

Alive or on last legs?

Disco dances some more

By JACKIE KLEIN

Disco mania in the Detroit area has been a musical phenomenon of the 1970s — a syndrome, a trend, a kind of lifestyle. For some entrepreneurs, disco has been a financial bonanza.

The question as we enter the 1980s is whether disco is alive, well and thriving or tottering on its last frenzied legs. Is it giving way to rock and roll or even the return of romantic ballads played by big bands? Will couples once again dance cheek-to-cheek or continue to do their own individual thing?

Opinions vary. Ted Fuller who owns Oscar's in Southfield's 12 Mile-Northwestern area, claims his place is still jumping. Membership, \$175 for new joiners and \$150 for renewals, is strong, he maintains.

The average age of his clients is 40, Fuller says, and non-members pay a cover charge of \$3.45 on weekends. Fuller doesn't like the idea that Oscar's has been labeled a disco. He'd rather have it known as a dance nightclub, patterned after those in New York. Anyone opening a real, pure disco today is in trouble, he contends.

Whether it's called a disco or a nightclub, Oscar's is a meeting place for singles and a night-on-the-town spot for couples as are other chic establishments around town. Disco dancing is known as a "tension breaker" — fantasy time.

MOST DISCOS require proper attire but some aficionados have a special wardrobe to blend in with the discotheque image.

Disco appeared to be slipping until the movie "Saturday Night Fever" revived it, breathed new life into it and seemed to make it bigger and better. The music is loud, lights flash and flicker and dance floors are filled with writhing bodies.

For one reason or another, at least two Southfield disco's bit the dust. When the Raleigh House closed, the Gaffa, a popular disco inside, became a casualty. The Landing, an outer space disco on Southfield Road and 10 Mile, went out of business along with the restaurant upstairs.

The Perfect Blend in the Fidelity Building on Evergreen and Northwestern isn't allowed a sign outside. It's hard to find and former owner, Marty Kopitz, had to resort to expensive advertising.

The disco has been sold and now features Sunday night platter dancing for

teens and other music during the week. A year ago, Benny's opened on Northwestern Highway and Franklin Road at the Vineyards restaurant. It was billed as a "disco extravaganza" and an ultra-chic nightclub.

Then came Scandals in the Ramada Inn on Telegraph and 11 Mile. Rose Lieberman is planning to open the Rosebud in the American Motors Center. It was to feature adult disco but will probably be more of a night club dance spot.

ALL TOLD, there are about 20 discos in the Detroit area. But some predict disco will be hustled off the scene like the blink of a strobe light.

A drummer who wrote a letter to Modern Recording magazine, published by Cowan Corporation, called disco a dirty word. He pointed out that 35 to 40 percent of Billboard's top 100 songs are judged by record sales to teens 13 to 18 years old. And, the writer contended, they're not exactly music connoisseurs.

Almost all disco songs are performed by musicians who couldn't hack it in the competitive market of jazz or rock, the drummer maintained. He claimed musicians between the ages of 13 and 18 have little trouble performing the primitive art of disco (especially boys whose voices haven't changed yet).

"Many musicians are hostile towards disco because half the clubs in the country which used to support live entertainment are now spinning records," the drummer said.

The recession of 1979, he said, is hitting the entertainment business hard enough without multiplying the problem by closing clubs to musicians. Few new local bands are forming because of the lack of available clubs in which to perform, he contended.

"How is the next generation of musicians going to be able to acquire stage presence and the business know-how to fight the androids behind the scenes?" the writer asked. "It's a shame to watch in garages and basements potential superstars of tomorrow who probably will never get a chance to perform for a live audience."

DISCO DRUMMERS will be replaced by electronic rhythm units, the writer predicted. Disco isn't the biggest thing happening in music today, he asserted. The biggest thing is the almost inconceivable technological breakthroughs in the art of recording and major advancements in the field of

electronics, he claimed.

"Disco listeners look for a beat to dance by and rely on plastic egos for entertainment," he contended. "Disco is to music what E.T. is to a trend, and it will change to something of finer musical quality."

Another letter writer in the magazine said, "Not only do I say 'no' to disco, I say 'death' to disco. Let's not waste time on Muzak-sounding mechanical drive. I'm not against dance music — just against trash that money-hungry execs choose to put on disc jockey's playlists."

"Let's not bend to this anti-musical trend but find alternative music forms that won't be encountered in a wasteland of pop music."

There have been reports that the Bee Gees musical group is splitting up. They reportedly are tired of the disco label and sick at the thought they might grow old repeating themselves.

ACCORDING TO People Magazine, published by Time Inc., in 1978, "Saturday Night Fever" sold more than 15 million albums making America a disco heaven. Then suddenly the gas crunch and the recession hit and the whole stack of wax went straight to meltdown. The tremors are everywhere and recession has affected everyone in the music industry. Fans feel the pinch too.

Music is less important than food, the magazine points out, and people don't have as much bread to throw around on concerts, albums or discotheques.

Some say the reason for the downturn is that the music is worse and we've been discoed to death the last couple of years. Others can't tell one group from another and hope true musicians will rise to the top one day.

"Disco Steppin' Out" magazine, published by Lauder Co., talks about the ultimate in discoing — the trends of tomorrow for the dancers of today who are so into disco they know what's coming.

Amtrak claims the first chartered disco car on which a group danced its way overnight from New York to Montreal and back without missing a beat. The train car was complete with bar and disc jockey.

Some braver discotheques are adding roller skates, fire dancing, hot tubs and highwire artists. Successful acts in disco's short but powerful history are aware it all may end. But they say a little shaking and growing makes up for some rational thinking.

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