



Project
MUSE[®]

Today's Research. Tomorrow's Inspiration.

MUSIC FROM THE WRONG PLACE: ON THE ITALIANICITY OF QUEBEC DISCO

Will Straw

Think Italy. Without claiming mind-reading powers, it's a comfortable prediction you've already got tacky piano sample records and frenzied all-night clubbing in mind, a nation that when it isn't knocking out club records by the cartload likes nothing more than to party all night on a hillside by the sea. Italian music has been in and out of style more often than the flares revival.

—“Flying Italia,” *DJ Magazine*,
January 1992

There are enough piew-piew-piew zaps during these 55 minutes to wipe out a small nation of roller skaters.

—Andy Kellman, review of
Unclassics, All Music Guide

One of my favorite compilation CDs of the last few years is *Unclassics: Obscure Electronic Funk and Disco, 1975–1985*, released in 2004 on the Environ label. The thirteen tracks on *Unclassics* were collected and remixed by house/techno artist Morgan Geist, who offers them as all-but-forgotten dance music gems from just outside an Anglo-American musical axis, from places like Spain and Italy. The style that ostensibly unites these tracks is “Eurodisco,” though, as we shall see, that label does not accurately subsume all of them. “Italo-disco” seems an even cruder reduction, but circulates among critics, fans, and collectors as a meaningful label for much of the music gathered here. While some of the cuts on *Unclassics* have long been the idiosyncratic favorites of DJs or dance music collectors, more is going on here than the resurrection of cultish or neglected treasures. *Unclassics* is one milestone within the significant rehabilitation of European and Italian disco

that has unfolded over the last decade. *Mixed Up in the Hague, Vol. 1*, a compilation first released privately in 1999, was a key event in this rehabilitation; other collections, like *I-Robots: Italo Electro Disco Underground Classics* and *Confuzed Disco: A Retrospective of Italian Records*, have followed. Zyx, the Germany-based label that dominated the field in the 1980s and early 1990s, is actively marketing dozens of compilations of its own Italo-disco from that period. The garish red and green covers of Zyx's Italo anthologies, which filled the discount cassette bins of European airport stores fifteen years ago, have been redesigned so that they now look authoritative and curatorial. Radio and DJ sets devoted to this music now abound on the Internet.

For almost two decades, tracks like those collected on *Unclassics* held the status of morbid symptoms, reminders of the decay and dispersion of dance music in the years between disco and house music. Even as they reclaim these tracks as lost gems, the liner notes to *Unclassics* embrace that morbidity, relishing the ways in which so many of these pieces are seen to have gotten things wrong. My favorite track on *Unclassics* is a Spanish cut from 1979, "Margherita," whose guiltless dishing out of pleasures betrays the compilation's broader sensibility. Piercing little synth notes alternate with thick, rolling movements that could drive an army forward. Mariachi horns interweave with tinny keyboard glissandos in rounding out sections. Changes come precisely when we want them; each gimmicky sound or flourish dutifully returns just as we start to miss it. As "Margherita" moves in unstoppable fashion around its wheel of styles and sections, it is easy to think that this is music trying too desperately to be liked.

Dominant understandings of the European contribution to disco read its influence selectively, focusing on the robotic, synthesized sounds of Kraftwerk or Giorgio Moroder. These versions of Eurodisco's history link such figures as Can, Patrick Cowley, Afrika Bambaataa, and Juan Atkins in a heroic story that sends disco to Europe so that it may return, reinvented, to an American underground able to realize its radical potential. When Eurodisco is remembered for its sleek mechanical control, however, what gets forgotten is the lush extravagance that seemed to mark so much of it. As early as 1977, North American critics had recourse to a well-entrenched moral geography in characterizing disco music from continental Europe as "florid," given to flamboyant passion and bombastic overlays of effects.¹

Arguably, the peculiarity of so much Eurodisco came from the ways in which its extravagant lushness often went hand in hand with a cold, mechanical quality. This jumble of seemingly contradictory sensibilities has made Eurodisco a slippery historiographical object. One common way of resolving this slipperiness has been to draw clear distinctions between the

sleek electronic lines of northern (mostly German) Eurodisco and the flamboyant sexiness of its southern, “Mediterranean” versions. As suggested, histories of techno have installed northern European disco as a key force within the broader development of electronic dance music since the 1970s. The disco of southern Europe has been rehabilitated more slowly, within recent genealogies of house and electro, and there is still a selective emphasis on its sleekest and most minimal (and therefore atypical) versions. I remember the 1983 track “Spacer Woman,” by Charlie (featured on the recent *I-Robots* compilation), being mocked on its original release for the faulty English of its vocals and the cheesy futurism of its electronic instrumentation. It is now celebrated for its affinities with the canonical early 1980s electro of U.S. artists like Man Parrish.

Implicit within all of these judgments is a distinction between the anticipatory character of Eurodisco (its prefiguring of electronic dance music in all its later forms) and its retrograde character (its unbroken ties to older traditions of tacky orchestral music and musical backdrops to Mediterranean vacations). If most of the recent Eurodisco compilations busily work to confirm that music’s anticipatory role, two collections from 2007, Dimitri from Paris’s *Cocktail Disco* and Stefan Kassel’s *Disco Deutschland*, are all the more interesting for embracing its backward-looking character. Here, disco is allowed to recede into a backdrop of *schlager* music, Riviera film sound tracks, and string-dominated big bands. More specifically, as Charles Kronengold suggests, these compilations reveal the extent to which Eurodisco’s selective deployment of the lush instrumentation of Philadelphia disco (the “Philly sound”) reinterpreted that sound as a bridge tying disco back to earlier, transatlantic forms of easy listening music.²

The liner notes to *Unclassics* embrace the incoherence that is taken to mark so much of the music gathered up here. Morgan Geist writes that there is “great pleasure in finding some raw, undigested gem, and beauty in its naiveté and ‘wrongness,’ like crossbreeding tense Italo-disco and laidback rap. Some UNCLASSICS are born simply by being in the wrong place at the wrong time.” The “problem” of music made in the wrong place and at the wrong time is a central concern of this essay. One challenge to those championing Italian disco as a coherent musical formation comes from the fact that so much of it was made outside of Italy. Dance records from Germany or Spain, or from fly-by-night studios across southern and eastern Europe, often had their commercial launches in Italy and frequently disguised themselves as Italian to facilitate those launches. A 2006 compilation titled *Baia degli angeli 1977–1978: The Legendary Italian Discoteque of the 70s* celebrates the role of Italian discoteques in gathering up styles of diverse origins, assembling them within sets that

somehow sound distinctly “Italian” despite the varied backgrounds of their different tracks. (A second volume of *Baia degli angeli* was released in 2007.) The loosely circumscribed corpus of Italian disco has come to include tracks made in Italy that pretend to be from somewhere else; others made somewhere else that seek to pass themselves off as Italian; and innumerable remakes, knockoffs, sequels, and remixes through which dance music records have been Italianized, de-Italianized, or made to seem placeless.

On the Italianicity of Quebec Disco

If the pedants are going to call it Canadian Disco, no one else is listening.

—Todd Burns, review of
I-Robots, Stylus

The French here [in Montreal] are very European in their musical attitudes, much more open to a variety of different styles, including dance music. Dance music is the international music of today and sooner or later, the rest of Canada is going to have to open up its eyes.

—Liam Lacey, “Toujours le disco!”
Globe and Mail

The artist who takes up the most space on the *Unclassics* compilation is not from Italy, however, nor from Europe at all, but from the Canadian province of Quebec. Montreal-based producer and performer Pierre Perpall is behind three of the tracks here, recording under the names Pluton and the Humanoids, Purple Flash, and the Purple Flash Orchestra. (The word “purple” plays on Pierre Perpall’s last name.) One of these tracks, Pluton and the Humanoids’ “World Invasion,” had already appeared on the first *Mixed Up in the Hague* compilation, and has circulated on the Internet as a proto-electro cut for the last few years. Another Perpall cut, “We Can Make It” (recorded under the name Purple Flash), is more germane to the sorts of issues I wish to raise here. In his comments on the track, Morgan Geist makes it clear that “We Can Make It” is the prime example of that music made “in the wrong place and at the wrong time” to which his liner notes had earlier referred. The track “came out of Canada in 1984,” Geist writes, “but actually echoed the classic disco sound of 1978.”⁴ This reading of “We Can Make It”—as a track somehow dislodged from spatiotemporal coordinates—migrates through other responses to *Unclassics*. The online

magazine *Stylus*, naming *Unclassics* its record of the week in late 2004, suggested that “We Can Make It” was “a couple of years and time zones too late to be popular.”⁵ Andy Kellman’s review of *Unclassics* on the *All Music Guide* website repeats this diagnosis, calling the Purple Flash track “an instrumental mini-anthem recorded several years too late—and in the wrong country, namely Canada.”⁶

For a piece of music to be made in the “wrong time” is distinct, of course, from its being timeless. The commentary cited above suggests that the “wrongness” of “We Can Make It” was at least partly a result of the track’s lateness in marshalling its constitutive musical elements. “We Can Make It” employs synthesizers to mimic string sections, and generally offers an agreeable lushness that does, indeed, evoke disco music of the late 1970s more than it does that of 1984, when the track was released. This “lateness,” reviewers suggest, had much to do with its producer’s being in the “wrong place,” on the margins of that informal, international system that communicates, to producers, performers, and listeners, the terms of up-to-dateness. One can imagine ways of echoing the “classic disco sound of 1978” in 1984 that were not simply the sign of lateness—that were knowing homages, for example, or very early anticipations of the disco revivals to follow. Perpall’s perpetuation of a six-year-old style is seen, nevertheless, to betray the backwardness of his “Canadian” location, as if one would naturally expect a producer working in Montreal to be late in responding to the changes in disco music happening elsewhere.

It is difficult, however, to imagine Montreal as somehow cut off, in 1984, from the channels through which stylistic change within dance music was communicated. In early steps toward a larger history, I have written elsewhere of Montreal’s disco culture of the 1970s and early 1980s, when a flurry of activity made the Montreal scene, for a few years, the focus of international attention and adulation.⁷ Montreal’s disco culture had its roots in the city’s well-entrenched economy of bars and nightclubs, an infrastructure that had flourished throughout the twentieth century but reached a recent peak during and after Expo ’67, the city’s highly successful World’s Fair. By the early 1970s, Montreal’s dance clubs were observed to be outliving the widely diagnosed fall from fashionability of discothèques, still regarded by many as a holdover from the early 1960s.⁸ Those of the city’s clubs that survived past the end of the 1960s served as bridges to the more familiar disco culture that took shape in Montreal, as elsewhere, in the early 1970s. The first disco pools (associations of disc jockeys) in Montreal were set up in 1976, within a year of their establishment in New York; local television programs taped in discothèques were introduced in the same year. An internationally connected network of specialty stores, labels, distributors, and tip

sheets drew components of Montreal disco culture together and linked them to events transpiring elsewhere. In 1979, at the height of disco music's commercial success, *Billboard* magazine described Montreal as "the second most important disco market on the continent, outside New York."⁹

The claim that Purple Flash's "We Can Make It" was a product of the "wrong place" thus bumps up against Montreal's acknowledged importance in disco culture during the years covered by the *Unclassics* compilation. That claim is symptomatic, nevertheless, of the larger problem of Montreal's place within a broader transnational geometry of late-1970s/early-1980s dance music. Even as Montreal's disco labels, distributors, performers, and producers knitted together to form a solid infrastructure, from the mid-1970s onward they were caught up in transnational processes that often obscured their local rootedness. It was not simply that as an important node in the transnational circulation of disco records, Montreal was a key point of transit for music that came from somewhere else. More insidiously, Montreal's linguistic and cultural character, notoriously difficult for outsiders to decipher, encouraged practices of production in which the markers of local identity were disguised, or acts of reception in which the identity of Montreal-based disco music was misread.

Starting in the mid-1970s, Montreal functioned as a point of passage and reassembly for dance records circulating internationally. Stereotypically, Montreal has long been seen to mediate between the cultural influences of Paris and New York, Europe and North America. In the dissemination of dance music records this role has been pronounced. Albert Goldman noted in 1978 that European disco records often reached New York via Montreal, through a process of gatekeeping that made Montreal-based labels important exploiters of territorial rights.¹⁰ As records moved through Montreal, pressed by Montreal companies for distribution throughout North America, the markers of their provenance (of the time and place of their production) were often left obscure or effaced.

Vincent DeGiorgio, a major producer and distributor of Montreal disco records in the late 1970s, recalls exporting to the United States "things from Canada . . . that people thought were Canadian, but many times [were] of French or Italian origins."¹¹ Just as often, however, Quebec labels and performers cultivated a deliberate vagueness about their identities, in the hope that record buyers and industry professionals might think that records produced in Canada were actually from somewhere else. DeGiorgio provides a list of disco performers whose Quebec or Canadian origins were not widely known or suspected, including Claudja Barry, Suzy Q, Karen Silver, Gino Soccio, and Patsy Gallant. Records by these performers often perpetuated the long-standing tendency of Canadian or Quebecois cultural commodities

to hide (or, at the very least, downplay) their origins, to look as if they came from more credible centers of cultural authority.¹² Uncertainty over their provenance was a key determinant of how disco records from Montreal moved through the world and were received.¹³

If Montreal disco records of that period are remembered or cherished today, it has much to do with the ways in which they have been gathered up within an emerging canon of Italian disco. The eccentric history of Italian disco music at the Croatian website *www.italo-disco.net* notes that many of the records perceived as European in the late 1970s and early 1980s were actually from Canada (and mostly from Quebec.) Another website devoted to Italo-disco advises its readers that “there is plenty of Italian Italian disco but some of the biggest Italian Disco records are from Canada.”¹⁴ Research by Emily Raine has traced the process by which inclusion of a Quebec track (“Un Habit en la Bêmol” by Roger Gravel and Flashback) on the recent Italo compilation *Baia Degli Angeli* quickly pushed the value of the original twelve-inch LP higher on the collector’s market, fueling a more general pillaging of Quebec record crates by international collectors of Italian-inflected disco.¹⁵

Italian and Quebecois disco often overlapped on the terrain of shared aesthetic sensibilities—a penchant for the florid exuberance mentioned earlier, and an often sleazy eroticization that exploited the “sexy” resonances of Romance languages. Indeed, it is easy to see the messy eclecticism of much Italian or Quebec disco as expressing hedonistic, Catholic, and anti-puritanical impulses stereotypically taken to define these places. This sense of a moral looseness marking the expressive forms of Italian and Quebec disco fits easily alongside the perception that this music came embedded within commodities that sought to deceive, if only through a deliberate vagueness about their national origins.

All social labor, as Henri Lefebvre has argued, works to transform the place of objects within spatiotemporal configurations.¹⁶ To cultural producers in Canada or Quebec, this transformation is often guided by an acute sense of models to be followed or materials to be reworked, and of the cultural pathways that are a precondition and result of these processes.¹⁷ Dance producers in Montreal often conceived their practice in terms of an international division of labor, assembling tracks from materials of disparate origins, and filling in niches when these presented themselves as opportunities. In 1976–1977 the Montreal-based Parapluie group of disco labels produced records by importing rhythm tracks from the Muscle Shoals studio in Alabama, joining these to vocals by Quebec-based artists who were themselves, much of the time, recent immigrants from the United States or Europe.¹⁸ Later, Canadian labels produced the stripped-down dance tracks

that helped to displace the lush, orchestral sound of the mid- to late 1970s, furthering the move toward sequencer-and-drum-machine-based production, which transformed dance music in the 1980s. Ian Levine, a major figure in the emergence of the Hi-NRG disco sound, noted that the hard, synthesized beat of tracks from Canadian labels Unidisc and Mantra was one response to the growing expense of the “big string disco sound” typical of major label productions.¹⁹

Dance and the Transnational

Dance music records are highly useful examples with which to think conceptually about issues of transnational circulation in popular musical culture. I shall pursue these issues with resources borrowed from the study of literary globalization—from the work, in particular, of Franco Moretti, Wai Chee Dimock, and Pascale Casanova. Moretti’s protocols for the analysis of literary cycles provide us with terms with which to think through the movement of musical forms and artifacts. To think about musical cycles is to think about the ways in which forms and styles organize themselves as transnational scatterings of musical texts and distinctive geometries of spatial dispersion. The term “cycle” suggests a distance traveled, but that distance is inseparable from two other measures by which cycles may be charted: the duration across time of forms or styles, and the arc of commercial and artistic energies as these forms or styles are set in motion and then play themselves out.

Dance music is an ideal form for this sort of “geometric” analysis, in part because any given dance music record is, at some level, trivial. The broader, collective phenomena in which dance records participate are not trivial, I hasten to add, as so many important histories and analyses have convincingly shown. Individual dance records themselves, however, invite what the literary scholar Franco Moretti has called a “distance reading”: an analytic distance at which the specific character of any given text undergoes a process of deliberate reduction and abstraction. Distance reading, Moretti suggests, should operate between the extremes of the individual text and its particularities, on the one hand, and the *grande durée*, the long span of unchanging structures, on the other. Between these two extremes, says Moretti, we are at the level of the cycle. “[T]he short span is all flow and no structure,” Moretti continues, “the *longue durée* all structure and no flow, and cycles are the—unstable—border country between them.”²⁰

Since the mid-1970s, dance music records have been cast into the world in patterns that we may identify as cycles. These cycles unfold within

rapidly generated processes of imitation, extension, and influence. They produce quickly visible constellations of musical events as styles or novel effects are picked up and reworked in a multiplicity of places. The discursive acts that respond to dance records are most typically contained within other records, which restate, rework, and extend a given creative impulse. From the analytic “distance” at which Moretti invites us to position ourselves, we can measure the geographical extensions of particular dance music cycles: the distances along which imitative practices are maintained, the routes through which patterns of influence travel, and so on. There is something to be gained by charting the transnational circulation of dance music coldheartedly, less as the formation of global communities than as the operation of what Moretti and others have called a “system of variations.”²¹ Variation at the level of musical gestures extends or weakens the commercial or cultural momentum of cycles. Variation may gather up a myriad of musical threads and propel them forward, or, by dispersing creative energies in too many directions, cause a cycle to flounder. A distance reading invites us to see individual records as points in these variations. We may follow the lead of Dilip Gaonkar and Elizabeth Povinelli here: “In a given culture of circulation, it is more important to track the proliferating copresence of varied textual/cultural forms in all their mobility and mutability than to attempt a delineation of their fragile autonomy and specificity.”²²

Pierre Perpall’s vocoder-heavy “World Invaders” of 1981 (credited to “Pluton and the Humanoids”) was one event within overlapping cycles that sent highly synthesized disco tracks by the Montreal group Lime to southern European discos and Italian-produced electronic tracks to the gay clubs of Montreal. In the interaction of these cycles, both Hi-NRG dance music and Italo-disco worked out the terms of their commonality and their distinctiveness. More generally, Quebec disco records of the early 1980s were caught up in cycles that led to Italian remakes, Quebecois remixes or remakes of European dance tracks, and to the constant reinscribing of a well-entrenched line of passage between Quebec and southern Europe.

Most of the tracks on the *Unclassics* compilation come from Italy, Spain, and Quebec, places whose distance from the centers of Western musical authority in the early 1980s was slight but meaningful. Their place at the wrong end of what, following Dimock, we might call a “radius of musical action” is taken to explain their slight or significant out-of-dateness.²³ It is impossible to disentangle the geographical marginality of these tracks from the sense of being “at the wrong time” to which Geist refers in his liner notes. In her exhaustive study of literary globalization, Pascale Casanova notes how the status of different national literary cultures is shaped by the widely shared belief in a “literary Greenwich meridian.”²⁴ This meridian,

like that which sets the world's time zones, establishes a ground for cultural currency such that geographical distance from a center inevitably expresses itself as temporal lag with respect to a norm. In the global literary field, the sense that certain literatures are behind the times is first and foremost an ideological effect of the uneven distribution of global, cultural power. In Imre Szeman's useful account, this unevenness works against a rhetoric that casts global economic and cultural systems as "isochronic," as occupying positions of simultaneity in relationship to each other.²⁵

As Casanova is quick to demonstrate, however, unevenness in the circulation of literary works and values does not result simply from prejudicial judgments that devalue work from the margins. This unevenness will be concretized within mechanisms of delay that give them a solid institutional basis and therefore work both to perpetuate and to naturalize them. Cultural mediators in the notoriously monolingual Anglophone metropolises of New York or London will typically recognize the literature of other places only when it has been translated. And so the delays of translation, and of critical recognition of these translations, will make the literature of places outside the Anglophone metropolis seem forever late in relationship to a center.

It is easy to see this logic and its associated prejudices working just as effectively in popular musical culture. In popular and critical understandings of music, distance from a center is presumed to institute a delay of influence, a "lateness," as when Soviet jazz or Bollywood thriller movie funk are mocked (or, these days, relished) for their tardy absorption of innovations from elsewhere. ("Ten years behind the Western styles," Hungarian-Canadian new-waver B. B. Gabor sang, mockingly, of Soviet jazz, in his 1980 song "Moscow Drug Club.") Ethnomusicological fieldwork narratives and the folklore of touring punk bands are full of anecdotes about finding places and audiences oblivious to those shifts in musical style or practice that have transpired in the outside world. The implicit model here is of a broken communications system through which news of stylistic change arrives at the margins too late and too faintly to be understood and credibly acted upon. That the tracks on *Unclassics* were born too many time zones from a musical Greenwich Mean Time is offered as an explanation of their slight or significant out-of-dateness. That distance is also taken to explain the undisciplined way in which individual tracks "digest" elements, like mariachi horns and Giorgio Moroder-ish electronics, which are not supposed to go together.

Delays of influence and translation seem poor explanations for the "wrongness" of dance music from Quebec, Italy, or Spain, however, given the observable quickness with which knockoffs of international hits were

produced in these places and their innovations mined. Arguably, the reputation of “Italo-disco” (in its Italian, French, German, or Quebec variants) suffered less from being out of date, in the early 1980s, than from the perception that certain places of production encouraged a decay of forms. Critical prejudice settles in when the traversing of distance is viewed as a dynamic process, acting upon styles and cycles to weaken and transform them. When the sounds of Mediterranean dance music become too “warm,” or its effects too “cheesy,” this is seen as what typically happens as one gets further from centers of musical authority, when discipline cannot be maintained. In the case of dance music, this decay was often read as a lapse into florid effects and desperate attempts at novelty whose imperative to please was all too evident. The paradox here is that in a variety of ways the “wrongness” of many tracks on *Unclassics* might be ascribed more to their overeager embracing of the new than to their residual attachment to the outmoded. “Decay,” in this sense, is the rapid burning out of musical gestures through their hurried and seemingly undisciplined overusage, rather than their slow decline. Nothing seems to exemplify this decay of form so strikingly as the fate of rapping within so much Italo-disco, wherein it is transformed (as in N.O.I.A.’s 1984 “Do You Wanna Dance”) into the stilted English of the artlessly sleazy come-on.

The disco music produced in Italy, Spain, and Quebec in the late 1970s and 1980s has become meaningful principally in terms of a spatialization of musical styles. These places are understood as those to which styles and musical effects travel, from birthplaces in which they fit more naturally within a history of invention. These are also, as suggested, the places in which styles and gestures are observed to decay, to become corrupted and wear themselves out. The difficulty is that of responding to such readings in ways that go beyond the simple denunciation of imperializing judgment. At some level we must acknowledge the ways in which cultural marginality (however slight) works upon forms to encourage such apparent degradation.

To this end, we might usefully chart what Dimock calls the “receding and unfolding extensions” of a cultural form.²⁶ For our purposes, the difference between these extensions is that between disco music’s containment within local circumstances and its movement outward, toward popularity in a transnational marketplace or imagined cultural center. In places like Quebec or Italy, the character of disco music was shaped in important ways by those forces that pulled disco back into the texture of local entertainment cultures, offering local success at the price of diminished integrity and exportability. These local entertainment cultures included television programs that encouraged lip-synching and extravagant performance, and so kept disco tied to regional (and, from many perspectives, degraded) traditions of

audiovisual variety entertainment. Notoriously, further degradation came with the recruitment to disco of national or regional celebrities from other cultural fields (like the Quebecois hockey player Guy Lafleur, Italian actress Claudia Cardinale, and one-time European model Amanda Lear, all of whom made disco records). Dance music culture in its “Latin” versions was shaped, as well, by local tourist-leisure economies, which, bringing together audiences of uncertain taste and composition, often encouraged music of broad appeal that might well appear to be pandering.

Local circumstances, then, worked to contaminate disco by binding it to the most obviously commercialized and provincial of cultural habits. Conversely, the impulse to seek success elsewhere brought its own risks of degradation, those that arise when producers strive to make music that is packed with features calculated as necessary for international success. Italian and Quebecois disco records were, indeed, full of effects, like distorted vocals, novelty rap, or dubby echo, that could not help but be heard as the degradation of such effects. There is often a sense, within peripheral musical cultures, that music must assemble all the ingredients that might ensure popularity in order to compensate for other disadvantages. One of the biggest disco hits produced in Quebec in 1979, “Can’t Stop the Music,” by the studio group Bombers (one of three Quebec tracks on the first *Baia degli angeli* compilation) offers up orgasmic female moans, synthesizer twirls, and rock guitar solos as it strains to be liked. By 1984, when Pierre Perpall released “We Can Make It,” Montreal’s disco labels found their international influence and local institutional foundations much diminished compared to a half-decade earlier. In these circumstances, the efforts of Perpall’s track to please everyone might well have been strategically astute. Indeed, what was left of Montreal disco music by the mid-1980s could well sound to the rest of the world as if it were overplaying its resources, trying too hard to be sexy, to be exuberant, to be “French” or international.

Many of the tracks on *Unclassics* simply let too many styles from too long a time span accumulate within their limits. As a result, these tracks may maintain a ground-level listenability over several years, but they will mark no single moment in the history of musical forms with a sense of their own leadership. Bits of eighties electro, Hi-NRG, and beat-box funk float through most of the tracks on *Unclassics*, but no one has invoked these cuts as turning points in the emergence or consolidation of any of these styles. Indeed, the “wrongness” of dance music from these margins will usually manifest itself at two extremes: in the excessive richness of tracks that will try anything and everything to please, or in the thinness of others whose energies are focused on the offering of a single novelty. The busy tracks on *Unclassics* exemplify the first of these extremes. Gimmicky transatlantic hits

of European origin like Trio's "Da Da Da" or Falco's "Rock Me Amadeus" are well-known examples of the second.

Roots and Homes

It is probably the case that as many disco records were made in Italy, Spain, and Quebec as in Miami or New York, cities that stood as centers of Western popular musical authority during this period. One might ask, amid the flurry of recent books charting the emergence of disco in early 1970s New York, why a history of disco as a Mediterranean form has not become the real story.²⁷ The music's roots in southern France and Italy are just as long as those in the United States, even if the former are seen as less heroically subcultural. While disco music from the Mediterranean usually seems like the absorption of an alien form into places that must grapple (often awkwardly) with differences of language and sensibility, it might be argued that this has been the dominant condition of disco music in the world. As Moretti reminds us about literature, the experience of negotiation with a dominant model, presumed to be from somewhere else is—statistically and otherwise—the most common experience of those writing literature on the planet.²⁸ That fact of this negotiation, then, might be taken as the real norm, just as definitive of the "form" of disco as the seemingly more natural elaborations of style that occurred in New York or other centers.

One response to these arguments, of course, is that for reasons of history and demography, places like Miami and New York were more properly the places in which disco was produced as the articulation of African American, Latin, and European practices. The question that persists is how this articulation has traveled with disco as a form, and how such traveling shapes its credibility. In Germany, as in Quebec, disco was made in practices of collaboration that assembled, at least in part, representatives of the key traditions defining the music (performers and producers who were both black and white). It is possible that these collaborations, in Europe or Quebec, merely replicated an originary articulation of influences that in Chicago or New York had served to invent a "truer" form of disco as an expression of this original articulation. It is conceivable, as well, that the "truth" of disco lay in the ways in which it was invented anew in each subsequent moment of such articulation, in each reinvention of the collaborative relationships that founded it, no matter where this reinvention took place. It is imaginable, too, that deeply encoded within disco's characteristic styles and forms, this articulation of influences expressed itself even in the absence of collaborative relationships that repeated those of its founding

moments. These are the thorny questions of a geopolitics of musical form, made even more difficult by the variety of communities (sexual, racial, ethnic, and geographical) that are able to credibly claim a proprietary relationship to disco.

Pierre Perpall

There is much more to be said about the career of Pierre Perpall, a Quebecois of mixed race who has described himself as the “first Afro-Quebecois star.”²⁹ Born in Montreal in 1948, Perpall began performing in Quebec song competitions in 1964, just before soul music began to find popularity in Quebec.³⁰ In a 2006 interview on Montreal radio station CIBL, Perpall described how the eventual success of Motown and soul in Quebec led local record producers to seek out black performers. The mid-1960s was a period in which Quebec performers mediated the passage of Anglo-American music into the local market, typically through French-language translations of international hits. Perpall’s second single (after a first that sought to position him as the Quebecois Johnny Mathis) was “Pour moi ça va,” a French translation of James Brown’s “I Got You (I Feel Good).” In the mid-1960s, Pierre Perpall was the lead vocalist (and only man of color) in *Les Beethovens*, one of dozens of Quebecois bands that produced local versions of British Invasion rock music.

From the early 1960s through the mid-1970s, the main currents of Quebecois popular music unfolded along a sequence of stages that was common in the non-English-speaking regions of Europe and the Americas: (1) local artists performing native-language versions of Anglo-American hits gave way to (2) artists or solo performers adapting the idioms of pop-rock to the local language and then, in the early 1970s, to (3) the reworking of local versions of rock so as to draw increasingly on folk and traditional elements specific to a given region.³¹ (In Quebec, well-known examples of each of these three stages would include *Les Classels*, Robert Charlebois, and *Harmonium*, respectively.) The first of these stages corresponded to those years in which Perpall functioned as both the “Quebec James Brown” and as a member of *Les Beethovens*, who modeled themselves after British beat-R&B groups of the mid-1960s. As the second and third of these stages unfolded, however, the traffic between African American and Quebecois popular music was reduced. The translation into French of English-language songs all but disappeared, but so, too, did any widespread interest in original, Quebec-based versions of soul music in either English or French. A general whitening of Quebec popular music

took shape in the turn toward deeply vernacular uses of Quebecois French and the exploration (or invention) of folkly, rural roots.

In 1969—after Woodstock, as Perpall specifies this turning point—his career “really dropped.”³² From the 1970s onward, Perpall has sustained a career by pursuing two distinct lines of activity. The first has made of him a successful working musician, performing in backup bands on tours throughout North America, and, more recently, leading ensembles that entertain audiences in nightclubs and casinos, on cruise ships, and at vacation resorts. His website announces the current availability of acts performing separate tributes to disco, Las Vegas show music, and rhythm and blues. Some of this activity has traded on his original reputation as a hit maker. (In the 1990s he played in retro concerts that brought him together with other *yé-yé*—Francophone pop—stars of the 1960s.) However, most of his performances of recent years have seen his own past as hit maker downplayed, in cabaret-like acts whose appeal lies in his ability to re-create the successes of others.

The second trajectory in Perpall’s career came with his turn to disco music. In 1977 Perpall contributed two tracks to the disco compilation album *La Connexion Noir*, alongside other black Montreal performers like Boule Noire and Alma Faye Brooks. His disco career stretches along a series of twelve-inch singles produced between 1977 and 1983.³³ In addition to making records under his own performing names (such as Purple Flash), Perpall produced records by others (Reggie Simms’s 1982 disco twelve-inch “Over and Over,” for example) and helped to launch the careers of a number of Quebec artists of considerable achievement (such as Nancy Martinez and Laurence Jalbert). Perpall openly admits that his entry into disco music was driven by the desire to find a musical practice that would allow him to break out of the Quebec market. It was not simply that disco music, in the late 1970s, represented a successful form whose appeal to the local market and beyond had already been demonstrated. Arguably, the textual and commodity forms of disco music made possible a transnational mobility that could extend a career in space and lay the bases for greater stability over time. Perpall’s disco singles, through 1984, took him to places like Los Angeles (where “We Can Make It” was popular, garnering him live performances) and Miami (to which he returned regularly during the 1970s and 1980s). “Crème Soufflé,” which Perpall recorded as Purple Flash, came out as a twelve-inch single on the Canadian label Uniwave in 1981, and generated enough momentum to get a 1982 French release on Disques Carrère. More recently, the inclusion of Perpall’s music on canonizing compilations like *Live at the Hague* and *Unclassics* has led to new reissue projects and numerous articles about his work on disco-themed websites.

Language and Mobility

Basically, when I say “Italo” I mean heavily synthesized, heavily arpeggiated, Moroder-inspired post-disco disco that thrived from about ’79–’87 and may or may not have been made in Italy. More than anything, “Italo” represents a sound and attitude, which is why something like Pluton and Humanoid’s [sic] sci-fi obsessed “World Invaders” is essential Italo to me even though its creator, Pierre Perpall, is French Canadian.

—Rich Juzwiak, *Fourfour* website

“World Invaders,” released by Pluton and the Humanoids in 1981, is today the most cherished of Perpall’s dance tracks. It turns up on Internet lists of the best Eurodisco records, of the best Canadian disco tracks, and of the best non-progressive-rock songs ever recorded about outer space. Most of the track’s vocals are processed through a vocoder, and though they are sung in English, the lyrics are mostly unintelligible. “World Invaders” invites us to think a little longer about the transnational circulation of disco music, and to reflect upon the role of language in enabling or hindering that circulation. If the international culture of disco in the years 1975 through 1985 was one in which musical gestures and effects circulated quickly between countries, the languages of song and voice served to trouble any sense of an equitably shared musical idiom. Like virtually all forms of popular music in the West after World War II, disco culture lived out the tension between the English language’s promise of broad appeal and the risks of illegitimacy or diminished local popularity that its use brought to artists working in non-Anglophone territories. Disco, like other musical forms, took shape in innumerable acts of *translation*, in an expansive sense of that term that designates any articulation of forms and influences from elsewhere. Any happy image of a transnational musical dialogue is undermined, however, when we take up the question of translation in its more familiar, restricted sense (as the transposition from one language into another). Here we are led to consider how translation is always a relationship between positions of unequal legitimacy and success.

The use of synthesizers and vocoder in “World Invaders” has let that track slip seamlessly into the canon of Italo or Eurodisco music that has taken shape over the last decade. The widespread recourse to distorted, machinelike vocals in Italo/Quebec disco was, at the simplest level, a way of using English that displaced the question of base-level linguistic ability onto that of the novelty of vocal effects. The processing of vocals was also a partial

resolution of the inevitable illegitimacy that haunts the use of English lyrics in popular music, particularly if these are sung by non-English speakers with accents that might betray their origins. When attention shifts from the communicative content of vocals to the foregrounded materiality of their distortion, tracks are able to demonstrate, simultaneously, their entitlement to the use of English and their necessary estrangement from it. This dual relationship, as Charles Kronengold points out, manifests itself most blatantly in the way so many Eurodisco tracks use highly codified, minimal units of English speech: “orders, announcements (including self-announcements), greetings, lists, simple reports (‘red alert!’)” and so on.³⁴ The science-fictional thematics of so many Eurodisco tracks authorize imperfectly articulated English expression through their recourse to robotic vocals and the stripped-down, ritualistic speech of official encounters or institutionally prescribed phrases.

All English-language vocals within European disco are not run through vocoders, however, and the more telling phenomenon is the enormous variety of ways that “normal” uses of the English language are avoided within dance music from non-English-speaking countries. From the cold, monotonous English of Trio’s “Da Da Da” (1982), through the singsong “Chinese” English of the (Italian) Cruisin’ Gang’s “Chinatown” (1984), and on to the hystericization of female vocals in hits like Black Box’s “Ride on Time” (1989), one sees a proliferation of distortive uses of English and very few attempts to approximate anything resembling a linguistic norm.

Pierre Perpall’s “World Invaders” is one example of how language functions within dance music as an agent of interference, nourishing eccentric musical gestures that are strategic at some fundamental level but, just as important, symptoms of positions occupied by producers within a transnational geometry of cultural forms. The opportunities for professional mobility that disco offered to people like Perpall had much to do with the status of the twelve-inch dance single as a *medial* form, as a carrier of musical information marked by its distinctive relationship to language, expression, and performer identity. Detached, at least in part, from the trafficking in performer identity and poetic vision that have marked other musical forms (like rock or soul), dance music lent itself to the circulation of records on which voices could be unintelligible and accents undetectable. The individual dance track does not presume the elaboration and sustaining of a coherent personal identity over time, as did the album, and so it may play with idiosyncratic forms of vocal expression. (Albums whose tracks are all processed through vocoders remain rare and highly risky ventures.) The twelve-inch extended format meant a reduced role for vocals, anyway, just as the absence of significant paratextual information (like liner notes or

performer photos) on the typical sleeves for twelve-inch singles reduced the markers of biography that tied other kinds of music to careers and personal styles.

I would suggest as well that the distorted, vocoder-processed English-language vocals of “World Invaders” are what allowed this track to sidestep the political question of language, a hot-button issue during this period in Quebec history. In 1977 the independence-oriented government of Quebec had passed Bill 101, a law that set in place a wide range of policies intended to protect and enhance the French character of Quebec. Quebec was not immune to the denunciations of disco music transpiring elsewhere in North America (most famously in Chicago, where disco records were burned in a ceremony organized by an album-oriented rock radio DJ). Hostility to the form in Quebec took further sustenance, however, from how Quebecois disco seemed to have little sense of itself as a practice of language and seemed to betray a weak commitment to the use of French. These sins were compounded, in the eyes of a critical establishment, by the interest of Quebec disco producers in seeking success elsewhere, and in obscuring those markers of place and culture that might hinder that success.

—McGill University

NOTES

Charles Kronengold was immensely helpful in evaluating early drafts of this article, and I owe him enormous gratitude for specific ideas and wide-ranging insights. Pierre Perpall responded quickly and with his characteristic generosity to requests for information. Work on Quebec culture by such scholars as Sherry Simon and Erin Hurley has been of great help as I have struggled with some of the issues here.

1. See, for example, Juan Rodriguez, “Rock & Pop: Want to Boogie? You’re in the Right Place,” *The Gazette (Montreal)*, May 21, 1977, 39.
2. Charles Kronengold, personal communication, April 2008.
3. Morgan Geist, liner notes to *Unclassics*, 2004.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Nate de Young, review of *Unclassics*, *Stylus*, www.stylusmagazine.com/reviews/morgan-geist/unclassics.htm, November 22, 2004, accessed January 10, 2006.
6. Andy Kellman, review of *Unclassics*, Allmusic.com, www.allmusic.com/cg/amg.dll?p=amg&token=&sql=10:39fwxqqsldhe, accessed January 10, 2006.
7. See Will Straw, “L’industrielle du disque au Québec,” in Denise Lemieux, ed. *Traité de la Culture* (Québec: Presses de l’Université Laval, 2002), 831–46; and “Pathways of Cultural Movement,” in Caroline Andrew, Monica Gattinger, Sharon Jeannotte, and

Will Straw, eds., *Accounting for Culture: Thinking Through Cultural Citizenship* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2005), 183–97.

8. See, among many other accounts, “Discotheques Dead? Somebody Forgot to Bury Them,” *Gazette*, November 6, 1971, 45; “Eric’s Place: Downtown Gets New Nightspot,” *Gazette*, November 17, 1971, 27; “Spec by Night: Montreal by Night pour Touristes Anglophones,” *La Presse*, May 18, 1972, E5.
9. “Montreal May Be Continent’s 2nd Best City,” *Billboard*, March 17, 1979, 84.
10. Albert Goldman, *Disco* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1978), 138.
11. Bernard Lopez, “Vincent DeGiorgio (Vince DeGiorgio) of Power Records,” Interview with disco DJ, producer, and founder of Power Records, Vincent DeGiorgio, *Discomusic.com*, August 12, 2004, www.discomusic.com/people-more/3302_0_11_0_C78, accessed April 28, 2005.
12. For an insightful account of the ways in which Canadian cultural phenomena “pass” for something else in the United States, see Erin Hurley, “Theatre as National Export: On Being and Passing in the United States,” in Sherrill Grace and Albert-Reiner Glaap, eds. *Performing National Identities: International Perspectives on Canadian Theatre* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2003), 160–80.
13. This confusion also had its roots in the significant involvement of Italian immigrants or their descendants in the Quebec disco scene, which led to many Quebec records bearing recognizably Italian names. For example, Pat Deserio (1950–1990), one of the key producers of Montreal disco during the 1970s and 1980s, moved to Canada from Italy at the age of seven.
14. Posted by Dan Selzer, WOEBOT: Italo Disco, www.woebot.com/movabletype/archives/000034.html, November 26, 2003.
15. Emily Raine, “Records of Montreal Musical History and eBay,” seminar paper, Department of Art History and Communications Studies, McGill University, 2007.
16. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1991), 77.
17. I discuss these issues at greater length in Straw, “Pathways of Cultural Movement.”
18. “Parapluie Imports Rhythm Tracks for Quebec Hits,” *Billboard*, January 22, 1977, 101.
19. See the interview with Levine and general discussion in Frank Töpe, “Lifting You Higher,” *DJ Magazine* 92 (July 1–14, 1993): 20–21.
20. Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary Theory* (London: Verso, 2005), 14.
21. See, for one usage of this term, Stephanos Stephanides, “Translatibility of Memory in an Age of Globalization,” *Comparative Literature Studies* 41, no. 1 (2004): 101–15.
22. Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar and Elizabeth A. Povinelli, “Technologies of Public Forms: Circulation, Transfiguration, Recognition,” *Public Culture* 15, no. 3 (2003): 391.
23. Dimock’s notion of a “radius of literary action,” the line along which reception and influence travel, is discussed in her “Literature for the Planet,” *PMLA* 116, no. 1 (2001): 173–88.
24. Pascale Casanova, *La République mondiale des lettres* (Paris: Seuil, 1999), 127.
25. See Imre Szeman, “Belated or Isochronic? Canadian Writing, Time, and Globalization,” *Essays on Canadian Writing* 71 (2000): 145–53.

26. Dimock, "Literature for the Planet," 175.
27. Peter Shapiro's history *Turn the Beat Around* is unusually attentive to the European contribution to disco, tracing it back to the influence of late 1960s "Euro-pop" on British dance music.
28. For a useful discussion of Moretti and others who have taken up this issue, see Stephanides, "Translatibility of Memory."
29. See the press clippings and interview on Pierre Perpall's website (under History), www.starplus.ca/perpall/english/index2.html, accessed May 20, 2008.
30. These and other details of Pierre Perpall's life and career are taken from an interview on Montreal radio station CIBL, October 5, 2006, and my own e-mail correspondence with Perpall.
31. This version of these stages is slightly different from that offered by Sabrina Ramet in her study of eastern European rock, and summarized by Tony Mitchell (109). In Ramet's model, an initial stage marked by the adaptation of international repertory to the local language gives way to "the emergence of original rock compositions, usually sung in English." For the most part, this phase is absent from the history of Quebec rock. See Tony Mitchell, *Popular Music and Local Identity: Rock, Pop, and Rap in Europe and Oceania* (London: Leicester University Press, 1996).
32. See Matthew Hays, "Perpall Power," *Montreal Mirror*, February 1, 2007, available online at www.montrealmirror.com/2007/020107/news5.html, accessed July 20, 2007.
33. The most complete discography of Perpall's work I have found is on the website "Le Parolier: Pierre Perpall" at www.leparolier.org/quebecois/classartistes/p/pierrepall.htm, accessed August 17, 2007.
34. Charles Kronengold, e-mail communication, April 20, 2008.