

# 70s dance party

SOUNDS OF THE SEVENTIES  
1979-1981

TIME  
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**SOUNDS OF THE SEVENTIES • '70s DANCE PARTY 1979-1981**

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SOUNDS OF THE 70s  
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ESSENTIAL

Boston native Donna Summer, who had gone to Europe to appear in *Hair* and other musicals, was a regular—albeit an up-and-down one—on the pop charts after her triumphant return from Munich, Germany, in 1975. That year, her *Love to Love You Baby* became one of the first extended disco mixes to be successfully cut down to 45-rpm length for radio play. Her label, Casablanca, grew along with the disco market, and so did her own career—she became known as the “diva of disco.” But that wasn’t enough, and by the end of the decade, she was getting restless; Summer wanted to be taken seriously as an artist, rather than as a dancing fool and sex machine.

The 1978 *MacArthur Park*, her first No. 1 ever, propelled her further in a pop direction, but it was 1979’s *Bad Girls* that completed the process. That album took its theme from the title song, which was inspired by an incident in which Hollywood

cops mistook Summer’s assistant for a hooker. **Hot Stuff**, which Casablanca chief Neil Bogart wanted to give to his prize new signing Cher, was the first single from that album. It shot to No. 1, and was followed there by the title song; **Dim All the Lights** reached No. 2 and Summer’s transformation was complete. In fact, she was now

such an acknowledged pop star that her next single would be a duet, *No More Tears* (*Enough Is Enough*), with Barbra Streisand. Cher, meanwhile, was then at the height of her notoriety, and made her Casablanca debut an effective one with the fearless femme come-on **Take Me Home**.

The Village People were Casablanca’s campy gay novelty act, assembled by veteran French producer Jacques Morali. Lead singer Victor Willis, like most of his backups, was a former actor; members portrayed gay stereotypes (such as construction worker and



biker) as part of the act. Their hook-happy songs were tongue-in-chic irony, though it was never clear whether mainstream hetero America got the joke or simply liked the music. **Y.M.C.A.** sold two million-plus, and has inexplicably endured as an omnipresent chant, complete with hand signals, used to jack up crowds when the action slows down at sports events (especially baseball games).

Lipps, Inc. (pronounced "lip-synch") was masterminded by multi-instrumentalist Steven Greenberg, who returned to his native Minneapolis and became a mobile disco DJ after failing to get a break in Hollywood. Once he tired of the disco gig, he wrote, produced and played all the instruments (except bass) on *Rock It*. Though only 500 copies were pressed, the indie single actually topped one local radio chart. He then recruited singer Cynthia Johnson, a 24-year-old police department secretary and former Miss Black Minnesota, and with Greenberg again playing all the instruments, the pair cut **Funkytown**. The song was inspired by Greenberg's urge to get out of

Minneapolis once again, and rode to the No. 1 position on his relentless rhythms and her sassy vocals. The subsequent national release of *Rock It*, which failed to make it halfway up the Hot 100, became their only other chart record.

Diana Ross brought in the new decade with **Upside Down**, her first No. 1 record in four years. Chic's Bernard Edwards and Nile Rodgers wrote and produced it, but the record changed radically before being released. Edwards and Rodgers heard her voice much differently than she did, and Ross didn't like their mix at all—too much them, not enough her. She requested they redo it, but they didn't change it enough to suit her. Milfed, she undertook the final remix herself. Though she entered the '80s with her strongest-ever string of hits as a solo artist, Ross's last single for Motown, the label that had nurtured her since her days as a '60s teen star with the Supremes, came out almost exactly one year after this.

Ross's polar opposite at Motown, Rick James, scored with **Super Freak (Part 1)**, hard funk that played up his propensity

for drugs and kinky sex. Bonnie Pointer left the Pointer Sisters in 1978 to sign with Motown. After one middling hit, she clicked with her biggest solo single in **Heaven Must Have Sent You**, a revival of a 1966 favorite by the Elgins, one of the label's shorter lived acts. The Spinners, who had also been on Motown in the '60s, hit their stride in the '70s with Atlantic Records. Gamble and Huff producer Thom Bell and the rise of disco. They were on the downside of their career in 1979 when new producer Michael Zager helped them put together their final million-seller, the medley **Working My Way Back to You/Forgive Me, Girl** (the former a 4 Seasons hit, the latter a Zager original).

Rodgers and Edwards had a more harmonious relationship with Sister Sledge than with Diana Ross. Offered a blank check to produce anyone on the Atlantic roster, they went into the studio with the Philadelphia foursome at the same time they were cutting their own group's *C'est Chic* LP. Actually, Chic was supposed to record **He's the Greatest Dancer**, which

at that point was only a groove (no melody, no lyrics). But the label was skeptical of *We Are Family*, which Sister Sledge and their producers had meant as the first single, and requested something else in its place. Rodgers and Edwards finished *He's the Greatest Dancer* for Sister Sledge, and though it was indeed a top-10 hit, *We Are Family* proved even bigger.


Kool and the Gang wrote **Celebration** in honor of their return to chart supremacy with the 1979 *Ladies Night*—only to see it become their first (and sole) No. 1.

The song was also used to welcome American hostages returning home from 444 days of captivity in Iran, and as the theme song to the 1981 Super Bowl. Olivia Newton-John's **Physical** also had a sports connection; it quickly became an aerobics favorite, even though the good-girl-gone-bad clearly had more of a sexual workout in mind.

Cheryl Lynn, a member of the Church



of the Living God, won a position in the cast of *The Wiz* after singing *You Are So Beautiful*, the only secular song she knew, on *The Gong Show*. Her performance in the musical, in turn, led to a record deal. She and David Paich (her co-producer, with his brother Marty) wrote **Got to Be Real** together at his piano. Stephanie Mills was another *Wiz* veteran, having played Dorothy at age 15; **Never Knew Love Like**



**This Before** was her sole top-10 single. **Let's Groove**, with its vocoderized intro, was the first single Earth, Wind and Fire cut after leader Maurice White shook up the band following the disappointing showing of its 1980

*Faces* album (which "only" reached No. 10). The single—and the album it came from, *Raise!*—had a considerably rougher sound than the EWF norm.

RSO—like Casablanca, a label whose rise was inseparable from disco—was not as dominant in the post-*Saturday Night Fever* years, but continued to command respect at the turn of the decade. The

label's cornerstone was the Bee Gees, but little brother Andy Gibb established his own niche there with hits like **Desire**. Irene Cara's **Fame** was the title song to director Alan Parker's smash movie about New York's High School for the Performing Arts; Cara, a former child star who first appeared on Broadway at age eight, starred as Coco Hernandez. And David Naughton was yet another thespian the label converted into a recording star, however briefly. A former English Lit major at Penn, Naughton studied acting at the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Arts. Returning to the States, he did TV commercials before landing "the John Travolta part" in *Makin' It*, a television adaptation of *Saturday Night Fever*. **Makin' It** was used in Bill Murray's *Meatballs* movie, in addition to being the theme for the TV show, but the program failed to make it, and was canceled after two months. Naughton cut a couple more records, which also failed to make it, before returning to acting fulltime.

—John Morthland

## DISCOGRAPHY

\*Indicates highest Billboard chart position

**1. Y.M.C.A.** Village People • Music and lyrics by Henri Belolo, Jacques Morali and Victor Willis, Can't Stop Music/Scorpio Music, BMI, Casablanca 945 (1979). © 1978 PolyGram Records, Inc. Under license from PolyGram Special Markets, a division of PolyGram Group Distribution, Inc. No. 2\*

**2. Hot Stuff** Donna Summer • Music and lyrics by Pete Dinklage, Harold Faltermeyer and Keith Forsey, Rightsong Music, Inc. BMI, Buddie Music, Inc. (admin. by Rightsong Music, Inc.), ASCAP/Casablanca 978 (1979). © 1978 PolyGram Records, Inc. Under license from PolyGram Special Markets, a division of PolyGram Group Distribution, Inc. No. 1\*

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**6. Upside Down** Diana Ross • Music and lyrics by Bernard Edwards and Nile Rodgers, Sony Songs/Tommy Jym! Inc./Bernard's Other Music, BMI, Motown 1494 (1980). © 1980 Motown Records, Inc. Used courtesy of Motown Record Company, L.P. under license from PolyGram Special Markets, a division of PolyGram Group Distribution, Inc. No. 1\*

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**11. Funkytown** Lipps, Inc. • Music and lyrics by Steve Greenberg, Rick's Music, Inc./Steve Greenberg Music, BMI, Casablanca 2233 (1980). © 1979 PolyGram Records, Inc. Under license from PolyGram Special Markets, a division of PolyGram Group Distribution, Inc. No. 1\*

**12. Fame** Irene Cara • Music by Michael Gore, lyrics by Dean Pitchford, MGM Affiliated Music, Inc. BMI, RSO 1034 (1980). © 1979 PolyGram Records, Inc. Under license from PolyGram Special Markets, a division of PolyGram Group Distribution, Inc. No. 4\*

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**15. Working My Way Back to You/Forgive Me, Girl** The Spinners • Music and lyrics by Sandy Linzer, Denny Randell and Michael Zager. Screen Gems-EMI Music Inc./Seasons Four Music/Sumac Music, Inc. BMI. Atlantic 3637 (1980). © 1980 Atlantic Recording Corp. Produced under license from Atlantic Recording Corp. No. 2\*

**16. He's the Greatest Dancer** Sister Sledge • Music and lyrics by Bernard Edwards and Nile Rodgers. Bernard's Other Music & Tommy Jymf, Inc., adm. by Warner-Tamerlane Publ. Corp. BMI. Cotillion 44245 (1979). © 1978 Atlantic Recording Corp. Produced under license from Atlantic Recording Corp. No. 9\*

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