# Inside The Disco Inferno

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When disco burst on the scene nearly 30 years ago, it was the tribal beat for a new generation of gay men: liberated, fashionable and wildly hedonistic. They converged under the pleasure domes of Studio One in LA, The Trocadero in San Francisco, and Paradise Garage in New York City. The nonstop party was fueled by cheap drugs and quick sex. But when AIDS hit at the end of the ’70s, the party was over.

With many gay DJs and performers, the dance-music industry suffered some of the first casualties, including Patrick Cowley, the turntable wizard of Megatone Records and muse to divine disco diva Sylvester, who died in 1981. Sylvester himself, whose classic cut “You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)” was one of disco’s megahits, succumbed to the virus in 1988. Shortly before he died, Sylvester succinctly summed up his view on AIDS -- which was in all likelihood shared by many of his contemporaries -- when he told the *San Francisco Examiner*, “I don’t need to take the AIDS antibody test. I know what I’ve done. Why would I want to waste $90 when I could go shopping?”

Throughout the 1980s, recording-industry execs were mum. “Much of the music industry had its head up its ass,” said dance-music producer and AIDS advocate Mel Cheren. “[AIDS] was not its top priority.” As the death toll rose, other disco royalty lost to AIDS included songwriter Paul Jabara (“Last Dance,” “Enough is Enough”), Dan Hartman (“Relight My Fire”), David Cole of C+C Music Factory (“Gonna Make You Sweat,” “Pride”), Village People producer Jacques Morali and hundreds of DJs. Most of these deaths were downplayed by the complacent industry.

“This is an image-driven industry and people are still frightened by the images that characterize this disease,” said Tim Rosta, executive director of Lifebeat. “Sex, drugs and rock ’n’ roll are the mythology of the music industry, but [people] don’t want to deal with the side effects of that.” Lifebeat, an AIDS-ed foundation and deep pockets to people with HIV in the industry, was founded by PWA producer-manager Bob Caviano, who penned a "*J’accuse!*" op-ed in *Billboard* in late 1991 that sent shockwaves through the music biz just as Queen lead singer Freddy Mercury died of the disease. Caviano passed away a year later.

Rosta and Cheren both acknowledge that an air of secrecy still prevails because of the need to protect career and image. As Rosta said, in the music industry “you have to have a long shelf-life.” Cheren is now lobbying to reopen the Paradise Garage as a shrine/performance space for AIDS benefits.

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Mighty Real.

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