



Hot Stuff: Disco and the Remaking of American Culture

By Alice Echols

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Disco thumps back to life in this pulsating exploration of the culture and politics of the glitterball world.

In the 1970s, as the disco tsunami engulfed America, the once-innocent question, “Do you wanna dance?” became divisive, even explosive. What was it about this much-maligned music that made it such hot stuff? In this incisive history, Alice Echols captures the felt experience of the Disco Years?on dance floors both fabulous and tacky, at the movies, in the streets, and beneath the sheets.

Disco may have presented itself as shallow and disposable?the platforms, polyester, and plastic vibe of it all?but Echols shows that it was inseparable from the emergence of “gay macho,” a rising black middle class, and a growing, if equivocal, openness about female sexuality. The disco scene carved out a haven for gay men who reclaimed their sexuality on dance floors where they had once been surveilled and harassed; it thrust black women onto center stage as some of the genre’s most prominent stars; and it paved the way for the opening of Studio 54 and the viral popularity of the shoestring-budget *Saturday Night Fever*, a movie that challenged traditional notions of masculinity, even for heterosexuals.

As it provides a window onto the cultural milieu of the times, *Hot Stuff* never loses sight of the era’s defining soundtrack, which propelled popular music into new sonic territory, influencing everything from rap and rock to techno and trance. Throughout, Echols spotlights the work of precursors James Brown and Isaac Hayes, dazzling divas Donna Summer and the women of Labelle, and some of disco’s lesser known but no less illustrious performers such as Sylvester. After turning the final page of this fascinating account of the music you thought you hated but can’t stop dancing to, you can rest assured that you’ll never say “disco sucks” again. 20 photos

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

As American studies professor and Janis Joplin biographer (*Scars of Sweet Paradise*) Echols succinctly states, Nothing seems to conjure up the seventies quite so effectively as disco. But while the decade's weltanschauung is often dismissed as merely polyester and platform heels, Echols aims for—and thoroughly achieves—a range of higher cultural insights. Using an encyclopedic knowledge of the eras' biggest stars, she shows how all sorts of musical disco styles played a central role in broadening the contours of blackness, femininity, and male homosexuality in America. She brilliantly explores the many ways that early disco clubs created new spaces where gay men could safely come together in a large crowd, at the same time often masking an early strain of the racial and class exclusion that dominated disco's later years. She brings to light the influence of underground legends such as club deejay Tom Moulton, who first remixed popular records to make them longer for dancing and created the model for the 12-inch, extended play disco single. Best of all is Echols's revelatory look at how the critique of racism and sexism in the film *Saturday Night Fever* offers a richer portrait of the disco seventies than its critics have granted. (Nov.)

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From [Booklist](#)

Only nominally about the watered-down funk music that was disco, Echols' history instead focuses on disco's social effects, particularly the rise of gay consciousness and the mainstreaming of the gay rights movement. Echols proclaims that she likes disco and thinks if others gave it half a chance, they would, too. Be that as it may, she knows her dancin'-fool stuff. She makes a convincing case for disco's far-reaching cultural legacies, and her discussion of the career arc of the Village People is an excellent vehicle for examining the phenomenon of much of mainstream America embracing disco while blithely ignoring the gay subtext of scads of disco songs. Her dissections of the trials and tribulations of disco artists in general and Donna Summer in particular are telling and well presented. All in all, if one feels the need to be knowledgeable about the rise and fall of the disco lifestyle and how elements of the once-reviled music genre still act upon American culture today—this is the goods. --Mike Tribby

Review

"Echols' love of music, her acumen about popular culture, and her gifts as a leading cultural historian come together in this remarkable book. The book is fascinating, carried along by prose that is as sleek and slinky as its subject." (Christine Stansell, Stein-Freiler Distinguished Se)

"In this expertly rendered, wide-ranging history of one of pop's most exciting social and musical movements, Alice Echols thoroughly recovers the moment in which disco was born and flowered?a moment of liberation for women, gay men, and not a few straight boys; of rich experimentation in the studio and behind the DJ decks; and of joyful dancing that broke down all kinds of boundaries. Echols, one of our best chroniclers of how pop creates social change (and is, in turn, inspired by it), gets its vibe because she lived it?and because she can step back from it now and see it whole." (Ann Powers - The Los Angeles Times)

"Echols aims for?and thoroughly achieves?a range of higher cultural insights. . . . Using encyclopedic knowledge of the eras' biggest stars, she shows how all sorts of musical disco styles played a 'central role' in broadening the contours of 'blackness, femininity, and male homosexuality' in America. . . . Revelatory." (Publishers Weekly)

“Engrossing... *Hot Stuff* is not just about disco; it re-examines the ‘70s as a decade of revolution.” (James Gavin - The New York Times Book Review)

“A clear-eyed encapsulation of what made this seemingly facile music so complex, compelling, and prescient... It all adds up to a thumping good read.” (Atlantic Monthly)

“Thoroughly researched, scholarly credible and fiercely entertaining... [*Hot Stuff*] pulsates with a style as relentless as the music it analyzes and the personalities who brought that sound to the airwaves, clubs, boardrooms and bedrooms.” (Warren Pederson - San Francisco Chronicle)

“Exhilarating, perceptive... an important work of cultural and musical resuscitation, written with a scholar’s acumen but a fan’s ardor.” (Melissa Anderson - Newsday)

“Quietly dazzling.” (Peter Terzian - Los Angeles Times)

“[*Hot Stuff*] reveals several unturned stones in the disco discourse, and presents an alternate account of those hazy-crazy yesteryears that’s ultimately indispensable.” (Smith Galtney - Time Out New York)

“Persuasively argued... [a] stimulating rethinking of well-trod terrain.” (Bookforum - Michaelangelo Matos)

“Thoroughly entertaining.” (Thomas Rogers - Salon)

“[A]n intriguing critical study of the complex relationships and the nontraditional development of the genre. A definite purchase for...pop-music enthusiasts.” (Library Journal)

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From reader reviews:

Marjorie Brown:

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Joseph Davis:

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