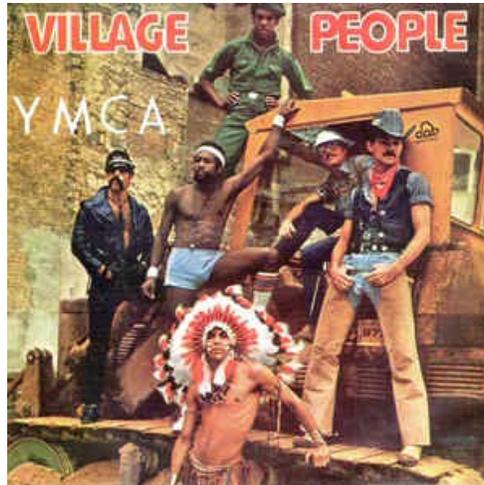


“Y.M.C.A.”--The Village People (1978)

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Essay by Josiah Howard (guest post)*



Aside from their shared dream of becoming rich and famous, Village People--all six band members--really didn't have much in common. Still, their outsize fantasy, one that they'd work tirelessly to achieve, would prove to be enough. For a time at least.

Mention the Village People and you'll probably hear a snicker or two, or get a pointed pursed lip and side-eye. If that doesn't happen you might watch as someone throws their arms into the air and contorts them into the shape of the letters Y, M, C, and A.

During the late 1970s and early '80s, Village People sold more than 100 million records, had three top ten pop hits, four top twenty dance/club hits, toured the world (selling out New York City's 20,789-seat Madison Square Garden twice), and made a major motion picture--1980's "Can't Stop the Music." They were award winners, television staples and pop culture icons whose music played everywhere: from discotheques to doctor's offices, from underground sex clubs to bar mitzvahs, from sporting events to the local mall. And they did something more. As Casablanca Records President Neil Bogart once unequivocally observed, "It's just Donna (Summer) and the boys (Village People): they're the ones who keep the lights on around here."

They kept the lights on elsewhere as well. The brainchild of French/Moroccan music producers Jacques Morali and Henri Belolo--who'd previously made a name for themselves with two top twenty hits for the Ritchie Family--1975's "Brazil" and 1976's "The Best Disco in Town"--Village People, it was decided, was going to do what the Ritchie Family had not managed to: ascend to the number one spot on the all-important "Billboard" pop charts.

Nineteen seventy-seven's eponymous "Village People" album was a collection of just four songs--a slim 22 minutes, recorded by a group of studio musicians and an unknown singer. The

songs targeted a niche record buying audience: gay discotheques and their patrons. The titles were self-explanatory: "Fire Island" (the East Coast's gay summer retreat); "San Francisco (You've Got Me)" (the West coast's premier gay destination); "Village People" (a look at the inhabitants of New York City's largely gay Greenwich Village); and "In Hollywood (Everybody is a Star)," the promise of artistic accomplishment in the world's entertainment capital.

Singer/songwriter Phil Hurtt was the one who broadened the album's appeal. At the time best known for co-writing "I'll Be Around," a top ten hit for the Spinners, Hurtt revised and "tamed" writer Peter Whitehead's original lyrics, making them more palatable for mainstream audiences. He also created the vocal arrangements and sang the guide track over which the group would eventually sing. Gypsy Lane, talented musicians from Philadelphia, created the music heard on Village People's first album.

Village People consisted of six members, each of whom personified a popular gay archetype. Twenty-one year-old Victor Willis, who was African American and heterosexual, was the soulful voice of the group. Costumed, as he eventually would be, as a Police Officer/Naval officer (he started out as a well-dressed "disco man"), Willis would go on to co-write several of the group's hits. Twenty-six year-old Alexander Briley, who was also African American (and heterosexual), took the role of enlisted GI/Sailor (he started out as a suspenders-wearing, boom box-toting "street kid"). Nineteen year-old Felipe Rose, who was Lakota Sioux/Puerto Rican, presented as the "Indian," a bespangled, war bonnet and loin cloth-wearing Native American, and 31-year old David Hodo was the helmeted, mirror sunglass-wearing Construction Worker. Rounding things out were 27-year old Glenn Hughes as the heavily-mustached Biker/Leather Man, and 25-year old Randy Jones as the ten-gallon hat and chaps wearing Cowboy. Only Willis and Rose participated on the "Village People" LP--with Rose indecorously credited as "Felipe 'Indian From the Anvil'" (the Anvil was a gay NYC sex club). Willis had brought Briley onboard, while Hodo, Hughes and Jones came by way of a no-nonsense trade ad: "Macho Types Wanted: Must Dance and Have a Mustache." They did.

Following three months of rigorous rehearsals, and with 1978's "Macho Man" just arriving in stores, on February 28, 1978, Village People made their debut at Brooklyn, New York's Odyssey nightclub--the discotheque seen in "Saturday Night Fever." The performance, the first of an extended cross-country tour, showcased the six band members backed by a six-member live band: 12 animated, choreographed, costumed men onstage! It was a gamble.

"We looked out at the audience and every guy had on that white polyester John Travolta suit, and every girl had Farrah Fawcett's feathered hairdo," remembered Randy Jones later. Regardless, they were a hit. The gay messaging in their songs, the gay fantasy stripper-costumes, the gay dancing and faux macho posturing seemed to go over the heads of the audience--or they just didn't care. It took just a single live performance for everyone; Casablanca Records, producers Morali and Belolo, and the Village People themselves, to realize that they were in possession of a winning formula.

The album "Macho Man" was a calculated continuation of the inroads made by the "Village People" album. This time a little longer, six songs rather than four, the song titles continued to appeal to a targeted demographic. "Key West" (a gay resort destination), "Just a Gigolo," "I Am What I Am" (a gay declaration), and "Sodom and Gomorrah" reached their core audience--but the single "Macho Man" reached further. An energetic chant song whose lyrics extolled the male form, exercise and gym culture, "Macho Man" was heard by straight audiences as less gay and more sports/athletics/cool-dude fun music. The result was dance floor dynamite and a #25 showing on the "Billboard" pop charts.

And then came the album that would propel Village People into pop music's stratosphere. Nineteen seventy-nine's double entendre-titled "Crusin'" (referencing gay cruising) hit stores just seven months after "Macho Man." Like the albums that preceded it, the collection contained the requisite titles: "I'm a Cruiser," "My Roommate," and "Hot Cop." But nothing compared to the single "Y.M.C.A."

An ode to the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), an American support institution originally created to provide housing and recreation for returning World War II vets, Village People's incantation offered up other, more lascivious, considerations. As they covertly revealed, the YMCA was not only a place where one could "have fun" and "have a good time," it was also a place where, if you so desired, you could "hang out with all the boys." (The YMCA briefly objected to the usurping of their brand but, following an agreeable out of court settlement, embraced the free publicity the song engendered.)

Not all publicity was good publicity, however: at least not according to Victor Willis. Throughout Willis' run with the original lineup (he would exit in 1979), the front man liked to point out that "Y.M.C.A." was not a "gay" song, but "a song for everyone." He wrote it--along with producers Morali and Belolo, appropriating the four-syllable chant heard on "San Francisco (You've Got Me)." That song's chorus--"San-Fran-Cis-Co," became "Y-M-C-A," complete with hoots, hollers and vocal flourishes.

"Y.M.C.A.'s" music was fashioned in the key of G major and divided into separate parts: each embellished with a distinct brass arrangement by famed session musician Horace Ott. Ott's horns continue throughout, punctuating a driving 148 BPM backing track. The sounds of a full orchestra are heard. So is a base-guitar, rhythm guitar, Fender Rhodes piano, clavinet, conga, timbale, triangle, and tambourine. Floating above it all are syncopated hand claps: sound blasts that allude to the tune's dubious leitmotif of sports, athleticism and fitness. Victor Willis' impassioned lead vocal, what one reviewer called "a husky-voiced church shout," tops it all off. Willis was the soul cred: an indispensable element.

It was true that "Y.M.C.A.," which peaked at number two in America but topped the charts in 15 other countries, was unique and stood out from the competition. But it was also true that the territory it covered had been traveled before. Petula Clark's 1964 smash "Downtown" was one of many songs that paved the way for "Y.M.C.A." Both had instantly memorable sing-song choruses; extolled the virtues and freedoms of city life; offered a sanctuary to the disenfranchised;

and furtively acknowledged the misfit. Additionally, lyrics like “linger on the sidewalk where the neon signs are pretty” and “someone who is just like you and needs a gentle hand to guide them along” were tacit invitations for a gay listening audience.

There would be three more Casablanca Records albums for Village People (six in all), before a major cast, label and career change. Nineteen seventy-nine's “Go West” contained the number three pop hit “In The Navy” (another ode to a national institution), and that same year's “Live & Sleazy” was a double disc set--one live with Victor Willis on lead, and one studio with leads by Ray Simpson (Willis' replacement), David Hodo and Alex Briley. The group's final significant creative endeavor was 1980's motion picture soundtrack album “Can't Stop the Music”--on which they performed six songs. “Can't Stop the Music” both topped off the new decade and finished off Village People's reign as a multi-platform, arena-filling, music industry commodity.

Today “Y.M.C.A.” remains one of fewer than 40 singles to have sold more than ten million physical copies. It's a mainstay in advertising, films, television and theater. It's got its very own group-dance routine (at the Sun Bowl, 40,148 people did the “Y.M.C.A.” dance--placing Village People in the “Guinness Book of World Records”), and it was chosen by American astronauts as the daily wakeup call on the Space Shuttle's *STS-106* space mission.

“Y.M.C.A.” was more than a hit record, it was a cultural milestone: a world anthem built on, for, and about gay life and sensibilities that was, nevertheless, fully embraced by mainstream audiences. More than 40 years after its release it remains the go-to party record: the first festive stop for teenagers, grandmas, children, heads of state and, yes, even construction workers!

Josiah Howard writes on popular culture and is the author of four books including “Blaxploitation Cinema: The Essential Reference Guide” and “Cher: Strong Enough.” A senior contributor at Furious Cinema, he regularly lectures on film and has curated cinema retrospectives in America, Brazil, UK and the Netherlands.

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

Notes:

In 2012, Victor Willis reclaimed 50 percent of the copyright for “Y.M.C.A.” and other songs that he cowrote.

In 2015, producer Henri Belolo's name was removed from “Y.M.C.A” and 13 other songs that originally credited him as “cowriter.”

In 2017, Victor Willis was granted sole use of the name “Village People.” A recast group continues to tour with Willis at the helm