Behind the Scenes

The amazing women who forged the disco music genre have worked with some of the music industry’s most esteemed professionals. These experts encompass a diverse range of renowned notables from the performance, management, production and composition sides of disco and dance music. They each possess formidable credentials, remarkable knowledge of disco’s history and unique insight into the workings of the world in which these women have flourished (and in which they continue to market their skills today). They have been individually asked to give their responses to a series of questions based largely on some key points common to many of the featured performers’ lives and careers as recording artists. The professionals include:

Troy Bronstein: In the mid ’80s, no nightclub was a hot spot without a constant stream of A-list entertainers parading through its doors and onto its stages. “As a waiter in a large Southern California club,” Troy says, “I had the good fortune to become a liaison between many of these performers and the club, and, in doing so, established great friendships with some of the hottest names on the charts. With the encouragement of several of these performers, I formed the T-Best Talent Agency.” His company has become one of the largest independent talent agencies in the world, representing more than 100 acts, including artists from the disco era and current DJs. Bronstein has also added a management division and created an independent record label (House of Hustle and Pride Records) and has worked with Cher, Tina Turner, Bette Midler, Chaka Khan, Deborah Harry, Jennifer Holliday and the Pointer Sisters. Bronstein also handles several top comedians and models.

George “Iz” Correia: “As a huge lover of music since my infancy, I had always dreamed of working with the artists whose music blasted out of my stereo!” says George. “I started in the entertainment business doing freelance work with a friend of mine who worked for Emmis Communications. Their properties included jazz station CD 101.9, hip-hop station 97.1 and R&B station 98.7 KISS–FM in New York City. I would help come up with production concepts and organize various community outreach events, concerts and parties for the radio personalities. I was summoned to book various recording artists for some of the events, and many of the artists commented on how professional the events were and how well they were treated. This led to many friendships and management opportunities with some of the women featured in this book.” Correia launched Show Iz Entertainment, which offered artist bookings and personal-road management services. He works actively today with various R&B–disco artists, including Rochelle Fleming of First Choice, Linda Clifford, Barbara Roy of Ecstasy, Passion & Pain and others.

Hazell Dean: Hazell, widely revered as the “Queen of the British Clubs” and the “Duchess of the Dance Floor,” scored a succession of massive club and dance hits in the mid ’80s following the original disco era. Many of her dance-floor classics crossed successfully onto
the U.K. and European mainstream charts. Though she didn’t have her first hit until 1984, she started working as a singer and songwriter as far back as the ’70s. After numerous recordings in the northern soul style, she eventually started veering towards dance music. Dean’s first big hit in both the U.K. and the U.S. was the double A-side dance smash, “Evergreen”/“Jealous Love.” She topped the charts on both sides of the Atlantic a short time later with her electrifying Hi-NRG recording of “Searchin’ (I Gotta Find a Man).” By the end of the ’80s, Hazell was the reigning diva of British dance music thanks to a slew of hugely popular singles, among them “Whatever I Do (Wherever I Go),” “They Say It’s Gonna Rain” and the Top-Five Brit pop smash “Who’s Leaving Who.” Many of Dean’s biggest successes were produced by the legendary Stock-Aitken-Waterman and PWL production teams. She was voted best female performer by the prestigious Club Mirror Awards and best live performer three times by the Federation of American Dance Clubs. Commenting on her numerous career highlights, Dean says, “There have been so many amazing moments. I had the pleasure of introducing Gloria Gaynor on stage at ‘The Fridge’ in Brixton, and I have performed at the legendary Studio 54—and you can’t get more disco than that!” Since the early ’90s, Hazell has concentrated her energies on both production and songwriting, while continuing to record hit dance music, including a 2012 remake of Sharon Redd’s disco evergreen, “In the Name of Love,” and Laura Branigan’s “Shattered Glass.” Reflecting on her remarkable legacy, she says, “By the industry, I would like to be remembered as a professional. By the public—I want them to have enjoyed my music and to know me as a nice person. Simple!”

Stephen Ford: “I got my start in music management working for one of the best managers around—Bill Sammeth—who trained me and was my mentor,” says Ford. “At the time, Bill managed Cher, Joan Rivers, Olivia Newton-John and KC and the Sunshine Band. I always wanted to work for Cher. I always thought she was cool, creative and did things her way. She didn’t care what people thought, and I liked freethinkers like that. It was my dream to work with Cher, and it all kind of started when I was working on the 1987 Academy Awards, where she was nominated for Moonstruck. I was with her the entire time of the show, and I learned how to be around celebrities. I think she saw something in me and liked the way I took care of her and [she] mentioned it to Bill. He then offered me an opportunity to work with him—and that was really my big break. Cher showed me you don’t survive in this business for nearly 50 years without being driven, focused and knowledgeable about who you have around you and what your talent is about.” Today Ford books veteran performers such as Thelma Houston, Anita Ward, Maxine Nightingale and Yvonne Elliman, as well as comedy stars, R&B legends, circuit DJs and American Idol contestants.

Rick Gianatos: The name Rick Gianatos was one of the most important and respected in music production during disco’s heyday. A pioneer DJ who helmed the turntables of the most prestigious clubs and an innovator of one of this country’s earliest disco remix services, Gianatos was instrumental in breaking many of the genre’s earliest classics. He became well-known and highly respected as one of the era’s most sought-after remixers, transforming the musical works of countless artists into all-time disco classics. Among his most celebrated achievements were Gene Chandler’s “Get Down,” Front Page’s “Love Insurance,” Edwin Starr’s “Contact,” Shalamar’s “Right in the Socket” and “The Second Time Around,” Carrie Lucas’ “Keep Smiling,” 5 Special’s “Why Leave Us Alone,” Loleatta Holloway’s “That’s What You Said,” Pamala Stanley’s “This Is Hot” and KC’s “Give It Up” and “Are You
Among the most sought-after music in the history of disco and dance, his resume is rich in hands-on experience. “I got into the business in 1972 working at 20th Century Records,” he says. “I worked my way up in the company handling artist relations and climbing to various label positions. I started an in-house disco department at 20th Century and, to this day, there’s still a debate as to whether we had one of the first 12” records to ever come out on the market — Bob Crewe and the Eleventh Hour’s ‘Hollywood Hot’ back in 1975. We also had the Ritchie Family’s 12” single, ‘Brazil,’ that same year. In 1977, I left 20th Century Records and started my own independent promotion company called Tom Hayden & Associates. Our first project was CJ & Co.’s ‘Devil’s Gun,’ which went on to hold the number 1 position on the Billboard disco chart for five weeks. We had a string of successes, and, in ’79, we took out an ad in Billboard magazine touting that we had promoted between one-fourth and one-half of all the records on the disco chart that year. I was very young back then, in my early 20s, and we had a blast! I was awarded best independent dance promoter numerous times at the Billboard disco conventions. We were handling dance promotion for the Rolling Stones, Barry White, The Whispers, Shalimar and on and on. Those were good days!

“After the ‘disco sucks’ backlash in 1979, I still saw the power of the clubs, and I started a new label when all the majors were getting out of disco and were thinking it was kind of a negative for them to promote that genre of music. I started TSR Records in 1980 and debuted with Two Man Sound’s ‘Capital Tropical.’ It was a Top-10 dance record, followed by Claudja Barry’s ‘Work Me Over,’ Miquel Brown’s ‘So Many Men, So Little Time,’ Evelyn Thomas’ ‘High Energy,’ Fun Fun’s ‘Color My Love’ and Pamala Stanley’s ‘Coming Out of Hiding.’ We later had success with Madleen Kane. We eventually expanded into flamenco music, alternative rock and jazz. That’s where we still are today. But my heart is always in dance music, and if I can find something that I really love, I’d love to sign a great new dance artist,” he says.

Tom Moulton: A New York native and former model, Tom is considered by many to be the disco genre’s original king. He is credited as the innovator of the extended mix, the 12” single and the man who refined the sound of countless classic disco songs that became mammoth hits. He’s worked with nearly every major artist of the day (KC and the Sunshine Band, The Three Degrees, Gloria Gaynor, Double Exposure, First Choice, Van McCoy, Grace Jones, Isaac Hayes, B.T. Express, etc.) and the words “A Tom Moulton Mix” on an album or single jacket became the seal of approval and the mark of excellence for DJs and music fans the world over. Moulton mixed The Andrea True Connection’s “More, More, More,” The Trammps’ “Disco Inferno” and countless other records, turning them into disco crossover smashes. Always frank and holding tight to his convictions, Tom laughs at his fame (with a kind of outspoken humility). He nearly dismisses the acclaim bestowed upon him, saying, “Tom Moulton — a big believer in toilet paper! I say that because I never believed in kissing anyone’s ass to get a record or to do anything. I wanted to make it on the merits of the mix. I wouldn’t play any of the games. Judge me for what I do, not how
I am. It wasn't about me; it was about the music—not me! I'm just the vehicle for it. I liked my music to take the praise and accolades. I tried to do the best I could with what I had to work with. But I don't think it's because of me that it's that way. It's a combination of all of us. It's the song, the performance. It's that combination that turns my creativity on. It's the simple, honest truth. I absolutely believe in that, and I always felt like that. People would say, 'Oh, I can't believe you're Tom Moulton.' You know, my mother used to say that!” he laughs.

Tom reflects on his remixing accomplishments. “I was doing something I loved doing; that's the only way I could look at it. I was shocked that a lot of these records went to number 1. I mean, I was really taken aback by that. I never thought I really 'arrived.' I thought of the music, the artist and then me—in that order. If it weren't for that music and those singers and the songs I mixed, I wouldn't be anything. If you don't have the right tools to create something—good luck!”

Felipe Rose:

Hailing from Brooklyn, New York, and of Puerto Rican and Native-American heritage, Rose is best known as the vocalist adorned in American Indian attire in the world-famous Village People, a group eternally synonymous with disco. While dancing at the Anvil—a once notorious gay and leatherman watering hole in the meat-packing district of New York City—in full Native-American regalia, Felipe was approached by music producers Henri Belolo and Jacques Morali to become part of a group they were forming. The producers’ inspired idea was to form a disco group that would embody the male stereotypes found in the city's gay district, Greenwich Village. Felipe and the men who were enlisted to form Village People (with cowboy, leatherman, cop and soldier characterizations) became a nearly instant pop, disco and cross-cultural phenomenon. “Macho Man,” “In the Navy” and “YMCA” became enormous pop crossover hits at the peak of disco fever, while songs like “San Francisco” and “Fire Island” became empowering gay anthems. Amassing more than 30 gold and platinum records from around the world, the Village People continue to tour. Rose has been inducted into the Native American Music Hall of Fame, actively promotes Hispanic and American Indian cultural awareness and tirelessly lends his name to HIV and AIDS awareness events. In addition to hosting a radio show, he is an ordained minister and a culinary expert. He continues to reinvent himself while remaining a highly visible media personality.

James “Tip” Wirrick:

Wirrick began his record-producing and composing career creating songs like Sylvester’s landmark “You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)” and Two Tons of Fun’s “I Got the Feeling” during disco’s early days. Later, Wirrick created such hits as “Time Bomb” for Jeanie Tracy and “Stranger (In a Strange Land)” sung by Pamala Stanley & Paul Parker. An accomplished guitarist, he also composed songs for Jimmy Sommerville, CeCe Peniston, The Barrio Boys and numerous other artists. His work has been featured in many major motion pictures, including Beverly Hills Cop and Robert DeNiro’s Flawless, as well as the final episode of the classic TV series Friends. Today he continues to write and produce music out of Los Angeles through Wirrick Productions, Inc.

Michael Zager:

Michael Zager’s contributions to disco music are renowned the world over. As a prestigious producer, composer and arranger, his music has also been a hugely successful part of pop history. He has worked with a multitude of major artists, including Whitney Houston, Jennifer Holliday, Luther Vandross and Herb Alpert. Zager made his mark in the disco genre numerous times, helming the enormously popular productions of Cissy Houston’s classic “Think It Over,” The Spinners’ “Working My Way Back to You” and “Cupid”
and The Andrea True Connection’s “What’s Your Name, What’s Your Number?” The producer and composer had landmark disco hits of his own with “Do It with Feeling,” under the Michael Zager’s Moon Band name, and the worldwide smash, “Let’s All Chant” as the Michael Zager Band.

“We sold about 5 million copies of ‘Let’s All Chant,’” Zager says proudly of the classic disco record he made with partner Jerry Love. “It went to number 1 on the pop charts in many countries, but not in the U.S. In this country, we must have sold about 6–700,000 copies, and it reached the Top 20. Jerry Love is still my partner. I met him when he was head of A&R at A&M Records in New York. I used to try to get my artists signed to the label. When he left A&M, we became partners. He used to go to the clubs every night. His main club was Studio 54, but one night he went to Greenwich Village in New York City to visit a couple of discos and check out what the dancers were reacting to. He heard dancers going, ‘Ooh-ah, Ooh-ah.’ The next day, he told me they were all chanting this phrase on the dance floor and that I should write a song using that sound. I thought he was crazy! I said, ‘You have to be kidding; that’s embarrassing!’ He said they’re all doing it, and if I write something and incorporate that sound, they’re gonna love it. The reason I added the piccolo-trumpet and classical section in the middle of ‘Let’s All Chant’ was mainly because I was embarrassed! I thought it was so stupid with that ‘Ooh-ah’ sound in it that I wanted to add something to lift the track musically. I have a classical background and went to a music conservatory, so I was really feeling embarrassed,” he laughs. “I wrote it with Alvin Fields, and I told my partner, ‘I’m gonna kill you if this isn’t a hit!’ We released it Christmas week — a time when you never release a record. It’s the worst possible time usually because so many popular artists release albums during this time period. ‘Let’s All Chant’ debuted at Studio 54, and the record took off like a rocket! We received a lot of club play, and it spread like lightning. We thought it would be a club hit, but it never entered my mind it would be a global hit. I thought it would be a two-month record and that would be the end of it.”

Michael’s recording awards for producing, composing or arranging include 14 gold or platinum records, Golden Boot Award (France), Europe 1 Award (France), Olé Award (Spain), 2 BMI Citations of Achievement, given for most performed songs on radio in a given year, a Grammy Award nomination for “Cupid/I’ve Loved You for a Long Time” (performed by the Spinners) and a nomination for producer of the year by the Golden Music Awards, in Nashville. Zager is currently Florida Atlantic University’s Dorothy F. Schmidt College Eminent Scholar in the Performing Arts and Director of the FAU Commercial Music Program. He is also the author of two editions of Music Production: For Producers, Composers, Arrangers and Students and two editions of Writing Music for Television and Radio Commercials: A Manual for Composers and Students.

Q: Were female vocalists better suited to performing disco music than their male counterparts?

Bronstein: “I would say disco was easier for women than men; I wouldn’t necessarily say it was better suited to them. Just like anything, if you’re going to watch someone perform, a male or a female, you’re probably more likely to get into the female. In the club atmosphere, the [male performers] tend to be in competition with each other. You didn’t have as many males in this genre as females, unless it was a group. It was more difficult for a male to make it. I don’t see issues of masculinity playing into it, though. Look at the Bee Gees. Their
music wasn’t macho at all. But, then again, [they were] also a group, rather than one guy trying to grab everyone’s attention.

“The women who made it big in disco all made their mark in time. They all had their anthem song at that moment that made them the ‘one.’ They had to jump on it, and then, depending on their ‘worthiness’—I’ll use that word—that would determine how long they’d last. If you were a one-hit wonder, that’s one thing—but if you produced several hits, that would keep you around for a while. The ones who had multiple hits also had just the right backing—the writers and producers of that time. And because they really had talent and could sing and had personality, that was able to carry them onward. For me to work with artists, to sell them, I have to believe in them and know they are going to do a great job in the club and everyone’s going to like them.”

Correia: “My hypothesis would be that these women found a unique connection—almost a friendship—with the people who listened to disco music. I think women have more flexibility to sing about a variety of subjects. Disco was kind of a free-for-all, and I think it gave women the freedom to sing about various subjects without their sexuality coming into question. There were some male artists that had a big disco following, but I think it was more acceptable for women to sing songs that were sometimes fluffy, about love, dancing—fun stuff like that—and not come across as corny.”

Dean: “Oh yes, I do believe female vocalists were better suited to performing disco! Only divas can really do disco, and there is only one reason why—these women were, and are, all great singers! I loved disco! Obviously—I was going to discos and working in them too. I was, and still am, a huge fan of Gloria Gaynor. She sang great songs, but more importantly, she has a great voice. I don’t know if she or the other [original disco] artists actually influenced me, but I enjoyed their work and the era! Disco [and these women’s songs] always will be fun!”

Ford: “When you think of disco, you think of women. You think of Donna Summer, Gloria Gaynor, Thelma Houston, Yvonne Elliman, Evelyn “Champagne” King, Martha Wash. In seeing today how the women have held up next to the guys who were in disco—there’s no comparison. The women are such amazing performers. They just still have that ‘it’ factor when they’re on that stage singing their hits. Whereas a lot of the guys—I’ve noticed they just can’t transfer that excitement and stage presence like a woman, like a legend of disco, can. The older the guys get, the harder it is for them to move around it seems.”

Gianatos: “I don’t feel that women were better suited for disco than male artists necessarily. I can think back to some great dance material by men like the Temptations, and their Whitfield-Strong productions like ‘Papa Was a Rolling Stone,’ ‘Masterpiece,’ ‘Law of the Land’ and ‘Plastic Man.’ When Eddie Kendricks went solo and came out with ‘Girl You Need a Change of Mind’ and ‘Date with the Rain,’ people went nuts over those tracks in the clubs. I would say people reacted to it just as strongly as a female vocalist’s hits. The O’Jays, Teddy Pendergrass—my God, both in and out of Harold Melvin & the Blue Notes—as well. If men like that had really full, gutsy vocals that touched an emotional nerve, people reacted to it. Now, on the other hand, except for groups like Earth Wind & Fire and Kool & The Gang with their wild outfits, of course the ladies were the ones with the outrageous costumes and the visuals. The gay community would eat that up, and they loved a good show. It still happens today with Lady Gaga and artists like her. I think musi-
cally it’s a good voice that makes it all click. But you couldn’t get Teddy Pendergrass to wear an amazing outfit — but you could get Donna Summer or Cher to do it up big. The straight community may have appreciated it, but the gay community really reacted to it.”

**Hayden:** “That phrase ‘disco diva’ came about back then because there were so many disco records with female artists that were hitting the top of the charts. Back in the day, those women could appear at a club and sing three or four songs over tracks and walk away with $4,000 or $5,000. There seemed to be a lot of successful female artists, and a lot of the clubs wanted performers with a lot of energy. Those women could really belt it out and were very passionate about the music. That’s probably one of the reasons why women became so revered and appreciated in disco. The formula seemed to be: the right producer, the right song and a female who could belt it out — and you’d have a hit!”

**Moulton:** “Well, I don’t know; women could do a lot of ‘cutesie-wootsie’ stuff that guys really couldn’t. For some reason, high voices always seem to go big on those records. There were a lot of guys like Eddie Kendricks that could also do that and were popular. When you can get up in the range of the strings, the horns — there’s something about it! It brings out the excitement in a song. [Male audiences], of course, like women better anyway for singing. They always like the appeal of the way they look, especially if they’re hot looking. It was all very visual back then!

“These women were all very individual. It’s nothing they had in common. For example, Loleatta Holloway was very churchy — that’s why I liked her. And Gloria Gaynor — Gloria was very professional about what she did. I think of her as a really good pop singer. Working with Grace Jones doing ‘I Need a Man’— she had done a demo and I had refinished it — and I said, ‘Grace, this is going to be the perfect vehicle for you to get the gay clubs!’ She asked me why. I said, ‘I Need a Man?’ She said, “Whatever it takes!” And I went, ‘Damn! Now there’s a person with drive!’ And I really mean drive! Grace had it, Loleatta Holloway did, Rochelle Fleming, Gloria Gaynor, Linda Clifford — they all did. A lot of these women really knew how to push the buttons!”

**Rose:** “I think it was in part because gay audiences were more into female performers, especially drag queens. Women were sort of a novelty in the gay clubs. It was also easier to promote and sell females in disco as opposed to men. There definitely were more women than men singing disco.”

**Wirrick:** “It didn’t make a difference to me whether a song would be sung by a man or a woman. In the early days, my whole focus was just writing and producing. I just wanted to get my songs on a record, and Sylvester gave me my first opportunity to do that. He was signed shortly after I began playing for him. ‘Mighty Real’ was a classic example of that, and everything I wrote back then was aimed at Sylvester’s voice and the girls [Two Tons of Fun] singing background. Most of it — not all of it, but most of it — was with a dance beat in mind. One of my music teachers in college would say, ‘There’s no inspiration like a deadline.’ And that’s so true! If you’ve got an artist to write for and there’s a record coming out, my God, it’s funny how you’ll come up with something. Whereas if you have nobody to write for and you’re sitting in a room thinking of a song, you end up thinking, ‘For what, for whom?’ But if you have a target — once in a while you hit can really it!

“I do feel female vocalists are better suited to disco, but if you follow that with the question ‘why,’ I’m not sure I can answer. You can cite really fine examples of very strong dance songs that were done by men, but women had a special connection to the genre. Maybe it has to do with the diva image — and I do think they are a better match for this
music. But I just can’t say why and, as a musician, I should be able to. Maybe you can say that it’s hard to sound real macho against a disco beat. I don’t know. Adam Levine does a good job of it, but there’s very few.

“Jeanie Tracy has been one of the best singers I have ever worked with. Sylvester himself was much more difficult to work with. However, Jeanie was always wonderful, and we are good friends to this day and we try to stay in touch. Jeanie was a blessing to work with, and I wish I had had a hit with her the way I had with Sylvester. She was one of my favorites, no doubt — still is and she still sings her ass off! Her voice was an inspiration because I knew, no matter what I came up with, she could sing the dickens out of it. She could sing circles around it!”

Zager: “A large majority of the hits were made by women. I have no idea why that was. Perhaps because many of them trained in the church and had a powerful gospel sound that fit the energy of dance music. You can find a lot of great male singers like Sylvester and Luther Vandross, but women just seemed to have more of the hits.”

Q: In the course of its history, did disco music earn an appropriate level of respect from the music industry and the public? Has it received proper recognition over time?

Bronstein: “I think disco and dance music were respected, but I think it’s viewed more positively in Europe than here in the United States. That’s also true in South America. Disco and dance acts are seen on MTV there. Here in the States, you don’t see them.”

Correia: “I’m not sure about outside of the U.S, but I don’t think disco ever got the respect it should have in this country. Perhaps in the beginning it did to an extent, but it eventually lost a lot of it for a couple of reasons. I think some people turned against it because they simply didn’t know how to dance! [laughing] Over the years, people look back at the music and have given it more respect. Music is one of those things you connect with events in your life and the good times you’ve had. Even if you didn’t like some of the songs at the time, I think in terms of it being a reflection of the points in someone’s life, it begins to earn respect. To me, disco was always something that people seemed afraid to admit that they liked. Today you have disco revival shows that lots of people attend, and the artists have large followings on social networking sites. I think it shows these women were loved by a lot of people. And I think there are a lot of closeted disco lovers! So, I think the respect is there now, but people are a little undercover about it. Maybe the better word to describe how people feel about it is ‘nostalgic.’ So much of today’s dance music is derived from the music these women made. Although some artists don’t like being classified as just disco, many of them are very happy to have been a part of such a big movement.”

Ford: “I think disco is recognized and respected by the generation of people who experienced it, generally by those aged 40 and up. They realize its importance. Some young kids are kind of discovering disco today, and that’s cool. I think disco has stood the test of time. Thelma Houston won the Grammy in 1976 for ‘Don’t Leave Me This Way,’ and here it is 2013 and she’s working more than ever. I’ve always told Thelma she’s like a fine wine because she just gets better with age.”

Gianatos: “The respect has come very, very slowly since it became ‘dance music.’ And now pop music is dance music. So many of the top songs today are dance tracks — not remixes —
the actual original versions of the song. I don't think there was respect for disco music [during the peak of the genre]. After it became so huge, everybody cashed in. So you had artists like Andy Williams doing a disco version of ‘Love Story.’ Some of them were fun, but you had so much kitsch in there that, to me, it didn't give the general public a chance to appreciate the real thing. You had these cliché arrangements — that were derivative of the really genuine material — getting too much attention and backed by major labels. I consider *Saturday Night Fever* the turning point. Before that, there was some great music — not even disco. It was very danceable R&B. It was beautiful music that would appeal to anyone to sit and listen to or get up and dance. Before *Saturday Night Fever*, it seemed more like the music was for the sake of the music — a good melody, arrangement, interesting to listen to and fun to dance to.

‘After the movie, it seemed like there was too much ‘getting on the bandwagon’ and putting out tracks with a beat for the heck of it. If disco had gotten a chance to evolve and come out at its own pace, it might have earned its place as a respectable genre. Instead, there was too much of that junk in there that got a lot of press. I think that ruined things and contributed to the ‘disco sucks’ backlash. I know Pamala Stanley tells the story in this book of how she was in the middle of touring for her *This Is Hot* LP, and all of the sudden EMI Records stopped promoting her. Her album was full of beautiful arrangements and songs — and they weren't for the sake of thump, thump, thump. They were good, danceable songs. Gloria Gaynor, whether she did a cover or an original, always had wonderful arrangements with everyone she worked with. There was truly quality music out there. The general population got exposed to so much crap that they finally asked themselves — what was the point of listening to the genre?”

**Hayden:** “I don't think the major companies understood disco back then. I think they knew radio and how to break hits on radio. When a lot of these songs began breaking out of the clubs, radio was kind of being forced to play them, and that's when the record companies started taking notice. They backed into promoting disco music. They certainly didn't jump in with both feet at first. They took a wait-and-see type of attitude and when the records sales became so undeniable, that's when they began putting money into it and getting heavily involved in the disco market. I don't think the labels back in the day treated disco artists any differently than any other artists. However, there may have been some discussion of an artist's importance because they were or were not a ‘disco artist.’

“Over the years, you can look at artists who have had problems with labels, but in some cases it wasn't the label's fault. Artists sometimes overspend in producing a record and when the accounting comes in, they don't realize that things get recouped against the money they were spending — or their managers were spending. There's all kind of factors that come into play. But to say that there wasn't also some creative accounting going on at times would be an understatement. It's always happened in the business, and that's why you need good lawyers to represent artists and to hope that it doesn't happen.”

**Moulton:** “You’re asking the wrong person! I will say simply this — I think a lot of the stuff today is just garbage. I can't imagine the London Symphony Orchestra playing the hits of Eminem. You needed music back then. I think that's why I got involved with it. I always liked those songs for the melody and the artist. I think that's what drove me to do the things I did.”

**Rose:** “I don't think disco music ever lost respect. I think it was the excesses that hurt it. When disco peaked, it was just too much. The fashions were insanely fabulous. There was
so much sex and drugs, and it was crazy. After a while, I think people had to come down from that. At the same time, the music industry in general also contributed to its downfall. The old-time rockers really hated disco, and they had a hand in it. The whole ‘disco’s dead’ thing started in Chicago’s Comiskey Park where people burned their disco records. [It was] sponsored by a rock radio station. Disco didn’t evolve and stayed on the high end of a party high that we never got off. We never got off the merry-go-round.

“When the disco backlash hit, I remembered the saying, ‘Don’t do anything out of anger.’ Don’t write a song or do a project that you’re going to sell to the masses out of anger. It would seem so obvious. With the Village People, we had two double albums out, the *Live & Sleazy* and *Can’t Stop the Music* albums, and we sort of took the nosedive. The album that came out after those was *Renaissance*. It was the one where we immediately dropped the images. We unveiled a glam look copying Adam and the Ants. While the music was good, it was sort of like, ‘If you’re gonna say disco sucks ... well, [this is what you get].’ People didn’t buy it. They wanted our old look back. But, by then, the music industry had changed so drastically and it was really hard to regain our footing. Thank God we had our international following in over 35 countries, where we were able to keep disco alive!”

**Wirrick:** “From a composition standpoint, I stumbled upon dance music because it was in vogue at the time. I was working with Sylvester and that was the predominant type of music on the radio and that’s what was making the charts. Many of us who were writers were basically mercenaries who would do whatever it took to get on the charts. Respect for the genre wasn’t really an issue. At the time, the late ’70s and early ’80s, that’s what people were writing, and that’s where my focus was. I learned by listening to what was on the radio and basically would try to emulate that.

“I suppose it came easy for me. You know, a lot of that music was first generated by using a raw beat. In those days, we used real drum loops. By real I mean we actually used real loops of tape because those were pre-drum machine days. You would literally scour records and the airwaves for any section of one to two bars of just drums. You’d find a song that had a two-bar or two-measure drum beat, and you’d literally grab that and record it onto a stereo left and right quarter-inch tape. In college, I learned how to edit those tapes where you could seam them, make the loop and make it sound like someone was playing. That’s how we began. You’d find a good beat that you’d like and start working around that. Beyond that, that kind of writing was like throwing noodles on the wall. You’d try progressions, melodies and eventually you’d find something you think worked and you’d go with that.

“To this day, the word ‘disco’ is shunned by a lot of musical people. For a time, it was treated with disgust. If you listen to songs on the radio today, jeez, half of the Top 10 has a four-on-the-floor beat. They just don’t call it disco anymore. If it’s got that four-on-the-floor beat—it’s dance music. Disco was pooh-poohed by a lot of the rock ’n’ roll people back in the day, and it’s still mocked to this day. When it is mocked today, it shows me that the people criticizing it really don’t know what they’re talking about because all you have to do is listen to the radio. In Europe, hits with dance beats never stopped. It’s only really come back in this country in the last ten years or so.”

**Zager:** “I don’t think that the musician or singer who specialized in dance music ever got the respect he or she deserved, in spite of the fact that many dance productions were some of the most inventive productions I have heard. Jealousy may have played a part in the demise of disco. Many artists were not receiving radio play because they were recording
other types of music—so they began ‘blasting’ disco. Most of the artists who were putting disco music down ended up having their records remixed as a marketing tool and to expand their audiences. I think that was part of it. It’s possible the campier songs also contributed to the decline of disco. My goal was always to get played on the radio. I rarely made a record that was just for the clubs. I have always considered myself a pop and R&B producer. At that time, dance records were pop records, and you could sell [a lot of them]. Diana Ross, David Bowie—you can go down the line and see how artists were making dance records into pop hits. I think that some of the records at the time were intended for just the clubs, like Donna Summer’s ‘Love to Love You Baby.’ There was nothing to the lyric, but it had such an infectious groove.

“The thing I liked about disco was it was such entertaining music. To be able to hear that music in a club and be able to watch people having a good time was truly satisfying. I really loved it! But disco wasn’t just entertainment — look at Gloria Gaynor’s “I Will Survive.” Cissy Houston — she would not record a song that didn’t have a lyric that didn’t mean something to her. If you go through the disco catalog, there were quite a few songs that had meaningful lyrics. But there’s nothing wrong with recording songs that are pure entertainment. Not every lyric has to have a message. I loved the music of Chic! They recorded amazing tracks, but their music was simply entertaining.

“I don’t find any difference between what’s going on now in dance music and what was going on back [in the disco era], except then we used live orchestras and today most dance tracks are electronic. As a professor, I tell my students that during the disco era we worked with some of the greatest musicians and singers in the world. Disco became a dirty word — although it never lost its popularity. It is absurd because many of the most inventive [music professionals] produced, and still produce, some of the most [creative] tracks in any pop musical genre. It still bothers me when disco gets criticized. The only problem I have with today’s music that is specifically for the clubs — not pop dance, e.g., Katy Perry — is that many of the tracks don’t include vocals and the instrumentals are so repetitive that I become bored.”

Q: Were the recording and entertainment industries fair-minded in their treatment and handling of disco music performers?

Correia: “When it comes to the business side of the music industry, it’s always been that the manager is looking out for himself and the record label is looking out for itself. I don’t think the disco genre suffered anything the people in rock and soul weren’t experiencing. The negative side of the business crossed all genres. Maybe when disco took off and became more commercially viable, there were more opportunities to encounter problems with labels and such, but the recording industry has always been a minefield from a business standpoint. The goal was to make money, and the artist’s concerns were very low on the totem pole at most of the labels.”

Ford: “Frankly, a lot of disco artists from the past have gotten screwed over — somehow, some way. I don’t really think the women who represent the disco era really got all the respect [and fair treatment] they deserved. The sad part about the record industry today is it’s all about the youth; it’s not about the legends as much. Some TV music shows do bring back the legends like The Voice and Idol, but it’s still rare. I think because music is so centered on the Justin Biebers of the world — centered on the youth — that a lot of young singers and
fans are not knowledgeable of the legends that paved the way. Which is sad! They don’t really know past Justin Timberlake."

**Hayden:** “The industry can be very difficult [today], and it was back then as well. One of the reasons I started my own label was because of some bad dealings I had with CBS Records at the time. I had a million-selling hit by Patrick Hernandez, ‘Born to Be Alive,’ which I had signed to CBS. The ‘disco sucks’ campaign in 1979 happened at the height of the release’s success, and CBS kind of backed away from the disco market and shelved all the upcoming releases I had with the label. So I never ended up making the royalties I should have from his record. After getting burned by that, I felt we should work for ourselves, and so I started our own label, TSR, in 1980.

“As an independent label, it was tough to compete with the majors because they had such an army of marketing forces and such control over the promoters out there. They could get adds to radio simultaneously, which would allow their songs to move up the national pop charts. With us, we’d get added to a station in New York, then one in Miami and by the time we’d get added in Chicago, it would drop off New York. If you look back at the charts back then, even though there were many more releases from independent companies like TSR compared to the majors, you’d have a hard time finding many independents that were at the top of the pop charts. We would do well on the dance charts and get regional airplay, but to bring it all together at once was difficult. It was a very political game, and that was life in the music business. The majors controlled the marketplace. It was the same for alternative bands that couldn’t cross over, country acts—anything on an independent label had a difficult time getting on the pop charts let alone the top of them.”

**Moulton:** “They weren’t fair — where would anyone get that idea?! [The record labels] were out to make money, and the contracts were for them, not the artists. I thought a lot of things were very unfair. People don’t realize that creativity is a wonderful thing, but the minute you try to cheapen it or screw around with it, it turns off. It’s like flicking a light switch off. Some people can turn it back on and others, like me, when it goes off—I don’t want to deal with that particular thing anymore. You know you’re really very vulnerable when you are in a creative position, like these women were. People try to take advantage of you or screw you over, and it affects you. The labels don’t realize that — they think you have an on-and-off switch. I’ve seen it happen with artists — once you’ve burned them, they just don’t want to know you or ever do anything with you again. I think back in those days you could always get another singer. Like a factory just throwing them out all the time. No matter how many they churned out, there’s a few that really stood out. Look at Rochelle [Fleming]. She’s had so much success — she’s a great person and a good friend.”

**Rose:** “When we were on Casablanca, Donna Summer and the Village People were the queen and kings of disco. We had a different type of rapport with the music industry and the label. We were promoted like no others. I felt like we were at Motown. You had to be the best to be with Casablanca, with the family. We had access to radio, access to television — Casablanca had an impressive publicity department and had access to every TV and radio show in the country. Again, I look at it and think maybe we had too much of it. Having so much exposure is also bad for a career. I mean, we were everywhere. I was getting sick of myself! Meaning I was watching myself on TV, in pre-recorded New Year’s Eve shows, on several TV shows at the same time!

“There were a lot of offshoot, boutique labels [under Casablanca] that had performers like Pattie Brooks, for example. A lot of artists were like Pattie — they did well, but they
didn’t get the A-list treatment. If you could have club hits, you’d have a nice career. If you had crossover hits and Top-10 hits, then you could have a career that spanned years and years. Gloria Gaynor had a long career in clubs, but it wasn’t until 1979 with ‘I Will Survive’ that she had that explosion and resurgence again and climbed into the higher echelons of the music industry.”

Wirrick: “Well, let me answer by saying the success of my song ‘Mighty Real’ was a huge surprise, and there’s an interesting story that goes with it about the industry somewhat related to this topic. We were touring — Sylvester and the girls — in Europe after ‘Mighty Real’ had become an international hit. We’d play these huge venues and generally after the show, the promoters and the people who knew about the records would come up to me and say, ‘Wow, you wrote ‘Mighty Real’ — you must be very wealthy!’ I would look at them with this deadpan look and say, ‘No, I haven’t got a penny to my name; I’m very poor!’ At least half a dozen of them who knew about the process and money involved said to me I needed to look into that when I got home. They’d say, ‘If you wrote that song, you should be very well off by now.’ So, I got back to the U.S. and I was referred to a music lawyer and went and introduced myself to him with a platinum and gold record in my hand. I said, ‘You know, I wrote these songs, and I don’t have a penny to my name.’ His glasses dropped down on his nose and he looked at me and said, ‘You’re kidding, right?’ He proceeded to find out that the attorney for the band at that time turned out to be crooked, and he stole Sylvester’s and my royalties and bought a house on Long Island with the money. True story — and we caught him with his hand in the till.

“He was almost disbarred. He was prevented from practicing law for a couple of years, and he could have been thrown in jail — really. He had to sell the house on Long Island in order to pay Sylvester and I back. We think we were paid about three-quarters of the money that was stolen from us. Supposedly, what happened was, for example, suppose a check for $5,000 came through for me. Well, [the attorney for the band] had told me he was administering my ‘publishing money,’ but at 22 years old, I didn’t know anything about this. So he would get a check for $5,000 and write me a check for $500 and keep the other $4500. I would receive the $500 check in the mail, and I would think I had just died and gone to heaven. I thought, ‘My God, I just got a check for $500, and it’s just for a song that I wrote!’ It was amazing. A year later, I discovered I should have [been paid much more]. So anyway, we got our money in one lump sum instead of [a payment period of] five years or 10 years, which turned out to be a blessing in disguise for me. For Sylvester, not so much, because he spent every penny he had and more. He went out and bought a lot of furs.”

Zager: “In my opinion, many disco artists were treated unfairly. Most had to continually have a hit to maintain a career, unlike a Joplin or a Jackson Browne. Those performers had to sell records too, but it didn’t matter if they had a hit single or not. They would still draw a lot of people.”

Q: How would you characterize the strong connection between disco music and the gay community? How vital has this audience been to the overall success of female performers in the disco music genre?

Bronstein: “As far as having a large gay audience, a fan is a fan, and I don’t know any artist who would disagree with me saying that. In my personal view, there are a lot of gay fans for these artists in America, but you go down to, say, South America, and it’s all straight
people. I’ve gone looking for a gay audience, and you can’t find them sometimes. Predominantly in Europe and South America, the disco and dance artists are doing straight events. Massive straight festivals and such; they’re not gay-related at all. These artists can go there for days and do 10 straight festivals. Gay crowds, I have to say, are always the best crowds. However, over in Europe, the straight crowds respond very much like the gay community does here. A lot of disco artists are working in Europe and South America and don’t come [to the U.S.] at all.”

**Correia:** “I do think there was an important connection. Blacks and gays were the first people to discover disco music, and gay men have always been on the pulse of anything new and exciting. Take Bette Midler, for example. She had started her career performing in gay bathhouses. In the clubs, gay men were able to relate to these singers and their music, be themselves and be free. I think that’s one of the reasons why these artists are still relevant among the gay community—even more so than the heterosexual community who bought the same records. I think gay men developed a more personal connection with these women. I think gay men just connected differently with these artists than the way heterosexual audiences did. I don’t think there’s a difference in the way people of all kinds enjoyed disco music in the clubs, however. I think the music had the same effect on all the people. If you looked at clubs like Paradise Garage, straight and gay people mingled there all the time. A businessman and his wife would be dancing next to a drag queen. I just believe the gay and black communities were pioneers of the music, and once disco became commercialized and the overkill set in, appreciation for the music may have [receded] back a bit to the gay fans.”

**Dean:** “You know what? I honesty have no idea if there is some deep and meaningful reason for the connection. Maybe it’s because the music is bright, brash and camp. Maybe it was the relentless beats per minute. Maybe it’s the pure escapism. The gay audience has always loved a diva — Gloria, Donna, Cher — the list is endless. The magic is born from the combination of fabulous songs performed by women with great voices — and some things will never change!”

**Ford:** “Having such a large gay fan base is a positive for these women. They feel, according to those I’ve worked with, that it’s an honor that they have qualities that gay fans are so enthusiastic about. They’re very thankful. What woman doesn’t love to be adored, and most gay men know how to adore divas and legends. I think they are all very, very happy that they have this fan base that [has been] so loyal to them after all these years. In many of the package shows that these divas perform in together, you actually get a mix of fans — couples in their 40s, 50s and 60s, and then you have gay fans and then a whole new generation of fans that prefer this music to the music of today. There are a lot of people living for music from the past — in disco, in rock — and that’s what they want. The music from the past can really be timeless. I think the sad part now is we’re in a time where the legends are in their 50s, 60s and close to 70 years of age. They are still out there and doing it, though, and aging doesn’t mean retiring.”

**Gianatos:** “There’s always been a tie to great female vocalists even outside of disco — Judy Garland, Edith Piaf and a lot of the divas from back in the day. So I think when dance music started to evolve into its own genre, outside of being just a danceable pop or R&B song, of course gay men were immediately attracted to it. I don’t even think it had as much to do with it being disco music as it was the artists — their personalities and energy. By the early ’70s, Stonewall had already happened and then there were these clubs that started playing this music — and the gay clubs were always the trendsetters. When I was a DJ in
New York and worked at the Limelight, everybody came to the club, not just gay people, because everyone knew that’s where they would hear the hippest music. The gay community that embraced disco was setting the trends that everyone else followed. I’d say, for the most part, I don’t think I’ve ever talked to a straight person that had the intense type of reaction to an artist that gay people did. I don’t think you heard straight men or women gush over Donna Summer or Gloria Gaynor. I think there’s just this emotional chord that’s touched in the gay community with this music and these women. It’s emotional … it makes you feel … it’s not arbitrary. It may very well be that female voice on the top of these magnificent dance tracks that somehow makes that connection.”

Hayden: “There’s no denying that the gay clubs were the front-runners in breaking dance music, especially the Hi-NRG brand. There were so many huge gay clubs that didn’t care what was happening with a record on radio. They almost shunned the record if it was a big radio hit. They were more into discovering new talent that wasn’t on the radio and taking pride in breaking it first and kind of making it be their music. I always appreciated the success we had with gay clubs, and I catered heavily to breaking music with them as well as crossing songs over to a mass appeal audience.

“The gay clubs were the forerunners of making disco happen to begin with. Back in the real early ’70s, they were playing 45s before the 12” single even came to the market. Places like Fire Island were very important, and four or five of the hottest DJs would play the clubs out there. If they all played a record one weekend to say a thousand people in each of their clubs, those people would then go into the city and spread the word. You’d sell 40 to 50,000 units without radio play. The gay clubs like 12 West, Infinity and all those discos in New York were packed constantly and breaking records all the time.”

Moulton: “I never understood why disco is sometimes referred to as ‘gay music.’ I have trouble understanding that mindset. I’ve heard people say, ‘That’s such a gay record.’ Well how is it gay? Most of the stuff I’ve worked on made the R&B charts. I never made ‘dance records.’ I made records you can dance to. There’s a difference. I always try to explain that to people. Why should I make anything only a disco record? You’re narrowing your audience.

“When I have been in gay clubs, they are more open than the straight clubs — the way they danced and expressed themselves. In other words, there was no feeling self-conscious. They were there to have a good time and screw everything. I think when they see a lot of these artists like Grace Jones and Linda Clifford, they can relate to them. There’s that same kind of mutual connection — I’m here to do what I do and if you don’t like it, well move on! It’s true! I went to see Grace about 10 years ago at the Roxy. She was two hours late. I was really pissed off and thought, ‘Who the hell does she think she is?’ And then she shows up and the crowd was screaming and she was wearing this wild outfit — and then the mike wasn’t working. She yelled, ‘I need a better microphone!’ and she threw it at the audience. And I mean she really flung it and hit someone in the head! The guy started screaming, ‘Oh my God! Grace Jones hit me in the head! Oh my God!’ He was so excited that Grace Jones hit him in the head, and he thought she did it just for him. He was screaming that he loved her! I couldn’t believe it! The owner came over to Grace and said, ‘We’re gonna get sued! What are you, crazy?’ She said, ‘It wasn’t working! I need a microphone that wo000orks! So I can siiiiiiiiiiing! That’s what I’m here for!’ She yells to the audience, ‘You want me to sing?’ They all scream, ‘Yes! Yes! Yes!’ I think that’s why gay men like her so much! She’s like, ‘Fuck everything! I’ll do everything the way I want and when I want and you’re gonna wait for me — and if you’re not here, other people will be!’”
Rose: “Disco was taken from the urban clubs to the gay clubs because [the gay community] was the underdog of society. If you wanted to break a new single or an act in disco, they’d take it to a gay club first. That would be the barometer — the test ground to see how successful it would be. Out of that, everyone would report to *Billboard* magazine. *Billboard* would report to radio and suddenly these disco songs were charting. I think if a record wasn’t big in [the gay clubs], it would never have made it to radio or crossed over. Also, the record pools were extremely important. You had DJs wanting to pick up records from each other, taking them to Boston, Chicago and Atlanta. I remember that happened with Karen Young’s ‘Hot Shot.’ Everyone wanted to hear her!”

Wirrick: “I can’t believe how many gay men have come up to me and said, ‘You wrote this song or that song? I came out to that song!’ That may have been more than I needed to know!” [laughs] “I am as straight as the day is long, so go figure. I think if you have a concept of what makes dance music work, gay or straight, it doesn’t matter. But so many of the producers of that music were straight, and they were just trying to get on the radio. I was never phobic about my audience at all, but I did wonder if my songs could make it, if you will, in the straight marketplace. With the passing of time, they have.”

Zager: “If it weren’t for the gay community, disco would never have been what it was. Disco music broke barriers from a sociological point of view. There were so many gay clubs at the time, and the music was appealing to this community. It was a great civil rights form of music. The genre never would have reached the heights that it did without their support. [However,] I never specifically kept this audience in mind when I made music. I just made the best record I could make. Making the record danceable was all I was concerned about if I was doing a disco track. I think for a disco song to cross over to all audiences, it couldn’t be just a good track or a good remix. It had to be a good 3.5-minute *pop* record.”

Q: Are there still opportunities today for disco’s original female performers? Are they still relevant?

Bronstein: “There are some challenges to booking the women who had hits in the disco era today, but it depends on who they are. If they crossed over, it’s easier. Evelyn ‘Champagne’ King, for example, is working everywhere, all of the time. Whether it’s a straight event, a gay event, a black event — it doesn’t matter. Her hits are timeless; they’re classics! I think these women are appreciated once they are seen today, and I think that’s evident by the love they receive when they do perform. Sometimes they don’t let ’em off the stage — they just give them so much love. That’s a great feeling when you see that happening to them. Sometimes people think that because they don’t have a current hit record or they don’t have a record label deal, their career is over. And that’s not true. You just gotta market yourself to the right people and be in the right place.”

Dean: “Are there opportunities? Hell, yes! Of course they are still relevant! I have seen *The X Factor* contestants left speechless after being blasted by the so-called oldies, like myself and Gwen Dickey (Rose Royce). Do we need to compete with the kids? Absolutely *not*! I have nothing to prove. *I can sing*! The biggest challenges to any artist are the changes to one’s voice. A trained voice will mellow with age, like a fine wine — and you do get tired.”

Ford: “Most of the disco artists need to rely on their hits, because that’s what people want. And the way music is today, you’re lucky to squeeze one new song in your set — whether
it’s a 30-minute track show or a one-hour band show. Most fans want to hear the hits from
the era that take you back. Thelma Houston, for example, has acknowledged that she may
not have had as many songs as Whitney Houston or Dionne Warwick, but what she does sing
she makes her own. Thelma, who has been performing over 43 years, is a Motown legend,
has 23 albums and a Grammy, and knows exactly why she does it so well. ‘Don’t Leave Me
This Way’ was just one song of many accomplishments that just happened to be in the disco
era and outshined most of her other work. She is, in my opinion, on a par with Tina Turner
when it comes to having the whole package. She knows what to sing and includes songs by
other artists from the era as well as her hits that compliment her voice. Maxine Nightingale
is another performer in that category. As a disco legend, it’s your ability to put a show together
where you make the songs your own. And a lot of people only have one hit and, frankly, some-
times they don’t have the whole package — the stage presence — and they haven’t found the
other songs from the era that go along as a nice companion piece to their big hit.”

**Moulton:** “I think they are very relevant today. I mean, they’re always working! I went to
a couple of big clubs where they had these diva shows. And it always seems so nostalgic
because the audience is so mesmerized by them. It’s like they’re in awe of them. Rochelle
Fleming was at a show and started to sing one of her hits and people were singing it louder
than she was. I would say that’s a testament to their talent and there’s a happy association
with the songs, especially if it was a big hit.”

**Rose:** “I think most of these ladies are relevant today! Take, for example, Linda Clifford—
she looks like a million dollars! And because of radio shows on SiriusXM, Studio 54 and
other radio stations, their careers have warmed up again!

“You know, I like my career today. I like being in and out of the music business, in
high profile and high definition! I also get to go home and reboot out of it and have a
normal life and be my whimsical self. [I get to do] a cooking demonstration and also, as an
ordained minister, spread love and the union of marriage. I work on my Native American
music and charities and things that I’m passionate about. I imagine many of these women
feel the same way. I can’t speak for most of the ladies of disco. I do know that Donna
Summer was a very successful painter. Gloria Gaynor just recently received a degree in psy-
chology. They are reinventing themselves and staying relevant. I know for the Village People,
the philosophy is just to constantly strive to be the best we can be on a stage. The more
seats you sell, the happier the promoters are. Gloria, for example, is always changing her
show around. She keeps it fresh, and vocally she is probably singing better today than she’s
ever sung. She keeps presenting herself beautifully in different live venues — it’s all about
how you present yourself. How you keep coming back and evolving with the times. You
have to do your best to preserve what you have.”

**Q: What qualities do the first ladies of disco profiled in this book possess?**

**Bronstein:** “I can put together a show with five or six of these divas and there’s no compe-
tition — they all support each other. They all cheer each other on. And it doesn’t matter
who opens and who closes. In fact, a lot of the ones who would normally be the closers ask
if they can go on first, so they can make the fans happy and get home. [laughs] Many of
these women are like family to me, and they are family to each other. A lot of these artists
are helping each other out by doing duets or one will write the song and the other will sing
it. They keep each other involved, which is great — and that’s family.”
Correia: “I think of the strengths and character these women have. Their talent was in the forefront, not their sexuality. They can still sing great! They fought sexism and racism and endured. The bottom line is they let nothing deter them from doing what they loved, and they followed their dreams. They were fighters and were willing to withstand a lot of negativity within the business. And a lot of these women are still singing their hits and coming up with new material. With each negative situation they may have encountered, they learned from it and they kept it moving forward — and I think that’s the part that’s very inspirational and encouraging. They have amazing fortitude and a passion for their music. I think now that the hard part of their careers, making sure they were having hits and making money, is behind them, they can have fun now. They can enjoy it more now and embrace the basics of why they got into the business in the first place.”

Ford: “Humility. Singers in general will never think of themselves as great singers, no matter who they are. I’ve found that they are always very critical of themselves, and they almost never listen to their own music. Each project they do — they kind of leave it behind when it’s done and go onto the next. They don’t look back too much and always seem to want to look onto the future, the next project.”

Gianatos: “The women I am in contact or deal with today — they are beautiful people! The artists I have worked with, like Pattie Brooks, Scherrie Payne and Linda Clifford for example, are professional, come into the studio and do their thing and are just lovely people. They have been affected by some of the things that have happened to them, good and bad. They are survivors, and they continue on. They are real singers — they are not manufactured — and they can go out there live and kick ass. Most of them are troupers and are determined to continue on, have a presence, get their gigs — and I think they are all highly capable performers! I’ve never had anybody that I’ve worked with in the whole group represented in this book that I’d ever say, ‘I never want to work with that person again.' Every encounter has been beautiful!”

Rose: “To all the first ladies of disco, I take my feathers off to you! I’ll say this — if you’re lucky enough to be able to roll with the years, it’s really an honor to still be in demand. And these women are! We’ve had some amazing women open for [the Village People]! Loleatta Holloway, Gloria Gaynor, Karen Young, Linda Clifford, the girls from Chic, The Ritchie Family. And Grace Jones — she was for disco what Lady Gaga is today for dance music! It was so complementary for us! Madonna even opened for us with her first single, ‘Everybody.’ We saw her walk through the lobby, and she had this ‘I am somebody!’ kind of look. One of my group members said, ‘Oh, she won’t last.’ I said, ‘I think this girl’s here to stay!’ If anyone studied Donna Summer, it was Madonna. She grew up listening to Donna.

“I would watch these women [who pioneered disco]. Before I went on stage, I wanted to see their craft. I wanted to see how they did it. I wanted to see what separated these women and what made them different. The thing I kept coming back to was just that they had their own different personalities and great styles. They just had ... something!”

Zager: “They were great singers! They could have sung anything. They would have been hit artists no matter what they sang. They were ... and are ... extremely gifted!”