

“I Feel Love” —Donna Summer (1977)

Added to the National Registry: 2011

Essay by Cary O'Dell



Original record artwork



Original release label



Giorgio Moroder

Though disco's musical origins can be traced back to the early 1970s, it is in 1977 that disco, as a musical style and cultural phenomenon, truly came into its own. That year saw disco and disco-styled hits dominate radio, sales charts, and dance clubs as well the first single and underground hit by the Village People and the phenomenal success of the film "Saturday Night Fever" starring a white-suited John Travolta and featuring a legendary soundtrack led by the falsetto-singing Bee Gees.

That year would also see the release of Donna Summer's "I Feel Love," a techno, synth-based, pulsating concoction that gave disco its heartbeat and launched Summer and her producers/co-writers, Giorgio Moroder and Pete Bellotte, into superstardom.

Donna Summer (nee LaDonna Adrian Gaines and born in 1948) grew up in Boston, one of seven children, and did her first singing in church, following in the footsteps of her early idol, Mahalia Jackson. She skipped school often in her teen years in order to sing with area bands. She also skipped out of high school just before graduation to decamp for New York City and become involved in theatrical circles. Soon she was touring Germany with a traveling production of the American musical "Hair." Summer would remain on the continent for the next eight years working as a model and performing in stage productions of "Porgy and Bess" and "Showboat." She augmented her income by working as a backup singer at the Musicland recording studios in Munich. Germany was also the sight of the singer's first marriage. Her union with Austrian actor Helmut Sommer lasted from 1971 to 1976; she would later adapt his surname into her on-stage moniker. The couple had one daughter, Mimi, born in 1973.

It was at the Musicland studios that Summer made the acquaintance of music producer Moroder and songwriter Bellotte. The then heads of their own small recording label, Oasis Records, the Italian-born Moroder and the English-bred Bellotte were working to synthesize a variety of European musical styles into a successful fusion. They found a great interpreter and collaborator in Summer. Summer reported in her memoir, "Ordinary Girl," "We were looking to create a sound and a singing style based less on the tradition of the jukebox and more on that of the theater. My greatest gift as a singer-songwriter has always been telling stories. That's why I was a natural for musical theater. And it is what first caught the eye, ear and imagination of Giorgio."

The team's first work resulted in the single "Hostage" which became a hit in France, Belgium and the Netherlands. This was followed by the single "Lady of the Night." But it was their next collaboration that was their first breakthrough, in terms of both the emerging "disco" sound and US audiences.

“Love to Love You Baby” was originally a 17-minute long quivering mass of synthesized beats (courtesy of the new Moog synthesizer) and deep, guttural moans seductively emitted by Ms. Summer. Its rhythms and suggestive “lyrics” resulted in a new-fangled type of dance single, one that has been described as creating a “hypnotic lubricity.” Though “Love to Love You Baby” did not fare well in Europe (with the exception of some Parisian clubs), it caught on (despite some controversy) in the US when it was released in 1975. And it certainly paved the way for the next Summer-Moroder-Bellotte collaboration, “I Feel Love,” which was released in 1977.

Similar to “Love to Love You Baby,” “I Feel Love” possessed the same sort of techno soul as its predecessor but, this time, it was reimagined with a slightly stronger beat—making it perfect for the dance floor. Lyrically it is similar as well as it is decidedly undemanding lyrically. There are only seven phrases in the entire song. Among them: “Oh, it’s so good”; “Fallin’ free” and, of course, “I feel love.” Each is repeated liberally, if not monotonously, throughout the recording.

But, for Summer and this song, it is not what she says but how she says it that got people moving. The songstress imbued each line with pungent meaning. Every “ooh” that is delivered arrived in a stunningly clear, just short of operatic soprano.

Though “I Feel Love” was easily Summer’s major breakthrough, the ethereal, breathy vocals the song demanded did little to truly showcase the singer’s range or strengths. Summer possessed powerful pipes but it would take her later hits like “Last Dance” from 1978, “Hot Stuff” from 1979, and “Bad Girls,” also from ’79, for audiences to truly discover that fact. Ken Tucker of “Rolling Stone,” at the time, described Summer’s vocals on “I Feel Love” as “the luxurious stretching out of a performer just beginning to realize her strengths and possibilities.”

While disco was happening before the ascendance of Summer and her cohorts, it was certainly their smooth yet hard-edged music that seemed to truly give the movement an appropriate score against which to unfurl its crowded, under-lit dance floors and twirling mirror balls. (And, it should be noted, also some of its seamier aspects—straight and gay promiscuity and rampant drug use as seen in disco’s unofficial epicenter of New York’s Studio 54). Jason Ankeny writes at Allmusic.com: “‘I Feel Love’ heralded a massive shift from the lushly orchestral disco records popular during the middle of the decade toward a harder-edged, electronic approach -- completely computer-generated....”

The success of “Love to Love You” and “I Feel Love”—along with “On the Radio” (1980), “MacArthur Park” (1978) and “Enough is Enough,” her duet with Barbara Streisand (1979)—earned Summer the title of “The Queen of Disco.” It was an undisputed honor. Amongst other qualifications, Summer was one of the few artists of the genre to enjoy any truly lasting career success.

Still, “Disco Queen” did not fully sum up Summer’s talents. Long after disco (the term if not the sound) became antiquated, Summer continued to have hits. One of the biggest hits of her career was 1983’s “She Works Hard for the Money,” a song Summer co-wrote and which would later become adopted as a feminist anthem. During her career—which ended prematurely in 2012 with her unexpected passing—Summer would be awarded five Grammy Awards out of a total of 18 nominations.

Despite battle cries of “Disco’s dead” and “Disco sucks,” Giorgio Moroder would, too, endure. Along with his continued work with Summer, Moroder would go on to produce hits for David Bowie and Blondie as well as music for the films “Scarface,” “Top Gun,” and “Flashdance.” Meanwhile, Brit Peter Bellotte would go on to compose and produce for Janet Jackson, Elton John and Tina Turner, among others.

“I Feel Love” was originally included on Summer’s time-oriented concept album “I Remember Yesterday.” It was released in May of 1977 over the Casablanca label, the US releasing arm of Oasis records. The album would eventually go gold before it left the charts.

“I Feel Love,” however, has never left the dance floor.

Cary O’Dell is with the Motion Picture, Broadcast and Recorded Sound division of the Library of Congress. He is the author of the books “June Cleaver Was a Feminist!” (2014) and “Women Pioneers in Television” (1997). He also served as assistant editor of “The Concise Encyclopedia of American Radio” (2009) and “The Biographical Encyclopedia of American Radio” (2010).