

FUTURE NOSTALGIA? 21ST CENTURY DISCO

— FEATURE ARTICLE —

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates 21st century disco and its nostalgic influences from 1970s and 1980s dance culture. First, it outlines the article's argument that contemporary disco music, whilst being influenced by its musical past, has different meanings in the present, and that artists are combining past influences with their own innovations. Second, it explores academic interpretations of nostalgia, and how these relate to popular culture. Third, it analyses three albums that consciously incorporate 1970s and 1980s disco aesthetics: Daft Punk's *Random Access Memories* (2013), Nile Rodgers and Chic's *It's About Time* (2018) and Dua Lipa's *Future Nostalgia* (2020). It does this through a combination of analysing different media including artists' stated intentions in interviews, lyrics and sounds. This opens a discussion of nostalgia in these albums, exploring what nostalgic feelings, specifically for 1970s and 1980s disco culture, can tell us about our present. Finally, it contextualises disco culture's historical journey to the present.

KEYWORDS: disco, nostalgia, retro, Daft Punk, Chic, Dua Lipa

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DISCO IN THE 2020S

21st century disco may have similarities to disco records and aesthetics of the past, but its meanings have changed since the 1970s and 1980s. The music itself, and the cultural context in which it exists have both changed and remained the same. It no longer displays the utopian and futuristic aesthetics imagined by 1970s and 1980s disco, but rather, it explores how we in the present envision that disco culture once imagined the future. What can the current fascination with this specific retro style tell us about the present? What function does disco have now?

Disco in the 21st century is not just a cool aesthetic, a signifier stripped of its political energy. It is more than apolitical escapism, and, as in the 1970s and 1980s, disco today should not be imagined as apolitical. Alongside its intergenerational appeal, contemporary writings on disco culture have identified its important role in emancipatory histories, perhaps most notably those for LGBTQ+ liberation. Many contemporary disco artists use dance music to assert their stances in identity politics, with Dua Lipa for instance, highlighting gender inequalities. Nile Rodgers, a veteran of disco culture, has used his latest Chic material to draw links between difficulties in the past and the present moment. The utopia of disco aims to be inclusive, inviting people towards non-discriminatory unity. It is comforting music that helps people during unpredictable times, whether it be the socioeconomic challenges of the 1970s, the austerity and Trump presidency of the 2010s, or the COVID-19 pandemic at the start of the 2020s.

Nostalgia is memory, imagined or real, infused with emotion. For *Random Access Memories* (2013), rather than relying on samples from past tracks, as they had done in previous albums, Daft Punk consciously sought to make new music that sounded as though it could have been from the 1970s and 1980s disco era. As with back-to-basics trends in rock, such as the shift from 1970s prog rock to punk, or 1980s and 1990s glam rock to grunge, the use of live instrumentation in disco could be seen as a return to the emotional core of dance music: the beat and the groove. With this considered, disco has been far from static in the 21st century. Varied electronic influences can be heard in disco albums such as Róisín Murphy's *Róisín Machine* (2020), Jessie Ware's *What's Your Pleasure?* (2020), Kylie Minogue's *Disco* (2020) and The Weekend's *After Hours* (2020). Whether or not the nostalgic aspects of these albums are considered artistically regressive, it would appear that disco has appealed to listeners and artists during COVID-19 lockdowns and helped them cope through unpredictable times. Although historically rooted, it seems that disco is now as much a part of the present moment as the past. People are creating new disco memories, and in the process, giving the culture new meanings.

NOSTALGIA

When considering the continuities between 20th and 21st century disco cultures, “nostalgia” can be a loaded term. Historically, nostalgia has had pejorative associations. The term was coined in the medical dissertation of the 17th century Swiss physician Johanness Hofer to

explain the homesickness of Swiss mercenaries (Hofer 1934: 381; Davis 1979: 1). The word comes from the Greek compound *nóstos*, meaning homecoming, and *álgos*, meaning pain. Hofer suggested that this state of “afflicted imagination” could cause a lack of sleep, physical weakness, heart palpitations and stupidity (Sprengler 2009: 11-12). Left untreated, he believed it could result in death. Although Hofer coined the term itself, the general emotion can also be found in ancient storytelling, such as Homer’s *Odyssey* and the Bible (Sedikides et al. 2008: 304). In biological terms, nostalgia seems to be evolutionarily hardwired into humans, rather than a recent societal construct (Oba et al. 2016: 1070).

In academic circles, much of the negativity attached to the term has continued throughout history, in which it has primarily been considered as an undesirable psychological condition. Linguist, Dirk Klopper, has suggested: “the notion that nostalgia is in some way regressive, whether it relates to a personal or a political history, is a legacy of the hermeneutics of suspicion” (Klopper 2016: 11). Professor of technology, William C. Kurlinkus, has added that these negative associations continue into the present: “nostalgia has gotten a pretty bad rap. At best it’s dismissed as an empty longing for an artificially sweetened past, and at worst, a propagandistic roadblock that halts progress” (2018: 5). Nostalgia can be thought of as an obsessive and inescapable longing for the past, perhaps derived from an individual’s dissatisfaction with their present. In contrast, “retro”, the idea of imitating styles from the past, perhaps sounds quainter, and thus to those in the culture industry, more marketable.

In popular music studies, hauntology has been an influential framework for approaching recent cultural fascinations with the past. Hauntology contends that the contemporary culture industry is excessively nostalgic, recycling retro trends rather than producing anything new. By extension, this is thought to preclude culture’s transgressive potential. Writing at the turn of the 2010s, Mark Fisher defined hauntology as “the failure of the future” (2012: 16). Discussing 2000s popular culture, he reasoned that

Twenty-first-century electronic music had failed to progress beyond what had been recorded in the 20th century: practically anything produced in the 2000s could have been recorded in the 1990s. Electronic music had succumbed to its own inertia and retrospection. (Fisher 2012: 16)

Not only did Fisher believe this lack of imagination to be culturally boring, but further, that it was a symptom of political stagnation, obscuring society’s capacity to envision alternatives to the capitalist status quo. In his words, it represented “the acceptance of a situation in which culture would continue without really changing, and where politics was reduced to the administration of an already established (capitalist) system” (Fisher 2012: 16). In *Retromania*, Simon Reynolds suggests that even amongst younger artists, popular music has become fixated upon “archived memories of yesteryear or retro-rock leeching off ancient styles” (2011: 420). Like Fisher, Reynolds links this cultural inertia to the conditions of capitalism, and measures culture by a criterion of radicalism. For Marxists and socialists, culture is often assessed by its capacity to generate social ruptures, by its revolutionary, or at least subversive, potential. Nostalgia can seem the opposite of this. Karl

Marx himself, in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852), considered nostalgia to be a superstition that needs to be rejected so that progressive politics of the future can be brought into being (Klopper 2016: 10).

More recently, some academics across popular music studies, psychology and the social sciences have challenged perceptions of nostalgia as something inherently negative. Although it is acknowledged that it can be addictive if excessive, the emerging consensus amongst psychologists moves nostalgia away from past definitions as a disease of the mind needing to be cured, instead suggesting that it serves necessary societal and biological functions. Broadly, it is argued that “it has capacity to improve perceptions of friendship and social support, nurture sentiments of protection and love, lower anxiety, and prompt sociable behaviour” (“Nostalgia” 2021). Marc Augé has argued that nostalgia interrupts the “unconscious fidelity” and “idleness” of routine, allowing for subversive, or at least escapist potential: “nostalgia comes to undermine the routine, possibly to test it by reintroducing the idea of the possible into the humdrum daily rounds, otherwise free of problems and questions” (2016: 79). Sedikides et al have suggested that on a personal level, nostalgia functions as a response to “dysphoric states such as negative mood and loneliness”, which “increases self-esteem, fosters social connectedness, and alleviates existential threat” (2008: 304). Similarly, Zhou et al have written that it is a “predominantly (albeit not exclusively) positive emotion that serves vital psychological functions”, and that “one of these functions is to facilitate socially beneficial reactions” (2012: 47). They found, for instance, that nostalgia made people more charitable.

Connecting to the idea of “future nostalgia”, nostalgia is linked not only to the past, but, in contrast to hauntology, it can be used more productively to evoke past ideas of the future. Some argue that this allows for radical ways of thinking as it presents past visions of how society could have alternatively developed. In this way, it has been proposed that nostalgia can be creatively inspiring for individuals and the collective (Boym 2001: 354; Badbury 2012; Duncan, Stevens and Sonn 2012). Arguing that nostalgia can be forward looking, Pickering and Keightley suggest that we should change the way it is understood as a concept (2006). Wing-Yee Cheung et al have argued that nostalgia has the capacity “to facilitate perceptions of a more positive future”, and that it “may constitute a catalyst for linking one’s personal past, present, and future, thus providing a sense of self-continuity” (2013: 1493). Janelle Lynn Wilson proposes that “nostalgia is not a mere passive longing for the past, but a potentially dynamic vehicle for (re)envisioning and (re)creating various pasts and futures” (2015: 490).

This article builds upon interpretations in popular music studies of nostalgia as potentially invigorating. Creative uses of nostalgia, for instance, have been observed by Ballam-Cross, who found that chillwave, synthwave, and vaporwave subcultures utilise nostalgia to creatively rework past popular culture in ways that are meaningful to its younger participants (2021: 91). Arno van der Hoeven has argued that nostalgia in popular music culture is important in fostering feelings of belonging, continuity, and identity (2018: 238). Elodie Roy has also found that nostalgia can potentially be creative in allowing artists

to reinterpret popular music's past in ways that are relevant to them, rather than nostalgia stagnating any new musical expression (2014: 156).

DAFT PUNK'S *RANDOM ACCESS MEMORIES* (2013)

While there were numerous successful disco singles in the 2000s, Daft Punk's commercially lucrative and critically acclaimed 2013 album, *Random Access Memories*, seemed to reposition disco as a dominant mainstream genre. The title of the album itself hints at something that is both retrospective and futuristic. *Random Access Memories* of course, ends on the word "memories", but the phrase itself relates to computers. Random-access memory, or RAM, refers to the process by which computers present data, bringing together different past "memories" to produce a current sequence. Computers are devices symbolic of modernity and the future, constantly linking together and presenting bits of the past. In the album, Daft Punk, both as artists and as their robot personas, are engaged in a similar process, bringing together elements of past dance music styles.

Alongside younger dance music collaborators, *Random Access Memories* involved older disco veterans such as Giorgio Moroder, producer of Donna Summer's classic *Love to Love You Baby* (1975), and Chic's Nile Rodgers. In promotional interviews, the collaborators emphasised both the oldness and newness of what Daft Punk were doing. There was a nostalgic drive to the album, as Todd Edwards put it, "they wanted to pick up this west coast vibe. . . going back to the time of Fleetwood Mac, The Doobie Brothers. . . The Eagles" (The Creators Project 2013a). Edwards added that the methods used to achieve this seemingly backward style were a subversion of modern dance music techniques, where the sound is largely produced on a computer rather than through live instrumental performances in the studio. He believed this was "a lost artform", suggesting that,

There was no going further into this direction that's been constantly replicated and imitated and emulated, and so the concept was, they reverse gears, and went back to a time that no one's really focusing on, and even just the way they record music. (The Creators Project 2013a)

Giorgio Moroder expressed similar sentiments:

So, Daft Punk wanted to do something and do it in a way that's not done by just pushing a note or a chord. You definitely hear that it's nice and full, and the drums and the bass have that warm, that full sound. It's time to have something new in the dance world. I love disco or dance anyway, but this is like a step forward. They had to do something that is different. Still dance, still electronic, but give that human touch back. (The Creators Project 2013b)

Contemporary music artist, Pharrell Williams, thought that the album represented a back to basics for dance music, as if to say, "let's go back to that magical time where music, and the liveliness of music, is what moved people" (The Creators Project 2013c). He added that he believed a hubris had taken place in modern dance music: "people lost respect for

the groove". Chic's Nile Rodgers summarised the feeling of going back into dance music's history to regain the fundamental human connection of the groove: "it's like they went back to go forward" (The Creators Project 2013d). Daft Punk's intentions are summarised in the title of the album's opening track, "Give Life Back to Music".

Disco's history is apparent throughout the album, via combined processes of "heritagisation", continuation and revitalisation (Poirrier 2015: 377). The choice of collaborators adds to this. Nile Rodgers features in multiple tracks on the album, and he has been involved with some of disco's biggest hits throughout the course of the genre's history. Besides his work with Chic, his discography includes Sister Sledge's *We Are Family* (1979), Diana Ross' "I'm Coming Out" (1980), David Bowie's *Let's Dance* (1983), Madonna's *Like a Virgin* (1984) and Duran Duran's "Notorious" (1986), among others. Elsewhere, the track, "Giorgio by Moroder", features Giorgio Moroder giving a spoken biography of his musical career over electronic instrumentation, and with it, a history of modern dance music's inception (Poirrier 2015: 373). Many of the songs he worked on, especially "Love to Love You Baby", have been considered seminal in the establishment and early development of electronic dance music. "Giorgio by Moroder" seems to self-consciously connect an earlier phase of modern dance music, namely electronic disco and the development of hi-NRG, to a present and future in which mechanised sounds have become, and seem to be becoming, ever more prevalent.

As with all Daft Punk music videos, the singles for *Random Access Memories* take place in spaces that are liminal, enigmatic and cosmic. Like the reality-distorting experience of dance music and lights in the discotheque, time itself feels suspended. Collaborator Pharrell Williams has described *Random Access Memories* as sounding as if from an alternate reality:

Somewhere outside of the ether that we exist in is a multitude of realms of possibility and alternate directions, and I think they just went in those libraries and just dusted off those things. It's kind of like the mid '70s, early '80s of a different universe and dimension, not of this one. (The Creators Project 2013c)

Daft Punk had already been influential in the music industry for their catchy French house classics, but the success of *Random Access Memories*, the single "Get Lucky" in particular, can be seen as a moment in which disco that consciously drew on old aesthetics gained a newfound popularity. There had been big 21st century disco influenced hits, such as those from Jamiroquai, Kylie Minogue and Sophie Ellis-Bextor, but "Get Lucky" not only had resemblances to 1970s and 1980s disco, it was explicitly located within disco culture. During certain moments of the 2010s, disco re-emerged as the dominant musical style in the charts.

Disco was not the only mainstream genre that was reproducing 1970s styles. In rock, Haim's *Something to Tell You* (2017) had a warm Fleetwood Mac vibe to it, while The Arctic Monkeys' long-term shift towards retro styles has thus far culminated in *Tranquility Base Hotel + Casino* (2018), complete with a modernist architecture model on the front cover. Similarly, The Strokes have increasingly used 1970s sounds and equipment in their

recordings, and a 1970s sci-fi feel can be seen in their video aesthetics for *The New Abnormal* (2020). This retro sci-fi style extends to vocalist, Julian Casablancas' other band, The Voidz, and he also provided vocals for "Instant Crush" on *Random Access Memories*. Beyoncé's *Lemonade* (2016) drew from influences across several genres including reggae, hip hop, soul, blues, and funk, with throwbacks to the 1970s amongst other eras. Childish Gambino's "Redbone" (2016), was a 1970s style funk track that went viral online, linking the Black radicalism of the era to continued inequalities in the present, with its refrain for listeners to "stay woke". The revitalisation of disco, however, considering it had once been shunned as a genre, seemed to many a significant "revival"—as if it had ever really been absent.

CHIC'S *IT'S ABOUT TIME* (2018)

The impact of this ongoing resurgence of disco can be seen in the delayed recognition of Nile Rodgers' massive influence on modern popular music, given his involvement, as previously discussed, with many of the biggest dance hits of the 20th, and thus far, 21st centuries. Although his band, Chic, has been popular since the 1970s, it was not until the 2010s that Rodgers became a household name in the music industry, and his eventual ascendance into the pantheon of pop personifies the acceptance of disco's continued relevance.

Following the success of *Random Access Memories*, Nile Rodgers produced new Chic material which blended the band's classic sound with collaborations from younger artists including Cosha, Mura Masa and Vic Mensa. In the album's first released single, "I'll Be There" (2015), Nile Rodgers recounted his personal history of disco and the commercial success it brought him, alongside throwback samples from previous Chic songs: "life began for me, when a single DJ dropped the needle on my vinyl (everybody dance)". The song is a bridge for Chic, it being their first release since *Chic-ism* (1992). "I'll Be There" cast an appreciative look back on the band's history, but simultaneously looked forward to new musical possibilities. It was reflective whilst rejecting stasis: "now I don't wanna live in the past, but it's a nice place to visit. So, if you come along, I'll be there". Nile Rodgers could easily rely upon his discography of hit releases, but as demonstrated by the collaborations on the album, he had a desire to remain contemporary and relevant, to produce music that is both "timely and timeless" (Wodtke 2019: 43).

The title of the recent album, *It's About Time* (2018), is of course, a joke—it's the first Chic album since 1992—but it could also be interpreted more literally, with several of the songs linking into themes about time. "Till the World Falls" (2018) is about a generalised state of chaos, alluding to the unpredictability and divisive rhetoric of the Trump presidency in the 2010s. Rodgers has been explicit in saying that disco is his response to the harshness of the world, having commented in an interview: "things now seem completely out of control. So, I thought to myself, 'what if we could bring order to chaos through music?'" (Halls 2018). Disco is proposed as offering an escapist, more inclusive alternative. As the song states: "the world has gone mad, we might be safer on the dancefloor" and "we keep dancing, until the world falls". In "Boogie All Night", disco dancing is also presented as restorative in a

challenging world: “I’m hoping it will heal me”. This links back to older themes in Chic’s music, such as in “Good Times” (1979): “good times, these are the good times. Leave your cares behind”. Disco is, as the song puts it, “an end to this stress and strife”, suggesting that all is not well in the world outside the discotheque. The similarities between tracks on *It’s About Time* and “Good Times” connects the uncertainty of life in 1970s New York to the cultural, economic and political turmoil of the 2010s. The politics of disco’s past is relevant to the present.

DUA LIPA’S *FUTURE NOSTALGIA* (2020)

Disco seems nostalgic for many, even for those who did not live through the 1970s. Although nostalgia has historically been thought of as an individual act of reflection, it is now more often understood as a collective and intergenerational experience (Kurlinkus 2018: 7). In this way, it is possible for someone to be nostalgic for times, places and cultures that they did not directly experience, whether grounded in historical evidence or myths. They may feel a sense of familiarity with the past through literature or popular culture, including both period movies and television shows, or those made retrospectively about it (e.g. Second World War and Wild West movies).

Millennial artist, Dua Lipa, has a relationship with disco nostalgia that is both personal and intergenerational. In her album, *Future Nostalgia* (2020), she wanted to emulate the dance records that she enjoyed in her own youth, tapping into a personal sense of nostalgia. Intergenerationally, the style of the music and aesthetic of the album fuse many past styles, but 1970s and 1980s disco is the core focus. It may seem odd that Dua Lipa, an artist in her mid-twenties, decided explicitly to title her album as nostalgic. Her youth, and the continued popularity of retro styled disco amongst young audiences, poses questions: what do millennials have to be nostalgic about, and what is the relevance of particular 20th century dance music styles?

Younger artists are positively embracing disco, both as nostalgic and fresh. Lipa’s album title for *Future Nostalgia*, although a seemingly vague aesthetic idea, taps into questions about the millennial relationship with 20th century culture. As Kurlinkus suggests, “isn’t nostalgia, a regressive emotion, the opposite of design, an innovative act?” (2018: 3). *Future Nostalgia* is oxymoronic, suggesting a longing for past ideas of the future. A hauntological interpretation might position such nostalgia as a commercialised phenomenon, lacking any possibility for radical content. Lipa’s material, I would argue however, does have something political to say about our society, whether this is considered radical or not. The videos for the singles on the album largely feature dream like sci-fi settings. “Levitating”, possibly the most 1970s style disco song, has a video where Lipa gets into a lift which is shooting up into space, complete with the disco signifiers of roller blading dancers and an LED dancefloor. This is imitative of past sci-fi aesthetics, but similarly to, and possibly inspired by the commercial success of Daft Punk’s *Random Access Memories*, it captures that disco feeling

of time being suspended on the dance floor. As with “Get Lucky”, “Levitating” is a moment of joy within itself, somewhere between our world and the next.

Future Nostalgia is era hopping in its blend of past aesthetics and genres. As one reviewer put it: “Future Nostalgia’ sounds like three Madonna eras at once” (Gaca 2020). The pulsating synth sound and video for “Let’s Get Physical Work Out” are a 1980s cliché, styled as a VHS video with Lipa instructing viewers through a workout routine. The album cover shows Lipa in a 1950s style pink shirt and gloves, driving a car of the period, but her misshapen silver earrings look more modern or futuristic (Hahn 2020). Lipa has explained that she “wanted to make something that felt nostalgic but had something fresh and futuristic about it too” (Kenneally 2020). She has cited diverse pop inspirations, such as Gwen Stefani, Madonna, Moloko, Blondie and Outkast. Mixing disco with different genres is nothing new, but rather a continuation of past practices. 1970s and 1980s disco tracks were not as rigid a genre as it might be supposed, with tracks such as The Rolling Stones’ “Miss You” (1978) or The Clash’s “The Magnificent Seven” (1981) being a rock and disco blend. As with much contemporary electronic music, there is a “stylistic diversity” combining genres which have historically been marketed as distinct (Charles 2020: 24). In *Future Nostalgia*, this includes Italo disco, nu-disco, funk, synth-pop, Euro disco, hi-NRG, house, techno and R&B. Perhaps in a 21st century Spotify-era kind of way, this album is influenced by everything at once, as one might track hop between eras in a digital playlist. The album combines all of these genres, using disco as a unifying style.

The musical styles and aesthetics of disco and its offshoots offer a catchy, colourful and nostalgic feel, that resonates with audiences in our contemporary moment. This extends to the physical and digital album of *Future Nostalgia*. Lipa’s website has successfully sold the album in formats associated with different music eras, such as audio file, CD and vinyl. Even pre-orders for the cassette copy, a format that has long been generally considered as outdated and obsolete in sound quality, have sold out on her website over a year after the album’s initial release. It is notable that this album, which is a much bigger commercial hit than Lipa’s debut album, was released during the COVID-19 pandemic, although it was recorded before this. With many audiences in lockdown and unable to experience new social relationships, it is possible that nostalgic desires appeal to audiences because they want new music that is also warm and familiar. If the pandemic has made the world feel unsafe and unpredictable, disco offers a happy sound with a predictable 4/4 beat. Dance music albums have thrived, despite the impossibility of social dancing. Perhaps their appeal includes some longing for past dance floor connections. It has been speculated that many people responded to the anxiety of COVID-19 lockdowns with simple nostalgic activities, such as listening to old music, watching past sports games, knitting and baking (Brunk et al. 2020). Roller blading, long remembered as a quintessentially 1970s pastime, has also experienced renewed interest, with larger than usual consumer demand for roller skates in 2020 and 2021 (BBC News 2021). This has perhaps been encouraged by their usage in the music video for Lipa’s popular hit, “Levitating”.

Jon Freeman of *Rolling Stone* has written of *Future Nostalgia*'s liberating escapism: "the future beyond the pandemic is vague at best, but we can momentarily escape the grimness of the news cycle and the sameness of our surroundings by setting our bodies free at home" (Freeman 2020). In *The Guardian*, Alexis Petridis identified similar popular music trends in 2020, relating the popularity of disco to COVID-19:

The big pop trend was disco revivalism. . . . as a genre, disco is lavishly escapist, but the best of it invariably comes with a curious undertow of melancholy. It is music that celebrates the transportive hedonism of the dance floor without ever entirely forgetting that there is something out there you're keen to be transported from (Petridis 2020).

Of course, disco and *Future Nostalgia* may have been popular regardless of COVID-19, but as disco culture is rooted in togetherness and self-expression on the dancefloor, it would make sense for it to reflect the desires of societies in lockdown. As Lipa herself has reflected on the success of her album during this moment, "happiness is something we all deserve and need in our lives" (Weinberg 2021).

The opening track of the album, "Future Nostalgia", is a funk-based manifesto for Lipa. The lyrical music video uses 1970s graphics and camera style, and features Lipa moving around a modernist building. It is reminiscent of settings in 1970s episodes of *Columbo*. Lipa indicates that retro styles are inspirations for the album in declaring she wants a timeless sound. She wants her music to be new, but also sound as though it could exist as a past great in the future: "you want a timeless song, I wanna change the game, like modern architecture, John Lautner coming your way". Accordingly, the song does not do anything particularly new, it is more a case of doing past styles well. The song is a self-confident declaration of her importance: "I know you're dying trying to figure me out". Lipa asserts that she is a self-confident female artist who does not depend on anyone else: "no matter what you do, I'm gonna get it without ya. I know you ain't used to a female alpha".

As Simon Reynolds has noted, there has been a "political turn" in certain strands of electronic music since the 2010s (Reynolds 2019). Whereas 1970s/1980s disco and house was more implicit in its underlying political messages, modern dance music tends to be more explicit when arguing for the rights of women and minority groups. Lipa, in her music, and from her social platform as a celebrity, has spoken of taking political stances on issues such as feminism: "I get a lot of backlash for speaking out, but these are things I'm passionate about - and that's that" (Savage 2020). *Future Nostalgia* is not just a self-confident assertion of individual female identity, but also discusses the collective anxieties and inequalities experienced by women. "Boys Will be Boys", a slower and less disco-influenced track on the album, does not hold back, opening with: "it's second nature to walk home before the sun goes down, and put your keys between your knuckles when there's boys around". The chorus comments on the unfairness of girls needing to grow up quickly: "boys will be boys, but girls will be women". While tracks like Helen Reddy's "I Am Woman" (1972) were anthems for second wave feminism in the 1970s, it is difficult to envision anything as explicit as Lipa's lyrics in the charts of that era—although less commercially mainstream female punk bands

were often vocally radical in highlighting gender inequalities. Even Lipa's feelgood disco bop of "Don't Start Now", assertively commands an ex-boyfriend to stop harassing her: "don't show up, don't come out. Don't start caring about me now". The album is styled as retro, but in tracks such as these it foregrounds a more politically contemporary discussion of #MeToo era themes. Lipa has said of her album: "I want it to be a soundtrack for young girls when they get older. I want it to age well" (Levesley 2020). Lipa's music has nostalgic influences, but it aspires to influence the future. It seeks to be timeless and to inspire future generations, to become nostalgic for them just as past music has influenced *Future Nostalgia*.

CONTEXTUALISING THE POPULAR MEMORY OF DISCO IN THE 20TH AND 21ST CENTURIES

Since the 1970s, nostalgia for disco has changed over time in the mainstream public consciousness. Until the 1990s, disco had a history of being popularly remembered as a dated and meaningless music culture (Shapiro 2005: 276). Developing into a commercially international commercial phenomenon from the early to late 1970s, it is considered synonymous with that decade. For many Americans, the 1970s have negative associations, such as with the Watergate scandal, defeat in the Vietnam War, violent domestic political groups, energy shortages, tense labour relations and a perceived decline in global power (Borstelmann 2012: 1). During the 1970s, disco was described by critics as individualistic and commercialised, incapable of any artistic merit (Lawrence 2003: 374). By 1979, the "disco sucks" movement, encouraged by DJ Steve Dahl, began campaigning against disco on the radio. There were resentments against it being played instead of rock, in many cases guided by an underlying homophobia (Gillian 2007: 278). This culminated in Disco Demolition Night, a baseball game to which Dahl invited people to come and destroy disco records, which turned into a riot. While the music industry has always fluctuated between different trends, this event seemed to make disco a toxic brand, and many companies moved away from it or relabelled "disco" records as different genres (Rodgers 2011: 155). Disco, and dance music communities more generally, would also be devastated by the aids epidemic during the 1980s, which disproportionately affected and prompted homophobic stigma towards one of their core constituents, LGBTQ+ communities.

Despite industry alienation, not everyone turned their backs on dance music, and disco continued in clubs, often as more of an underground movement. It was foundational for new genres that would be popular in the 1980s, such as house, techno and Euro disco (Lawrence 2003: 430). Disco was also an important part of the history of minority groups in the US, particularly for members of the LGBTQ+ community, for many of whom discotheques were emancipatory spaces for self-expression and meeting with other members of the community (Echols 2010: 56-57). Themes of tolerance, unity and liberation were featured, often implicitly, in disco music – a set of utopian ideas that had been passed to it through 1960s psychedelic culture (Lawrence 2003: 10). These influences would arguably become even more pronounced in disco's offshoots towards the end of the century, such as in house tracks like Joe Smooth's "Promised Land" (1988), and Chuck Roberts' sermon proclaiming the emancipatory power of house music, "My House" (1987).

After the 1970s, disco was often seen as commercialised, low-quality music by mainstream culture. Genres from the same decade, punk and hip-hop, seemed more directly tied to underground movements and radical politics, and were treated by researchers as such. Histories of disco, however, were largely neglected. It was only by the 1990s that this began to change, and many factors may have influenced this. Not only had dance genre offshoots of disco continued to be popular, but many of them, such as trance, clearly had diverse audiences and grassroots support. They appeared more radical and authentic than disco had seemed to the general public in the late 1970s. Furthermore, it is possible that cultural attitudes had shifted by the 1990s, a shift perhaps influenced by the implicit messages of tolerance from 1970s disco culture. Perhaps America was more ready to celebrate a genre that, in its original form, was culturally diverse and embracing of different sexual identities. It may have also been that just the right amount of time had passed between the 1970s and the 1990s for people to feel nostalgic about disco. Non-academic books were followed by in-depth histories in the 1990s and 2000s that revised scholarly perceptions of disco, finding that while it was commercialised, there was a radical core to disco that brought people together (see Thornton 1995; Rietveld 1998; Jones and Kantonen 1999; Lawrence 2003; Shapiro 2005 and Echols 2010). Popular culture in the 2000s was also embracing disco to some extent, with successful singles in the charts such as Spiller's "Groovejet (If This Ain't Love)" (2000), Sophie Ellis-Bextor's "Murder on the Dancefloor" (2001), Kylie Minogue's "Can't Get You Out of My Head" (2001), and Justin Timberlake's "Rock Your Body" (2003). It would also be influential in the sounds of upcoming bands, such as LCD Soundsystem.

Disco would become even more commercially and culturally popular in the 2010s, and this trend has continued, so far, into the 2020s. It had year-dominating hits such as Daft Punk's "Get Lucky" (2013) and Mark Ronson and Bruno Mars' "Uptown Funk" (2014). Besides being a naturally catchy and accessible genre, it is generally perceived as fun and inclusive, sharing affinities with the identity politics of many millennials and zoomers (generation z), for whom minority rights and gender equality have gained a new political urgency (Fisher 2017). As this article has examined, there is a utopian element to disco music, and this links in with how people in the 21st century remember the utopian imaginings of the 1970s. The titles of commercially successful disco albums, Daft Punk's *Random Access Memories* (2013) and Dua Lipa's *Future Nostalgia* (2020), seem to acknowledge this. Disco's optimistic sound gives hope to many listeners in the present, providing inspiration for their struggles to create a different future.

CONCLUSION

As posed at the start of this article, what function does disco have now? This paper has reviewed three recent disco albums, finding that nostalgic influences have not necessarily stagnated disco culture. Rather, they have been utilised alongside present day influences, and this article has explored how contemporary political attitudes and musical styles have been incorporated into disco. These give disco culture new meanings in the present, without divorcing it from its historic legacy. As the section contextualising disco's journey from

the 1970s to the present elucidates, new meanings and interpretations of disco culture are affected by how we interpret its past. As with all history, it is used in ways that are meaningful to us in the present. For Daft Punk, that was a desire to return to a less mechanical recording process, with more live instrumentation. For Nile Rodgers, disco links present and past, offering hope in troubled times. For Dua Lipa, disco can legitimate feelings of happiness, as well as social activism, influencing the future for the better.

Disco may not seem as different as it did in the 1970s. As with rock or hip-hop, it cannot be born again, but it is still able to make us feel something. It is joy for times of elation, and consolation for when it seems the world, or we as individuals, fall. In line with the ethos of disco: if it feels good, we should use it. Disco is said to have had many “revivals” since the 1970s, but this assumes it ever died. Rather than being a retro fad, disco has proven an enduring sound that over half a century after its inception is dominating the charts once again. 21st century disco needs to be thought of as less of an imitation of a past culture, and more as its lively continuation and development.

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