



TIME  
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MUSIC



## SOUNDS OF THE SEVENTIES • 1977: TAKE TWO

- 1. Best of My Love** Emotions
- 2. I'm Your Boogie Man**  
KC and the Sunshine Band
- 3. Runaway** Bonnie Raitt
- 4. Black Betty** Ram Jam
- 5. Couldn't Get It Right**  
Climax Blues Band
- 6. Jet Airliner**  
The Steve Miller Band
- 7. Isn't It Time** The Babys
- 8. Telephone Line**  
Electric Light Orchestra
- 9. Car Wash** Rose Royce
- 10. Float On** The Floaters
- 11. It's Ecstasy When You Lay Down  
Next to Me** Barry White
- 12. Whatcha Gonna Do?**  
Pablo Cruise
- 13. You Make Me Feel Like Dancing**  
Leo Sayer
- 14. Don't Stop** Fleetwood Mac
- 15. Do Ya** Electric Light Orchestra
- 16. Boogie Nights** Heatwave
- 17. Smoke From a Distant Fire**  
The Sanford/Townsend Band
- 18. Brick House** Commodores
- 19. (Every Time I Turn Around) Back in  
Love Again** L.T.D.
- 20. Don't Leave Me This Way**  
Thelma Houston

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SOD-17  
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*Car Wash* came out after blaxploitation movies had peaked and before more serious or mainstream films with black casts and themes became popular. *Car Wash* gave some of today's top black directors a few ideas. Michael Schultz's movie, which details a day in the life of a Los Angeles car wash, is full of funky urban energy, humor and optimism in the face of adversity. It poignantly mingles wholly believable characters (mostly ghetto teens struggling for a little pocket money and respect) with figures that, though based in reality, are so overblown the effect is hilarious. *Car Wash* marked an important transitional phase in black pop culture—and it also amounted to a rite of passage for Norman Whitfield, who wrote and produced the sound track featuring Rose Royce and the Pointer Sisters.



When he was at Motown, Whitfield had helped shape some of the best music of Marvin Gaye and the Temptations. In the early 1970s, he transformed a Los Angeles group called Total Concept into

Rose Royce, using them first as Edwin Starr's road band and then as the group behind the Temptations. In 1976,

Whitfield left Motown to start his own label, and Rose Royce went with him. Before launching Whitfield Records, however, the writer-producer worked on *Car Wash*. He wanted the title song to capture the progress of an automobile as it moves

through a car wash. The opening percussion and handclaps represent water splashing out of the nozzles, and the bass and guitars add sheen to the surface like brushes rolling over the body. By the end of **Car Wash**, instruments and vocals have

dropped in and out of the tune, and the song finally bulds to a crescendo.

By 1977, funk and disco were well established, and the styles boasted stars as well as journeymen and one-hit wonders. KC and the Sunshine Band had their fourth No. 1 single in **I'm Your Boogie Man**, a salute to a club DJ. The song had started out as a rather nondescript lyric ("I'll be a son of a gun/Look what you've done"), but writer Harry Casey decided the world didn't need another soured-love song and rewrote it as a celebration of the night life.

The Commodores had formed in 1970 at the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. The group was signed to Motown in 1971 with the idea of using them as an opening act for label stars such as the Jackson Five and Stevie Wonder. But their hard-funk style was so outside the Motown norm that it took three years before the band got its own album out. By 1977, **Brick House** was such a huge dance anthem that the Commodores were starting their first tour as headliners and filming *Thank God It's Friday* with Donna Summer.

Thelma Houston, a former gospel singer

born in Mississippi, was another Motown breakthrough. She had been discovered by the 5th Dimension's manager, Marc Gordon, and her 1969 debut album was produced by Jimmy Webb. When it failed to hit, she struggled on the fringes of show business, singing movie themes and working what was left of the chitlin circuit. Houston's producer Hal Davis had her record Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff's **Don't Leave Me This Way**, which became her only No. 1 pop hit.

The Emotions—sisters Wanda, Jeanette and Shella Hutchinson—also began as gospel singers, at Mt. Sinai Baptist Church in Chicago. They were befriended by the Staple Singers, gospel stars with pop savvy, and soon went secular. Sister Pamela eventually replaced sister Jeanette after the trio had signed to Stax/Volt, the Staples' label. The Emotions had modest success before the company went under, but Maurice White, the mastermind behind Earth, Wind and Fire, brought them to his Kalimba Productions and sent them to the top. White co-wrote **Best of My Love** and produced it, with Wanda singing lead an octave higher than her normal

range.

L.T.D., which stood for Love, Togetherness and Devotion, had quite a flashy live act, and **Back in Love Again** was the only top-10 single for the 10-man band before lead singer Jeffrey Osborne went solo. **Float On** was the only top-10 hit for the Floaters, a vocal group discovered by the Detroit Emeralds, whose members wrote, arranged and produced the record. Heatwave featured Dayton, Ohio, brothers Johnnie and Keith Wilder, who stayed in Germany after their discharge from the army. Though discovered while playing a pub in London's West End, they hooked into the burgeoning Munich disco circuit for the hit **Boogie Nights**.

Leo Sayer was no funk or disco singer, but his **You Make Me Feel Like Dancing** was helped along by those scenes. Sayer was best known for having written most of the songs on the debut solo album of Roger Daltrey, lead singer for the Who, and for a clown image inspired by the classic 1944 French film *Children of Paradise*. Sayer was fooling around in the studio with his new producer Richard Perry when he began singing in falsetto the

line "You've got a cute way of talking." Perry got it on tape, patched together various other song fragments, and later played it back to Sayer, who didn't even remember the initial episode. But Perry, confident they had the makings of a hit record, got Sayer to flesh out the song. The producer turned out to be right.

Ram Jam was inspired by black music of a much older vintage. Bill Bartlett, who had once been a lead guitarist for the Lemon Pipers of *Green Tambourine* fame, played Leadbelly's **Black Betty** while hanging out on his Ohio farm. He finally formed a band to record the old blues tune, but the NAACP and CORE both called for a boycott of the song on the grounds that it perpetuated offensive stereotypes. *Black Betty* survived a partial radio boycott, but Ram Jam never saw the charts again.

Bluesy rock held forth from other quarters as well. The Sanford/Townsend Band, Los Angeles studio professionals, recorded **Smoke from a Distant Fire** in Muscle Shoals with top soul producers Jerry Wexler and Barry Beckett in the control booth. On her sixth (and first gold) album, *Sweet Forgiveness*, Bonnie

Raitt turned in an atypical performance of Del Shannon's early-'60s gem **Runaway** to earn her first chart single. But the Climax Blues Band, who had begun as British blues revivalists, were now veering closer to rock with efforts such as **Couldn't Get It Right**. Steve Miller, who was living the life of a country squire and thinking about the hassles of touring when he cut **Jet Airliner**, had likewise outgrown his blues roots.

The Electric Light Orchestra emerged in 1972 as the offspring of the Move, a British cult band. **Do Ya**, one of the last songs the Move recorded, was also its only single to reach the American charts. By the mid-'70s *Do Ya* was recognized as a rock classic—Todd Rundgren often sang it in concert—so when ELO went into the studio for *A New World Record*, they cut their own updated version of the song. Along with **Telephone Line**, it helped the group maintain a solid reputation on the *Billboard* charts.

The Babys offered an equally revealing look at things to come. The power-pop quartet (fronted by bassman John Waite) was put together by a British television-rock producer, Mike Mansfield, and

moved to America when its debut album starting hitting in the U.S. instead of at home. Television was probably the decisive factor making **Isn't It Time** a hit: the song was one of the first to be promoted with an accompanying video. Soon, it would be hard for any song to attract attention without one.

—John Morthland

## DISCOGRAPHY

*\*Indicates highest Billboard chart position*

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