



DONNA SUMMER

**She could sing anything, anywhere,
with anyone, at any time.**

— *By Harry Weinger* —

Donna Summer is the Queen of Disco. Within a genre that sprouted anonymous voices, Summer, who died on May 17, 2012, was prolific, versatile, and determined. Pushing boundaries, she symbolized a time that her work transcended. Her influence, from Madonna to Beyoncé, from the invention of the twelve-inch to the whole of modern EDM, is immeasurable. She was no producer's puppet: Her association with the production team of Giorgio Moroder and Pete Bellotte was one of collaboration, as she cowrote eight of her fourteen Top Ten pop chart singles. A ninth, "Dim All the Lights," she wrote on her own.

And, of course, Bruce Springsteen wrote a song *for her*.

"Donna never wanted to repeat herself," said her husband, Bruce Sudano, also a writer, producer, and artist, who met Summer while a member of the group Brooklyn Dreams. "She always looked for ways to advance her art."

Her stage shows are the stuff of legend — marked by the excess of the times, with elaborate sets and costumes, but ultimately soul-satisfying due to Summer's remarkable performances. Tom Carson, reviewing her concert album *Live and More* in *Rolling Stone* in late 1978, wrote that she possessed "a fine, dramatic voice, [with] immense charm and unusually tasteful technical control . . . Whenever she gets away from the strictures of disco, she can be quite extraordinary."

Those watching up close were equally impressed. "Fuck!" exclaimed Elton John, an unabashed fan, as he was about to headline a benefit concert where she was performing. "Why do I have to go on after her?"



With Giorgio Moroder, 1976



Onstage in 1978

Born LaDonna Adriana Gaines, on December 31, 1948, in Boston, she was the third of seven children in a close-knit family. At 18, she left home to find her own voice. She was a church girl who studied Mahalia Jackson records, but she was drawn to Boston's rock scene – including a particularly inspiring Janis Joplin performance at the Psychedelic Supermarket.

After a stint as the lead singer of a Boston rock band called Crow, Summer moved to Greenwich Village to be closer to the action. But soon, like the Beatles and Bowie, she decamped to West Germany. There, immersed in the artistic community, she appeared in several European musical productions, including *Hair* and *Godspell*, which were popular enough to have their own German-language cast albums featuring Donna and another cast member, Helmuth Sommer. Donna and Helmuth married, then divorced, though Summer retained an Anglicized version of his last name.

In the early 1970s, still in Europe, Summer connected with Giorgio Moroder, an Italian melodic genius living in Munich. Together they cut a few singles, including “The Hostage,” a major hit in the Netherlands. Then Summer came up with an inspired song idea – that she’d “love to love you.” She took it to Moroder, who cut a mesmerizingly slow dance track, over which Summer laid down extra-breathy vocals, impersonating Marilyn Monroe and including some fake orgasms for good measure. She treated it as a campy joke, but fate intervened when, in 1975, Moroder sold the four-minute tune – Summer’s lead vocals intact – to the new independent U.S. label Casablanca Records.

Casablanca head Neil Bogart, a master of hype and promotion, couldn’t get the song out of his head – or his own bedroom, the legend goes, but he wanted the track to be far longer (more than fifteen minutes) for some serious lovemaking. With an ear to a growing disco/dance market, and seeing the movement needed a star, as well, he asked Moroder to extend the track, then turned on his company’s now-legendary PR machine. The twelve-inch single and Donna Summer, disco star, were born.

Summer became disco’s face – those lips, those eyes! – though she remained grounded. “I guess I was treated as a novelty at first, but that was to be expected,” she told Mikal Gilmore in a 1978 *Rolling Stone* cover story. “It’s probably what Marilyn Monroe must have gone through her whole life, playing the part of a dumb blondie while she was depriving herself of something greater . . . I don’t want that to happen to me.”

As disco’s voice, Summer moved from the novelty of “Love to Love You Baby” to increasing sophistication and wit through the albums *A Love Trilogy* and *Four Seasons of Love* (both 1976). With *I Remember Yesterday* (1977), she

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progressed from disco to something broader; the album is a dizzying sampler of pop vocal styles. Yet it was the LP's last cut that signaled there was even more to come. With Summer riding along Moroder's insistent hooks and undeniable electronic beats, "I Feel Love" was – as Brian Eno was heard to say – "the sound of the future."

A global Top Ten smash, "I Feel Love" was recognized as one of *Rolling Stone's* "40 Songs That Changed the World." "Every club record with a drum machine and synthesized bass line, from house to trance and beyond, owes its existence to this song, and few are anywhere near as sexy," the editors wrote in a May 2007 issue.

Summer's next album, *Once Upon a Time* (1977), a mock opera based on a Cinderella theme, extended her development. She followed it with her film debut, a starring role in the 1978 feature *Thank God It's Friday*, nearly forgettable save for her everlasting hit from the soundtrack, "Last Dance." Written by Paul Jabara, the upbeat hit won the Oscar and a Golden Globe for Best Original Song, and gave Summer her first Grammy. She continued her hit streak that year with *Live and More*, her first Number One pop album, which included a studio cut: an unlikely cover of "MacArthur Park," her first Number One pop single. The album's side-long version incorporates an original song, "Heaven Knows," that features Sudano's group Brooklyn Dreams, and became a Top Five hit on its own.

If anyone doubted her evolution, the next album, from 1979, laid those doubts to rest. In less than the entire length of "Love to Love You Baby," side one of *Bad Girls* courses through tough rock & roll ("Hot Stuff"), a funky homage to working girls (the title song), nostalgic orchestration ("Love Will Always Find You"), and, finally, demanding R&B with touches of Stevie Wonder-style clavinet ("Walk Away"). On each track, Donna Summer is a completely different singer. The four-sided album also includes the first



Rocking out in Europe, 1977

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song Summer wrote on her own, "Dim All the Lights," initially intended for Rod Stewart. The title song, "Bad Girls," nearly didn't make the album. First recorded as an acoustic demo by Summer, Sudano, and Joe Esposito, it was set aside for at least a year as a possible track for Cher until Summer, at the urging of studio engineer Steve Smith, took it back. The album stayed at the top of the charts for six weeks that summer, solidifying Summer's reign as Disco's Queen – and, at the following year's Grammy Awards, she became the first artist to win for Best Rock Vocal Performance, Female.

Returning to straight disco, Summer then garnered her fourth Number One hit of 1979 with "No More Tears (Enough Is Enough)," a duet with Barbra Streisand, whose hit "The Way We Were" had been covered by Summer on *Live and More*. Summer hardly slowed down, hosting her own ABC-TV special, and writing and recording "On the Radio," a song featured in the film *Foxes* – and a Top Ten

Selected Discography



Love to Love You Baby
Casablanca, 1975



Bad Girls
Casablanca, 1979



I Remember Yesterday
Casablanca, 1977



On the Radio: Greatest Hits - Volumes I & II
Casablanca, 1979



Live and More
Casablanca, 1978



The Wanderer
Geffen, 1980

“It shouldn’t be too surprising that Donna Summer’s most mature sound is based on rock & roll.”

single in 1980. And when her LP, *On the Radio: Greatest Hits - Volumes I & II*, hit Number One, Summer became the first solo artist with three Number One double albums, and she did it back-to-back-to-back. But her Casablanca days were over. By late 1980, Summer became the first artist signed to Geffen Records. On *The Wanderer*, her Geffen debut produced by Moroder and Bellotte with new-wave energy, Summer proved she was finally on her own.

“It shouldn’t be too surprising that Donna Summer’s most mature sound is based on rock & roll,” wrote Dave Marsh in a *Rolling Stone* lead review in March 1981. “Summer pulls everything together with such intense purposefulness that the album is finally a complete and convincing statement of innocence, faith, joy, terror, and the ability to deal with life head-on.”

A followup double album, *I’m a Rainbow*, went unreleased at the time. Summer’s 1982 self-titled LP, a venture with Quincy Jones (who was soon to unleash Michael Jackson’s *Thriller*), was not the hoped-for spark. It did, however, produce the U.S. Top Ten hit “Love Is in Control (Finger on the Trigger),” the international all-star smash “State of Independence,” and “Protection,” a song custom-built for Summer by Springsteen, who also contributed guitar. *She Works Hard for the Money*, a stronger effort issued on Mercury as part of Summer’s settlement with Casablanca, was a thematic sequel to *Bad Girls* – all praise the working girl – and delivered the timeless title song as well as the spiritually centered, reggae-fied “Unconditional Love,” a duet with Musical Youth.

Summer issued two more albums on Geffen, with diminishing returns. By 1989, she was on Atlantic, produced by the dance mavens of the moment, Stock, Aitken & Waterman. They collaborated on “This Time I Know It’s for Real,” a Top Ten hit worldwide. In 1991, she experimented with rap, issuing *Mistaken Identity*, which failed to chart. Then she cut back on her schedule, determined to live life as she put it, an “ordinary girl.” She focused on her family and gardening – “I’m the Martha Stewart of disco,” she cracked – and started a second career in painting. A one-off reunion with Moroder, “Carry On,” won the first-ever Dance Recording Grammy in 1997.

Summer returned forcefully to the public eye in 1999, with a VH1 special and a subsequent DVD and CD, *Live and More Encore*, issued by Epic. Two studio tracks from that year, “Love Is the Healer” and “I Will Go With You (*Con te partirò*),” a cover of an Andrea Bocelli song, took her back to the top of the dance charts. She also was a stellar presence on a VH1 *Divas* tribute to Diana Ross. A new album, *Crayons*, appeared on Sony’s Burgundy imprint in 2008. Its lead single, “Stamp Your Feet,” was another dance chart Number One. So was her final release, “To Paris With Love,” a digital single issued on her own label, Driven by the Music, in 2010; it topped the chart in October of that year, the same moment Summer was a featured guest on a David Foster television special. She was continuing to record, with no public indication she was ill from lung cancer. Her death in 2012 was a shock to her friends and fans.

Summer didn’t need – or want – to escape the disco tag. After all, she could sing anything, anywhere, with anyone, at any time. Look for her Venezuela TV appearance on YouTube, or her straight-up country duets with Eddie Rabbitt, or even her rare, hippie-rock, pre-Casablanca European singles. Consider that a playlist of her sampled or covered songs would include tracks by Ne-Yo, Robbie Williams, Emmylou Harris, David Guetta, Reba McEntire, k.d. lang, Erasure, J. Lo, Dolly Parton, *et al.* Notice that four of her five Grammys are in the Rock, R&B, Dance, and Inspirational categories. Not that Summer would: the Gaines family upbringing kept her humble, although her humility would have taken a hit tonight.

“Donna never displayed awards at home,” Sudano said. “But as an older person reflecting on her career, she quietly hoped for a little nod from the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.”

Dim all the lights. Tonight it’s all the way. 🎧

