

**This interview with
NILE RODGERS
was conducted by the Library of Congress
on May 9, 2018**



Library of Congress: Is it true that the song “Le Freak” was born out of an evening of frustration outside of Studio 54?

Nile Rodgers: Yes, 100%. I can give you the story. It was early on in our career and we had never produced [for] a *star*. All of our records had been successful—“Dance, Dance, Dance,” Norma Jean [Wright’s] “I Can’t Wait for Saturday.” They had all gone gold and platinum and made stars. But we had never produced *for* a star.

Then Grace Jones phoned us. She said that the only way to understand her completely as an artist was to see her perform live. We were very anxious to produce what would have been her next album, to start a relationship with her. She told us to come to the back door of 54 and say we were “Personal friends of Miss Grace Jones.” And to say exactly that.

Now Grace has a very interesting accent. It’s very unusual; it’s not reflective of any one culture. It’s like a mix of Marlene Dietrich and Bob Marley and Bela Lugosi. I thought [her accent] was a put on, at first....

When we went to the back door, we put that voice on. I mean, in some ways it was just too easy—we were just about to get into 54! It was the hottest club on the planet! The center of the disco universe!

We are banging on the back door really hard in order to be heard above the level of the music inside. Finally this guy opened the door and I said, “Helloooo. We are personal frieeennnds of Meeeez Grace Jones.”

And he slammed that door in our face, saying “Oh, f--- off!”

Well, we couldn’t believe it. We sounded just like the voice on the phone....

Frantically, we begin knocking again, kept kicking the door. Obviously annoying the guy inside but we had to beat the decibel level inside. We are knocking with our fists and kicking with the heels of our shoes.

He came back, “Oh, didn’t I tell you to f--- off!?”

It was so disappointing. And we dressed to the nines! We wanted to make a big impression on Grace.

Finally, we were like, “I guess that’s it.”

At the time, I only lived a block away. On our way back to my place, we passed a liquor store and got two bottles of Dom Perignon. Or, as everybody called it then, “Rock ‘n’ roll mouth wash.” We downed them pretty fast. We quickly went from shunned and depressed to giddy and happy.

Then we started going [*singing*], “Ah, f--- off!

[*sings*] “F--- 54!”

And we developed it. We wrote a bridge! We came up with every possible scenario to put with “F--- off!”

Finally after playing with it for so long, we began the process of internalization.... It sounded really good to us.

Of course, you know this sh-- is happening two years before hip-hop, so I said to Bernard, you know, “They can’t play this on radio.” It would become “beep,... beep, off!” It would be rejected by every record company.

So I came up with “freak out.” I was kind of a hippie when I was 14 years old. I took acid. I took acid with Timothy Leary; who I didn’t really know who was at the time. I told Bernard what “freaking out” meant. I told Bernard about what a “bad trip” was; Bernard had never done anything. I said, “It’s like when you are freaking out on the dance floor. When you are dancing the night away.” The kids are doing this dance.

So we decided to mix Chubby Checker’s “The Twist,” with the “Peppermint Twist,” and teach people about doing the “Freak.” [The song] was about a dance.

That’s how we were introduced on “American Bandstand.” Dick Clark said, “This is the strangest band with the strangest record about a dance nobody knows....”

That’s what it was, about this dance.

LOC: Since “LeFreak” was about dance is that what inspired the mention of the Savoy in the lyrics?

NR: Chic’s concept was based upon the “buppie movement,” the rise of black urban professionals now representing themselves on Wall Street. Chic was *their* band. It was similar to the era of Count Basie.... It was about the anglophilic lifestyle that we could aspire to. [Chic] was patterned after those bands in the 1920s. The jazz age.

Basically, I came up with the idea when I was in London and my bag got stolen. Someone took my passport and I was stranded in London. But my girlfriend at the time talked me into going to see her favorite band—Roxy Music.

I couldn't believe how elegant and fashionable they were! Usually rock and roll stars wear whatever they put on when they got up that morning, that's what they wore on stage. But, WOW! These guys dress up in couture and suits to do their set?!

Bernard had pointed out that, if you're good, fans imitate the artist. So, we wanted Chic to be wearing suits. It can backfire sometimes, but the concept worked. We were also the first to incorporate fashion designers' names into music—we talked about Halston, Gucci. Sister Sledge mentioned them in "He's the Greatest Dancer." Before, rock never mentioned fashion, before it was just cars!

LOC: Long after disco "died," "Le Freak" has endured. Why do you think it has remained so strongly part of the culture?

NR: I was wondering about that myself. Of course, I don't ask older people about it; they grew up with it. I ask young people.

We do shows now and the median age is 17, it's 19...we even see 12 and 13 year olds.

I do think one of main reasons is the video games and films which introduce this music to them.

When I was growing up, the music that I heard in cartoons was a lot of classical—Liszt, Mozart, Wagner—that's what they used because it was public domain. [*Sings*] *Kill the wabbit, Kill the wabbit!* Now, the music in—video games and, let's call it, electronic entertainment—is our music. You know, they grew up with "Shrek."

There are tons of examples. I'm always getting requests to license our music for new things. And kids come up to me and say, "Did you know you are in 'Dance Revolution 2, 3 and 4'!"

LOC: Speaking of enduring songs. You also co-wrote "We Are Family," by Sister Sledge, another recording on the National Registry. How did the Sisters come to be involved with that particular song?

NR: We had had a string of successes at Atlantic and Sister Sledge was on the same label. The label was really pressuring us at that time to produce either Bette Midler or the Rolling Stones, then the company's two biggest acts. But we felt if we did produce the Stones and they got a big record out of it, that was just going to be just another thing that the Stones did; it would be nothing special to us.

Our production style was to play the song in our style and then have the artists copy us. But you know that wouldn't work for Mick Jagger and Keith Richards. So we said, "Can you give us someone unknown?" We thought, "If we can take *them* to the top, then they'd believe in us." We would have a solid foundation for ourselves upon which we could build, like our own Motown within the company.

We sat down with the [heads of the company], in this meeting, taking down dictation on a legal pad! Tried to act like we were professionals! Atlantic said, "We've got these girls. We can't seem to get a hit with them but we really like them."

We were journeymen. We always had ideas that seemed logical to us. I coined a term--"band logic," which is not to be and never to be confused with actual logic!

They told us about this group of sisters who we had never met. But we came up with a complete record before they [Sister Sledge] even came to the studio—well, almost complete, we were still working on the lyrics when they showed up.

Of course, we could never have done that with the Stones! It felt like we could make hit records, if it was done our way. We were introduced to them and they were really wonderful about it all.

Kathy Sledge said it best, she said, “We were going along for the ride. And it was a wonderful ride!”

LOC: I also wanted to ask you about yet another song of yours that is on the Registry—“Rapper’s Delight” by the Sugarhill Gang. But you only sort of found out about your involvement in that record after the fact, didn’t you?

NR: Yes, I was in a nightclub in New York and I heard what I thought was the DJ rapping over a simulation of one our tracks that a band had done. To be completely honest, we used to do that, too. People would hire us to do what was called a “break-down” of a song, to make a 12-inch single for clubs, a disco break-down that took a song from three minutes to nine minutes.

We weren’t offended. What did offend me was that they took our record and “sampled” it. That’s something different. It’s like if I took the bar scene from “Star Wars” and put it in the middle of my movie—that’s copyright infringement. That is infringement all day long.

I mean, musicians copy each other all time time—that’s what we call “writing” *[laughs]*. We learn to play our instruments by copying others.

So, I’m not disturbed by it. A lot of mimicking of our bass line has taken place. In fact, I just left a meeting where we named five of them....

But the DJ had scratched over the strings in our song. I said, even though it’s just a small infraction, they can’t do that without a license. It’s completely against the law. It’s just not fair. You don’t know how long I worked on that! I had to think of it, hire a studio, hire musicians and get it to some sort of completion. I toiled to come up with that.

So, we sued. They though had Morris Levy on their side. He was this...well, a mob tough guy. He beat John Lennon in a copyright suit. He sued John Lennon!

The point we were making was totally valid—sampling is part of composing. That’s why now you see full credits on songs--sometimes a crazy number of composers.

Back then, our instincts were right. We didn’t know this was the start of something. Our instincts were right though. We recognized that it was copyright. So we sued them but not for the base line---for the strings. A judge could easily say, “Maybe all bass line sound like that” but not the strings.

We came first. It was a hard case to win but it was a clear-cut case.

The head of our record company wouldn’t join us on the lawsuit. I think they were scared of Morris. We had to it alone. But we were young and naïve, and we were artists.