# Requiem for the Queen of Disco

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**By Dennis Daniel (Comptroller, Smart + Strong)**

Last week, Donna Summer, the Queen of Disco, died of cancer at the tragically early age of 63. Summer was a major diva and a musical icon of the ’70s, particularly to the gay community, which was finally coming into its own in this post-Stonewall era. In many ways her music was a clarion call for our generation. I remember one college party where my friends and I danced in the rain in the front yard with “Last Dance” blasting from the windows of the house. She had the remarkable talent of being able to get just about anyone on their feet and moving.

*Watch video of “Last Dance” from a 1978 concert:*

Within minutes of the announcement of her death, my Facebook news feed began filling with obits, fan condolences and video clips of her songs. Most of the comments were laudatory, but a few people tempered their remarks by referencing the homophobic controversy she was embroiled in during the 1980s. Several of the gay news blogs I read posted items on her death; they also referenced the controversy. The discussions in the threads following those articles were long and often quite heated. It fascinated me that so many people felt so passionately about this incident from almost 30 years ago.

The controversy to which they were referring began in 1983, at a time when the gay community was reeling from the early impact of the AIDS crisis. A reviewer for the Village Voice reported that during a concert in Atlantic City, Summer, who had recently become a born-again Christian, had made some disparaging remarks about gays and said that AIDS was God’s punishment for homosexuality. The alleged comments were not recorded or broadcast. But the gay press picked up the story, and the gay community became incensed. Many broke or threw away their Donna Summer albums. Some gay clubs refused to play her music.

Eventually she made some tepid apologies, claiming what she’d said had been misconstrued and that in the early ’80s she had been uneducated about the facts and science of AIDS. Many felt this was too little, too late. Finally, in an interview with The Advocate in 1989, she totally denied ever making the statements and said that the whole thing had been a terrible misunderstanding that had hurt her greatly. Coincidentally, in 1989 she also released her comeback album *Another Place Another Time*. The timing had naysayers claiming that her apologies were insincere.

I was bartending at the Ice Palace in Cherry Grove, Fire Island, in the summer of 1989. Cherry Grove and its sister community The Pines were considered the epicenter of gay disco culture at the time, and the Donna Summer controversy was still raging there--well, as much as any controversy can rage on the

island that isn't about how dry a martini should be or when tea dance should start. Her new song "This Time I Know It's for Real" was the runaway hit of the summer. All a DJ had to do was cue that one up, and the dance floor would be packed in seconds. But many had not forgotten or forgiven Summer, and they would stand on the sidelines glaring at the dancing crowd. Some would leave the building completely.

I was in Cherry Grove again this past weekend--the first weekend after Summer's death--and I ran into many people who had been there back in the '80s, so I decided to do an informal poll about the issue. Surprisingly almost everyone I spoke to believed that Summer had indeed made some kind of disparaging statements, although many agreed that whatever she had said had probably been exaggerated. Many were willing to let bygones be bygones. "It was over 25 years ago...let it go." But there were quite a few who, like the Dixie Chicks, were not ready to make nice. One of those also hadn't bought anything by Tropicana since Anita Bryant's anti-gay campaign in 1977 (Bryant was a spokesperson for Florida orange juice at the time).

Unlike Bryant, who remains a vocal opponent of gay rights, Summer, if she did misspeak about AIDS, seemed to have changed her tune. And in later years she did many benefit concerts for AIDS causes, including one at Carnegie Hall that raised $400,000 for GMHC in 1998. Elton John, the godfather of the "gay mafia," said about her death, "She is a great friend to me and to the Elton John AIDS Foundation and I will miss her greatly."

Personally, I suppose I too believe she did make some sort of negative remarks all those years ago, which she surely regretted. But I never stopped dancing to her music. I still have my LP of *On the Radio*, the double album of her greatest hits. I think I can let it go. So Donna, rest in peace. Your contributions to our musical culture far outweigh the "alleged" controversy. Tonight I think I'll pull out the vinyl, dust off the turntable (yes, I still have one), and "Dim all the lights, sweet darling, 'cause tonight it's you and me."

*Watch her 1978 "MacArthur Park" live performance:*

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