

“Le Freak”—Chic (1978)

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Essay by Cary O'Dell



“Le Freak” 45 sleeve



Original 45 label



Nile Rodgers

Inevitably, there seems to be a collective groan whenever that word is spoken. That word, of course, is “disco.”

It is, without question the only musical genre to illicit such a response. No one smirks and recedes from “country” or “classical” or “folk.”

It is also the only musical genre to ever have had its own made-to-order funeral: the public lambasting that was the famous—turned infamous—“Disco Sucks” Demolition Night held on July 12, 1979 at Comiskey Park in Chicago, Illinois.

Yet, despite all the baggage attached to it, and despite the endless jokes, and the very bad fashion connected with it, the music of disco, itself, has actually aged remarkably well. And, in fact, it has never completely departed. Today, disco beats still rain down from the radio airwaves and steam upwards from the streets and meet on a million dance floors in between. It’s just that, today, instead of daring to utter the word “disco,” we hide these same grooves under euphemisms like “dance” music or “club” music.

Founded, more or less, in 1976, the band known as Chic has survived, with some hiatuses, up to the present day. They have also existed in various incarnations with a wide assortment of musicians and singers coming and going over the years. At the time the group recorded their major hit “Le Freak,” however, the group consisted (in the studio, at least) of five members: Nile Rodgers, Bernard Edwards, Tony Thompson, Norman Jean Wright and Alfa Anderson.

Guitar maestro Rodgers and skilled bassist Edwards met in 1970 when both were gigging around New York City. After hooking up with Patti LaBelle’s drummer, Tony Thompson, they formed the group Big Apple Band and, with Walter Murphy, had a disco hit with “A Fifth of Beethoven” in 1976.

Yet, despite that success, the group had difficulty securing a recording contract. After a name change, Rodgers, Edwards and Thompson became the band they called Chic. They also added two female vocalists to the ensemble: Anderson and Wright. (Anderson had recently been part of Broadway’s “The Wiz” company; Wright was already on the edge of her own solo career.)

By 1977, the newly configured Chic was fully riding the disco wave then sweeping the nation and they were fully echoing the genre’s purpose with the song they were peddling at that time, a pro-dance ditty titled “Dance, Dance, Dance.”

Eventually signed by Atlantic records, Chic's "Dance, Dance, Dance" (which had the subtitle "Yowsah, Yowsah, Yowsah") was released late in '77 and boogied its way all the way up to number six on the charts.

The funky "Dance, Dance, Dance" was followed up with another get-down anthem "Everybody Dance" (which featured Luther Vandross on backing vocals); it appeared in mid 1978. "Everybody," however, only reached #38 on the charts before dropping out of sight.

But Chic was fully in the groove now. And in late '78, the group had one of the biggest hits of the era—in fact, one of the biggest hits of all time.

The festive "Le Freak" began in frustration. Rodgers and Edwards had been invited to Studio 54 on New Year's Eve 1977 by no less of a dance diva than Grace Jones. But, that night, they got refused at the front door of the famous club by the keepers of the entrance who had not been informed that they men were coming.

Turned away, Rodgers and Edwards channeled their anger into music--and some funky music at that. To the musical jam that would soon dominate the dance floor, the gents sang a refrain aimed straight at the famous club's doorman: "F--- off!"

But, Rodgers and Edwards knew that such a lyrical passage, though powerful and to the point, was not at all radio friendly—not then and not now. Hence, their expletive got replaced and "F-- - off!" became "Freak out!"

And that is how some disco drama soon became disco history as Rodgers and Edwards stitched it all together. As erudite music critic Dave Marsh describes the elements of the song: "the string-wash and chicken-scratch guitar, the plodding bass drum and relentlessly repetitious brushstrokes on the cymbal," not to mention, of course, some catchy and well-sung lyrics....

But, for a song that's "just fun to dance to," "Le Freak" (as the song was eventually christened) was also something of history lesson, an American dance recap with verses trumpeting the days of "Stomping at the Savoy" as well as offering up an all-is-forgiven shout out to the club that started it all: "Just come on down, to 54 / Find a spot out on the floor...."

"Le Freak" by Chic was released in late 1978 and became a number one disco hit, a number one R&B hit and hit the top of the pop charts as well. It would be #1 for six weeks. At the time of its issue, "Le Freak" would become the biggest hit in the history of Atlantic records. It would hold that honor until 1990 when it was finally surpassed by "Vogue" by that other giant of the dance floor, Madonna.

Still, long after Chic's most famous song left the charts and disco "died" sometime in the late 1970s, "Le Freak" refused to fade. First, it landed in the realm of "camp," becoming an ironic relic of an era alongside giant disco balls and multi-colored, under-lit dance floors.

But "Le Freak's" pit stop as camp was short-lived. By the 2000s—or, perhaps, more accurately, by the late 1990s--"Le Freak" by Chic had fully transcended, bubbling up not only on numerous soundtracks celebrating the 1970s—like 1998's "Last Days of Disco" but also those far removed from the disco era, including "Son of the Mask," "Toy Story 3," "Buddy," and "Diary of a Wimpy Kid," among others.

And it remained a principle part of many a dance floor set list and a regular component of many a mix tape—perhaps one of the two (alongside the Bee Gee's "Stayin' Alive," for sure) or so famous disco tracks to always get a free pass, allowed to extend beyond its disco origins.

Today, “Le Freak” is part of the club scene as well as a crowd-pleaser for sure to be found at present-day proms and nearly every single wedding reception and sports game. Rappers and DJ’s alike have also turned to its well-done chords for all sorts of sampling, a way to establish an amazing groove and connect immediately with the listener. “Le Freak” has become that rarest of works--completely evocative of an era but also undeniably timeless.

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