The Origins of Disco

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

What are the cultural, economic, and geographic origins of Disco and how has the genre been presented, remembered, and represented in popular culture?

OVERVIEW

In this lesson, students will examine the sociocultural origins of Disco and how it has been presented in popular culture through analysis of music, photographs, videos, and articles. Students will engage in active note taking activities, group discussion, reflective writing, creative writing, and creating visual art.

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On February 14th, 1970, a local New York City deejay named David Mancuso hosted a dance party in his Manhattan loft apartment. Mancuso's party was inspired by "rent parties" that had been popularized in Harlem during the 1920s. During this time, Harlemites would invite bands to play in their apartments and charge a fee to help pay the rent. However, Mancuso didn't hire musicians to play at his rent party on Valentine's Day 1970. Instead, he provided the music by deejaying and he played Soul, Funk, and R&B music from his record collection to get attendees dancing. This night is often cited as the birth of Disco, and the beginning of a movement that centered Black, Brown, and Queer people.

During this time, New York City was a center of political and social activism. In response to the growing economic disenfranchisement among many communities of color, groups such as the Black Panthers and the Gay Liberation Movement created supportive networks that served both as mutual aid and advocacy organizations. Through events and parties, they also created a space for escapism from violence, poverty, and other forms of oppression and marginalization many in the city were experiencing.

Meanwhile, discothèques, a term from which Disco derives its name, had been popular in Europe for decades leading up to the 1970s. These nightclubs thrived by playing Black American music, originally Jazz. In the U.S., underground dance scenes for Black, Latinx, and/or Queer people were common in many northern cities such as New York and Philadelphia. Gay clubs such as the Stonewall Inn provided space for Queer people to dance, socialize, and engage in music listening. This origin in queerness can be seen in Disco's aesthetics, featuring androgynous fashion, extravagant makeup, and bright colors. Parties like those hosted by Mancuso became increasingly popular in the 1970s as these communities grew in size and reach, and with that growth, the music grew in popularity as well.

The Disco sound became characterized by driving "four on the floor" beats, the integration of synthesizers and electronic production tools, and song arrangements often featuring strings and horns. Disco songs were intentionally long to encourage dancing and movement. With successful songs and albums from a variety of musicians such as Sylvester, Donna Summer, Village People, and Gloria Gaynor, Disco became noticed by the music industry at large. More Disco clubs emerged and those such as Studio 54 drew a celebrity audience.

The Disco sound became mainstream as the 1970s progressed, but as it rose in popularity, the attention shifted away from the communities it had been born in. The success of the film, *Saturday Night Fever* and its soundtrack, featuring white artists and actors, cemented the genre as profitable. By the end of the 1970s, Disco music was being produced by major companies and acts far removed from its Soul and R&B, Queer, and Black and Brown origins.

While popular, there was also a noted backlash to the rise of Disco. Some criticism of Disco came from its production techniques and style, with some criticizing it as "overproduced" and lacking emotion. Yet, the symbolic representation of Black, Brown, and/or Queer communities that Disco presented was also a key part of the backlash. This rejection of Disco culminated with Disco Demolition Night at Chicago's Comiskey Park in July 1979. At that event, local Chicago radio personality Steve Dahl led the implosion of thousands of Disco records to chants and signs of "Disco Sucks," and ultimately the several thousand attendees rioted.

While some claim that Disco "died" in the 1980s, its legacy lives on in the creation and evolution of House music, Synthpop, EDM, and club remixes. Creating spaces for Queer people and people of color, these genres continue to thrive in clubs and in urban areas all over the country. Contemporary artists such as Beyoncé, Lizzo, and Silk Sonic draw from the vocal styles, fashion, instrumentals, and production techniques of Disco records.

OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- The experiences/discrimination of Queer people and/or people of color in the 1960s and 1970s in major cities

- Prominent Disco artist Sylvester

- That artists make intentional choices in their medium to make a point about identity, culture, and politics

2. MASTERY OBJECTIVE:

- In this lesson, students will be able to identify the major themes and elements of Disco by examining photographs of social movements from the 1970s, watching Disco music videos, and reading an article about Disco musician Sylvester.

ACTIVITIES

PREPARATION:

1. Display images from **Gallery Walk - Disco and Society** around the room.

MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY

1. Ask students the following questions:

   - When you hear the word "Disco", what do you think of? (*If students are unfamiliar with the term, an alternative question might be: Why do people dance and/or listen to music together?*)

   - Do we have "disco(s)" (or music gatherings) now?

   - What sorts of music gatherings have you been a part of?

2. As students discuss, write their responses or keywords from their responses on a board or piece of paper.

PROCEDURE

1. Distribute **Handout - Disco and Society Gallery Walk Questions**. Ask students to analyze the photographs around the classroom, while following the instructions on the handout.

2. After the students finish the Gallery Walk activity, ask volunteers to share what they observed about the photographs, based on the questions on the handout.

3. Have students consider what they saw in the images and the earlier discussion of Disco. Invite them to consider why the pictures may be connected. Ask students:

   - What seems to have been going on in New York during the 1970s?

   - What groups of people are shown in these images?

   - What might the images of the dance clubs suggest to us?

   - What might the music have sounded like at these dance clubs?

4. Inform students that they will now listen to some examples of Disco. Distribute **Handout - Music Video Analysis**. Have students read the instructions to the handout. Then play **Clip 1, 1970s Disco** and have them complete the handout.

5. (*Differentiation option*) To help students get started with the activity, pause the clip after the first song clip (around 0:35). Ask students some of the following questions and model how to add their responses to the handout by using a T-chart on the board (use **Handout - Music Video Analysis (Teacher's Guide)** to further guide student thinking):

   - What did you see in the video?

   - What did you notice about the fashion?

- What were people doing in the video?

- What do the musicians' actions in the clip suggest about Disco?

- What sorts of musical instruments or sounds seem to be important in Disco?

- What is the Disco beat like?

- What sorts of feelings does it bring up?

- How would you describe the singing you heard?

- Did the music remind you of anything? If so, what?

6. Inform students they will now discuss what Disco meant to the musicians performing it. Distribute **Handout - NPR Article on Sylvester** (*Differentiated version of the handout available here*). Have students read Part 1 of the article, looking for information about elements of the genre, its origins, and popularity. Then ask students:

- According to Joshua Gamson, what did Sylvester do to make himself a "folk hero" for LGBTQ people? What might a "folk hero" be?

- How would you describe Sylvester's childhood and upbringing?

- What might have made "You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)" a hit at discos?

SUMMARY ACTIVITY

1. Display **Image 1, Summary Activity** and ask students to follow the directions on the prompt.

- In what ways is "You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)" a good example of Disco and Disco culture?

7. Now inform students that they will be examining what Disco might have meant for audiences. Play **Clip 2, "You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)."** Then ask students:

- According to the clip, how was Disco associated with the LGBTQ community?

- How was Disco associated with social movements?

- Why might have Sylvester been considered a "Symbol of Defiance" for the LGBTQ community?

- In the clip, David Mixner states that "You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)" "held us together." How might a song or genre hold a community together?

8. Ask students to read part 2 of Handout - NPR Article on Sylvester. Then ask students:

- How does Gamson describe the motivations behind "Disco Demolition" night?

- To you, what is the lasting cultural significance of the song "You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)"?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. Listen to artists such as Beyoncé, Silk Sonic, Dua Lipa, and Lil Nas X, and construct a written response that compares the artist you listened to some of the music heard in this lesson. Would you argue that Disco was an influence for these artists' work?

2. Watch the trailer to *Saturday Night Fever*. Then research the film and the success of its soundtrack, especially the Bee Gees. Write a short piece considering if *Saturday Night Fever* is an accurate or inadequate representation of Disco music and culture. Hold a debate with other students to consider the legacy of this film and Disco history.

3. Research a Disco musician such as Sylvester, Chic, Donna Summer, Gloria Gaynor, or Barry White. Upon completing your research, create a poster, slideshow, or other presentation that introduces the musician's life and music, and discusses their musical legacy.

4. Read the article "The Revolutionary Spirit of Soul Train" (https://www.vox.com/culture/24080012/soul-train-history-explainer-revolutionary-spirit). Consider how television brought the spirit of Disco into the homes of people, and the importance of the show for Black people and communities of color.

COLLEGE, CAREER, AND CIVIC LIFE (C3) SOCIAL STUDIES STANDARDS

History

> D2.His.1.9-12. Evaluate how historical events and developments were shaped by unique circumstances of time and place as well as broader historical contexts.

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

College and Career Readiness Reading Information Text Standards for Grades 9-12

> CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.9-10.1 Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

> CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.9-10.2 Determine a central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.

> CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.9-10.7 Analyze various accounts of a subject told in different mediums (e.g., a person's life story in both print and multimedia), determining which details are emphasized in each account.

> CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.1 Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

> CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.7 Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in different media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively) as well as in words in order to address a question or solve a problem.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Writing for Grades 9-12

> CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.2 Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

> CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.4 Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience. (Grade-specific expectations for writing types are defined in standards 1-3 above.)

> CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.9 Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

> CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.1 Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.2 Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.4 Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience. (Grade-specific expectations for writing types are defined in standards 1-3 above.)

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.9 Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening for Grades 9-12

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.2 Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.4 Present information, findings, and supporting evidence clearly, concisely, and logically such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and task.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11-12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.2 Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) in order to make informed decisions and solve problems, evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source and noting any discrepancies among the data.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.4 Present information, findings, and supporting evidence, conveying a clear and distinct perspective, such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning, alternative or opposing perspectives are addressed, and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and a range of formal and informal tasks.

SOCIAL STUDIES — NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR THE SOCIAL STUDIES (NCSS)

Theme 1: Culture

Theme 3: People, Place, and Environments

Theme 4: Individual Development and Identity

<div style="background:#E6007E; color:white; text-align:center; font-weight:bold;">RESOURCES</div>

VIDEO RESOURCES

- 1970s Disco
- *CNN Soundtracks* - "You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)

HANDOUTS

- Gallery Walk - Disco and Society
- Handout - Disco and Society Gallery Walk Questions
- Handout - Music Video Analysis
- Handout - Music Video Analysis (Teacher's Guide)
- Handout - NPR Article on Sylvester
- Handout - NPR Article on Sylvester (Chunked Reading with Comprehension Questions)