Disco Inferno 2.0: A Slightly Less Hedonistic Comeback

Charting the DJs, labels, and edits fueling an old new craze

By Andy Beta

published: November 19, 2008

Santiago Felip

Love Fingers (left) and Doug Lee re-educate the masses.

Every other Wednesday night, LCD Soundsystem's James Murphy and Pat Mahoney host their Special Disco Version party down at Santos' Party House, complete with complementary blue-neon signage. But earlier this year, they took their disco records (and their sign) cross-country, and the Chinatown club's downstairs room, bereft of that neon glow, grows darker. In the shadows, furtive cigarettes flare, while in the booth, DJs Prince Language and Lee Douglas are just barely visible, whipping up track after track of deep, cheesy, ridiculously obscure disco sides.

Taken by St. Vitus, perhaps, a girl breaks from the dance floor and storms the booth, ravishing the lanky Language and threatening to capsize him onto the spinning decks. For an instant, the return of disco seems as hedonistic as its original '70s version. Prince Language (née Joshua Taylor) laughs it off the next day, though: "The girl in the booth was a friend's wife, scaling me like some sort of disco pony," he tells me in his Mercer Street studio, where he's working to finish up a mix for a fashion show as well as remixes for LCD Soundsystem and Lindstrøm. "I eventually carried her back to her husband and presented her to him like an award statue. All in a night's work, I guess."

Over the past couple of years, disco has re-emerged to soundtrack and reinvigorate not just New York's nightlife, but parties around the globe. There are folks like Prins Thomas and Todd Terje in Norway, the Idjut Boys and Quiet Village in England, Optimo and Betty Botox in Scotland, Pilooski and Joakim in Paris, and even some West Coasters getting in on the action. But one needn't look beyond the boroughs to note disco's renaissance. There may be no more Paradise Garage, no Body & Soul parties, and only intermittent instances of the hallowed Loft parties hosted by David Mancuso, but a new generation of DJs, producers, and record labels are keeping the flame. There's Morgan Geist and Daniel Wang, Rub-n-Tug, Escort, My Cousin Roy, the Real DJ Spun, Jacques Renault, Love Fingers, Mark E., the aforementioned Lee Douglas and Prince Language, and dozens of other aliases at work, while labels like DFA, Environ, Rong Music, Wurst, Golf Channel, Italians Do It Better, Editions Disco, Whatever We Want, and Black Disco are just a few of the imprints showcasing New York's nu-disco in a new century. Rather than attempt to chart symphonic strings and ludicrous sounds in glitzy studios (much less hearken back to Studio 54 megalomania), many of these producers and artists are instead paying homage to the musical form in its earliest incarnation, chopping up an extant song to make it dance-floor-friendly.

"Edits created disco," explains Lee Douglas (née Doug Lee), citing folks like Tom Moulton, who famously took

master tapes of Philly soul and funk songs and spliced the tape so as to extend the best parts. As Moulton recalls in the crucial tome *Last Night a DJ Saved My Life*, "I just thought it was a shame that the records weren't longer, so people could really start getting off." To make a nonstop 45-minute mix back then, Moulton would labor on the reels for upward of 80 hours. Such edit work set the template for all future mixers, remixers, and producers, be it Walter Gibbons, Larry Levan, and François K., or Chicago DJs like Ron Hardy and Frankie Knuckles, on through to the present.

Edits were a tool that allowed DJs to take pre-existing tracks and reshape them to better fit into their sets, whether it meant setting an 808 under the drums, extending the percussion break, or repeating a vocal line to the point of mesmerism. "With every edit, it's an ode to the artist," says DJ/producer Jacques Renault, who releases edits under his own name and original productions as part of recently DFA-signed group Runaway. "You admire this piece of work so much you want to make it even better."

The modern renaissance of the disco edit starts with Ministry of Sound's DJ Harvey and his epochal "Black Cock" series of edits in the mid '90s, followed up by the Idjut Boys and Theo Parrish's "Ugly Edits." Due to the scarcity of the pressings (mostly made for DJ use, plus copyrights become an issue if they remain on the market for long), in the past few years the edit itself has become a fetish object, exacerbated by Internet message-board zealotry and the proliferation of software like Pro Tools and Ableton, which allows initiates and tyros to easily beat-match and make loops. DJ Harvey, who made his first edits via tape and cutting block—and then later on an old Atari computer, all scarcely a decade ago—laments the ease of the edit now. "People don't put quite enough effort into it. It's easy to attempt, but it's not easy to get right with computer technology."

Language agrees: "Edits are relatively easy to do—they're a gateway production drug. It's an easy way to learn what works and what doesn't." The edit arises from the all-too-natural urge of "when you hear something great, you want it to continue," he explains, cueing up his own edit of Canadian disco auteur Gino Soccio's "Love Is" to prove his point; originally a two-minute album interlude, Language expanded it into an ebullient eight minutes for the Francophone-sounding Editions Disco label.

The second reason that edits arise is to elide cringe-worthy parts of otherwise excellent tracks, be it overwrought and keyless singing, lame lyrics, haphazard chord changes, or what-have-you. In the edit, shit can transform into shinola. Language perceives that with the technology available, edits are now "a punk-rock thing, in that making edits allow a lot of people access into it. But the downside is that most edits are going to suck. If you only need three or four chords to play, it's great because all of a sudden someone who thought they had no chance of ever being in a band before will start a band. But most people aren't going to be the Ramones or Wire."

Disco edits can mean recasting the most wretched Eastern European disco or dollar-bin pariahs in startling new lights, or it can lead to hubristic cut-ups of the Rolling Stones, Frankie Valli, America's "Horse With No Name," Billy Ocean, Chicago, Paul Simon, or even Wire. "What's annoying is how much people hype them on the Web," sighs Lee. "People do edits for the sake of copping a name for themselves. There's no fucking rules now."

The adage goes that those who don't know history are doomed to repeat it, a fact that echoes at times through the new disco edit scene. Many of the form's current practitioners were toddlers during disco's '70s heyday,

but grew up under the assumption that "disco sucks." Coming of age in the eras of hardcore punk and hip-hop (itself a genre birthed in part from seeking out the breaks in disco records), they had to work their way backwards to get at the original source of dance music. Unlike learning about, say, the canon of classic '60s rock, disco music and DJ culture remain decentralized as a whole. "Too many people these days just look to the Internet to learn about music," laments Rong Music's Jason Drummond, a/k/a the Real DJ Spun. "If you're a DJ, you don't learn on the Internet. It's about interacting with people on a personal level, in person."

In the midst of Chicago's post-rock heyday—while attending the Art Institute there—Renault began grabbing whatever records were filed under the "WBMX" section (an urban radio station that frequently had its playlists overlap with those of Chicago's hallowed Music Box; think of the synergy between the Paradise Garage and New York's WBLS). Previously, Language DJ'd hip-hop and funk in the Windy City, and even had a reggae residency at Joe's Pub upon relocating here. Doug Lee started out spinning funk, jazz, and soul out West in the '90s, before the "rare groove" renaissance shot all the record prices through the roof. Digging for disco was primarily an economic matter for him: "I got into disco just because the other shit was too expensive, whereas people would just give away 50-cent disco records."

Renault muses that many of the DJs on the scene today were originally old punk-rock kids, and he himself was drawn in part to the music by "the dirtiness of disco—it's similar to punk." Much like punks relished obscure seven-inches, that mindset carried over to disco. "There's still the pleasure of finding that awesome record. The whole vinyl thing is important to disco, too, like, 'Oh, you have that? Mine's in mint condition.' It's like baseball cards."

The metaphor is apt, as the primary distinction between disco then and now is glaring. Originally, disco music and discotheques provided a haven for disenfranchised gays, blacks, and Latinos. "Disco music is implicitly political, in the best sense of the word," Language explains. "It has the weight of politics, social situations, communities, and cultures, but it's not banging you over the head with it. But it does come out of this very real need, and the music reflected that. You don't have to read *too* deep into something like (South Shore Commission's) 'Free Man' to understand its chorus of 'I'm a free *man*.' "

Back then, discotheques provided a space and shelter for personal expression not available to disenfranchised subsets in their daily lives. "But now, it's the province of nerdy, mostly straight white guys, which is ironic in the *real* sense of the word," laughs Language. Nu-disco may pound and swing similarly, but its audience has blanched and grown stiff. Disco may no longer be a celebration of sexual freedom, but instead, just another ironically embraced taste of the moment. Language cedes that such trends are always in flux and that disco itself no longer serves as the soundtrack of sexual freedom that it did back then. "Gay culture in general has changed so radically. It's not that our society is free of homophobia, but a lot of aspects of gay culture have become mainstreamed." This inversion of race and sexual preference isn't lost on disco's practitioners or newfound admirers, as Language knows all too well. "My girlfriend once summed it up: 'You and all your friends are the straightest white guys who play the gayest dance music.' "