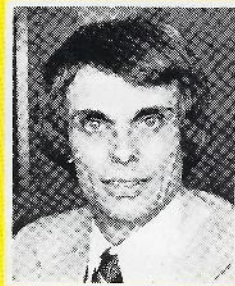


MARLIN TAYLOR



# Like it or not... Disco isn't a fad

**W**hether one particularly likes the music or not, it's difficult not to acknowledge disco and the impact it is having upon the nation. There's no question it has crashed full force upon the American scene. The discotheque is now a familiar sight in many communities. It's been called a fad... a flash in the pan. Will it be?

Discotheques and the disco lifestyle were sweeping the country before radio "discovered" disco music. Or, should we say had its eyes opened to the opportunities to be reaped from it? There were three or four stations playing it in places like Baltimore, Washington, D.C. and Memphis. They were getting some numbers in the ratings, but these were markets with heavy black populations and this music was deemed to be attuned to the black person. Plus, these people who frequented discos were looked upon as some kind of subculture and really didn't amount to very large numbers. This wasn't the kind of people most broadcasters wanted as an audience for their stations.

Oh boy, are we broadcasters a fickle bunch! Last summer an old-timer in this business named Eddie Cossman, who learned the radio trade selling it in the streets of Newark, New Jersey, saw what was happening on the streets of New York. The rest is history. His New York FM station, WKTU, was playing mellow rock and going nowhere.

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He had nothing to lose, so ordered a switch to full disco music. Within 60 days, the Mediatrend ratings service showed the move to WKTU was on. Last fall's Arbitron showed WKTU a dominate number one in the nation's largest market, the first for an FM and the first time in anyone's recollection that any radio station in New York has ever achieved a double-digit share in the Arbitron ratings. And, the race to jump on the disco bandwagon was on!

What happened? Stations in markets all around the U.S. jumped into the format, many without any forethought or true understanding of what they were getting into, how to do it or what was needed to make it work. Of course, most of them have not achieved the kind of instant success that WKTU saw, bringing out the doubters and doomsayers saying "I told you so" and "disco is unique to New York." Some have even been heard to say, "It's definitely a fad. See, it's already beginning to fade."

While WKTU is riding high, there appears to be minor panic in the executive suite at WABC, the dominate New York music station for nearly two decades. It starts playing disco cuts en masse, but sees further erosion in the next Arbitron. The heavy emphasis on disco continues at this writing and for the first time since WABC found success as a contemporary music station has it deviated from its "all hit music" policy. Did they over-react? Many think so. But, they are a shrewd bunch at ABC. They know that ratings for youth-oriented formats are won or lost in the five boroughs of New York City...

not in the total survey area. And, disco is now the music of the streets of New York. We'll have an indication shortly as to whether the move was a good one, but probably won't know the true outcome for a long time. The results here will likely be considered a guideline for many others.

Meanwhile, radio has fueled the news media's interest in the disco phenomenon. After all, it's big news. A new kind of music. New musical artists, new fashions, and a totally new industry involving millions of dollars has opened up. It makes good journalism in a time when much of the news surrounds rising oil prices, relations with China and a new regime in Iran... not things that exactly turn on the average American. *Newsweek*, *Life* and even *Nation's Business*, the national Chamber of Commerce magazine, have done feature articles on disco. My company, Bonneville Broadcast Consultants, has seen its first disco-consulted station, WWOM (FM) in Albany, New York, be the subject of two major newspaper articles and feature news reports by two television stations within its first two weeks of operation.

**U**ntil recently, the negative vibes toward disco within the broadcast industry outshone the positive ones. We believe they were generated primarily by the management and programmers of successful rock stations. Why? Isn't disco really a form of rock music? Isn't disco the popular music of the day? Yes, but because album-oriented rock and disco come from opposite ends of the



rock spectrum, disco is not easily integrated into a typical rock format. Rock programmers didn't know how to deal with this new star of the musical world, so naturally were afraid of it. "Maybe if we ignore it, it will go away," was the attitude.

Basically, problems arose because programmers felt an obligation to deal with disco, to try to protect their flanks by playing disco cuts, hoping to appease listeners who might want some of this popular new style of music. That was their mistake. They started playing disco tracks for the sake of playing them, not because they fit or were a logical extension or modification of the format. A Philadelphia top-40 station has now dropped all disco cuts except those that are bona-fide hits, which is what they should have been doing all along!

Is disco a fad? Where is it headed? I predict that those who are declaring disco to be a fad are deceiving themselves and others. It's likely that some of the novelty of all-disco radio will wear off after music lovers have gotten their fill of it. But, it will not fade away until a new music form with

equal dynamics comes along to supplant it. Yes, I anticipate that the ratings of WKTU will level off and drop back to a normal level for the market. Yet, the station will still be a leader among the dozens of stations competing for the audience.

After all, this is history repeating itself. The world needs music to dance to. It has for many generations past, it most likely will for many to come. Regular rock had evolved into a very non-danceable sound, opening the door for music that was suitable . . . offering the rhythmic texture, motivating bodies into action. There's a saying, "as go the record companies, so goes trends in music." The record companies are behind disco with some of the biggies just now getting their disco A & R machinery moving full tilt. These are two of the major factors that support my belief in a long life for disco. Another is the simple fact that pop music has been stagnating, losing the excitement and vitality that is so important to the human psyche. On comes the beat and rhythm that is the essence of disco, luring the masses just as rock 'n roll itself had done 25

years earlier.

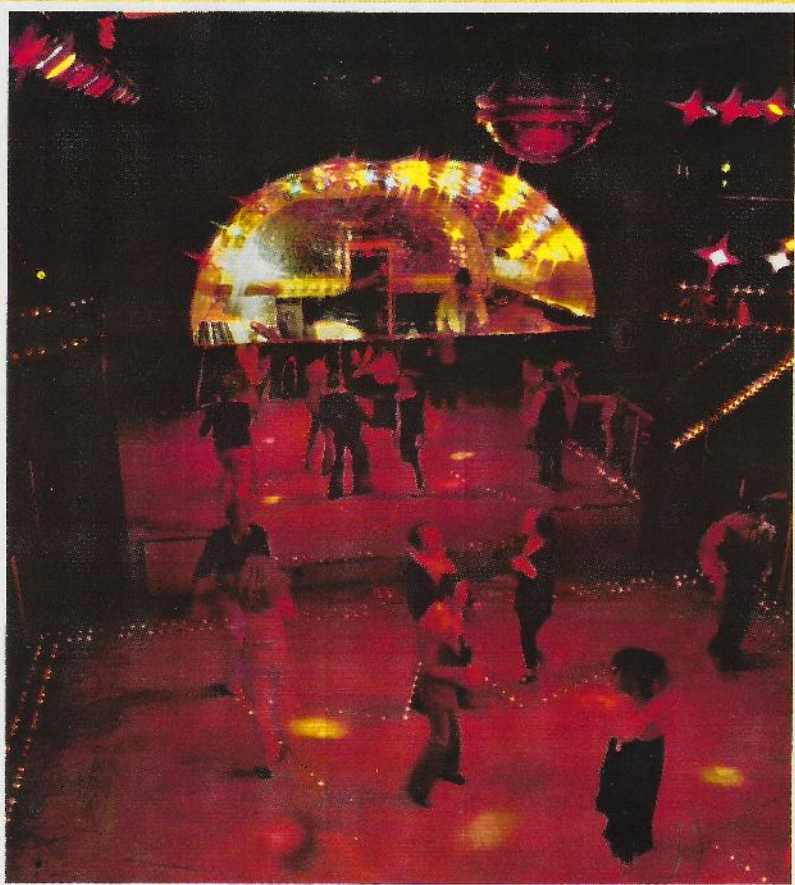
Eventually it will assimilate itself into the total rock picture, just as other variations of rock have over the years. Or, as the contemporary music newsletter *Goodphone* suggested a few weeks ago, disco is the frozen yogurt of rock. When frozen yogurt took the country by storm a few years back, stores and street-corner stands selling it popped up everywhere. Today it is just one item among many found in ice cream stores. Disco will not depart soon. Certainly not so quickly as to be termed a fad.

Listenership makeup is proving to be far different and much broader than most broadcasters ever thought. It was thought to be a highly ethnic audience and probably quite young in age. This is only partly correct. The white population is accounting for a good half of the audience at most stations and the demographics pulling meaningful shares is running up to 35 to 49. Detroit's first full-time disco station, WDRQ, is reporting heavy telephone response from women who are obviously well into their 30's and 40's. The reason is, simply, the music makes a person feel good.

As we enter the 1980s, we are experiencing a period of accelerated changes in lifestyles, music and musical tastes . . . of which disco is only a part . . . making traditional radio formats more fragile. Add to this increasing audience fragmentation due to the ever-growing number of radio stations competing for a significant share of listening. Disco is just the beginning of the challenges that will face many broadcasters and station programmers in the new decade.

Joe Capobianco of Bonneville Broadcast Consultants suggests that "today, only beautiful music remains inviolate as a music format. In many ways, the lesson of disco emulates the lesson of beautiful music — a distinct, consistent musical environment can be downright addictive to radio listeners. Both envelop the listener in a sea of energy; both are instantly identifiable; with both, the 'medium is the message' theorem applies."

The true potential in disco for any station lies in the one factor that impacts far more than any other — regardless of format — on its ability to succeed: the commitment to doing a top-notch professional job in assembling, presenting and promoting the product. Disco's own dramatic ascension or another station's success with it is no guarantee that you will reap the same harvest.



Osko's Discotheque, Beverly Hills, California. (Photo by Bob Marich)