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Discophobia: Antigay Prejudice and the 1979 Backlash against Disco

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ON THURSDAY, 12 JULY 1979, over seventy thousand people converged at Comiskey Park in Chicago for a doubleheader between the Chicago White Sox and the Detroit Tigers. The stadium was filled beyond its capacity, marking the highest attendance of any White Sox home date in over a decade. Many of these spectators, however, were not there to watch the baseball games. Instead, they were gathered to witness the planned destruction of thousands of disco records during the intermission between the games. The evening was billed as Disco Demolition Night and was organized by a Chicago radio disc jockey named Steve Dahl in collaboration with Mike Veeck, the promotions manager for the White Sox. In the weeks prior to the game, Dahl invited his listeners to bring to the stadium the disco records that they would like to see destroyed. To encourage attendance, those who brought disco records were charged 98 cents admission, which was about a quarter of the regular ticket price. The price of tickets corresponded to the call numbers of the FM radio station where Dahl worked, WLUP-FM 98. The event was also billed as Teen Night, so many who did not bring disco records were still admitted at a discount. Of those who attended the game, over ten thousand deposited disco records at the turnstiles. Because so many people showed up with records, regular ticket holders were denied admission, and thousands of people were turned away from the gates but waited outside of the stadium to be near the event inside. Many spectators even climbed the gates to get in before the game started. In total, an estimated fifty-five thousand people filled the stadium, while another fifteen thousand gathered around

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Comiskey Park. Another ten thousand attempting to get to the stadium were stuck in traffic on the Dan Ryan Expressway.¹

Inside the stadium the scene was unrestrained. Dozens of homemade banners emblazoned with slogans like “disco sucks” hung from the upper and lower balconies and were described by some observers as “obscene.” As the first game progressed, groups of fans shouted various antidisco chants. By the fifth inning hundreds of disco records had been tossed down onto the field along with fireworks and trash. The field was covered with litter well before the break between the games. When the intermission began at 8:16 P.M., the crowd became increasingly rowdy. Many of the records being thrown were aimed at the players. Things became so disorderly that the White Sox players were locked in their clubhouse between games for their own protection. Tension reached its peak at 8:40 P.M., when Dahl, dressed in military fatigues and an army helmet, drove onto the field in a military-style jeep. He was accompanied by a blonde model named Lorelei who was known for her sexually provocative poses in WLUP’s advertisements. The crowd then began to chant “disco sucks!” so loudly that they were clearly audible outside of the stadium. Those who had gathered around the stadium joined in the chant. Meanwhile, a giant crate filled with over fifty thousand disco records was placed in deep center field. The climax of the ceremony occurred when Dahl set off a row of large fireworks in front of the crate, which was followed by the detonation of a fireworks bomb that exploded the records and sent fragments flying.²

But the Disco Demolition wasn’t quite finished. When the disco records exploded, the crowd erupted, rushing the field and rioting. An estimated seven thousand fans ran wild, lighting bonfires, tossing firecrackers in the audience, tearing up turf, and destroying the records themselves.³ Many of those who had been unable to get into the stadium crashed the gates, while

¹ Abe Peck, “Hangover at Dahl’s House,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, 14 July 1979, 42; Brian Hewitt, “White Sox Fans Demolish Doubleheader,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, 13 July 1979, 104; Allan Jones, “U.S. Disco Wars: Carter to Resign?” *Melody Maker*, 4 August 1979, 10; Roger Noll, “Weighted Average Ticket Prices,” available online at <http://users.pullman.com/rodfort/SportsBusiness/MLB/MLBFrame.htm>, 27 April 2001; Joseph Sjostrom and Lynn Emmerman, “‘These weren’t real baseball fans’—Veeck,” *Chicago Tribune*, 13 July 1979, 1.

² See Brian Hewitt, “Tigers Want Sox to Forfeit,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, 13 July 1979, 98; Don McLeese, “Anatomy of an Anti-Disco Riot,” *In These Times*, 29 August–4 September 1979, 23; Bill Gleason, “The Horror at Comiskey,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, 13 July 1979, 104; Phil Hersh, “Ch[annel] 44: We Didn’t Broadcast Obscenity,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, 14 July 1979, 85.

³ “Anti-Disco Rally Halts White Sox,” *New York Times*, 13 July 1979, A16; “For Those Who Hate Disco,” *Briarpatch*, August 1979, 4; Don Merry, “White Sox Fans Smash Records,” *Los Angeles Times*, sec. 3, 13 July 1979, 3; “Rowdy Fans Cost Chicago a Game,” *Boston Globe*, 14 July 1979, 22.

others milled around outside. The rioters destroyed the batting cage and the pitcher's mound and set several small fires. Other fans in the middle of the field set a large bonfire fueled by disco records and danced around the fire. At 9:08 P.M. the police department's tactical force rushed onto the field. Most of the rioters ran back to the stands as soon as they saw the police, who were equipped with riot helmets and nightsticks. Within five minutes the police had the situation under control and had cleared the area. Shortly afterward, the umpire declared the field unplayable and called off the second game between the Sox and the Tigers. The riot led to thirty-nine arrests for disorderly conduct and over half a dozen reported injuries. Even more significantly, the Disco Demolition, which lasted less than half an hour, "was the explosion heard round the record industry" and around the nation.⁴

The Disco Demolition was not an isolated incident or an aberration; it was the climax of an antidisco backlash that spread across the United States in 1979. The antidisco backlash involved acts of intimidation and violence against disco fans and the destruction of disco records.⁵ That year in Seattle hundreds of rock fans gathered at fairs and attacked a mobile dance floor. In Portland, Oregon, thousands cheered as a radio disc jockey cut through a stack of disco records with a chainsaw. In Detroit and Chicago antidisco clubs attracted thousands of members. T-shirts that bore the phrases "Disco Sucks" or "Death to the Bee Gees" were worn across the United States.⁶ In Los Angeles a radio station released a promotional antidisco record with songs such as "Disco's What I Hate," "Disco Defecation," and "Death to Disco."⁷ In New York radio listeners protested a rock radio deejay because he played disco singer Donna Summer's so-called sex anthem, "Hot Stuff."⁸

The violent backlash against disco in 1979 transformed disco from a socially acceptable form of music and culture to one that was highly stigmatized. However, the backlash was directed not simply at a musical genre but at the identities linked to disco culture. The attack on disco was informed by the general perception that disco was gay and elitist, and the discourse surrounding disco was highly sexualized and framed by "homo/heterosexual

⁴ Mel Cheren, *Keep On Dancin': My Life and the Paradise Garage* (New York: 24 Hours for Life, 2000), 257–58; see also "Disco-Haters to the Barricades," *Newsweek*, July 1979, 90; Richard Dozer, "Sox Promotion Ends in a Mob Scene: Tigers Ask for Forfeit of 2nd Game," *Chicago Tribune*, sec. 5, 13 July 1979, 1.

⁵ "Chicago's WLUP Cools Attack on Rival Station," *Billboard*, 28 July 1979, 16.

⁶ Frank Rose, "Rock & Roll Fights Back: Discophobia," *Village Voice*, 12 November 1979, 35; Alan Penchansky, "Chicago Spot Unfurls Banner; Rock Acts Yes, Disco Sound No," *Billboard*, 3 March 1979, 104.

⁷ "Disco-Haters to the Barricades," *Newsweek*, July 1979, 90; *No Disco* (BOMP Records LP, 1979).

⁸ Lindsay Van Gelder, "Disco Usurps Rock's Reputation," *Syracuse Herald-Journal*, 26 November 1979, 20.

definitions.”⁹ Jeffery Weeks has argued that associating negative qualities with homosexuality has two effects: “It helps to provide a clear-cut threshold between permissible and impermissible behavior; and secondly, it helps to segregate those labeled as deviant, and thus contains and limits their behavior patterns.”¹⁰ At the same time, popular music is an aural space of representation through which identities are constituted, organized, and reified within a wide range of interpretive practices and contexts. Consequently, genres of music are often claimed by particular constituencies as cultural forms that provide meaning and structure to their identity politics. Indeed, musical affiliation is frequently treated as a marker of social affiliation in U.S. culture, linking music to powerful territorial claims and sometimes giving rise to significant conflicts over the boundaries between perceived identity territories. The events leading up to the Disco Demolition saw the assignment of homosexual definitions to disco and heterosexual definitions to rock music. The attack against disco enabled the broad demarcation of heterosexual and homosexual cultures and gendered behaviors through popular music. A close analysis of the Disco Demolition reveals how an acute antigay prejudice was used to stigmatize disco and in turn instigated the genre’s rapid decline even as discophobia reflected and furthered antigay prejudice.

The implications of the Disco Demolition and the backlash against disco, as historians of music such as Walter Hughes, Judith Peraino, Tim Lawrence, Peter Shapiro, Bill Brewster, and Frank Broughton have noted, far exceeded the destruction of several thousand disco records in Chicago.¹¹ The attack on this musical genre had implications for gay men whose identities were associated with disco. This article analyzes in detail a process that these historians of music have only briefly noted: the ways in which the backlash against disco was motivated by antigay prejudice. Through a close reading of antidisco discourses, which framed disco as queer, gender transgressive, elitist, and socially threatening, it is clear that disco music declined because

⁹ Queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick defines “homo/heterosexual” as “the world-mapping by which every given person [is] considered necessarily assignable to a homo- or heterosexuality.” According to Sedgwick, these terms have not been restricted to identities but are “full of implications for the least sexual aspect of personal existence” and are regularly used to describe a range of acts, practices, situations, and behaviors that are not necessarily sexual but occur between and in relation to men. See Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 2–3.

¹⁰ Jeffery Weeks, *Sexuality and Its Discontents: Meanings, Myths and Modern Sexualities* (Boston: Routledge, 1985), 75.

¹¹ Bill Brewster and Frank Broughton, *Last Night a DJ Saved My Life* (New York: Grove Press, 2000), 168, 200, 268–70; Walter Hughes, “In the Empire of the Beat: Discipline and Disco,” in *Microphone Fiends: Youth Music & Youth Culture*, ed. Andrew Ross and Tricia Rose (Routledge: New York, 1994), 147–57; Tim Lawrence, *Love Saves the Day: A History of American Dance Music Culture, 1970–1979* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003), 373–95; Judith A. Peraino, *Listening to the Sirens: Musical Technologies of Queer Identity from Homer to Hedwig* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 176–80; Peter Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around: The Secret History of Disco* (New York: Faber & Faber, 2005), 240–57.

of antigay prejudice and because of the opportunism of radio promoters. Furthermore, the events of 12 July 1979 are easily connected to broader cultural anxieties about sexuality and gender that emerged in the 1970s. Coming on the heels of a widespread legislative and electoral backlash against gay civil rights across the United States, the backlash against a form of musical and sexual expression signified the conscious evacuation of gays from popular culture.¹² While historian Susan Jeffords has identified the 1970s as witnessing the remasculinization of America, a process that she describes as depending upon “the exclusion of women and the feminine” and the creation of “a world in which men are not significantly different from each other,” the sexual and gender politics of the antidisco backlash marked a moment in which a primarily white male and middle-class audience sought to assert their masculinity within heterosocial spaces. Put differently, the backlash against disco saw heterosexual men attack disco music because they believed that disco culture limited their ability to interact with women, excluded them from heterosocial spaces, imperiled their heterosexuality, and privileged an inauthentic form of masculinity.¹³

The Disco Demolition offers a lens with which to view the complex ways in which antigay prejudice, fears of shifting gender roles, and concerns over heterosocial spaces came to be articulated nationally through popular culture even as parallel struggles over sexual identity were taking place within organized politics. Exploring the connections between the backlash against disco and antigay prejudice allows us to understand how the consumption and production of popular culture informed, organized, and articulated heterosexual politics and identities and how multiple forms of media are used to construct and police the expression of normative sexuality.

In order to understand the Disco Demolition, it is necessary to first understand the connections between the histories of sexuality and music in the 1970s. Two trends led to the association of music with identity politics and to later conflicts between disco fans and rock fans: the emergence of the youth movement in the 1960s with rock as its music and the emergence of the gay liberation movement in the same period with disco as its music. By the mid-1960s rock was synonymous with the youth movement, which in turn was linked with the civil rights, antiwar, antipoverty, women’s, and countercultural movements of the period. Unlike 1950s classic rock songs, whose lyrics were characterized by emotional, sexual, or romantic themes, rock lyrics increasingly conveyed political messages.¹⁴ Rock was still viewed

¹² For an extensive discussion on how music is employed and used to situate bodies within social contexts and accentuate how bodies are articulated see Peter G. Christenson and Donald F. Roberts, *It’s Not Only Rock & Roll: Popular Music in the Lives of Adolescents* (Cresskill, N.J.: Hampton Press, 1998).

¹³ Susan Jeffords, *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 168.

¹⁴ See Paul Friedlander, *Rock and Roll: A Social History* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1996).

as youth music, but now rock became politically confrontational in ways that surpassed the sexual message of earlier 1950s rock. For many youth, rock music provided a sense of identity and coherence and created overarching narratives for the struggles and protests of the 1960s. In the 1960s a new criterion was increasingly used for evaluating music, and it was one that referred to literary rather than emotional effects. Rock began to carry with it intimations of sincerity, authenticity, and art.¹⁵ By the 1970s there was a general stress in rock on individualized skills rather than on collective participation in music. Consequently, audiences were no longer encouraged to dance and to enjoy the beat of the music but were supposed to be appreciative listeners who could recognize the virtuosity and depth of the musicians' performance.

By 1970, however, the youth movement had increasingly fragmented into conflicting factions, many of which divided along lines of race, gender, and sexuality.¹⁶ The implosion of the New Left and an increasingly articulate and powerful New Right heralded a growing skepticism about the accomplishments of the previous decade.¹⁷ Along with these changes, the rock genre expanded into a number of subgenres by the 1960s, including art rock, jazz rock, country rock, and soft rock.¹⁸ Moreover, rock had become entrenched as a mainstream music. It was marked by a demographic shift and encompassed much of the American "under thirty" population; its audience had broadened, moreover, and was less defined by political ideologies and age—it was no longer only the music of adolescents and the disenfranchised. Still, rock audiences and performers continued to be

¹⁵ For essays on the discourse of authenticity in rock music see Simon Frith, *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure and the Politics of Rock* (London: Constable, 1983), 11; Richard Dyer, "In Defence of Disco," in *On Record: Rock, Pop & the Written Word*, ed. Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin (London: Routledge, 1990), 41; and Norma Coates, "(R)evolution Now?" in *Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender*, ed. Shelia Whitely (New York: Routledge, 1997), 52–53.

¹⁶ See Brett Beemyn, "The Silence Is Broken: A History of the First Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual College Student Groups," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 12, no. 2 (2003): 205–23; Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967–1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989); Sara Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (New York: Random House, 1979); Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin, *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Terrence Kissack, "Freaking Fag Revolutionaries: New York's Gay Liberation Front, 1969–1971," *Radical History Review* 62 (1995): 104–34; and Benita Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism: Black, Chicana, and White Feminist Movements in America's Second Wave* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

¹⁷ See Dan Carter, *The Politics of Rage: George Wallace, the Origins of the New Conservatism, and the Transformation of American Politics* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995); and Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001).

¹⁸ For a comprehensive discussion of the subgenres of rock see Joe Stuessy and Scott Lipscomb, *Rock and Roll: Its History and Stylistic Development*, 4th ed. (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 2003).

overwhelmingly white, heterosexual, male, and suburban. Accordingly, rock music in the 1970s became implicitly defined by a new set of identity politics of gender, sexuality, and race.¹⁹ Music historian Keir Keightley has aptly noted that “it is more useful to approach [rock] as a larger musical culture” as opposed to a coherent musical genre, for what “is truly at stake in rock culture is the differentiation of taste, not an affiliation with forms of cultural action.”²⁰ Indeed, by the 1970s the politics of rock were divergent, and it no longer offered the political coherence that had been associated with 1960s social movements. In the decade before the Disco Demolition, many commentators, fans, and musicians bemoaned the fact that rock music in the 1970s was apolitical, in decline, out of touch, or dead. Such sentiments were articulated in many places and appeared in an article that appeared in the *New York Times* two days before the Disco Demolition. The article was entitled “Discophobia,” and its author, Robert Vare, wrote:

The Disco Decade is one of glitter and gloss, without substance, subtlety or more than surface sexuality. The Disco Decade is the era when intimacy and close personal connections are to be avoided even with the self. In the 1960's, of course, Americans would have given anything for something as mindless and impersonal as disco, an escape hatch from the social responsibilities, from the shouting and shoving in the streets. Now we have found the answer. All we have to do is blow dry our protein-enriched hair, anoint ourselves with musk oil, snort another line of cocaine and turn up the volume. . . . After the lofty expectations, passions and disappointments of the 1960's, we have the passive resignation and glitzy paroxysms of the Disco 1970's. After the poetry of the Beatles comes the monotonous bass-pedal bombardment of Donna Summer.²¹

For those who bemoaned the state of popular music, rock, as it had crystallized in the second half of the 1960s, was privileged as a golden age.²² Indeed, the *New York Times* article reflects how the political and aesthetic

¹⁹ Aaron Fuchs, “The Disco Round as Rock and Roll Reality,” *Village Voice*, 5 February 1979, 4; Friedlander, *Rock and Roll*, 173–88. For a discussion of the increasing segregation of popular music between 1965 and 1970 see Nelson George, *Where Did Our Love Go? The Rise and Fall of the Motown Sound* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985).

²⁰ Keir Keightley, “Reconsidering Rock,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock*, ed. Simon Frith, Will Straw, and John Street (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 110, 129.

²¹ Robert Vare, “Discophobia,” *New York Times*, 10 July 1979, A15.

²² For a theoretical discussion on the ongoing discourse about the decline of rock music from the 1950s to the present see Kevin Dettmar, *Is Rock Dead?* (New York: Routledge, 2006). Dettmar argues that “popular writers who declare rock to be dead [seem] to do so from a selfish, if predictable, motivation: the writers are partisans of an earlier genre of popular music” (78).

dominance that rock held in the 1960s had eroded.²³ Yet the memory of rock as a seriously political art form continued to inform the aesthetics of music audiences, as did the implicit demographic politics of race and age. These factors in turn combined to set the stage for a rejection of disco music that was as much aesthetic as it was based on the politics of identity—but it was not confined to the critique of disco alone.

The rise of disco music directly related to the transformations that took place in rock music and the more general cultural upheavals of the 1960s and set the stage for conflicts over gender and sexuality in the late 1970s. Scholars Gregory Bredbeck, Tim Lawrence, and Judith Peraino have shown how discotheques and dancing became increasingly important to many members of a newly liberated gay community who, following events like the New Year's Ball organized by a group that called itself the Council on Religion and Homosexuality in San Francisco in 1965, were in effect dancing together publicly for the first time.²⁴ The gay liberation movement emerged just as the 1960s youth movements and rock music were becoming increasingly fragmented. Following watershed events like the Stonewall Riots in New York City in 1969, which brought together an older homophile movement with radical currents from the social movements of the 1960s, there was an immediate proliferation of gay organizations that fought for the recognition of gays as citizens with equal rights. Gay liberation rendered sexuality and gender as primary sites of cultural and political conflict, and one of these highly charged sites was popular music.²⁵

²³ Frith, *Sound Effects*, 33; Archie Loss, *Pop Dreams: Music Movies, and the Media in the 1960s* (Fort Worth, Tex.: Harcourt Brace, 1999), 149.

²⁴ For a comprehensive discussion of the emergence of disco music as a genre see Tim Lawrence, *Love Saves the Day: A History of American Dance Music Culture, 1970–1979* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003); Stephen Holden, “The Evolution of a Dance Craze,” *Rolling Stone*, 19 April 1979, 29; Maureen North et al., “Get up and Boogie!” *Newsweek*, 8 November 1976, 96; and Cheren, *Paradise Garage*.

²⁵ For the links between gay liberation, the meanings of gay identity, and gay social spaces see Beemyn, “The Silence Is Broken”; John D’Emilio, “Cycles of Change, Questions of Strategy: The Gay and Lesbian Movement after Fifty Years,” in *The Politics of Gay Rights*, ed. Craig A. Rimmerman et al. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 31–53; John D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940–1970*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Kissack, “Freaking Fag Revolutionaries”; Ian Lekus, “Losing Our Kids: Queer Perspectives on the Chicago Seven Conspiracy Trial,” in *The New Left Revisited*, ed. John McMillan and Paul Buhle (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), 199–213; Toby Marotta, *The Politics of Homosexuality* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981); Marc Stein, *City of Sisterly and Brotherly Loves: Lesbian and Gay Philadelphia, 1945–1972* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 304–5, 324–40; Justin David Suran, “Coming out against the War: Antimilitarism and the Politicization of Homosexuality in the Era of Vietnam,” *American Quarterly* 53 (2001): 452–88; and Kenneth Wald, “The Context of Gay Politics,” in Rimmerman, *The Politics of Gay Rights*, 1–30.

The gay liberation movement drastically transformed gay nightlife and, by implication, the spaces and places where music was consumed by gay men, for, prior to the late 1960s, it was difficult for gays to congregate publicly without fear of police harassment. In addition, many gay clubs were still controlled by organized crime, which severely limited the extent to which gays could control and socialize in their own spaces. Consequently, gay men often congregated at private parties, where records were often the main source of musical entertainment.²⁶ After Stonewall, urban gays increasingly claimed the right to dance openly and associate with each other and quickly began to open up their own clubs and create places for themselves across the United States.²⁷ These developments led to an increased sense of freedom among gay men and allowed for public affirmations of their identities, albeit still limited, since gay men still could not participate fully in mainstream culture and remained segregated from straight society.

From its origins, disco music was associated with cultural difference. At the beginning of the 1970s many disco artists were Latinos or African Americans, and many were African American women. The audiences for this first wave of disco were predominantly urban straight and gay African Americans, straight and gay Latinos, and white gay men dancing in African American and gay night clubs in major urban centers like New York and Chicago. Many white gay men saw disco as a music that spoke to and represented their experiences of oppression and coming out. Gay men interpreted popular songs such as Wilson Pickett's "Don't Knock My Love," the Pointer Sisters' "Yes We Can," Aretha Franklin's "Respect," MFSB's "Love Is the Message," and Gloria Gaynor's "Never Can Say Goodbye" as reinforcing gay pride and affirming gay identity, romance, and sexuality.²⁸ When gay men danced to these songs and sang along with them, they viewed disco as their own music. According to Nat Freedland of Fantasy Records, disco music was "a symbolic call for gays to come out of the closet and dance with each other."²⁹ Moreover, disco allowed gay men who owned discotheques and who served as disc jockeys and producers to become highly visible and respected within the music scene.³⁰

If rock music popularly was understood as the music of rebellion and liberation in the 1960s for the youth movement, disco was framed similarly as the music of liberation for gay white men in the early 1970s, for it coincided with—and provided a focal point for—the process of becoming politically visible and winning civil rights within American culture. The

²⁶ Stephen Holden notes that disco was originally known as "party music" in the gay community ("The Evolution of a Dance Craze," 30).

²⁷ Peter Braunstein, "Disco," *American Heritage*, November 1999, 43.

²⁸ For a comprehensive discussion of popular disco hits in gay clubs see Lawrence, *Love Saves the Day*.

²⁹ Barbara Graustark, "The Disco Takeover," *Newsweek*, 2 April 1979, 56.

³⁰ Jack Egan, "Cashing in on the Boogie to a Tune of \$5 Billion," *Washington Post*, 26 June 1978, B1.

1970s witnessed a flourishing of gay political activism and culture and the building of gay commercial and social institutions. Not simply apolitical or commercial, discos were an important part of these transformations, for they served as sites of political organizing, fund-raising, and celebration. Disco clubs and music made the growth of gay liberation concrete, as queer theorist Gregory Bredbeck has noted aptly, for these clubs helped gays to imagine a sexual community and coordinate their gay identity.³¹ This process was demonstrated in novelist Edmund White's description of disco music in his 1973 *Joy of Gay Sex*:

There is no better proof than such discos of the emergence of gays from their closets. Gone are the days of sleazy hideaway bars buried in basements. . . . Now hundreds of gays troop into big, spacious, luxurious discos where the dancing, the sounds, the lights and the company are great. In fact, the main problem the gay discos face is how to keep straights from moving in and elbowing out the original gay clientele.³²

Indeed, disco music rose to cultural prominence within the gay community at the moment of their political and cultural ascendance. However, disco began "crossing over" to the straight community at the moment of a virulent antigay political backlash.³³

Although gays were making significant political and cultural advances, with disco as their anthem, their achievements were widely resisted by those who maintained that homosexuality threatened society and ought to remain invisible and illegal. In 1977 an antigay campaign in Florida called "Save Our Children, Inc." (SOC) triggered a nationwide backlash against gay rights. The most visible leader of the group was Anita Bryant, a fundamentalist Baptist best known as a popular singer and spokesperson for the Florida Citrus Commission. SOC sought to overturn a Dade County human rights ordinance that prohibited discrimination on the basis of "sexual or affectional preference"

³¹ Gregory Bredbeck, "Troping the Light Fantastic: Representing Disco Then and Now," *GLQ* 3 (1996): 81.

³² Quoted in *ibid*.

³³ During the controversy surrounding the gay rights referendum in Dade County in 1977, discos across the United States boycotted Florida orange juice to protest Anita Bryant's antigay crusade, and they were used to raise funds for gay rights organizations in Florida as well as national organizations. One local gay rights group, the Miami Victory Campaign, even released a disco song entitled "Hurricane Anita" that was used as a fund-raising tool. After Dade County, discos continued to be centers of political and cultural activity aiding in organizing and fund-raising, both for local political organizations and for events of national urgency such as the Brigg's Initiative in California. See, for example, *Free Press* (Charlotte, N.C.), 4 April 1977, 17; Paul Nash, "Is the Squeeze Working?" *Out!* 29 July 1977, 13; *Our Own Community Press*, July 1977, 2; Ron Anderson, "Orange Ball Brings Community Together," *Gay Life* (Chicago), 20 May 1977, 2; *Lesbian News*, December 1977, 10; *Dade County Coalition for Human Rights* 1 (March 1978); Carla Hall, "The Big Event: Disco Benefit for the Gay Community at the Sheraton Park," *Washington Post*, 24 October 1978, C9.

in the areas of housing, employment, and public accommodations. At the heart of SOC's campaign was the belief that homosexuality was contagious and that exposure to it might turn anyone gay, especially male children. Their homophobic belief that the "recruitment of our children is absolutely necessary for the survival and growth of homosexuality" helped to convey a belief that homosexuals ought "to go into their closets, in their bedrooms, in their privacy and take care of themselves there."³⁴ In short, SOC's campaign attacked the core position of post-Stonewall gay politics, coming out of the closet and becoming visible.³⁵

In the years immediately preceding the Disco Demolition, opposing interests fought for the right to define and organize sexuality and gender. Within six months of its founding, SOC put the Dade County gay rights law to a referendum and successfully defeated it. Dade County's 1977 vote on gay rights marked the second time in American history such a referendum was held; however, it was the first vote of national significance.³⁶ SOC's activism also helped to defeat the ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment in Florida because anti-ERA activists claimed that the ERA would invalidate "laws outlawing wedlock between members of the same sex" just as civil rights laws had invalidated "laws forbidding miscegenation."³⁷ Within a year, SOC had helped to organize anti-gay rights campaigns across the United States and successfully overturned three municipal gay civil rights ordinances while informing the rhetoric of countless other attacks on gay rights. SOC also provided the rhetorical framework for newly forming and powerful right-wing coalitions such as the Moral Majority and Christian Cause that placed antigay activism at the center of a conservative political and religious agenda, following SOC's lead. By 1979 these New Right groups were advancing a legislative and cultural agenda based on what historian Jeffery Weeks describes as "a referential system in which 'sexual anarchy' became the explanation of social ill."³⁸ Among their concerns were the suppression of "sex education, abortion, the ERA, pornography and gay rights."³⁹ Nevertheless, SOC's activism galvanized gays and lesbians to become politically active and come out of the closet in unprecedented

³⁴ Quoted in David Goodstein, "Opening Space," *Advocate*, 20 April 1977, 5; Theodore Stanger, "Dade Approves Ordinance Banning Bias against Gays," *Miami Herald*, 19 January 1977, 18A.

³⁵ See D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics*, 35.

³⁶ The first referendum took place in Colorado in 1974 and resulted in the repeal of a gay civil rights ordinance. The referendum was largely ignored by the mainstream media. It also seems to have been ignored by gay and lesbian periodicals that covered the struggle in Dade three years later.

³⁷ Phyllis Schlafly, "ERA and Homosexual 'Marriages,'" *Phyllis Schlafly Report* 8, no. 2 (September 1974).

³⁸ Weeks, *Sexuality and Its Discontents*, 34.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 39.

numbers.⁴⁰ The years immediately following the Dade County referendum witnessed unparalleled organization building, activism, and cooperation among gays and lesbians across the United States. Disco clubs were important to gay rights campaigns and organizations, who used these spaces to raise funds and awareness when seeking to combat the New Right. The backlash against gay rights that sought to push gays back into the closet, while not directly causal of the backlash against disco music, formed the larger context in which those advocating disco's destruction espoused antigay rhetoric.

Indeed, disco's timeline ran parallel to the rise of and backlash against gay rights. By 1974 the first wave of New York gay clubs devoted strictly to dancing were firmly established, and discos began to attract white straight baby boomers. Between the summer of 1975 and the summer of 1977 over twelve thousand discos opened across the United States as disco broadened its audience.⁴¹ In 1976 *Rolling Stone* published an anthology called *Dancing Madness*. One essay, entitled "No Sober Person Dances," explained to its heterosexual readers that "the first test for the hetero male who wishes to be in tune with at least the basic of bisexual chic is not to feel threatened when addressed as 'baby' rather than 'sir.'"⁴² *Dancing Madness* understood that many straight men would react poorly to being in the same space as gay men and also indicated that the two groups increasingly were coming into contact with one another within gay discos.

Two phenomena in 1977 helped the disco genre to attract a straight white middle-class audience and to become a billion-dollar business: *Saturday Night Fever* and WKTU-FM.⁴³ The 1977 movie *Saturday Night Fever* and its best-selling soundtrack album introduced and popularized disco among

⁴⁰ Numerous articles in gay and lesbian periodicals and movement newsletters credited Bryant with reinvigorating gay liberation. See, for example, Drummond Ayres, Jr., "Miami Vote Increases Activism on Homosexual Rights," *New York Times*, 9 June 1977, 1; Randy Shilts and Robert McQueen, "The Movement's 'Born Again' from Apathy to Action," *Advocate*, 27 July 1977, 7; Randy Shilts, "The New Improved Gay Movement: Will It Work?" *Advocate*, 19 October 1977, 7; Dade County Coalition for Human Rights, "Just Begun," *Weekly News Bulletin*, 6 September 1977; *National Gay Task Force Action Report*, April–May 1977.

⁴¹ Constance Rosenblum, "Discomania," *Human Behavior*, November 1978, 27.

⁴² Ed McCormack, "No Sober Person Dances": In Which a Suburban Prole Decadent Visits a Hot Manhattan Disco and Learns that Cicero Was Right," in *Dancing Madness*, ed. Abe Peck (New York: Rolling Stone Press/Anchor Press, 1976), 13. McCormack's observations about bisexual chic were bracketed by his interview with a disco-goer named Tony Pagano who stated: "'What my old man doesn't understand is that you don't have to be a fag to be into this scene,' Tony says as he sips a tequila sunrise. . . . 'My old man doesn't understand that dancing is not a tight-assed, uptight sex role scene. It's just a way of communicating with people you might not have anything to say to if you sat down to talk. It doesn't mean you want to fuck a broad or a guy if you dance with them. You're just doing what comes natural.'" These sentiments were hardly unique to *Dancing Madness* and appear to have been widespread. See, for example, Art Carey, "Gays, Straights Dance It up at New Prelude," *Bucks County (Pa.) Courier Times*, 5 September 1976, A5.

⁴³ Holden, "The Evolution of a Dance Craze," 29.

straight white middle-class Americans.⁴⁴ The film starred John Travolta and featured songs written and performed by the Bee Gees. Because they were white and presented an image of heterosexuality, the Bee Gees and Travolta made disco safe for white, straight, male, young, and middle-class Americans and were crucial to disco successfully crossing over to this new audience. Al Coury, the president of the RSO record label (which released the two-record soundtrack for the film), even declared in 1979 that *Saturday Night Fever* “kind of took disco out of the closet.”⁴⁵ Coury’s statement suggests that disco was understood as a gay medium that had crossed over into mainstream popular culture. By 1978 the movie’s soundtrack had sold more than thirty million copies worldwide, making it the highest-selling soundtrack ever.

Meanwhile, with the astonishing rise of WKTU, New York’s first all-disco radio station, mainstream record companies became aware that popular dance songs in discotheques could also cross over to key radio stations and produce hit albums. WKTU had been a low-rated rock station until 1978, when it switched to an all-disco format. By 1979 it was the most popular radio station in the country, and its success caused many other radio stations to alter their formats in hopes of cashing in on the burgeoning disco market. WKTU and *Saturday Night Fever* made disco into a highly profitable commercial industry and enabled disco to spread quickly to white and straight communities across the United States with unprecedented force. At the beginning of 1979 disco was a four-billion-dollar-a-year industry.⁴⁶

The commercial success of disco music triggered a fearful and homophobic reaction from rock fans because it was considered to be a quintessentially gay genre of music. During 1978 and 1979 disco reached its apex in the United States. Major American magazines were covering extensively what they called the “disco phenomenon” or the “disco crossover.” Explaining disco to a presumably straight and white audience that had had no previous exposure to disco culture, these magazine articles all traced a similar genealogy for disco, locating its origin among urban gay male and African American communities. For example, the *Washington Post Magazine* reported that disco “began among the bayous and backfields of the cultural landscape, the gay clubs and black clubs.”⁴⁷ A *Village Voice* cover story used the headline “The Dialectics of Disco: Gay Music Goes Straight.” *Newsweek*’s article, “The Disco Take-Over,” noted that “what

⁴⁴ Egan, “Cashing in on the Boogie,” B1; Lynn Darling, “The Prince of Disco,” *Washington Post*, 5 August 1979, H1.

⁴⁵ James Henke, “Record Companies Dancing to a Billion-Dollar Tune,” *Rolling Stone*, 19 April 1979, 47.

⁴⁶ See Cheren, *Paradise Garage*, 241; Kopkind, “The Dialectics of Disco,” 1; Egan, “Cashing in on the Boogie,” B2; “How a Station Becomes a Money Machine,” *Business Week*, 5 February 1979, 60; “Disco: The Sound of Money,” *Economist*, 1 July 1978, 36.

⁴⁷ Darling, “The Prince of Disco,” H1.

started a few years ago as all-night dance music in African-American and gay clubs has moved into the American heartland and is fast taking over the pop-music business.”⁴⁸ Such rhetoric echoed antigay political discourses, which represented homosexuality as menacing and spreading clandestinely throughout the nation.

These articles and statements, which are representative of hundreds of similar articles published in 1978 and 1979, all concurred on three points: disco was originally and primarily a marginal gay and African American musical form that had crossed over to mainstream culture; disco was antithetical to mainstream music and culture; and disco was taking over mainstream white culture. Musicologist David Brackett points out that “crossover implies that there must be discrete boundaries, for a recording can only ‘cross over’ when one field is clearly demarcated from another.”⁴⁹ The demarcated fields are usually those of audience as well as of genre. Because the media coverage represented disco not only as a “crossing over” but, as *Newsweek* stated, as a “taking over,” popular discourses positioned disco as both transgressive and threatening to rock music and heterosexuality.

Despite the linked claims in the press that both African Americans and gays had shaped disco culture and the assertion by some historians of the disco genre that the Disco Demolition was overtly racist, racist comments rarely surfaced in written antidisco discourse, and the African American influence on disco was not an explicit issue for rock fans. Instead, rock fans primarily focused on the gay roots of disco culture. The fact that African Americans were not seen as problematic, while Latinos and other ethnic groups largely were erased from the written discourse on disco, suggests that commentators and rock audiences in this instance did not openly or consciously perceive these groups as sources of anxiety, perhaps because of their long-standing influence on American popular music. Conversely, the relatively new and unprecedented influence of gay subcultures may have led the overwhelming majority of commentators to emphasize the gay presence in disco. It is equally possible that the focus on sexuality and the omission of race and ethnicity coincided with the color blindness that marked reactionary discourses on racial and sexual issues such as busing and school integration. Nationally, conservatives overtly disavowed public expressions of racism even as public expressions of homophobia remained acceptable. The politics of race were doubtlessly connected to some antidisco sentiments, given the overwhelmingly white rock audience and the multiracial disco audience. However, the emphasis on sexual identity in the media created a historical and a cultural framework for rock fans to describe the disco threat within a predominantly sexualized framework that was never explicitly or

⁴⁸ Graustark, “The Disco Takeover,” 56.

⁴⁹ David Brackett, “The Politics and Musical Practice of ‘Crossover’ in American Popular Music, 1963 to 1965,” *American Quarterly* 78, no. 4 (1994): 777.

consistently connected to race. By the time of the Disco Demolition in Comiskey Park, the media commonly emphasized that disco was gay and cultivated a widespread perception that disco was taking over.⁵⁰

In the months leading up to the 1979 riot, rock music was in visible crisis. Disco had unprecedented and unparalleled commercial radio play, media coverage, and popularity. Disco also dominated fashion styles, nightlife, and sales in record stores and saturated the market. The media reported “disco proms, disco cruises, and . . . wedding service[s] complete with smoke machine and light effects.”⁵¹ Meanwhile, visibly queer performers such as the Village People and Sylvester solidified the association of disco music and homosexuality in the popular mind. In April 1979 a *Rolling Stone* article described the Village People as “the face of disco” and described their songs as recalling “the gay roots of Seventies disco” and straddling “both gay and straight disco cultures.”⁵² Rock fans were not only threatened by the domination of the Bee Gees, the Village People, Sylvester, and Donna Summer but were also threatened because established rock acts like Rod Stewart, the Rolling Stones, and the Beach Boys were releasing disco singles in order to stay competitive in the marketplace.⁵³ Disco had even taken over what *Newsweek* described as “TV’s last two strongholds of rock—‘Don Kirshner’s Rock Concert’ and ‘Midnight Special.’”⁵⁴ “Can Rock and Disco Music Coexist?” asked the headline of an article appearing in the *New York Times* in January 1979, noting that this was a burning question for many music fans.⁵⁵ At the 21st Grammy Awards in February 1979, rock and disco albums directly competed against each other, and

⁵⁰ At the same time, the relationship between “black music” and disco was conflicted. Several white and African American commentators believed that disco, despite its origins in gay African American clubs, hurt black music and black male musicians. Because black women dominated disco culture and it was black male musicians who complained the most about disco, gender may have been a determining factor in these statements. These articles also stated that disco was one of many forms of “black music.” Consequently, African American culture was not reducible or reduced to disco in the same way that gay culture was. See Fred Murphy, “No Agreement at BMA Meet on Disco Music’s Pros & Cons,” *Variety*, 13 June 1979, 67; Radcliffe Joe, “Assn. Fearful Disco Hurting Black Music,” *Billboard*, 7 April 1979, 18; “Disco Not Proving Panacea for Black Artists,” *Billboard*, 14 July 1979, 59.

⁵¹ Irv Lichtman, “They All Jump on Bandwagon,” *Billboard*, 14 July 1979, 64; Geoffrey Himes, “The Big Disco Debate,” *Washington Post*, 16 May 1979, B16; Doug Hall, “No Surprise: Disco Hogging N.Y. Arbitron,” *Billboard*, 14 July 1979, 15.

⁵² Abe Peck, “The Face of Disco: Macho Men with Their Tongues in Their Cheek,” *Rolling Stone*, 19 April 1979, 13. Disco historian Tim Lawrence has noted that the lyrics of the Village People’s tracks “were cleverly titled after gay urban centers and referenced hot spots such as Folsom Street, Polk Street, Studio One, the Ice Palace, and the Sandpiper along the way” (*Love Saves the Day*, 256).

⁵³ Henke, “Record Companies Dancing,” 46; Graustark, “The Disco Takeover,” 56.

⁵⁴ Graustark, “The Disco Takeover,” 56.

⁵⁵ John Rockwell, “Can Rock and Disco Music Coexist?” *New York Times*, 21 January 1979, D22. Although the article answered affirmatively, it nevertheless noted growing rage among rock fans against disco.

disco emerged the winner, producing a headline in *Variety* that read: "Another Grammy Failure by Rock Produces Cries for Disco Category."⁵⁶ After the Grammys there were calls by rock musicians and record companies to segregate disco from rock. Disco because of its overwhelming commercial popularity appeared to be taking over and threatening rock's existence. The crisis of rock was thus framed as economic, aesthetic, and territorial.

Part of the negative response to disco occurred because disco marked a radical departure from the organization, artistry, and sexuality of rock music. While rock music was a live medium with an emphasis on the relationship between performers and fans, disco was organized in terms of dancers and recorded music. In rock concerts the primary bodies that were on display were those of the performers. Conversely, disco placed the bodies of its audience on display and displaced the performers and the idea of congregating around a live act.⁵⁷ According to music journalist Peter Braunstein, "rock's dynamic was reversed by the democratic principle within disco that relegated many performers to a state of near-anonymity and made the dancers the stars."⁵⁸ Musicians had little place in disco culture once the record had been produced. Moreover, the qualities of individuality and technical virtuosity that were privileged in rock music were replaced by the anonymous production of sound and the physical coordination and rhythm that disco dancing required. As well, the musical sign of rock music par excellence, the guitar, was no longer predominant or even present. The lyrics of disco songs often depended upon repetition rather than narrative storytelling and often did not carry a political message that was readily legible to heterosexual audiences. Therefore, the paradigm of artistic and political lyrics could not be applied to disco, and there was no readily available framework within rock discourse with which to analyze disco. The popularity of novelty songs such as "Disco Duck" and a disco version of the theme to the movie *Star Wars* further frustrated many rock fans, who decried the inauthenticity and commercialism of disco music while claiming that rock music was more authentic and less commercial. Authenticity, as music historian Keir Keightley has argued, was a core ideology for fans of rock, who believed that "rock somehow emerges prior to the involvement of the record industry, mass media, or large audiences."⁵⁹ These differences between the two genres came to play an important role in the backlash against disco, for they helped to set disco as antithetical to rock music.

⁵⁶ Frank Meyer, "Another Grammy Failure by Rock Produces Cries for Disco Category though MOR's Really Big Winner," *Variety*, 21 February 1979, 97–100.

⁵⁷ Jim Curtis, *Rock Eras: Interpretations of Music and Society, 1954–1984* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1987), 300; "Hot Acts Work Few Club Dates, Many Disco Operators Are Swearing off Live Talent," *Billboard*, 3 March 1979, 44.

⁵⁸ Braunstein, "Disco," 43.

⁵⁹ Keightley, "Reconsidering Rock," 127.

Even as the media framed disco as gay, they also represented disco clubs as elitist and exclusive. Some disco owners had strict admission policies and sought to cultivate a clientele of “beautiful people” who dressed fashionably. Other discos had steep membership costs that were prohibitive to working- and middle-class clientele.⁶⁰ Not surprisingly, these discos gained notoriety and bred resentment.⁶¹ While different disco clubs had radically different identities, admission prices, and policies, the more famous and exclusive discos, like Studio 54 in New York City, came to represent the entire culture. As resentment toward disco music grew among rock fans, they charged disco with cultural elitism and as being out of touch with mainstream American values.⁶²

As disco increased in popularity, many rock radio deejays across the United States had to incorporate disco into their song rotations or face economic consequences. By April 1979 over 250 American radio stations had switched formats to include disco, and about 75 of these adopted all-disco formats. Deejays who did not adapt to the changing market frequently lost their jobs, and there were firings across the music industry. Among those who lost their jobs was a twenty-four-year-old Chicago deejay named Steve Dahl. Dahl had been working for WDAI Chicago, an album-oriented rock station that decided to switch to an all-disco format in December 1978. Dahl was fired around Christmas of that year, a fact that reportedly contributed to his embitterment toward disco. In March 1979 Dahl was hired as the morning host on a rival Chicago rock station, WLUP-FM, nicknamed “The Loop,” for a reportedly lower income. It was on WLUP that Dahl immediately began his crusade against disco and against his former employer.⁶³

On his new morning show at WLUP Dahl began verbally attacking disco in a series of on-air rants and disco jokes. He stated that disco was “fun to dance to but ridiculous to take it that seriously.”⁶⁴ Many other commentators

⁶⁰ “Disco: The Sound of Money,” 36.

⁶¹ See, for example, Brian Sherrat and Nalani Leong, *Disco Chic: All the Styles, Steps, and Places to Go* (New York: Harmony Books, 1979). The authors of this book told their readers that the best way to get into a popular disco was to be born beautiful, dress in disco fashion, and buy expensive memberships to disco clubs. See also Darling, “The Prince of Disco,” H1.

⁶² Toni Ginnetti, “Outburst Spotlights DJ’s Cause,” *Daily Herald* (Chicago), sec. 1, 14 July 1979, 3. Ginnetti quoted Dahl’s interview from the July 1979 issue of the *Illinois Entertainer*, where he stated that “the disco culture represents the surreal, insidious, weird oppression because you have to look good, you know, tuck your shirt in, perfect this, perfect that.”

⁶³ Steve Dahl, “Corporate Airwaves, Radio Daze,” *Chicago Tribune*, 17 March 1996, 1. See also “Disco Grows in Chicago as MOR Declines,” *Billboard*, 21 July 1979, 16; Mary Tuthill, “Disco Dancing to the Tune of Billions,” *Nation’s Business*, April 1979, 58–60; Doug Hall, “Heads Roll as Disco Sound Dominates N.Y.,” *Billboard*, 7 July 1979, 4; Peck, “Hangover at Dahl’s House,” 42; Rose, “Rock & Roll Fights Back,” 36.

⁶⁴ Steve Dahl, “WLUP Freak Out: Blowed up [1979],” in *20 Years in the Can* (Chicago: Lake Effect, 1998), track 17.



Figure 1: Antidisco cartoon from *Punk Magazine*, 1979.

did the same by calling disco a “contrived, formulaic, repetitive music.”⁶⁵ By refusing to take disco seriously, Dahl and other cultural commentators undermined it as a valid musical or cultural form. As his rhetoric intensified, Dahl went on to state that “we were not only replaced by [disco] but we think it does nothing but create a cultural void in this country.”⁶⁶ Dahl described his discourse at WLUP as “making fun of disco,” and many of his jokes about disco depended upon negative stereotypes of homosexuality. These jokes reduced disco to a form of sexual deviance while assigning homosexual meanings to objects, situations, events, and sequences of actions associated with disco.⁶⁷ For example, Dahl would lisp the word disco and thus implicitly signal the genre’s gay associations. A similar representation appeared in 1979 in a *Punk Magazine* cartoon that portrayed a gay man lisping in a disco even as it implied that discos were inhabited by lisping gay men (see figure 1).⁶⁸ Folklorist Alan Dundes argues that jokes are “a barometer of the attitudes of a group.”⁶⁹ Therefore, Dahl was not merely “making fun” of disco. He was verbally attacking disco by drawing upon a shared vocabulary of derision and insult that revealed widely held antigay attitudes. With crude humor that amused and incited his audience, Dahl made disco both laughable and threatening by deploying a sexualized language that ultimately coded disco as gay and threatening.

As Dahl’s campaign against disco escalated, his rhetoric and jokes intensified and represented disco as antithetical not only to rock music but also to heterosexuality. Dahl’s song, “Do You Think I’m Disco,” which he wrote for a promotional album, clearly illustrated this notion. The song parodied Rod Stewart’s disco song “Do Ya Think I’m Sexy” and articulated

⁶⁵ Rose, “Rock & Roll Fights Back,” 36.

⁶⁶ Richard Goldstein, “Disco Sucks Up,” *Village Voice*, 7 May 1979, 47.

⁶⁷ Dahl, “Corporate Airwaves, Radio Daze,” 1.

⁶⁸ Cartoon from Goldstein, “Disco Sucks Up,” 47.

⁶⁹ Alan Dundes, *Cracking Jokes: Studies of Sick Humor Cycles and Stereotypes* (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 1987), 20.

three main ideas: heterosexuality and masculinity could not operate within discos; men in discos were gay and effeminate; and disco culture threatened masculinity and heterosexuality.⁷⁰ The main theme in “Do You Think I’m Disco” is that heterosexuality had failed within disco culture, and its failure was linked putatively to the failure of rock music and was attributed to two factors: sexually unavailable women and effeminate men. The narrator of Dahl’s song, Tony, shared his name with Travolta’s character in *Saturday Night Fever*. Indeed, Dahl’s song parodied John Travolta’s status as a sex symbol in *Saturday Night Fever* and by implication insinuated Travolta’s homosexuality. In the course of the song’s narrative, Tony attempts to dance with and sexually attract a woman. However, Tony fails to attract this woman because, according to the song, women at discos are “cold as cucumbers” and therefore sexually unavailable. The cartoon from *Punk Magazine* similarly illustrated that women were only interested in dancing with “faggots.” Moreover, the *Washington Post* reported that some discos would only admit women “if they were accompanied by a gay man.”⁷¹ The same idea also appeared in the 1976 anthology by *Rolling Stone* entitled *Dancing Madness*. It quotes a woman named Hollywood, who stated:

I had already made up my mind to become a hag, but as you can imagine, honey, Texas wasn’t exactly what you would call a hotbed of flaming faggotry. I managed to sniff out the one or two gay bars in Dallas where you could go dance and . . . well, the very first time I just looked down at my feet and said, “Honey, this is for you! This is it! This is even better than sex!”⁷²

Even the Jacksons’ 1978 disco song “Blame It on the Boogie” lamented about disco that “My baby’s always dancing and it wouldn’t be a bad thing but I don’t get no loving and that’s no lie. We spent the night in Frisco at every kind of disco from that night I kissed our love goodbye.”⁷³ These texts all stated that straight men were being displaced within discos because women found discos to be “better than sex” and no longer desired heterosexual interaction or intercourse. Thus, a number of popular texts portrayed disco as both excluding straight men and challenging heterosexuality.

Even as the media represented heterosexuality as being displaced within the sexually charged atmospheres of discos, they likewise represented the men who went to discos as unmanly and gay, often portraying them as perpetually grooming their own hair. In 1976 Maureen North of *Newsweek* reported from the men’s and women’s bathrooms of a discotheque in Chicago, where she described the grooming rituals of teen disco-goers:

⁷⁰ Dahl, “Do You Think I’m Disco?/Do Ya Think I’m Sexy,” in *20 Years in the Can*, track 20.

⁷¹ Nina S. Hyde, “Fashion Notes,” *Washington Post*, 14 October 1979, M3.

⁷² Ed McCormack, “No Sober Person Dances,” in Peck, *Dancing Madness*, 14.

⁷³ The Jacksons, “Blame It on the Boogie,” *Destiny* (Sony, 1978).

In the ladies' room, 21-year-old Yolanda Cimino, a book-keeper, and her girlfriend, a typist, are using one of the seven blow dryers and hairbrushes thoughtfully provided by the management. . . . In the men's room, Johnny Boy Musto, 18, an attendant at Shea Stadium, and his buddy, Ray Muccio, a packer for a hamburger franchise, are blow-drying their hair after spending an hour and a half on their toilette at home. Johnny Boy is wearing a black body shirt, half-unbuttoned, several gold chains around his neck and tight-fitting beige pants. "It's very important you don't wear the same thing for at least four weeks," he says, earnestly checking himself in the mirror one last time. . . . Discos are often curiously asexual. There is no stigma attached to girls dancing with girls or boys with boys—and no compulsion to find a mate.⁷⁴

In her article North emphasized that men's grooming rituals paralleled those of women. Indeed, the article's parallel structure between masculine and feminine grooming and same-sex dancing did not differentiate between male and female gender roles but instead accented the gender transitive, "asexual" nature of disco culture.

That North emphasized gender transgression from the location of bathrooms was not insignificant. Bathrooms not only were associated with excretory functions and illicit sex between men but were, as queer theorist Lee Edelman notes, "a site at which the zones of the public and the private overlap with a distinctive psychic charge."⁷⁵ Indeed, messages that linked gender disruption, unisex bathrooms, homosexual marriages, and the end of American civilization were widely disseminated through the rhetoric of anti-ERA activists.⁷⁶ Similarly, North's article raised the specter of sexual chaos within disco culture by collapsing the space between actions in men's and women's bathrooms, thereby conflating the symbolic space of difference between sexuality and gender. By following the lengthy section on grooming that turned male bodies into gender-transgressive spectacles with same-sex interaction on the dance floor, she reinforced the association between males who participated in disco culture and gayness.

A 1978 *Washington Post* article by Henry Allen brought what North had only implied into the open. He explained that the association between males grooming their hair and disco culture had been popularized by John Travolta's image-conscious character in *Saturday Night Fever*. Allen wrote:

⁷⁴ North et al., "Get Up and Boogie!" 96.

⁷⁵ Lee Edelman, "Tearooms and Sympathy, or, The Epistemology of the Water Closet," in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michele Barales, and Dave Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993), 560.

⁷⁶ Phyllis Schlafly's "Stop ERA" movement continually iterated that the ERA would require "sex-integrated bathrooms" and stated that the ERA would legalize homosexual marriages and adoptions. See Schlafly, "ERA and Homosexual 'Marriages,'" and "ERA Means Unisex Society," *Conservative Digest* 4 (July 1978): 14–16.

Women seem to be particularly astonished or delighted or intrigued by a scene in *Saturday Night Fever* in which John Travolta gets dressed to go out dancing. It took me a while to figure out why. . . . What was being titillated is a prudish sense of masculinity. . . . Men aren't supposed to dwell on their appearance, but even more important, they aren't supposed to admit that they all do. And there was John Travolta, with the sweet, simple dignity of a 20-year-old, preening with absolutely no sense of sin, with no fears of being feminine, and none of the buffoonery that tends to accompany portrayals of the working class in American movies or TV shows. In other words, Travolta was being sinful, feminine, working class, and unashamed.⁷⁷

The media thus represented disco culture as sexually liminal and threatening because it undermined gender differences and, by implication, heterosexuality.

Dahl's jokes and utterances, then, which operated in tandem with a more general commentary about disco taking over the music business, formed part of a larger network of negative connections between disco, masculinity, and homosexuality. The extent to which a widespread media commentary fixated on the sartorial and physical qualities of disco-goers revealed acute anxieties about the displacement of masculine and heterosexual identity in disco culture and a homophobic fantasy that by merely participating in disco culture men would become effeminate and gay and women would no longer desire heterosexual men. Disco thus became a particularly gay threat that endangered heterosexual desire and gender identity. Indeed, the phrase "disco sucks," the rallying cry of the antidisco campaign, communicated this very idea, for as journalist Frank Rose commented in 1979, "it is a little too coincidental that the music that's popular with gay people should have the epithet 'sucks' attached to it."⁷⁸ In other words, a man who listened to disco was by implication thought to be symbolically, if not literally, engaging in oral sex with another man.⁷⁹ Indeed, some television viewers criticized the media for broadcasting signs that bore the phrase "disco sucks" because they considered it too obscene to be aired in coverage of the Disco Demolition.⁸⁰ In these ways, the discursive connections made

⁷⁷ Henry Allen, "The New Narcissism; 'The Male Narcissist: He Walks in Beauty . . . and His Face Is His Fortune,'" *Washington Post*, 10 June 1978, 21.

⁷⁸ Rose, "Rock & Roll Fights Back," 37.

⁷⁹ Hersh, "Ch[annel] 44."

⁸⁰ *Ibid.* This article reported that viewers complained that the phrase "disco sucks" was obscene. However, the article never spelled out the "obscene" meaning. Ed Morris, general manager of channel 44, denied the obscenity of the word "sucks." Morris was quoted in the article and offered a contradictory statement about the phrase: "I have a 29-year-old son who uses the expression, 'This sucks and that sucks.' I've asked him not to use it and he said all it means is that something stinks. If my son doesn't think it's obscene, I don't think it's obscene."

by the media between disco, homosexuality, and femininity all multiplied the ways in which men who participated in disco culture could be accused of being gay.

However, even as Dahl participated in a widely shared discourse that stigmatized male participants in disco culture as effeminate and gay, he believed that gender and sexual status could be recovered alongside the restoration of heterosocial spaces. Dahl's song "Do You Think I'm Disco" stated that men could be remasculinized by listening to rock music. The final verse of Dahl's song allows Tony to return to the proverbial fold by selling his "white three piece suit in a garage sale," melting "down all [his] gold jewelry into a Led Zeppelin belt buckle," and proclaiming "long live rock and roll."⁸¹ However, it was not enough for Dahl and others to passively wait for men like Tony to realize disco's apparent superficiality and return to "authentic" music and sexual practices. Dahl perceived the threat of disco as too great and one that required direct action.

In May 1979 Dahl founded a loosely organized group called the Insane Coho Lips Antidisco Army to respond to the threat of disco culture and to promote his antidisco cause and his radio show.⁸² More than a fan club, the Antidisco Army became central to the backlash against disco in Chicago because it focused Dahl's rhetoric and provided an organized way for his fans to attack disco. Dahl stated that his army was engaged in a war "dedicated to the eradication of disco dystrophy in our lifetime" and "dedicated to the eradication of the dreaded musical disease known as DISCO."⁸³ From its inception until the 12 July riot, the Antidisco Army gained ten thousand card-carrying members and became the center of a number of violent activities staged against disco. Dahl's violence began with a daily feature on his morning show where he simulated blowing up disco records on the air.⁸⁴ His dislike of disco was so strong that he even destroyed a copy of Van McCoy's song "The Hustle" to celebrate the disco star's sudden death. In early June, when a disco in Linwood, a suburb of Chicago, switched to rock music, Dahl showed up to celebrate. Nearly five thousand members of his army joined him, and police from Indiana were called to control the situation. Later that month Dahl was the host of a rally at a suburban nightclub, and several thousand rock fans came out to support him and to "occupy" a teen disco. Dahl encouraged his army

⁸¹ Dahl, "Do You Think I'm Disco?"

⁸² Coho were a type of salmon introduced into Lake Michigan to devour parasitic eels called lampreys that were wiping out the lake's natural fish population. Dahl's radio audience was encouraged to view disco fans and disco music as parasitic and a violent threat to the natural order.

⁸³ Rose, "Rock & Roll Fights Back," 36.

⁸⁴ Dahl, "WLUP Freak Out"; Steve Dahl, "WLUP Sister Sledge: Blowed up Real Good! [1979]," in *20 Years in the Can*, track 21; see also "For Those Who Hate Disco," *Briarpatch*, August 1979, 4.

on this occasion to “feed the animals”—disco fans—by pelting them with marshmallows and peanuts. At the end of June Dahl again urged listeners to throw marshmallows at a WDAI promotional van at a shopping mall where a teen disco had been set up. The fans ended up chasing the van and cornering it at a nearby park, where, according to the *Village Voice*, “the driver had to talk his way out of the first potential disco hostage situation.”⁸⁵ Similarly, when the Village People performed in Chicago, Dahl encouraged one hundred contest winners going to their show to “write disco sucks on marshmallows and . . . to throw [them] at the group.”⁸⁶ On July 1, less than two weeks before the Disco Demolition, a crowd of seven hundred Dahl fans descended upon the Hollywood Disco in suburban Hanover Park to see Dahl at a promotional event. When only three hundred fans could enter the disco, hundreds of rowdy fans remained in the parking lot. Fights ensued, and some fans tossed firecrackers into the air, resulting in fifty police officers from eleven different communities being called in to control the boisterous crowd.⁸⁷ Clearly, Dahl’s fans were willing recruits in the war against disco. Revealingly, by calling his movement the Antidisco Army, Dahl constructed the relationship between rock and disco not only as antagonistic but also as cultural warfare.

Because Dahl’s events were becoming increasingly violent and reckless, Les Elias, the station manager at WLUP, warned Dahl to contain his demonstrations. Effectively barred from holding any more violent activities, Dahl searched for another way to promote his antidisco cause. During his short time at WLUP Dahl had become friends with Mike Veeck, who was the sports broadcaster for the station and shared Dahl’s intense dislike of disco. Veeck was also the son of White Sox owner and promotion manager Bill Veeck. Dahl and Veeck came up with the idea of holding the Disco Demolition Night; Dahl, Veeck, and Elias represented the event as a harmless promotional tool that would raise attendance at the White Sox game and give the radio station added publicity. However, what was labeled as a promotional tool was advertised and received as an emotional crusade against disco. In the weeks prior to the Disco Demolition, Dahl incited his fans with antidisco rhetoric and heavily promoted the event.

On 12 July 1979, then, almost ten years to the day after the Stonewall Riots, over seventy thousand people converged on Comiskey Park to participate in the Disco Demolition. At 8:40 P.M., with the chants of “disco sucks” and “death to disco” resounding throughout the stadium, Steve Dahl drove onto the field of Comiskey Park as the leader of the Antidisco Army in a war where the sexuality and musical taste of a culture was at stake.

⁸⁵ “Chicago’s WLUP Cools Attack on Rival Station,” *Billboard*, 28 July 1979, 16.

⁸⁶ Kurt Loder, “Rolling Stone Random Notes,” *Daily Intelligencer* (Pa.), 3 August 1979, 43.

⁸⁷ Sandy Riemer, “DJ’s Anti-Disco Fever Cooled by Melee in Hanover Park,” *Daily Herald* (Chicago), sec. 1, 3 July 1979, 4.

When Dahl, accompanied by WLUP sex-symbol Lorelei, detonated the explosives and sent shards from thousands of disco records flying through the air, the crowd also exploded. Their anger at disco manifested itself on the field of Comiskey Park and then spread across the United States.

Immediately following the Disco Demolition, a series of competing narratives emerged that attempted to explain the event yet presented only a limited understanding of the event as antigay. Journalist Dave Marsh interpreted the Disco Demolition as antigay, racist, and sexist in an article for *Rolling Stone*:

White males, eighteen to thirty-four are the most likely to see disco as the product of homosexuals, blacks and Latinos [*sic*], and therefore they're most likely to respond to appeals to wipe out such threats to their security. It goes almost without saying that such appeals are racist and sexist, but broadcasting has never been an especially civil-libertarian medium.⁸⁸

Despite Marsh's claim, analyses of Dahl's antidisco position and its appeal largely went "without saying" in the national and international media coverage that followed the Disco Demolition, and his article stood in contrast to most other cultural commentators.

Curiously, the baseball establishment attempted to disavow the Disco Demolition as part of baseball culture and distanced itself from the event. Indeed, there was widespread agreement in newspapers and entertainment journals that those who participated in the Disco Demolition were not, in the words of team owner Bill Veeck, "real baseball fans" but adolescents who came to the game solely to destroy disco records.⁸⁹ The media noted that the crowd was mostly between fifteen and twenty-five years of age, overwhelmingly white, male, and from the suburbs of Chicago.⁹⁰ The media continually emphasized that the crowd was youthful and smoking marijuana in order to convey that those who attended the Disco Demolition represented the typical rock audience and not a baseball audience.⁹¹ Two days after the Disco Demolition this idea was forcefully conveyed in a letter to the editor of the *Chicago Tribune*:

Disco Demolition Night turned out to be an outrageous example of ir-

⁸⁸ Dave Marsh, "The Flip Sides of '79," *Rolling Stone*, 22 December 1979, 28. Similar comments appeared in a column in the *Syracuse Herald* by journalist Lindsay Van Gelder, who claimed that "the anti-disco clamor has often smacked of intolerance toward two oppressed groups—blacks and gays—who comprise a large chunk of disco's audience as well as its producers" ("Disco Usurps Rock's Reputation," 20).

⁸⁹ Sjostrom and Emmerman, "These Weren't Real Baseball Fans," 3.

⁹⁰ Phil Hersh, "This Time, Veeck Is Forced to Swallow His Pride," *Chicago Sun-Times*, 14 July 1979, 85. This article sought to show that those who attended the Disco Demolition were not real baseball fans by noting that the "gate-crashers Thursday had little or no desire to see a baseball game. Many had called to ask directions to the park."

⁹¹ Ibid.

responsible hucksterism that disgraced the sport of baseball, endangered the White Sox and Detroit Tigers players and cheated and insulted the genuine fans who came to see the game. . . . Thursday had little to do with why baseball fans come to Comiskey or any other park and even less to do with the game of baseball.⁹²

Therefore, while the events of 12 July marked an intersection between rock culture and baseball culture, it was an intersection that was resented by baseball fans, who viewed their space as being “invaded” and “taken over” by young rock fans.⁹³

Meanwhile, WLUP and Steve Dahl explained the Disco Demolition as a fun event that had gone violently awry. The day after the Disco Demolition Les Elias, the station manager for WLUP, explained that the Disco Demolition “all began as good, clean fun. We had problems in small places so we thought, ‘Why don’t we move to a huge outdoor area where we wouldn’t have a problem.’ Much to our amazement, we drew too many people.”⁹⁴ When interviewed immediately after the Disco demolition, Dahl also told reporters that “we were trying to downplay the violent aspect” and insisted: “We just wanted people to have fun.”⁹⁵ Similarly, the *Chicago Tribune* sports journalist David Israel argued that the riot “would have happened any place 50,000 teenagers got together on a sultry summer night with beer and reefer.”⁹⁶ The repeated insistence by popular commentators that the violence of the Disco Demolition was mere happenstance has effectively obscured Dahl’s violent rhetoric, military themes, antigay sentiments, and the physical destruction of over fifty-five thousand disco records.

The backlash against disco in Chicago was fueled by the perception among many of Dahl’s listeners that disco was threatening to rock music and to heterosexuality. Moreover, the Disco Demolition provided an opportunity for Dahl’s listeners to respond in a concrete way to the threat of disco. It also allowed a socially sanctioned way for youths to express their collective dislike toward disco and to act out their fantasies of disco destruction. For many participants the Disco Demolition was fun precisely because it was so clearly violent. Many who attended the Disco Demolition had a genuine dislike for disco. They also attended for the sheer excitement of taking part in a mass demonstration and seeing something blown up,

⁹² “Veeck Asked for It,” *Chicago Tribune*, 14 July 1979, 8.

⁹³ Richard Dozer, “Sox Promotion Ends in a Mob Scene: Tigers Ask for Forfeit of 2nd Game,” *Chicago Tribune*, sec. 5, 13 July 1979, 1; Richard Dozer, “Sox Forced to Forfeit to Tigers,” *Chicago Tribune*, sec. 2, 14 July 1979, 1.

⁹⁴ Peck, “Hangover at Dahl’s House,” 42.

⁹⁵ Sjostrom and Emmerman, “These Weren’t Real Baseball Fans.”

⁹⁶ Israel, “When the Fans Wanted to Rock.”

⁹⁷ Alan Penchansky, “Chicago Anti-Disco Deejay Signs Ovation Record Pact,” *Billboard*, 11 August 1979, 33; Paul Sullivan, “Looking Back on a Record-Breaking Night at Comiskey,” *Chicago Tribune*, 12 July 1989, Sports 1.

especially for the cheap admission price of 98 cents.⁹⁷

Notably, the violence against disco was not contained in Comiskey Park. The *Daily Herald* of Chicago described a number of physical altercations between disco and rock fans that resulted in police intervention following the Comiskey Park riot and even claimed that “the Chicago area is fast becoming a battleground for disco and rock fans.” Another *Daily Herald* article quoted the owner of a teen disco and his seventeen- and eighteen-year-old patrons who claimed that since Dahl launched his antidisco campaign during his morning show “they have been abused verbally, threatened with physical violence and seen the brick walls of their establishment spray painted with anti-disco slogans.” This violence among youth was just one indicator that the Disco Demolition was not simple fun. Rather, antidisco sentiments profoundly spoke to cultural and sexual identities of music fans in complex ways.⁹⁸

The sexual dynamics of the antidisco backlash were signaled the day after the Disco Demolition when a large headline in the *Chicago Tribune* proclaimed: “Discophobia out of Control.” This was not the first time the word “discophobia,” imitating in its construction the word “homophobia,” had appeared in print, but it took on added resonance after the riot. In August 1979 an article in the *Village Voice* by Frank Rose explained that discophobia was a backlash against “the whole disco phenomenon, especially the disco lifestyle.”⁹⁹ Both discophobia and homophobia emphasized fears of a lifestyle and a reaction to those fears, and the *Chicago Tribune* headline stated prominently that these fears were unrestrained. That same month, Steve Dahl gave a television interview with Tom Snyder on a popular television talk show called *Tomorrow*. Dahl appeared dressed in military fatigues and an army helmet and proceeded to break disco records on his head and make fun of disco. When asked by Snyder why he hated disco music, Dahl replied with surprising candor: “I have a problem with the culture, not the music.” Dahl then reiterated several times during the interview that he found “disco culture intimidating.”¹⁰⁰ Although Dahl didn’t state then which aspects of disco culture he found to be intimidating, his attacks on the sexualized and gendered nature of disco as well as its elitism suggest that these were primary sources of anxiety for him.

There is little record of an immediate response from the gay community about the Disco Demolition. There was no mention of the event in any of the local Chicago gay papers or in newsletters such as the *Chicago Gay Alliance Newsletter* or the *Chicago Gay Crusader*. There was no coverage of the Disco Demolition in national gay papers like the *Advocate* or *Gay*

⁹⁸ Debbe Jonak, “Decked for Disco, Fan Vows New Battles,” *Daily Herald* (Chicago), sec. 1, 17 July 1979, 1; “Big Kumquat Vandalized,” *ibid.*, sec. 1, 19 July 1979, 2; Paul Gores, “Cops Avert Repeat Battle over Music,” *ibid.*, sec. 1, 23 July 1979, 4; Tim Moran, “Brother, Sister Swing into Fame with Disco,” *ibid.*, sec. 1, 3 January 1980, 6.

⁹⁹ Rose, “Rock & Roll Fights Back,” 36.

¹⁰⁰ NBC Network, *Tomorrow with Tom Snyder*, 13 August 1979.

Community News or even in gay entertainment journals such as *After Dark*.¹⁰¹ One disco promoter, Mel Cheren, believes that gay men understood that the backlash was antigay but did not anticipate the effect of the Disco Demolition. Cheren writes in his autobiography: "At the time, we did not realize that a revolution was taking place. Nobody, especially those of us riding the wave could conceive disco could fade from mass popularity so fast. As far as we were concerned, the Comiskey Park incident was a nasty homophobic blip."¹⁰² Cheren's perspective and the overall absence of commentary in the gay press suggest that gay men did not view the Disco Demolition as newsworthy or as a serious threat. For Cheren and many others involved in the disco scene, a few young malcontents could not affect a multibillion-dollar industry that was dominating the record charts, no matter how vocal they were in their opposition to disco. However, to their surprise, the Disco Demolition triggered a nationwide expression of anger against disco that caused disco to recede quickly from the American cultural landscape.

At the beginning of 1979 there were over twenty-five thousand discotheques in the United States generating six billion dollars a year in revenue. There were over two hundred all-disco radio stations and eight thousand professional deejays. The disco record industry was grossing over four billion dollars a year and accounted for nearly 30 percent of the entire music business and almost 40 percent of the top one hundred hits.¹⁰³ Immediately after the July 1979 riot, rock radio deejays across the United States began attacking disco and imitating Dahl's rhetoric and antics. Rock radio stations also began staging antidisco promotions similar to those in Chicago.

Many commentators have agreed that the entertainment market was oversaturated with disco and that audiences simply grew weary of the fad and expressed their discontent. While this was partly true, most fads do not result in violent backlashes, and the rejection of disco music was not a simple grassroots expression of discontent. The widespread abandonment of disco by radio stations and the adoption of antidisco promotions across the United States were not spontaneous but instead were largely determined by financial interests of music promoters, among them, Kent Burkhart, Lee Abrams, and John Parikhhal. Burkhart and Abrams of Burkhart-Abrams Associates were radio consultants who directed over fifty album-oriented rock radio stations, including WLUP in Chicago. Burkhart and Abrams also directed over forty country, Top 40, and disco radio stations. Their decision to drop disco was based upon the market research of John Parikhhal, who, working for a media consulting firm called Joint Communications, con-

¹⁰¹ I examined issues of over thirty regional and local gay and lesbian journals at collections in the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives in Toronto, Canada, and the Stonewall Archive in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida. In my survey of gay and lesbian periodicals published between 1978 and 1980 I found no articles about the backlash against disco.

¹⁰² Cheren, *Paradise Garage*, 261.

¹⁰³ Darling, "The Prince of Disco," H1; Graustark, "The Disco Takeover," 56.

ducted attitudinal and market research on disco for Abrams and Burkhart. Parikhal's research included three focus groups and several thousand surveys about disco. Through these surveys Parikhal and Abrams became aware of a rising backlash against disco in the summer of 1979. They also saw the tremendous promotional power of Dahl's stunts and decided to capitalize on the antidisco backlash with other rock stations. In an interview with *Rolling Stone* Dahl claimed he spoke with Abrams about "doing a national hookup . . . to blow up disco records all over the country" and expressed hope that an all-rock radio format would spread to stations whose playlists were determined by Abrams.¹⁰⁴ After consulting with Parikhal, Abrams galvanized sixty radio stations across the country within seven days.¹⁰⁵ Parikhal says that "by then, everyone had seen Chicago so they wanted to follow disco destruction."¹⁰⁶

When *Village Voice* journalist Frank Rose interviewed Parikhal in 1979, Parikhal stated that "homophobia cropped up repeatedly with rock fans" and was a motivating factor in the popular backlash.¹⁰⁷ Antigay prejudice may have had little to do with Parikhal's and Abrams's own decisions to abandon disco or Abrams's decision to use disco destruction as a marketing tool. Nevertheless, an antigay message *was* spread by radio programmers who saw the commercial appeal of disco destruction and were not concerned with the ideological content of their actions. Abrams's own influence led to the broadcast of antigay statements similar to Dahl's on radio stations across the United States.

Disco promoter Mel Cheren's autobiography attests to the importance of Abrams, Burkhart, and Parikhal:

Overnight, the "disco sucks" campaign grew into a huge juggernaut, and everybody who ever had any misgivings about disco jumped on. Radio deejays began denouncing the music openly; disgruntled writers at music publications went on the attack; people began making fun of anything associated with disco, and it quickly had an effect. Programmers and market researchers began to encounter visceral hatred for anything connected with the word disco, gay people included. Within months of the Comiskey Park rally, dozens of all-disco radio stations were abandoning what they now believed was a sinking ship, adopting instead a blend of rock, pop and only the most popular disco hits, a format they labeled urban-contemporary.¹⁰⁸

The changes outlined by Cheren led to the rapid decline of disco and

¹⁰⁴ Loder, "Rolling Stone Random Notes," 43.

¹⁰⁵ Rose, "Rock & Roll Fights Back," 37.

¹⁰⁶ From a telephone interview conducted between John Parikhal and myself, 30 November 2000.

¹⁰⁷ Rose, "Rock & Roll Fights Back," 36.

¹⁰⁸ Cheren, *Paradise Garage*, 258.

the reemergence of rock as the dominant musical genre. Concurrently, there was a groundswell of complaints against disco's sexual nature, which resulted in ABC Radio's vice president reassuring "a group of advertisers that 'contemporary' rock stations deliver wholesome 'family buying power'" in contrast to disco. This assurance took place in the context of the New Right's profamily struggle and an increasing opposition to sexual representations in popular culture. Indeed, in one of the many disco postmortems that appeared in the media in the months that followed the Disco Demolition, one journalist noted in November 1979 that "one of the biggest complaints of the rockers is that disco is 'oversexed.'" ¹⁰⁹

By January 1980, according to Mel Cheren, "disco was so officially over that the word itself ceased being used by the mainstream media except as a pejorative." ¹¹⁰ By then, disco rarely was heard on the radio and no longer had the unprecedented and unparalleled media coverage and popularity that it had enjoyed just a year earlier. In February 1980 *Billboard* noted "the decline of disco on radio in the U.S., indeed its virtual ban as a format," and stated that disco's flagship, WKTU-FM, "no longer promotes itself as 'Disco 92'" and had broadened its playlist to "include a wider range of black artists." ¹¹¹ Later in February, *Billboard* observed that "rock dance music continues to enter the playlists of established discos . . . and out in middle America the disco operators are getting worried because the crowds are not coming any more." ¹¹² The shifts in the popular music scene were also visible at the 22nd Grammy Awards. Complaints from the previous year about disco's dominance meant that rock albums and disco albums no longer competed against each other. Consequently, traditional rock performers like Bob Dylan were recipients of major awards. The *Washington Post* stated in its coverage of these Grammys:

No funeral marches were played, but the death of disco was solemnly

¹⁰⁹ Van Gelder, "Disco Usurps Rock's Reputation."

¹¹⁰ Cheren, *Paradise Garage*, 259.

¹¹¹ Doug Hall, "Disco Decline Spurs R & B," *Billboard*, 9 February 1980, 1, 20.

¹¹² Roman Kozak, "From Trickle to Torrent: Rock Overwhelming the Clubs' Playlists," *Billboard*, 23 February 1980, 36. The same issue of *Billboard* had a contradictory article that described "Billboard's Seventh Disco Forum," where the keynote speaker, Radcliffe Joe, set "the tone for the air of optimism which pervaded all aspects of the convention." The article reported that in "his opening remarks, Joe assured his audience that the discotheque industry was as viable and full of energy today as it was during the pinnacle of its popularity in the late 1970s" and "lambasted those who 'would conspire to foster the demise of the industry.'" The article thus acknowledged that disco was under attack, and Joe's reassurances themselves seemed defensive. See "Forum Attendees Unite, Vow to Aid Disco," *Billboard*, 23 February 1980, 3, 53. An editorial in the same issue also defensively affirmed disco's strength and urged its readers not to interpret changes in radio's programming format as "the fading of a given music category." See "Disco: What's It All About?" *Billboard*, 23 February 1980, 16. See also Maurie Orondecker, "New Philadelphia WCAU Sound 'Fascinatin' Rhythm' Mood Continues sans Disco Beat," *Billboard*, 1 March 1980, 17.

commemorated—not a minute too soon—last night in the recording industry’s 22nd annual orgy of self-congratulations, the Grammy Awards. It was not that disco records didn’t win any prizes—just that no fuss was made about them. This was the year that disco joined gospel music, jazz fusion and folk, among others, as a special award category—in a sense, a protected musical species where awards can be won without going platinum.¹¹³

The placement of disco into a separate Grammy category was one of the many ways that disco was segregated from other forms of music and gradually removed from the popular music scene. So stigmatized was disco that by March 1980 the Chicago radio station, WDAI-FM, that had fired Dahl two years earlier when switching to disco abandoned the disco format in favor of an adult rock program style and announced that it would even adopt new call letters in order to dissociate itself from its previous identity.¹¹⁴

Meanwhile, rock’s resurgence under other rubrics such as punk and New Wave was so great that even famous disco establishments like Paradise Garage and Studio 54 integrated it into their clubs.¹¹⁵ White straight men and women continued to dance after the Disco Demolition, but what they danced to was no longer called disco. Likewise, disco did not disappear in gay and African American communities, where it had originated and flourished. The music, however, increasingly was marketed under the name of “dance music,” which was not substantially different from disco but did not carry the same gay connotations. As disco receded from the mainstream, it became evident that the widespread backlash against disco had enabled Dahl and other rock fans to reclaim symbolic ownership of the radio airwaves and heterosocial spaces.

Rooted in antigay prejudice, the systematic collection and destruction of records at the Disco Demolition on 12 July 1979 sent a message to the American public that listening to a genre of music that was openly identified as gay was unacceptable and that an overt gay influence would not be tolerated. The antidisco actions by radio programmers further expelled an audibly and visibly gay genre from the American mainstream. Following the Disco Demolition, gay men were no longer collectively visible in popular music and nightlife, and by April 1980 popular music had been reclaimed, at least momentarily, by straight white and male rock fans.

The attacks on disco took place within a larger backlash against gay visibility in American politics and culture. Although the Disco Demolition was not a right-wing movement, its reactionary and populist nature was articulated

¹¹³ Joseph McLellan, “The Grammys: Nostalgia & Disco’s Demise,” *Washington Post*, 28 February 1980, D3.

¹¹⁴ Alan Penschansky, “New Call Letters Coming: Chicago WDAI-FM Abandons Disco,” *Billboard*, 1 March 1980, 17.

¹¹⁵ Jay Merritt, “Rock Strikes Back!” *Rolling Stone*, 20 March 1980, 19.

alongside a rising right-wing antigay, antielitist, and antisexual politics that also expressed antidisco sentiments.¹¹⁶ Both movements sought to limit the cultural and political visibility of gay men. Despite political and cultural backlashes that sought to desexualize mainstream culture and despite the terrible toll of AIDS in the 1980s, struggles for gay civil rights and dignity continued unabated. Gays and lesbians continued to fight for visibility and struggle over questions of social equality and sexual difference. Moreover, musicians who presented themselves queerly or sung queer lyrics such as Boy George and Culture Club, Frankie Goes to Hollywood, and the Cure continued to find commercial acclaim. However, no mainstream and commercial musical genre matched disco's success at making gay men collectively visible or at advancing a participatory queer cultural aesthetic that offered a possibility of bridging racial, gender, and sexual divides.

When disco reemerged in the late 1990s in movies such as *Last Days of Disco* and *Studio 54*, in stage musicals such as *Mama Mia* and *Saturday Night Fever*, in radio programming and in dance clubs, its explosive history and subversive sexual possibilities were largely muted. Instead, disco music and its accompanying fashion styles were reintroduced without difficulty as kitsch. The reappropriation of disco was dramatically illustrated on the twenty-second anniversary of the Disco Demolition in 2001. The Disco Demolition was commemorated at a Salute to Disco Night at a Florida Marlins baseball game. Like the original Disco Demolition Night, the event was organized by Mike Veeck, who was now a marketing consultant for the Marlins. This time, however, disco records were not exploded or burned. Instead, fans were asked to dress up in disco attire, and Harry Wayne Casey of the 1970s disco group KC and the Sunshine Band sang "Take Me out to the Ballgame." In a ceremony before the game, Veeck asked Casey to accept his apology for the damage that the Disco Demolition had caused to disco performers' careers. Veeck told Casey, "I want to make it right, I want to tell you right from the bottom of my leisure suit that I'm sorry." Casey accepted Veeck's apology and told the media, "I'm happy he's finally apologizing for it, I feel redeemed. It gives closure to the whole thing."¹¹⁷ Disco has now safely reentered American mainstream cultural memory—with few gay connotations—as nostalgia for a time of platform shoes, bell-bottoms, and white polyester suits.

¹¹⁶ See, for example, *Anita Bryant Ministries News* 2 (June 1979). In it an article warned that homosexuals were "producing [disco] records with double meanings . . . then having 'straight' children buy them." See also Stephanie Mansfield, "'Clean up America' Rally at the Capitol," *Washington Post*, 28 April 1979, C1. The article reported how "television preacher Jerry Falwell came to the Capitol steps yesterday to attack President Carter, homosexuality, pornography, television comedies, abortion, discos, divorce and sex education before 8,000 flag-waving supporters."

¹¹⁷ Mark Long, "Disco Demolition Night Promoter Apologizes for 1979 Event," Associated Press news item, 12 July 2001, available online at www.foxsports.com. See also Sarah Talalay, "Florida Sports Hall of Fame Is on Endangered List," *Fort Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel*, 13 July 2001, 18C; and "A Vow to Vinyl," *St. Petersburg Times*, 13 July 2001, C1.