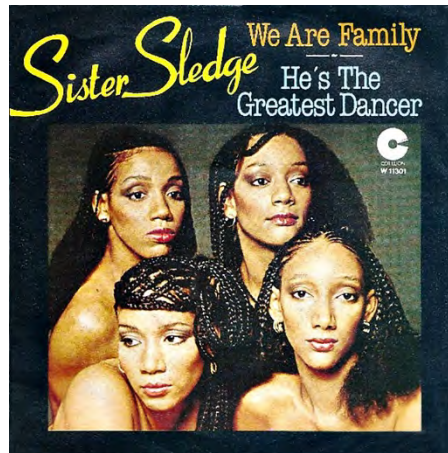


“We Are Family”--Sister Sledge (1979)

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Essay by Tim Lawrence (guest post)*



45rpm sleeve

Released on Atlantic in the spring of 1979, Sister Sledge's "We Are Family" captured disco's drive to integration. On the surface, the lyrics referred to the close relationship enjoyed by the four sisters who laid down the vocals. A little below, they expressed disco's underlying ethos: to establish the dance floor as a social space that cut across the boundaries of class, creed, gender, nationality, race and sexuality.

The goal to liberate and even unite marginalized groups took root through the work of the liberation movements of the 1950s and 1960s. When internal contradictions, overambitious goals and state repression precipitated the post-Woodstock decline of the countercultural movement and the rainbow alliance, the energy generated by the Civil Rights, gay liberation, feminist and anti-war movements needed somewhere to go. Opening at the beginning of 1970, David Mancuso's Loft and Seymour and Shelley's Sanctuary, the first weekly New York City dance parties to admit definitionally diverse crowds, became two of the most compelling if underreported destinations.

Born out of equally diverse music influences hunted down, absorbed and integrated by DJs, all of them in search for material to feed spiraling, insatiable dance crowds that contributed to the act of music-dance creation, disco broke through as the movement's dedicated genre when the Hues Corporation and George McCrae scored back-to-back number one hits during the summer of 1974. Although Nelson George alleges that disco was largely responsible for killing R&B, DJs and dancers understood that disco amounted to the latest reincarnation of R&B--one that continued to organize itself around the groove generated by the rhythm section while placing more emphasis on polyrhythm, syncopation, chanting, percussion breaks, crescendos and, following the breakthrough of a dedicated disco format, the 12-inch single, reedits and remixes.

Chic contributed to disco's reinvention of R&B thanks to the telepathic relationship cultivated by the band's rhythm section players--bassist Bernard Edwards, guitarist Nile Rodgers and drummer Tony Thompson--with vocals and orchestral flourishes introduced with such constrained efficiency that the result left the impression that every gesture fueled the shimmering groove. Released on Buddah and Atlantic in 1977, the year before disco's commercial peak, "Everybody Dance" and "Dance, Dance, Dance (Yowsah, Yowsah, Yowsah)" foregrounded a metronome rhythm section, tight instrumental phrases, smooth vocals, and lyrics that beckoned dancers to enter the transformative space of the dance floor. Released in 1978, "Le Freak" invited listeners to "*feel the rhythm / check the rhyme / come on along / and have a real good time*," because, thanks to a new dance craze called "Le Freak," there was "*big fun to be had by everyone*." Ironically, Edwards and

Rodgers wrote the song after being barred from Studio 54, one of the midtown venues that would corrode disco's original, inclusive imperative.

Simultaneous to recording "Le Freak," Edwards and Rodgers teamed up with Sister Sledge to record a track that epitomized disco's extended family values. The collaboration came about after the increasingly influential Rodgers told Atlantic president Jerry Greenberg that he and Edwards wanted to produce other artists, the duo having recently founded the Chic Organization as the vehicle through which they would spread their sound. Greenberg suggested the four-sister band from Philadelphia, signed to Atlantic since 1973. Chic historian Daryl Easlea recounts that when Edwards and Rodgers confirmed they knew of Sister Sledge, Greenberg added, "I love these girls; they're also like family to me." His comment struck a chord.

Debbie, Joni, Kathy and Kim Sledge (the sisters of Sister Sledge) were open to the collaboration, having scored only one hit to date. In the studio, Edwards and Rodgers took charge, laying down the kind of tight, unadorned, glistening track that had already come to define their work. For "We Are Family," lead singer Kathy Sledge recorded her vocals in one take while the chorus was appropriately sung in unison save for the outro words-- "*get up everybody and sing*"--which the sisters delivered in harmony. Their infectious presence persuaded Edwards and Rodgers to let the vocalists loosen Chic's established prism of studio perfection and sing with their hearts.

"We Are Family" became the standout hit single of the eponymous Sister Sledge album, reaching number one on the R&B chart, number two on the pop chart, and accumulating major international sales. "*We are family,*" ran the song's chorus, "*I got all my sisters with me / We are family / Get up everybody and sing.*" The record amounted to "the ultimate disco manifesto," argues Craig Werner, author of "A Change Is Going to Come: Music, Race and the Soul of America."

The record, however, was merely papering over a deepening national fault line. Anticipating the electoral shifts that would underpin Ronald Reagan's success in the November 1980 election, the Middle American electorate, looking for scapegoats as growth started to seep out of the US economy, turned on queers, people of color, women and intersectional subjects. Disco came to be targeted as the musical manifestation of the coalition of minority interests that was perceived to have made gains while self-designated "traditional American families" lost ground. It didn't help that the success of "Saturday Night Fever" had encouraged labels to start releasing increasing numbers of made-to-measure disco records. Disco became ubiquitous at the very moment its content emptied out, deigning to even outsell rock during 1978—another perceived assault on Middle America. An angry, populist, decentered movement started to gather around the slogan "disco sucks." In July 1979, just three months after the release of "We Are Family," a DJ detonated a pile of 40,000 disco records at an anti-disco rally in Chicago.

Chic and Sister Sledge struggled to ride the music industry's synchronized abandonment of disco. "When people started 'disco sucks' we started saying, 'we're proud to be a disco band,'" Rodgers told Marc Taylor, adding, "We were so angry that people would victimize an entire movement because it felt to us like black people were dominating the charts, the pop charts, the only charts that counted. We were ruling it, so the only way to get the rock guys back at the top of the charts was to say 'these guys suck' and 'let us have our charts back.'"

The movement that had started out as a radical socio-sonic expression of the rainbow coalition had been unceremoniously sidelined by the very people who were behind the drive to its commercialization. Yet the organic party culture that gave birth to disco's transformational ambitions didn't miss a beat. In downtown New York, the Loft was reaching its peak. Mancuso's party had also given birth to a series of satellite parties, one of which, the Paradise Garage, had even outgrown its parent.

As for Sister Sledge and Chic, they had recorded an anthem that would continue to receive play at the Loft, the Garage and successor parties around the world. With the fault line that contributed to the collapse of disco if anything deepening, a song that survived the late 1970s collapse in unity rings ever more forcefully today.

Tim Lawrence is the author of "Love Saves the Day: A History of American Dance Music Culture, 1970-79," "Hold on to Your Dreams: Arthur Russell and the Downtown Music Scene, 1973-92," and "Life and Death on the New York Dance Floor, 1980-83," all with Duke University Press. He is a Professor of Cultural Studies at the University of East London, and the co-founder of Lucky Cloud Sound System and All Our Friends.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.