

'I Will Survive': musical mappings of queer social space in a disco anthem

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Abstract

This essay reconsiders the constituencies of fans and detractors present at prime and bursting 1970s discos. It argues for a more gender-inclusive conception of discos multiracial 'gay' revellers and for a particular convoluted conception of 'homophobia' as this applies to the Middle-American youths who raged against disco in midsummer 1979. Their historic eruption at Chicago's Comiskey Park came just weeks after the chart reign of Gloria Gaynor's 'I Will Survive', today a classic emblem of gay culture in the post-Stonewall and AIDS eras and arguably disco's greatest anthem. Disco inspired lovers and haters, too, among music critics. Critical adulation and vitriol are conjoined in the present reading of musical rhetoric, which explores disco's celebrated power to induce rapture in devotees at the social margins while granting anti-disco critics' charge of inexpressivity in its vocals. In 'Survive' musical expressivity is relocated in the high-production instrumentals, where troping of learned and vernacular, European and Pan-American, sacred and profane timbres and idioms defines a euphoric space of difference and transcendence. The use of minor mode for triumphant purposes is also a striking marker of difference in 'Survive' and is among the factors at work in the song's prodigious afterlife.

On 12 July 1979 the Chicago White Sox hosted the Detroit Tigers in a double header at Comiskey Park. Also scheduled was a promotional event for the Chicago album-oriented rock (AOR) station WLUP 'The Loop', led by a young disc jockey named Steve Dahl. Against the chant of some 90,000 present – 'Disco sucks!' – Dahl towed a dumpster-load of disco records onto centre field and detonated it. A mob of young white males stormed the field, torching records and wreaking mayhem. Among the displays of anti-disco backlash in the late Carter–early Reagan years, including incarnations of the 'Disco sucks' motto as bumper-sticker slogan, punk song, and tee-shirt inscription, that day's near-riot in the heartland stands as the most menacingly emblematic.¹

Such a violent reaction must seem impossibly disproportionate to its object, if that object is taken to be nothing more than a style of popular music. But there was more at work and at stake than such a surface-bound reading can admit. The cultural crusaders of Comiskey were defending not just themselves but society from the encroachment of the racial other, of 'foreign' values, and of 'disco fags' – symbolised Hollywood-style in the bodily and dramatic extravagances of John Travolta's *Saturday Night Fever* (1977) protagonist Tony Manero, whose marked ethnicity and Qiana-swathed chic was counterbalanced by conspicuous whiteness and heterosexuality.²

By now various writers have retrospectively located disco's origins in DJs spinning black music at gay Manhattan dance clubs (e.g. Cummings 1975; Tucker 1986; Thomas 1989), and many sources rightly locate both racist and homophobic impetuses in the anti-disco backlash (e.g. Tucker 1986; EMP 2002). But in 1979 the word *homophobic* was not in general circulation.³ And in 1980 Diana Ross could proclaim 'I'm Coming Out' against a disco beat without raising mainstream eyebrows or controversy: The song rose to number five on the pop charts, its double-voiced meaning hidden from all but a scattering of insiders.⁴

Thus, in the event, the threats against which the Comiskey Park mob reacted surely included such 'faggotries' as ballroom dancing, fashion consciousness, and music that used horns, strings and harps.⁵ Real men *ca* 1979 found their music at AOR arena concerts, adhered to a jeans-and-tee-shirt dress code, and by their inept dancing and off-key singing affirmed the redoubtability of their gender and sexual identities.⁶ We can only imagine the disco inferno in centre field had many of those guys known about the real, live faggots, dykes, and others who created and thrilled to disco's endless beat.

Phantom attacks: homophobia and the unreal enemy

In the historical scene just sketched I would highlight two points that diverge from familiar representations. First, I regard disco as a musical, social, and cultural space with critical African-American, Latino/a, and variously *queer* involvements. The customary naming of gay men in this last slot perpetuates an effacement of queer women in male-centred narrations of 'gay' history, and of dance-clubbing queer persons of other configurations of sex, gender identity, and object choice. Historical accounts locate disco's origins in Manhattan clubs whose clientele were African American and Latino, and gay – meaning: gay men. But we need to extend our perspective on disco beyond the instant and place of its birth – beyond New York, beyond that moment *ca* 1969–1970 and the handful of dance clubs in which DJs first spun mixes now identifiable as disco or proto-disco. Outside Manhattan, in large, medium-sized, and small cities across the US, many gay bars and clubs of the era were gender- and sex-integrated. And their male and female clientele alike often called themselves 'gay' with no thought that the term applied more to one sex than another. Gay men and lesbians, drag queens and 'fag hags' were all part of the 1970s–1980s disco scene in countless queer locales, whether or not at disco's New York debut.⁷

Second, in pointing to the presence of homophobia in the anti-disco backlash, I expressly am not using 'homophobia' as simply equivalent to 'fear of known homosexual persons' in the disco world. Certainly this is one meaning I intend to invoke here. But I would cast a broader definition of 'homophobia' so as to capture also the far greater phenomenon of fear and loathing towards any perceived aura of homosexuality (often figured as gender crossing) in a culture in which knowledge of actual homosexuals and homosexuality was taboo, avoided and denied. Thus I view disco as a musical and social phenomenon situated within the overarching twentieth-century Anglo-American condition of 'homosexual panic' theorised by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1985, pp. 88–9 etc.; 1990, pp. 184–8 esp.).

In Sedgwick's formulation, the establishment of proper masculine heterosexual subjectivity simultaneously requires and stigmatises male homosocial bonds, whose rules of engagement are shifting, arbitrary, and often self-contradictory. Only men who successfully navigate the brutalities of this double-binding path may claim the

privileges of material, power and knowledge that constitute masculine entitlement. Meanwhile, the threat of the unsuccessful alternative motivates considerable anxiety, and many violent eruptions. And it motivates a great deal more: In modern patriarchy, a cultural system structured by relations of exchange between men, the imperatives of male homo/heterosexual definition regulate definition, representation, and knowledge of every kind, and thus give rise to an 'epistemology of the closet'.⁸

Sedgwick's theory can lend support to my assertion that homophobic reaction to disco in the 1970s and 1980s was often focused on the mere (attributed) style of homosexuality: The culture of homosexual panic rendered its actual substance so taboo as to be irrelevant, if not unreal. Under a regime in which male homosocial relations are 'at once the most compulsory and the most prohibited of social bonds', as Sedgwick (1990, pp. 186–7) notes, 'self-ignorance [is] constitutively enforce[d]'. To possess knowledge about homosexuality is itself suspicious. Thus, the function of secrecy in the modern social and sexual economy is 'not to conceal knowledge, so much as to conceal knowledge of the knowledge' (Miller 1988, p. 206). And so, we shouldn't be surprised that homophobia in Anglo-American modernity has frequently manifested itself not only in explicit anti-homosexual statements and acts, but in violent attacks on a homosexuality evoked subliminally, as phantom. This mechanism is illustrated vividly throughout Vito Russo's (1987) analyses of mid-twentieth-century Hollywood cinema: In one instance after another, implicitly homosexual relationships and characters are killed off in horrific fashion. But even before their extinguishment these unfortunate creatures smoulder. What precedes their gruesome deaths is something less than real life.

In our twenty-first-century present, homophobia is often overt and directed at queer persons who are granted realness, their actual existence explicitly acknowledged – as the current US battle over gay marriage illustrates. We must therefore summon a historicising perspective to apprehend the homophobia in Middle America's anti-disco furore *ca* 1979, for homophobia in this context was frequently enacted through assaults on queerness that simultaneously denied queer existence. This same perspective can help us understand and appreciate the role of twentieth-century queer subcultural space, including that of disco: It served not just to provide contact, safety and acceptance, but crucially to confirm queer persons' very existence and intact survival in a world that would make of them, if not monsters, then walking ghosts, nonentities.⁹

Transcendence in A-minor: the musical rhetoric of difference in 'Survive'

The historical context just outlined grounds the analytic frame into which I will place my consideration of Gloria Gaynor's disco anthem 'I Will Survive'. Released in 1978, the song attained platinum-single status, pinning the No. 1 spot on the pop charts from 20 January through 25 May 1979 in the weeks leading up to South Chicago's anti-disco tumult. But the track enjoyed even greater success in club rotation and endures still as a queer dance classic. In my reading, 'Survive' stands as the archetypal emblem of disco as a musico-social movement born of and bespeaking a cross-subcultural mingling in the margins. I hear in the song a rich interplay of musical and verbal discourses of difference, yielding a pop-cultural trope whose residual signs of otherness were perceptible in the following ways: (i) they could elude apprehension, and thus 'pass' in mainstream culture, or (ii) they could be apprehended, and so, (a)

^ 8	—	^ ♭7	—	^ ♭6	—	^ 5	—	^ ♯7	—
Am	Dm	G	C	F	B [♭] 7	E ^{sus} 4	E		
/ / / /	/ / / /	/ / / /	/ / / /	/ / / /	/ / / /	/ / / /	/ / / /	/ / / /	/ / / /
i	iv	♭VII	III	♭VI	ii [♭] 7	V4	—	♯	

Figure 1. 'I Will survive' (Fekaris-Perren): basic vocal melody over ostinato.

provoke disfavour, fear and loathing, on behalf of the status quo or, alternately, (b) inspire identification on the basis of experienced marginalisation.

Vis-à-vis this last possibility, (ii)(b): from a marginal subject standpoint, the title and lyrics of 'I Will Survive', particularly given their appearance around the time of the Comiskey Park fracas, already resonate beyond their narrative surface¹⁰ – which depicts, in the first person, one woman's experience of romantic abandonment and eventual hard-won transcendence. Vis-à-vis possibilities (ii)(a) and (b) both: given music's mysterious, often subliminal, seemingly inscrutable powers, we might expect special potency to attach to musical markers of difference – that these would be potentially threatening or potentially cathartic, depending on the perceiver.

A host of musical signifiers in 'Survive' serve to telegraph, embroider upon, and reinforce its textual thematics of marginalisation and transcendence. The first of these to greet the listener is the song's high-drama opening gambit, which launches with a sweeping, Liberace-esque piano arpeggio, up and down several octaves of an E dominant-seven-flat-nine chord. The singer then enters *andante* and, with quasi-recitative accompaniment from the rhythm section, presents the song's essential vocal melody over the eight-bar A-minor falling-fifths harmonic ostinato (i.e. chord pattern) that will repeat throughout (see the Figure).¹¹ In its repetition the ostinato determines the song's form – which proceeds gradually by the addition and subsequent subtraction of instrumental layers, and so exemplifies pop-rock 'accumulative form' (see Spicer 2004). Rhetorically, the ostinato, in its descending course and minor mode, evokes the Baroque lament. All these features combine for a *mise en scène* in which 'Survive' musically asserts difference from its first notes and establishes a distinct conversance with imported and 'exotic' musical idioms. With the start of the second stanza, the slow intro shifts to an upbeat groove, and the sparse recitative-like scoring is abandoned for a denser mix: the dance track begins.

I mentioned the use of minor mode in 'Survive'. In concert music, minor is semantically marked as the 'sad' mode and, in relation to the conventionally normative major, the 'other' mode. A shift from minor to major here can powerfully signify a move from tragedy to transcendence – as exemplified in Mahler's 'Resurrection' Symphony, with its journey from C-minor death to E^b-major transcendence. Minor-mode usage in 1970s album-oriented rock is largely comparable. The minor frequently arises in slow-tempo tender or tragic love ballads – the Rolling Stones' 'Angie' (No. 1, 1973), for example – and in slow-to-mid-tempo 'meaning' songs like Led Zeppelin's 'Stairway to Heaven' (1971) and Aerosmith's 'Dream On' (No. 6, 1976). But up-tempo, danceable AOR anthems are typically in major. Examples from 1979 include Cheap Trick's 'I Want You to Want Me' (No. 7, 1979) and Billboard's Number One song

throughout the latter half of that Comiskey summer, The Knack's 'My Sharona' (arguably in C, though it spends much of its time on a G-blues riff signifying heavy sexual tension). A list of representative songs from earlier in the decade could include Thin Lizzy's 'The Boys Are Back in Town' (No. 12, 1976), the Stones' 'It's Only Rock 'N Roll' (No. 16, 1974), and Grand Funk's 'We're an American Band' (No. 1, 1973), all characteristic rock anthems in major.

Like Mahler's 'Resurrection', 'Survive' begins in the realm of minor-mode tragedy. The change of tempo at the second stanza corresponds to a shift of tone in the lyrics and a new direction in the narrative, leaving tragedy behind. The protagonist has gone from abandonment and misery to Signifyin(g) sass, signalled straightaway by the line 'And so you're back from outer space' (see below for further discussion of Signifyin[g] practices). The rest of the song will stay in the up-tempo groove without ever moving from the minor mode. In thus employing minor, this disco anthem differs from contemporary rock anthems of comparable upbeat tempo and narrative tone. Interestingly, disco anthems in general very often used the minor mode, even in the most celebratory instances, like KC and the Sunshine Band's 'Shake Your Booty' (No. 1, 1976), Sylvester's 'You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)' (No. 36, 1979), and the Weather Girls' 'It's Raining Men' (1982). All of these songs deploy a verse-chorus scheme in which the verses are in minor, and the euphoric choruses emphasise major sonorities. Minor-ness in 'Survive', on the other hand, is unyielding. As such it extends disco's preoccupation with minor mode, while offering narrative implications that the protagonist even in her triumph always carries some mark of her past, formative tragedy. Overall, the frequent use of minor in upbeat disco anthems including 'I Will Survive' was a marker of difference in relation to contemporary AOR, and this difference registered syntactically as well as semantically – in the latter instance, as a difference of affect, of feeling-tone.

Another crucial signifier here is vocalism. In her book *Hole in Our Soul*, Martha Bayles (1994, p. 281) writes that Gloria Gaynor cannot sing (an assessment she elsewhere levels at Jimi Hendrix, among others). Bayles calls Gaynor a 'panting, sighing, yelping, moaning amateur'. She may be simply confused in casting Gaynor's lot among the 'Love to Love You' Babies – that is, with Donna Summer and other climax queens of disco.¹² For in fact Gaynor made no conspicuous entries into what Bayles calls the 'orgasmic sound effects' genre. Still, it seems perfectly logical, and somewhat telling, that Bayles wouldn't like her singing: It's not Aretha's, Chaka's, or even Mariah's singing, and in songs like 'I Will Survive' it undoubtedly stands outside the vocal traditions of R&B and gospel. Such vocalism has drawn fire from certain R&B devotees including Bayles and Nelson George, who criticise disco in terms of its alleged 'inflectionless vocals', 'metronomelike beat', and cold, passionless, dehumanised affect (George 1988, p. 154).

Queer *jouissance* on the 'borderline'

Shoulder to shoulder with Bayles's and George's statements I will place those of Richard Dyer and John Gill, both writing on queer experiences of disco. In his classic essay 'In defence of disco', Dyer (1979, p. 413) wrote that an "'escape" from the confines of popular song into ecstasy is very characteristic of disco'. And Gill (1995, p. 134) more recently exalted disco-dance music as 'the one form of music which . . . is bound up in something that closely resembles Roland Barthes's notion of *jouissance*, that is, rapture, bliss, or transcendence'.

By constructing a view that embraces both the adulations of Dyer and Gill and the vitriol of Bayles and George, I find a coherent basis for interpretation of disco language in 'I Will Survive'. I have to agree with Bayles (1994, p. 278) that disco 'leached all the emotion out of the vocals', at least by the standards of gospel, blues, and R&B styles, with their expressive pitch bending, melisma, and other vocal inflections.¹³ Although many of disco's most celebrated vocalists – most of whom were African-American women – came out of these traditions, and although disco's musical language is rooted in the fundamentally African-American language of pop, still it eschews the established rhetoric of emotionalism and expression in African-American musics.

Bayles and George would end the story here, but the disco *jouissance* of Dyer and Gill only begins at this point. Thus in my reading, the affect and passion that find such brilliant expression in African-American popular idioms are not forsaken in 'Survive'. Rather, these are *relocated* in the music, by means of a troping move that also transforms the emotional palette. In place of the vocal (or vocally conceived) inflections and timbral shadings of African-American music, the song's construction of sentiment *instrumentally* invokes timbres and gestures imported from European and Latin music – specifically that of the café, street and carnival. In this regard we hear, for instance, the Latin percussion in 'Survive' and likewise its trumpets and saxophone, which invoke the bright, broadly vibrating timbre characteristic of both Gallic torch singer and mariachi brass. The timbres of strings and harp are highbrow Europeanisms and thus here, as in Motown and Philly Soul, bespeak upward mobility, while the strings' particular idiom in 'Survive' further infuses them with a tragic vernacular elegance redolent of cabaret and tango.

The affective sensibility that issues from this semiotic juncture is distinctly foreign. Its musical symbols mark it as Latin-Mediterranean and Catholic, but it's the Catholicism not so much of the Vatican as of Mardi Gras, less Sunday morning than Saturday night: the Catholicism not of the Church but of the streets, the little people. Musical affect here occupies the marked category of the sentimental – a sentimentality further marked by virtue of its explicitly foreign flavour: adult, worldly and sensual, as compared with the adolescent, naïve, and sexually neurotic rock of the time; indulgent, in-your-face and theatrical, compared with the stoical-else-childlike Protestant sentimentality that's channelled through Disney to mainstream America. The distinctive emotionalism emergent from this minor-mode trope is that of a frank sentimentality at once tragic and richly celebratory, earthy and embodied, and ultimately triumphant, transcendent – but on a human, not monumental, scale: That is, triumph is tethered to a vulnerable humility and candid reckoning of *la condition humaine*.¹⁴

Analysis of this musical trope in 'Survive' can suggest some of the ways in which disco might have served the identification needs of its amalgamated audience in the margins, and even become a vehicle for their rapture. Unpacking the language of 'Survive' reveals it as a commingling of high and low, art and life, that is neither one nor another of these: Like Bakhtin's Rabelaisian carnival it 'belongs to the borderline between art and life' – though while it lasts 'there is no other life outside it' (Bakhtin 1984, p. 7). The affective and semantic richness arising from such commingling distinguishes disco in its musical and other dimensions, as some commentators have apprehended. Ken Tucker, for example, amidst other critics' mutually parroting characterisations of disco as emotionally flat and essentially superficial, has listened perceptively to songs and uncovered possibilities for coded meaning within

ostensibly shallow surfaces. In the flat, emotionless voices of Chic in 'Good Times' and their endless repetition of the song's titular opening line, Tucker (1986, p. 531) recognises 'an aching ironic anthem for the recession 1970s'. He hears the song, in other words, in an integrated domain of musical form, vocalism and lyrics, as a double-voiced discourse.

Comparably, various phrases throughout the lyrics of 'Survive' are readable as figures of Signifyin(g), a style-focused, troping, double-voiced mode of discourse that juxtaposes playful performativity and serious intent, and has functioned centrally in African-American discursive culture (Gates 1998, pp. 44–124). In noting the Signifyin(g) flavour in 'Survive' we might underline (i) its congruity with both the African-American involvements in disco production and reception, and the troping and multivalence I read in other, musical dimensions of 'Survive'; and (ii) queer culture's long, admiring engagement with African-American Signifyin(g) and 'testifyin' speech, which has fundamentally influenced camp expressive codes. Like Signifyin(g), camp speech is double voiced and trafficks in ambiguity, affording a surface meaning to hostile outsiders and another, deeper meaning to attuned allies. Camp speech and sensibility are distinguished, too, by piquant juxtaposition in the realms of style and intention, characteristically through a Wildean convergence of grave seriousness and transparent artifice.

In 'Survive', at the second stanza, Gaynor sings, 'So you're back from outer space / I just walked in to find you here with that sad look upon your face'; and in the sixth stanza, 'You see me – somebody new / I'm not that chained-up little person still in love with you'. These lyrics foreground emotional ambiguity, juxtaposed tragedy and flippancy, and pungent irony, all of which resonate simultaneously with gay camp and African-American Signifyin(g). These subcultural expressive codes are also evoked by the heroine's insistent engagement with earthbound, trivial tangibles ('I shoulda changed that stupid lock, I shoulda made you leave your key') in the face of her existential crisis ('At first I was afraid, I was petrified / Kept thinkin' I could never live without you by my side').

A similarly shared sensibility is readable in disco's thematics of sophistication – a sophistication peculiarly inflected by a sort of gritty candour. This species of sophistication emanated from the racial and sexual margins, and was little represented in mainstream culture. Its representation in disco arose from the resourceful troping of musical emblems of high Europeanism with emblems of the vernacular: European, Latin, and African American – though the impulse seems less to access the sophistication of privilege and entitlement than to assert a sophistication 'of one's own', of difference.¹⁵ A bolder, more defiant assertion of difference in 'Survive' may be read in the song's lyrics, at the pivotal line, 'Oh, as long as I know how to love I know I'll stay alive'. In this radically trans-valuative statement, the (anti-) heroine, in direct address to her once-oppressor, locates the condition for her survival in her ability to love – thus in the very ability (or, vulnerability) that had brought her to the brink of disaster. Having cast off her chains she does not ascend but rather, digs more deeply into the patchy terrain of flesh-and-blood human existence.

This story is not that of the winners and masters of the world: Indeed, her narrative and its emphases reveal our protagonist as a sort of anti-Bill Gates, or anti-Trump. One classic interpretive strategy would be to explain the song's pivotal statement, in connection with the narrator's gender, in the familiar terms of Freudian 'female masochism', and thereby add it to the annals of status-quo misogynist

knowledge. And perhaps that is how some listeners have interpreted 'Survive'; we know that many people found much to despise in this music. But the song's multi-dimensional assertion of difference militates against its relegation to the status quo. Moreover, its singer, as a 'disco queen', occupied a special subject position, possessing polygendrous, polyracial powers of voice. Iain Chambers (1985, p. 246, n. 8) alludes to this: 'Doubly emarginated by sex and race', he writes, 'the more "extreme" accounts of sexual and social margins were widely deemed – by both white and black audiences – to be the "natural" property of black women singers'.

I read the singer's statement – of openness to life and love despite her suffering – as trans-valuative rather than normative, and as occupying a subject position demarcated not by feminine gender, but by its cognate, otherness, embracing here various racial and sexual others of both genders. I further hear this textual message of asserted difference and resilience echoed musically in the song's unconventional use of mode. 'Survive' modally constructs transcendence in the margins of 'minor-ity', and so here too, musically as narratively, reverses the norms of triumph and tragedy. Difference in 'Survive', as I have argued, is also conveyed musically by the use of classical and other 'exotic' style markers; relatively uninflected vocalism; and salient (non-rock) instrumentals, which carry much of the expressive weight in this track and invoke (by timbre and idiom) a 'foreign', carnivalesque sentimentality. The song's lyrics and narrative further link with difference and marginality in evoking African-American and queer discursive styles; non-hegemonic, un-masterful values; and a distinctly mortal, non-epic transcendence. Here, in such freighted, tropic intersections of textual and musical discourses, we might well perceive the possibility of queer rapture and bliss, of Barthesian *jouissance* in a disco song.

And indeed, the disco revellers in Andrew Holleran's 1978 novel *Dancer from the Dance* live for the next song that will leave them 'on the dance floor with heads back, eyes nearly closed, in the ecstasy of saints receiving the stigmata'. Some, on drugs, 'enter the discotheque with the radiant faces of the Magi coming to the Christ child' (Holleran 1978, pp. 38, 115). For Holleran's gay discotheque is a site of consecration, and his central characters Malone and Sutherland are, ultimately, martyrs to its cause: the pursuit of male beauty and the ecstatic pleasures of dancing. Throughout the novel these pursuits are figured (albeit amidst a gay society depicted as ethnically and religiously diverse) in terms of a Catholic religiosity, which also grounds a sacralisation of the abject:

What can you say about a success? Nothing! But the failures – that tiny subspecies of homosexual, the doomed queen, who puts the car in gear and drives *right* off the cliff! That fascinates me. The fags who consider themselves worthless because they are queer, and who fall into degradation and sordidness! It was those Christ befriended, not the assholes in the ad agencies uptown who go to St. Kitts in February!¹⁶ (Holleran 1978, p. 18)

In passages like this one Holleran articulates a particular camp thematics – a sentimentalised trans-valuation of failure and success that resonates sympathetically with the central, defiantly 'un-masterful' message of 'I Will Survive' (in what I have labelled the song's pivotal line). In doing so he also expresses a Catholicist preoccupation that surfaces frequently in camp imagery and, I have argued, imbues the musical rhetoric of 'Survive'.¹⁷

Holleran's queer disco scene further makes vivid, in visual and social realms, the carnivalesque note that I remark in the music of 'Survive'. His 1970s discotheque is painted in expressly carnivalesque tones, and parallels in multiple dimensions the

Medieval-Renaissance European carnival anatomised by Bakhtin (1984, p. 10). This latter celebrated in chaotic, colourful and sensuous fashion a 'temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order . . . [and] suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions'. It is thus indistinguishable from Holleran's Manhattan gay disco:

They lived only to bathe in the music, and each other's desire, in a strange democracy whose only ticket of admission was physical beauty – and not even that sometimes. All else was strictly classless. . . . It was a democracy such as the world . . . never permits, but which flourished in the little room on the twelfth floor of a factory building on West Thirty-third Street, because its central principle was the most anarchic of all: erotic love.

What a carnival of people. (Holleran 1978, pp. 40–1)

We might note that this gay disco is further indistinguishable from the gay nightclub of pre-disco and pre-Stonewall times. Indeed, queer bars and clubs had long served to reproduce the carnival's collapsings and reversals of social norms, hierarchies and castes. I would suggest that one factor in disco's extraordinary power over queer listeners was its *abstract* encoding of the gay bar's carnivalesque ecstasies, including high-low collapsings, into musical language – whose decoding (however unconscious) by its audience was cued by disco's *concrete* invocation of musical emblems of the carnival via Latin-Mediterranean popular idioms.

Survival signs

Since its original appearance, the polysemic richness and queer resonances readable in 'Survive' have helped to inspire multiple applications and reincarnations of the song. Its textual message of defiant and enduring presence was already well tailored to queer identification needs, but this message and the song's titular statement took on even deeper meaning with the dawn of the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s. As Wayne Studer (1994, p. 269) notes, 'It's no accident that this Number One smash . . . became an anthem for the gay community in 1979 and remained so for several years thereafter. Given all that's happened since then, it resonated more than ever'. Thus, from the 1980s until now Gloria Gaynor's rendition has survived as a gay anthem. It has also inspired cover versions, often non-disco and non-queer-attuned in style, by Billie Jo Spears (country, 1979), Chantay Savage (house/dance, 1995), Diana Ross (dance, 1995), Cake (alternative rock, 1996), and others.

But the paradigmatic status of 'I Will Survive' as gay anthem is also vividly illustrated in a pair of discursive and performative sites in which the song does not appear literally. Close listening reveals the presence of 'Survive' as musical and text-thematic basis for highly queer-inflected singles by two of the most queer-identified acts in popular music: Pet Shop Boys' 'It's a Sin' (No. 9, 1987) and Erasure's 'Love to Hate You' (1991). Each song uses 'Survive's' falling-fifths harmonic ostinato as its own harmonic structure and sets this to an upbeat dance groove. Erasure also cops the distinctive string riff from 'Survive', unveiling it as the climactic foreground event (not mere counter-melody) in 'Love to Hate You', carried here on the voice of a colossal swirling string synth. Moreover, both duos made their homages explicit in 1990s concert tours featuring medley renditions that segued or morphed their own songs into excerpts from 'I Will Survive'.¹⁸

Particularly noteworthy is Pet Shop Boys's use of 'Survive' in their stunning, highly theatrical exit number, 'It's a Sin / I Will Survive'. Again Catholicism

surfaces vividly, at once fetishised and repudiated here: vocalist Neil Tennant personifies a decadently gilded and red-sequined pope (or perhaps cardinal), and the onstage dancers monk-acolytes. The performance begins with Tennant's black female co-singer intoning on the darkened stage, in all-white nun's garb, the slow intro of 'I Will Survive'. Then Tennant enters in papal procession to sing 'It's a Sin', an inexorable dance groove whose lyrics and onstage drama create a battle between good and evil in the form of religiosity and sensuality, accompanied throughout by strange and beautiful video (projected behind the live performers) created by the late gay film-maker Derek Jarman. Ultimately the performance presents a reversal of the warring terms' conventional values, with a polymorphously queer sensuality winning out over Church authority at the climactic moment: The nun rips off her wimple and habit to reveal a sultry sequined gown, and reclaims the soloist's role with a florid, full-throated, *a tempo* return to 'Survive'.

The medley closes with the singers trading title lines from each song and so recapping the drama's outcome – 'It's a sin . . . I will survive' having come to convey: 'Though condemned and maligned, I will survive'. Pet Shop Boys' troping of 'Survive' mines it for gay emblematisation and for a dramatic-narrative progression from tragedy to transcendence, thus staging the queer significance that had undoubtedly attached to the song for many fans. Enacting scenes from a queer imaginary, their performance reveals rich identificatory affordances – of the song as a sort of queer *Bildungsroman*, modelling a triumphant queer subjectivity that has been idealised in prescriptive and descriptive, individual and collective queer realms; and of disco as queer religion.¹⁹ Pet Shop Boys' use of religious imagery in such a queer context is also suggestive vis-à-vis the Catholicism that surfaces in Holleran's gay-disco novel and in my reading of disco's musical semiotics: In all these instances the Church is rendered as *Ur*-source of fetishised theatricality, and of passionate sensuality. And all three instances manage to invoke a Catholic religiosity while ultimately averting and even inverting Christian condemnations of extra-marital and homo-configured sexuality – though, notably, without ever *deglamourising* the Church. These Catholiphilic moments are not, in my reading, merely religious kitsch. Camp, however – in which juxtaposition of artifice and seriousness is of the essence – is surely a factor. For the uses of religious imagery here spotlight the ritual, visual and sensual splendour of Catholicism – that is, reveal and revel in its elaborate artifice – while implicitly undercutting the associated doctrine by bracketing its (now) evident self-seriousness.

A somewhat different invocation of 'Survive' as gay anthem surfaced in the mid-1990s, as the song began to appear as an audible indicator of queerness in media products targeted to mainstream audiences. These included movies like *Adventures of Priscilla*, *Queen of the Desert* (1994) and *In and Out* (1997), and the TV sitcom *Will and Grace* (in a 1999 episode). The 'Survive' usage of *In and Out* typifies the genre: In this comedy Kevin Kline, playing the sexually ambivalent main character, is forcibly outed by a disco song. The pivotal scene shows Kline's usually reserved character rendered helpless, compelled wildly and with abandon to move his feet and shake his booty when a disco record comes on. Thus at last, according to the (comedic) logic of the narrative, are Kline's true essence and sexuality revealed to himself and the audience: as irrepressible disco fool, and (formerly) repressed gay man. In this mass-release moment, the song that functions as gay/straight acid test is Gloria Gaynor's 'I Will Survive'.²⁰

Conclusion: sounds of queer social space

All these references to 'Survive' draw on its singular semiotic potency as gay-disco emblem. But the foregoing analysis of signification in 'Survive' may also have relevance for other, less emblematic disco anthems. One might infer as much from Ken Barnes's liner notes for Rhino Records' *Disco Years* collection: Commenting on Vicki Sue Robinson's 'Turn the Beat Around', Barnes (1990) notes that 'most exceptional disco songs . . . are in minor keys', and wonders as to 'the significance of this phenomenon'. I have argued here that its significance is one of difference, created and played out in disco within a rich web of signifying elements, musical, textual and social. The difference thus articulated registered with disco's worshippers and enemies alike, engendering 'the most self-contained genre in the history of pop, the most clearly defined, and the most despised' (Tucker 1986, p. 524).

But as I noted at the outset, disco was despised not simply as a music, but as a social and cultural phenomenon. It has been called 'the most truly interracial popular music since early rock 'n' roll' (Hamm 1995, p. 205). While it may be true, this statement, constructing a coalition *across* racial difference, omits the further relevant subject inflections, of gender and sexuality, by which disco constituted a coalition *around* shared experiences of difference, including stigmatisation, marginalisation and invisibilisation. This point was not lost on everyone, however. As Comiskey Park suggests, some saw in disco not just blacks, Latino/as and queers, but blacks, Latino/as and queers coming together in ecstasy.²¹

Disco has been accused of brazen commercialism and criticised in its function as fodder for the global glitterati at exclusive venues like Studio 54 (though Dyer [1979] has argued that disco was simply more transparent in its materialism than rock, and thus the authentic/inauthentic opposition typically assumed here is false). But disco served, too, as soundtrack for a big party among various little people, a ritual of radical embodiment enacted by radically stigmatised bodies. As a musical discourse, disco's power 'both to describe and to induce rapture' (Gill 1995, p. 134) had much to do with its reverberant troping of other, also othered, musical and verbal discourses.²² As such, its beat pulsed with the revels of sinners and pleasures of the scorned. And its ecstasies were the improbable, transcendent ecstasies of persons against whose ecstasy sanctions were drawn and punishments exacted, but who proclaimed nevertheless, 'I Will Survive'.

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Endnotes

1. We might also note that in 1979 'disco sucks' constituted more aggressive, obscene phraseology. Photos and clippings from the 1979 Comiskey rally are viewable at WLUP's 25th anniversary 'Disco Demolition' website: www.discodemolition.com/pr.htm (viewed 16 December 2005). This site includes the 90,000 crowd-estimate figure (also variously cited elsewhere), and it links to Dahl's radio-show page: now silver haired, he is still a popular DJ in Chicago.
2. Qiana was a 'luxury fabric' created by DuPont Corporation, a silky, shiny polyester weave that was the stuff of disco-era elegance in Travolta/Manero's shirts, Donna Summer's dresses, and more.
3. The term had made its print debut seven years earlier in Weinberg (1972). I am grateful to the late Philip Brett for this reference.
4. Among such insiders the phrase was still recognisable as an arch appropriation of the 'coming out' that constitutes the debutante's shining hour. Since its 'outing' in the 1980s, the expression has lost this semantic sparkle not only for the larger culture, but for queers themselves: It is now a commonplace, understood as abbreviation for 'coming out of the closet', whose puritanical, decidedly un-celebratory overtones are applied to all manner of formerly-hidden-now-exposed activity: drinking, talk show viewing, junk food indulgence. Interestingly, according to Sedgwick (1990, pp. 72–3) such ubiquitous usage of the 'closet' figure attests to the semantic centrality of homo/heterosexual definition, rather than any amnesia around its queer-specific meaning.
Billboard rankings throughout this essay indicate the highest chart positions attained by a given song. All are from Whitburn (1996).
5. Relatedly, a contemporary lyric by Mark Knopfler provides this description of an audience for a bar-band gig: 'They don't give a damn for any trumpet-playing band / That ain't what they call rock and roll'. The source-song, 'Sultans of Swing', was a number four (non-disco) hit in 1979 for Knopfler's band Dire Straits.
6. My statement suggests that singerly incompetency can contribute to a performance of manly competency. The claim finds corroboration in Suzanne Cusick's theorisation of song as a field of embodiment and performance that serves, in our time, to delineate sharp gender differentials. She reads the cultural script for puberty as engendering a change of vocal register for boys but not girls (though such change, in both cases, is physically possible but not inevitable) and notes that youths/men rarely relearn their enunciation so as to continue singing after this mandated change. Thus, in contemporary Euro-American culture, girls sing, boys sing, and women sing, but men normatively do not sing, and these facts shape the embodied performance of sex and gender difference. Cusick (1999, pp. 31–3) further speculates that post-pubescent males' relearning of enunciation in speech but not song (which involves more deeply one's 'interior spaces') might reflect the cultural anxiety about penetration of the male body, in conjunction with 'the prevailing idea that masculinity is about being fully individuated, body and soul'.
7. A number of writers have revealed the inadequacies and omissions of homosexual (and inversion) models of identity hinted at here, including Chauncey (1989), Halperin (1990 and 2000), and Sedgwick (1990, pp. 44–8, 157–63, etc.).
8. The phrase is Sedgwick's. She presents some of the work I summarise here in *Between Men* (1985), but my passage is drawn exclusively from *Epistemology* (1990, pp. 184–6), parts of which recap the argument advanced in *Between Men*.
9. A pivotal cultural medium for queer effacement ca 1930–1968 is illumined in Vito Russo's (1987) analysis of Hollywood movies from the era of Hays Code censorship. The individual effects and costs of invisibilisation and denial of queer existence in post-war American culture are drawn lucidly in the autobiography of the late gay novelist Paul Monette (1992).
10. That is, the song appeared within six months' proximity to the Comiskey Park rally: Billboard records 20 January 1979 as the date when 'Survive' charted (Whitburn 1996).
11. The ostinato shown in the Figure is from my aural transcription of 'I Will Survive' (the 7:56 mix), as are all song lyrics given below.
12. I refer to the climactic performance in Summer's 1975 hit 'Love to Love You Baby'. Bayles's apparent confusion here (1994, p. 281) constitutes one instance, among others throughout her book, that raises questions about the extent of her familiarity with some of the material on which she registers her contentious opinions.
13. *Melisma* is the classical European term for a musical device wherein a single syllable of text is set melodically by multiple pitches, usually to expressive effect. In pop-rock contexts the term *gospel run*, or simply *run*, is sometimes used.
14. I refer to a complex sensibility that can be expressed simply, via Gallic shrug and the dictum, '*Je suis comme je suis*' (I am as I am). Interestingly, the latter phrase would translate (literally) into another Gloria Gaynor gay-club classic and quintessential pride anthem: her 1983 disco cover of 'I Am What I Am' – however innocent many US gay-club patrons must have been to the phrase's prior existence and connotative richness as French *formule*. This phenomenon suggests possibilities for *extra-linguistic* sympathy- and sensibility-sharing between Mediterranean folk wisdom and American queer subculture – possibilities, in other words, of the kinds of cross-cultural resonance I sketch herein. Undoubtedly the song's origin in the

queer context of *La Cage aux folles* is also relevant, although it reached iconic status (as 'The great gay pride song of the American musical theatre', according to Studer [1994, p. 270]) not in George Hearn's show-tune rendition but in Gaynor's disco remake.

15. The 'playa' and 'pimp' culture of 1990s and current hip-hop seems a later relative of this strain of sophistication. And one could argue that its unabashed emphasis on 'bling' also links it to disco, which has long been identified with conspicuous materialism.
16. The novel's Christian imagery is explicitly Catholic in various passages, though not the one quoted here.
17. Elsewhere, crucial connections between Catholicism and homosexuality have been drawn by Michel Foucault (1978, pp. 37–41), who reveals the Catholic confessional (in conjunction with the courts) as the locus of conception for homosexuality, among other 'sexual perversions'. By Foucault's account, a Western eighteenth- and nineteenth-century explosion of discourses on sex, motivated by the Christian pastoral, sharpened surveillance of sexual practices and produced discursive 'sexual heterogeneities' of which the homo/heterosexual binarism would emerge, from later nineteenth-century medico-juridical discourses, as most consequential.
See Ellis Hanson's *Decadence and Catholicism* (1997), for exploration of cross-linkages between the queer and the Catholic in late-nineteenth-century symbolist, or decadent, literature. For a discussion of linkages among these former two categories and twentieth-century US concert music, see my book *The Queer Composition of America's Sound* (Hubbs 2004), especially chapter 1, 'Modernist Abstraction and the Abstract Art: *Four Saints* and the Queer Composition of America's Sound'.
18. Pet Shop Boys and Erasure are both British synth-pop duos formed in the 1980s and comprising a (now-out) gay vocalist as theatrical front-man in partnership with a (comparatively back-grounded) keyboard-synth wiz. I thank Fred Maus for pointing out the resonances

between 'I Will Survive' and 'It's a Sin', for our conversations on these, and for lending me the Pet Shop Boys 1994 tour video *Discovery: Live in Rio*. My discussion of 'It's a Sin / I Will Survive' is based on the performance included on this video.

- Perhaps there is evidence of some subliminal effect from 'Survive's embedded presence in Wayne Studer's (1994, pp. 166–7) notice towards 'pronounced gay overtones' in Pet Shop Boys' 'trenchant, marvellously overblown "It's a Sin"', even while giving no hint of any connection between this song and 'Survive'.
19. The *Bildungsroman*, a novelistic genre modelling (most characteristically: white middle-class male) coming of age, has already been reread in terms of homoeroticism by Michael Moon (1987).
 20. Also of interest is Victor Navone's 45-second digital animation 'Alien Song', a word-of-Internet phenomenon since its 1999 appearance. It depicts a drag-queen-like performance of Gaynor's 'Survive' by a green, one-eyed alien, vaguely male in form but unmistakably African-American-diva in gesture. The creature thus exemplifies the 'polygendrous, polyracial' disco-queen qualities discussed above, and its sudden demise, when crushed rudely under its own mirror ball, poignantly mirrors disco's fate. See <http://www.scores.de/movie/alien.shtml> (viewed 16 December 2005).
 21. In connection with my earlier discussion of markers of queerness (or, in the above, 'faggotries') in the context of homosexual panic, the word *queers* here should be taken to include not only known homosexual persons but others marked in various ways as 'queerly suspicious'.
Saturday Night Fever also provides at least subtle allusion to black-queer solidarity, as Russo (1987, p. 230) noted: Travolta's Tony Manero at one point yells, 'Attica, Attica!' echoing his hero Al Pacino in his role as a gay bank robber in *Dog Day Afternoon* (a poster from which hangs on Tony's bedroom wall), where the line served to link gay and black oppression.
 22. Gill's reference is to dance music in general, subsuming disco.

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