

**This interview with
GLORIA GAYNOR
was conducted by the Library of Congress on
March 29, 2016.**



Gloria Gaynor

LOC: How was the song “I Will Survive” first presented to you—by the songwriters, on a demo?

Gloria Gaynor: It’s a long story—I had performed in New York at the Beacon Theater. And I fell backwards over the monitor. But I jumped up, finished my show, went out to breakfast, then went home and went to bed.

And I woke up the next day, paralyzed from the waist down.

And while I’m there, I’m praying about what I’m going to do. I’m thinking, I can’t do anything! I can’t even maintain my apartment--because I can’t work.

But I prayed and prayed and then felt fully assured by God that I was going to be okay....

And [earlier] my record company had decided that they were not going to renew my contract. There were people walking around the building saying, “The Queen is dead,” because I had been elected queen of disco.

I kept thinking: “So, God—What?”... What am I going to do?

After I left the hospital, after I got home, I learned that they weren’t going to end my contract. The record company had a new president from England. “He likes you,” they said, “He wants you to record a song that he’s had success with in England”; the song was entitled “Substitute.”

I went to Los Angeles, to record this song with these new producers. And they had made a deal that they’d produce [“Substitute”], *if* they could write a B-side.

They asked me, “What kind of songs do you like to sing?”

I said, “I like good melodies, good lyrics, meaningful songs that touch people’s hearts.”

They said that they believed I was the one they had been waiting for to record a song they'd written two years prior. They wrote the lyrics out on a brown paper bag and handed it to me.

I read it and thought, "What are you? Stupid?" I said, "Of course, I can relate to this. Everyone is going to relate to this! Everyone can relate to this, with whatever they are going through." I related it to what I was going through with my back.

I asked, "You're gonna put this on the 'B' side!?" And [the writers] were like "Most likely, no one's going to hear it. But, it might get a shot sometime in the future."

And I said, "They will NOW!, if I have anything to do with it!"

I took [the record] to the record company—they didn't want to listen to it because no one wanted to go against the president's choice.

I took it to my management team and the A&R guy at the label and we took it to Studio 54. The DJ there played it and the audience immediately loved it! And if they loved it, I was convinced—New York audiences are so jaded.

We gave the DJ a stack of the records which he passed out to his NY DJ friends. Soon people began to request it in other clubs, and then on the radio. And when the radio stations started getting requests for the single, and began to call the record company about it, much to their chagrin, the record company had to say, "Well, you've already got it--it's on the B side!"

LOC: I was surprised to learn that at the time you recorded "I Will Survive," you had just had surgery on your back. Were you in traction?

GG: I was in a back brace, it was like that plastic that they use for cheap lawn chairs. It was molded--molded to my body—and then latched in front.

LOC: Could you sit down? Did it affect your breathing when you sang?

GG: I could sit down. The brace went just to my hips, it would end just about an inch before hitting the chair. I just couldn't bend my back. It didn't affect my breathing.

LOC: Today, when you sing "I Will Survive," do you sing it differently than you did when you first recorded it?

GG: Oh, yeah! A lot of differently. Today, I think of what it has seen me through: the death of my mother, the death of all but one of my siblings (I had six siblings originally.) My divorce....

I sing it with a lot more conviction, a lot more feeling. And *emotion*.

LOC: "I Will Survive" has, of course, been labeled "disco" and you a "disco artist." Are these labels correct?

GG: Well, it's disco music in that disco is music for dancing. I actually think it's more of an R&B song.

I think the one thing that disco has never gotten credit for is being the one type of music in history to truly bring together people from *every* nationality, race, creed, and age group.

Disco music is alive and well, and living in the hearts of music lovers around the world. It's simply changed its name to protect the innocent...or the not-so-innocent!

LOC: I'm sure over the years you have heard many stories about how "I Will Survive" has served as an anthem for people—are there any particular stories that stand out for you?

GG: Oh, yes. In fact I wrote a book about many of those stories! It came out as an audio book, as well, and was nominated for a Grammy.

It's a compilation of 40 stories that fans, friends, and family have told me about how "I Will Survive" has encouraged, inspired them, empowered them.

LOC: Could you ever do a concert and not perform "I Will Survive"?

GG: I couldn't...nor do I want to. I love singing the song and knowing what it does to people and for people, and that I've given them something that lasts beyond the duration of the concert.