

## Chapter 1:

### Introduction to the cultural context of electronic dance music

The rhythmic structures of dance music arise primarily from the genre's focus on moving dancers, but they reveal other influences as well. The poumtchak pattern has strong associations with both disco music and various genres of electronic dance music, and these associations affect the pattern's presence in popular music in general. Its status and musical role there has varied according to the reputation of these genres.

In the following introduction I will not present a complete history of related contributors, places, or events but rather examine those developments that shaped prevailing opinions and fields of tension within electronic dance music culture in particular. This culture in turn affects the choices that must be made in dance music production, for example involving the poumtchak pattern. My historical overview extends from the 1970s to the 1990s and covers predominantly the disco era, the Chicago house scene, the acid house/rave era, and the post-rave club-oriented house scene in England.<sup>5</sup>

#### **The disco era of the 1970s**

##### DISCOURSE ON DISCO

The image of John Travolta in his disco suit from the 1977 motion picture *Saturday Night Fever* has become an icon of the disco era and its popularity. Like *Blackboard Jungle* and *Rock Around the Clock* two decades earlier, this movie was an important vehicle for the distribution of a new dance music culture to America and the entire Western world, and the impact of its construction of disco was gigantic.<sup>6</sup> It became a model for local disco cultures around the world and comprised the core of a common understanding of disco in mainstream popular music culture.

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<sup>5</sup> For the disco era, see Brewster & Broughton 1999/2006, Lawrence 2003, Fikentscher 2000, and Shapiro 2005; for the club culture of electronic dance music, see Thornton 1995, Kempster 1996, Rietveld 1998, Reynolds 1999, Gilbert & Pearson 1999, Bidder 2001, and again Brewster & Broughton 1999/2006.

<sup>6</sup> See Lawrence 2003:306ff. In discussing the impact of the film, Lawrence points out the economic and racist undertones of its choices of protagonists and music: "The film deleted any trace of the downtown night network: out went Manhattan's ethnic gays, black funk, drugs, and freeform dancing, and in came suburban straights, shrill white pop, alcohol, and the Hustle" (ibid.:307).

The image of John Travolta therefore also evokes the enormous commercial success of *Saturday Night Fever* itself, and in turn the later exploitation of disco music and culture by those with economic, rather than artistic, designs upon it.<sup>7</sup> Disco fell from grace after only a few years (especially in the United States), overtaken by a constellation of disapproving notions about its commercialism, decadence, rigid rhythms, and deleterious effect on “real” music. Walter Hughes writes, “Few forms of popular culture receive the kind of opprobrium that has been lavished on disco music since its emergence in the seventies . . . Even at the height of its popularity, it was widely condemned, most vociferously by the admirers and consumers of popular music themselves.”<sup>8</sup>

Recent writers on disco and dance music have focused less upon *Saturday Night Fever* and its wider promotion of disco and more upon the underground dance music culture related to nightclubs, DJing, and dancing that arose primarily in New York City.<sup>9</sup> This new emphasis introduces fresh aspects of authenticity, integrity, and the resistance of subjugated groups (for example, African Americans, Hispanics, the working class, homosexuals) into the discussion. Yet the elevation of these overlooked cultural contributors has led also to new dichotomies between authentic and inauthentic appreciation within the dance music culture.<sup>10</sup>

Middleton observes that authenticity is used in discourses on popular music “to mark out the genuine from the counterfeit, the honest from the false, the original from the copy.”<sup>11</sup> Keir Keightley describes it as “the compass that orients rock culture in its navigation of the mainstream.”<sup>12</sup> He further notes that authenticity is not actually an audible feature in the music, but instead “a value, a quality we ascribe to perceived relationships between music, socio-industrial practices, and listeners or audiences.”<sup>13</sup> As Allan Moore has pointed out, the important question here is *who* decides upon this authenticity, with regard to tracks, performers, or whole genres.<sup>14</sup> The issue is as divisive in dance music culture as it is in popular music culture writ large, though the rules for

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<sup>7</sup> Brewster and Broughton rather graphically describe the lack of interest in the origins of disco culture by latecomers to the industry after 1977: “Plenty of marketing men would figure it out just enough to rip out its heart and suck out every last drop of blood” (Brewster & Broughton 2006:177). Though this is certainly overwrought, scholars and critics do agree that the music industry itself was at least partly responsible for the music’s rapid decline in popularity.

<sup>8</sup> Hughes 1994:147.

<sup>9</sup> Prior to 1995, very few books on disco had been released: “Jazz, rock ‘n’ roll, reggae and now rap all have not only devoted listeners but intellectual defenders; conspicuously missing from this canon, however, is disco” (Hughes 1994:147). For an overview of the literature until 1999, both academic and non-academic, see Fikentscher 2000:19ff.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Peter Shapiro’s derogatory description of roller disco (Shapiro 2002:213ff).

<sup>11</sup> Middleton 2006:200.

<sup>12</sup> Keightley 2001:131.

<sup>13</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>14</sup> Moore 2002.

what is considered authentic for the former arise from somewhat unique principles of value.

An important relationship with regard to those principles involves constructions of the “mainstream” and the “underground.” These constructions were very relevant to club culture in the 1990s but impacted disco culture as well. The hits of the Bee Gees represented mainstream appreciation, while the obscure disco tracks of Barrabas or Eddie Kendricks belonged to a more “authentic” underground disco culture. Disco dance music that has proven in time to be influential arose from both sources; Tim Lawrence, in his book on the American dance music culture of the 1970s, asserts that “creativity and innovation didn’t just emanate from the underground but also from the much broader downtown party network.”<sup>15</sup>

Writers on disco do agree that widespread ignorance of the original motivations and practices associated with this New York dance culture eventually doomed it. The real (and positive) trappings of disco culture gave way to mistaken but viral impressions of its hedonism, decadence, and acceptance of drug use, as well as to poor imitations of its music. Brewster and Broughton write that “many of the people involved with its early days blanch at using ‘disco’ to describe the music and clubs they knew and loved. They don’t really have an alternative name, but they have a strong need to distinguish their music – funky and soulful – and their scene – small, gritty and underground – from what disco eventually became and from how disco is seen by most people today.”<sup>16</sup>

Recently scholars have attempted to restore disco’s original reputation. Kai Fikentscher, in his study of underground dance music in New York City, argues that definitions of disco<sup>17</sup> have progressively distorted from “first referring to a specific musical environment, then to a type of popular music, and later to various styles of dress and hair and a leisure-time philosophy of extravagance, hedonism and, to some, decadence.”<sup>18</sup> Fikentscher prefers to return to a concept that denotes “a particular performance environment in which technologically mediated music is made immediate at the hands of a DJ, and in which this music is responded to via dance by bodies on the

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<sup>15</sup> Lawrence 2003:434.

<sup>16</sup> Brewster & Broughton 2006:136.

<sup>17</sup> An etymological description of the word “disco” may be found in Fikentscher 2000:23 or Lawrence 2003:14.

<sup>18</sup> Fikentscher 2000:22.

dance floor.”<sup>19</sup> This reclaims the term from its culturally pejorative connotations and places its music front and centre.

“Disco music” is often used as a catchall for various genres (funk, soul, Latin) that in fact share few common traits other than their role in a certain specific space (discos) at a certain specific time (the 1970s). Brewster and Broughton claim that an amalgamation of these musical styles took place upon the arrival of the major record companies to the disco scene:

As disco became a financial force, the music changed considerably. It had begun not as a genre, but as an amalgam of whatever danceable records the DJs could lay their hands on. Rock, soul, funk, Latin: there was no single style or tempo which characterized the music played in the disco’s underground years. In its commercial period, the opposite became true. Few major label A&R executives had any great understanding of the club scene from which this music had emerged, so they could only see it in terms of its most basic generalities. They looked at the records which had crossed over, noted a few common denominators, and concluded that there was a simple formula for making disco.<sup>20</sup>

While diversity characterized original disco music, at some point a formula surfaced for a particular “disco beat” and “disco bassline” that in turn became a self-fulfilling prophecy for disco as a musical genre. The pountchak pattern was part of this formula and it promptly disappeared from most popular music production in the 1980s, probably as a casualty of its strong association to that stereotypical disco music of the late 1970s.

#### THE ORIGIN OF CLUB CULTURE

All histories are constructs, and some are more reliable than others. This holds true for music as well. Joseph G. Schloss, for example, asserts that hip-hop “grew through a series of small innovations that were later retroactively defined as foundational.”<sup>21</sup> A list of these sorts of pivotal innovations necessarily involves a simplification of reality but can nevertheless provide a starting point for investigation. In the case of electronic dance music and its roots in disco, we might start our own history of small innovations with a singular New York nightclub: the Loft.

In 1970, David Mancuso started arranging parties in his own home (a loft) at 647 Broadway in New York; when he later changed homes, the parties went with him. Mancuso is not the first DJ, and the Loft is not the first nightclub, but the two would set the disco bar. Brewster and Broughton describe the Loft as “more influential than any

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<sup>19</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>20</sup> Brewster & Broughton 2006:200.

<sup>21</sup> Schloss 2004:27.

nightclub before or since, it was the place where the music you dance to today, and the place you go to do it, were first envisaged.”<sup>22</sup> Its foundational principles included the following: a focus on dancers and dancing; an appreciation of the obscure track; a mediation of music through a dedicated sound system; and a distinction between members and non-members. These principles have followed club culture throughout its historical development and therefore merit further discussion here.

#### THE APPROACH OF THE DISCO DJ, PART 1: THE FOCUS ON THE DANCERS

The Loft’s focus on dancers and participation in general was explicit. Mancuso considered the DJ to be a provider of good dance music, but not in any way a focal point for dancers. This dictate points to ways in which the experience of dance music culture diverges from a conventional popular music concert experience, where people do in fact watch the “performer.” Mancuso’s approach required a full commitment to the act of being moved by the music that was incompatible with a focus on the DJ’s performance. Nevertheless, the major record companies who moved in on this culture saw music exclusively driven by an artist or group: “to make disco work for them, they squeezed it into the star-based marketing structures which had worked so well with rock . . . Most major labels, used to marketing famous people whose poster you could buy and whose career you could follow, only felt comfortable with this club music if they could dress it up with all sorts of artists and group-based fronts.”<sup>23</sup>

Marketing fame and stardom did not coincide with Mancuso’s original approach, however; popularity interfered with the idea of the DJ as fundamentally beholden to the dancers. But when disco suddenly became profitable, avoiding recognition meant missing opportunities, and not only of the economic variety. A DJ’s natural ambition to expand his loyal followers (for his club, or a particular music genre) would likewise suffer. Lawrence describes a “contradictory and irresolvable tension between protecting oneself from overexposure while simultaneously transforming the world.”<sup>24</sup> The risk of DJ overexposure, of course, evokes constructions of underground versus mainstream and authenticity versus “selling out” – the perception that one has abandoned one’s principles for commercial success. This is a central theme in observations about corruption by

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<sup>22</sup> Brewster & Broughton 2006:150.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.:201.

<sup>24</sup> Lawrence 2003:116.

commerce in popular music culture as well. But in a dance music context, it all comes back to the dancefloor.

In the electronic dance music scene of the 1990s, this tension around influence persisted as DJs grew ever more popular. Their numerous performing aliases perhaps represent an attempt to avoid focus, and most CD covers and music videos of dance music acts avoided a lot of face time for the performers. But acts did begin to happen in traditional concert venues as well,<sup>25</sup> despite the fact that they were simply not as visually interesting as a rock band or pop artist. Because these later audiences saw themselves as spectators rather than participants (and were largely unaware of the cultural codes of the dancefloor), dance acts had to provide (often artificial) visual focal points,<sup>26</sup> such as background movies, slide shows, light shows, dancers, vocalists, or instrumentalists. Tony Langlois, in his article on house music from 1992, affirms those producer-DJs as largely unassuming characters, despite the drawbacks: “Even when showcasing their own material, perhaps on television pop shows, they tend to remain in the background, usually in ‘groups’ fronted by ‘featured vocalists’ who give the music a visual and compositional focus.”<sup>27</sup> A DJ who sought approval from original fans and cultural insiders had to avoid attention at the risk of being deemed arrogant by new or potential fans. In production processes this dilemma may be reflected by choices of auditory focal points that can double as visual focal points in performances (or the lack thereof).

#### THE APPROACH OF THE DISCO DJ, PART 2: THE OBSCURE TRACKS

To find obscure dance tracks and to introduce them successfully to dancers was another of Mancuso’s dictates. At the Loft one would often hear music that was played nowhere else. Though Mancuso was probably not the most inventive or influential of DJs, – for example, he insisted on playing tracks in their entirety rather than mixing them – his taste in music established a powerful precedent for the disco scene. Brewster and Broughton in

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<sup>25</sup> When the Chemical Brothers played at the Roskilde Festival in 1999, they were placed at the “Orange Scene,” which has a capacity for 60,000 people. The crowd was predominantly faced towards the stage trying to distinguish the visually introvert actions of the two men. For a few “insiders” the message concerning the music and the dancing was probably crystal clear, but for the majority of the crowd this message was probably misconstrued, and the “concert” was rather unfavourably received as a consequence.

<sup>26</sup> “Lighting . . . has become an elaborate accompaniment to the music, emphasizing its rhythms, illustrating its chords. . . . Computer-generated fractals and other abstract designs of coloured light can act as visual equivalents of the instrumental sounds of house and techno music, while film, loops, slide projectors and music videos punctuate the space with figurative entertainment” (Thornton 1995:57).

<sup>27</sup> Langlois 1992:234.

fact point to Francis Grasso as “the first modern DJ.”<sup>28</sup> Grasso started DJing in 1968, and he was renowned for his ingenuity in keeping the beat going, forming his music sets in a narrative manner using mostly rather obscure tracks: “Grasso stormed the profession out of servitude and made the DJ the musical head chef. DJ Francis didn’t follow the pop chart menu, and he didn’t meekly bring the customer what he’d ask for. Instead, he cooked up a nightly banquet of new and exotic musical dishes which the diners, though they devoured them eagerly and came back for more, might never have known to order.”<sup>29</sup>

A similar attraction to obscure music arose in the northern English club scene at the same time. The “Northern Soul” scene accommodated a new passion for dancing to early Motown soul music and the like, and DJs competed to turn up old or underappreciated recordings. Brewster and Broughton observe that “northern soul’s most significant contribution to the DJ’s trade was to introduce the idea of connoisseurship . . . until soul, dance music had been largely about playing the hits of the day. Since the northern scene thrived on rarities, it made the DJ’s profession as much archaeology as record playing.”<sup>30</sup> This knack for “archaeology” came to characterize the successful DJ of any musical style, and it found even more momentum in the subsequent era of digital sampling. Of hip-hop producers, for example, Schloss writes: “The process of acquiring rare, usually out-of-print, vinyl records for sampling purposes has become a highly developed skill . . . Individuals who give themselves to this quest are held in high esteem.”<sup>31</sup> Consequently, the DJ who tries to please the crowd with likeable, popular tracks may garner less respect than the DJ who presents his or her individual taste in music (provided it is good).<sup>32</sup> Brewster and Broughton agree: “The real work of a DJ happens behind the scenes – searching dark record stores, devouring endless lists and daunting stacks of vinyl, and sniffing out the wonders they contain.”<sup>33</sup> Playing popular tracks, on the other hand, carries risks. These tracks have the advantage (or disadvantage) of being recognized and thereby evoking associations, either good (linked to earlier positive dancing experiences) or bad (seeming lame or predictable). If dancers come to

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<sup>28</sup> Brewster & Broughton 2006:138.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.:139.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.:107; see also Shapiro 2005:37–44.

<sup>31</sup> Schloss 2004:79–80.

<sup>32</sup> Lawrence recalls how the legendary DJ Larry Levan would play a certain unknown track repeatedly until the crowd learned to like it as he did: “Larry would rarely give in. Not only would he leave the record on until the end. He would also start to play it week in, week out, until finally everyone wanted to dance to it” (Lawrence 2003:356).

<sup>33</sup> Broughton & Brewster 2002:12.

expect to hear music they have not heard before, they may be disenchanted by the choices of the less progressive DJ.

Playing popular tracks may get the crowd dancing, then, but it can also harm the DJ's reputation. The lure of obscurity remains strong in the digital era in the choice of material for sampling or copying<sup>34</sup> as well as in less obvious decisions concerning rhythm patterns (like the poumtchak pattern), basslines, specific sounds, melodic themes, and the use of effects.

### THE APPROACH OF THE DISCO DJ, PART 3: THE FOCUS ON GOOD SOUND

The sound system at the Loft was constantly upgraded and refurbished to offer the best experience to the dancers. Mancuso collaborated with sound engineer Alex Rosner to improve sound systems particularly for nightclubs, with “Mancuso supplying the visionary ideas for Rosner’s practical expertise.”<sup>35</sup> Larry Levan, the most famous DJ from another club, the Paradise Garage (1977/78–83), was also known for his commitment to sound quality, according to Lawrence: “Because the room’s acoustics were in a state of constant flux, Levan would also tweak the system as the night progressed, introducing modifications to take account of an additional two thousand bodies on the dancefloor, subsequent shifts in humidity levels, and eventual ear fatigue, and this remorseless quest for perfection meant that [sound engineer Richard] Long had to re-equalize the system every Friday and Saturday.”<sup>36</sup>

A focus on good sound and a dedicated sound system distinguishes genuine dance clubs. This focus is not unique among contemporary live music scenes, but certain aspects of sound are more significant to the dance music scene than elsewhere, such as the ability to control low frequencies to produce an effective bass-drum “punch.” With digital recording techniques the process of choosing and shaping sounds using compression and equalization has become more straightforward, but the demands concerning these matters have become more stringent as well. In this sense it is helpful to be both a DJ and a producer so that one might test how certain mixes behave on a dedicated sound system and thus learn about essential details for mixing techniques.

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<sup>34</sup> Early Chicago house producers frequently copied basslines from various disco tracks; see chapter 6, page 180.

<sup>35</sup> Brewster & Broughton 2006:153.

<sup>36</sup> Lawrence 2003:357. See also Bidder 2001:10.



#### THE APPROACH OF THE DISCO DJ, PART 4: THE UNDERGROUND POSITION

The Loft remained a private club to avoid certain city ordinances, and one needed an invitation to be admitted.<sup>37</sup> DJ and clubgoer David DePino described the situation to Lawrence: “Finding the door in the first place remained a formidable obstacle. ‘These were the first parties where you had to know somebody to get in,’ says David DePino, who went to the Broadway spot several times. ‘You couldn’t find out about them by asking around because nobody knew and they were never advertised. You had to be invited. It was very underground.’”<sup>38</sup>

The (sometimes arbitrary) determination of insiders versus outsiders is not unique to dance music cultures, but the abuse of the privilege of doing so (for example, the infamous rudeness of the doormen at Studio 54 in New York) has become linked to disco. The concept of a dance “underground” could be said to have originated with these first unlicensed parties. According to Fikentscher, New York’s initial underground (in the 1950s) “referred to a socio-cultural avant-garde”<sup>39</sup> that included beat poets, performance artists, painters, musicians, and other groups that defined themselves somehow in opposition to the public in general and also by and large to the commercialization of culture. When DePino describes the Loft as “very underground,”<sup>40</sup> he refers to the club’s status as beyond the reach of almost anyone save a small group of the invited. The Loft also evokes traditional associations of the underground with some sort of illegal resistance activity that is hidden from the government in power. But while disco as a dance culture in New York City arose as a type of countercultural lifestyle that was largely unknown to the general public, these associations gradually fell away as it became more popular. So how are the succeeding constellations of disco/dance clubs, music styles, and record labels even recognizable as part of an inherently underground scene? Lawrence admits that this is “a slippery concept”<sup>41</sup> in relation to disco culture, since the reality of the situation defied such expectations: “Should it include cutting-edge discotheques, even though they were open to the general public? And should it be applied to radical DJs, even if they were generating chart smashes and playing commercial

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<sup>37</sup> “The Loft was situated in a building that had been set aside for industrial use in which Mancuso organized ostensibly commercial parties without a certificate of occupancy, a cabaret license, or officially sanctioned fire exits. Going to the Loft and keeping quiet about it wasn’t a pose. It was a pragmatic practice” (Lawrence 2003:53).

<sup>38</sup> Lawrence 2003:22.

<sup>39</sup> Fikentscher 2000:10.

<sup>40</sup> See quotation above; Lawrence 2003:22.

<sup>41</sup> Lawrence 2003:433.

clubs?”<sup>42</sup> Disco’s connection to the underground, however, would be vital to countering the negative associations with it that emerged at the end of the 1970s.

Fikentscher uses “underground” as a prefix in his book on dance music to explain “that the associated type of music – and its cultural context – are familiar only to a small number of informed persons. Underground also points to the sociopolitical function of the music, framing it as one type of music that in order to have meaning and continuity is kept away, to a large degree, from mainstream society, mass media, and those empowered to enforce prevalent moral and aesthetic codes and values.”<sup>43</sup> In comparison to the ultimate (over)exposure of disco, the dance music of the 1980s definitely happened outside the public eye and remained comfortably “underground.” But the difficulty of negotiating this status re-emerged with the popularity of dance music in the 1990s. Its early illegal raves and associations with drugs preserved for it a sort of underground status, even when its events attracted huge crowds and massive public attention. By the new millennium, though, its widespread popularity demanded a fresh reappraisal of its “underground” status.

In Sarah Thornton’s study of club culture, she writes: “The term ‘underground’ is the expression by which clubbers refer to things subcultural. More than fashionable or trendy, ‘underground’ sounds and styles are ‘authentic’ and pitted against mass-produced and mass-consumed. Undergrounds denote exclusive worlds whose main point may not be elitism but whose parameters often relate to particular crowds.”<sup>44</sup> According to Thornton, then, “underground” may be used rather liberally to indicate any degree of subcultural affiliation; she also links it to a certain type of authenticity that eschews overexposure. But “authenticity” in dance music culture can be even more problematic than the “underground.”<sup>45</sup> Since the acts of dancing and playing records (made by others)

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.:434.

<sup>43</sup> Fikentscher 2000:5.

<sup>44</sup> Thornton 1995:117.

<sup>45</sup> Thornton explores authenticity in club cultures at length: “What authenticates contemporary dance cultures is the buzz or energy which results from the interaction of records, DJ and crowd. ‘Liveness’ is displaced from the stage to the dancefloor, from the worship of the performer to a veneration of ‘atmosphere’ or ‘vibe.’ The DJ and dancers share the spotlight as de facto performers; the crowd becomes a self-conscious cultural phenomenon – one which generates moods immune to reproduction, for which you have to be there” (Thornton 1995:29–30; emphasis in the original). Thornton also distinguishes between two kinds of authenticity: one relates primarily to DJs, involves “issues of originality and aura” (1995:30), and “draws upon definitions of culture as art,” and the other, which is more widespread and concerns “being natural to the community or organic to subculture” – that is, involving culture as lifestyle. She frames the DJ’s role as uniting these two authenticities in the act of collecting and playing records and leading the crowd without demanding its attention. The crowd, then, takes on the role of the live performer in giving life to the objects that are presented by the DJ. Thornton (1995:66ff) also discusses four characteristics through which certain records and music genres are perceived as authentic; their assimilation and legitimization by a subculture; the distance between production and consumption; the environment of production; and the ideological vagaries of genres.

are central focal points in dance music cultures, hierarchies of authenticity necessarily differ from pop music scenes in which the live performance typically underpins authenticity.<sup>46</sup> In this respect, “underground” thus depends upon the common knowledge shared by insiders of dance music-related subcultures. Insiders, once the relatively few invited members of the Loft, have come to comprise an intricate network of subcultural environments, one with many “undergrounds” and an equal number of opposing “mainstreams.”

Thornton criticizes earlier works in cultural studies that rely upon definite dichotomies between certain groups and an established “mainstream.”<sup>47</sup> Such dichotomies almost always involve the reduction and oversimplification of real life. She also points to the role of the media in club culture and specifically that culture’s assertion of its subcultural identity.<sup>48</sup>

As I have tried to demonstrate, the meaning of “underground” has changed with various developments in the music cultures that rely upon the concept. Nevertheless, it remains relevant. In both DJing and music production, constructions of “underground” and “mainstream” affect many choices about both the art and the context of its appreciation.<sup>49</sup>

#### THE END OF THE DISCO ERA

Disco music is a disease. I call it disco dystrophy . . . The people victimized by this killer disease walk around like zombies. We must do everything possible to stop the spread of this plague.<sup>50</sup> – Radio DJ Steve Dahl

Steve Dahl has become a vehicle for the disapproval of disco music in the United States. He is associated with the “disco sucks” slogan and the infamous “Disco Demolition Night” at baseball’s Comiskey Park in Chicago on July 12, 1979, where reduced admission was offered in exchange for old disco records that were in turn blown up inside a container partway through the game. An anti-disco riot ensued that ultimately

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<sup>46</sup> See Fornäs 1994 for a comparison of authenticity in house/techno and other popular music genres.

<sup>47</sup> She discusses primarily Hebdige 1979 and Mungham 1976 (see Thornton 1995:93ff). See also Bennett 1999 for relevant discussions on subculture theory linked to the dance music scene of the 1990s.

<sup>48</sup> Thornton 1995:116ff.

<sup>49</sup> On the St. Germain (Ludovic Navarre) track *What’s New?* there is a monologue listing DJs whom he believes play “real house music”: “This is what we call easy-listening *underground* house music, with much respect to Smack Production and music stations, our favourite *underground* house label” (2:15–2:35). This method of positioning oneself within a history of other legitimate or authentic figures is relatively common; see also Daft Punk’s *Teachers* (1996).

<sup>50</sup> Steve Dahl quoted in Brewster & Broughton 2006:290.

prevented the game from finishing.<sup>51</sup> Brewster and Broughton observe that this protest was in fact not unique: “Dislike for disco was everywhere. The rock generation saw it as the antithesis of all that was holy: no visible musicians, no ‘real’ stars, no ‘live’ performance. It was music based wholly on consumption, music with no aesthetic purpose, indeed with no purpose at all other than making your body twitch involuntarily. Dehumanizing, expressionless, content-less – the judgements were damning.”<sup>52</sup>

Following the incident in Chicago, disco clearly fell from grace, at least in the United States. The major record labels had forced this dance-related music culture into a typical star performer-oriented package, and the public in turn experienced lip-synching, derivative arrangements, and other studio “fakery” as evidence of disco’s (rather than the disco business’s) illegitimacy.<sup>53</sup> The major labels saw disco as a passing phenomenon that had to be “exploited as quickly and thoroughly as possible.”<sup>54</sup> This fate would then become self-fulfilling.

The capitalist exploitation of this cultural phenomenon appears to have involved not only record companies but also corporations of all sorts.<sup>55</sup> The casualties of this rather short period of excessive exposure must have worried later dance music insiders as well. While acts (or at least their music) need attention, too much of it can present a problem.

Two other issues may also have contributed profoundly to disco’s fate in the United States: its African American musical roots and its strong connection to gay culture.<sup>56</sup> A majority of the performers in disco music were African Americans. Racist tendencies were still quite common in the United States in the 1970s and the major record labels may have been worried about the prejudices of the general American

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<sup>51</sup> In an NBC-TV interview with Steve Dahl on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the event, the focus was more on the disturbance to the baseball game rather than the indignity foisted upon the music (see webpage 1.1). Many people who were there have left personal accounts on a webpage dedicated to the event (see webpage 1.2).

<sup>52</sup> Brewster & Broughton 2006:291.

<sup>53</sup> According to Shapiro, not only the major labels were to be blamed. The independent label Casablanca’s executive Neil Bogart created hype with false sales to promote new artists: “Puffing up no-talent acts with a load of hot air became the norm for the record industry during the disco boom” (Shapiro 2005:223). In her study of house music culture, Hillegonda Rietveld asserts that the market at the end of the 1970s was in fact flooded with “second-rate” music – that is, “music that was not made with the same sensibilities and without a finer understanding of the aesthetic forms from which disco had developed, such as funk, soul and gospel” (Rietveld 1998:115). See Brewster & Broughton 2006:201, Fikentscher 2000:29, and Shapiro 2005:222 for similar accounts.

<sup>54</sup> Brewster & Broughton 2006:201.

<sup>55</sup> Shapiro describes examples of disco-related TV advertisements and children’s TV programs, and even a religious dancefloor passion play; see Shapiro 2005:224ff.

<sup>56</sup> See Shapiro 2005:230.

public. After disco's demise, African American performers would generally lose ground in the public eye until hip-hop increased in popularity in the late 1980s.<sup>57</sup>

The gay clubs of New York City (and Fire Island) had been very influential in the shaping of disco culture since the early 1970s. The decade was formative for the gay liberation movement, and its celebration in disco culture made a difference in this regard. The Village People, assembled by Jacques Morali and Henri Belolo in 1977, was probably the first group in popular music history to overtly display a connection to gay culture while gaining widespread commercial success.<sup>58</sup> Many Americans in fact probably missed the group's connotations of a gay lifestyle as they bought the music.<sup>59</sup> But for those who hated disco and all of its associations, the Village People, with their constructed history and exceptional focus on image, became a perfect target for disdain.<sup>60</sup>

In his study of underground dance music in New York City, Fikentscher considers its relations to African American and gay culture, arguing that dance music's perpetuation in the 1980s was to a large extent due to these cultural groups: "Larry Levan's reign at the Paradise Garage, as well as Frankie Knuckles's rise to 'Godfather of House' or Junior Vasquez's long-term association with the Sound Factory cannot be explained without considering the consistent support these DJs had and have in gay communities and/or those defined by ethnicity."<sup>61</sup> Because disco faded from public awareness early in the 1980s, producers and DJs could explore new variations upon dance music that were more in line with the needs of their supporters. Buckland assumes that most Americans by late 1981 had turned their attention to the economy and unemployment, and that "under these circumstances, the core audience for dance music, a significant segment of whom were urban gay clubgoers, became an even stronger influence on the artistic direction of the music."<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> MTV avoided music videos by African American artists between its launch in 1981 and the arrival of Michael Jackson's *Thriller* videos. They claimed to be formatted as "rock'n'roll" at a time when few African American artists were seen as such. MTV was accused of racism by several African American artists and ultimately changed course when Jackson's music videos came to them in early 1983. See Rose 1994:8 and Kaplan 1987:15.

<sup>58</sup> The name refers to Greenwich Village in New York City, which at the time was famous for having a substantial gay population.

<sup>59</sup> See Smucker 1980:566.

<sup>60</sup> Brewster and Broughton describe how Steve Dahl gave away one hundred tickets to a Village People concert, provided the recipients would throw marshmallows bearing the words "Disco Sucks" onto the stage; Brewster & Broughton 2006:290.

<sup>61</sup> Fikentscher 2000:109.

<sup>62</sup> Buckland 2002:68.