

“Celebration”--Kool & the Gang (1980)

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Essay by James Arena (guest post)*



Formed in the mid-60s by Ronald Bell and his brother Robert “Kool” Bell, along with friends from their Jersey City neighborhood, the band that eventually became known as Kool & The Gang soon had a reputation for making feel-good vocal and instrumental party jams. Signed to De-Lite Records, their style (combining a mix of jazz, R&B, funk and a touch of early disco) was well-honed by the mid-70s with hits such as “Hollywood Swinging” (1973), “Summer Madness” (1976) and “Open Sesame” (1976), the latter appearing on the “Saturday Night Fever” soundtrack. Bringing in vocalist James “J.T.” Taylor and combining forces with producer Eumir Deodato (who effectively refreshed their sound), Kool & The Gang’s ultra-smooth single “Ladies Night” firmly put the band on the mainstream map in 1979. It became one of the most popular funk and disco hybrid hits of the era. The track was wisely polished to suit pop and soul radio but was equally favored by DJs and dancers grooving on nightclub floors. Their newfound appeal was duly noted, but few could have anticipated what would come next.

When the boogie brakes were hit and disco music’s popularity dimmed by 1980 (at least with the media), Kool & The Gang proved the public’s appetite for a rousing party jam was most definitely undiminished. “Celebration,” the group’s first single off the “Celebrate!” album released in autumn of that year, was an irresistible explosion of invigorating bass, brass and funk. It slid effortlessly into the world of R&B-dance-pop, a sound which became a much broader, less polarizing, and more encompassing realm than disco. And let’s not overlook the song’s biggest selling point--that infectious title chant, a call to jump up and down, pump one’s fist, and cheer on the best life has to offer. Written by Ronald Bell and the group and produced by Eumir Deodato with the Kool & The Gang crew, “Celebration” quite literally defined what having a party was all about. Coming off an energy crisis in ’79 and catching a subsequent wave of double-digit inflation, the beginnings of a recession, high unemployment rates, terrorist attacks and wars, the United States and most of the world had few sources of hope and inspiration. Ask fans who endured those days—“Celebration” was a godsend.

Shortly after the song had been released, “Billboard” Disco Mix columnist Barry Lederer highlighted “Celebration” in the publication and predicted the forthcoming success of the single.

He cited the heavier R&B sound of Kool & The Gang's "Ladies Night," which he believed had significantly broadened their audience. Said the critic on October 18, 1980, "'Celebration' is destined to follow the same path...with bright and meaty instrumentation backed with a tight lead and harmonic vocals." Over at the other major US recording industry publication of the time, "Record World," columnist Brian Chin was equally enthusiastic. He described "Celebration" on that same October date as, "a big, bright, funky cut with some fine subtle synthesizer textures behind the lead keyboards. 'We're gonna have a good time tonight,' the group assures us, between high-pitched shouts of 'Ya-hoo!' Right on the money." Indeed, it was a sure bet, with the single quickly gathering fans, airplay and sales in the US, Europe and other international territories.

"Celebration" punched through the depressing noise of headline news, sparking optimism in the masses over the roughly 15 weeks it took to climb the pop charts on its journey into the hit zone. On February 14, 1981, the song became Kool & The Gang's first (and only) single to reach #1 on the US "Billboard" Hot 100 chart and "Record World's" singles chart.

In many ways, "Celebration" was (and is) the quintessential pop song. Its chucking guitars, relentlessly upbeat lyrics, pulsating beat, and unbridled, summery enthusiasm gave it the deep hooks needed to catch on big--and its grip has yet to loosen. Kool & The Gang accomplished this by conveying a powerful sense of warmth and authenticity, still palpable in the recording over 40 years later. The song's shout-out-loud confidence in the power of revelry elevated the single to the caliber of anthem, where it continues to reside. Joining the ranks of positivity-drenched monster hits of the time, such as Gloria Gaynor's "I Will Survive" (1978), Chic's "Good Times" (1979), Diana Ross' "I'm Coming Out" (1980), and Katrina and The Waves' "Walking On Sunshine" (1985), Kool & The Gang's "Celebration" is a tribute to, and expression of, the spirit we humans manage to conjure up through both the good and the bad times. When we find this fortitude and joy pouring out of a song such as this, it's absolutely incredible how uplifting it can be for our souls. And though it's often reported (with a nod to the kitsch) that the unabashed exuberance of "Celebration" has made it a bar mitzvah, graduation, wedding reception, and sporting event mainstay over the years, that's a badge to be worn with pride. The song's infectious, euphoric spirit and timeless production quality will never permit it to be trivialized. In a world so hell-bent on beating us down, "Celebration" sets to music our longing to savor those precious moments of jubilation. And Kool & The Gang's iconic achievement is worthy of a big ol' bash all by itself.

According to songfacts.com: "No one close to the band was surprised by the song's enduring popularity as a celebratory anthem. In fact, lead singer J.T. Taylor's mother predicted it. Taylor told "Billboard": 'My mother told me when she heard it, 'You're gonna play this song for the rest of your life--so get ready!'" A mother always knows!

James Arena is a writer and former executive with BMG Entertainment. He is the author of several books celebrating dance and pop music, including "First Ladies of Disco," "Legends Of Disco," "Europe's Stars of 80s Dance Pop," "Stars of 90s Dance Pop," "Stars of 20th Century Dance Pop & EDM," and "Hot Summer Jams." He is a G.E.M.A. Foundation and City of

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.