

“I Will Survive”--Gloria Gaynor (1978)

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Essay by Louis Niebur (guest post)*



Gloria Gaynor



Original single



Original single sleeve

On the surface, Gloria Gaynor's disco anthem, "I Will Survive" tells the straightforward story of a woman unwilling to put up with a cheating partner. But immediately upon its release in 1978, it was endowed by listeners with much more power than this simple premise, through its universal themes of strength, pride, independence, and overcoming self-doubt. It had, and continues to have, particular resonance with the groups most closely connected with disco since its creation in the early 1970s: African-Americans, gays, and women. Gaynor's story isn't one of overnight success. Rather, her title as the first "Queen of Discos" was earned after years of struggle as a touring live musician, sacrificing security and stability for the less tangible but more fulfilling rewards of a musical career.

Gaynor was born on September 9, 1949 as Gloria Fowles in Newark, New Jersey. After high school, she spent nearly a decade singing in a string of semi-regular nightclub gigs, and touring the chitterling circuit, performing standards alongside the latest Top 40 hits with house bands up and down the east coast. She recorded her first single, “She’ll Be Sorry” for Johnny Nash’s Jocida Records in 1965. Nash also recommended she change her name to the alliterative “Gloria Gaynor,” in the hopes that people would call her by the catchy “G.G.” (a nickname that stuck). Throughout the second half of the 1960s and the first half of the 1970s, she and her band, City Life, achieved some renown with their upbeat disco sound, playing venues around the East and Midwest.

After an introduction to Clive Davis at Columbia Records, she recorded “Honey Bee” as a solo artist, which became a modest club hit in 1974, primarily in gay discos. Gaynor and her band had been performing their own arrangement of the classic song “Never Can Say Goodbye” and, after a move to MGM Records, she recorded her first album titled “Never Can Say Goodbye.” A highlight of the album was the title track, “Honey Bee,” and “Reach Out, I’ll Be There” all three edited into one continuous dancefloor groove, filling an entire side of the record. Mixed by Tom Moulton, it was the first of its kind. Along with drummer Allan Schwartzberg’s adoption of Earl Young’s distinctive off beat hi-hat pattern and Harold Wheeler’s dramatic arrangement, Gaynor’s unapologetic vocal

delivery refashioned the title song into an upbeat, strident, and empowering statement, which, according to disco historian Alice Echols, “go a long way toward stripping the song of its anguish.”

“Never Can Say Goodbye,” the song, and “Never Can Say Goodbye,” the album, were milestones in disco history, and Gaynor’s performance let her to be crowned the “Queen of Discos” by the National Association of Discotheque Disc Jockeys in 1975, in a ceremony complete with 30-pound cape, throne, crown, and trophy!

A series of albums followed on MGM/Polydor, establishing Gaynor as a consistent presence on the dance charts, one whose style and voice captured the joyousness of disco. As disco rose to prominence as the premiere popular American musical form after the release of the film “Saturday Night Fever” in 1977, however, Gaynor’s hits had begun to slow down. And while her music had never left the dance floors, she had yet to recapture the mainstream success of “Never Can Say Goodbye.” To make matters worse, in 1978, Gaynor had suffered a spinal injury during a performance, leaving her nearly paralyzed from the waist down. Only after surgery and intensely painful physical therapy was she able to recover her ability to walk.

During this low-point, Gaynor was visited by legendary producer Freddie Perren, who wanted her to record a new disco version of the Righteous Brother’s 1975 song, “Substitute.” The song had already been a disco hit for Polydor in Europe with the girl group Clout, and the label’s new president was looking for an equally successful American version. The song was released in 1978, with the b-side, “I Will Survive,” written by Motown stalwart Dino Fekaris.

Perren and Fekaris had recently had a string of successful disco hits with performers like Peaches and Herb, Tavares, Yvonne Elliman and The Sylvers, and they felt sure “Substitute” would be another feather in their, and Gaynor’s, cap. But it was immediately apparent to her and her producers that “I Will Survive” was the stronger track. Gaynor recalled in her autobiography that, “we discussed the kinds of things I like to sing and the kind of subject matter I liked to deal with,” and Fekaris wrote “I Will Survive” based on these discussions. She recorded the vocals from a wheelchair and a back brace, finding inspiration in her determination to overcome her physical pain and disability.

When the record label was unwilling to promote “I Will Survive” over “Substitute,” Gaynor took matters into her own hands. Delivering the song to famed Studio 54 DJ Richard Kaczor, Gaynor knew the song would be a hit with dancers. As she recalled, “we took with us the A&R man from the record company to show him that the people would like it. So Ritchie played it while we all were standing there. The audience immediately loved it. And you know New York audiences don’t immediately love anything.” Within a few months, radio stations had begun playing this b-side, and “I Will Survive,” finally released as its own single, gradually rose up the Billboard Hot 100. By March, 1979, the song reached number one, where it remained for three weeks.

The disco genre found in “I Will Survive” an anthem that reflected one of its central themes: providing a voice to those whose voices were often silenced. Women have heard in the song a model of independence and strength, and the belief that their identity is not solely defined by their relationships with men. Disco was one of the first dance forms in popular culture that allowed women to dance independently of men, allowing them to shine on their own, a literal manifestation of liberation. The prominence of African-American voices in disco offered the representation of a newly empowered population, who assumed their equality, and offered no apologies or compromises. The gay community, in particular, who had created disco in the newly-legalized dance clubs of a post-Stonewall New York, heard a kindred spirit in the song. Proud, defiant, and determined, the song (which dispenses with the standard backup singers in favor of a lone, powerful voice) symbolized the ongoing struggle for equality. And in the 1980s and 1990s, with the outbreak of AIDS/HIV, the song gained a new meaning for the gay community, promoting solidarity and determination in the face of unimaginable loss. To this day, the song continues to inspire and motivate audiences, and is a battle cry to those who seek to overcome the challenges of contemporary life.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.