harp on anything and everything." No one went about appropriating sophistication in a more determined way than the disco group Chic. Committed to "reversing the traffic," they fashioned a tony style drawn from the look and posture that Bryan Ferry and David Bowie put forward during their "decadent" period. Chic cofounder Nile Rodgers recalls thinking, "If we take this sophistication, high-fashion, aristocratic, interesting, cerebral stuff, put a beat to it, make it black and our own thing, we could really be happening, too." More recently, Rodgers has said that with Chic he and his partner Edwards were trying to create funk music distinct from that of the South, Midwest, or the West Coast. They decided that "New York funk is slick, it's sophisticated, it's chic, it's . . . French." With the women dressed in Norma Kamali and the men in Armani and Cerruti, Chic advanced an elegant, classy look. Once they became established, they traveled with three violinists as well. No one rammed this music down the throats of black listeners, who, as Stevie Wonder noted, "were looking for this change in their music."

Still, the movement away from overtly political R&B wasn't just about the transgressive pleasure of seizing what traditionally had been white turf—sophistication, class, those thousand violins in the air. There was likely another reason that these musicians backed away from songs like the O'Jays' "Backstabbers," which chronicled white America's "broken promises" and black America's "faded hopes." In part the answer lies in the evanescence of popular music. The detailing of duplicity and disappointment that produced goose bumps of recognition in 1970 had grown formulaic by 1974. Song after song had taken to recycling what discographer Peter Shapiro calls the "smiling face trope," the image of the backstabbing (white) politician or (black) brother. Perhaps more to the point, by this juncture the realization that the sixties' dream of peace, justice, and love had fallen short was old hat. What was the point of belaboring it in song after song? To radical cultural critic Michele Wallace, it was simply a foregone conclusion by the midseventies that the Black Power movement had passed, largely as a result of the FBI's campaign against it. "Everybody knew, I thought, that the possibility of radical politics was over." Her response was not more handwringing, but rather to conclude "at least you could be famous and then tell them all to fuck themselves."

For disco's architects, fame may have been its own revenge. They weren't interested in cataloguing disappointments, but rather in breaking expected racial stereotypes and "taking it to the bank," which is not quite the same thing as accommodation. Chic's Nile Rodgers was a sixties' person (he says he wrote Sister Sledge's big disco hit "We Are Family" at 1969's Woodstock Festival), but he was committed to making music that "uplifted the race," albeit cagily. What Rodgers and his

bandmates “would do was hide it in our songs,” sometimes so successfully that the political message was discernible to only the most maximally competent listeners. A case in point is the backstory to Chic’s “Le Freak,” which became Atlantic Records’ bestselling single of all time. The story of “Le Freak” begins on New Year’s Eve 1977, when the doorman at Studio 54 refused to admit the group’s cofounders, Nile Rodgers and Bernard Edwards, who were guests of the singer Grace Jones. Infuriated at the snub, they retreated to Rodgers’s apartment where they got wasted and jammed. As they played, they shouted, “fuck Studio 54 . . . fuck em,” and “Aaaaaaaah, fuck off.” The final version, which substituted “freak out” for “fuck off,” seemed a paean to the newly opened but already famous New York disco. However, anyone familiar with the club’s legendary snobbishness might have smiled at Chic’s seemingly guileless suggestion, “Just come on down to 54 / And find a spot out on the floor.” This was the way that Chic worked—through -indirection.

And so it was with “Good Times,” their 1979 track that many took as a clueless, head-in-the-sand celebration of the good life at the height of hard times. “People asked how we could write a song called ‘Good Times’ in the middle of the greatest recession since the 1930s,” says Rodgers. A former Black Panther, Rodgers maintains the song was always meant ironically. “Listen to the lyrics, we are comparing it to the Great Depression!” But most listeners didn’t pick up on Rodgers’s rip-off of a line from an Al Jolson song or anything else. “If Dylan was standing in front of a tank singing ‘happy days are here again’ people would say ‘oh, check Bob,’ ” Rodgers observed. “It would be loved and would make all the sense in the world.” But something that arch coming from a black disco group, Rodgers pointed out, “sounds totally different.”

There were some disco songs that grappled with political issues in a straightforward manner. The best known include Machine’s “There But for the Grace of God Go I,” Gladys Knight’s “Bourgie Bourgie,” and two PIR songs, McFadden and Whitehead’s “Ain’t No Stoppin’ Us Now,” and the O’Jays’ “Message in the Music.” But for the most part, disco was politically oblique rather than explicit. From the beginning disco favored manifestos of love, songs such as “Love Train,” “I Love Music,” “Love’s Theme,” and “Love Is the Message.” As disco congealed, the noirish music that had been a strand of early disco (songs such as “Papa Was a Rollin’ Stone”) gave way to upbeat, broadly humanist tracks such as the Temptations’ “Happy People,” and most famously “We Are Family,” the song that Edwards and Rodgers wrote and produced for Sister Sledge. Given half a chance disco would almost always dodge the politically -controversial.

However this hardly means that disco was emptied of political meaning. Just as the shift toward sophistication was in a broad sense political, so was the shift in the representation of black masculinity that occurred in these years. At the beginning of the 1970s James Brown was the undisputed Godfather of Soul and his style of masculinity, which journalist Nelson George considered one of “unbridled machismo,” still held sway among many. Brown advanced a cocky masculinity rooted in the streets that, as one fan recalls, “hooked most black men (including me) to the James Brown culture.” Activist Al Sharpton Jr. has said of Brown, “We look at James Brown, and we say, ‘Hey, *that’s* how I’m gonna be a man.’ ” With his hard-edged funk and his political audacity (recording his anthem of black pride, “Say It Loud—I’m Black and I’m Proud”), Brown configured black masculinity in the sixties as surely as the Black Panthers did in their black berets and leather jackets. Much of Brown’s appeal lay in his swaggering, boastful sexuality. In songs like “Get Up (I Feel Like Being a) Sex Machine” and “I’m a Greedy Man,” Brown advertised his outsized libido. Even in his late forties, Brown appeared onstage “in a red jumpsuit with the word SEX stitched across the front.” George Clinton is likely not the only man whose love of Brown’s funk has something to do with the way “it makes your dick hard.”

On the surface, Hayes also seemed like a “black stud,” as rock critic Ken Tucker put it. After all, he described John Shaft as a “sex machine,” and likely Hayes enjoyed the inevitable slippage between himself and the “black private dick” he sang about. But while “Theme from *Shaft*” suggested that black power is phallic power—that it emerges from the shaft of . . . you name it—Hayes’s self-representation leaned toward the ironic. Reviewing his 1973 London concert, *Melody Maker* noted that Hayes “didn’t take himself seriously, thank God, but came on with a maximum of showbiz camp.” Hayes has said that his tough-guy pose gave him the necessary cover to express emotions usually considered unseemly in men. In his view, much of his popularity stemmed from the way he expanded the emotional parameters of masculinity in a way that both men and women found

appealing. Even a cursory listening to Hayes's music reveals that underneath all the Spandex and chains, he was as much a love man as a sex machine, as apt to sing about getting hurt as about getting laid, and able to move seamlessly from baritone croon to falsetto wail. In the lugubrious "By the Time I Get to Phoenix" the narrator only leaves his wife after the ***eighth*** time he's found her in their bed with another -man.

Hayes was a race man and a love man—a combination that no other R&B singer of his generation, even Marvin Gaye, was able to pull off quite as effectively. As critic Carol Cooper has persuasively argued, Hayes was simultaneously sexy and warriorlike. Hayes pioneered a different kind of black masculinity in which toughness, rather than being an end in itself, could be harnessed for the purpose of tenderness. He was a transitional figure whose soul-baring R&B and tough but vulnerable masculinity bridged the sixties and the seventies and prepared America's airwaves and dance floors for disco. With Marvin "Let's Get It On" Gaye, Hayes also pushed the boundaries of respectability with his X-rated bedroom music. It was Hayes's 1973 album *Joy* that, with Sylvia Robinson's "Pillow Talk," pioneered the orgasmic gasps and moans that would later turn up in Marvin Gaye's "Since I Had You," Major Harris's "Love Won't Let Me Wait," Leon Ware's "Body Heat," and most famously of all in Donna Summer's 1975 record "Love to Love You Baby," her first hit.

Given Hayes's love-man credentials, he should have been positioned to take advantage of the disco turn. But by late 1973 he was playing catch-up with Barry White, who as a solo artist racked up five Top 10 hits (and even more on the R&B and disco charts) between 1973 and 1979. By comparison, Hayes managed three disco hits, "Disco Connection," "Don't Let Go," and "I Ain't Never," but they were far from his most memorable or bestselling tracks. Writing about this turn of events in the mideighties, critic Dave Marsh said it was hard to believe that Hayes, whom he called the master of the "personalized epic," had actually been "laying the groundwork for Barry White." Indeed, White so copped Hayes's baritone croon, raconteur vocalizing, and pillow-talk soul that he was widely recognized as an Isaac Hayes imitator. Hayes edged R&B closer to disco, but, like Brown, he found it difficult to adjust to disco's diminution of the performer. His mini-epics about the betrayals and loss that come with loving were too Ike-centric for the disco years, when dancers expected a singer to commit himself to ***their*** pleasure and not, as Hayes often did, to the exploration of his already much-examined psyche. Moreover, Hayes's love songs remained focused on his needs at the very moment when women's liberation was making an issue of women's -desires.

Barry White did take an armful of pages out of Hayes's musical playbook—the buttery baritone, the plush orchestration, the languorous come-ons. White's breakthrough single, 1973's "I'm Gonna Love You Just a Little More Baby," easily could have been the latest Hayes record . . . except for the fact that with its intense strings-versus-rhythm structure the song was tighter and tenser than anything Hayes was putting out. Jon Landau was one of the few rock critics to appreciate White, and in 1975 he wrote that at his best he was one of rock's great bandleaders, someone who could "perform any song at what feels like the beat of the universe." White had more than his music going for him. In contrast to "Black Moses," White "erased the difference between black and white," contended music promoter Howard Stein. With his "easy emotion, no challenges," and a twenty-piece orchestra, half of them middle-aged white men, he was, in Stein's view, "accessible to everyone."

White's success also owed a lot to his enthusiastic proclamations on behalf of the ladies. When it came to lovemaking, his aim always was to "please her and please her / any time or any place." Before most male musicians, White was onto the country's shifting sexual terrain, one in which women's sexual desire actually mattered. White presented himself as a heterosexual woman's fantasy of fidelity, devotion, and desire. At concerts he asked how many men in the audience really "know how to love their women." Longtime nightclub owner Trude Heller marveled at what she called his "women's liberation rap."

White was the vital ingredient in his woman's pleasure, but it was ***her*** pleasure that he claimed to be after. Always, she was "his first, his last, his everything." White advanced a more idealized vision of romantic love and a more selfless masculinity than just about anyone else on the scene. Certainly there were plenty of R&B and funk artists whose music reflected the usual masculine prerogatives. Even Stevie Wonder, who produced plenty of songs of adoration like "Golden Lady," turned regressive in "Superwoman," reprimanding an ambitious woman for "trying to boss the bull around." Marvin Gaye's falsetto was so

seductive that it was easy to miss that *his* sexual healing took precedence. Falsetto Eddie Kendricks's "Girl You Need a Change of Mind," in which he sang, "Why march in picket lines? Burn bras and carry signs?" is explicitly anti-feminist. And funk musicians of the time—Rick James, P-Funk, Cameo, the Ohio Players, the Commodores, among others—celebrated "freaky girls" known for "letting it all hang out."

However, White had plenty of company when it came to this women-first music. In 1975 the Miracles had a hit tweaking James Brown's sex machine mantra by declaring, "I'm just a love machine / and I don't work for nobody but you." Teddy Pendergrass's popularity soared with steamy songs such as "Close the Door" and "Turn Off the Lights," in which he implored his girlfriend to "tell me what you wanna do." Even the onetime funk outfit Kool and the Gang abandoned their "Jungle Boogie" for "Ladies Night," a number one disco hit. Although more romantic than sexual, falsetto-fueled groups often put forward a woman-identified vision of romantic love. The Dells scored a hit with "Give Your Baby a Standing Ovation," as did the Intruders with "I'll Always Love My Mama," a song that African American scholar Cornel West recently sang on Tavis Smiley's radio episode for Mother's Day. Under the direction of Thom Bell and often in collaboration with lyricist Linda Creed, also from Philadelphia, the Stylistics churned out woman-friendly songs of romance like "Betcha By Golly, Wow." So did the Spinners with records such as "Mighty Love," "I'll Be Around," and "Could It Be I'm Falling in Love."

One can't know the extent to which White's gospel of love prevailed in the discos, bars, and bedrooms of the seventies where his music played. After all, the relationship between the textual and the social is tricky. We do know that as the seventies came to a close his woman-centered love songs, and disco more generally, provoked a backlash among the young black men who began to turn toward the harsher sounds of hip-hop. Public Enemy had no truck with the cruder sort of misogyny peddled by the likes of 2 Live Crew; nonetheless, they went out of their way to make guys' music. Chuck D has said that the group "intentionally made records girls [would] hate and once they hated it, we knew we had some shit." Even though they knew their records were danceable, they preferred to think of them instead as "driving" or even "fighting" records. Coming of age in the days before bitches and hos, Michael Jackson, Prince, and Luther Vandross were among those who struggled in the post-disco landscape where masculine hardness and performative streetness mattered. Indeed, from ***Thriller*** onward, Jackson sometimes cast himself in his videos as an alien—too soft and androgynous to fit in with the ghetto-tough black men around -him.

Performers like Jackson and Vandross, who consciously defied the mandate against "softening up," could situate themselves in a seventies' tradition of male sensitivity that included Isaac Hayes and Barry White. These love men could be schlocky, but they helped to make the seventies a time when vulnerability and tenderness weren't the sole preserve of women, when men's "rhymes could still sigh," as critic Thulani Davis so beautifully put it. But if these male architects of disco were refusing black macho, the men most gripped by dance fever were opting for -butchness.

Photo captions:

Chic, album cover for Real People. L–R: Bernard Edwards, Alfa Anderson, Nile Rodgers, Luci Martin, Tony Thompson. "In lots of different areas we broke through the color line," recalls Anderson

House-wrecking James Brown and the Famous Flames do some damage at the Apollo Theater, 1964. L–R: Johnny Terry, Bobby Byrd, Bobby Bennett, James Brown

The nervy cover of Isaac Hayes's 1969 album Hot Buttered Soul

A one-time gang-banger, Barry White said that had his mother not been a loving presence in his life he might well have developed into “another kind of human being”

JAMES BROWN’S “GET UP OFFA THAT THING”

DETERMINED TO BREAK the disco juggernaut he believed was killing his career, Brown declared war on the mellow dance music sweeping the nation with his 1976 release “Get Up Offa That Thing.” Brown has said that the song came to him in the middle of a dispiriting gig at a Florida nightspot where the audience seemed determined to sit through his set. They were “trying to do a sophisticated thing, listening to funk.” Frustrated, he began yelling, “Get up offa that thang and dance till you feel better.” The resulting record, which opened with Brown’s declaring, “I’m back,” found the singer throwing down the groove and the gauntlet. Mr. Dynamite was on a mission to take back America’s airwaves and dance floors from disco, or what fellow funk artist George Clinton dubbed “the blahs.” For Brown, the song was about “releasing the pressure” by unleashing the hardcore funk that he believed disco was pushing to the margins of popular music.

In the LP’s liner notes, Brown made it clear that he understood that disco had democratized the music scene, pushing aside stars in the process. “It once was me, now it’s the people,” he wrote. Brown insisted that he knew “this game,” he had conquered dance floors some ten years earlier, and he was out to liberate the hearts, minds, and asses of America once again. The track was bouncier than Brown’s fractured funk, but its only concession to the disco sound was the way the hi-hat articulates the off-beats. There was nothing smooth, cool, or synthetic about his latest track, just Brown’s boasting, and an especially lively example of the jive talk that usually passed between Brown and his backup band the J.B.’s, including jabs at the Ohio Players and Barry White, whom one band member derisively called “Barry White Boy.” It is a hard-edged jam so funky that Brown predicted it would jolt the disco crowd to its feet and to its senses. “I can see the disco now, jumping, stomping, shuffling, screaming, roaring, hollering, getting overheated and shacking. Ha!”

“Get Up Offa That Thing” climbed no higher than number four on the R&B charts and barely cracked the disco Top 20. It demonstrated that as badly as Brown wanted to turn the clock back to those days when his music dominated the charts, by 1976 the ground underneath him, the ground he had so skillfully negotiated, had shifted. For the next three years Brown was lucky to get any chart action. Then in 1979, at the very tail end of disco’s reign, his record company made a last-ditch effort to market him as the progenitor of disco. The cover of The Original Disco Man shows Brown in a white Bee Gees–like jumpsuit in the middle of a cavernous, empty disco, a glitterball above his head and a smile on his face. The album’s execrable title track, “The Original Disco Man,” a song with all the intensity of a sitcom theme song, transformed Brown into the scream at the back of the disco. Critic Robert Christgau nailed it when he wrote that the LP found Brown “exploring the alien world he founded.”

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