

“Saturday Night Fever”—Bee Gees, et.al. (1977)

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Essay by David N. Meyer (guest post)*



Original album cover

Disco is not the Bee Gees' fault.

They are not to blame. When “Saturday Night Fever” hit, most record executives thought disco had already peaked. The Bee Gees’ only offense was to make disco popular again at a time when its dominance of pop music seems to be flagging.

Very, very popular.

“Saturday Night Fever” sold 25 million copies between 1977 and 1980, which at that time the most copies sold of any sound recording since sound recording began. So far, it’s sold over 40 million copies. For six months, starting in January of 1978, the album topped the popularity surveys of all three major industry trade papers: “Billboard,” “Cashbox,” and “Record World.” At one point, it was selling 200,000 copies a day in an America with a hundred million fewer inhabitants than today.

Four singles released from the album were number one hits: the Bee Gee’s “How Deep Is Your Love,” “Stayin’ Alive,” “Night Fever” and Yvonne Elliman’s “If I Can’t Have You,” like the others, a Bee Gee’s composition. Thanks to the success of their younger brother Andy’s hit, “Shadow Dancing,” which was not part of “SNF,” between Christmas 1977 and June 1978, six Bee Gee songs held the top singles charts spot for 25 of 32 weeks. Barry Gibb became the first solo songwriter in history to have three consecutive #1’s and four songs in the Top Ten simultaneously. The “Saturday Night Fever” album stayed in the Top 200 from November 1977 to March 1980: 29 consecutive months.

“Saturday Night Fever” proved such a monster because--Bee Gees aside--it featured well-known disco tracks from brand name bands: KC and the Sunshine Band; Kool & The Gang; Trammps; M.F.S.B.; Yvonne Elliman; Ralph McDonald and Walter Murphy. “SNF” offered a range of sounds and styles--a complete dance party on two discs. “SNF”

also provided the template for today's universe of cross-marketing: the soundtrack sold the movie and the movie hit and sold the soundtrack, which boosted the movie.

The movie and soundtrack were the brainstorms of Robert Stigwood, one of the most brilliant, cunning and relentless manger-entrepreneurs in rock and roll history. It all started with a June 7, 1976 article in "New York Magazine" about Queens, New York working-class young adults who flocked to a local disco in platform shoes and outlandish clothes to perform organized dances. Stigwood read "Tribal Rites of Saturday Night," and immediately bought the rights from the author, seminal rock critic Nik Cohn. Cohn later admitted he fabricated the entire piece and based the Queens dancing teens on British Mods from the 1960s. But by the time Cohn was found out, life had imitated art so abundantly no one cared. When the movie adaptation of the article, "Saturday Night Fever" starring John Travolta, exploded, America made Cohn's fantasy a daily reality.

To make the movie, Stigwood hired a writer and director and chose the cast. Meanwhile, the Bee Gees--for tax reasons--traveled to Hérouville, France, to record in a ramshackle studio in a rundown castle in the middle of nowhere. After Elton John recorded his 1972 platinum album there, the studio became famous under that album's name--the Honky Chateau. The Sweet, Cat Stevens, David Bowie, Fleetwood Mac and others soon followed.

Stigwood phoned the Bee Gees as they worked on tracks for a then-untitled new record. He wanted five songs for the soundtrack to his film. Working with typical speed, the Bee Gees knocked out the songs--the backbone of "Saturday Night Fever"--in one long weekend. Stigwood arrived in France with the script in hand. He ran down the script and told the Gibb brothers to hone their tracks to suit the story. As they always did, the Bee Gees delivered.

The Bee Gees (beyond the three brothers) were a real band, men who'd already played together on two albums and two tours over two years. Producer Albhy Galuten and engineer Karl Richardson were key collaborators. Dennis Bryon played drums on most tracks; Maurice Gibb played bass; Barry Gibb, rhythm guitar; Blue Weaver, keyboards and synthesizers; and Alan Kendall, guitars. It's generally agreed--though with the Bee Gees credit is often in dispute--that most of the ideas for the songs came from Barry, the alpha Bee Gee. None of the Gibb brothers could read music and none ever wrote down their musical ideas. Barry would present his song sketches on acoustic guitar and hum the keyboard, string and horn parts. Barry was renowned for his perfect pitch and equally perfect recall of how he wanted every aspect of a song. Robin Gibb contributed musical suggestions and vocal harmony.

"Stayin' Alive" made history for more than sales. It features the first drum loop ever recorded on a pop music track. During recording, drummer Dennis Bryon's mother died and he left the sessions to return to England. Karl Richardson took one complete drumbeat from the drum tracks for "Night Fever" and spooled that 20-foot loop of tape across the studio, over microphone stands and through empty tape reels to run through the master recorder. The band credited the drums on "Stayin' Alive" to "Bernard Lupe"

--a compliment to the great R&B drummer Bernard Purdie. The Gibbs insisted that afterward they received numerous calls looking to hire Lupe for recording sessions.

This ubiquitous juggernaut--incessantly on the radio, in the car or everyone's turntable at home--inevitably stirred backlash and resentment. To chants of "Disco Sucks," popular public taste turned elsewhere. As they stuffed their platform shoes into the back of the closet, some forgot how much they loved and how often they danced to "SNF," but, for many others, it remains the perfect embodiment of the zeitgeist.

David N. Meyer's "Twenty Thousand Roads: The Ballad of Gram Parsons and His Cosmic American Music" was named one of the 20 Best Nonfiction Books of the Year by the "Los Angeles Times" and one of the three best books of the year by "Rolling Stone." A professor in cinema studies, he also wrote "A Girl and A Gun: The Complete Guide to Film Noir" and "The 100 Best Films To Rent You've Never Heard Of."

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