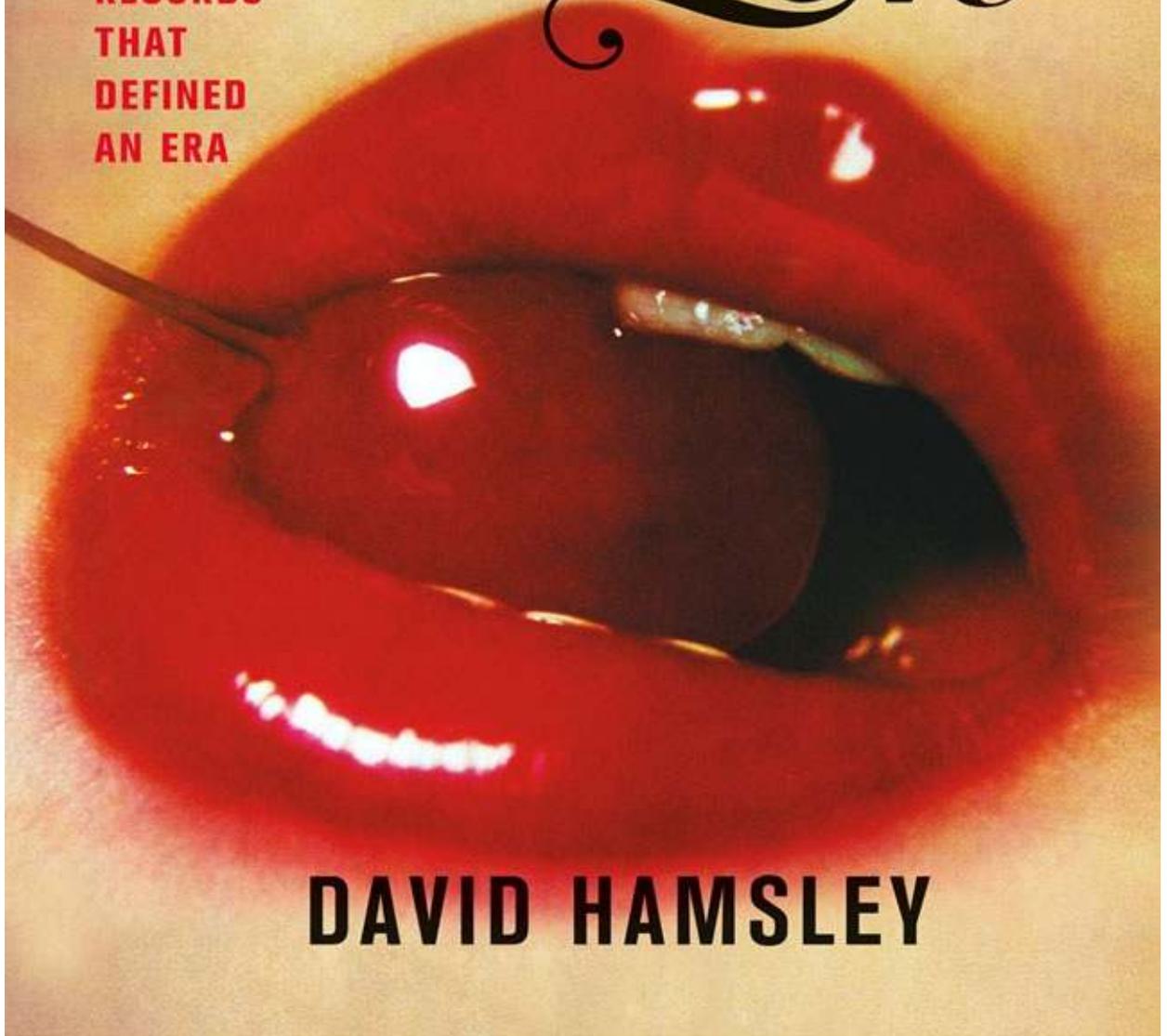
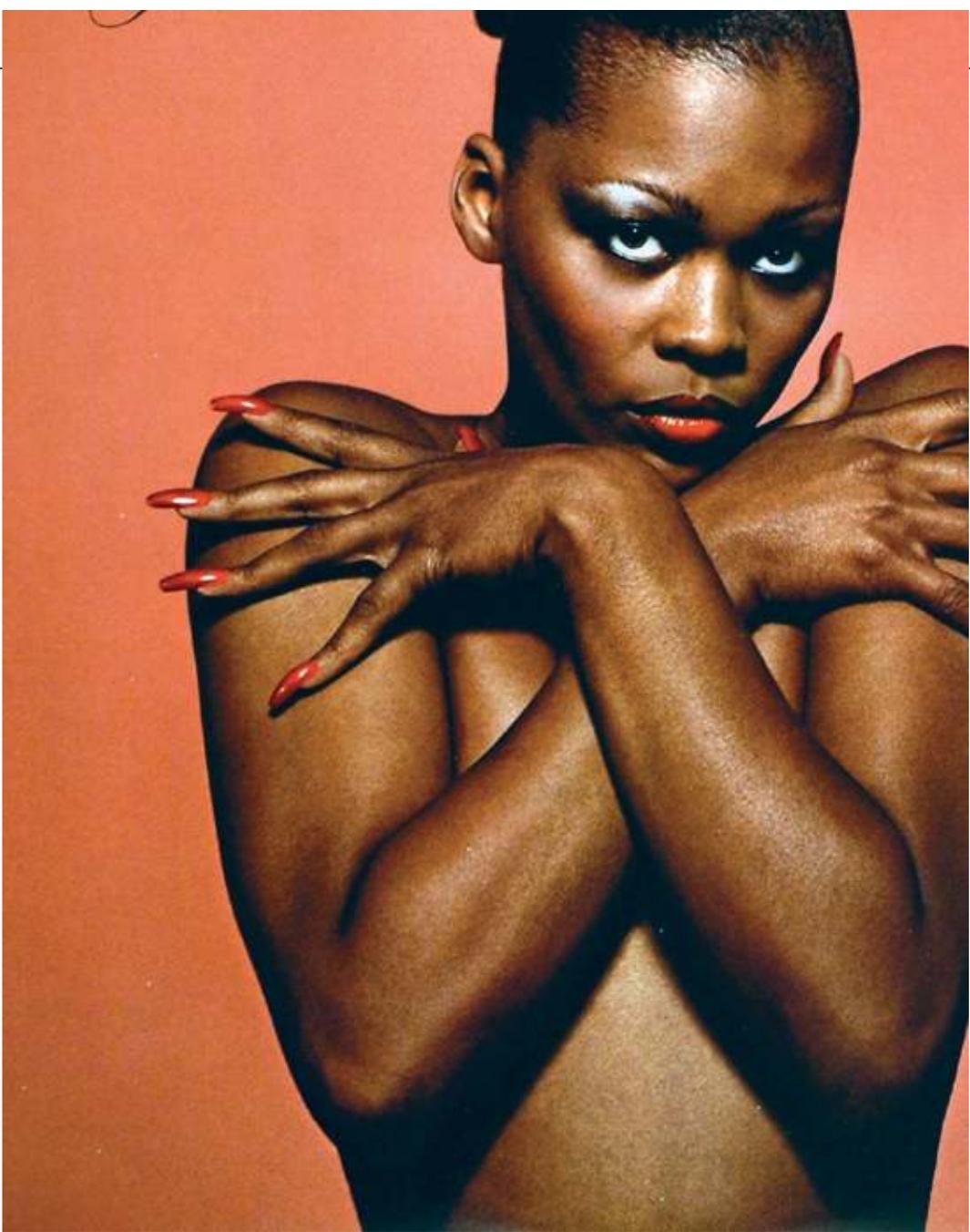


To Disco, with Love

THE
RECORDS
THAT
DEFINED
AN ERA



DAVID HAMSLEY



To Disco, with Love

The Records That Defined an Era

David Hamsley



FLATIRON
BOOKS
NEW YORK

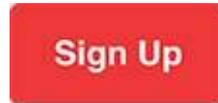
[Table of Contents](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

**Thank you for buying this
Flatiron Books ebook.**

To receive special offers, bonus content,
and info on new releases and other great reads,
sign up for our newsletters.



Or visit us online at
us.macmillan.com/newslettersignup

For email updates on the author, click [here](#).

The author and publisher have provided this e-book to you for your personal use only. You may not make this e-book publicly available in any way. **Copyright infringement against the law. If you believe the copy of this e-book you are reading infringes on the author's copyright, please notify the publisher at** <http://us.macmillanusa.com/piracy>.

Introduction

In 2001, I went to an exhibit of record album art at a gallery in New York City. The walls were papered from floor to ceiling with covers of every description. The crowd was enthralled, pointing at familiar pop stars, reminiscing about where they were when they first heard a certain song, or connecting again with an album that seemed to never stop spinning all through college. I wondered what it was about a twelve-by-twelve-inch album cover that could engage just about anybody. The curators of the show were people like me—dedicated to records it's almost as if free will didn't count. I envied their ability to express their devotion and dreamed about what I could do to celebrate album art. As my wheels turned, I realized that conspicuous by its absence was any spotlight on the Disco era—particular favorite of mine—and I decided at that moment that I had a mission, a calling, to change that. *To Disco, with Love* is the result.

I thought I knew all about the history of Disco because I had lived and loved it. But as I started to research, I realized what I knew was far from the whole story. Studying the *Disco Action* charts found in scratchy, microfilmed issues of *Billboard* magazine at Lincoln Center library was an eye-opener. The first Disco chart appeared in November 1974, with record positions calculated by audience response as reported by a few New York DJs, and by sales reported by select New York record shops that specialized in this new music. It was barely enough to fill two skinny columns. But by September 1976, a little less than two years later, the magazine was devoting an entire page to what was being played in fifteen major cities across the country. *Billboard* magazine, the music industry bible, was telling the country that *Disco had arrived*. Each city, unsurprisingly, had its own personality. As Detroit was defined by Motown and its particular sound, Philadelphia, the City of Brotherly Love, grew to be defined by its unique Disco sound, one that was characterized by a smooth orchestral Soul. Miami also had its own sound, exemplified by KC and the Sunshine Band's catchy beats and breezy hooks, and tempered by the endless summer and miles of beaches. And Los Angeles often danced to a song that wasn't being played in any other city. (It should come as no shock that David Bowie's "Fame" made Disco playlists there and nowhere else.) By September 1979, there were so many tracks that Disco had its own National Top 100.

Going over these charts with a fine-tooth comb felt like I was reading the diary of an old friend and learning something new about him on every page. Each time I came across an unfamiliar song, I wrote it down and went hunting. In the end, I collected over 1,600 album covers. Through this project, I came as close to "going back" as one possibly can.

By the time I finished writing, one thing was abundantly clear: Disco's soundscape was richly textured and open to a myriad of influences, not the homogeneous, it-all-sounds-the-same blur some people remember it to be. It is important to note that in the early days an album could have a track that got the attention of the dancing public, but not be a Disco album, per se. Papa John Creach played fiddle with Jefferson Airplane, and Buddy Miles played drums behind Rock legend Jimi Hendrix. Both had albums that contained floor-filling cuts, but they were definitely not "Disco" albums. In the same way, Jazz also enjoyed a good share of floor time. In the spring of 1975, four of the biggest Disco hits were by Jazz artists: the Brecker Brothers, Hubert Laws, Ramsey Lewis, and Grover Washington Jr. Latin music also exerted a huge influence over Disco's sound, and although authentic acts like Lou

Ramirez, José Fajardo, and Fania All-Stars were quickly washed off playlists by the flood of new releases, the echoes of Salsa, Mambo, and Cha-Cha can be heard in many Disco arrangements. Later, when time and tide were right, Disco dancers warmly welcomed the B-52s' New Wave and Kurtis Blow's Rap. All that ever really mattered was that the song made a dancer want to dip, spin, and bump.

The disco itself became a social stage upon which the fantasies and excesses of the late 1970s played themselves out. Much, almost too much, has been made about the role that the sexual revolution, the hippie drug culture, and other social influences and changes in the American psyche played in the Disco phenomenon. True, all those factors were present, and we leave them to others to debate, but above all, Disco happened the way it did because of the music. The music was the catalyst that sparked the chemical reaction.

As demand for music specifically designed for dancing increased, a new aesthetic emerged. Nothing like it had been heard before. In the three years between the debut of the *Disco Action* column and the release of *Saturday Night Fever* in November 1977, the amount of original Disco music released was staggering. Each week a new stack of singles and albums would come on the scene. A door had opened and the new sound of Disco allowed established artists such as Patti LaBelle, the Jackson Five, and Frankie Valli to reinvent themselves, as well as a crowd of great new talent like the Trammps, Donna Summer, and Paul Jabara to rush on to the scene.

Disco distinguished itself from traditional Top 40 songs by experimenting with the length of its tracks. Disco dancers wanted to be fully involved in a song, wrapped up in it. No one knew this better than Tom Moulton, who is universally credited with inventing the extended "Disco Mix" with his work on early, longer tracks like "Peace Pipe" by B.T. Express. It became common for a song to be seven or eight minutes long, during which it would break down and then build itself back up to another climax. Eurodisco took it a step further by exploring variations on one song's theme for an entire side of the disc was not unusual. Dancers loved this! Often the floor erupted in screams of joyful approval as the song progressed. Furthermore, Disco benefited from strides in sound reproduction. The better discos were installing state-of-the-art sound systems. Grinding bass lines, crash cymbals, soaring violins, and tinkling keyboards played at Rock concert volume took dancers inside the sound.

There was one other important element that set the disco experience apart: The songs merged seamlessly. Using two turntables and a mixing console, the DJ could cross-fade between them; as one song faded out, the other faded in. Nonstop music kept dancers on the floor, engaged. Good DJs could calculate which songs to play when and manipulate the crowd into a dancing frenzy. The best could do so while exactly matching the beats, making it sometimes impossible to tell when one song ended and the other began. Thanks to Disco, DJs became artists with followings, stars in their own right.

By the mid-1970s, album art for the 12-inch record had evolved into a mirror of social values, and Disco album covers—possibly pop music's most notorious—are no exception. The classic Disco era, a period ranging from mid-1974 through the early 1980s, evolved into an international obsession and an enormous body of music was created to support the demand. The music provided the soundtrack and the album art promoted the package.

It is easy to dismiss much of this art with an eye roll, but that would be a mistake. The

album art established its own vocabulary in much the same way as the music. If it wasn't for Disco would we have had paintings of dancing aliens in a transparent spaceship streaking through space? Or photographs of a girl group dressed up as motorcycle-riding dominatrices surrounded by Speedo-wearing bodybuilders? Looking at these covers is like catching *Saturday Night Fever* all over again. We are reminded how good it feels to shake off our worries and just dance.

Tracking down the hundreds of artists who contributed to the album art showcased in the book was an arduous, but fascinating task. Some had passed on, others simply could not be found, but for the most part, the designers, illustrators, and photographers are alive and well, having gone on to prosperous, award-winning careers. I enjoyed hearing their observations and recollections. One thing I heard over and over was that it was a rush job. These records had an almost uncontrollable energy, and they had to rush to meet the market's demand. For more than a few artists, the cover art included here was their first assignment. Some cringe when confronted with their forty-year-old work, and I gently reminded them, "Hey! It was the '70s! There was no Photoshop or Illustrator that could solve any problem." If you were a photographer or illustrator during this period, you had to work with your hands.

When the covers are gathered together and presented chronologically, a story in pictures emerges. We see a rapid evolution, from the early days when Disco's roots were firmly planted in Soul, Latin, and Jazz, all the way to the digital revolution of the 1980s. Like fleeting moments caught in the strobe, these covers vibrantly capture, for better or for worse, our takes on fashion and beauty, wealth and status, sex, race, and even God. Thirty-five or forty years later, they are a measure against which we can assess the present, and maybe they explain—at least in part—the magnetic appeal of the art.

Much, too, has been made of the last days of Disco. Disco did not die. Disco didn't end because the general public got sick of it and staged a symbolic funeral pyre at Comiskey Park. This Disco dancer and DJ has no personal recollection of that event. It made no impression on me while I was grooving to the fresh releases of summer 1979, like "**The Boss**" by Diana Ross, and "**Good Times**" by Chic. Disco, like it did from the beginning, continued to evolve. Disco was the springboard that launched Rap, Hip Hop, and break dancing into the mainstream. Michael Jackson, Madonna, Prince, Boy George, and other megastars of the 1980s owe a huge debt to Disco and the dance floors that were still in full swing. To this day there are numerous venues where patrons gather to dance, dance, dance the night away.

An Explosion Was About to Occur

Out of all the records collected for this book, the photograph on Wild Cherry's debut album sums up the over-the-top quality of the Disco era best. Poised for puncture, lips smeared with bulletproof gloss pop a juicy cherry. Photographer Frank Laffitte's stunning capture of the old locker-room humor is pure sex, but somehow not vulgar. Laffitte was sought after to bring his flair for the ultrahot to the business of album art and contributed many cover photos throughout the era.

Wild Cherry played at bars and clubs, working hard to establish themselves as a Rock band. But for night crawlers, the tide was turning away from Rock and toward Disco. More and more bar patrons and club-goers were routinely asking the band to play danceable music. "**Play That Funky Music,**" written in an if-you-can't-beat-'em-join-'em response, quickly became a Number One hit, earning the band awards galore. The public could relate to the lyrics, which told of the once stubborn singer's joyful discovery of Funk, and his eventual surrender to the groove. When this record was released in the fall of 1976, masses of people were thinking the same thing.

WILD CHERRY





The New Sound: Lushly Orchestrated Soul

Halter tops, pantsuits, platform shoes ... For those who can remember back to early 1974—when people dressed like this the first time around—these album covers bring back past-colored memories. Along with their matching wigs and dresses, Love Unlimited's symmetric pose referred to the not-quite-left-behind Motown styling of the 1960s. Musically, however, the success of the single "**Love's Theme**" from this album, featuring a forty-piece orchestra conducted by Barry White, signaled the arrival of a new sound: lushly orchestrated Soul. In spite of the cover's promise of a girl group, with Glodean James—Barry's future wife—on the right, the song was an instrumental track conceived as filler, but ended up a surprise hit. White recorded under his own name as well, leveraging his deep I'm-gonna-make-you-like-bedroom voice against his suave and sexy music, establishing himself as a ladies' man. Either extreme self-confidence is sexy no matter what shape it's in, or the music was just *that* good.

Considered "armed and extremely dangerous," First Choice's man charmed his women with flowers, furs, and candy. Credits for this album read like a recipe for what is about to become the signature Philadelphia sound. Key backup musicians would soon form important groups like MFSB (Mother Father Sister Brother), as well as play on nearly every record being made in the city. Lead singer Rochelle Fleming's strong voice could wring Soul out of the genre with often simple lyrics. The group had a presence on the Disco charts throughout the entire era, and, for that matter, beyond. Forty years later, hits like "**Smarty Pants**" are still being remixed and sampled for today's club scene.

FIRST CHOICE
"armed and extremely dangerous"



**I've Got
So Much
To Give**

*Barry
White*





STEREO / KZ 31712

O'JAYS

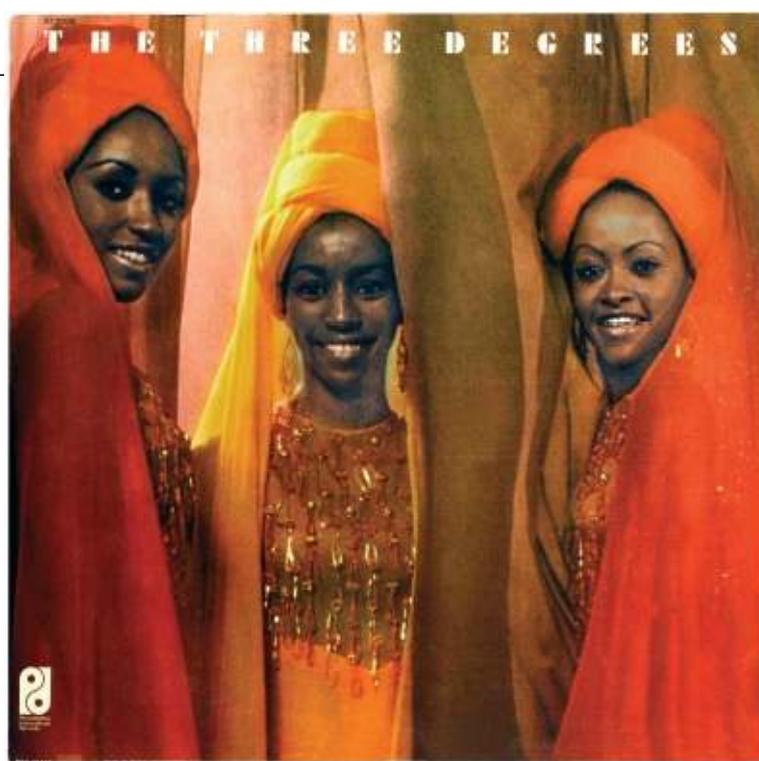
BACK
STABBERS



PHILADELPHIA INTERNATIONAL RECORDS

Philadelphia: Cradle of American Disco

Philadelphia, the City of Brotherly Love, was a treasure trove of talent. Alchemists Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff, owners of Philadelphia International Records, transformed the elements into something of enduring value. The Three Degrees and O'Jays were two of the early successes. Taking their cue from Norman Whitfield's work at Motown with The Temptations, ("Papa Was a Rolling Stone," "Runaway Child, Running Wild,") they chose songs that attempted to raise social consciousness. The label's mantra was, "There's a message in the music."



Three's a charm. Riffing on their name, The Three Degrees' album portraits present them at different temperatures, warm and cool. The turban-wearing gals look like hot licks of flame on the red album, which has three important cuts: "Dirty Old Man," an early dance floor favorite; "When Will I See You Again," an international hit for which they are still remembered; and the Gamble and Huff-penned theme song for TV's *Soul Train*, "TSOP" ("The Sound of Philadelphia") which was such a huge success it was on both albums.

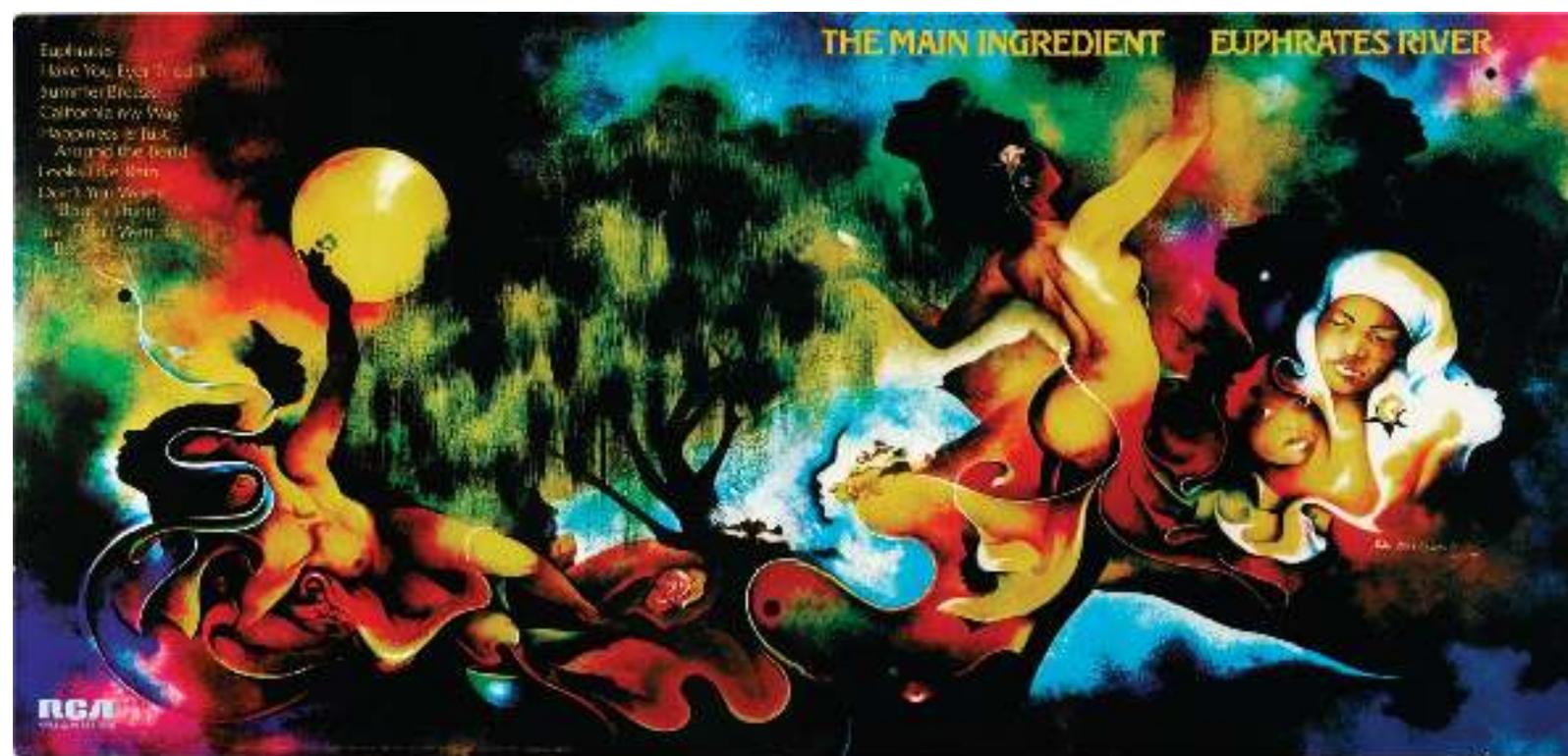
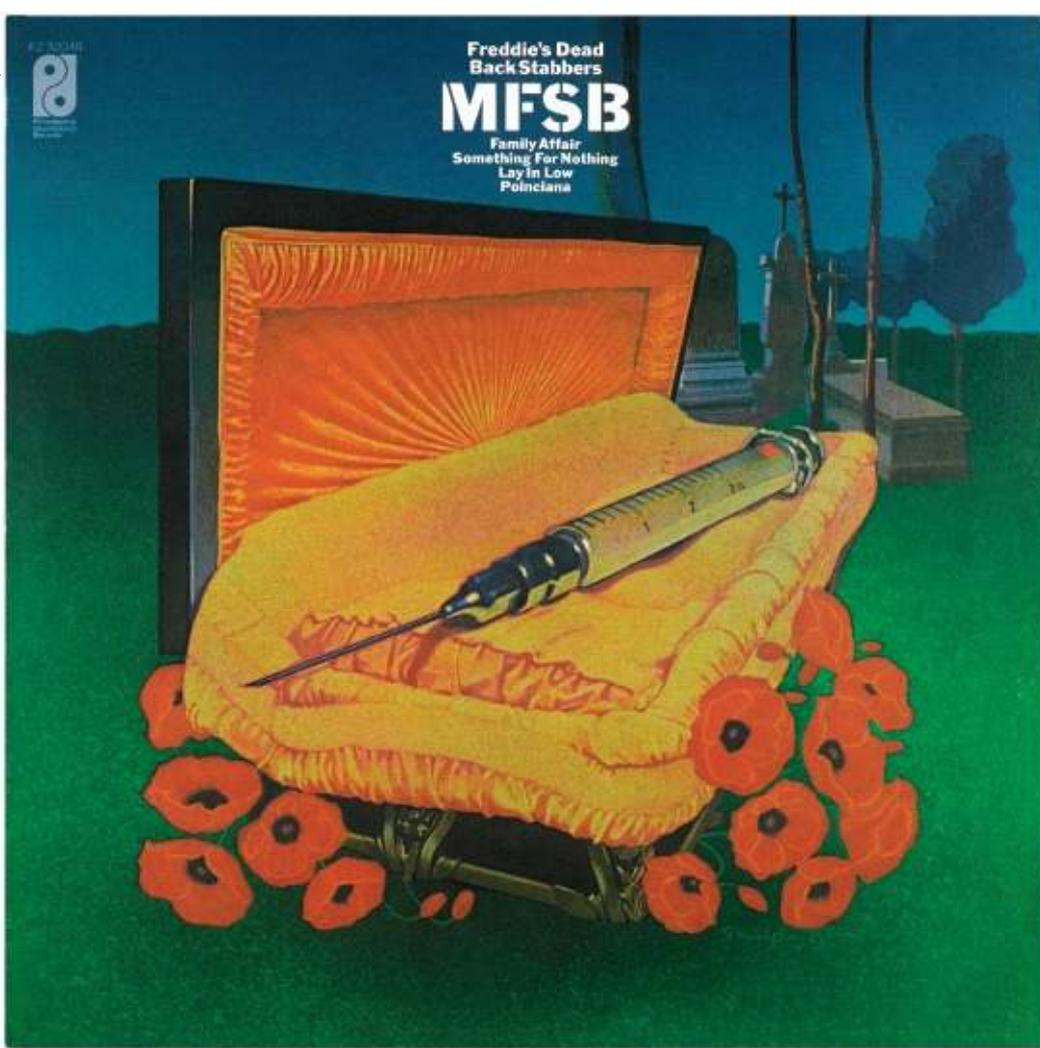
MFSB: LOVE IS THE MESSAGE



MFSB and Sigma Sound

MFSB was a large group of session players based at Philadelphia's Sigma Sound Studios. They backed up all of Philadelphia International's artists. Sigma Sound was a state-of-the-art recording facility, the second in the country to offer 24-track recording. Talents like B. King, David Bowie, and Laura Nyro flocked there to record. "Love Is the Message" by MFSB is an anthem for the genre, and along with Barry White's work, further defined the emerging Disco aesthetic of sophisticated orchestral sound. "TSOP" makes another appearance on the album, perfectly capturing the jazzy joy that resulted from MFSB's chemistry. Their contribution to Disco cannot be overstated.

MFSB's cover illustrations referred to issues of the day and supported the socially aware content of the songs. At the time of *Love's* release in 1973, the Vietnam War was a fresh and painful wound on the American psyche. Bart Forbes's watercolor collages are symbols of humanity's worst—but don't miss the tiny blue heart; the promise of love can never be extinguished.



Go with the Flow
Walter Allen Rogers Jr.'s fluid mural for The Main Ingredient's *Euphrates River* (which flows through Turkey, Syria, and Iraq before emptying into the Persian Gulf) suggests the necessity

for a religious conversion on the part of the listener. Thank heaven that was not the case. An soul could *get up, get it on* to “**Happiness Is Just Around the Bend**,” “**Have You Ever Tried It**,” and “**Just Don’t Wanna Be Lonely**.” The original painting is over eleven feet long.



Early Days: Late 1974, Early 1975

These aren't Disco albums per se; it was too soon to have figured that out. Many albums of the day had a variety of content, intended to reach a variety of audiences. With an ear for the new sound, smart producers were now including a song (or two) that made people want to dance. Painted portraits as album art—executed with varying degrees of maturity—were commonly used to package and present artists.

Carl Carlton looks happy in his smoky reverie. A hit both in the discos and on Top 40 radio, “**Everlasting Love**” was irresistible. Like other current songs it is short, not even three minutes long, and never gets the “long version” treatment that became the hallmark of Disco.

After making twenty albums for Scepter, Dionne Warwick moved to Warner Bros. Records and on to the next phase of her long career. Joining forces with The Spinners, they recorded “**Then Came You**,” which hit Number One on Top 40 radio. Also on this disc, “**Take It from Me**.”

Legendary blues guitarist and vocalist B.B. King already had a dozen albums under his belt before heading off to Philly to record with some new *Friends* at Sigma Sound. The hit track “**Philadelphia**” was a tribute to the city.

The Whispers consistently made the Disco charts well into the '80s. Released in late 1977 their first offering includes "Where There Is Love," and the title track, "Bingo."





Signature of the '70s: Bold Shapes, Bright Colors

With an unlimited color palette and some simple graphic shapes, these covers attract like mobile above a baby's crib. Illustrator Roger Huyssen's inventive composition has Major Harris's backup getting busy in the negative space under his wide brim hat. In case there was any doubt, the obvious brickwork motif of his shirt and hat band identified him as a city dude. Was matchy-matchy ever so cool?

These albums breaking in late 1974 and early 1975 anticipate the burst of creativity that was to come. Recorded at Sigma Sound, Major Harris and Blue Magic had a nearly identical lineup of talent backing them up: Norman Harris, Ron Baker, Earl Young, Bobby Eli, Ron "Have Mercy" Kersey, Vince Montana ... This crew was adaptable and the intuitive understanding that existed between them is loud and clear. They played a full range of styles that all worked together, but never sounded the same. **My Way** yielded two distinctly different hits: "Each Morning I Wake Up" got disco dancers going, and the dreamy ballad "Love Won't Let Me Wait" was a Top 10 radio hit. Vince Montana's arrangement of "Let Me Be the One," from *The Magic of the Blue*, more than hinted at the future sound of the Salsoul Orchestra.

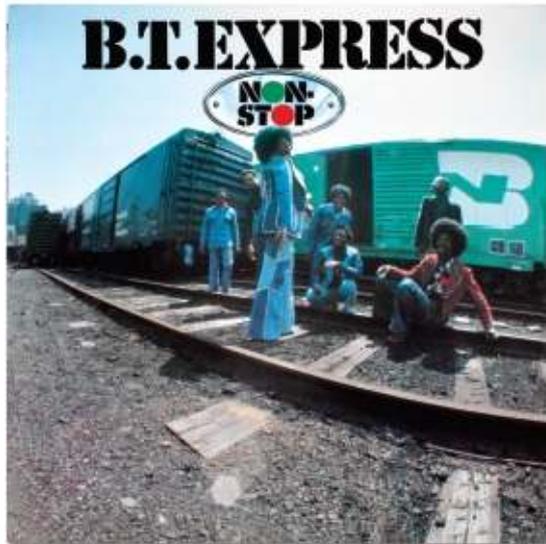
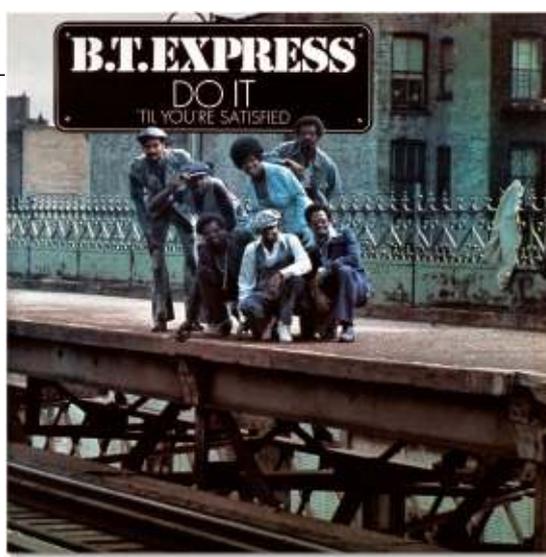


BD5 5630 STEREO

The Futures

CASTLES IN THE SKY

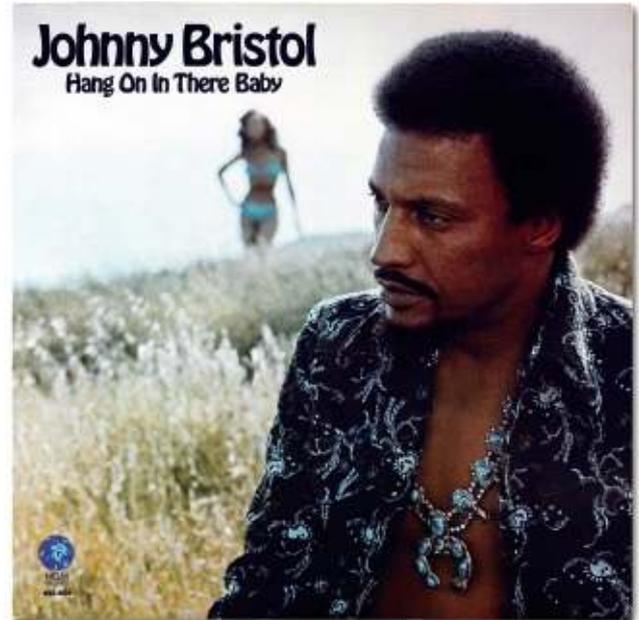
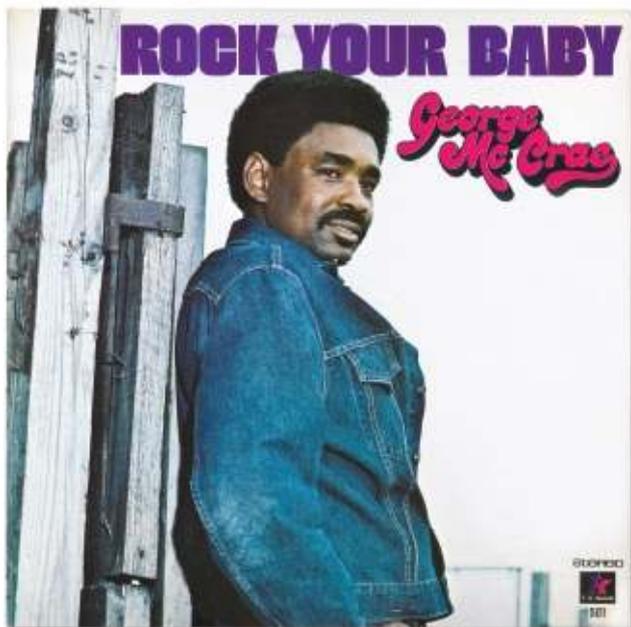




Location, Location, Location

Excluding the questionable posing of The Futures as Elizabethan soccer players on the moon, the group had all the ingredients for success, including a Philadelphia pedigree. Yet somehow their future never arrived, and this hard-to-find album features their only charting hit, “**Castles.**” Maybe it was their outfits after all. It’s so hard to know when to wear doublet and hose.

Meanwhile, back on Earth, denim was in. 1975’s post-hippie styling, patchwork, and decorative studs made the dirty jeans of back-to-the-garden Woodstock look almost dressy. They were ironed! Disco was the music of the city and these covers showcase that urban vibe. Besides the self-assurance that came from looking cool, B.T. Express and The Trammps were both profiting from their association with Tom Moulton, a mixer, producer, and visionary with a genius instinct for what made a good song. His reworking of B.T.’s single “**Do It (’Til You’re Satisfied)**” was the first “Disco Mix” to go gold. The Trammps developed a strong momentum that culminated with “**Disco Inferno**” in 1977. The “legendary” Zing album never existed until Moulton created it from old tapes in 1975.



The Disco Becomes a Hit-Making Machine

“Disco-ing” was still relatively underground, but as more and more people found the congregating at venues with dance floors and disc jockeys was a great way to party, the demand for music created specifically for those disco environments also increased. Suddenly, songs were becoming hits on the radio because of their popularity on dance floors, which was significant because up until that time it was the other way around, with radio breaking the hits. Off the dance floor and on to the airwaves, the singles from these albums were among the first to come out of the discos and cross over to Top 40 radio. Written and produced by Harry Casey and Richard Finch, who would soon become known worldwide as KC and the Sunshine Band, “**Rock Your Baby**” was on the Miami-based T.K. label. T.K. became an important source of Disco material throughout the era.

Johnny Bristol wrote and produced for Motown’s big names. He left the label to pursue a solo singing career and scored big with “**Hang on in There Baby,**” which, driven by its success in the discos, made the Top 10 in the summer of 1974.

Type treatments were a feature of the cover art from this era. Almost as important as the portrait, the hand-drawn design of Carol Douglas's name takes its cue from neon and puts the young singer's name in lights. A star was born. George McCrae's name looks like it was stretched out in bubble gum by a kid with a flair for flourishes. The font used on John Bristol's cover is called Hobo, a '70s classic.



sample content of To disco with love

- [*download The Wisdom Books: Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes pdf*](#)
- [*Tales from Q School: Inside Golf's Fifth Major pdf, azw \(kindle\), epub, doc, mobi*](#)
- [*Psychology: A Journey \(4th Edition\) online*](#)
- [*Introducing Windows 8.1 for IT Professionals pdf, azw \(kindle\), epub*](#)
- [*Heir to the Empire \(Star Wars: The Thrawn Trilogy, Book 1\) online*](#)

- <http://yachtwebsitedemo.com/books/The-Ultimate-Sleep-Guide--21-Days-to-the-Best-Night-of-Your-Life.pdf>
- <http://www.uverp.it/library/Tales-from-Q-School--Inside-Golf-s-Fifth-Major.pdf>
- <http://www.freightunlocked.co.uk/lib/Ballet-Beautiful--Transform-Your-Body-and-Gain-the-Strength--Grace--and-Focus-of-a-Ballet-Dancer.pdf>
- <http://aircon.servicessingaporecompany.com/?lib/Introducing-Windows-8-1-for-IT-Professionals.pdf>
- <http://www.shreesaiexport.com/library/Heir-to-the-Empire--Star-Wars--The-Thrawn-Trilogy--Book-1-.pdf>