



Madonna



BY JIM FARBER



Forget her role as fashion plate. And businesswoman. And dancer. And sexual contrarian. And video groundbreaker. And PR powerhouse. And shock queen. And even as icon.

Yes, all those roles play their parts in the global juggernaut, and aesthetic nexus, that is Madonna, but, collectively, they offer one big distraction from the key element that anchors them all: the music.

It's a scandal in itself that so much of the ink and chatter rushing around Madonna over her twenty-five-year career has centered on image and ideology. They're fascinating pursuits, to be sure, but not at the expense of the essential element that got her voted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame as soon as she could be considered.

"Madonna the music maker" has proved to be a more deep and enduring role than any of the individual headlines or scandals that, admittedly, have made her career such a juicy blast. From her first baby step of a single – 1982's "Everybody" – Madonna showed a flair for matching an exuberant beat to an embraceable tune. At the same time, she exemplified the full randiness of the rock & roll spirit.

Madonna hasn't lost the flair, or the feeling, since. As a result, she now stands as one of the few pop stars to bat out top-shelf songs a quarter century into a career – all while continuing to sell millions of albums around the world.

Madonna's most recent work, *Confessions on a Dance Floor*, houses such songs as "Jump" and "Hung Up," tracks that burst with as much enthusiasm, smarts, and hook-appeal as anything from deep in her catalogue. Moreover,

they're strong enough to stand up to any songs from the younger competition. Certainly, no early observer could have known that Madonna would have the creative invention, or personal fortitude, to have survived – and even triumphed – for such an improbably long time in the pop jungle. But if we looked closely at her earliest songs, we might have had a clue.

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Madonna's first album, 1983's self-titled effort, already sounded like a "greatest hits" collection. The disc contained no less an impressive, hummable, or danceable string of smashes and club favorites than that of "Borderline," "Lucky Star," "Burnin' Up," "Holiday," and, of course, "Everybody." It was an instant dance-pop classic.

The following year, Madonna matched that disc hit for hit with her second album, *Like a Virgin*, which also benefited from Nile Rodgers's sterling production. Songs like "Material Girl" and the title track were mini-plays, character pieces perfect for video elaboration. "Over and Over" continued the star's flair for rock & roll fervor, while the sheer joy of "Dress You Up" epitomized pop fizz. Meanwhile, in the ballad "Love Don't Live Here Anymore," we glimpsed a more mature Madonna, exuding more earnest feeling than we'd heard from her up until then.

Of course, at the same time, Madonna was already ballooning from "just" a star into an icon. Girls had been imitating her every accessory from day one. But when she performed "Like a Virgin" on the very first MTV Video Music Awards, writhing around the stage in a wedding dress, she banked a pop-culture moment that people still giggle and swoon over to this day. It's right up there with Michael Jackson's moonwalk on the *Motown 25* special as a cherished talking point in TV music history.



Madonna poses in Amsterdam, 1984.

That water-cooler moment would be nothing, however, compared to the talk and outrage kicked up over a hit from her next album, *True Blue* (1986). In the song "Papa Don't Preach," Madonna told the story of a young pregnant girl who ignored the advice of her dad to get an abortion and declared, in no uncertain terms, "I'm keeping my baby." With that one line, Madonna enraged liberals, who somehow saw the story of a single character who refuses to terminate her pregnancy as a universal fatwa on abortion. It's a measure of Madonna's power at the time that she could stir up such a culture war with the simplest of gestures. It was also a sign of her independence that she risked angering the very leftists who formed her natural constituency. Either way, the song boasted a killer melody and more gorgeously rich production than ever.

Elsewhere, *True Blue* showed Madonna's expanding musical breadth. Its songs ranged from girl-group pop ("Jimmy, Jimmy") to peak club music ("Open Your Heart") to the singer's first real Latin foray ("La Isla Bonita"). The album even featured a grand ballad, "Live to Tell," that rates among the most moving of its decade.

By 1987, every move Madonna made was headline news. Likewise, every single she released clicked on the charts. Even the "non-Madonna" album that followed *True Blue* – the soundtrack to *Who's That Girl?* – spawned a peak single in its frothy title track. To solidify her club-audience core, Madonna followed this up – and stalled for studio time – by issuing one of the decade's best remix albums, *You Can Dance*, a disc that handily lived up to its name.

The star closed out the decade with a work that strived for (and achieved) more cohesion as an album than any she had previously released. "Like a Prayer" featured more revealing lyrics and expressed an unconventional faith. Its video took the latter idea to berserk new heights. One of the most fantastic-looking, and thematically convoluted, clips ever released, "Like a Prayer" saw Madonna having sex with a black saint in a church, serving as a civil rights pioneer, and – in its most undying scene – appearing in a clingy black slip, sashaying around in a field of burning crosses. That last image swiftly turned one of the most potent symbols of evil in American history into noth-

ing more than really great backlighting. Consider it Madonna at her most simultaneously maddening and captivating. You had to love her.

In fact, by the next year, that was practically mandated by law. By 1990, Madonna had achieved such a feverish level of fame it was for all intents and purposes illegal for any world citizen to go more than five minutes without mentioning her name. Her *Blond Ambition* Tour of that year made that mandate seem wise. It stands as her finest live hour, and the single greatest video-age/dance-driven tour anyone has ever launched. Although previous visually driven tours (including her own) had elements of Vegas tack, here every piece of choreography riveted and elevated. The tour also marked a major escalation in Madonna's use of her sexuality.

While before she had presented herself as a mixture of conventional sexual object and defiant sexual subject, now her image landed entirely in the latter realm. All the tease and flirt had vanished, while the in-your-face defiance of her sexuality took full, ravishing hold.

Astonishingly, with her next moves, Madonna ratcheted things up even higher. In 1992, she put out *Erotica*, her most cutting-edge album to date, with a darker sound that drew on the demimonde of gay sex-club dance music. The move saw Madonna, more assertively than ever, serving as a conduit between underground culture and the pop mainstream.

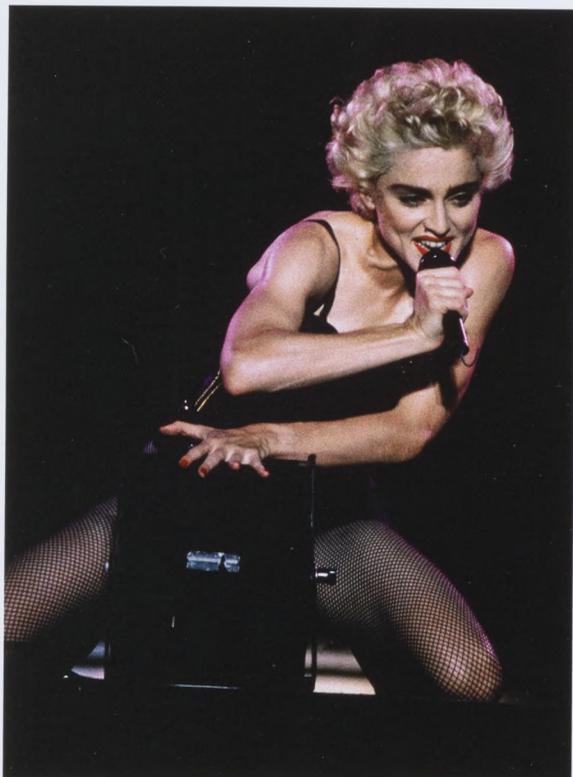
At the same time, she issued her *Sex* book, a widely trounced work that pictured her hitchhiking in the nude and engaging in group sex. Critics balked – and even declared her dead (the first of what would be many such pronouncements). In fact, *Sex* presented something unprecedented: It's the only time – before or since – that a major female celebrity has taken off all her clothes in public and maintained a point of view entirely her own.



At the first annual MTV Video Music Awards, 1984



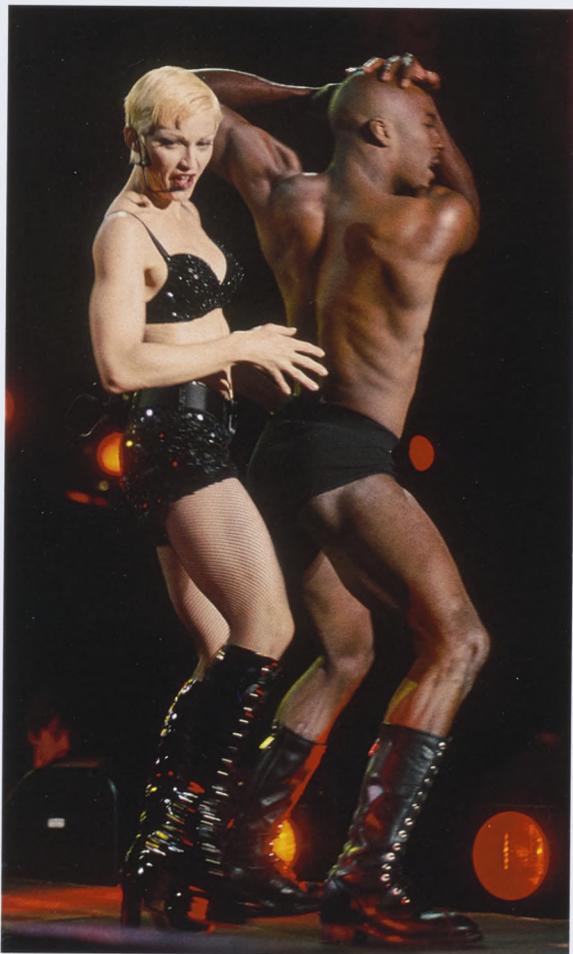
Burnin' up: Publicity still from the film *Desperately Seeking Susan*, 1984



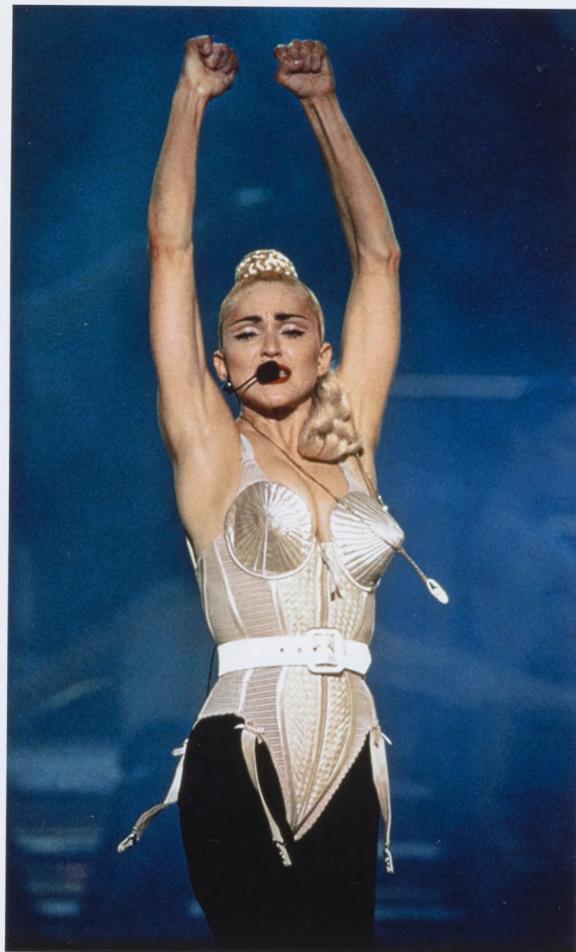
Erotica: Live in London, 1992



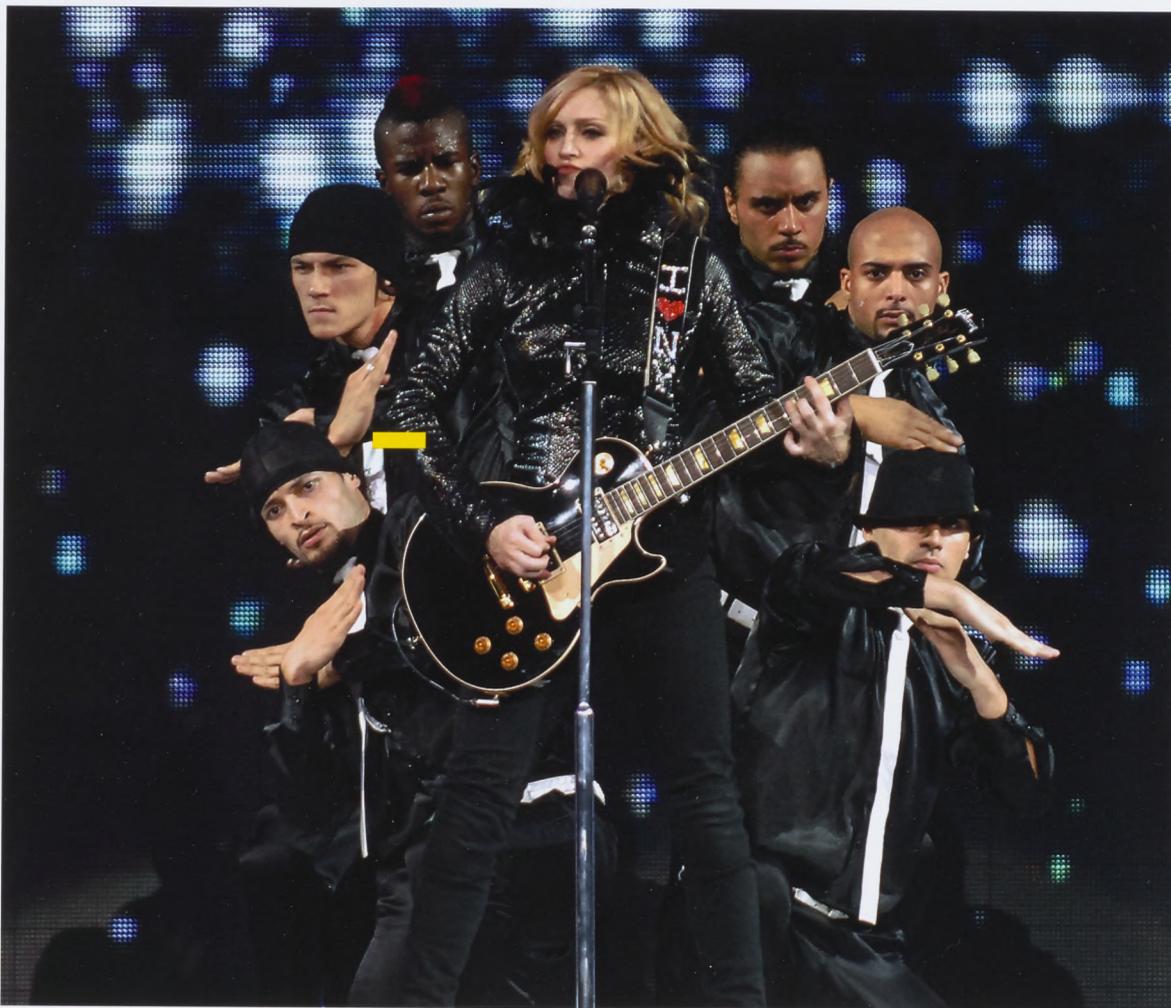
Girlie Tour: Madonna sports a retro look in 1993 . . .



and strikes a more buff pose the same year.



Her finest live hour: The Blond Ambition Tour, 1990



Looking forward: Madonna and dancers, Madison Square Garden, July 3, 2006

Madonna wasn't a passive object for the audience's voyeurism in those pictures. She was the aggressive auteur of every shot.

Despite a fever pitch of media outrage that followed – and the aforementioned lethal assessments of her career – Madonna came back resoundingly with 1994's *Bedtime Stories*. Here she devised an entirely new style once again, translating the New Jack Swing sound of modern R&B into her own Madonna-speak.

Her next move would not only prove one of her few successful forays into another medium (film), it would mark a dramatic change in her singing skills. With her starring role in *Evita*, Madonna found as perfect a character for herself as Barbra Streisand had in *Funny Girl*. Who better to play a charismatic fascist dictator than the queen of pop control? Madonna took voice lessons for the film, and it paid off handsomely. On the *Evita* soundtrack, Madonna's voice had a depth and resonance nowhere in evidence on her earliest, chirpiest recordings. She nailed the difficult material and, by singing the character's role with sympathy instead of with the usual mugging evil, she became the best and deepest Eva Perón ever.

If *Evita* gave Madonna a classic musical, her follow-up, 1998's *Ray of Light*, brought her back to forward-seeking pop. Riding the electronica wave, the singer hit on the most accessible take on that genre to date. The title song had as striking

a beat as anything from her earliest, club-centric days. Her next release, *Music*, took that style to the next level. It featured even better songs, including the title track – which was as perfect, and deceptively simple, a pop tune as she had delivered since "Holiday."

Few listeners felt as positively about 2003's *American Life*, the target of the worst reviews of the star's career. But those who counted her out (for the nine millionth time) had to think again when Madonna returned to her dance-pop roots with 2005's *Confessions on a Dance Floor*. Her tour to support it was one of the year's top grossers, earning more than any tour ever by a female artist. But it's telling that Madonna was able to fill those arenas with a show that rarely looked back. Newer material still dominated, as it has for all her tours, save the Re-Invention rewind show in 2004. And even that road show refigured the old songs for a new time.

Consider that both a promise and a warning. Even as Madonna hits fifty this August, she shows no signs of spending any more time gazing in the rearview mirror. At the end of 2007, she earned a brand-new record contract, one that doesn't involve any old-fashioned label. And she has a fresh album arriving any minute now. While some Hall of Famers may have their most creative days behind them, Madonna gives every sign of promising many more scintillating ones to come. ♣

Whatever Happened to Disco?

The Many Faces of Dance Music

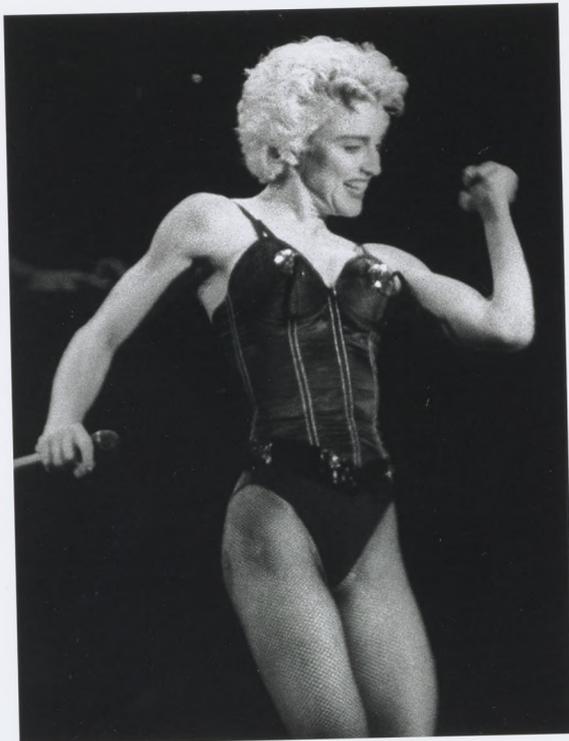
Some of the stars of disco's heyday in the 1970s reinvented themselves in the 1980s. Also in the eighties, a whole new crop of artists – who'd learned lots from the golden age of disco – became the new superstars of dance music.

ENR

BY TOM SMUCKER



John Travolta heats up the dance floor in *Saturday Night Fever*, 1977.



Ladies working the beat: Madonna in 1987 . . .



and Donna Summer in 1977.

By 1982, the wave of disco that had surged across the shoreline of rock & roll in the 1970s was receding, leaving behind a thousand great singles, the two memorable careers of Donna Summer and Sylvester, one good movie, a legacy of multiple subcultures, and a wide variety of pop stratagems for aspiring superstars.

Donna Summer was nearing the end of a remarkable run from a disco sexpot to a princess to a diva to a rocker and, in 1983, to a picket-line feminist with "She Works Hard for the Money." Summer's range matched the broadest ambitions of disco tied together in one comprehensible but flexible voice. Duetting with Barbra Streisand, moaning with the Munich Machine, reimagining Jimmy Webb's "MacArthur Park," or collaborating with Quincy Jones — it was all Donna Summer. There wasn't another act like her, or another pop bio that can as capaciously trace the story of the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s.

Sylvester would have one last, prophetically eerie club hit in 1984, "Trouble in Paradise," and die from AIDS in 1988. Bubbling out of the San Francisco counterculture and the formation of an openly gay community, he was a Josephine Baker who found Paris in the peak of the late-seventies dance scene, a peak chronicled in a two-LP set recorded at his triumphant San Francisco Opera House show in March of 1979, *Living Proof*. In the eighties he "withdrew" from the mainstream Fantasy label and moved to the regional dance label Megatone, a symbol of the waning of disco as the dominant national trend as well as the dance club's continuing vitality as a subculture scene. Looking back now through the plague years of AIDS and the rise of right-wing sexual, cultural, and political reaction, Sylvester's career attains a poignancy and clarity on a

par with the greatest pop martyrs, most recently articulated by Joshua Gamson in his thoughtful 2005 biography *The Fabulous Sylvester*.

And then, of course, there's *Saturday Night Fever*, if for nothing else but the image of John Travolta in his white disco suit, closing in on white-suited Las Vegas Elvis in the icon competition. Proof always that disco had roots in straight working class urban culture as well and was entwined with the American dilemma of race.

"Discoey" disco, with the violins, the optimism, the ebb and flow of seventeen-minute singles, and the anonymity, was disappearing by 1982. But dance music wasn't. Call it house, drum 'n bass, trance, Hi-NRG, northern soul, dub, techno, or contemporary R&B; music whose imperative was *making people dance* in one form or another was here to stay. Maybe there would never be another cultural moment when dancing held the center in pop music as it did in the last half of the seventies, but the disco wave at the very least announced the permanence of the dance clubs and the DJs in all their permutations. From here on out, the turntable would join the human voice, electric guitar, and drum kit as essential tools of the trade. And club scenes would cross-fertilize across continents.

One of those club scenes was already growing out of the Bronx in the eighties and preparing to take over the world: hip-hop and rap; turntables and mics. The big story is told better elsewhere, but for our purposes let us pause here to honor rap's earliest theoretician, Afrika Bambaataa, and the two dozen or so most useful notes of recorded music since the guitar riff of "Johnny B. Goode": the beginning of "Good Times," by Chic.

Afrika Bambaataa was a seminal former gang member, counterculturist, utopian, and DJ who stirred a stew similar to disco in a grittier ghetto reality. He infused hip-hop with



The True Queen of Disco: Sylvester in the spotlight

ideology as well as good cuts and took pleasure in mixing outside of the canon. If it wasn't disco, it was dance music that also showcased the mastery of multicultural taste. Bambaataa could brag about tricking his audience into dancing to the Monkees' "Mary, Mary." His "Planet Rock" in 1982 sampled Kraftwerk's "Trans-Europe Express." It was disco one step removed.

Besides being catchy, "Good Times" in 1979 distilled the disco ethos, with just a bit of irony, and boiled the disco sound back down to bass and guitar, thereby producing a template that could be copied into the world of the music video and the

Top Forty single. Chic masterminds Nile Rodgers and Bernard Edwards revitalized Sister Sledge, resuscitated Diana Ross, encouraged Blondie, inspired Tom Tom Club, and helped launch Madonna. And "Good Times," of course, looped under the rapping of "Rapper's Delight," also in 1979.

With Chic retooling the disco riff, disco's eclectic extravagances could be plundered for inspiration, just like the outfits of thrift store *mélange* (see first phase, lace-sleeved Madonna) that signaled the end of the austere aesthetics of punk. The New Romantics in the U.K. struck some as Disco for Dum-

mies, but however you looked at Boy George, you were looking through the lens of Sylvester, not Alice Cooper. Madonna was not just riding a riff, she was compressing and reformulating the history of disco, reminding us that the downtown Manhattan scene encompassed not only CBGB but Danceteria and the Palladium, as well. And she would revisit that transmutating dance-club scene throughout her career, a subcultural source of rejuvenation for her mainstream persona.

It's impossible to think of Madonna or Prince without the procession of Donna Summer, Sylvester, et al. – the androgyny, the miscegenation, the ass shaking, the shape-shifting role-playing. Although that does not diminish all the other influences both synthesized throughout their careers. But 1982's milestone of synthesis, if not the decade's, was Michael Jackson's *Thriller*.

Jackson, with producer Quincy Jones, echoed the legacy of disco, quoting from Manu Dibango's Afro-disco "Soul Makossa" and mimicking Chic's bottom on three cuts: "Wanna Be Startin' Somethin'," "Baby Be Mine," and "Thriller." If he aspired to and achieved a Presleyan status, he did it by combining rock, disco, R&B, and pre-rock pop, proving that the Moonwalker could dance to Eddie Van Halen's guitar (which was already accustomed to working with the oddly analogous great diva of white, heterosexual rock, David Lee Roth). "Thriller" was not "Love to Love You Baby," but it understood that it had to make you dance if it was going to achieve its ambitions.

And maybe that was the best legacy of disco: At its zenith, it showed a desire to absorb every influence and appeal to every dancer. Retrospectively, it might sound wishy-washy or look as goofy as every other fashion whose time has passed, and yet it



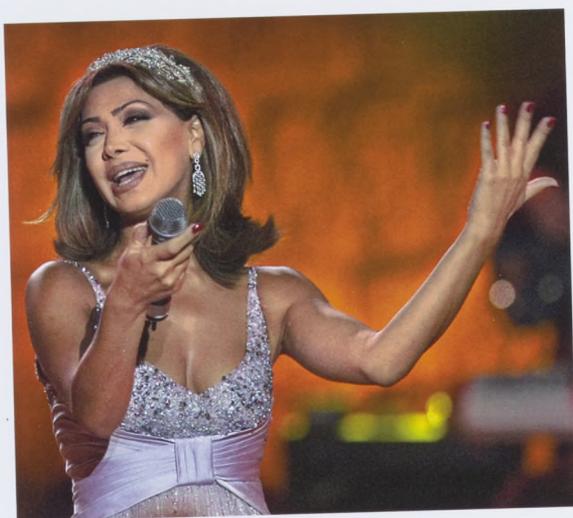
Hip-hop hits the scene: Afrika Bambaataa, New York City, 1983.



Elegantly bridging disco and hip-hop: Chic in 1978



Genius of love: Tom Tom Club in top flight, 1988



Keeping the beat alive, worldwide: Lebanese singer Nawal Al-Zoghbi performs in 2007.

still transmits an ambitious, idealistic glow. It wasn't trying to be a subculture, it was trying to reach across race, class, gender, sexuality, and geography.

That opened up pop music to influences that couldn't work their way into guitar-based rock bands. As pliable and resilient as that format has been, inspiring musicians from Mexico to Moscow, disco left an opening for other influences to work their way into (or back into) pop consciousness.

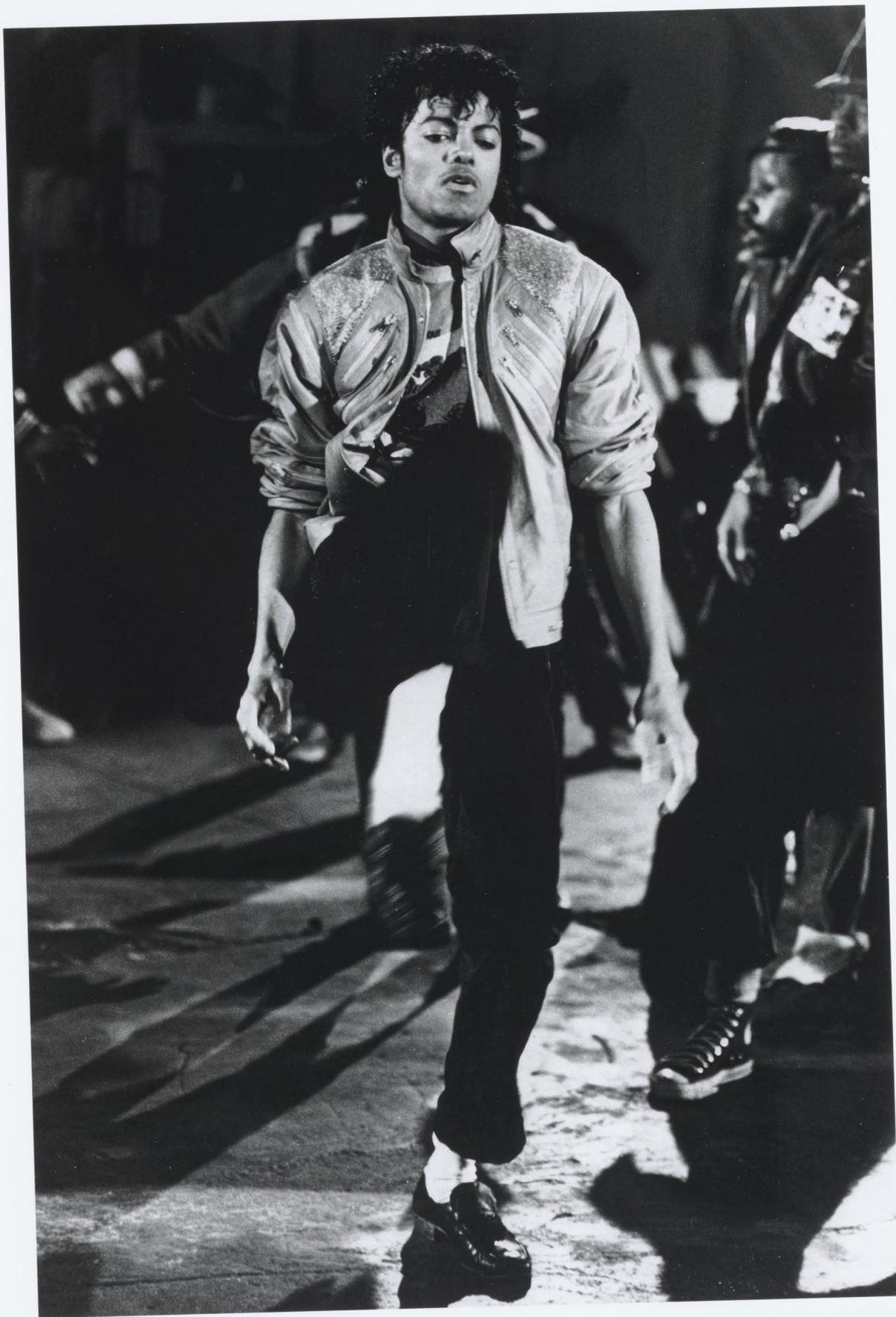
The contemporary Madonna and Shakira of Lebanon, Nawal Al-Zoghbi, for instance, makes music in a context comprehensible to American eyes and ears, even if we don't understand the words. The Lebanese references and influences, signals to an audience we aren't a part of, are there in vocal technique and instrumentation along with the bass beat and evocative synthesizers of Euro-American dance music, a frame of reference we can share. It's the same big world of recording studios, music videos, clubs, and CDs. A bigger world, perhaps, than we are usually aware of. We can't translate the lyrics, but the music makes us dance. Music from Lebanon that's impossible to imagine without disco.

Which leads to one last observation. A useful but limiting theory describes rock & roll as an Afro-Celt amalgam, a brew first boiled in the American South. But how to incorporate other influences from other parts of Africa, and Italy, and the Caribbean, and Asia, and the Middle East, and North America? Donna Summer's career, after all, was launched in Germany when she reworked a Frenchified disco hit into English with her British and Italian producers. The Munich Machine, the Funk Brothers of disco, were from Britain, Sweden, Iceland, and Italy. Disco drifted into salsa more easily than rock. The break dancers of the Bronx in its hip-hop heyday were largely Puerto Rican.

So maybe we can look back on disco as an opening toward an ongoing global musical conversation where social dancing is the shared vocabulary. Or maybe *disco* was just a word to describe what happened after rock & roll jumped across the Atlantic Ocean and kept on going. ♪



Tumbling for you: Culture Club in 1983



Michael Jackson on the set of the music video "Beat It," 1983