What the beat turned around: How disco changed the world

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Even before the release of "Saturday Night Fever" in 1977, disco was a $4 billion business. But after John Travolta made it fashionable for a guy to shake his booty in public — in a white suit and platform shoes, no less — the pop culture phenomenon laid claim to urban and suburban America.

By the end of 1978, between 15,000 and 20,000 discos were in operation. Six months later, disco records constituted 40 percent of all Top 10 chart activity. And then, in the blink of an eye, disco fell into such disrepute that the name gave way to the innocuous-sounding "dance music."

In "Hot Stuff," Alice Echols, a professor of American Studies at Rutgers University, traces the rise and fall of disco in the "Me Decade." Acknowledging that it was shamelessly commercial, conjuring up polyester pants, platform shoes and a plastic sound, she argues that disco's "hidden transcript" provides insights into the shifting landscape of masculinity, upward mobility and politics.

Echols also posits that the much-maligned music gave African-Americans, women and gays the opportunity — on the dance floor, "in the streets and between the sheets" — to "reimagine themselves and in the process to remake America."

Echols works hard, and not always successfully, to defeat disco's detractors. With language "a mere verbal echo of the beat itself," disco lyrics — let's face it — were sappy and superficial.

Critics on the left were correct to associate disco with a shift toward political quiescence through a love affair with commodities: the "More, More, More" mantra of Baby Boomers.

Critics on the right connected the dance craze with '60s hedonism, sexual licentiousness and depravity.

And it's quite likely that black identity, female empowerment and gay pride would have evolved in essentially the same ways without marching to a disco soundtrack.

More persuasive, however, is Echols' claim that disco expanded "the parameters of masculinity" and that "Saturday Night Fever" can be best understood as a gender-bender.

She writes that, unlike his blue-collar father, Travolta's character Tony Manero embraces a sense of manhood that is "self-consciously performative." Though he's clearly a "ladies' man," he's by turns "vulnerable and hard, naïve and street smart," a clothes horse who prepares for each night's conquest by primping in front of a mirror.

And, Echols continues, the camera celebrated his body so intently and intensely that the production designer tried to reduce the homoerotic charge of some scenes by hanging a poster of Charlie's Angels star Farrah Fawcett next to Tony's mirror.

The movie doesn't end with Tony as a sensitive New Age male or discovering that he's gay. But he is no longer a "trash-talking misogynist."

Derided for being "both too gay and too straight, too black and too white, oversexed and asexual, leisure class as well as leisure-suited (loser) class," disco, Echols suggests, was an easy target for ridicule and criticism.

Nonetheless, a funny thing happened on the way to the cemetery. Disco took a deep breath. In the 1980s, Michael Jackson and Prince recorded songs that were disco in all but the name. And working-class rocker Bruce Springsteen issued singles from his 1984 hit album "Born in The U.S.A." that were disco in tone: "Dancing in the Dark" and "Cover Me."

Disco, in other words, has been "stayin' alive," and has remained an "unstable signifier," sending many different messages to many different people.
At the millennium, Echols shrewdly concludes, millions of Americans danced away to a sound whose popularity seemed to depend on its kinship to disco and its arms-length distance from it: "It was almost as if 'don't ask, don't tell' was the unspoken law of the land."

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