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“I Want to See All My Friends At Once”: Arthur Russell and the Queering of Gay Disco

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Disco, it is commonly understood, drummed its drums and twirled its twirls across an explicit gay-straight divide. In the beginning, the story goes, disco was gay: Gay dancers went to gay clubs, celebrated their newly liberated status by dancing with other men, and discovered a vicarious voice in the form of disco's soul and gospel-oriented divas. Received wisdom has it that straights, having played no part in this embryonic moment, co-opted the culture after they cottoned onto its chic status and potential profitability. With Sylvester and John Travolta marking out the polar opposites of disco's terrain, it was supposed to be easy to spot the difference. The sequined black gay falsetto, who delivered soul and gospel-charged disco, embodied the movement's gay roots, while the white straight hustling star of *Saturday Night Fever*, who was happiest dancing to the shrill pop of the Bee Gees, represented its commercialization and suburbanization. In this article, however, I want to refract this popular analysis through a queer lens in order to explore not just the mixed composition of early dance crowds, which I take to be historically given (Lawrence 2004a: 22, 31, 104), but, more importantly, the way in which both the dance floor experience and disco's musical aesthetics could be said to be queer (rather than gay). I will also examine how disco producers, responding to the mainstreaming of disco culture from the mid-1970s onwards, took the genre in fresh and unsettling directions. These questions will be explored through the decidedly odd figure of Arthur Russell, whose disco releases stand as an allegory of the unexplored relationship between gay and queer disco.

Russell was disco's barely known crown prince—and this in a culture where, as the darkened floors and faceless studio producers indicated, anonymity was already the norm. An awkward dancer who was prone to shyness and lacked confidence in his pock-marked looks, Russell would lurk in the corner of favorite nightspots such as the Gallery, the Loft, and, a little later, the Paradise Garage. He did not release his first disco record until the end of 1978, some 6 months before the savagely homophobic and racist

backlash against disco prompted the major record companies to scuttle away from the genre, and his forays into disco before and after the pivotal summer of 1979 were undertaken behind the camouflage of a series of band names such as Dinosaur, Dinosaur L, and Loose Joints. As if to make sure he did not become known for his disco output, Russell pursued simultaneously a myriad of other music projects, including a score for theatre producer Robert Wilson's *Medea*; his own 48-hour art-vernacular composition, *Instrumentals*; pop-rock projects with the Flying Hearts and the Necessaries; folk-mutating-into-mantra performances with Allen Ginsberg; and other folk-oriented acts such as the Sailboats. In short, Russell did not know how to plot a career in music (he pursued too many genres) and did not pin his flag to any movement (always broke, he could not have afforded all the flags). Within disco, no record label latched onto Russell as a figure who was worthy of development, and no DJ bought a record just because the small print included his name. Yet when compared with Carl Bean, the Village People, and Sylvester, disco's best-known gay acts, Russell could be described as the culture's most self-reflexive gay artist.

Carl Bean's "I Was Born This Way" was the first disco record to address gay sexuality as a public issue, yet the record did not get played outside of gay clubs and Bean did not develop his theme (Lawrence 2004a: 328; Shapiro 65). The Village People dressed up in gay role-play regalia, performed in gay clubs (at least at the beginning of their career), and wrote songs that brimmed with gay innuendo. But the group never came out as gay to the general public and, their first album aside, their music was not played in New York's trend-setting gay discotheques (Lawrence 2004a: 331–32; Shapiro 220; Smith 20–24). Sylvester was significantly less shy than the Village People when it came to declaring his sexuality, but his route into disco was accidental and initially reluctant, and he wrote only one song, "You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)," that explicitly addressed "gay disco" (Diebold 28–31; Gamson 142; Lawrence 2004a: 328, 2005; Walters 649).¹ Russell also came from a nondisco background, yet, as far as can be established, sought out and enjoyed relationships with women until he met a hairdresser who was best friends with Nicky Siano, the DJ at the Gallery, one of the most influential parties of New York's downtown party network (Lawrence 2004a: 111). Drawn to disco's mutating repetitive framework, Russell started to record disco that, perhaps more than the output of any other artist, could be described as self-consciously gay or queer. It is through these recordings—in particular, "Kiss Me Again," "Is It All Over My Face?" and "Go Bang"—that I want to tickle the underbelly, or maybe even the torso, of the regularly

asserted yet fleetingly explored argument that disco was gay, as well as to explore the way in which Russell's records both validated and challenged the foundations of gay disco.

Russell was an unlikely convert to disco, even in a culture whose *raison d'être* was, at least in its earliest formation, to attract the unlikely. Having grown up in Oskaloosa, Iowa, where he learnt to play the cello and hung out with an older, Beatnik-oriented gang, Russell ran away at the age of 17 and, drawn to experimental communities, joined a Buddhist commune in San Francisco (Goshorn 12.9.2005; Russells 6.4.2004; Van Weelden 20.7.2005). He attended both the Ali Akbar College of Music and the San Francisco Conservatory while off duty and developed an intriguing musical aesthetic that drew on classical Indian music, Buddhist mantras, leftfield folk, and western art music (Mathieu 7.12.2004). In 1973 he became convinced that this vision, which he believed to be unique to the milieu of the West Coast, could find a commercial outlet in New York (Whittier 1.8.2005). With the support of his parents, Russell enrolled in the Manhattan School of Music in the autumn of 1973 and a year later became the Music Director of the Kitchen, the downtown hub of experimental art music (Stearns 22.7.2005). Some time after moving to the East Coast, Russell had the briefest possible fling with his friend and mentor, Allen Ginsberg, but otherwise had apparently fulfilling relationships with women (Abrams 20.7.2005; Fujii 3.2.2004, 10.2.2004; Murray 1.9.2005; Whittier 1.8.2005, 2.8.2005). As the last of these relationships hovered between middle and endgame, Russell met Louis Aqualone—the hairdresser—and was introduced to the Gallery (Siano 3.11.2004). DJ Nicky Siano, who played records that combined fire with emotion (Lawrence 2004a: 104–9, 2004b), became friends with Russell: He remembers him attempting to dance like Aqualone (something even talented dancers struggled to pull off) and becoming “possessed by the Gallery” (Siano 3.11.2004). The milieu of the venue, in which a predominantly black gay yet ultimately mixed group of dancers gathered in a communal space in order to dance all night to black dance music became a social, political, and aesthetic touchstone for Russell (Hall 30.11.2004; Gordon 1.7.2003; Siano 3.11.2004)

Russell's discoized conversion to gayness was far from unique. Although many men entered New York's disco network in order to express an already known gay identity, an unquantifiable number of others—including Russell—appear to have only come to understand fully their preference for male sexual partners within this environment (Lawrence 2004a: 27–28, 91, 104, 188–91). The discotheque setting of the first half of the 1970s was tailor-made for this kind of self-discovery, for although Manhattan's

dance floors of the early 1970s are regularly described as being uniformly gay (Brewster and Broughton 129; Collin 11; Garratt 7–10; Goldman 117; Posthardt 110; Shapiro 47–63), they were in fact fundamentally mixed and fluid in character. Gay men were the key constituency of this movement, but many of them considered themselves to be bisexual, or were simply the product of a culture in which there was limited space to live as a gay man. They were joined on the floor by a range of straight men (including a number of early “strays”—straight men who identified with gay men) and women (many of them lesbian, many of them straight admirers of gay men) (Lawrence 2004a: 22, 31, 104).² This experience articulated the belief, developed in Gay Liberation Front literature, that gayness was a politically acceptable staging post on the way to a fuller bisexual identity (Altman 218; Epstein 243).³

By the middle of the decade this kind of talk had become less common as gay men began to comprehend (and enjoy) their sexuality as being settled rather than mutating, at least in Manhattan’s private gay venues, the first of which, the Tenth Floor, opened in December 1972 (Lawrence 2004a: 76).⁴ To varying degrees, these members-only gay nightspots became incubators of gay identity, and by the end of the decade nightspots such as Flamingo were even being referred to as “finishing schools”—environments in which gayness was not simply expressed, but actively taught (Stambolian). Disco, according to Gregory Bredbeck, was not just a space in which gay men expressed an already-formed identity. It was also a key site for their interpellation as gay men (77, 82–83). That was evidently Russell’s experience when he first went to the Gallery. “I went to a disco one night, . . .” he told David Toop in an interview published in the *Face* in 1987. “It made a big impression on me . . .” (Toop 27) The venue did not simply affirm who he already was; it hailed him into a new way of being.

Long before he entered the Gallery, Russell’s primary mode of being was expressed through music. His relationships with men and women were very much secondary to his music; he showed only a vague interest in food; sports did not register on his radar; and friendships were formed almost exclusively with fellow musicians. In the Gallery the volume and quality of the system, the consciousness-changing practice of the all-night dance marathon, Siano’s extravagant talent for selecting and mixing records, and the need-for-release outlook of the venue’s primarily black gay crowd combined to create an extreme musical environment. Unsurprisingly, Russell started to take note of Siano’s selections, and soon after approached the DJ to work

with him on a disco record, which was paid for out of “the Gallery war chest” (Siano 3.11.2004). The result, “Kiss Me Again,” was coproduced by Russell and Siano in November 1977 (Siano acknowledges that Russell pulled the musical strings and pushed the studio buttons). Sire picked up the result and paid for some additional recording before releasing the record as a Jimmy Simpson 12-inch remix in November 1978. Eyebrows, a fair number of them pierced, were raised that Sire, one of the pioneering labels of new wave, should dip its toes into what many punk-o-philes considered to be the saccharine swamp of disco. A casual listen to “Kiss Me Again” would have confirmed their doubts, if only because the record revolves around the principal figure of the 1970s dance music, the disco diva, who appears to conform to type in addressing her lover through the discourse—widely loathed in new wave circles—of heterosexual romance.

Disco has received only fleeting recognition for establishing a milieu in which female vocalists were able to carve out a significant space for artistic expression in the recording studio and music industry.⁵ Jocelyn Brown, Linda Clifford, Carol Douglas, Taana Gardner, Gloria Gaynor, Loleatta Holloway, Thelma Houston, Grace Jones, Chaka Khan, Evelyn “Champagne” King, Cheryl Lynn, Donna Summer, and Karen Young were among the most notable solo acts, while Ecstasy, Passion & Pain, First Choice, LaBelle, Shirley & Company, Sister Sledge, and the Three Degrees possessed the kind of gumption that had been lacking arguably in the girl groups of the 1960s, who showed plenty of signs of agency but, as Brian Ward notes, made choices that “invariably revolved around thoroughly conventional notions of a sublime, thrilling, monogamous [sic] romance which would be solemnized within the emotional and material security of traditional marriage” (158). Having had more time to absorb the lessons of feminism, the disco divas drew on the harder-edged themes of betrayal and breakup, or, if all was going well, sex and desire. Even when they did not write their own lines, these performers would regularly find room to say what was on their minds when they were given the nod to embark on a vamp, and these lung-busting improvisations could become the centerpiece of a subsequent 12-inch remix.⁶ The presence of the female performer had already started to shift with the emergence of gospel-oriented soul vocalists such as Aretha Franklin, whose interventions were intertwined with the rise of the feminist movement. Perhaps it is not surprising that a high proportion of the new tranche of disco divas also came from a Church background and intended to pursue a soul/gospel career until, to their surprise, they discovered they had been co-opted by disco’s core constituency of gay men.

Disco's core gay dancers took to these female vocalists because they related to their tales of hardship, pain, and emotional defiance in the face of adversity (Hughes 151–53; Lawrence 2004a: 178, 328–29; Walters 647). Hunting down their records and boosting their rankings in the Hot 100, gay men created a market for these female vocalists, who had been frustrated by the way in which they were sidelined by their labels (Lawrence 2004a: 148).⁷ The practice of gay men establishing a rapport with a female vocalist can be traced to the operatic tradition—this is, for example, the central theme of Wayne Koestenbaum's *The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality and the Mystery of Desire* (1993)—but it is an alliance that has come under attack from authors such as John Gill, who criticizes the notion of the alliance of gay men and female divas in relation to dance in his book *Queer Noises* (1995). “We could talk irony and intertextuality until we were blue in the face and dance music would still be about heterosexual hegemony, . . .” writes Gill. “Worse, when they address the subject of love, which they normally do, the lyrics hymn the sort of relationships, and the sort of politics, that would otherwise be an anathema to queers.” (137) That is obviously not the case in disco, though, where the lyrics are often coruscating in their critique of the happy veneer of heterosexual romance, with betrayal, loneliness, anger, jealousy, and postrelationship survival the bread-and-butter themes of the 1970s disco diva. In one such song—“Free Man” by South Shore Commission, a bloodbath of a duet in which the female vocalist informs her fickle male partner of his obligations—the lyrics could be said to apply to any relationship in which promiscuity and faithfulness are an issue, irrespective of sexuality. Yet the thematic relevance of “Free Man” was quickly sidelined by dancers at Flamingo, the most prestigious white gay venue of the 1970s, who preferred to appropriate the chorus as an anthem of gay liberation (Lawrence 2004a: 192–93).

Gill's reference to irony and intertextuality alludes to ironic, camp humor, perhaps the most discussed mode of western gay expression, but there was little space for irony in the 1970s discotheque, where emotion (feelings) and affect (bodily sensation) were far more prominent. After the introduction of reinforced sound (tweeter arrays and bass reinforcements) in David Mancuso's Loft in the early 1970s (Lawrence 2004a: 89–91), if not before, the dance floor functioned as a space in which distance—and therefore irony—was impossible.⁸ The force of the sound system, as Kodwo Eshun and Julian Henriques point out, envelops the dancer to the extent that she/he cannot exist outside of or be removed from the experience (Eshun 188; Henriques 451–53), and when the music selected by the DJ included

a female diva, which it so often did, her powerful, amplified voice would have permeated the body of the gay male dancer, who in turn would have been charged by the vocalist's refusal to assume the role of the downtrodden underdog within the conventional heterosexual relationship. Walter Hughes points to the importance of the racial identity of these female performers, who were for the most part African American, and maintains that it was their double underdog status—that they were both black and female—that encouraged gay men to adopt them as spiritual partners on the dance floor. The fact that disco was experienced overwhelmingly through vinyl playback rather than live performance does not so much undermine this analysis as suggest that gay male dancers, when they did not know otherwise, would imagine the vocalist's invisible racial identity according to the quality of her vocal delivery, with black divas emphasizing what Roland Barthes describes as the "grain of the voice" (182)—the voice that is felt and material rather than disembodied and ethereal. White divas who sang with a sufficient degree of raspy emotion, such as Linda Clifford and Karen Young, were received with an equally warm embrace.

Nicky Siano was arguably the most influential DJ of all when it came to breaking divas. Dancers talk of him playing records that made men want to "put on a skirt and spin" and he regularly turned these records into national hits. He also invited Grace Jones and Loleatta Holloway to perform at the Gallery at the very beginning of their disco careers (Lawrence 2004a: 243–44, 259), and it is likely that Arthur Russell would have been at the Gallery for these shows. When it came to recording "Kiss Me Again," therefore, the decision to employ a potential disco diva, Myriam Valle, the back-up singer from Desmond Child and Rouge, was a relatively safe strategy. On the record, Valle delivers her lines melodically and forcefully, according to the conventions of the time, and the song's title, which the vocalist repeats many times over, evokes the trope of gay mournfulness and loss, which was born out of historical circumstances—the obstacles gay men faced in sustaining a public relationship, which in turn encouraged engagements that were intense and fleeting. The Jackson 5 might have recorded "Never Can Say Goodbye" as a sweet Motown pop song, but the lyrics took on added meaning when they were sung by Gloria Gaynor and played in a gay disco, where "goodbye" was always a likely outcome. The "Again" of "Kiss Me Again" evokes a similar pit-of-the-belly cocktail of absence and desire, the longing felt by the lover who will soon be alone, or might already be alone.

The centrality of emotion is reinforced by the instrumental structure of "Kiss Me Again," especially on the 12-inch version of the single.

The 12-inch came about when it became clear that, in contrast to radio DJs, club spinners preferred to play long records, largely because these enabled dancers to lose themselves in the flow of the music—a key objective of the dance experience (Lawrence 2004a: 25–26, 182–83, 191, 212–18, 288–90).⁹ Remixers, many of them DJs, became specialists in extending the sections that worked on the dance floor—the vamp of the diva, the percussive tension of the break, the groove of the rhythm section, etc.—and this strategy is played out in “Kiss Me Again,” which was long even by disco’s standards, with the main version running at 13 minutes. As with many 12-inch disco singles, the feel is “stripped down,” meaning that the elements that make up the propulsive rhythm section—the dynamic between the drummer (Alan Schwartzberg), the bass player (Wilbur Bascum), and the rhythm guitar (David Byrne)—are highlighted in the mix. Around this locomotive structure, Valle delivers her lines and Russell (cello) and Peter Zummo (trombone) add a mournful lyricism. “Kiss Me Again,” to all intents and purposes, was written for a gay disco—in this case, the Gallery.

Yet behind the song’s romantic title lies an edgy story of sexual submission that offers a foretaste of Russell’s future move into queer disco. “I need you beside me, the best love that I gave,” opens Valle. “The wind blows, the clouds wave, am I a woman or a slave?” The vocalist then asks, “Ooh baby, is this the woman I want to be?” She goes on to repeat the line “kiss me again” several times before she confesses, “I want to be used.” The explicit S/M theme of domination and submission might have been far removed from the discourse of diva resistance, but it connected with the popularization of leather culture in gay discotheques following the introduction of the Black Party, in effect a leather party, by Michael Fesco at Flamingo in 1975 (Lawrence 2004a: 192). Soon after, Michel Foucault experienced leather and S/M practices during his trip to the West Coast of the United States and was inspired to call for the making “of one’s body a place for the production of extraordinary polymorphic pleasures, while simultaneously detaching it from a valorization of the genitalia and particularly of the male genitalia” (Miller 269). By the early 1990s queer theorists, drawing on Foucault and opposing the belief that sexuality was natural, advocated a sexual politics that, amongst other things, sought out instability and surprise through a demonstration of the constructed, performative nature of sexuality (Butler 1990: 6, 1993: 228; Rubin 9–11; Sedgwick 82–86; Warner vii–xxviii). They also argued that even gay sexuality risked becoming “a minoritizing logic of toleration or simple political interest-representation” that forgot to resist “the normal” (Warner xxvi). Drawing on the unsettling theme of sadomasochism,

the lyrics of “Kiss Me Again” anticipated this shifting debate between gay and queer politics.¹⁰

The recording of “Kiss Me Again” contained other clues that Russell was on the cusp of shifting from a gay to a queer aesthetic. The performer-producer’s use of instrumentation was strange: Disco was familiar with string and brass sections, but it is unlikely that any producer had previously deployed an amplified cello and a trombone on the same record, never mind given them solos.¹¹ Russell also hired not one but two bass players, which confounded the players to such a degree they assumed that their booking agents had made a mistake until Russell explained that he wanted them to both play—and create an undercurrent of threatening, rumbling dissonance (Saltzman 3.8.2005). Most intriguingly of all, Russell asked Valle to bring an element of alarming disturbance into her delivery, believing this would complement the lyrics, and according to Donald Murk, Russell’s steady boyfriend and unofficial manager at the time, the vocalist was sufficiently unnerved by Russell’s request and unhappy with his off-the-wall demeanor that she created the desired effect by default (Murk 11.9.2005). Russell then made an error. Unhappy with Byrne’s contribution, he decided to rerecord the rhythm guitar over Valle’s vocal track, believing he could get her to rerecord in a similar style at a later date. But when Valle went back into the studio, she had her wits about her and sang the song in an altogether more soulful manner, and this is the version that ended up on the Sire release (Murk 11.9.2005). Still, the episode reveals the way in which Russell intended to unsettle the roots of gender—and to expose the illicit feelings that can emerge when the known is not immediately available and cracks start to appear in the most frequently performed diva identities.

Before Russell came onto the scene, gay disco was in fact already queer. Even though Richard Dyer doesn’t use the term, his classic essay “In Defence of Disco” articulates this position thanks to his highlighting of the way in which disco’s emphasis on open-ended, mutating polyrhythm and timbre “restores eroticism to the whole body” and contrasts radically with the “indelibly phallo-centric music” of rock (Dyer 523). Whereas rock confines “sexuality to the cock” (Dyer 523), disco opens up into an open-ended way of becoming that coheres with Butler’s conception of the queer body, as well as subsequent theorizations developed by critics such as Elizabeth Grosz and Rosi Braidotti, who together, as Jeremy Gilbert writes, “have all in different ways sought to develop a politics of embodied identity which is radically materialist as well as explicitly feminist and pro-queer in character” (Gilbert forthcoming). Suzanne Cusick, in her chapter in *Queering*

the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology, suggests that queer music might combine elements that are normally understood to be “masculine” and “feminine” in one piece in order to upset notions of any stable, essential gendered self (76). Susan McClary, in a chapter written for *Microphone Fiends*, similarly argues, “the music itself—especially as it intersects with the body and destabilizes accepted norms of subjectivity, gender and sexuality—is precisely where the politics of music often reside” (McClary 32). With regard to disco, Gilbert adds, “Dyer’s ‘all-body-eroticism’ would seem to be precisely the objective of a queer musicology’s erotic politics, informed at once by a rigorous anti-essentialism and by Cusick’s rather beautiful suggestion that ‘music *is* sex’” (Gilbert forthcoming).

Implicit here is the way in which queer disco was felt as a corporeal phenomenon (rather than understood as a signifying text) on the dance floor. Reflecting this experience, songwriters, producers and remixers started to condense their disco vocals into bite-sized injunctions that complemented the dance floor dynamic (Hughes 149). “Dance Dance Dance” sang Chic, while Taana Gardner instructed her listeners to “Work That Body.” Indeed the seemingly mundane experience of dancing in a discotheque in the 1970s was itself a likely entry point into queerness thanks to the fact that the 1970s version of discotheque culture, in contrast to its 1960s articulation, broke with the long-established practice of partnered social dancing in favor of freeform movement in which participants danced solo-within-the-crowd (Lawrence forthcoming). The highly affective environment of the dance floor—in which bodies were penetrated by sound, came into contact with other bodies, and experienced further disorientation thanks to lighting and drug effects—destabilized normative conceptions of sexuality and boundedness still further. And there can be little doubt that gay men, along with women, were the key protagonists of early 1970s disco culture because they were less invested than straight men in holding onto the dominant form of the autonomous, rational, masculine self.¹²

By the second half of the 1970s, however, disco’s queer-affective ethos was coming under threat. Released in the same month Russell laid down the initial tracks for “Kiss Me Again,” *Saturday Night Fever* reflected and reinforced the reappropriation of the dance floor by patriarchal heterosexuality, whereby dancers—in this case John Travolta and his cohorts—could only take to the floor as part of a straight couple in which the man led the woman (Gilbert and Pearson 11; Lawrence 2004a: 304–7). From the beginning of 1978 onwards, disco was suburbanized according to this regressive template, and the influence of the mercilessly hierarchical and

celebrity-fixated Studio 54 normalized queer disco still further. Even the music began to lose its queer qualities as the major record companies jumped on disco belatedly in the belief that anything with a four-on-the-floor beat would sell in a nanosecond (Lawrence 2004a: 320–21; Shapiro 222–25). The genre, once queer, began to sound stale.

Yet the terrain of the dance floor, vulnerable as it might have been to this form of conservative lassoing, remained a potentially progressive site for queer experimentation, and this became the key theme for Russell's next disco 12-inch, "Is It All Over My Face?" which amounted to a radical aesthetic intervention at a point when disco was settling into two dominant strains: Eurodisco and, for want of a better term, R&B disco.

Eurodisco emerged in the mid-70s and revolved around a simplification of early disco's polyrhythmic percussion, which it reduced to a pounding bass beat (Lawrence 2004a: 175, 252–57). In addition, Eurodisco turned the elaborate melodic and harmonic sequences of artists such as the Love Unlimited Orchestra and MFSB into a staple feature and added to them a range of thematic narratives that were played out in lyrics, song titles, and album covers. The resulting aesthetic amounted to the racialization of European art music, which was hauled through the traditions of Memphis, New York, Philadelphia, Havana and the urban centers of the Black Atlantic (Gilroy), yet its latent whiteness remained sufficiently explicit for the music to be played more regularly in white gay venues such as Flamingo than black gay venues such as the Paradise Garage. R&B disco, meanwhile, combined soul music's emphasis on groove, emotion, and feel (Guralnick 6–15) with the pristine production values of the 1970s recording studio. Slick yet self-consciously black records such as Chic's "Good Times" and Sister Sledge's "We Are Family" were typical of this strain of disco, and although a number of R&B-oriented disco records crossed over into venues such as the Saint—Sylvester's "You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)" was a notable example—they remained much more popular in the Garage (Lawrence 2004a: 295, 355).

Even though Russell's primary compositional and performance mode was in European avant-garde art music, soft rock and folk, he aligned himself explicitly with the black music tradition when he entered the studio to record "Is It All Over My Face?" The Ingram brothers, an established R&B rhythm section led by James Ingram, and three black vocalists—Robert Green, Leon McElroy, and Melvina Woods—were invited to deliver the lyrics. Bob Blank, who was fast developing a reputation as being the hottest engineer of R&B-driven disco, was employed to run the studio, and the recording sessions, which took place in February and March 1979, were held in Blank

Tapes Studios, where he worked. Nevertheless Russell, reacting perhaps to the way in which the smooth disco aesthetic was becoming stale in the aftermath of the unprecedented commercial success of *Saturday Night Fever*, sought to tweak the song's most prominent racial markers. The drummer was instructed to play behind the beat to the point of punk carelessness, and the final recording is loose to the point of being arrhythmic. In addition, the vocalists were asked to sing against the grain of soul, with their delivery deadpan, flat and discordant.

The title and lyrics of "Is It" point to the way in which Russell, along with coproducer Steve D'Acquisto, a Loft insider who met Russell at the Gallery, wanted to make a record that evoked the gay dance floor. The lyrics—"Is it all over my face? I'm in love dancing"—were written after Murk caught Russell dancing with another man in the Buttermilk Bottom, a popular gay venue in the late 1970s. "I found Arthur dancing with some cute guy and there was some communication between Arthur and the guy that made me angry," says Murk. "I could see they liked each other and if Arthur hadn't been going home with me he would have gone home with this guy. It disturbed me very much" (Murk 11.9.2005). This kind of lyrical content is a little riskier than Sylvester's wholesome "You Make Me Feel," which is implicitly directed towards a single gay partner who, when he touches Sylvester, makes the vocalist feel "mighty real." According to Murk, Russell was doing what many gay men did in these situations—dancing and flirting with other guys he fancied—but Murk was not accustomed to this kind of behavior and they rowed over the incident. Russell wrote "Is It All" soon after as a hymn to cruising, yet was a clever enough wordsmith to evoke two additional layers of meaning: That he was not in love with someone else dancing, but was in love with the experience of dancing; and that the "it" referred to semen. Dancers, revelling in a vulgarity that made Donna Summer's auto-erotic groans on "Love to Love You Baby" seem positively refined, preferred the final interpretation (DePino 30.3.2005; Feldman 16.9.1997; Hall 7.10.2004). Whatever the interpretation, "Is It" brushed aside Carl Bean's and Sylvester's concerns with coming out and proclaiming their gay identity with the business of being gay—cruising, dancing, even coming.

The second reading of "Is It"—that Russell did not fall in love with someone else while dancing, but was in love with the experience of dancing, itself surely a queer twist on gay identity—is given added potency thanks to the way in which Russell and D'Acquisto approached the recording session. Green, McElroy, and Woods were not professional vocalists but were found on the dance floor of the Loft, where they would sing along to Mancuso's

selections with a spontaneous vibrancy that Russell might have felt was difficult to extract from a trained singer (such as Valle. . .) (Lawrence 1999). Russell and D'Acquisto's explicit intention was to recreate the energy of the discotheque on vinyl, a strategy that highlighted the radical potential of the dance floor to be a productive site of music making (rather than just the passive recipient of prerecorded sounds). In order to recreate the energy of the Loft, D'Acquisto and Russell went into Blank Tapes late at night on a full moon—they both believed that recording on a full moon would enhance the creative energy of the session—and did everything they could to engineer a party atmosphere in the studio. “The session took place at four in the morning, and Arthur and Steve showed up with all of these people from the Loft,” says Blank. “I remember that being the moment I saw there was a different vibe out there in the trenches. It was like a circus” (Blank 15.7.2004).

The Ingram Brothers must have wondered what they had let themselves in for, and their puzzlement would have only increased when they heard the final version of “Is It All,” which edited out Woods and dived deep into a rough, homoerotic aesthetic that had little in common with the pumping, harmonic choruses of the Village People or the signifying-feminine of Sylvester's heartfelt falsetto. The closest parallel to “Is It All” was “Walk the Night,” a dark and sinister song that was recorded by the leather-clad Skatt Brothers and released by Casablanca. “Is It,” which was significantly more discordant, dived even further into the queer abyss and proved to be too threatening and off-kilter for both David Mancuso, who liked his music to be expansive and life-affirming, and Garage DJ Larry Levan, who was still drawn, at this point, to R&B-oriented disco (Mancuso 29.3.2005; DePino 30.3.2005; Lawrence 2004a: 295). Mel Cheren, whose West End label paid for the original recording session, was also deeply worried about the record's brusque aesthetic, and when Levan sneaked into the label's office one lunchtime to grab the multitrack tapes and lay down a hurried remix, Cheren was initially angry but ultimately relieved to be able to put out a more conventional remix (Cheren 266; DePino 30.3.2005; Kevorkian 31.3.2005). Rereleased as the “Female Version” of “Is It All Over My Face?” the Levan remix cut out the male vocals, as well as Russell's scratchy cello; edited down the sprawling original; highlighted the stripped down groove of the Ingram Brothers; and utilized the Woods vocal track—which was still utterly strange in terms of harmonic progression (there was no progress), but remained a little less threatening than the expressionless growls of Green and McElroy.

Steven Hall, one of Russell's best friends and most important musical collaborators, was disappointed. "They decided to go with the standard female vocal, which I think is a shame, . . ." he says. "It made it into a boring straight narrative [if the female sings, the semen is on her face, not those of the men . . .] when it really should have been a gay anthem" (Hall 18.12.2004). Russell was happy with the exposure generated by the Levan remix. "Arthur didn't think it was bad to have another version, . . ." says Murk. "He thought they were so totally different. But he thought his was superior." Murk adds that Russell had omitted Woods from what became known as the "Male Version" because "he liked those really dark voices. There was a little bit of menace to it" (Murk 11.9.2005). Both versions can be considered among the earliest songs of queer disco: They engaged with black music yet chizzelled away at the idea of a black essence; an artistic amateurism that mirrored the ethos of punk and new wave ran through both of the mixes; and the Russell and Levan mixes both addressed questions of gayness explicitly, and in a way that was unsettling to any notion of gay assimilation. Black-not-black and gay-not-gay, "Is It" anticipated the early 1980s phenomenon of disco-not-disco, otherwise known as mutant disco, which amounted to a ruder, punk-influenced dance sound. Studio slickness was dumped unceremoniously and replaced with a rougher, earthier edginess (Reynolds 383–402; Shapiro 256–58). Within disco, the unlikely figure of a classically trained cellist from Oskaloosa led the way.

Russell's next major dance track, "Go Bang," which was recorded in 1979 and released in 1981 on the album *24 → 24* and as an inspired François Kevorkian remix in 1982, contains lyrics that are even more concise than Russell's previous dance releases: "I want to see all my friends at once, go bang!" As with "Is It," the words sound like they might be made for male masturbation, and the gruff, out-of-tune male vocal that defined the original recording of "Is It" appears again to deliver the line "I want to see all my friend at once." The black and flamingly queer baritone Julius Eastman—who was best known for his performance in the postclassical opera *Eight Songs for a Mad King*—sings the "go bang" conclusion, beginning at a subterranean register before scaling three and a half octaves to end on an orgasmic high. Kevorkian's remix, which highlighted Eastman's clip and tightened up Russell's diffuse if compelling original, became Levan's favorite record at the Garage. Russell and his partner, Tom Lee, would go to the King Street venue in order to hear the song thunder out of the world's most powerful sound system and witness some two thousand black gay men dance to its groove and peak in an explosive culmination

of energy—the very purpose of the song’s explicit lyric, which intersects with Foucault’s queer conception of nongenital pleasure, which superseded conceptions of gay identity. As Jim Feldman, a regular on the Garage dance floor remarks, “Sex was subsumed to the music and was worked out in the dancing. It was like having sex with everyone. It was very unifying.” (Lawrence 2004a: 353)

The fluidity (and radical nature) of Russell’s vision is suggested by the inclusion of Lola Blank’s startling rendition of the song’s title—“Bang go-bang-bang go-bang-go, Go bang bang bang go-bang it back”—which confirmed that women featured among Russell’s “friends.” Blank’s rendition was telling in itself. A backing vocalist for James Brown, Blank, the wife of Bob Blank, was known for her classic soul/gospel voice, but in the studio Russell encouraged her to sing against everything she knew—everything that evoked the human, sensual, warm, melodic, nurturing black woman. “Most of the R&B singers are gospel, . . .” says Lola Blank. “You’ve heard one, you’ve heard them all. For me, recording with Arthur was a time when I could be creative and fun. It was a time when I could go a bit crazy” (Blank 29.7.2005). Hall, who talks regularly of Russell’s gay lifestyle, insists that Russell always maintained a politics that was open to and inclusive of women—and was also queer for this reason (Hall 23.1.2006). Blank’s presence in “Go Bang” suggests that when Russell writes that he wants to see all his friends at once go bang, he is talking about women as well as men.

This combination of politics and aesthetics is articulated further in the song’s instrumental structure. Once again the Ingram Brothers were hired and their groove, which this time around was tight rather than intentionally loose, and provided the foundation for a radical, shifting collage of instrumental solos and vocal clips. The record includes Peter Zummo’s ska-like chromatic trombone lines; Russell’s plucked, funky cello; a Julius Eastman organ solo that starts out as feel-oriented jazz before it surges into a psychedelic haze; and Timmy Ingram’s driving congas. Along the way “Go Bang” builds up and breaks down, with Eastman and Blank’s clips, along with the gruff vocalists, woven into Russell’s ethereal and eclectic texture. Russell did not just want to see all his dancing friends at once; he also wanted to see all his musician friends at once, even if musical convention suggested they should have been kept apart. “Go Bang” should not have worked, but became one of the most popular dance releases of the 1980s.

Yet “Go Bang” was not rotated in the best-known white gay venues of the era. Along with “Is It All,” it was considered to be “too raw and stripped down” for the white gay crowd at the Saint, according to resident DJ

Robbie Leslie (Leslie 15.3.2006). It was at the Saint that the quasi-mythical A-list dancer, who was born at the Tenth Floor and became entrenched at Flamingo, began to believe in his own immortality, at least until AIDS cut short the dream. As with the “heroic masculinities” identified by Judith Halberstam in *Female Masculinity*, the heroic masculinity of the dancers at the Saint depended “on the subordination of alternative masculinities” (Halberstam 1998: 1). The Garage was rejected as a inferior venue that might be visited on a “slumming trip” (Lee 18.2.2004), with Levan derided for his emphasis on R&B-oriented sounds (Lawrence 2004a: 425–26). At the Saint, the music rarely veered away from Hi-NRG, a musical form that, in Dyer’s terms, evoked the pounding, restrictive phallocentrism of rock (even if it was complemented with “sweet” vocals).¹³ This aesthetic shift reflected the way in which the Saint became the most sexually charged white gay venue of its type. Whereas previous white gay venues evoked sex, sex never took place. Instead, men would wait until the end of the night, when they would routinely head to the bathhouses. But at the Saint sex—which took place on the venue’s balconies—became a core part of the experience, and the relentless phallocentric music would have worked as an appropriate soundtrack to these activities. As John Giove, a white gay dancer who danced regularly at both the Saint and the Garage, notes: “The Saint queens did not like their music black. They liked their black divas wailing to a Hi-NRG beat (think Evelyn Thomas ‘High Energy’) or to a Euro-beat (think Phyllis Nelson ‘Don’t Stop the Train’), but the real black music did not get played there” (Giove 17.11.2005). Giove adds: “The music at the Garage had feeling and emotion. When Larry Levan started playing MFSB’s ‘Love is the Message,’ you never knew where he was going to go with it. That song could be the background and then he would mix in and then out other songs. Larry was the only DJ that could put together ‘Go Bang’ by Dinosaur L and MFSB” (Giove 24.11.2005).

Having set out on a gay, if somewhat dark, aesthetic in “Kiss Me Again,” Russell soon began to blend black forms with avant-garde experimentation. The results were arguably the first and most sustained offerings of queer disco. “I think Arthur’s work was more sexual than homosexual, . . .” says Hall. “He was inclusive in a way that even some early gay pride pioneers were not in terms of straight sexuality, and he was also informed by his experiences with women. It is limiting to think of his music through the gay prism” (Hall 23.1.2006). More than any other contemporary recording artist, Russell established the musical co-ordinates by which dancers could shift from the terrain of gay to queer disco. In so doing, he mapped out a way

in which dance music could connect with both gay and straight dancers while embracing, in the face of the “Disco Sucks” backlash of 1979, an aesthetically credible future. Russell only received fleeting recognition for his music when it was released, however, and even though he produced a panoramic range of records during his short lifetime, he died in relative anonymity in 1992 (as a result of complications from AIDS). As disco, filtered through the contemporary dance sounds of house and techno, as well as the discoized pop of Madonna and the Scissor Sisters, continues to drum its drums and twirl its twirls, now would seem to be as good a time as any to do what Russell might have always wanted us to do: Kiss him again.

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Notes

1. Originally recorded as a down-tempo ballad, "You Make Me Feel" was transformed into a disco song by Patrick Cowley. As Sylvester told David Diebold, who chronicled the SF disco scene of the 1970s and early 1980s in his book *Tribal Rites*, "here were all of these people putting out disco, making lots of money and becoming famous and everything, so we thought

‘why not?’ We’ll put it out and nobody will like it *and we certainly won’t like it*, but we’ll do it.” (Diebold 29)

2. The only all-gay venues at the time were the Continental Baths, which was first and foremost a bathhouse and secondarily a disco, and the Ice Palace and the Sandpiper, which were situated on Fire Island, the popular gay holiday resort, and as such were seasonal holiday outposts. The most influential venues of the early 1970s—the Loft and the Sanctuary—were mixed in terms of race and sexuality, even if gay men provided the most important constituency. It was not until the Tenth Floor opened at the end of 1972 that a homogeneous gay disco experience emerged. By this point, New York State Law had been revised to permit men to dance with each other (Lawrence 2004a).

3. The gay liberationists of the early 1970s, as Steven Epstein notes, rejected “the notion of ‘the homosexual’ as a distinct type . . . in favour of a left Freudian view of human sexuality as ‘polymorphously perverse’” (252). Dennis Altman looked forward to the emergence of a “new human” who would regard the distinctions between masculine and feminine identities as irrelevant. For many activists, the assumption of a gay identity was regarded as a strategic step on the path to a truer bisexual identity: Gayness would be occupied until it became acceptable to wider society, at which point the gay liberationists would move into bisexual mode.

4. Predominantly black gay private parties—such as the Loft, the Gallery, SoHo Place, Reade Street and, from 1977 onwards, the Paradise Garage—tended to be less homogeneous than their white gay equivalents because, first, David Mancuso, the host of the Loft, the pioneering private party, cultivated a “mixed crowd” ethos and, second, because the most influential black gay private venues were owned by white men. This made it much more likely that they would veer towards a multiracial make up.

5. The disco diva has been highlighted by some authors (Hughes 151–153; Lawrence 2004a: 178, 221, 254, 328–29, 371–72, 378, 435), but goes missing just when you would expect to deepen your acquaintance with her (Shapiro). Even *Disco Divas: Woman, Gender and Popular Culture in the 1970s*—could there be a more promising title?—contains just one chapter on women and popular music. In that chapter, disco divas are barely a subplot.

6. Loleatta Holloway’s “Hit and Run,” remixed by Walter Gibbons, is the prime example of this technique (Lawrence 2004a).

7. Patti Jo's "Make Me Believe in You," a sparse, almost metallic Curtis Mayfield production released in 1973, was one of the first vocal tracks to be picked up by the all-white, all-gay crowd at the Tenth Floor. (Andrew Holleran references the song in his fictionalization of the white gay private disco scene, *Dancer from the Dance* (38).) The relationship between gay men, female divas and the rise of disco was institutionalized with a nod and a wink the following year when gay DJs and dancers crowned Gloria Gaynor as "Queen of Disco" at Le Jardin. Gaynor's debut release for MGM, "Never Can Say Goodbye," had been unceremoniously sidelined by the record company, but gay DJs rotated the record regularly, gay dancers went out and bought the vinyl, and the record started to climb up the charts, even though it was not being promoted by the company and was not being played on radio. The record was an early instance of the power of the "pink pound" and the key influence gay tastemakers (Lawrence 2004a:148–49, 178).

8. If anything, the experience is closer to what Judith Halberstam has described as the trope of lesbian sincerity, which "rejects the association of all things queer with irony, camp, critical distance and innovation" (Halberstam 2005).

9. This was in sharp contrast to previous dance movements, including the Twist, in which records were short and dancers tended to spend a relatively short time on the floor before adjourning to the bar (Lawrence forthcoming).

10. As Gayle Rubin notes, "Unmarried couples living together, masturbation, and some forms of homosexuality are moving in the direction of respectability." She adds, "Promiscuous homosexuality, sadomasochism, fetishism, transsexuality, and cross-generational encounters are still viewed as unmodulated horrors incapable of involving affection, love, free choice, kindness, or transcendence" (Rubin 15).

11. Other disco records had gone down the "sinister" path, including CJ & Co.'s "Devil's Gun."

12. As Ramsay Burt puts it, "Gay male dancing bodies signify the possibility that men can dissolve in pleasure within the leaky boundaries not of women but of other men. This blurring of masculine subjects and objects destabilizes notions of male objectivity and rationality that, within

Enlightenment thought, guaranteed the disinterestedness of the rational unitary subject” (Burt 211).

13. Intriguingly, Dyer went to live in New York soon after he published “In Defence of Disco.” After he arrived he started to date a black man and danced at the Paradise Garage—not the Saint. His experiences with black gay New York prompted him to write *White*, one of the most influential racial interrogations of whiteness.

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