



Nile Rodgers in  
New York City,  
1991

# Nile Rodgers

**HE CREATES A DISTINCTIVE SOUND ON THE RECORDS HE WRITES, PRODUCES, ARRANGES, AND PLAYS ON.**

BY ROB BOWMAN

Nile Rodgers' influence on popular music over the past forty years is nearly unfathomable. As a guitarist, songwriter, producer, arranger, and funkster extraordinaire, Rodgers has left his imprint on a stunningly wide array of genres including disco, R&B, rock, mainstream pop, hip-hop, and EDM. Looking over the breadth of his career, a case could easily be made that no single individual has had a greater impact on the sound of pop, from the late 1970s to the present day.

¶ Alongside his partner, bass player wunderkind Bernard Edwards, Rodgers wrote and produced hit after hit for Chic, Sister Sledge, and Diana Ross, tearing up both the dance floor and the radio. After Chic broke up and Rodgers and Edwards went their separate ways, Rodgers broke free of the disco moniker and reinvented himself, producing, arranging, and playing guitar on David Bowie's comeback album, *Let's Dance* (1983), and Madonna's breakout album,

*Like a Virgin* (1984). Along the way he took INXS and then Duran Duran to new heights with “Original Sin” and “The Reflex,” respectively, and produced albums by Mick Jagger, Jeff Beck, the B-52s, and David Lee Roth. He played key guitar parts on Steve Winwood’s “Higher Love” and Michael Jackson’s *HIStory*. More recently he cowrote and played guitar on Daft Punk’s “Get Lucky,” winning two Grammy Awards in the process. This past November (2016) he topped the dance charts once again, with Christina Aguilera’s “Telepathy.”

A polyglot with a wide-open mind and drive to spare, Rodgers played classical flute and clarinet in school, studied with jazz giant Billy Taylor in the latter’s innovative “Jazzmobile” program, developed rock chops in Greenwich Village with New World Rising (even jamming with Jimi Hendrix), and learned about soul and funk as a member of the Apollo Theater’s House Band in the early 1970s. Capable of playing just about any style, Rodgers saw his future come into focus when he joined Bernard Edwards in the Big Apple Band, backing up the vocal group New York City after they hit in 1973 with Thom Bell’s “I’m Doin’ Fine Now.”

Over the next few years, Rodgers and Edwards – gigging as the Big Apple Band – would morph into Chic, crafting a compelling image. “Back then, most R&B acts wore flamboyant clothes,” wrote Rodgers in his 2011 autobiography. “But we created believable alter egos: two men in impressively labeled but subtle designer business suits, which effectively gave us the anonymity of Kiss. We put sexy girls on our album cover, which was suave like Roxy Music, and we tooled a new form of Euro-influenced R&B that also still passed the smell test of my jazz-police friends.”

With former LaBelle drummer Tony Thompson and keyboardist Rob Sabino, Rodgers and Edwards spent the next few years gigging in the New York City area while trying to score a record deal. When they found record labels uninterested in a black jazz/R&B/rock fusion band, they turned their attention to dance music.

Rodgers’ first dance composition was the monumentally funky “Everybody Dance.” Engineer Robert Drake took the demo to spin at the Night Owl club in the Village, and it was an immediate sensation, garnering Chic a bit of a bidding war, won by Atlantic. From the fall of 1977 through the summer of 1979, Chic tore up the charts with “Dance, Dance, Dance (Yowsah, Yowsah, Yowsah),” “Everybody Dance,” “Le Freak,” “I Want Your Love,” and “Good Times” reigning supreme on dance floors coast to coast.

Stigmatized as the quintessential disco band, Chic was much more than that. While Giorgio Moroder’s synth-dominated productions for Donna Summer were what defined the sound of disco in the summer of 1977, Chic’s records featured live musicians. Edwards played the most innovative dance bass lines since James Jamerson had scorched those grooves at Motown. At the same time, Rodgers developed a style of guitar playing that Edwards called chucking, which involved continuous 16th notes, some muted and others ringing out. The result meant that Rodgers was effectively playing rhythm and melodic parts at the same time – and was funkier than a mosquito’s tweeter in the process.

“Where I come from, groove is everything,” stressed Rodgers. “Groove is something that’s rewarding on a spiritual level, on a primal level, an intellectual level, and a physical level. You feel it . . . We were an R&B band that had figured out this jazzy type of formula to present music that DJs could listen to one time and play it, and the people would hear it one time and respond. That’s how we crafted our records. You play it one time and you’ve got ‘em.”

Chic in their prime with Rodgers and Bernard Edwards center stage, 1979







Part of Rodgers' singular style was that, while playing the chuck, he was employing extended jazz chords, with 11ths and 13ths utilizing jazz inversions that no one else used in dance or pop. His voicings became every bit as unique as those of Keith Richards, creating a readily identifiable sound on the records he wrote, produced, and played on.

Another key component of the Chic sound was their extensive use of breakdowns. Rodgers and Edwards also avoided the typical pop and R&B penchant for vocal harmonies, instead using a number of singers (including Luther Vandross) to sing percussive hook lines in unison.

Finally, Rodgers' classical training came in handy for the string arrangements he wrote and conducted on all of his and Edwards' recordings, brilliantly crafting a sound dominated by glissando, percussive slides that

wove in and out of his nonstop chucking, and Edwards' bubbling bass lines. For his arrangements alone, he deserves to be in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

Chic's last big hit was "Good Times," issued in the summer of 1979, just before Chicago disc jockey Steve Dahl escalated the "Disco Sucks" movement with his Disco Demolition night at Chicago's Comiskey Park.

"The media came after us," rued Rodgers. "How can we do these hedonistic celebratory songs when we are going through the greatest financial recession since the Great Depression. We said, 'Because that's what they did back then when they had the Great Depression.' All those songs that we were referencing were from that era . . . We could see the mirror between the Disco Era and the Speakeasy Era."

True to Rodgers' word, the opening lyric to "Good Times" – "Happy days are here again" – happens to be

**OPPOSITE PAGE,  
FROM TOP**  
Rodgers onstage,  
New York City,  
1982; with  
Edwards and  
David Bowie,  
1983. **THIS PAGE**  
In the studio, 1985.





**FROM TOP**

With Lady Gaga at the Grammy Awards, 2016; with Daft Punk and Pharrell Williams at the MTV Video Music Awards, 2013.



# “Where I come from, groove is everything.”

the title of one of the biggest hits of 1930 by pop band-leader Ben Selvin and His Orchestra.

When Sugarhill Gang used the bass line and guitar chuck of “Good Times” as the basis for “Rapper’s Delight” in 1979, the sound of Chic effectively kick-started the commodification of hip-hop. Since then, Chic, and Rodgers and Edwards’ productions of other artists using Chic as the backup band, have been sampled dozens if not hundreds of times. Among the more prominent samples are the Notorious B.I.G.’s use of “I’m Coming Out” on his chart-topping “Mo Money Mo Problems,” and Will Smith’s similar sample of Chic’s hook from Sister Sledge’s “He’s the Greatest Dancer” on his Number One smash “Gettin’ Jiggy Wit It.”

The “disco sucks” campaign sidelined most dance artists, and Chic was no exception, with the hits abruptly stopping after “Good Times.” Undeterred, as the Chic Organization, Rodgers and Edwards continued to produce hits for other artists. In 1979, they turned Sister Sledge into superstars with “He’s the Greatest Dancer” and “We Are Family.” In 1980, they were similarly tasked with re-envisioning Diana Ross’ career. Financially secure, they felt they could write bolder songs, crafting “Upside Down” and “I’m Coming Out” for the album *Diana*. The latter became an anthem for gay men on dance floors nationwide, and the album – despite Motown’s initial reluctance to release it – would prove to be Ross’ biggest-selling record ever, going platinum six times. Rodgers and Edwards were soon producing records by Debbie Harry, Carly Simon, Johnny Mathis, and Teddy Pendergrass, and virtually every one of these productions featured the members of Chic.

By 1983, Chic, as well as the Edwards and Rodgers partnership, had come to an end. In 1992, Chic would briefly reunite, charting with the album *Chic-ism* and the single “Chic Mystique.” Tragically, four years later, in April 1996, Bernard Edwards passed away hours after playing a show with Rodgers in Japan.

In the early eighties, a chance meeting with David Bowie led to Rodgers’ coproducing and arranging Bowie’s *Let’s Dance*. Rodgers took what, in Bowie’s original instantiation, had been an acoustic folk-oriented song and crafted a monumental, tectonic-shifting production featuring Thompson on drums and Rodgers’ trademark chucking guitar. The album produced three hit singles, including the title song, “China Girl,” and “Modern Love,” and sold over ten million copies, leading Rodgers to be named *Billboard’s* #1 Singles Producer of the Year.

Although his first solo album, *Adventures in the Land of the Good Groove*, stalled, with *Let’s Dance* Rodgers became an in-demand producer, arranger, session musician, and, at times, cowriter. His biggest-selling record ever would be Madonna’s second album, *Like a Virgin*. While there had been talk from her record company of following current trends and digitally programming much of the album, Rodgers had other ideas:

“The tunes were hooky, but on the radio they might [with digital programming] be indistinguishable from every other pop song of the moment. We had to be unique. Since computer sequencing now essentially allowed anybody to be funky and groove, I wanted her record to have the classic R&B-based sound that only live players give you. A true artist approaches a breathing groove differently from a computer track. The solution was to use my band Chic as the bedrock.”

*Like a Virgin* would go on to sell over twenty million copies, blast Madonna into superstardom, and lead to Rodgers directing her band at Live Aid in 1985. That same year, Rodgers produced Jagger and Bowie’s “Dancing in the Street” single, Jagger’s *She’s the Boss*, and records by the Thompson Twins and Sheena Easton. Over the rest of the decade he would work with Bob Dylan, Grace Jones, Robert Plant and the Honeydrippers, Slash, Peter Gabriel, Eric Clapton, and the Vaughan Brothers.

As early as 1982, Rodgers had tried his hand at scoring feature films, and in 1988 he was hired to compose the full orchestral score for his first major film, Eddie Murphy’s *Coming to America*. Between 1982 and 2008, Rodgers worked on over a dozen feature films. In 1998, he formed Sumthing Else Music Works and Sumthing Distribution to release and market the soundtracks for AAA video games. Beginning in 2003, Rodgers focused on writing the soundtracks for such popular titles as *Rise of Nations* and *Halo 2* and *3*.

Consistently a collaborator, Rodgers was tapped by French duo Daft Punk to work on their fourth album, 2013’s *Random Access Memories*, cowriting and playing on three songs, including the best-selling “Get Lucky.” The latter hit the top of the charts in thirty-five countries and, at last count, has sold over nine million copies, making it one of the most popular singles of all time.

Never one to rest on his laurels, in the last few years Rodgers has produced, played on, and/or cowritten tracks for dozens of artists such as Avicii, Sam Smith, Kylie Minogue, Janelle Monáe, Lady Gaga, Laura Mvula, and Christina Aguilera. The latter’s “Telepathy,” featuring Rodgers on guitar, hit the Number One spot on *Billboard’s* dance chart.

In between all these projects, Rodgers has once more revived Chic, releasing a single, “I’ll Be There” (also Number One on *Billboard’s* dance chart) in 2015 as a precursor to a full album. Appropriately entitled *It’s About Time*, the album is slated for 2017 to coincide with the fortieth anniversary of Chic’s debut recording.

Not surprisingly, Nile Rodgers’ extraordinary contributions to the soundtrack of the past forty years has been recognized with numerous awards. In 2015, “Le Freak” was inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame. In June 2016, Rodgers and Bernard Edwards were inducted into the Songwriters’ Hall of Fame. Tonight, Nile Rodgers assumes his rightful place in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. *Let’s dance!*