

Anniversary

It's So Good: I Feel Love By Donna Summer Turns 45

JUDE RODGERS, June 30th, 2022

To create the future, you have to imagine the future. You have to take that potential and extend its possibilities – sonically, mechanically, literally – through time. Jude Rogers speaks to co-producer Pete Bellotte and a host of famous fans about one of the all time great singles



Part 1. Inventing The Future (Accidentally, Fortuitously)

Forty-five years ago, Pete briefly thought about inventing the future.

This is what happened to Pete's future. Pete is 78. He lives in a village in the West Sussex countryside, where he spends a lot of time walking with his wife, Ellie, and their two English Pointer dogs, Bebe and Vita. He was born on the other side of London, in Barnet. He also writes and loves literature, as he always did.

Nowadays, he spends a lot of time collating work by British writer and illustrator Mervyn Peake, best known for his *Gormenghast* trilogy: original paintings, drawings, letters and signed first editions of all of Peake's books and other ephemera. It's not a cheap business. The *Gormenghast* books also inspired him in the mid-1970s, when he thought about applying the idea of a trilogy to the narrative of an album. He was working in Munich at the time, having moved to Germany after touring Europe with a British band, Linda Laine and the Sinners, throughout the 1960s.

Fluent in the language of his adopted country, he worked alongside two other non-Germans. One was from northern Italy and had originally moved to West Berlin in the mid-1960s to stay with his aunt, before heading to Bavaria and establishing a music studio. The other had come from the US to sing in a musical production of *Hair*, then met and married an Austrian actor called Helmuth Sommer. She took his name and kept it after their divorce in 1976, although she did change one letter.

In early 1977, Pete had just finished reading Anthony Powell's *A Dance To The Music Of Time*, the celebrated series of twelve books which runs through the decades of its characters' lives. Applying this idea to an album which similarly travelled through time, *I Remember Yesterday*, Pete thought that the album should finish on a note about how music would sound in the future, which he assumed would not involve any analog instruments. A local recording engineer was brought in to help, Robbie Wedel, who had access to a Moog Modular 3P synthesiser. His day job was working with an avant garde German composer, Eberhard Schoener.

Moogs weren't particularly new or revolutionary by this point. First demonstrated a decade earlier at the Monterey International Pop Festival, they had been used on records that very same year by Jean-Jacques Perrey and Gershon Kingsley, The Monkees, The Doors and The Byrds. Syncing every track to a tempo was a new idea, however, one that purely came from Wedel. "'I Feel Love' is unthinkable without Robby Wedel," Pete says today – Pete Bellotte is forever tied to his colleagues Giorgio Moroder and Donna Summer as pioneers of that masterpiece of effervescent, elegant futurism. "So much more should be made of his contribution. He was part of the instrument, almost, from the moment he brought those three cases and the 61-note keyboard into the studio."

Robby Wedel is the enigma buzzing in the middle of 'I Feel Love'. "He was a very unassuming man, born and bred in Munich, and a wearer of tweed suits," Bellotte goes on. "Quite Bavarian. He could have come out of an office." It was Wedel's idea to record a reference pulse on the tape's sixteenth track, one of stuttering, buzzing white noise, to which the Moog could be locked in, which would then synchronise everything else. "He'd only just figured the Moog could do this a few weeks before, something nobody else had at that point. So it was just serendipity, really – one of those things – accidental that a few weeks later he was with us, saying, 'Do you want to try to do this?'"

Pete laughs. "We didn't even know what syncing was. We just weren't on his wavelength."

Up to that point, Bellotte and Moroder had recorded against what he calls "terrible, cheap cha-cha-cha" beats on drum machines. It wasn't just the syncing of the track, however, that gave 'I Feel Love' its undeniable power. The tone of the bassline – that amazing sequence of Moroder's running arpeggios – also comes from a sequenced sound created by Wedel. The bassline was doubled up in the mix for impact, with added reverb, "and with the reverb and the doubling, it sounds like the heaviest bassline of all. That turned the magic on."

British drummer Keith Forsey was then brought in to add a four-to-the-floor kick-drum to the mix, not because the timing on the track was off, but because the synth-drum sounds on Schoener's Moog didn't quite deliver the right punch. (He was later a co-writer of two differently heavy-hitting

1980s hits: 'Flashdance...What A Feeling' with Moroder and Irene Cara and 'Don't You Forget About Me' for Simple Minds.)

The atmosphere in the studio in 1977 was studious, clean and hard-working. "But Robbie was the real inventor," Bellotte says again, repetitively, insistently. He hasn't seen Wedel since those days, and trawls online suggest his engineering career seems to have finished in 1982, with his last credits being on Eberhard Schoener's ambient album, *Meditation*.

Schoener writes on the German MIG website how he tried and failed to sue Moroder to get a share of the profits of 'I Feel Love', saying Wedel passed on a rattling, rhythmic effect he had produced on the Moog to Moroder – one he called the Black and Decker effect – without his consent. I emailed Schoener, now 83, through his website, to ask what happened to Wedel after their last contact. "I can let you know that Robert Wedel worked as a technician for many years until he retired," ran the email. "If I remember right[ly], he died many years ago. Unfortunately, I don't know more. I'm sorry." Other attempts to locate Wedel for this feature sadly came to nothing.



But 'I Feel Love's' magic is also about another extraordinary element: Donna Summer's ethereal vocal, which helped create a template for the future of club mixes, and the bedrock of genres like house and garage. Summer had had hits already with Moroder and Bellotte, most famously 1975's 'Love To Love You Baby', inspired by a lyrical ideas of hers, which she recorded lying on the floor in the studio, so her friends couldn't see her, singing it in an approximation of the voice of Marilyn

Monroe. She had intended that to be a demo for somebody else, she told German TV in 2009, as it felt “too sexy a song” for her to sing.

But the emotion behind ‘I Feel Love’ came from a very real place. “We wanted the music to sound like an automaton – relentless,” Bellotte explains. “The beat sounded heartless, but Donna was the heart. She was love.”

On the night that Summer was meant to be writing the song’s lyrics with Bellotte, he was kept waiting for three hours. Summer was having a romantic crisis, trying to work out whether or not to leave the boyfriend she had thought about while writing ‘Love To Love You Baby’, artist Peter Mühlendorfer, for a man she’d just met, Bruce Sudano, of the group Brooklyn Dreams. “She was on the phone to her astrologer trying to work out her astrological compatibility with both of them,” Bellotte says, a smile in his voice. “And that was the very night that she decided to be with Bruce, who became her husband, who she had two children with, and who she stayed with for the rest of her life.’

Bellotte completed the lyric himself while he waited. Summer apologised profusely to him when she came down – “she was always such a lovely, easy person to work with” – and delivered the song in one take. Summer was also fun, Bellotte says: she loved messing around with different tones and delivery. “Whatever suited the song. She just did the vocal for ‘I Feel Love’ that way, going high, in that range.” As she did, the idea of female pleasure and ecstasy entered the synthesiser’s mechanical world, one often thought of as very masculine before, especially in the world of prog. A new shimmering juggernaut of sound was launched into the world, accessible to everyone.

The trio “didn’t think that much” of their new song to start with, but their boss at Casablanca Records, Neil Bogart, jumped on it. He’d also spotted ‘Love To Love You Baby’s’ commercial potential in 1975, after seeing the effects it had on people at an orgy in his house, and asked for it to be made into a 17-minute mix, long before the era of the commercial twelve-inch disco single). “He was an incredible music man,” Bellotte says. “He also suggested three edits to the track which really made it work. He understood what it could do and where it could go.”

Despite its success, Bellotte is still staggered by the song’s ongoing legacy. “Thing is, none of us – myself, Giorgio, Donna – ever planned anything. Things just evolved. Here we were, an Italian, an Englishman and an American in Munich, three foreigners in a foreign land – it was an accident we got together in the first place.” Giorgio, Donna and he were in the studio all the time, he adds, working hard. “We didn’t drink, smoke, or take drugs. We barely went out.” After ‘I Feel Love’ was a huge global smash, however, things changed a bit. “We’d stop at 6 pm, and go out to nice restaurants every night.”

Bellotte also only saw ‘I Feel Love’s’ impact in a nightclub once, in the late 1970s. A friend had begged him to come along, and see it for himself. “I couldn’t believe it. I’m not a nightclub person, as you may have realised from my other interests. People were going absolutely *mad*.”

In the last forty-five years, he has also had time to reflect on why the song might work. “Music changes but love doesn’t. Love’s the same as it was centuries ago.” The coupling of a relentlessly physical, sexual beat beneath a sensual vocal of cascading triplets – bringing men and women, men and men, women and women, together – love keeps going, backwards, forwards, everywhere, forever.

Part 2. ‘I Feel Love’ Inventing Other Futures

In the UK, the summer of 1977 should’ve been the summer of punk. “So many youngsters were trying to be little punks around that time,” remembers Orbital’s Phil Hartnoll; he was 13 in 1977, and fitted that description. “But little punks generally had broad tastes too. I liked Kraftwerk, for instance – anything that sat at odds with the mainstream. We were all open-minded, and eager, to hear things that were different. That felt different.” Then Hartnoll heard ‘I Feel Love’, on John Peel’s Radio 1 show. “It was like a bomb going off. As soon as I heard that bassline something changed inside me. That sequence, that rhythm, that musical pattern – it felt like ecstasy in sound. It still feels like ecstasy in sound.”

'I Feel Love' meant something to him particularly, he says, because he was "quite a self-destructive kid. But compared to punk, which was angry, this record was just about joy. It was a very touching moment for me, hearing that record for the first time, it really was. It was a reminder that there were other things out there." It also got Phil sneaking off to gay discos and clubs at the turn of the 80s, as these were the only places, he says, playing good electronic club music. "And then things started to change after that. That sound started to come through more and more."

Those synced-up Moog sounds informed the growing culture of synth-pop in the UK as the new decade progressed. In mainland Europe, Italo house soon arrived, hugely influenced by 'I Feel Love''s rhythms. Over in the US, house and techno would take the robotic, ethereal roots of 'I Feel Love''s futuristic disco, and twist them into sparser, darker, stranger incarnations. But before them came Patrick Cowley, and the definitive 'I Feel Love' remix which arguably invented Hi-NRG, that was made ambitiously, and quickly, after the original's release.

It's important to remember that 'I Feel Love' was a much faster, and bigger commercial success in Britain. It spent four weeks at no. 1 in the UK in July 1977 but took a while getting to no. 6 in America's Billboard Charts, in the November of the same year. Cowley, a 27-seven-year-old who worked lights in San Francisco nightclubs, had heard it earlier in the summer when it was released on an acetate for DJs. Soon after he started work on his mix of the song – but vogueish new synthesisers and sequencers were way out of his means.

Cowley didn't have access to the original recording of 'I Feel Love' either – only a vinyl copy, says Dark Entries label founder Josh Cheon, who has released reams of Cowley's epic, psychedelic music in recent years. "This was long before MIDI, so he must have been using reels of tape, cutting and layering, at home. So then to make something that leftfield and avant-garde – and nearly sixteen minutes long – that says a lot." Cowley adds sections where Moroder's arpeggios continue, as well as high-octane synth melodies and percussive washes of sound over the top, which further ramp its tensions. "And remember he wasn't paid to do it. He just wanted to. That was his dedication to his craft."

In *Mechanical Fantasy Box*, Cowley's homoerotic journals from the 1970s, finally published in 2019, 'I Feel Love' is mentioned twice. The first time is on 25 September 1977. "'I Feel Love' rages on in the Disco (with me in the middle of it)". This suggests his remix was already out there in the clubs before it was a US hit; he made 50 acetate copies of it for DJs and radio stations. The next comes on 16 October, when 'I Feel Love' marks a hugely important moment in Cowley's life.

"Casablanca Records possesses the extended, augmented version of 'I Feel Love' and I await their judgment. Nevertheless, an important shift of perspective has taken place. I now realise my talents are valuable and are fast approaching a level of maturity sufficient to pay the rent. I'm ready for it. Ready to dive into the business of music and come up with my share of the larger life, The Extended, Augmented Version!"

This track only came to be released in 1980, by the New York subscription service Disconet, on their compilation *Volume 3, Program 7* (Disconet were the first remix service, established in 1977, produced professionally selected and mixed disco music for club DJs, mobile discos and radio stations). Casablanca didn't release the megamix until 1982, the year that Cowley died; he was one of the earliest people to die from an AIDS-related illness in the US.



Cowley's mention of 'I Feel Love' in 1977 in his journals moves Cheon very much. "It makes me cry, almost. Him suddenly realising the impact of what he was trying to do."

"And it's still one of the best remixes in the world," house DJ Roland Leesker tells me by e-mail. He first heard the track at what he describes as a "Hi-NRG gay tea dance party in Frankfurt" party in the late 1980s. "I was maybe 15 years old [when I heard it], and I was overwhelmed by the energy of the music, the sweat and the sweetness of all dancers and people in that discotheque." Cowley's remix is as important to dance music production culture, he believes, as the works of Kraftwerk were. "It was a mind-blowing game-changer. And I think you need to have big balls to do what [Cowley] did: simply repeating the instrumental parts of the song, making it very, very long and adding psychedelic discoid effects ... wow, what a bomb!"

Leesker also thinks that Donna Summer's lyrics affected house music. "I think it gave many DJs, producers and dancers many positive vibrations, and helped them in their belief to trust the way – the idea – of love." In 2017, DJ Pierre did a cover of 'I Feel Love' called 'Acid Love', for Leesker's *Get Physical* series. The original, he says, still sounds "absolutely modern and timeless". And let's not forget, he adds, that disco and house are from the same root. "House music is just more track and rhythm-based, developed out of those disco mixes where DJs prolonged instrumental parts to make them longer and more danceable."

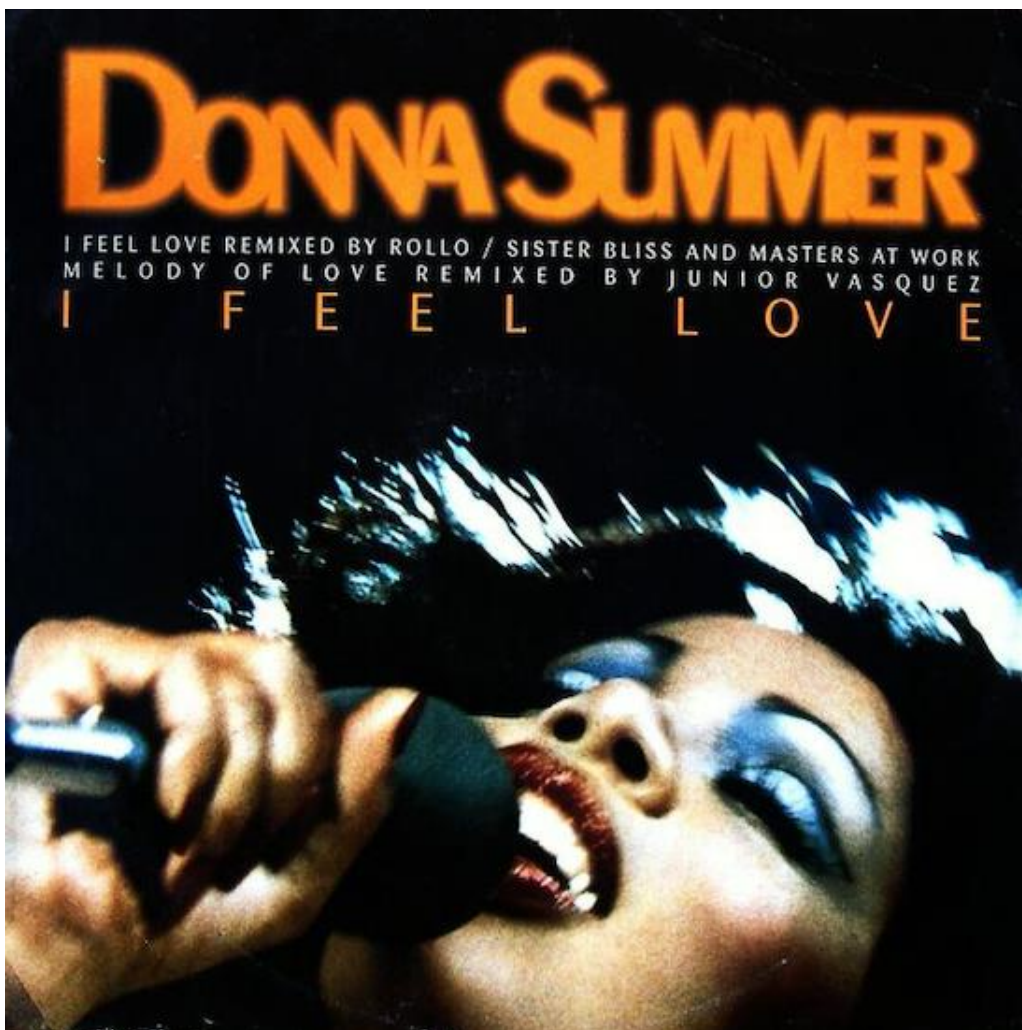
'I Feel Love' kept being played by DJs like Derrick May and Carl Craig in the last decades of the 20th century for a very practical reason, argues Bill Brewster of DJ History and co-author of *Last Night A*

DJ Saved My Life. “The BPMs work well with house and techno, making it easy to mix into sets. That and how powerful it sounds – that always makes it work.”

Louie Vega agrees. Along with Kenny Gonzalez as Masters of Work, the duo were commissioned to remix it in 1995. He’d first heard the song as a child, and as a DJ loved its perfect arrangement.. “[It] lent itself well to the DJ world... there was the intro, then the two breakdowns, that were made for mixing out or even bringing it in from any of those points. It was the quintessential dance record!” They’d also had the idea of asking Donna Summer to re-record her vocal. Vega was nervous about this. “We didn’t think she would say yes, but to our surprise, she said she would... and the only condition was we had to drive out to Connecticut to cut vocals at a studio there.” He was blown over by her. “She was kind, humble and super-sweet. And you know that aura thing you’ve heard certain artists and people have? Well, she had it. I was truly in awe of her presence, as she’d been such a big part of my musical life.”

She added that she’d wanted to sing the song again after hearing new chords in their new version, Vega continues, and she also asked for lots of reverb in her voice to a point where it was almost all reverb. “And she sang far from the mic maybe two feet away.” She was producing herself. “It was perfect when we heard it back. What a true honour it was to have that entire experience.”

And over twenty-five years after that remix, ‘I Feel Love’s power hasn’t diminished even slightly. “It still resonates today because besides it having the sounds that have stood the test of time, from recording to mastering, it also has timeless lyrics that any age can relate to. A few years ago, I played it at the Glitterbox closing Party at Hi in Ibiza to over 6,000 people and they were screaming to it! So many other tracks have dated or now feel overdone: ‘I Feel Love’ has somehow missed that conundrum completely.”



Other DJs have had odd experiences like Vega's when they have dropped 'I Feel Love' in a live set in recent years. Something strange happened to The Blessed Madonna when she played it in 2018, as she recounted to Ellen Penrose for DICE. Playing a huge techno-heavy set at Pitch in Australia, it was going so well that she felt "this weird psychedelic quality — you come out of your brain". She usually never played 'I Feel Love', "because it's such a classic you just don't play it. I've played it like three or five times through my whole DJ career... but everyone was going wild and I just thought, 'If I drop this now, it'll be great.'"

Just as she was about to press play, a man emerged from the crowd, out of nowhere, looked at her dead-on, and said "I Feel Love". "I've never had anything like that before or after."

The song's popularity in the mainstream over the last four decades has also had an impact on younger DJs. Chris Reed, AKA Plastician, remembers it being everywhere on the radio when he was small. "In the house, in the car — it was the background noise to us messing around as kids." His teenage interest in funk and soul led him to garage, then to dubstep and bass, the genres within which he would make his name as a DJ. His crate-digging interest in disco persisted, however, and in 2011, he began to play disco sets as a sideline.

His first was recorded in 2014 at Bestival; soon after he was playing more disco, he says, than the music he was originally known for. He enjoys spending days finding rare disco on recordings of live sets from the 70s ("whacking out my Shazam, then when I can't find anything, trying to track down very old DJs online") or going deep on sites like The San Francisco Disco Preservation Society.

"But 'I Feel Love' is never far away from me at a disco gig," he's at odds to point out, full of the same enthusiasm about the track as Louie Vega, Roland Leesker and Phil Hartnoll. "I've never played it at a bass gig, but I know I could — the night would still go off. Those arpeggios that run through house and techno are the bedrock of club music. Everybody knows that and feels that."

He agrees with The Blessed Madonna that 'I Feel Love' deserves a very special place in a set. "It's such a big track. It needs to be near the end of the night. It's a kick up the arse. It's also never aged, which is a huge part of its appeal. People try and emulate it all the time because it stands outside time."

And even though he loves 'I Feel Love's' many remixes, he always goes back to the original. "The original sounds different. It sounds honest. There was a different energy in those days. It's in the rhythms, in Donna Summer's voice — there's a poignancy in it that's hard to describe. It's just perfect."

'I Feel Love' has existed in many other sparkling, insistent, outward-reaching iterations. Its status as an LGBTQ+ anthem was underlined when Bronski Beat covered it in 1986 and Sam Smith in 2019. Underworld took its pulse in 1999, dipped it in darkness, and reimagined it as 'King Of Snake'. Madonna melded it with 'Future Lovers' on her disco-inspired, neon-lit *Confessions On A Dancefloor* tour.

Remixes also continue to flourish. Speaking to the DJ Richard Norris a week ago on Twitter, he remarked there's usually one per season, including Danny Howells, Afrojack and Moreno in the last decade. Yesterday, he messaged me again, with a link. I clicked, and watched DJ Jon Carter's new remix, played at the 2022 Glastonbury Festival, in tribute to investigative journalist and former *Mixmag* editor Dom Phillips. His accompanying post read: "Feel Love. Celebrate life. Protect others. These abilities can never be taken from us. Use them."

To create the future, you have to imagine the future, even if the future ends up being something very different for you to what you expected. Around his dog walks and time spent curating his collections these days, Pete Bellotte is writing his own, non-linear memoir. Giorgio Moroder got a new lease of life in the last decade with Daft Punk, toured solo around the world and co-produced last year's Duran Duran album *Future Past*. Donna Summer died in 2012 at 63 of lung cancer. Robby Wedel's final moments remain a mystery. If you know anything, this journalist is desperate to find out, and follow that pulse.

But the combined energy of the makers keeps going. It's there in 'I Feel Love's' propulsive power, the rises and falls of Summer's vocals, its relentless spirit, its fast-pounding heart.

Ideas of what the future could be have always been with us. They never lose their power. They're timeless. The music of the future is also an idea, a dream, a utopia that we have to keep conjuring up in our bodies and the emotional movement of our minds. 'I Feel Love' came to occupy this space so accidentally, so fortuitously, so perfectly, that it has become a place of glistening optimism that never loses its light.

You and me. You and me. Falling free. Falling free. It's so good. It's so good. We feel love.