

# “I Feel Love”—Donna Summer (1977)

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Essay by David Hamsley (guest post)\*



*Donna Summer*

The earliest discos started to emerge from the New York City underground circa 1974. Venues became magnetic centerpieces around which a lot of like-minded people could gather and dance, dance, dance. Nobody knew it at the time, but this was the last era in which dances that might have been performed on television broadcasts like Dick Clark’s “American Bandstand” and Don Cornelius’ “Soul Train” were a truly important part of American culture. The Charleston was the rage of the 1920s. The 1940s had swing. In the 1960s, it might have been the Twist or the Mashed Potato. In the 1970s, it was the Hustle, the Bump or the Bus Stop. Like every decade before, music was created to support the dance craze of the moment. A new aesthetic began to take shape as designed-for-disco songs like Carol Douglas’ “Doctor’s Orders” and George McCrae’s “Rock Your Baby” were so popular in the disco they started showing up on Top-40 radio. With that, discos moved out of the urban underground into the suburbs, and began popping up everywhere, in every town, from sea to shining sea. Like many things new, there was a group of nay-saying phobics who found disco music to be without “meaning,” and thought it all sound the same. They lamented the passing of unpolished spontaneous improvisation that was the hallmark of so many rock bands of the 1960s and early 1970s. Disco, they said, “sucked.”

This criticism did nothing to slow disco’s momentum, and by the summer of 1977, it was hitting a creative peak. The result was a landslide of truly innovative releases. Charting titles like “Soul Dracula,” “Devil’s Gun,” “Queen of Sheba” and “Doctor Love” suggest a full spectrum of discofied concepts. Perhaps more than any other time in disco’s brief lifespan, this summer saw numerous records that further defined the disco aesthetic and set standards to which other songs aspired. Alec R. Costandino’s side-long, fabulously overblown Eurodisco arrangement of “I Found Love (Now That I Have Found You)” by Love and Kisses, featuring a three-minute conga drum break, was a smash hit. The Salsoul Orchestra’s deep dive into classical music, “Magic Bird of Fire,” was derived from Igor Stravinsky’s ballet, “The Firebird.” It’s likely that few dancers knew the inspirational origin of this unique song and it didn’t matter. Violins soared, kettle drums boom-boom-boomed, and dancers spun, each choreographing their own ballet. It was pure disco drama. Grace Jones’ interpretation of the French cabaret standard “La Vie en Rose” would go on to become as recognizable as Edith Piaf’s. On their debut album, Village People sang out proudly about gay life on Fire Island and in San Francisco and Hollywood. Perhaps ironically, since at that time it was still technically illegal for two men to dance together, it was an overnight sensation in gay discos from coast-to-coast. (In order to appeal to a broader audience, Village People’s act was turned into a campy cartoon of gay stereotypes. They went on to become international superstars, but lost their gay audience along with their authenticity in the process. Nevertheless, a case can be made that their worldwide exposure introduced “gay-

ness” to the general public in an entertaining, non-threatening way, helping to slowly inch gays closer to acceptance and, eventually, marriage equality.) But perhaps the song of Summer 1977, later critics and aficionados would agree decades later, that did more to influence the future of music than any other was Donna Summer’s Giorgio Moroder-Pete Bellotte produced “I Feel Love.”

The song was included in the trio’s fifth collaboration, “I Remember Yesterday.” Like many disco albums, much of the project was built around a theme—in this case nostalgia. Side One was a medley of three songs segued together in the non-stop tradition of disco. The first, “I Remember Yesterday,” referenced swing music of the 1940s Big Band era, and the next two, “Love’s Unkind” and “Back in Love Again,” referenced 1950s and 1960s girl groups that always seemed to be singing about breaking up and making up in high school hallways. Side Two followed with a few unremarkable tracks but then finished off with an ultra-futuristic offering: “I Feel Love.” It was an utterly unique track on the soundscape of the day. Absolutely nothing else sounded like it.

With “I Feel Love,” science had met art: other than Donna’s seemingly disembodied voice and a kick drum, the music was created entirely with a Moog synthesizer. The Moog synthesizer, pioneered by Robert Moog in the mid-1960s, led the way for those exploring electronic music. Giorgio Moroder, one of the leading architects of disco’s sound, loved to delve into the latest recording technology, so it was a natural match. (In 1979, he would release the world’s first direct-to-digital album, “E = mc<sup>2</sup>.”) Synthesizers of the day, looking like an old-fashioned telephone operator’s switchboard, were complicated and required assistants and engineers to operate the oscillators, voltage controls, arpeggiators, sequencers and the myriad of other esoteric technicalities. The Moog drifted out of tune every few minutes, making its use an arduous task of stop-and-go. Reportedly, Giorgio approached this song differently from his other compositions; he did the bass line first and worked his way up through the layers of sound. Engineer Robbie Wedel, whom Giorgio refers to as “the unsung hero” of the record, provided a eureka moment for the team when he added a click track, a silent signal to which all other subsequent layers of sound—and there would be many—would synchronize. All together and at 128 beats-per-minute, the spacey sounds jittered frenetically, like atoms moving so fast they successfully occupied two places at the same time. Today, when virtually all aspects of our lives are somehow managed and conducted with the use of digital technology, it is easy to forget that there was a time when electronic music was the vanguard, not the norm.

The lyrics were Donna’s contribution to the piece. Typical of most disco songs, they were really more of a repetitive chant:

*Ooh, I feel love, I feel love, I feel love, I feel love, I feel love...*  
*Ooh, fallin’ free, fallin’ free, falling free, falling free, fallin’ free...*

True, not exactly the poetry of Bob Dylan, but it was the way she could deliver these simple phrases that set her apart. Unlike many Disco Divas, Donna had a trained voice with an incredible range. The early albums of her career were almost always sung in the upper registers, it was sexier, and this song was no exception. When she sympathetically cooed, “*I feel love, I feel love, I feel love,*” as if ecstatically engaged with a fantasy in her mind, she delivered on the promise of dreamy sensuality like no one else. Toss in a few mirror balls, some strobes and lasers, and dancers could imagine themselves actually fallin’ free through space as they weightlessly turned head-over-heels in love. (Donna became tired of the Love Goddess image early on, and it wasn’t until she was allowed to sing in lower ranges, to songs like “Last Dance,” “MacArthur Park,” and “Bad Girls,” that she started to earn Number One records on Top-40 radio and the credit she deserved for being a “legitimate” singer.)

It would be 16 months between “I Feel Love’s” release and “Saturday Night Fever’s” debut in

late 1978, an event that many disco-devotees say signaled the beginning of the end for the genre. In that space of time, disco had become an international obsession and an absolutely staggering amount of music was created to support the demand. Inevitably, the quality of the material started to buckle, and disco shortly collapsed under its own weight. And yet, over four decades later, it's interesting to note that people are still talking about it. When older people discuss disco, "I hated it then, but I love it now," is often heard. What was once often described as a passing fad that "sucked" has proved to be incredibly durable--and influential. Anybody wanting to understand the genesis of today's Electronic Dance Music (EDM) need look no further than disco's "I Feel Love." One could tell a friend who had never heard this work before that it was a brand new release and it would be completely believable. "I Feel Love" is timeless.

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\*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.