House music as an expression of gay male identity:

An exploration of the relationship between club environments, disco, house music and masculinity.

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Definition of Terms

Dominant Culture

'A dominant culture is one that is able, through economic or political power, to impose its values, language, and ways of behaving on a subordinate culture or cultures. This may be achieved through legal or political suppression of other sets of values and patterns of behaviour'. (Encyclopedia.com, 1998)

Heteronormativity

'Heteronormativity refers to the Western social norm, or assumption that the overwhelming majority of sexual relationships in society are heterosexual. It is the dominant sexual model of social cultural political, and economic organisation, including the way it organises identities, experiences, regimes of truth and knowledge, and ideologies of gender and sex'. (Goldberg, 2016)

Masculinity

'Masculinity can be viewed as a multiplicity of gender practices enacted by men whose bodies are assumed biologically to be male'. (Pascoe, 2012)

Hegemonic Masculinity

'Hegemonic masculinity can be defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy which guarantees the dominant position of men and the subordination of women'. (Connell, 1995)

Introduction

If music can be viewed as an expression of culture, then early house music can be viewed as an expression of gay culture; this can be evidenced from the development of gay identity within the safe spaces that disco created within the United States throughout the 1970-80s. This paper will trace the synthesis of both musical and sociocultural influences which produced house music and therefore identify its ultimate relationship with gay culture. By examining influences, such as the changing attitudes towards masculinity, the emergence of the discotheque and the homophobic undertones of the backlash against disco, this paper will show how the significant relationship between house music and gay male identity may be understood.

Who (2015) fittingly acknowledges the contribution of gay men, but more widely, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) people to the story of house music. His viewpoint is important to help us understand why the contribution of gay men to the story of house, has been overlooked because of homophobic attitudes. He writes:

> *'The LGBT contribution to the dawn of house isn't the whole story, but it's the backbone, glitter and colour that often gets overlooked. The unsung influence of gay culture may not stem from conscious discrimination, but when a major contribution isn't celebrated, that oversight can allow homophobia to flourish'. (Who, 2015)*

This highlights the need to examine how homophobia and the backlash against disco, led to disco being pushed 'underground'. This paper will support the notion that this backlash was really an adverse reaction to the effeminacy of disco and the emerging presence of gay men within popular music and wider culture. This will evidence that not only were the expressions of gay men 'masculinised' but also that in response, the very sound of disco was too: resurfacing as house music.

Research revealed that expressed notions of masculinity were central to how gay men identified themselves within dance music culture, as this revealed that these notions of masculinity could be expressed through dancing. Amico (2001) addresses the relativity of

masculinity as he states that *'the various guises which masculinity might take in society are perhaps limitless'.*

Therefore it can be said that both positive and negative influences from a dominant culture are apparent in both the sound and cultural practices of early house music and these influences will be explored throughout the following chapters. This will show how gay men synthesised these to aid the development of their own identity. Thereupon, the leading hypothesis will be clear: house music coincided with the emergence of a gay identity which was made possible by the legacy of disco and the safe spaces (discotheques) it created. In the conclusive statements, it will be clear that the contribution that gay men made to the story of house was a response to the negative societal attitudes towards them, which further implies that this contribution has not been fully acknowledged.

Literature Review

The scope of literature on my subject area, specifically on gay men and house music, is narrow. This has meant that applied research has been conducted to facilitate a focused discussion to show how the development of dance music culture coincided with the development of a collective gay identity. However, on subjects such as masculinity and gender, where the scope is much wider, a wide range of sources has been available for review. Discussing lacunae in available literature, relevant to my subject area, Whiteley (2013) explains that *'courses exploring the political and cultural implications of gender are somewhat a rarity in popular music studies'.*

The type of literature reviewed for this paper includes academic journals, academic books, case studies and TV documentaries. In order to fully understand how masculinity can be performed within club environments and how identity is constructed within these spaces, it has been crucial to examine and contrast a wide variety of sources, hence reviewing documentaries, for example. Sources of information from outside the academic domain, like documentaries, have been helpful in contextualising one common theme, that the origins of house music are strongly linked to the development of identities within club environments.

The documentary, *I Was There When House Took Over The World (2018)* is a short but concise history of house music that recognises the influence of the people behind the early sound through interviews. This documentary charts the same history as much of the academic literature studied on the origins of house music and has been useful in contextualising the sociocultural considerations of the genre: for example, it recognises that the genre's early gay audience had already been established by disco and that new advances in music technology, and new approaches to music creation, played a part in the appeal of house to a wider audience.

Throughout the majority of literature reviewed to address questions on how a sense of gay identity was formed alongside house music, a common theme emerged: that the safe spaces disco created (discotheques) during its key years were not only the blueprint for later nightclubs, but that they were also some of the first places where gay men could safely and comfortably meet one-another.

To ensure this paper is grounded in academia, a wide range of sources that comment on the various guises of masculinity have been analysed. Hawkins (1997) claims that masculinity can be performed and that within the performance of masculinity, a use of pastiche is present, especially in the context of music that presents versions of masculinity. His work is useful in understanding how wider popular culture can influence gender. For example, he claims that sophisticated forms of marketing were responsible for significant changes in gender roles in the 1980s.

Signorile (1998) recognises the negative aspects of the kinds of masculinity presented by gay men. Though somewhat reductive in tone, this key text is nonetheless a reflection of the sociocultural issues that faced gay men at the time and one that cannot be overlooked. Signorile's report is interesting because, as can be seen from subsequent reviews, it was polarising. This may be because his views tend to focus on what he calls the 'cult of masculinity' within gay club culture: identifying gay men with an obsession of achieving physical perfection. This text has been useful in shaping an understanding of what life was like for gay men prior to the 21st century, but it is however, slightly biased as the writer has a tendency to acknowledge the negative sides to gay club culture. On the other hand, writers such as Peterson (2011) and Weems (2008) have examined the positive aspects of this culture that point to another key theme. The importance of dance is a crucial means of expression for gay men. Like Weems, both Peterson (2011) and Amico (2001) also agree that safe spaces contribute and culminate as places for expression for them. Amico, however, goes further to examine what part masculinity plays in house music. He suggests that masculinity is contingent and socially negotiated which is helpful in understanding masculinity as a kind of performance.

Adjunct to the findings of Signorile, another common theme is discussed that underpins the main discussion, and one that appeared throughout most of the academic journals studied: this is the notion that masculinity can be performed. Weems (2008) creates links between the performance of masculinity within the 'circuit' that Signorile speaks of, however he does recognise the positive aspects of the culture and its practices such as dancing. Unlike Signorile, who does not identify the importance of safe spaces in helping gay men to affirm their identity, Amico, Lawrence (2003) and Frank (2007) see these spaces created by disco, as having played a part in the development of a gay identity. Lawrence through his extensive writing on the history of dance music culture, associates

the emergence of safe spaces for gay men with the popularity of disco. Discussions on the importance of dancing within these spaces seems to only appear within more recent academic studies. For example, Shuker (2008) contends that dance has always been an important part of popular music culture whilst recognising that it has been neglected in scholarship until recently. This highlighted limitations in the wider subject area and as a result applied research was conducted to confirm links within the main discussion.

Whiteley (1997) and Hawkins (1997) look at central issues surrounding masculinity which are relevant and grounded in academia, as they closely examine masculinity within popular culture. They usefully allude to masculinity being a ‘performance’ through their writing, they both make similar claims saying that masculinity is variable and not fixed. This idea has been found in other research but has not been explicitly mentioned as ‘performance’.

Conversely, Edwards (2005) suggests homosexuality negates masculinity and that gay men have been historically associated with being effeminate. Peterson (2011), however identifies why such displays are presented by gay men within dance music culture. He proposes that perceptions of effeminacy within society are conflated with homosexuality and because they are constantly changing, then this can then lead to gay men masculinising or de-masculinising themselves. Likewise, Peterson and Anderson (2012) recognise that attitudes towards homosexuality, within dominant culture, are made worse when homosexuality is associated with being ‘feminine’. Claims such as the ones mentioned above discern how gay men’s identities might be affected if they adjust their appearance or behaviour according to the standards set by a heteronormative structure.

A recurring theme identified within some of the more recently published academic articles, discuss the sociocultural significance of disco as they explain that dancing is crucial in the expression of identity. The influence of dominant culture on how gay men present themselves has also been a recurring theme. Eichenberger (2012) explains that ‘bricolage’ was initially at work within the beginnings of gay culture, where gay men would take elements from other cultures and synthesise them in order to create their own. There is a hint of so-called ‘bricolage’ within the work of writers like Lawrence (2003) and Amico (2001) who identify such influences but do not exclusively explain how gay men respond to them. They do, however, allude to influences from dominant culture playing a part in the shaping of a gay identity.

Methodology

The main method used for collecting data has been through secondary research. For example, historical accounts have been used to identify the sociocultural considerations around disco and effort has been made to ensure information on masculinity and gender is grounded in academic literature. Case studies have been reviewed to understand the significance of club environments for gay men. These have been considered alongside the views of relevant, notable figures, resulting in the emergence of a strong theory as to how and why, after discotheques, house music nightclubs became an important place for the expression of gay male identity.

Documentaries on the evolution of house music from disco have provided first hand accounts of relevant historical events and eras. Information gathered from these has meant that a solid sociological understanding has emerged. However, there is a limit on the use of such sources due to the nature of the data presented in them: it can often be biased. To properly justify the aim of this paper, many academic journals on masculinity and its various guises have been analysed to ensure that there is depth to the research.

There is not a wide range of relevant research available on how gay identities have been formed within popular music culture. Järviluoma, Moisala and Vilkko acknowledge that research in this area prior to 1990 was focused on physicality and sex roles rather than the role of gender, masculinity or femininity in the sound of the music itself:

> *'In popular music studies, gender research focused initially on sex roles: what the men and the women do in and with music, as well as on the lyrics. The gender aspects of the music and the other sounds were relatively neglected until the 1990s when an increasing number of researchers turned their attention to how music is gendered, how masculinity and femininity and the borders between them are constructed'.* (Järviluoma et al., 2003)

Due to the complexity of gender and its variables, it has been important to focus specifically on the relationship between gay men and notions of masculinity. To ensure data collected from secondary sources was appropriate, applied research has been used to show how masculinities might be performed in popular music culture.

A framework was used when research was conducted for this paper. This framework consisted of common themes, key ideas and other findings relating to the wider subject area. By organising literature into categories based on subheadings, it was possible to build a picture of the main issues that informed the writing.

An interdisciplinary approach has facilitated the identification of relationships between how masculinity can be performed in club environments and how house music and its safe spaces encouraged expression that then enabled gay men to form and express their identity.

Disco & Identity

How disco challenged heteronormativity within popular music and wider societal attitudes towards male sexuality and masculinity

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In this chapter, discussions will point to how disco can be viewed within a historical context as a cultural marker for changing attitudes towards male sexuality and masculinity. By looking at dancing as one of the cultural practices of gay men, discussion in this chapter will hypothesise that both collective and individual identities can be formed through expressions of various masculinities in the form of dance within club culture. Positive cultural developments in attitudes towards masculinity will be explored in line with the rise in popularity of the disco genre and the effect this had on gay male identity. Towards the end of this chapter, the homophobic undertones of the Disco Sucks movement will emerge to illuminate how disco later became house music by being pushed 'underground'.

Masculinity in the 1980s went through significant changes and this is evident through different music throughout this period. Whiteley (1997) contended that genres such as new wave and disco, all played a major role within popular music throughout this decade. It is purported by Shuker (2008) that the phenomena around disco put dance music forcibly into discussions of popular music within the late 1970s and 1980s. Hubbs (2007) could help us to better understand why this was so, as he claims that fresh displays of sexuality and femininity by males were embedded visually and sonically within early disco. Shuker (2008) also points out that these discussions centred negatively on a cultural practice that was central to the ethos of disco. He describes the portrayal of dancing in the context of the time as a feminised or de-masculinised activity that he believes people associated with displays of homosexuality. This view is helpful in understanding how homophobic views within popular culture of the period may have had an impact on what could be the origins of the backlash against disco.

In addition to being a physical activity, dancing is also a way in which popular music can be consumed (Shuker, 2008). In the context of gay clubs, the way in which music is consumed is through dancing to music played through sound systems (Wall, 2013, p.269). The musical components of disco appear to encourage the kind of dancing that is practised within these environments and here, links can be made to better understand the

relationship between expressions of masculinity and identity. It appears that dancing is an important recreational activity and a way in which gay men can express their identities.

History, such as the history presented in *I Was There When House Took Over The World* (2018), can show us that the culture that developed around house music has a strong connection to expressive, danceable forms such as disco. Noting this connection, Hubbs (2007) describes how disco transcended acts of casual listening and dancing. She signifies the presence of disco as key in helping gay people confirm their identity as she writes: '*disco served not just to provide contact, safety and acceptance, but crucially to confirm 'queer persons' very existence and intact survival in a world that would make of them, if not monsters then walking ghosts, nonentities'*. This implies that disco was not only a form of popular music widely consumed, but that it also created a culture which encouraged expression, tolerance and open-mindedness through practices such as dance. It's by no surprise then that when tracing the emergence of a collective gay identity within house music clubs, the sense of this coming together of gay men can be linked to the open culture that disco created through discotheques. Moreover, Shuker (2005, p.234), claims that 'disco generally celebrates the pleasure of the body and physicality, and is linked to the gay community and specific club scenes'.

Peterson's (2011) views lend support to this, as he describes the appeal of discotheques to gay men, explaining that disco was a *'popular church of the orgasm for gay men'*. This claim not only helps us to understand disco's popularity with gay men, but helps us to understand the importance of discotheques as being safe spaces in which they could meet one another. Alluding to the origins of the 'nightclub', he goes on to explain the etymology of disco as how the genre claimed these large spaces (discotheques) for its own, so that disco music could be danced to. It appears then that these spaces may have helped gay men to affirm their identity through a sense of belonging. Accrediting discotheques as providing some of the first popular safe social spaces where gay men could embrace their sexuality, Peterson alludes to the beginnings of a gay identity. From Peterson's findings it seems that there is a compelling link between the popularity of discotheques and the emergence of gay nightlife culture.

Further examining the importance of discotheques to gay men, Signorile (1998) goes into more depth than Peterson and suggests that discotheques became a kind of 'church' for gay men which allowed them to express masculinity more openly. The comparison of

discotheques to a church can be contextualised by what he calls ‘the circuit’, the culture surrounding house music as being the origins of ‘the cult of masculinity’. By likening the culture within ‘the circuit’ to a religion, Signorile’s view has pejorative connotations of that culture, deeming it merely hedonistic. However, Signorile’s views, many of which can appear negative in tone, do not reflect the positive aspects of gay nightlife in that it served as a meeting place for gay men, contributing to feelings of a wider sense of community.

The popularity and significance of discotheques and their practices cannot be underestimated when trying to understand how gay identity was formed and expressed. These spaces were some of the first places in which gay men could safely meet friends, future partners and sexual partners. It is the practices within the discotheque that appear to give depth and meaning to its purpose to gay men.

By looking at the components of the music played at discotheques: the combination of highly rhythmical music, non-stop partying and the assertion of varying cultural identities (Shuker 2008), we can begin to be aware of the role disco played in the formation of gay nightlife which contributed to this wider sense of identity.

Echoing a similar sentiment to that of Peterson, Shuker (2008) ventures further and historically describes how this nightlife culture was brought into being. He says that, in the case of disco, it was the ‘result of a series of transformations’ including ‘a modernised term for a dance hall’ and a ‘blurring of different musical scenes’ that made the discotheque a part of popular culture. These transformations may have been made possible by changes within the political environment in which disco blossomed. Such transformations previously described by Shuker are congruent with the findings of Whiteley (1997), who calls for attention to be paid to the causes for changes in attitudes towards masculinity in the context of the 1980s: she claims that a fertile political environment was behind much of the musical narratives of this period.

Accordingly, Peterson (2011), sheds light on the way these changes affected how gay men performed notions of masculinity in the 1970s and interestingly implies an element of pastiche is a part of doing so as he writes: *‘butch men of the ’70’s appropriated a heterosexual masculine dress and style in a way that maintained a degree of camp and irony—a virtual masculinity not dissimilar to the hyper femininity of the drag queens’*.

The idea that gay men knowingly perform notions of masculinity is important in understanding how gay men have historically expressed their identities. In discussing how the disco band the Village People were presented to the public and acknowledging this element of pastiche, Sinfield (1998) writes:

> *'Their excessively butch manner is pastiche… even manly gay men are not all that manly. Their novelty was to display, to gays and the general public, a comic version of the macho style that was being cultivated by gay men in 1979.'* (Sinfield, 1998, p. 3)

Disco & Homophobia

The homophobic undertones of the Disco Sucks campaign

In the previous chapter, changing attitudes towards masculinity were discussed to show how they influenced the emergence of gay nightlife culture. This chapter will discuss disco's decline in relation to an apparent backlash against (which some viewed as a backlash against black and gay music) while examining how homophobia may have led to gay men 'masculinising' themselves.

The 'Disco Sucks' campaign, which saw the mass burning of disco records during the half time period of a baseball game on 12th July 1979, is widely cited as the 'demolition of disco' (Lawrence, 2003, p.410). Describing the campaign as a 'coalition of predominantly straight white men', Peterson and Anderson (2012) explain that the campaign was started by those who felt dispossessed by disco. Frank (2007) however, claims that this incident was not isolated as she recalls the campaign as *'the climax of an anti disco backlash that spread across the United States of 1979'*. Identifying the homophobic undertones of this campaign, Frank later reveals the following:

> *'The violent backlash against disco in 1979 transformed disco from a socially acceptable form of music and culture to one that was highly stigmatised… the backlash was directed not simply at a musical genre but at the identities linked to disco culture. The attack on disco was informed by the general perception that disco was gay and elitist'.* (Frank, 2007)

From this insight into what society was like at the time, within the US, it appears that homophobic attitudes existed not only within wider culture but also within the domain of popular music. Though it cannot be said that disco was exclusively 'gay music', in the context of the time, it's no wonder that disco's salient characteristic, that of heightened male and female sexuality combined with a highly danceable form of music, caused reactions in this way. Conversely, this backlash could show us that society was beginning to recognise, though somewhat negatively, the presence of gay men within popular music. For gay men in the US, who were beginning to see positive changes in laws and politics since movements like Stonewall Riots of 1969, it can be understood that disco was

something they were able to identify with, especially as it presented them with relatable, progressive images and attitudes towards male sexuality. Maddison (2000, p.29) clarifies the ramifications of such movements as she states that it ‘celebrated cultural forms that were seen as ‘intrinsically gay’ and ‘rejecting of straight norms and values’.

The events of Disco Demolition night of 12 July 1979 were not isolated. They are connected to cultural anxiety around homosexuality and gender that emerged in the 1970s (Frank, 2007). Though the combination of these factors led to the decline and ultimate death of disco, they had also ‘unwittingly initiated’ the birth of house music (Lawrence, 2003, p.410). The gay audience that disco established but had now been left dispossessed following the backlash, is understood to have gone ‘underground’ by Joe Shanahan (2017). He explains that '*all of a sudden there was a them and us and we were stronger because we went further underground… we went deeper’*. The ‘us’ that Shanahan is speaking of here is, in part the DJs who, as fans of disco, would be responsible for shaping an entirely new form of dance music. What arose out of the ashes of disco, would soon become known as house music.

Phoenix from the Ashes of Disco

How did societal attitudes towards the ‘effeminacy’ of disco influence the origins of house music and its culture?

With black DJs, such as Frankie Knuckles, building upon the foundation of disco (Langlois, 1992) through creative interpretations upon disco’s musical components and trademark grooves (such as the four-on-the-floor kick pattern), the creators of this new genre, unlike disco, would be DJs rather than musicians. Facilitated by developments in technology, such as remixing and sampling, new methods of music creation emerged. Early house music appeared to blossom within the gay male audience that felt dispossessed by the backlash against disco. Nile Rodgers of the disco-funk band Chic recalls that when discussing the emergence of house music and the clubs in which the music was played, a synthesis of influences is responsible:

> *‘People started to ask for their voices to be heard. The gay movement, the women’s movement, the black power movement… all these things started to cross pollinate each other and we became comrades and it played itself out in nightclubs'.* (Rodgers, 2017)

In order to understand how the negative attitudes towards effeminacy that the Disco Sucks campaign had on gay men specifically, it’s important to consider how society has historically positioned heterosexual masculinity as the signifier of male identity. Signorile (1997), who has written extensively about masculinity and its relationship to gay men, has studied how the fear experienced by gay men during the McCarthy Era of the 1950s should not be underestimated. Explaining the effect of this fear on how men constructed their identities in relation to the negative connotations of effeminacy and homophobia, he writes:

> *‘It exploited a prevailing fear in American culture at large of effeminate men and instilled it further, even among gay men. Not only would men, gay and straight, not want to appear effeminate lest someone think they were homosexual, but the profusely masculine pose that straight men adopted in the 1950s had a profound effect that lasted for generations’.* (Signorile, 1998)

This view could help us understand the recurring effect the homophobic undertones of the Disco Sucks movement might have had on gay men in the late 1970s to early 1980s, who saw disco as a way to express facets of their identity. It also offers insight into how effeminate men can be perceived to be less than a more 'masculine man' within society. Edwards (2005) indicates this as he writes: *'gay men are often castigated as the wrong sort of men: too masculine, too promiscuous… too lacking in masculinity or simply effeminate'*.

Signorile suggests how the masculine ideals of dominant culture may influence gay men to alter their physical appearance and how that might impact their sexual preferences:

> *'Homosexuals are, after all attracted to men, and if men in a given culture are assuming an even more masculine appearance than previously, thus redefining once again what it means to be a man, homosexuals will perhaps by default become more attracted to a more masculine appearance'.* (Signorile, 1998, p.46)

This example demonstrates that dominant culture may dictate how straight men present themselves and perform a notion of masculinity which may in turn have an influence on how gay men present themselves. This again not only alludes to the idea that masculinity can be a performance but that the performance emanates from wanting to fit in within society. Could it be that Signorile is touching on what might lead to gay men 'butching up'? That is, a version of the kind of masculinity that is accepted by both gay and straight men. Correspondingly, if the way masculinity is presented within wider culture influences gay men and societal attitudes towards homosexuality, the same could be said for how masculinity is presented in popular music culture. It's possible then that the backlash against disco and all that it represented, in terms of progressive representations of male masculinity, may have had a regressive impact on the presentation of masculinity within popular music culture. Subsequently, if discotheques are places in which popular music is experienced, then it might be said that gay men began to masculinise themselves in accordance with the masculinity norms that Eichenberger described above.

Peterson (2011) lends support to this idea as he explains that when levels of homophobia increase within society, this filters down and produces more conservative expressions by gay men as he explains: *'gay men's experience of cultural homophobia impacts upon their gendered performance'*. The point Peterson makes within the context of club dancing is

important as it regards how expressions of identity through cultural practices can be influenced.

Amico (2001) takes a more positive position on how gay men have constructed a collective sense of identity as he explains that 'bricolage' as something that is constructed or created from a diverse range of things (Eichenberger, 2012). Amico believes that this took place at a stage of gay identity where gay men would re-appropriate and 'mine' dominant culture for music which resonated with their group ethos. An example of which can be seen as DJs like Frankie Knuckles would synthesise tastes and influences to create a sound that would later be labelled 'house music'. It seems gay men understood (and were frustrated by) the limitations imposed by the dominant culture. Nevertheless, they persevered in an effort to develop their own. Maddison (2000) explains that in this process gay men can be seen as asking for equality within a heteronormative structure.

Though different notions of masculinities were apparent within popular music culture in the 1980s, Eichenberger (2012) recalls that following the backlash against disco and all it represented, meant there was 'a shift towards masculine ideals'. Relevant to the idea that masculinity is not fixed, Eichenberger goes on to explain that *'gay men began to masculinise themselves due to stigmas to act in accordance with hegemonic masculinity norms of dominant culture'*. Here, Eichenberger is not only suggesting that masculinity is not fixed (variable), he is suggesting that the way in which gay men present their identities has historically been regulated by the confines of dominant, heterosexual culture. Here, Eichenberger is speaking of subordinated masculinity, which is described by Pascoe (2012) as the oppression of gay men by hegemonic masculinity definitions. This suggests that by by complying with hegemonic masculinity norms in terms of appearance, gay men may be more accepted socially or that they may draw less negative attention to themselves that might otherwise result in homophobia. What the author doesn't comment on, however, is that if some gay men are knowingly 'masculinising' themselves then did other gay men simply followed suit?

By understanding the kind of influence heteronormative culture can have on gay male expressions of masculinity, and the detrimental effect it had on disco, it's now possible to consider how a synthesis of musical influences may have shaped and influenced early house.

Hubbs (2007) identifies discos cultural significance has not been fully acknowledged because of propagation of the view that it was shallow or too ‘commercial’. Suggesting that disco was simply more transparent in its materialism than rock, she cites the beginnings of the disco backlash within rock audiences and critics who saw disco in such light. House carried on disco’s tradition *‘of vocals performed by black female vocalists … delivered through lyrics that spoke about ‘love, abandonment and betrayal’* (Amico, 2001). Bradby (1993) analyses the prominence of the female voices who sang lyrics in early house music as she writes: ‘*there is a sense in which the female voice is being used to connote the expression of human emotions…anger, desire, love, pity’*. When considering the kind of problems, some of which have been noted in the previous chapter, that gay men in society are faced with, it is interesting to see what they identify with musically. It could be that the expressiveness that Bradby speaks about is appealing to gay men because it may represent or reflect situations within their lives. Likewise, as Amico (2001) explains, it is not just the lyrics which ‘exhibit powerful emotions’ that may have appealed to gay men, but it is also about the delivery of the vocal too.

Hawkins recognises how music can be influenced by the experiences of its audiences. If this is the case, could DJs have interpreted gay men’s experiences within heteronormative society in early house music? Hawkins (1997) writes:

> *‘Any notions of gender and sexuality borne out of musical sound, lyrics and production techniques, visual images, are ultimately constructed around the identities and experiences of the fans themselves. Concepts of pleasure and power resulting from the sexual undertow are never rendered fixed; everything is left open for negotiation, definition and reinterpretation’.* (Hawkins, 1997, p,125)

This is useful in understanding how part of the gay male audience that disco left behind, may have fed the development of house music. Many of its early gay pioneers, who were fans of disco, for example, Ron Hardy and Frankie Knuckles made use of new technologies such as sampling and drum programming through technology like the Roland 808. In the process of combining musical tastes with experimentation on such technologies, a new approach to music creation, that was accessible, emerged.

Peterson (2011) notes how the repetitive nature of house music ‘*structurally imprisons the body with rapid repetition and minimal variation’*. This limitation in the music itself could be

accounted for if we take into consideration how gay men began to 'masculine themselves' following the backlash against disco, which has been explored above. If we understand this in relation to how music is an expression of culture, then it could be argued that by going 'underground', disco, as a genre, was 'masculinised' too. As Nile Rodgers has pointed out about the origins of house: '*Music is just a reflection of the culture, it's a microcosm of what's actually happening out there in the world'* (Rodgers, 2017).

Interestingly, there appears to be something unrealised and undefined about early house music. Amico (2001) alludes to this as 'double entendre', explaining this to mean that house music implies male to male sexuality but that it never fully admits it. The implied male to male sexuality that Amico mentions here, could be conveyed throughout the music production rather than the lyrics. Hawkins (1997) illustrates:

> 'E*xpressions of sexual difference … appear to function to a greater extent through the codes of the musical sound than through the lyrics and visual representations of their performance either live or in videos'.* (Hawkins, 1997, p.121)

This notion of 'implied male to male sexuality' is an interesting one considering that the popularity of house music was propelled by both gay and straight DJs. The dynamic of being both a DJ and a creator is important here. Is it possible that house music's pioneers, because of their experience as DJs and who's job it is to understand the demographics and constitution of their audience, fed notions of sexuality into the music? It can also be said that even in its early days that house music was already an accessible form of dance music that was capable of reaching far beyond the gay audience it initially thrived within.

It could be said that due to its ambiguity, house music is something more visceral, as it encourages expressions of emotion, sexuality and identity, rather than something more cerebral like politics or a world view. It appears that early house music is open to interpretation, that its limitations allow listeners to each express something different, something 'free-flowing' upon its rigid musical structure. There appears to be a simplistic and subconscious essence to house music that encourages participants to express themselves, free from constraints.

In the following chapter, the thesis that dancing is an integral part of the expression of gay male identity within house music is further explored. As Wall (2013) demonstrates, the

cultural importance of dancing, as a means of expression, can help us explain why it is so entwined with house, and important for gay men, as he writes:

> *'Whether we dance (or do not dance), how, where and to what music we dance are all very meaningful acts within popular music culture. They relate to broader issues of class, nationality, ethnicity, gender and sexuality, and their politics have both a history and a contemporary resonance that we need to analyse and understand'.* (Wall, 2013, p.254)

Safe Spaces

The significance of dance music culture to gay men and how it enabled them to construct identities through notions of masculinity expressed through dancing

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An idea that set out part of the direction for the discussion of this paper is one that has been touched on above: the performance of masculinity. This chapter will discuss how increasing and decreasing levels of homophobia affect the expressions of gay men within gay culture, with emphasis on how masculinity is performed through dancing within club environments.

Dance can be viewed as both being adjunct to and as a physical representation of the music (Amico, 2001). Gay clubs can also be seen as safe places for the expression of sexuality and identity for gay men through dancing (Eichenberger, 2012). Peterson can help us to better understand how homophobia can influence these expressions of masculinity within these environments as he writes: '*as cultural perceptions of homophobia decrease gay men's dance has become more feminine in expression'* (Peterson, 2011). To understand how club environments can act as spaces in which culture can grow, Wall (2013, p.262) sheds light on how dance music culture raises considerations about three interconnected areas: *'the physical experience and meaning of dancing, the way the dance floor operates as a cultural space in which certain senses of identity are forged: and finally the way dance floors are organised around the playing of records'*.

Lawrence cites the historic purpose of dance floors being places where 'man would meet woman', and continues to explain that after disco, house music helped to reinvent the nightclub as *'a multicultural, polymorphous, free-flowing space'* (Lawrence, 2006). He goes on to suggest that the club is a space where individuals could simply dance and let go of their struggles, becoming free from their everyday lives. From this we can understand how the technological advances that made house music creation possible, combined with the creative lighting within clubs, made way for a different kind of music listening experience, an experience within a safe space that was attractive to gay men.

In the case of house, it appears these three considerations are useful in understanding how dancing came to be an important part of its culture and an expression of gay identity.

If gay club culture and its venues developed from the spirit and blueprint of discotheques then, as Peterson (2011) notes, the importance of such spaces to gay men can be envisaged as he explains that house music *'superseded disco as gay men's preferred dance form in the 1980s. Here, men danced at mega events… as well as regular weekly dance clubs that featured electronic music'*. Peterson's claims here show that dancing is clearly an important expression for gay men due to the popularity of such events.

Those who also acknowledge the significance of dancing for gay men include Eichenberger (2012) who explains that *'there is a fluidity and creativity in gay dance compared to that of straight male dance'.* By suggesting that there is creativity in the way gay men dance, which is unlike that of heterosexual men, then perhaps it could be said that gay men are adept, more so than heterosexual men, at interpreting the music that they dance to. This may also help gay men to differentiate themselves from heterosexual men. Amico (2001) however, goes further than this to discuss how notions of masculinity, expressed through dancing, can be performed and interpreted in congruency with the musical components of house music:

> *'The beat is representative of masculinity in its potency… the beat is positioned as paramount… unremitting, and 'dominant' in a visceral form unmediated by thought - pure power as opposed to a lyric representation of such. This masculinised representation is more than aural signification, however. By impelling the participants to physical action - dancing which can go on for hours - the beat also engenders a performance of the construction of masculinity through a physical response'.* (Amico, 2001)

It is an interesting notion that percussion in this case could represent masculinity and that this may encourage the type of reaction in gay men that Amico speaks about. It seems then that there is something to be said about the 'visceral' form he describes. Similarly to disco, experiences of dancing to house music within clubs is that the very sensuality of the music may awaken feelings of sexual desire, ecstasy or togetherness. Relevantly, Hawkins explains that *'pleasure, desire and enjoyment from sound converts into dance'* (Hawkins, 1997, p.127). If viewed in this way, dance music could be a means of escapism for gay men who may have been enjoying house music culture as a safe space free from discrimination. Reflecting on the kind of collective experiences that house music creates for its listeners, and the kind of joy it promotes, through the practice of dancing to

music, Weems (2008) writes: *'All of these communities and events promote ecstatic communal bonding through dance*'. Shuker (2008) explores this further and explains that collective identity is woven into dance cultures, a claim especially relevant when discussing the importance of house music in the emergence of a gay identity.

Peterson (2011) reflects on the cultural significance of dance and how it can, as an expression of culture, tell us much about how different choreographies are unique to different decades and groups of people as he explains that dance informs us about the *'sexual and gender mores of the day'*. Here, Peterson is suggesting the ways in which people dance, can be seen as an indicator of the ambient culture of the time. Going into further detail, he explains that *'dance in general, but social forms of dance in particular, employ and reflect cultural notions of gender, sexual desire, race and class' ,* revealing that there is a depth to dancing that can help us to better understand ourselves. If dance within the safe spaces of house music culture is viewed in this light, then we could say that the creativity that has been identified in gay men's dance, could be an emotional reaction or interpretation of the sociocultural issues they face in the world around them.

The repetitive, 'rigid' nature of house music can influence the way in which gay men dance. Levine (1998, p.59) likens the dance and poses of gay men in these environments to the physicality of 'working out' at a gym. By likening dance to exercise, you might carry out within a gym, for example, Levine is suggesting that dancing can not only be a form of exercise but also a performance of masculinity. Likewise, Amico explains that when gay men dance to house music their stances are 'almost militarised' (Amico, 2001).

In the following chapter, the masculinisation of gay men and their dance is explored in line with the idea that gay men perform notions of masculinity with an element of pastiche.

Cult of Masculinity

Masculinity, performance and pastiche

As house music culture evolved, so did the masculine expressions of gay men within it. The hyper-masculine circuit culture took over from disco as gay men's preferred form of dance within the 1980's (Peterson, 2011). Those who also maintain this, and that ever since the demise of disco, gay men's dance and club culture has become more masculine, include both Peterson and Signorile. They both argue that this resulted in the 'cult of masculinity' within the gay community which originated as far back as the Stonewall Riots and *'the birth of a broad-based commercial gay sexual culture'* (Signorile, 1998). He defines the 'cult of masculinity' as:

> *'The cult of masculinity can perhaps best be viewed in the way its name suggests: as a religion. Looking at it in this way in fact allows us to have a broader understanding of its grip on our entire culture, and on gay men specifically'.* (Signorile, 1998, p.31)

Signorile was one of the first to identity how this plays out within gay club environments and alludes to the notion that the hyper-masculine dance moves and stances that gay men carry out in the 'circuit' are in fact a kind of performance. Both Signorile and Peterson recognise that the negative attitudes and language propagated throughout 'Disco Sucks' was aimed at effeminate gay men who in turn 'beefed up' their appearance alongside the rise of house music. Peterson suggests that gender-policing such as this *'reflects how the gender regime of circuit culture is enforced by self-regulation and a heavy reliance on music structure to prevent feminine choreographies'*. Signorile is slightly more explicit in depicting why gay men perform masculinity in this way as he says that gay men have an obsession with physical perfection (Signorile, 1998). Likewise, Amico (2001) supports this idea when suggesting that the 'attainment of physical perfection' is something that is of high importance to gay men.

An example of a way in which the cult of masculinity may play out in club environments through the performance of gender is discussed by McDonald (1997), who writes:

> *‘Gendered identities are produced and performed in forms of doing, and there is no gender identity separable from the performance… performance invokes notions of acting, in which a performer constructs a fictional identity. The concept of masquerade retains this sense of identity as something dated and constructed, but rather than see gender as the construction of a fictional person, masquerade is read as the reality of how gender differences are produced by the body’.* (McDonald, 1997)

This notion of performance is interesting in that it suggests that gay men are only playing with masculinity, that by it being a performance, they are almost acting a part. A connection could be made here with pastiche: could gay men be knowingly performing notions of masculinity, as they do when presenting hyper-femininity in drag for example? Sinfield (1998) gives an example of this when talking about the kind of masculinities that the disco group The Village People presented:

> *‘The Village People celebrated an attainment of gay citizenship even while recognising, through camp self-mockery, that gay men could not achieve more than a hybrid, self-cancelling, pastiche relation to the pioneer values that are supposed to constitute America. If this was not a real colonisation of manliness, it did indicate that some gay men were having a lot of fun’.* (Sinfield, 1998, p.3)

Could this be true for gay men within club culture of the 1980s? This element of pastiche indicates that gay men might have been merely ‘having fun’ as Sinfield describes above. However, it could be argued that gay men construct and present their identities intelligently through the performance of masculinity for example. If disco challenged heteronormative ideals by presenting images of effeminate men, was house music doing the same, but this time presenting an exaggerated image of masculinity? It seems that gay men, due to the implications of their sexuality and masculinity, are more aware of the fluidity of both former and latter and how this can be communicated within dance music such as house.

Conclusion

The Gay 'DNA' of house music

If we can understand that part of the backlash against disco was fuelled by negative societal attitudes towards gay men and effeminacy and that such influences had implications on how gay men presented themselves, then it could be contended that this led to the 'masculinisation' of the very sound of disco. If the response of gay men was to become more masculine in their appearance, and if such notions of masculinity were expressed within the beginnings of dance music culture, then, early house music could be seen as an 'masculinised' expression of gay male identity. The significance relationship of masculinity to gay identity is now clear. Reddy (1998) recapitulates this as she explains that '*gay masculinity hints at a collection of ideas which culturally determine the way gay men view themselves as men'*.

Did disco upset heteronormativity within popular music as it shifted the paradigm from song to singer where the focus became the expression of sexuality through dancing? If so, it can be argued that house music, with the advent of new technologies and DJs as creators, shifted the paradigm even further from the singer to the listener. As has been explored, the visceral nature of early house music encourages listeners to creatively interpret the music through dance. Through tracing this progression, where gay men have been identified as playing a major role, dance music appears to have been a vehicle for the expression of sexuality where collective identities have been formed. Gay men appear to have an intelligent grasp on the implications of their sexuality and the confines of dominant culture in which they live. They are also capable of expressing both effeminate and hyper-masculine notions, which enables them to explore their sexuality and identity. Hawkins (1997) lends support to this assertion as he writes:

> *'Experiences of enjoyment and the thrill of music are often wrapped up in the exploration of identities positioned at a distance from our own. The pursuit of escapism and pleasure in pop music allows us to rediscover, reject or even reconstitute personal concepts of gendered identity'.* (Hawkins, 1997, p.120)

Through a synthesis of influences: material that appealed to them from within dominant culture, homophobia and the societal treatment towards them, gay men positively planted the seeds for a music that would soon cross from the US into Europe, from the underground to mainstream radio. By doing so, they created for themselves a culture in which identity could be explored through dance. If dance is an expression or practice of culture then music can be seen as a reservoir of *'significant and complex representations through which we think ourselves'* (Sinfield, 1998, p.1). Moreover, as can be seen in disco and house, *'genres of music are often claimed by particular constituencies as cultural forms that provide meaning and structure to their identity politics'* (Frank, 2007).

This paper has traced how disco challenged heteronormative standards of masculinity and how the emergence of its safe spaces developed in line with gay subculture. The homophobia experienced within the backlash against disco, has been investigated to show how its decline inadvertently lay out the foundations for a music that would develop from its ashes. The limitations imposed from dominant culture were explored to show how this led to the 'masculinisation' of gay men. It was argued that in this process disco also became masculinised and was 'pushed underground'.

Subsequently, a new music began to take shape within the audiences it left behind and with it came the emergence of gay identity. In this exploration, significant relationships have been established to acknowledge the contribution of both disco to house and house to gay men. It was noted in the outset of this paper that music can be seen as an expression of culture and from this discussion it has been established that early house music can be seen as an expression of gay culture. The gay 'DNA' of house music is now clear.

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