

Disco (actually doesn't) Suck

Written by Tony Peters

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Jeans 'N Classics - Rockin' Orchestra - Disco Ball - 4/28/12: The Dayton Philharmonic Orchestra's 2011-2012 "Rockin' Orchestra" Series capped off Saturday night with Disco Ball - a tribute to the much-maligned music genre of the late Seventies. The show was great fun, and was also one of the best examples of melding the orchestra with popular music (some, like Three Dog Night, weren't that memorable). The band, Jeans 'N Classics, was fabulous, sporting an enviable lineup of stellar vocalists, who all seemed to embody each song they sang. Throughout the evening, bandleader John Regan played "DJ," introducing each performance by giving some sort of trivia surrounding each one of the blockbuster songs. This was all done with lots of snickering from the audience. Yes, it's true - no other music genre is reviled quite like Disco. Yet, upon further examination, I think we need to give it some long overdue credit.

Disco is the music we love to hate. A great deal of that revulsion comes from the culture that once surrounded the style of music. A mere mention of the name conjures up images of John Travolta in his white leisure suit, picking imaginary apples to "Night Fever." Like the Pinto, 8-track and Pet Rock, Disco gets lumped in with everything that was wrong with the "Me Decade." But face it, that was over thirty years ago - no one still has a Pet Rock, and we actually like John Travolta as an actor. It's time to ease up on the boogie music.

For one thing, Disco was actually the last form of popular music totally played by human beings - entire orchestras were employed to create the backing tracks to many songs. Just a few years later, the synthesizer would become all the rage - sending those string sections to the unemployment line. Who needed them anymore when a keyboard could (somewhat) faithfully replicate an entire orchestra with the touch of a button? However, something was certainly lost in this transition. A misconception of the genre is that just because the content of most disco records was superficial, that somehow the music was too. This couldn't be farther from the truth - have you ever tried to play the bass line to Chic's "Good Times" or the guitar solo to the Bee Gees' "You Should Be Dancing"? In order to play these songs, you had to have CHOPS. Compare anything from that era with the songs that came later, like "Safety Dance" or "I Ran (So Far Away)," and you can definitely see the drop-off in musicianship.

Sure, the late Seventies were goofy. But, you mean the late Sixties weren't? There's plenty to make fun of in hippies wandering around singing dreck like "San Francisco (Don't Forget to Wear Flowers in Your Hair)" and "Hair." The difference, of course, is in the context; the Sixties were all about social change, so we give the music a pass - where the music of the Seventies was all about simply having fun. Hell, we deserved it - the Vietnam War was finally over and it was time to party. But, when taken side by side, I'll take KC & the Sunshine Band over Scott McKenzie anyday of the week.

Thankfully, despite all the "Disco Sucks" campaigns throughout the years, the music has carried on, outlasting all of its detractors. You can't attend a sporting event without hearing "YMCA," your wedding reception isn't a party without "Brick House," and whenever a club wants to play an oldie, there's a good bet it's coming from the late Seventies - Donna Summer is still a must.

Eventually, all of us who remember the Seventies will be gone. Then, there won't be anyone who remembers mood rings, bell bottoms, and Joanie Loves Chachi. But, the great music of that era - the best dance music ever created - will prevail. -- Tony Peters