

Love to Love You, Baby: The Birth of Disco

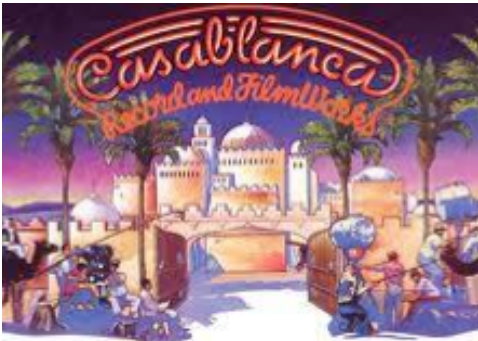
by Diana Mankowski

German music producer Giorgio Moroder threw everyone out of the recording studio and dimmed the lights. A somewhat reluctant Donna Summer stepped up to the mike and oohed and aahed her way through a song that *Time* magazine would later describe as “a marathon of 22 orgasms.”

It was 1975 and the song Summer was recording---”Love to Love You, Baby”---would

launch her career and significantly influence the emergence of disco.

Summer’s recording lengthened what had been



first recorded as a three minute single into a “17 minute vinyl aphrodisiac.” Created at the insistence of Neil Bogart, President of Casablanca Records, the song Moroder and Summer recorded was little more than a haunting instrumental track covered over with Summer repeating the title multiple times in a high, whispery vocal, accented by erotic moans and groans.

The danceable beat of “Love to Love, You Baby” made it an instant hit in the clubs. Bogart then convinced radio stations to play Summer’s song at midnight, billing it as “seventeen minutes of love with Donna Summer.”

In February 1976, the song hit number two on the American pop charts. It wasn’t the first disco song to climb the *Billboard* Hot 100, but “Love to Love You, Baby” advanced disco’s presence in the musical mainstream by bringing Casablanca Records

into the disco promotion pool. And it did so by highlighting one of the defining themes of the disco craze—female sexual desire.

I love to love you, baby
Do it to me again and
again
You put me in such a
awful spin, in a spin.

Love to Love You, Baby,
Giorgio Morodo, Pete Bellote, and
Donna Summer

Before releasing “Love to Love You, Baby,” Casablanca’s success had rested on a few big acts, most notably the glam rock band KISS. The record label had barely acknowledged the existence of disco. But after Summer’s hit, disco’s moneymaking potential led Casablanca to collect a growing roster of disco artists.

The biggest disco hits were often linked to record labels that focused heavily on promotion and by the later half of the 1970s, Casablanca had become *the* disco label through this tactic. In fact, Casablanca became so associated with disco that people often walked into stores and simply asked for whatever was new by Casablanca. By August 1977, Casablanca’s success had translated into two years of almost constant inclusion on *Billboard*’s National Disco Action Top 40.

As Casablanca’s first commercial disco success, “Love to Love You Baby” was typical of the expanding craze for disco. Like other disco hits,



Between 1975 and 1980, Casablanca dominated disco and Donna Summer's nine gold albums, ten top-five hits, two Grammy Awards, and one Academy Award-winning song made her Casablanca's fastest rising star.

Summer's song garnered sales through being played at clubs---not through radio exposure. It was also typical of disco music in that its extended play allowed for continuous dancing.

But it was the hint of sexuality, conveyed through a driving 4/4 beat, that really defined "Love to Love You Baby" and disco itself. Before Summer's hit, female performers on the pop charts had sung only about romantic love. They had also refrained from raunchy explicitness and sported relatively unrevealing attire.

Disco divas like Donna Summer changed pop music forever by singing about---and being---independent and sexually empowered women. The artists who followed in Summer's immediate wake were aggressive, assertive, playful, romantic and even respectable. Their freedom to explore female sexual desire in mainstream music and success reflected the feminist movement and sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s.

As one of the first popular hits to vocalize female sexual pleasure in a truly explicit manner, "Love to Love You, Baby" ushered in a new era of pop music representing a broad range of female sexual expressions. From Madonna and Janet Jackson to Britney Spears and Beyoncé, female pop stars have built upon Summer's break-through "marathon of 22 orgasms" by vocally embracing female sexuality.

Diana Mankowski received her PhD in history from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. Her dissertation was titled "Gendering the Disco Inferno: Sexual Revolution, Liberation and Popular Culture in 1970s America." She works as a free-lance historian in Michigan.