

**I Feel Like Letting “Le Freak” Flag Fly:
Psychedelic Rock and Disco’s Unspoken Similarities**

Violet Cochrane

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Carlos Santana and his band, Santana, stood on the stage of the Woodstock Festival on August 16, 1969, still mostly unknown to the massive audience before them and weeks from releasing their first album. They put on a captivating performance that launched the band into popularity and is regarded as one of the most notable performances of Woodstock. Before the set, Carlos Santana arrived at the festival and was greeted by Jerry Garcia, lead guitarist of the Grateful Dead, who offered him a strong dose of LSD (though Santana says he was given mescaline, another psychedelic drug, in one interview) which he accepted, figuring he would come down by the time of his set.¹ The band went on earlier than expected and Santana performed one of the most significant performances of his life under the influence of LSD. A clip of their performance of “Soul Sacrifice”, which was shown in the Woodstock movie that brought the band further fame, is one of great intensity. Santana’s face writhes in both pain and pleasure as he plays his guitar over congas, keys, and other instruments for over ten minutes.² Later on, Santana described his experience tripping while performing and said that it felt like the neck of the guitar was slithering away from him like a snake, and he needed to wrestle it and maintain balance in his performance.³

Woodstock was a muddy, mismanaged, and chaotic event that lasted only three days in the final year of the 1960s, yet it has become representative of the decade as a whole for many. Santana spoke about the event and said, “And you get to smoke weed and you get to hear congas, and music that makes you celebrate, not think about fear or Vietnam or Nixon or

¹ Rob Tannenbaum, “How Santana Hallucinated Through One of Woodstock’s Best Sets (His Own),” *The New York Times*, August 6, 2019.

² GuitarDocs, “Santana - Soul Sacrifice 1969 Woodstock live concierto HQ,” YouTube Video, 6:16, January 11, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JaaT_HRb4GU.

³ MetroFocus, “Santana’s Acid Trip,” YouTube Video, 5:00, August 16, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eylXneeUIJ4>.

whatever.”⁴ By no means did the attendees of the festival represent the majority of the United States, as it was attended mainly by young, middle class white people.⁵ However, as reflected in the quote by Santana, the event represents the significance of music, specifically psychedelic rock, in the 1960s. Along with themes of growing sexuality in the late 1960s, this genre is emblematic of the expression “sex, drugs, and rock and roll”; these elements come together to represent an avenue of escapism and expression for the generally discontented youth of the decade against a greater landscape of war and oppression.

Psychedelic rock lost prominence in the 1970s as the political, social, and economic climates of the nation suffered. However, the importance of music as an outlet remained, and the emergence of disco allowed for a similar hedonistic escape into a world of sex, drugs, and music. After the fall of psychedelic rock, musical and lyrical content were less influenced by drugs (though musicians and fans did not stop engaging in drug use). Instead, disco was a genre whose lyrics and sonics were more overtly sexual, mirroring the sexual revolution that grew throughout the United States during the sixties and seventies.

One prominent example of disco’s unapologetic sexuality is “Love to Love You Baby”, a nearly 17-minute song that features Donna Summer’s sultry vocals and repeated erotic moans throughout the track, with lyrics begging to “do it to me again and again.”⁶ The single peaked at #2 for two weeks on the Billboard Hot 100 charts in 1976 and immediately launched her into stardom.⁷ Summer initially did not want to record the song as she felt it was too sexy, but

⁴ Tannenbaum, “How Santana Hallucinated”

⁵ “Woodstock: Like it was: Woodstock: Like it was in Words of Participants at Musical Fair.” New York Times (1923-), Aug 25, 1969.

<https://libdatabase.newpaltz.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/woodstock-like-was/docview/118589448/se-2?accountid=12761>.

⁶ Donna Summer, “Love to Love You Baby,” track 1 on *Love to Love You Baby*, Casablanca Oasis, 1975.

⁷ “The Hot 100.” Billboard. Billboard Media. <https://www.billboard.com/charts/hot-100/1976-02-13/>

imagined herself as Marilyn Monroe as she lay on the floor of the candlelit studio in order to sing it.⁸ Though she was uncomfortable with the explicit sexuality of the song and treated the “Love to Love You Baby” persona as playing a role, it created an image of her as a sexual icon in the disco scene.

What is the link between Santana’s iconic Woodstock performance and Summer’s iconic studio recording? Psychedelic rock and disco are two popular music genres that served as an outlet of expression and escapism, focusing on the pleasure that sex, drugs, and music can bring to people despite the tumultuous landscape of the sixties and seventies. Despite their shared qualities, there is a disparity in the treatment of the two genres both in academia and popular perception. Psychedelic rock is often regarded as deep, unique, and politically expressive, viewpoints that can be extended to the scholarly treatment of the 1960s as a whole. In contrast, disco is regarded as vapid as the seventies “Me decade” in which it occurred and is not the subject of serious scholarship nearly as frequently as psychedelic rock. To many, it would seem the only connection between two genres is the ire that disco invoked from rock fans during its popularity, but the genres are not so dissimilar.

This essay seeks to give a fair treatment to both psychedelic rock and disco as it investigates both the development and decline of both genres. How do they function in the changing political and social climate of the 1960s and 1970s? What is the significance of “sex, drugs, and rock and roll” in society, and how do these elements collaborate within psychedelic rock and disco? Why does the disparity in attitudes towards these genres and, furthermore, the two decades exist?

⁸ Signed Media, “Donna Summer - Love to Love You Baby’ backstory,” Youtube Video, 7:04, December 28, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Na9DUUd5i5Y>.

Psychedelic rock, also called acid rock, is rock music influenced by LSD and other hallucinogenic drugs like mescaline, psilocybin, and peyote. It is a product of the counterculture, a subculture composed of “hippies” that rejected conformity to traditional societal norms, instead embracing ideals of love, community, and liberation. In 1965, “hipsters” (eventually labeled as hippies) that stemmed from the beatnik culture began to leave the Lower East Side of Manhattan for Haight-Ashbury, a neighborhood in San Francisco.⁹ The majority of hippies were young, white, and middle to upper class. Hippies sought to reject societal conformity and traditional values embodied by both parents and the establishment in most ways possible. They practiced free love, sex outside of marriage, communal living, and recreational drug use, all of which threatened capitalistic American ideals. In addition, their style of dress and hair are described by Russell Duncan as not a passive quality but a direct act of rebellion, their long and unkempt hair a “clear sign of disorder, anti-capitalist, military draft-dodging, and sexually-liberated leanings.”¹⁰ Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young’s “Almost Cut My Hair” is a hippie anthem that addresses the significance of their long hair in relation to their nonconformity. David Crosby sings, “Almost cut my hair / It happened just the other day / It was gettin’ kinda long / I coulda said it was in my way / But I didn’t and I wonder why / I feel like letting my freak flag fly / Yes I feel like I owe it to someone.”¹¹ Despite the inconveniences of long hair, it was a tangible act of rebellion that some felt to be an obligation to the lifestyle.

⁹ Russell Duncan, “The Summer of Love and Protest: Transatlantic Counterculture in the 1960s,” *In The Transatlantic Sixties: Europe and the United States in the Counterculture Decade*, 157. Transcript Verlag, 2013. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1wxt2b.9>.

¹⁰ Duncan, “The Summer of Love and Protest,” 158.

¹¹ Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young, “Almost Cut My Hair,” January 1970, track 3 on *Déjà Vu*, Atlantic.

The counterculture lacked an overall structure or tangible goals as a movement; it represented a philosophy to life rather than a group seeking direct political action like the Students for a Democratic Society. There were only an estimated 100,000 hippies during the Summer of Love, the summer of 1967 in which hippie activity and cultural output peaked (for example, the Jimi Hendrix Experience released “Purple Haze” in March of 1967 and the Monterey Pop Festival was held June of 1967) and the community was at its strongest.¹² However, the desire to break free from traditions resonated with many and allowed the counterculture to expand outside of Haight-Ashbury, for it wasn’t required to drop LSD or live in a commune in order to embrace the ideals they preached. The late sixties were a particularly tumultuous time after a long period of postwar prosperity, including increased racial violence, political assassinations, escalation of conflict in Vietnam, increasing economic issues, and an overall change in morale that caused many to abandon their ideas of American superiority. Young people were growing disgusted with their country and their fellow Americans; nearly half of college-age Americans polled found the United States to be “a sick society”.¹³

Despite the counterculture’s lack of structure, there were prominent figures that aided specifically in the widespread usage of LSD. Timothy Leary, author of *The Psychedelic Experience*, became interested in the drug during his time as a professor at Harvard University and dedicated himself to its promotion after his firing. He notably advised the public to “turn on, tune in, and drop out” and was largely responsible for its popularity during this time.¹⁴ In addition, novelist Ken Kesey painted a school bus with psychedelic colors and drove around

¹² Bruce Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics*, (Boston: Da Capo Press, 2001) 14.

¹³ Schulman, *The Seventies*, 16.

¹⁴ "Timothy Leary," In *Encyclopedia of World Biography*, 2nd ed., 266-267. Vol. 9. Detroit, MI: Gale, 2004. *Gale eBooks*, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CX3404703777/GVRL?u=newpaltz&sid=bookmark-GVRL&xid=966cfa1c>.

providing acid tests in order to share the psychedelic experience with others, his motto being to “freak freely”.¹⁵ LSD is a hallucinogenic drug that affects the senses, causing the user to perceive things that are not there or differently than they actually appear. More significantly, it has deep emotional effects; at times, this can harm the user and cause a “bad trip”, or it can create a deeper connection to others and a change in worldly perspective, a sought-after effect referred to as “consciousness-expanding”.¹⁶ Hippies viewed LSD, among other drugs such as marijuana and mescaline, as “dope” rather than drugs, tools used to tap into physical pleasure and spiritual awakening.¹⁷ Drugs had long been used by musicians (for example, many jazz musicians consumed marijuana) but it was not until the sixties that drug references became commonplace in music.¹⁸

Psychedelic rock is a unique genre reflective of the profundity and mind-altering elements of a psychedelic trip. It was conceived in 1965 as bands, influenced by LSD use and the impact of The Beatles’ sound and image, began to experiment with idiosyncratic music and sounds that grew into an initially small, comfortable scene.¹⁹ It mirrors the psychedelic experience through the sound and structure of the music rather than lyrics, although some songs did directly or indirectly reference LSD.²⁰ Artists’ aesthetics were also important to contributing to the psychedelic experience; Grateful Dead posters, for example, often featured distorted fonts,

¹⁵ Duncan, “The Summer of Love and Protest”, 159.

¹⁶ Alison Farah Palkhivala, "LSD (Lysergic Acid Diethylamide)," *Drugs and Controlled Substances: Information for Students*, edited by Stacey L. Blachford and Kristine Krapp, Gale, 2003, pp. 252-263. *Gale eBooks*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/CX3402000124/GVRL?u=newpaltz&sid=bookmark-GVRL&xid=e5bfc927.

¹⁷ Duncan, “The Summer of Love and Protest”, 164.

¹⁸ John Markert, “Sing a Song of Drug Use-Abuse: Four Decades of Drug Lyrics in Popular Music--From the Sixties through the Nineties.” *Sociological Inquiry* 71, no. (Spring 2001): 195. doi:10.1111/j.1475-682X.2001.tb01108.x.

¹⁹ Craig Morrison, “Psychedelic music in San Francisco : style, context, and evolution,” 176, Concordia University, (2000).

²⁰ Markert, “Sing a Song of Drug Use-Abuse,” 208.

unconventional color schemes, and faces hidden in the artwork.²¹ While an LSD trip can be too intense to produce music while under the influence, its use created inspiration for notable psychedelic acts such as The Beatles, Jimi Hendrix, Pink Floyd, and the Grateful Dead.²² It can be difficult to describe these connections precisely, as psychedelic music is just as complex as a hallucinogenic trip, a mind-altering experience that is difficult to describe in words or comprehend to those who have not taken such drugs. It is also much easier to hear these similarities in music rather than writing. Many sources make the mistake of over-analyzing psychedelic music and subsequently taking the life out of it, thus utilizing the same rigidity and standardization that the counterculture sought to reject.

However, there are many general elements of psychedelic music that invoke the experience of a psychedelic trip. One important element is that of time and rhythm, as drugs often alter one's perception of the passing of time, something that can be conveyed through the manipulation of rhythm in music.²³ A psychedelic song may change tempo to reflect the slowing up and speeding down of time an individual perceives during a trip. Another significant element is that of improvisation and experimentation, reflecting the new perspectives gained by one whose consciousness has been expanded after a psychedelic trip. Improvisation is often observed in live performances, notably in Grateful Dead shows in which the band would turn five minute songs into unique fifteen minute versions. Many artists had backgrounds in genres like folk, jazz, and rhythm & blues and enjoyed the artistic freedom of experimentation that psychedelic rock offered over the traditional structure that rock and roll had taken on by the sixties. Psychedelic

²¹ Wes Wilson, "Otis Rush and His Chicago Blues Band, Grateful Dead, The Canned Heat Blues Band - Bill Graham Presents in San Francisco - February 24-26 [1967] - Fillmore," Grateful Dead Archive Online, <https://www.gdao.org/items/show/391490>.

²² Ewen MacDonald and Jarmo Saarti, "Drugs and popular music: shake your nerves and rattle your brain," *Publications of the University of Eastern Finland, General Series* (2020), 143.

²³ MacDonald and Saarti, "Drugs and popular music," 36.

rock took the traditional rock format of guitar, bass, drums, and vocals and stretched them into something new.

Certain qualities of psychedelic rock embody more than just the effects of LSD but the values of the counterculture itself. In an interview, Sam Andrew of Big Brother and the Holding Company describes the lack of structure or hierarchy within the group and how it allowed more unity among the members, specifically noting a section within the song “Summertime” in which two guitars play at the same time, not falling into the traditional roles of lead and rhythm guitar but instead exploring their own contrasting melodies.²⁴ This is a sentiment echoed by members of other prominent bands such as the Grateful Dead and Jefferson Airplane, demonstrating a common desire to separate from structure. More importantly, rock represented a forum for community, an integral part of the collectivist counterculture. Acid tests, music festivals like Monterey Pop and Woodstock, and communes all provided opportunities for togetherness. The Grateful Dead’s impact and long-standing Deadhead culture can be attributed to this collectivism; the Dead’s aptitude for live music and the close-knit culture of the fans meant that a show was not just a venue for music but a transformative experience.²⁵

Psychedelic rock was an embodiment of the hippies’ holy trinity: sex, drugs, and rock and roll. Just as the genre was lyrically and sonically influenced by LSD, it was also inspired by the promiscuity and sexual freedom enjoyed by its creators. In her analysis of the music of Jimi Hendrix, Sheila Whiteley often describes the eroticism of both the tone and the subject matter of his music. The overt sexuality of his music was amplified by live performances in which he

²⁴ Morrison, “Psychedelic music in San Francisco,” 76.

²⁵ Andrew Flory, “Liveness and the Grateful Dead,” *American Music* 37, no. 2 (2019): 124. <https://doi.org/10.5406/americanmusic.37.2.0123>.

would play the guitar with his teeth or with “strong masturbatory connotations”.²⁶ Sex allowed for physical pleasure, drugs allowed for metaphysical pleasure, and rock and roll allowed for the pleasure of community; all together, these forces allowed hippies to embrace the things their parents hated, rejecting expectations of productivity and marriage in favor of their own pleasure. Aside from figures like Grace Slick and Janis Joplin, however, psychedelic rock was dominated by men. Songs with sexual content either focused on the sexual pleasure of men or objectified the female subject; Hendrix’s “Foxy Lady”, for example, says, “I’m gonna take you home / I won’t do you no harm, no / You’ve got to be mine, all mine.”²⁷

The genre grew in popularity throughout the late sixties as other artists and major labels began to take notice of what was happening in San Francisco. Technological advancements in the recording studio, like the increasing multi-track recorder, allowed for the technical growth and refinement of the genre, as well. Psychedelic artists could record layer upon layer of music and further contribute to the complex psychedelic sound. However, psychedelic musicians’ values of artistry, particularly the focus on albums rather than singles, meant that the music often did not achieve mass consumption or recognition.²⁸ It was the fascination with their unique image, as well as the scorn that older generations held for them within the raging culture wars, that made the hippies so notable to regular Americans.

In 1969, the Woodstock Music and Art Fair, known typically as just Woodstock, was held in Bethel, New York and drew a crowd of over 400,000 people. It featured most of the biggest bands of the day, as well as folk rock musicians and musicians from the San Francisco

²⁶ Sheila Whiteley, “Progressive Rock and Psychedelic Coding in the Work of Jimi Hendrix.” *Popular Music* 9, no. 1 (1990): 37–60. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/852882>.

²⁷ Jimi Hendrix Experience, “Foxy Lady,” December 1966, track 1 of *Are You Experienced*, Track, 1967.

²⁸ Morrison, “Psychedelic music in San Francisco,” 160.

psychedelic scene. The festival was a failure in several ways, as the organizers, Woodstock Ventures, faced economic problems and failed to plan for the lack of resources, technical difficulties, hippie shenanigans, and bad weather that the event would face.²⁹ Despite its disasters, however, it was an emblem of hope for the attendees that has since become a defining moment of the 1960s. For the youth of 1969, Woodstock was actually a success, a symbol of harmony among hundreds of thousands of people as they were able to enjoy sex, drugs, and rock and roll despite the mismanagement of the event. Thus, it felt like a symbol of the power of the youth, marking their departure from the older generation.³⁰

Yet, the youth culture and the counterculture were not immune to the mounting tensions the United States faced at the end of the decade, with 1968 representing “the year the dream died” as student protests failed and racial violence increased.³¹ The hippie era came to an end for many reasons, one of them being the increase in race and class-related tensions within the neighborhoods the overwhelmingly white and middle-class hippies overtook.³² Their lack of concrete visions and structure proved problematic as drug problems and crime afflicted their communities, as well, a trait that was mirrored by the untimely drug-related deaths of psychedelic icons such as Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin. Both psychedelic rock and hippie culture fizzled out as the popularity of LSD also decreased. This was due to disillusionment in icons like Leary who became increasingly capitalistic, a rise in the sale of fake LSD, and a rise in popularity of methamphetamines.³³ Rock music remained alive, but fragmented into even more

²⁹ Douglas Cooke, "Woodstock," In *St. James Encyclopedia of Popular Culture*, edited by Sara Pendergast and Tom Pendergast, 176-179. Vol. 5. Detroit, MI: St. James Press, 2000. *Gale eBooks*, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CX3409002709/GVRL?u=newpaltz&sid=bookmark-GVRL&xid=de894cab>.

³⁰ Schulman, *The Seventies*, 18.

³¹ Schulman, *The Seventies*, 2.

³² Duncan, “The Summer of Love and Protest”, 166.

³³ John Robert Howard, “The Flowering of the Hippie Movement,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 382 (1969): 49. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1037113>.

subgenres. While the seventies inherited the long hair and discontentment of the counterculture, the optimism for a better future died out, signaling the beginning of an anxious and disillusioned decade.

In the early 1970s, night clubs known as discotheques became popularized among gay men. Prior to the seventies, to be visibly gay in public was dangerous; gay people faced police brutality, extortion, and anti-gay laws that made it illegal, for example, for two men to dance with each other in public. The Stonewall riots occurred in 1969, a few months before the Woodstock festival that symbolically marked the end of the optimistic sixties. Yet, Stonewall was a moment that sparked hope among gay Americans as much of the nation lost their hope; the previously timid homophile movement was energized into the gay liberation movement and gay people quickly began to enjoy newfound visibility.³⁴ The disco was a space where gay men could dance without the fear of police raids that plagued gay bars in the sixties. Homophobia was still rampant in the United States, and the growth of the gay liberation movements alongside other activism movements, like women's and civil rights, heightened the anxieties of the growing New Right. This conservative movement was fueled by Richard Nixon's rhetoric surrounding America's "Silent Majority" meant to appeal to Middle America, as well as increasing evangelism in the country referred to as the Third Great Awakening.³⁵ However, the ability for gay visibility was no small feat in comparison to the extreme taboo and concealment of homosexuality that occurred in the 1960s. It was an era of incredible isolation and secrecy for gays and lesbians. The gay activism groups that did exist operated under discreet titles such as

³⁴ Alice Echols, *Hot Stuff: Disco and the Remaking of American Culture*. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010), 43.

³⁵ Schulman, *The Seventies*, 41.

the Mattachine Society and Daughters of Bilitis and preferred to avoid public activism until the late sixties.³⁶ In contrast, discos felt like a gay haven where they could openly enjoy themselves and dance. Though the venues for the music had changed, the sense of community felt by fans of psychedelic rock and disco were both significant.

In the early days of disco, deejays played danceable R&B and soul songs, as there was not yet a signature disco sound. That sound wasn't recognizable until 1973, when Eddie Kendrick's "Girl You Need A Change of Mind" was released and Barry White's Love Unlimited Orchestra's "Love's Theme" became a number one pop hit.³⁷ Disco music evolved out of R&B and grew more distinct as artists sought peak danceability, since disco culture and music revolved around dancing. Disco is characterized by its heavy drum beats, since the genre prioritized rhythm over vocals in order to provide a good dancing beat. It is stylistically very different from psychedelic rock, featuring synthesizers and lush orchestration rather than guitars and other live instrumentation. Songs are long with minimal, repetitive lyrics that are often criticized for their shallowness by both rock fans and R&B fans. Over time, deejays were able to maximize a song's danceability as they seamlessly embellished and remixed songs to make them feel infinite. Disco shared some stylistic characteristics with funk, as well as its popularity among black Americans, but disco's sophistication set it apart. Fred Wesley, a trombonist for James Brown, said, "Disco music is funk with a bow tie."³⁸

Though disco isn't typically associated with the counterculture, the hippies' hedonistic values of sex, drugs, and rock and roll were not lost to the growing seventies genre. The genre

³⁶ Jason Baumann and Edmund White, *The Stonewall Reader*, (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2019,) 53.

³⁷ Echols, *Hot Stuff*, 3.

³⁸ Echols, *Hot Stuff*, 21.

could be unapologetically sexual, like Donna Summer's "Love To Love You Baby" and Labelle's "Lady Marmalade", and songs often contained themes of love and romance even when they weren't as raunchy. The atmosphere inside of gay discos specifically was bursting with sexuality, and the use of drugs like poppers, Quaaludes, and cocaine stimulated euphoria and made disco even sexier. Club drugs didn't have the same formative effects on the genre that LSD had upon psychedelic rock- Ewen MacDonald and Jarmo Saarti write, "Cocaine may have left its mark on the noses of many musicians but its impact on the actual musical content has been minimal."³⁹ However, experimentation with drugs and utilizing such substances to increase personal pleasure, sexuality, and connection with music is a trait shared by fans of both psychedelic rock and disco.

Disco was so sexual that it is a point of contention for many. Its sexual nature can be explained by a change of attitudes towards sex throughout the sixties and seventies that is referred to as the sexual revolution. There are many reasons this change occurred, like the introduction of the birth control pill to the public in 1960 as well as the sexually liberated attitudes of the counterculture, but it is largely attributed to the women's movement, also called the second wave of feminism. Activists inspired by the civil rights movement fought for women to be liberated from the domesticity and stringent gender roles that existed in the United States. One form of activism was consciousness-raising, an act in which women would get together in groups and discuss their lives in order to demonstrate the oppression that women faced and spread feminist ideas. As cultural awareness was raised to the different issues women faced, the topic of women's sexuality and pleasure became popular, specifically discussion of the clitoral

³⁹ MacDonald and Saarti, "Drugs and popular music", 127.

orgasm as a rejection of the myth that women cannot orgasm.⁴⁰ Just as the country began to realize that women can experience sexual pleasure, disco songs facilitated the expression of female sexuality and found a large audience among women. In fact, disco was interpreted as a threat to straight men since women seemed to gain more pleasure from dancing than from sex. This perceived threat against heterosexuality reflected wider societal anxieties about the shifting of gender roles as more women entered the workforce and the women's movement influenced a change in the public perception of women, and subsequently men.⁴¹ However, it was not just the New Right that objected to the sexualization of disco, but discourse within the women's movement that grappled over whether or not women in disco were sexually objectified or liberated, the same as feminists were divided over the sexual revolution.

Some former disco divas, many of whom were black women, have expressed regret over the sexual image they held during their fame, like Donna Summer and Chaka Khan. Labels often encouraged selling their stars as sex symbols in order to increase sales. Overall, singers had little power over their music and image since it was a producer's genre and was heavily controlled by record companies. As disco grew more popular and profitable, record companies contributed more and more to the downfall of the genre, sparking criticism from gay critics and black critics alike for the dulling and whitewashing of disco. Lin Tan writes, "disco lost its underground, avant-garde edge, exited the gay club scene of the mid-seventies, and began to enter the mainstream, where it mimicked forms of mass cultural production."⁴² This is a perspective on disco shared by many and stems from a larger criticism of both disco and the 1970s, that of its

⁴⁰ Schulman, *The Seventies*, 174.

⁴¹ Gillian Frank, "Discophobia: Antigay Prejudice and the 1979 Backlash against Disco," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 16, no. 2 (2007): 294. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30114235>.

⁴² Tan Lin, "DISCO AS OPERATING SYSTEM, PART ONE," *Criticism* 50, no. 1 (2008): 87. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23130867>.

commercialism. Critics found disco to be elitist and fake, another symptom of the narcissistic seventies. Even disco sympathizers, like the author of a 1976 article on disco, acknowledge that “[disco] really epitomize[s] modern life as well as anything else- loud, noisy, tacky-stylish, energetic, thoughtless, and fun.”⁴³ However, the original audience of disco should be considered, which was largely white gay men, gay and straight Latinos, and gay and straight black people.⁴⁴ Even as disco became mainstream, many original fans remained dedicated as it continued to serve its purpose: an escape from oppression; a celebration of victories and advancements in equality that were won; and an indulgence into opulence and glamor as a combination of economic stagnation and high inflation known as stagflation sent many into poverty.⁴⁵ LeeEllen Friedland describes disco as “a milieu of rhythm that extends across different performance genres and different communication systems,” taking care to note the significance that the musical and dance components of disco held as a form of cultural expression and social performance for young black Americans.⁴⁶

The hippies’ indulgence of the pleasures of life is seen as characteristic of their free spirits, a trait often praised or glossed over by critics and scholars alike. In contrast, disco’s opponents often focus on criticizing that same hedonism. I’ve employed the term “sex, drugs, and rock and roll” many times throughout this essay, and though it was popularized in the sixties and seventies, the complementary relationship between these three qualities is not a recent development. This is evident as the proverb “Who loves not wine, women and song, remains a

⁴³ John Rockwell, "The Pop Life: Disco Forum Disseminates a Craze," *New York Times* (1923-), Jan 22, 1976, <https://libdatabase.newpaltz.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/pop-life/docview/122612087/se-2?accountid=12761>.

⁴⁴ Frank, “Discophobia,” 285.

⁴⁵ Schulman, *The Seventies*, 7.

⁴⁶ LeeEllen Friedland, “Disco: Afro-American Vernacular Performance,” *Dance Research Journal* 15, no. 2 (1983): 35. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1478675>.

fool his whole life long”, or “wine, women, and song” for short, was first found in print in Germany in 1775 and can be traced back even earlier, demonstrative of a long standing human affiliation for intoxication, sexual pleasure, and music.⁴⁷ More important than being a source of pleasure is the historical context of the sixties and seventies. With consideration upon the culture wars that raged throughout these decades, an arduous battle between those who sought social change in the face of oppression and those who fought to hold on to tradition, music remained a constant source of both solace and inspiration for American people and has become a valuable tool in representing the societal ideas of their time.

Disco continued to broaden its audience and enter the mainstream as over twelve thousand discos opened in the United States between 1975 and 1977.⁴⁸ Although discotheques had existed in Europe before their popularity in America, the music genre spread across the world and attracted overseas artists like David Bowie and the Bee Gees. Even the Grateful Dead dipped into the disco sound with “Shakedown Street” in 1978. Disco’s success was further bloated by the opening of Studio 54 in early 1977, a club that was frequented by celebrities; entry was so coveted by average people that the crowds outside of the club on its birthday in 1978 “squashed against the barricades at the front and back entrances, shouting and pleading to be let in.”⁴⁹ Chic’s hit “Le Freak” was written in response to being turned away from Studio 54 despite their success within disco, a reflection of the conflict between commercialism and

⁴⁷ Wolfgang Mieder, “Wine, Women and Song: From Martin Luther to American T-Shirts,” *Kentucky Folklore Record*; Bowling Green Vol. 29, Iss. 3, (Jul 1, 1983): 89.

⁴⁸ Frank, “Discophobia,” 287.

⁴⁹ Leslie Bennetts, “An ‘in’ Crowd and Outside Mob show Up for Studio 54’s Birthday: Some just Watched,” *New York Times* (1923-), Apr 28, 1978.

<https://libdatabase.newpaltz.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/crowd-outside-mob-show-up-studio-54s-birthday/docview/123736745/se-2?accountid=12761>.

artistry- the refrain “freak out!” was originally a “fuck off!”.⁵⁰ Most responsible for disco’s commercial success was the release of *Saturday Night Fever* in 1977, with a Bee Gees-heavy soundtrack with songs like “Stayin’ Alive” and “Night Fever” that would come to dominate the charts. The movie, which grossed more than \$100 billion in the United States alone, caused the already-popular genre to explode in profits and popularity, inspiring disco-exclusive radio stations, disco television shows, and the spread of disco out of metropolitan areas and into suburban America.⁵¹ Discos even opened for teenagers, like the Guys and Dolls club in Long Island. One 15-year-old clubgoer said, “Disco music is great. Rock stinks, and it’s outdated because you don’t dance to it and you have to get high to listen to it.”⁵² Disco was no longer just gay music- it had become palatable for straight, white America.

Despite *Saturday Night Fever*’s huge success, disco sales began to drop by 1979. The genre’s decline can be explained by many different reasons, since disco’s heyday stretched across the decade and appealed to many different communities, thus creating complexities. One of the biggest factors of its decline was anti-disco rhetoric that had always circulated but increased after 1977. There is no consensus on what shaped this rhetoric the most; Gillian Frank argues that homophobia was responsible, Bruce Schulman argues that racism was responsible, and Alice Echols contends that racism and homophobia were just two of many factors that were detrimental to disco, especially since many of disco’s detractors were black themselves. Regardless, it is evident that, whether such attitudes were sparked by changing race or sexuality

⁵⁰ Richard Buskin, “CLASSIC TRACKS: Chic 'Le Freak',” *Sound on Sound*, (SOS Publications Group, 2005,) <https://www.soundonsound.com/techniques/classic-tracks-chic-le-freak>.

⁵¹ Echols, *Hot Stuff*, 198.

⁵² Andy Edelstein, “Teen-Agers Pick Up Disco Beat: Teen-Agers Pick Up the Disco Beat,” *New York Times* (1978-), Dec 31, 1978. <https://libdatabase.newpaltz.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/teen-agers-pick-up-disco-beat/docview/123546474/se-2?accountid=12761>.

roles within America, it is a part of a greater landscape of growing conservatism and discomfort with the changes that had taken place in the country as a result of activist movements. While the 1960s are known as a decade of social protest, great change occurred in the 1970s as well, such as legal advances in gay liberation and increased economic equality for women. This attitude was also influenced by disgruntled rock fans who hated the lack of substance that disco had in comparison to their beloved rock and roll. Rock was also very popular among white men who didn't care for the dancing that disco entailed and didn't like the prominent gay influence upon pop culture. In addition, disco's popularity contributed to its own demise. For one, record companies like Salsoul Records significantly increased their output of disco songs after *Saturday Night Fever* out of desire to increase profits, but with a decline in quality of the music.⁵³ The genre also lost its appeal to many, since it lost any claims of trendiness once it made its way out of metropolitan areas and into middle America. Record labels also often used vocalists interchangeably, which meant there was a lack of big personalities in an already producer-driven genre that the public was typically drawn to.

On July 12, 1979, disco's fate was decided with Disco Demolition Night, an event orchestrated by Steve Dahl, a Chicago rock radio show host who was outspoken against disco. For the promotion, he invited his listeners to bring disco records to be destroyed at a White Sox game. About 55,000 people were inside the stadium, with tens of thousands more surrounding or stuck in traffic on the nearby expressway.⁵⁴ Footage from the event displays a largely young, white crowd rushing onto the field, throwing objects, attempting to climb into the stadium from the outside, and brandishing "DISCO SUCKS" banners as the disco records burned before

⁵³ Echols, *Hot Stuff*, 211.

⁵⁴ Frank, "Discophobia," 277.

them.⁵⁵ This destructive incident sparked a wave of radio shows mirroring Dahl's anti-disco rhetoric, as well as radio shows dropping disco and reverting to rock, which quickly shaped public opinion. Gay men did continue to enjoy discotheques into the 1980s, enjoying "dance music" which was stylistically similar. In addition, disco helped give rise to hip hop; throughout the seventies, early hip hop deejays borrowed beats from disco, funk, and soul music, and the 1979 hit "Rapper's Delight", the first hip hop song to go mainstream, sampled Chic's "Good Times".⁵⁶ Despite its lasting influences, however, disco as the genre it had been for the last decade was effectively dead.

Initially, I wanted to investigate psychedelic rock on its own since I fell in love with the genre in 2020 and spent the beginning of the pandemic listening to nothing but, a good thirty plus years after my dad had done the same and became a lifelong Deadhead. Frankly, disco was an afterthought. I didn't know much about disco except that my mom thinks it's great and a group of rioters in 1979 thought it was anything but. As I began conducting my research I quickly got frustrated, first with the dreariness of most articles I found, then with the lack of sources pertaining to disco at all. I did not want to write anything and wondered why I even picked such a topic. Slowly, the connections between psychedelic rock and disco clicked for me, and I realized I like disco more than I thought I did. From both sides of the story, psychedelic rock and disco are pitted against each other, and there doesn't seem to exist any space for the idea that both were good and significant genres. I also realize that the vast majority of secondary sources I interacted with were written by older white men and women. Even sources that

⁵⁵ Brad Palmer, "DISCO DEMOLITION NIGHT AT OLD COMISKEY PARK (1979)," Youtube Video, 4:05, June 21, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fAJfOcnYYEQ>.

⁵⁶ Angela Ards, "Organizing the hip-hop generation," *That's the Joint* (2004): 312.

defended disco were written by white scholars, which makes me wonder how much of the true story is lost to the lack of diversity in academia? Nevertheless, I tried to create a piece of research that occupied a space previously vacant, one that appreciates both genres for their own merits and recognizes the similarities between the two.

Psychedelic rock and disco are memorable to this day, but have left different legacies. The sixties are often viewed with a sense of nostalgia for the affluence of the time period and the cultural output associated with the counterculture and Woodstock, though the counterculture was only active towards the end of the decade and did not represent the whole time period. It is also regarded for the activism that occurred, with some historians labeling 1954 to 1975 as the “long sixties” due to the activity of the civil rights movement during that period.⁵⁷ Today, psychedelic rock has seen a resurgence with neo-psychedelia groups such as The Flaming Lips and Tame Impala. The affection for sixties culture and hippies is especially clear in New Paltz, as Main Street is dotted with head shops, local jam bands like Man’s Mother and The Field Service hold outdoor performances, and the area colloquially known as the “Tripping Fields” reminds students of the school’s psychedelic past. Disco remains in the public memory as a kitsch caricature, a “nostalgia for a time of platform shoes, bell-bottoms, and white polyester suits.”⁵⁸ Seventies style music and fashion has made a reappearance in recent pop culture, like Doja Cat’s 2019 hit “Say So” or Silk Sonic’s 2021 hit “Leave The Door Open”, but there are less fuzzy feelings towards the decade known for stagflation, rampant individualism, and distrust in the government. While it’s understandable that the seventies left a negative impact on many, the contrasting nostalgia for the sixties or the concept of the “long sixties” seem strange when considering that the events of

⁵⁷ Jeremy Varon, Michael S. Foley, and John McMillian, “Time is an ocean: the past and future of the Sixties,” *The Sixties*, 1:1, 1-7 (2008), DOI: 10.1080/17541320802075731

⁵⁸ Frank, “Discophobia,” 306.

the seventies wouldn't be possible without the precedent set by the sixties. It is also dismissive of the change that *did* occur in the seventies- otherwise, what would the reactionaries of the decade have been campaigning against?

Even on a scholarly level, psychedelic rock seems to hold more respect as the subject of more scholarship, frequently regarded as profound and political, although most of the music is not explicitly anti-war or political as often thought.⁵⁹ It is true that disco didn't value artistry and consciousness-expansion as psychedelic rock did, but it feels just as useless to academically criticize disco for its shallowness as it is to criticize rock for its, say, lack of danceability. It is more important to investigate the function that each genre served in American society and see that, despite their opposing reputations and their perceived roles as villains in each other's narrative arcs, psychedelic rock and disco held many similarities. However, there has been an increase in revisionist history regarding disco like Echols's *Hot Stuff* that seeks to address the anti-disco biases and assign it more value than it's usually afforded.

Psychedelic rock and disco both offered an outlet for pleasure against a tumultuous political background, whether it was hippies seeking solace from the Vietnam War and the draft, or marginalized groups getting lost in dance in light of the oppression they faced outside the walls of the discotheque. Perhaps it is because the hippies were whiter, straighter, and of a higher class than most of the early fans of disco that such a disparity in treatment exists, or perhaps it is just the nostalgia for a good economy and the Woodstock-induced optimism that is responsible. Both genres, despite stylistic differences, reflected the changing values of United States society, yet the constant pleasures that sex, drugs, and music offered to the people. It is a timeless

⁵⁹ David James, "The Vietnam War and American Music," *Social Text*, no. 23 (1989): 133. <https://doi.org/10.2307/466424>.

concept, but has proved crucial to overcoming even the largest obstacles we've faced as a society.

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