Montreal, Funkytown: Two Decades of Disco History

Will Straw

Observation: Everybody, even the suit-and-tie business crowd and the fashion-conscious slummers, knows how to dance, really dance, in Montreal
—Chin (1997)

In 2016, the Cologne-based Red Bull Music Academy came to Montreal for a month of seminars, talks and concerts. One of the most high profile of these events was an evening devoted to celebrating the period now known as the 'golden age' of Montreal disco, which extended from the mid-1970s through the early 1980s. Guests at this event included Robert Ouimet (who had DJ'd from 1973 to 1981 at the Limelight, the city's pre-eminent discothèque during those years) and Montreal-born performer France Joli (whose hit records during the city's golden age of disco included "Come to Me" in 1979 and "Gonna Get Over You" in 1981).

W. Straw (✉)
Department of Art History & Communication Studies, McGill University, Montreal, QC, Canada
e-mail: william.straw@mcgill.ca

F. Pitrolo, M. Zubak (eds.), *Global Dance Cultures in the 1970s and 1980s*, Palgrave Studies in the History of Subcultures and Popular Music, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-91995-5_2

Brian Chin, who covered disco records for many years for *Billboard*, has described "Come to Me" as 'the generational turning point between traditional Fire Island disco and the more progressive 'dance music' of the '80s" (Chin 1997). Joli's international career had taken off in 1979, when she was a last-minute replacement for Donna Summer at a 1979 Fire Island concert, in New York, beginning an association with LGBTQ groups which has continued through the present.

The Red Bull Music Academy's acknowledgement of Montreal's centrality as a disco city went beyond this celebratory evening. In 2014, I had been asked to write a piece on Montreal disco for the RBMA's online platform (Straw 2014), and other articles on the site have covered Montreal's dance music history from a variety of other perspectives. Outside the RBMA, commemorations of Montreal's disco history have grown in frequency and media ubiquity since the early 2000s. DJ sets or playlists of disco music made in Montreal may be found on a number of download or streaming sites. Some of them, like *Disco Spatial Quebec (1976–1982)* (Psycquébélique 2013) or *Disco 80s Canadian MONTREAL SOUND Hi-NRG Electro—Non-Stop Mix (77 mins) 1977–1984* (Mixcloud 2015), highlight (or retrospectively construct) specific generic strains within the history of the city's disco music.[1]

In 2009 *Funkytown*, an hour-long Canadian Broadcasting Corporation radio documentary, interviewed key players in the scene and set the city's golden age of disco within a broader history of the city's nightlife (*Funkytown: The Montreal Disco Era* 2009). Two years later, a feature-length French-language film, also titled *Funkytown*, was released, accompanied by a 2-CD soundtrack album. Its fictional story was set in and around a 1970s Montreal disco called Starlight (based on the original Limelight). The film both glorified Montreal's disco culture of the 1970s and set out to expose the corruption and violence allegedly at the core of the scene in which that culture was embedded. *Funkytown* met with a mixed reception, criticized in several quarters for its emphasis on Anglophone participation in the city's disco scene and for its marginalization of the French language (Lisée 2011).

Commemorations like these of Montreal's disco histories acknowledge achievements too long overlooked in official accounts of the city's cultural heritage, which have tended to emphasize the legacies of Québec political *chanson* or Montreal's folk-tinged rock music of the 1970s. At the same time, it must be admitted, coverage of Montreal disco culture often reveals the city's fondness for exaggerated claims about its cultural pre-eminence.

In the mid-1960s, local news reports repeated the boast that La Licorne, which opened in Montreal in 1962, was the first discothèque in North America. One of its owners, it was reported, had seen discothèque-style dance clubs in Paris and other parts of Europe and brought the idea back to Montreal (*La Patrie* 1968, 31). While this claim was often repeated over the next decade (*Billboard* 1969, C12), it may easily be contested. Jim Dawson, in his history of the twist, suggests that the first true discothèque in North America was Le Club, launched in New York City in 1960 (Dawson 1995, 60). A thorough history of record-centred nightclubs in Harlem and other North American locations would almost certainly move the moment of their appearance back even further, though this would require resolving the murky instability which marks the very definition of 'discothèque' (Thornton 1995, 37–43). These claims of Montreal's absolute pre-eminence as a nightlife capital would continue. In 1970, *Current Events*, a tourist-oriented entertainment magazine distributed in Montreal hotel rooms, suggested that 'Montreal's ratio of discothèques to population is the highest in the world—certainly the highest in Canada!' (*Current Events* 1970, 46). In that same year, a reporter for *The Gazette* newspaper made reference to Montreal's one-time reputation as 'the city that had the best night-life on the continent' (*The Gazette (Montreal)* 1970, 39).

A more modest and convincing claim about Montreal's stature as disco music capital came in a headline from *Billboard* magazine in 1979: 'Montreal may be the continent's 2nd best city [for disco music]' (*Billboard* 1979a, 84). This article appeared at a time when press coverage of Montreal's disco culture, both in specialist and in general media, would enumerate several empirical indicators of that culture's success: the numbers of people attending clubs, the capacity of Montreal discothèques to stimulate record sales and the significant number of Montreal-based performers, producers and record label owners who had emerged from the city's disco music infrastructures and attained international stature. Together, these phenomena were seen to place Montreal just behind New York on a list of North American disco capitals.

In my own research and published work, I have returned regularly to the history of Montreal disco culture, focussing on the networks of collaboration and dissemination which marked this scene from the mid-1970s through the early 1980s (Straw 2005, 2008). To avoid excessive duplication of these other writings, I am concentrating here on the periods before and after the perceived 'heyday' of Montreal disco culture. I will begin by

looking at the wave of discothèque openings in Montreal in the 1960s, and at the range of economic, cultural and other actors pulled into what quickly became a discothèque scene. I will briefly summarize the reconfiguration of the city's disco culture in the early to mid-1970s, when 'disco' came to designate a distinctive complex of musical styles, recording formats and transnational musical flows. Finally, I will turn to the late 1970s and early 1980s. In this final period, ongoing international diagnoses of a crisis or 'death' of disco (the familiar post-Saturday Night Fever 'burn-out') obscured the real successes occurring at this time within Montreal's disco infrastructures.

A Scene Takes Shape, 1962–1970

The opening of La Licorne, widely regarded as Montreal's first discothèque, occurred, as noted, in 1962. It preceded, by only a few months, the opening of Place des Arts, a major performing arts centre funded with public monies. Both establishments permitted Montreal to reimagine itself, during a decade in which the city became a major world tourist destination, largely as a result of its hosting of the 1967 World's Far, Expo '67. In the 20 years following the beginning of World War II, Montreal had acquired a reputation as a corrupt and vice-ridden city, one whose night-time culture was intimately interwoven with sexual commerce, gambling and the collusion of municipal administrators with organized crime (Lapointe 2014; Straw 1992). By the 1950s, many of the venues dominating Montreal's nightlife were decaying cabarets and supper clubs from the pre-war era, or smaller taverns and 'grills' offering versions of burlesque entertainment and small-ensemble musical performance.

While crime and vice would continue to flourish in the 1960s, the city's image would be revised in important ways during that decade. The 1960 election of a Liberal Party government in the province of Quebec is now viewed as the beginning of the so-called *Révolution Tranquille* [Quiet Revolution], a broad set of social transformations marked by the growth of the middle class, the spread of post-secondary education, moves to protect the French language and a modernization of Quebec's cultural sphere. The newly built Place des Arts was intended both as a home for a new, liberal Quebec culture—one which resisted the oppressive influence of the Catholic church—and as one stop on the continental circuit of municipal cultural centres that included Lincoln Center in New York and the O'Keefe Centre in Toronto, Canada's largest city. The construction of

Place des Arts had occurred on one edge of Montreal's longstanding red-light district, an area of bars, brothels and back-room gambling pits that the city was anxious to eradicate. The city government used the building of the new arts centre, and the subsequent hosting of the 1967 World's Fair, as pretexts for demolishing many of the vestiges of the city's older nightlife (Straw 2015).

It was meaningful, within Montreal's linguistic and moral geographies, that the city's first discothèque, La Licorne, opened on McKay Street, several blocks to the west of the old red-light district. From the early 1960s through the 1980s, McKay and the streets adjacent to it (including Stanley Street, where the Limelight would later be located) would serve as the gravitational centre of Montreal's disco scene. To move west in downtown Montreal is to move closer to its English-speaking populations, and while McKay Street was still in the linguistically mixed centre of the city, it was in close proximity to the largely Anglophone bohemian strip on Crescent Street and to the campus of the English-language Sir George Williams University (renamed Concordia University in 1974). It was in this neighbourhood, as well, that the city's largest concentration of gay bars could be found, before police repression and a changing real estate market pushed the institutions of gay nightlife to the city's present-day Gay Village, far to the east of downtown (Crawford 2016). This section of Montreal's downtown remains a key site of nightlife, but the dominant institution, since the 1980s, has been the British-style pub.

In the journalistic commentary which accompanied the opening of La Licorne, it was clear that the institution of the discothèque was seen as a European invention. The discothèque was chic and modern and thus appeared to have little to do with the burlesque clubs and cabarets which had typified Montreal nightlife for much of the post-war period. Over the next ten years, advertisements for La Licorne would brag that '[t]here's the atmosphere of Paris in Discothèque La Licorne,' and compare the club to a Parisian 'cave' (*Current Events* 1971, 20).

The perceived freshness and cosmopolitanism of the 1960s discothèque are efficiently condensed in the following passage from an article in the popular French-language weekly newspaper *La Patrie*. If I quote it at some length, it is because it expresses, better than anything else I have seen, the specific appeal of the discothèque as an institution engaged in reordering the temporal and spatial dimensions of music. The article's very title—'La "dolce vita" dans le vent établit ses quartiers dans les discothèques' ['The "good life" of today finds its domain in

discothèques']—invokes the glamorous world featured in contemporary Italian films, while the description which follows captures the transition from an old era of live orchestras to a new culture based on the playing of records:

> Montreal, just like New York, now dances to Paris time. Old-fashioned now are those nightclubs where you suffered your boredom in front of a listless orchestra of lifeless, mechanical fingers. (…) In the discotheques, there are neither bands nor music-hall shows. Boys and girls, alone or with others, crowd around a dance floor the size of a handkerchief to talk and dance, breathing in the latest hits by their idols of the hour: the Beatles, Richard Anthony, Petula Clark, Alan Barrière, Johnny Halliday, France Gall, the Rolling Stones and the rest. This is the triumph of the record (directly imported from France) over bands unable to update their repertory at the same pace. Because, in this way, we are more free, preferring originals to bad imitations. (*La Patrie* 1965, 6)[2]

The vinyl record, here, is an agent of synchronization, binding time and space. It guarantees that Montreal is hearing the very same music as Paris at roughly the same moment, rather than awaiting the slow assimilation of that music into the repertoires of orchestras performing covers. As well, the record carries within it the auratic presence of celebrity, of a song's original performer, rather than sacrificing that presence for the liveness of the anonymous club musician, an experience now stripped of any value. In this, and other accounts, the freshness of the record would be set in contrast to the stale labours of ageing, bored nightclub musicians (*La Presse* 1970, 15). In a musical culture where music from elsewhere often arrived through the intermediary of the local cover band or the cabaret orchestra (often performing translations of English songs into French), the discothèque offered contact with the original version of songs. Somewhat paradoxically, then, the discothèque made the record rather than the live musician the guarantee of presence and authenticity.

In the five years that followed the opening of La Licorne, dozens of other clubs opened in Montreal. We may trace several processes whereby the discothèque as cultural form rippled across the terrain of public discourse and attached itself to local systems of celebrity and creative expression. Three developments pulled the culture of the discothèque towards the centre of Montreal's public life, imbricating the phenomenon within the complex, overlaid networks of Quebec's entertainment culture during

a period of that culture's significant expansion. One of these was the circulation of a range of pedagogical interventions—in newspapers, in magazines, and in clubs themselves—instructing Montrealers on the origins of the discothèque, where to find them in the city, how to dance and what to wear. This pedagogy extended beyond the expected coverage of passing trends; it cast the discothèque as a complex, aspirational space requiring multiple forms of preparation and prior knowledge.

The most basic form of preparation involved learning how to dance currently popular steps like the Watusi. A key figure in instilling such knowledge in Montrealers was the New York-based dancer and teacher 'Killer Joe' Piro, who had served as dance instructor at the Manhattan club the Palladium in the 1950s and early 1960s. Piro was brought to Montreal in 1964 for the opening night of the discothèque Manny's, and he would return on several occasions for similar events. In the same year, Piro, with his Discotheque Dancers troupe, undertook a tour of department stores across Canada, providing dance lessons as a means of cross-marketing new fashions to be worn at discothèques (*The Gazette (Montreal)* 1965, 4; Fritz 1964, 4; Kilgallen 1964, 36). In 1966, when the *Gazette* newspaper introduced the first eight books in its *Modern Living Library*, a manual for 'Discothèque Dances' was sold alongside guides to interior decoration and Jewish cooking (*The Gazette (Montreal)* 1966, 38).

A second dynamic within Montreal's discothèque culture of the 1960s was its attachment to broader systems of celebrity, and those of music celebrity in particular. If it was common in Montreal, as in so many other cities, for media and social elites to be seen in discothèques, a large number of members of Quebec's entertainment star system actually invested in such venues, in many cases incorporating their name within that of the club. Singers Joel Denis (with Disco à Jo-Jo) and Donald Lautrec (Chez Donald Lautrec), and actress/singers Dominique Michel (Zouzou) and Denyse Filiatrault (Epoca) all announced or opened discothèques during the period 1967–1970 (*Tele-Radiomonde* 1967a, 19; *Tele-Radio Monde* 1969, 8). The affiliation of celebrities with discothèques ensured that the latter's openings were high-level gatherings of other celebrities, whose presence attracted coverage within the gossip columns and social pages of Montreal's many newspapers and entertainment magazines (*Tele-Radiomonde* 1967b, 16). This dynamic pulled the city's discothèques into the very centre of its popular culture, at a time when an expansion of broadcasting outlets and recording companies bolstered Montreal's status as centre of Québéc's increasingly mediatized cultural effervescence. In

Montreal, as in so many other cities in the 1960s, the discothèque became a space in which the city performed and contemplated the spectacle of its own extravagant urbanity.

A third dynamic, likewise common in other places but of great importance in Montreal, was the involvement of high-profile designers and architects in the structure and look of the city's discothèques. Eleanora Diamanti and others have traced the influence of radical movements within architecture on the design of the Italian discothèque in the late 1960s and 1970s (Diamanti 2017). Montreal participated within a broader international interest in discothèque design, but this was given local inflections by the burst of architectural activity which accompanied the construction of the Expo '67 site, the completion (in 1967) of the city's first *metro* (subway system), and a wave of building of commercial and government buildings during the same period. In Montreal, the designer associated with the most high-profile discothèque projects was Jean-Paul Mousseau, who had begun as an abstract painter and subsequently worked on a key station in Montreal's new Métro system, among many other projects. Articles in Montreal's daily newspapers, and in specialized design magazines like *Architecture/Concept* set discothèque design within the broader emergence of a modernized Quebec design culture whose primary other examples were public works projects and corporate skyscrapers (*Architecture/Concept* 1969, 38–43; Saumart 1969, 15).

Narratives of Decline and Rebirth

Writing of a later period in the history of New York City's disco culture, Tim Lawrence quotes music journalist's Brian Chin's bemoaning of the 'ceaseless proclamation[s]' of disco's death that would mark this period (Lawrence 2016, 105). In fact, such proclamations had accompanied the expansion of Montreal's discothèque culture since its very beginnings, in the early 1960s. Announcements of disco's death quickly followed Montreal's first wave of club openings and were made at regular intervals in the 20 years that followed. The frequency of these obituaries had much to do with the contempt of so many journalists and cultural elites for the institution of the discothèque and the musical forms with which it was typically associated. This contempt would only grow as the 1960s gave way to the 1970s, and as the appeal of fashionably designed spaces gave way to the conviction, on the part of so many journalists, that the discothèque represented a capitulation to passing trends with little staying

power. The eagerness to declare the discothèque dead would become almost epidemic in the 1970s, when such proclamations could draw more easily on a disdain for assembly line records and nameless, faceless recording artists.

Already, in the very aftermath of the opening of La Licorne, we find predictions about the imminent death of the discothèque as institution. In 1965, the author ('Fritz') of the 'On and Off the Record' column in the English-language newspaper *The Gazette* laid out the reasons why discothèques were doomed in Montreal:

> DISCOTHEQUES NO GO-GO HERE: They are still thriving in New York and elsewhere, but the discotheque fad has failed to catch on in Montreal; and more and more spots which tried them are switching to other forms of entertainment. The younger set which patronized them created a problem for licensed operators, who had to institute door-checks to keep out underage would-be patrons. Those that did pass muster for the most part lingered all evening over a single drink or two, effectively silencing cash registers. The better-spending middle-aged and older crowd didn't take to the acrobatic antics of the frug and its myriad variations. The take hasn't been sufficient, even at reduced entertainment cost, to make the experiment worth-while. Hence the decline of the discotheque hereabouts. (Fritz 1965, 4)

In 1966, without directly responding to the *Gazette*, the French-language newspaper *La Patrie* ran an item titled 'Les discothèques ne sont pas mortes' ['Discotheques are not dead'], pointing to the imminent opening of three high-profile clubs with significant backing behind them (*La Patrie* 1966, 2). By 1971, when the wave of discothèque openings which had marked the 1960s could well appear to have run its course, a newspaper article could still protest that, if discothèques were supposedly dead, 'someone forgot to bury them' (*The Gazette (Montreal)* 1971, 45). Indeed, the stability of Montreal's discothèque scene in 1970 was compared to the uncertainty of that in New York City, where 'the focus of attention seems to change so quickly that a place that's crowded one weekend is literally empty the next' (*The Gazette (Montreal)* 1970, 39).

In fact, Montreal's disco culture of the 1970s was characterized by a set of overlapping temporalities. In the first half of the 1970s, a perceived decline of the city's discothèques unfolded against the backdrop of other signifiers indicating disco culture's international reorganization and ascension. Those who diagnosed a decline often did so in moral terms, finding,

in the discothèques of the early 1970s, an increased sexualization and moral degradation. In 1971, entrepreneur Gilles Archambault, a partner in both the original La Licorne and the extravagantly designed Mousse Spacthèque (which had opened in 1967), reopened and renamed the latter as the Sexe-Machine. Archambault called upon a well-known Montreal cartoonist to design Sexe-Machine as 'a part-Clockwork Orange, part-Fellini fantasy with topless waitresses and plastic breasts' ('When Discotheques Reshaped Montreal, Told with Rarely-Seen Photos' 2018). Press coverage of Sexe-Machine stressed the prevalence of nudity within its walls (*Weekend Magazine* 1974, 7–10).

Narratives of the long history of Montreal's nightlife since the 1930s too frequently locate the moral endpoint of that history in the perceived debasement and abjection of the post-burlesque strip club and sex show. This framing rarely acknowledges the role of such places as new spaces of congregation for subaltern communities, such as the city's increasingly militant gay community, or as venues for the emergence of practices of drag performance. It was the case, nonetheless, that a rise in media reporting on night club murders and criminal gang wars in Montreal in the early 1970s set the city's bars and discothèques against a backdrop very different from that of the chic, fashionable 1960s. As I note elsewhere, the photojournalistic representation of Montreal's bars and nightclubs of the early to mid-1970s, in lurid tabloids like the weekly *Allo Police*, constructed a topography of night-time menace very different from the celebratory nightlife maps and design magazine spreads which represented the discothèques of the previous decade (Straw 2021).

The Montreal Disco Explosion

Against this backdrop of the discothèque's perceived loss of cultural status, the period 1973–1975 nevertheless saw a reconfiguration of the city's disco culture around a set of new phenomena discernible in other cities in North America. These included the emergence of new musical styles, a newly enhanced role for the club DJ, and the ascension of the 12′ single and remix as both professional tool and cultural commodity. Within these shifts, the discothèque, as a distinctive kind of space, became less talked about than 'disco' as a musical form with its attendant forms of sociability and spectacle. A key event in this reconfiguration, as suggested, was the opening in 1973 of the Limelight disco (Pemberton 2016; 'Lime Light Disco' 2015). Located amidst a cluster of gay bars, and with a record

library largely acquired from contacts in New York City, the Limelight formalized the shift, in Montreal discothèque design and purpose, from European to American models.

While the story of the Limelight and its transformative role in Montreal nightlife has often been told in mainstream media (Cross 2016), coverage of Montreal's rise to importance as part of the economic expansion of disco music at a transnational level was largely confined to the music industry specialty press. In the absence, as yet, of trade magazines specializing in the dance music industries, the U.S.-based *Billboard* became a key chronicler of Montreal's emerging status as disco capital in the mid-1970s. An unsigned article in its February 1, 1975, issue, 'Discos Break in Quebec,' offered early recognition of the role of Montreal clubs in spurring sales of 'soul/r&b' singles. Citing Richard Glanville Brown, the Montreal-based national director of publicity for Polydor Records, the article noted that the commercial successes of "Pepper Box" by The Peppers, "Do It ('Till You're Satisfied)" by B.T. Express; and Gloria Gaynor's "Never Can Say Goodbye" 'have had their beginnings in clubs such as Dominique's; the Speak Easy; Limelight; Marlow's; Valentino and the 2001 Disco in Montreal' (*Billboard* 1975, 72). One week later, Billboard's Canadian correspondent, Martin Melhuish, enumerated a series of quite extraordinary sales figures: that "Soul Makossa" by Many Dibango had sold 6000 copies in Quebec with virtually no radio play; that George McCrae's 1974 hit "Rock Your Baby" had sold 8000—10,000 copies in Montreal before adoption by radio playlists, and then gone on to sales of 175,000 in the Quebec market, and that Polydor had shipped 15,000 copies of the B.T. Express single "Express" in response to positive feedback from Montreal jukeboxes and discothèques (*Billboard* 1975, 60). This wave of activity had apparently begun only six months earlier.

Two years later, in its January 29, 1977, issue, *Billboard* would feature a 22-page 'spotlight' on Quebec music. While this supplement was not devoted exclusively to disco, it was nevertheless full of self-congratulatory advertisements from disco labels and distributors, lengthy accounts of Montreal's success as a disco city, and focused articles detailing the infrastructural role of media, clubs labels and studios in sustaining that success (*Billboard* 1977c). Between 1975 and 1977, the networks and foundations on which Montreal disco rested and through which it would flourish had quickly taken form.

In 1976, Dominique Zgarka and George Cucuzella, key figures in the disco scene who occupied a variety of mediating functions, launched the

first disc jockey record pool (the 'Canadian Record Pool'). That same year, in partnership with a new, disco-focused television programme (*Disco Tourne*) on Quebec's privately owned television network, TVA, they held the first annual Canadian disco awards in Montreal. A key dynamic during this period was the movement of record industry personnel into the launch of small disco labels and the local production or distribution of disco records. In some cases, employees of the Canadian subsidiaries of international music industry majors left these to form independent companies servicing disco markets (this was the case of Pat Deserio, who had worked for CBS and moved to become a partner, with George Lagois, in the disco-centred Empire Records) (*Billboard* 1977a, 54). In other cases, independent distributors who had previously focused on other genres of music became key figures in the importation into Montreal of disco records from elsewhere. As early as 1975, Variétés de l'est, a long-time Quebec rack jobbing operation, began buying disco records from a New York-based independent distributor, selling these within Montreal and across Canada (*Billboard* 1975, 72). Further transnational relationships included the importation of rhythm tracks from Alabama's Muscle Shoals studio band for use in records released by the Montreal label Parapluie (*Billboard* 1977b, 101; *The Gazette (Montreal)* 1976, 39).

In the latter half of the 1970s, Montreal's disco culture drew strength from a constant back and forth between its various undergrounds—the networks which linked record stores, labels, distributors, disc jockey associations and tipsheets—and a variety of public phenomena which set disco at the centre of the city's night-time effervescence. The latter included the high-profile opening, in 1978, of a branch of the Paris-based discothèque chain Régine's and a series of articles, in American newspapers, heralding the city's status as disco capital (*New York Times* 1979, 9; *Chicago Tribune* 1979, H5). An article in the national English-Canadian *Financial Post*, under the title 'Sweet Music for Investors as Bubble Keeps On Growing' spoke of the economic viability of Montreal's discothèques and the stability of the membership-fee-based business model employed by Régine's and other clubs (*Financial Post* 1978, 18).

Other developments undermined the otherwise ubiquitous exuberance which surrounded Montreal disco culture in the second half of the 1970s. In 1974, Montreal's police department released a document claiming that half of the murders in the city during the previous year had taken place in nightclubs (*The Gazette (Montreal)* 1975, 3). At a discothèque named Le

Dôme, in 1976, two men were killed amidst a larger wave of night-time killings (*The Gazette (Montreal)* 1976, 1). A more long-term set of issues reached public attention in 1977, when major police raids on a gay bar called Truxx resulted in the arrest of 145 customers in what was the largest mass arrest in Canada since World War II (*The Gazette (Montreal)* 1977b, 3). The Truxx case dragged on, amidst complaints of police harassment, until 1979 (*The Gazette (Montreal)* 1979, 7), and stands as a key moment in a history of gay activism against police oppression that would continue through the 1990s (Crawford and Herland 2016; Podmore 2015; Podmore and Chamberland 2015).

A Scene Survives

As I have suggested elsewhere—echoing many other commentators—Montreal's key role as a production centre for mid-1970s disco music had much to do with its capacity to mediate between the forms and styles of European and American versions of disco (Straw 2008). In 1977, a lengthy report in the *Gazette* celebrated the city's disco culture as emblematic of the broader interweaving of European and American sensibilities which has long functioned as a stereotypical explanation of the city's distinctiveness. Noting that Montrealer's were amongst the world's most avid buyers of disco singles, journalist Juan Rodriguez suggested that

> [l]ocal audiences were more attuned to the European sounds, in which florid, echoed string arrangements blend with the cooler rhythms of American disco records. That's not the only way Montreal blends the flavors of the American styles it lives so close to with the European lifestyle it wants to emulate. The success of the disco scene rests in that mix. The fever of the American night scene combines here with a more refined, European penchant for evening entertaining. (*The Gazette (Montreal)* 1977a, 39)

If this cultural duality is one of the clichés through which Montreal markets itself to the world, it is nonetheless verifiable that, in the movement of disco records through the world, Montreal was a key hub through which European tracks found their way to New York and other U.S. markets, and through which the sounds of Italo disco and other European variants entered the musical languages of North American disco. The same perceived lack of a local soulfulness which led Montreal labels to import rhythm tracks from a studio in the American south would leave Montreal

producers and labels open to the Hi-NRG and synth-pop sounds which, by the early 1980s, rendered Montreal dance music distinct from that being made elsewhere in Canada or the United States.

By the end of the 1970s, as music industry trade publications and the general press spoke with increased frequency of disco's unravelling, the Montreal scene seemed to reach its highest levels of success. To be sure, observers of the scene began to note the emergence of musical currents which threatened to displace disco—new wave, in the first instance, and the more eclectic cluster of styles named 'Dance Oriented Rock' on the other. In 1979, I attended an event promoted as a 'punk rock disco' at McGill University, and, by 1980, journalists such *The Gazette*'s John Griffin were speaking of a 'demise of disco' and triumphant return of rock, to be glimpsed not only in the ascendancy of punk and its successor forms, but in the resurgent popularity of such artists as Bruce Springsteen and Led Zeppelin (*The Gazette (Montreal)* 1981, 36). In 1979, panicked downtown Montreal clubs revised their music policies. The Limelight introduced 20% New Wave musical content, while Disco 1234 and Oz, prominent downtown discos, moved to full New Wave formats the following year (*The Gazette (Montreal)* 1979, 3; *The Gazette (Montreal)* 1980, 57).

Tim Lawrence's account of New York City club life in the 1980s shows the degree to which diagnoses of disco's demise obscured the continuities and strengths of dance music in the early years of that decade (Lawrence 2016). If Montreal observers, in 1979, anticipated the withering of the disco explosion, this was also the year in which the number of Canadian radio stations playing disco music reached 90 (*Billboard* 1979b, 66). It was the case, as well, that several of the clubs which had dropped disco for New Wave quickly realized that this music's younger customers were unlikely to spend money at the same levels as the more multi-generational clientele of the discothèque. By 1980, the Limelight was announcing investments of $250,000 in efforts to win back the disco crowd, while Club 1234 and others which had migrated to post-punk dance music were reinventing themselves as British-style pubs or updated forms of the chic discothèque. As late as 1983, the Toronto-based newspaper *The Globe and Mail* published a lengthy account of a journalist's visit to the Limelight in which, it was claimed, one could find evidence of disco's continued survival (*The Globe and Mail* 1983, E1). Still, a search for 'disco' in the online archive of Montreal's *Gazette* newspaper finds that, after 1983, most hits

were for classified advertisements by individuals looking to sell their disco hardware.

Many of the key labels and personnel who had emerged within Montreal's disco scene in the mid-1970s would remain active in dance music through the 1980s and beyond. The city would produce a wave of early 1980s synthesizer pop/dance bands, with Men Without Hats reaching international stardom and others, like Rational Youth, achieving long-term cult status. As I have shown elsewhere, 12″ singles of the late 1970s and early 1980s by long-time Quebec musician and producer Pierre Perpall, recording under a variety of names, would be retrospectively installed as important fore-runners of techno, even as they were regularly mistaken for examples of Italo disco (Straw 2008).

The most broadly based success of Montreal dance music after disco, however, was that of the highly synthesized style known as Hi-NRG. In a 1993 interview, the Britain-based Ian Levine, perhaps the most prominent international producer of this music in the 1980s, noted that the hard, synthesized beat of tracks from Canadian labels—largely Montreal-based—had been one response to the growing expense of the 'big string disco sound' typical of major label productions (Tope 1993, 20–21). A quite reputable Wikipedia canon of the Hi-NRG sound shows the steady success of Montreal-based artists working in this style right through the latter half of the 1980s: Lime, "Your Love" (1981), Claudja Barry, "Work me Over" (1982), Lime, "Baby, We're Gonna Love Tonight" (1982), Claudja Barry, "For Your Love" (1983), Miquel Brown, "He's a Saint, He's a Sinner" (1983a), Miquel Brown, "So Many Men, So Little Time" (1983b), Tranx-X, "Living on Video" (1983), Lime, "Unexpected Lovers" (1985), Suzy Q, "Computer Music" (1985), Claudja Barry, "Down and Counting" (1986) ('Wikipedia: List_of_Hi-NRG_artists_and_songs' 2019).

Often reissued or remixed, and newly cherished, records such as these, which were often dismissed as symptoms of disco's retreat and Montreal's abdication of the title of 'disco capital,' now stand as evidence of continuity and renewal in the city's dance music culture. In their use of prominent, sometimes grandiose synthesizer flourishes these records are even, on occasion, read against the backdrop of Montreal's other distinctive taste culture of the 1970s and early 1980s: that which made the city a key launching pad for European progressive rock (*La Presse* 2013).

Disco: Underground and Overground

I have argued elsewhere that the history of the discothèque might be written as much through the lens of European culture (with its chic Parisian clubs and Mediterranean dance venues) as from perspectives which follow its emergence through a set of mutations in the club life of New York City (Straw 2008). An even broader internationalization of disco histories, of the sort represented by this volume, is obviously more welcome. The 'problem' of a Europe-centred history for cultural analysts is that it is not so obviously (or not yet) the story of underground struggles by identitarian communities to build spaces of encounter. Nor is it so clearly a story of the transformative interweavings of musical traditions, of the sort which may structure histories of disco music in New York. If U.S.-centred histories of disco may organize themselves around these heroic processes, they also, however, organize transnational disco culture in terms of a geographical centre in which the music is defined and a set of peripheries in which the music (thus defined) is imitated, lightly inflected, debased or always arriving a little too late.

The challenge of writing histories of disco in places like Montreal, then, is that such histories are not always the histories of musical undergrounds in any direct or exclusive sense. In Montreal, disco was about the building of new mainstream entertainment forms, in which relationships between entrepreneurs, designers and architects, language groups, ethnic communities and areas of the city came to be reordered. In this reordering, sexual communities might find new spaces of public expression, and racially distinct musical communities might come to inhabit new kinds of proximity. Both these developments were often driven by commercial imperatives which swept up older traditions of show business, launched new careers and set something called disco at the centre of media networks which were quick to absorb it as something like a cultural dominant.

The history of disco in Montreal is in significant ways about the fate of popular culture in an urban centre which is, on the one hand, outside of the major centres of popular culture (New York, Hollywood and Paris) and, at the same time, itself the cultural metropolis of a circumscribed cultural territory (that of the province of Quebec). The Francophone culture of Montreal during the disco period was minor vis-à-vis that of Anglophone North America, yet dominant within Quebec, where it was embedded within a range of cultural institutions (such as highly successful media networks) whose capacity to magnify new cultural phenomena

across multiple platforms was significant. At the same time, the city's Anglophone population was minoritarian within Montreal, but disproportionately represented within Montreal's downtown disco culture, which ensured high-level coverage of disco in the city's English-speaking media. Further, Montreal's disco culture, like that of New York City (as Tim Lawrence has described it), involved significant numbers of people rooted in Italian immigrant communities (Lawrence 2016, 64), whose positioning between Anglophone and Francophone populations of long standing (and whose high rates of bilingualism) facilitated their role as intermediaries. And, in a process I have described elsewhere, disco's success in Montreal pulled certain black Québécois musicians out of the background roles of session musician or background singer, to which pre-disco trends in Quebec popular music had relegated them, and into the limelight of new supergroups, like that assembled for the compilation *La Connexion Noire* or solo performer-producer careers like that of Pierre Perpall (Straw 2008). One effect of Montreal's disco culture was a redistribution of the visibility of these populations across the stages of public life.

In the 1960s and 1970s, then, Montreal's disco culture was in many respects a machinery of visibility, producing a spectacle of downtown exuberance which had been in remission in the city since the decline of the much-celebrated Golden Age (from the 1920s through the early 1950s) of Montreal's cabaret and dance hall scenes. Dance music cultures are very often about the knitting together of invisible undergrounds, and this would be partially true of Montreal's from the mid-1970s onwards. In specific times, and in particular places, however, dance music cultures are one of the resources through which a city performs itself as a spectacular, festive space.

Notes

1. These playlists and mixes may be found at http://psyquebelique.blogspot.com/2013/02/psyquebelique-presente-disco-spatial.html and https://www.mixcloud.com/retro-nrg/montreal-sound-hi-nrg-electro-80s-canadian-disco-non-stop-mix-77-mins-1977-1984-canada-disco/, Accessed 15 January 2019.
2. All translations are henceforth the author's unless otherwise stated.

References

Architecture/concept. 1969. Plexi: disco-club. July–August, pp. 38–43.
Billboard. 1969. Soul Music—A Long Time Arriving in Canada, May 24.
———. 1975. Discotheque Scene in Quebec Is Seen Unique as Single Breaker, February 8.
———. 1977a. Empire Records Looks to Disco, January 8.
———. 1977b. Parapluie Imports Rhythm Tracks For Quebec Hits, January 22.
———. 1977c. A Billboard Spotlight: La Province de Québec, January 29.
———. 1979a. Montreal May Be Continent's 2nd Best City, March 17.
———. 1979b. 90 Canadian Stations Now Programming Disco, March 24.
Chicago Tribune. 1979. Montreal Clubs Dance to a Disco Beat, April 8.
Chin, Brian. 1997. Brian Chin. Accessed November 20, 2018. https://www.jahsonic.com/BrianChin.html.
Crawford, Jason B. 2016. Forgetting Montreal's Gay Downtown: The Popular Gay Geographic Imagination and a Miş-mash History of the Present. *Quebec Studies* 61: 165–186.
Crawford, Jason B., and Karen Herland. 2016. Sex Garage: Unspooling Narratives, Rethinking Collectivities. *Journal of Canadian Studies* 48: 106–131. https://doi.org/10.3138/jcs.48.1.106.
Cross, Alan. 2016. Canadian Nightclub History: Montreal's Infamous Limelight. *A Journal of Musical Things* (blog). October 18. https://ajournalofmusicalthings.com/canadian-nightclub-history-montreals-infamous-limelight/.
Current Events. 1970. Montreal Discothèques, April.
———. 1971. Advertisement, 'La Licorne,' April.
Dawson, Jim. 1995. *The Twist: The Story of the Song and Dance That Changed the World*. Boston: Faber & Faber.
Diamanti, Eleonora. 2017. The Parabola of Italian Discothèques: Between Radical Architecture and Spaghetti Dance. *Scapegoat* 10: 134–150.
Financial Post. 1978. Sweet Music for Investors as Bubble Keeps On Growing, October 21.
Fritz. 1964. On and Off the Record. *The Gazette (Montreal)*, September 12.
———. 1965. On and Off the Record. *The Gazette (Montreal)*, July 24.
Funkytown—The Montreal Disco Era. 2009. *Inside the Music*. Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. https://soundcloud.com/colinmackenzie/funkytown-the-montreal-disco-era.
Jay. 1971. Discotheques Dead? Somebody Forgot to Bury Them. *The Gazette (Montreal)*, November 6.
Kilgallen, Dorothy. 1964. Voice of Broadway. *The Gazette (Montreal)*, October 9.
La Patrie. 1965. La 'Dolce Vita' Dans Le Vent Établit Ses Quartiers Dans Les Discothèques, May 27.

———. 1966. Les Discothèques Ne Sont Pas Mortes: Trois Nouvelles Ouvrent Leurs Portes à l'Automne, September 3.
———. 1968. Les Discothèques Sont Nées En France En 1945? Pourquoi? Comment?, August 11.
La Presse. 1970. Spec by Night: Une Soirée Dans Le Montréal d'avant Drapeau, April 16.
———. 2013. Montréal n'oublie pas ses héros, September 28. Accessed February 10, 2019. https://www.lapresse.ca/arts/201309/28/01-4694294-montreal-noublie-pas-ses-heros.php.
Lapointe, Mathieu. 2014. *Nettoyer Montréal: les campagnes de moralité publique, 1940–1954*. Québec City, Québec: Septentrion.
Lawrence, Tim. 2016. *Life and Death on the New York Dance Floor, 1980–1983*. Durham: Duke University Press.
Lime Light Disco. 2015. *Montreal Time* (blog). June. Accessed January 21, 2019. https://mtltimes.ca/Montreal/montreal/lime-light-disco-then-now-montreal/.
Lisée, Jean-François. 2011. Le Problème de Funkytown | L'actualité. January 30, 2011. Accessed April 22, 2019. https://lactualite.com/politique/le-probleme-avec-funkytown/.
Mixcloud. 2015. Disco 80s Canadian MONTREAL SOUND Hi-NRG Electro—Non-Stop Mix (77 mins) 1977–1984. Accessed January 31, 2019. https://www.mixcloud.com/retro-nrg/montreal-sound-hi-nrg-electro-80s-canadian-disco-non-stop-mix-77-mins-1977-1984-canada-disco/.
New York Times. 1979. Notes: Montreal Claims Disco Crown, April 1.
Pemberton, Rollie. 2016. Nightclubbing: Montréal's Lime Light. *Red Bull Music Academy Daily*. October 20. Accessed April 20, 2019. https://daily.redbull-musicacademy.com/2016/10/nightclubbing-lime-light.
Podmore, Julia A. 2015. From Contestation to Incorporation: LGBT Activism and Urban Politics in Montreal. In *Queer Mobilizations: Social Movement Activism and Canadian Public Policy*, ed. Manon Tremblay, 187–207. Vancouver, Canada: University of British Columbia Press.
Podmore, Julia A., and Line Chamberland. 2015. Entering the Urban Frame: Early Lesbian Activism and Public Space in Montréal. *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 19: 192–211.
Psyquébélique. 2013. Psyquébélique présente: DISCO SPATIAL QUÉBEC 1976–82. Accessed January 30, 2019 http://psyquebelique.blogspot.com/2013/02/psyquebelique-presente-disco-spatial.html.
Saumart, Ingrid. 1969. L'inventeur Montréalais Des Discothèques Prépare La Suit. *La Presse*, February 20.
Straw, Will. 1992. Montreal Confidential: Notes on an Imagined City. *CineAction* 28: 58–64.

———. 2005. Pathways of Cultural Movement. In *Accounting for Culture: Thinking Through Cultural Citizenship*, ed. Monica Gattinger, Caroline Andrew, Sharon Jeannotte, and Will Straw, 183–197. Ottawa, Canada: University of Ottawa Press.
———. 2008. Music from the Wrong Place: On the Italianicity of Quebec Disco. *Criticism* 50 (1): 113–131.
———. 2014. How Montréal Became Disco's Second City. Accessed April 25, 2019. http://daily.redbullmusicacademy.com/2014/08/montreal-disco-feature.
———. 2015. Place Des Arts et La Vie Nocturne à Montréal. In *50 Ans de La Place Des Arts*, ed. Louise Poissant, 115–130. Montreal: Presses de l'Université du Québec.
———. 2021. The Pastness of Âllo Police. In *Photogenic Montreal: Ruins and Revisions in a Postindustrial City*, edited by Martha Langford and Johanne Sloan, Montreal, Canada: McGill-Queen's University Press, 99–216.
Tele-Radio Monde. 1969. Donald Lautrec Ouvre Une Discothèque à Montréal, May 31.
Tele-Radiomonde. 1967a. La Discothèque à Jo-Jo: Une Boîte Très Sympathique, April 8.
———. 1967b. Ouverture Officielle de La Boîte à Joel Denis: La Discothèque à Jo-Jo, Une Boîte Très Sympathique, April 8.
The Gazette (Montreal). 1965. Discotheque King Loves His Subjects, July 31.
———. 1966. Announcing the Gazette Living Library, January 29.
———. 1970. Discotheques—We're Number One: Something for everyone from freaks to old folks. June 6.
———. 1975. "Montreal this morning," September 4, 1975, p. 3.
———. 1976. Rock & Pop: Disco 'Lindbergh' Flies High, October Paris-based discothèque chain Régine's 30.
———. 1977a. Rock & Pop: Want to Boogie? You're in the Right Place, May 21.
———. 1977b. "Homosexuals fighting back after raid." October 27, 1977, p. 3
———. 1979. Ted Blackman, December 21.
———. 1980. Punk, It Seems, Is Marrying Disco, January 16.
———. 1981. Rod Stewart Roars Back with a Super 1980 Album, January 3.
The Globe and Mail. 1983. Toujours Le Disco!, May 7.
Thornton, Sarah. 1995. *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital*. London and New York: Polity.
Tope, Frank. 1993. Lifting You Higher. *DJ Magazine* (July 1).
Weekend Magazine. 1974. The Biggest Dirty Joke in Town, December 14.
When Discotheques Reshaped Montreal, Told with Rarely-Seen Photos. 2018. *Coolopolis*. Accessed January 31, 2019. http://coolopolis.blogspot.com/2018/04/when-discotheques-reshaped-montreal.html
Wikipedia: List_of_Hi-NRG_artists_and_songs. 2019. Accessed April 4, 2019. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Hi-NRG_artists_and_songs

Discography

B.T. Express. 1974. *Do It ('Till You're Satisfied)*. Scepter Records/Roadshow.
———. 1976. *Express*. Musart.
Barry, Claudja. 1896. *Down and Counting*. Epic.
———. 1982. *Work Me Over*. Jupiter Records.
———. 1983. *For Your Love*. Jupiter Records.
Brown, Miquel. 1983a. *He's A Saint, He's A Sinner*. Record Shack Records.
———. 1983b. *So Many Men, So Little Time*. Record Shack Records.
Dibango, Manu. 1972. *Soul Makossa*. Fiesta.
Gaynor, Gloria. 1974. *Never Can Say Goodbye*. MGM Records.
Joli, France. 1979. *Come to Me*. Ariola/Disques Dreyfus.
———. 1981. *Gonna Get Over You*. Manhattan.
Lime. 1980. *Your Love*. Prism.
———. 1982. *Babe, We're Gonna Love Tonite*. Matra, 16
———. 1985. *Unexpected Lover*. Matra.
McCrae, George. 1974. *Rock Your Baby*. RCA Victor.
Suzy Q. 1985. *Computer Music*. Matra.
The Peppers. 1973. *Pepper Box*. Sirocco
Trans-X. 1983. *Vivre Sur Vidéo/Living On Video*. Illusion.
Various Artists. 1978. *La Connexion Noire*. Les Disques Revelation.