



THE RISE OF DISCO

OVERVIEW

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How did Disco relate to the sentiments and social movements of the 1970s?

OVERVIEW

The rise of Disco in the 1970s had an enormous cultural impact on the American audience. It was the music they heard on the radio, the music they danced to. It affected fashion. It affected club culture. It even affected film.

Disco's roots were multiple. It had connections to R&B and Funk, but it was also born out of the urban gay culture in New York City. But no matter its roots, it quickly moved into the mainstream with a string of best-selling hits by artists from Donna Summer to the Village People. The phenomenally successful 1977 film *Saturday Night Fever* took Disco's commercial popularity to surprising heights. The film's soundtrack produced numerous Top 10 hits and the album sold over 15 million copies.

The vibrant sound and energetic dance moves of Disco provided young people with an escape from what film critic Roger Ebert called "the general depression and drabness of the political and musical atmosphere of the seventies." The economic prosperity and countercultural exuberance of the 1960s had faded. By the mid-1970s, crime rates soared and the combined "Misery Index" of unemployment and inflation reached new highs.

With that as the backdrop, the lure of Disco proved particularly powerful for working-class youth. As *The New Yorker's* Pauline Kael noted in her 1977 review of *Saturday Night Fever*, the film and Disco itself centered on "something deeply romantic: the need to move, to dance, and the need to be who you'd like to be. Nirvana is the dance; when the music stops, you return to being ordinary."

But almost as powerful as the embrace of Disco was the backlash against it. For those who grew up with three-minute songs, bands playing instruments, and the raw aesthetic of early Rock and Roll, Disco was part of a new problem. Ultimately, Disco's rise helped to foster the fragmentation of the 1970s and changed the shape of popular music culture.



OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- The general feeling of economic and social malaise in the 1970s, as crime rates soared and unemployment and inflation hit record highs
- The influence of the Gay Rights and Women's Rights movements on popular American culture
- The prominence of Disco music as a social and cultural force in the late 1970s

2. BE ABLE TO (SKILLS):

- Evaluate primary sources and make connections between those sources
- Assess the importance of a cultural form in a specific context
- Common Core: Students will identify the main themes in two quotes on Disco, and then extend their understanding by studying photos, texts and videos on these themes from the 1970s (CCSS Reading 2; CCSS Reading 7)
- Common Core: Students will write a speech eulogizing the death of Disco, centering on the themes developed in the class discussion (CCSS Writing 4; CCSS Speaking and Listening 6)

ACTIVITIES

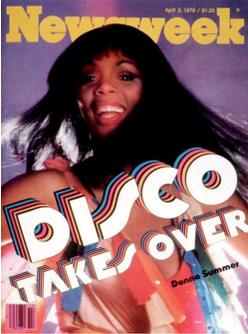
MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY:

Ask students:

- Why do people dance?
- Under what circumstances do people most want to dance? When they are feeling good about something? When they are feeling down? Think about your own life – when do you want to do nothing else but find a place where you can dance?
- How do you feel while you are dancing? What does dancing accomplish?

PROCEDURE:

1. Explain to students that you will show them a historical artifact from 1979. Display the cover of Newsweek magazine from April 2, 1979, and discuss as a class:



- What is Newsweek? What does the title of the magazine suggest about what it covers?
- What does this cover suggest about the popularity of Disco? Was it perhaps more than just a style of music? How would you describe the mood of the cover?

2. Display this quote from music critic Stephen Holden, also from 1979:

“Everyone here knows that 1979 will go down in history as the year Disco became the biggest thing in pop since Beatlemania and possibly since the birth of rock & roll.”

-Music critic Stephen Holden, quoted in Ralph Giordano, Social Dancing in America, 2007

3. Discuss as a class:

- What does the word “Disco” mean? What is a discotheque? What do people do at a discotheque?
- Why might a particular style of music come to be known as “Disco”? What does the name imply about the purpose of the music?
- What does the quote say about how popular Disco was in 1979?
- Under what kinds of historical circumstances do you think people would be drawn to music that

makes them want to dance? Times of prosperity? Times of economic hardship?

4. Show students the opening moments of the following videos of songs that were major Disco hits in the 1970s: Peaches and Herb, “Shake Your Groove Thing”; Sylvester, “Mighty Real”; and Donna Summer, “Love to Love You Baby.” Discuss:

- How would you describe the music? Is it fast or slow? What instruments are used? What kind of beat does it have?
- How does these performers look different from, for instance, the Beatles performing “She Loves You”?
- How are the performers dressed? What words would you use to describe their appearance?
- Who are the performers? Describe them in terms of gender, ethnicity, etc.
- What are the people listening to the music doing? What kind of mood do they seem to be in? How would you describe the style of dancing they are doing?
- Why do you think many of these people have come to the disco to hear the music and dance? How might this music provide them with an escape from the issues that they face in their daily lives?

5. Play the video of the Village People on The Merv Griffin Show performing their hit song “YMCA.” Explain to students that the Village People were named for New York City’s Greenwich Village, an area with a large gay population and where the modern Gay Rights movement began in 1969 with the Stonewall Riots.

6. Discuss:

- According to the discussion, what is the attraction of a disco?
- Why might some people like this atmosphere more than others?
- How would you describe the costumes

PROCEDURE: (CONTINUED)

- and gestures of the Village People in their performance? How do they reflect common stereotypes about gay men?
- How does the success of the Village People as a Disco band reflect the influence of gay culture on the Disco genre?
 - Can you identify elements of this influence in any of the other videos viewed in this lesson? Be as specific as you can.
7. Divide students into groups, ideally of six students each. Explain that each group will work together to read and analyze some documents before creating a set of two “tableaux,” living images in which they will pose together to create still pictures that express a particular point or idea. Each group will create two “tableaux,” one representing the economic and political realities of the 1970s, and the other representing the world of a 1970s disco. To help them prepare for their tableaux, students will investigate the cultural and historical circumstances from which Disco emerged.
 8. Distribute Handout 1: Social and Economic Conditions in the 1970s. Instruct students to work in their groups to analyze the documents, answer the questions on the chart, and discuss the questions listed at the end of the Document Set.
 9. After all groups have had a chance to look at the documents and answer the questions, briefly poll groups on their findings.
 10. Distribute Handout 2: Saturday Night Fever. Ask for a volunteer to read the first paragraph aloud.
 11. Play the Saturday Night Fever trailer. Discuss:
 - What does Tony tell his father about when and where people say positive things about him?
 - What word is used to describe Tony when he is on the dance floor?
 - How are the people at the disco dressed? What kind of atmosphere does the disco offer?
 - Based on what you have seen in the trailer, why do you think this movie was so successful? Why did it help to make Disco music, and the kind of dancing it encouraged, so popular? (Note to instructor: Consider the shift from stars on the stage to stars on the dance floor.)
 12. Ask for volunteers to read out loud the quotes on the handout from Roger Ebert and Pauline Kael. Discuss:
 - How does Ebert describe the political and musical atmosphere of the 1970s? What does he suggest Disco music and dancing provided for young people in this environment?
 - Why might Disco have been particularly appealing to people from working-class backgrounds? What did it provide them that they might not have found in their everyday lives?
 - What does Kael suggest about what Disco dancers got out of dancing? What does she mean by “the need to be who you’d like to be”?
 - Look at the last sentence of the Kael quote. What is Nirvana? What is Kael saying not simply about the characters in Saturday Night Fever but about why Disco was so popular with young people in the 1970s?
 13. Allow students sufficient time to work in their groups to apply what they have learned in this lesson to create their two tableaux. Remember that one will represent the economic and political realities of the 1970s, and the other the world of a 1970s disco. Students should be encouraged to think about the relationship between the two tableaux they will create.

SUMMARY ACTIVITY:

1. Have each group present their two tableaux to the class as a whole. As each group presents, the other students in the class may ask questions about the presentations and identify the themes the group is trying to express. Each group will then have the opportunity to explain its choices to the class.
2. After all groups have presented, discuss the following question: What was the relationship between political and economic conditions of the 1970s and the popularity of Disco music and dancing?

WRITING PROMPT:

Ask students to write a “eulogy” for the 1970s and Disco. They should write their piece in the form of a speech in which they memorialize the importance of Disco in the 1970s, and reflect on how the climate of the decade contributed to the rise of this musical form and the way it became an important cultural force.

EXTENSIONS:

1. Have students research the vast commercial success of the Bee Gees in the Disco era, and analyze how the band, originally a “British Invasion” act of the early 1970s, was successfully able to reinvent itself in the Disco era. Play the video of the band performing “Stayin’ Alive,” the song featured in the opening credits of *Saturday Night Fever*. How did the band’s association with the film help bring it commercial success? In this interview with two of the Bee Gees, how do they describe their relationship to the Disco movement?
2. Ask students to research the careers of some of the musical stars most closely associated with Disco, such as Donna Summer, Gloria Gaynor, Kool and the Gang, and the Village People. Students may also wish to focus their research on the Bee Gees, who began as a “British invasion” group in the 1960s but reinvented themselves as a Disco group in the late 1970s and were the main group featured in the *Saturday Night Fever* soundtrack.
3. Have students read and evaluate the 2010 article “Boogie Nights” from *Vanity Fair* magazine, which begins as follows: “It became known, and ultimately reviled, as Disco. But the music that surged out of gay underground New York clubs such as the Loft and 12 West in the early 70s was the sound of those who wanted to dance, dance, dance—blotting out everything but their bodies and the beat.” Ask students to consider:
 - Why do you think that people have such different, vivid recollections of Disco?
 - Why might these memories be so meaningful more than 30 years later?
4. Ask students to research the considerable backlash against Disco that gathered force among many Rock and Roll fans. As Dick Clark has noted, “Frustrated Rock fans just couldn’t see Disco for what it actually was—another offshoot of Rock and Roll. In condemning Disco, these bitter rockers sounded like anti-Rock parents of the 50s, with their complaints that the music was unimaginative and monotonous. Nevertheless, people wanted to dance.” Have students research the criticisms of Disco and evaluate whether or not they had merit.

STANDARDS

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

College and Career Readiness Reading Anchor Standards for Grades 6-12 for Literature and Informational Text

Reading 2: Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

Reading 7: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse formats and media, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

College and Career Readiness Writing Anchor Standards for Grades 6-12 in English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science and Technical Subjects

Writing 4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening for Grades 6-12

Speaking and Listening 6: Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and communicative tasks, demonstrating command of formal English when indicated or appropriate.

SOCIAL STUDIES – NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR THE SOCIAL STUDIES (NCSS)

Theme 1: Culture

Theme 2: Time, Continuity, and Change

Theme 5: Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

National Standards for Music Education

Core Music Standard: Responding

Select: Choose music appropriate for a specific purpose or context.

Analyze: Analyze how the structure and context of varied musical works inform the response.

Interpret: Support interpretations of musical works that reflect creators' and/or performers' expressive intent.

Evaluate: Support evaluations of musical works and performances based on analysis, interpretation, and established criteria.

Core Music Standard: Connecting

Connecting 11: Relate musical ideas and works to varied contexts and daily life to deepen understanding.

RESOURCES

VIDEO RESOURCES

- Sylvester – (You Make Me Feel) Mighty Real (1979)
- Donna Summer – Love to Love You Baby (1976)
- The Bee Gees – Stayin’ Alive (1977)
- Saturday Night Fever Trailer (1977)
- The Bee Gees – Interview: Disco Music (1977)
- Peaches & Herb – Shake Your Groove Thing (1979)
- Village People – YMCA (1979)

FEATURED PEOPLE

- Donna Summer
- Village People

HANDOUTS

- Handout 1: Social and Economic Conditions in the 1970s
- Handout 2: Saturday Night Fever