

# The Arts

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## For Disco's First Diva, It's Still Not Last Dance

By **BERNARD WEINRAUB**

LOS ANGELES, Nov. 10 — Disco music has faded, but Donna Summer hasn't. The uncontested Queen of Disco, a sultry singer whose music defined an era, Ms. Summer says she is no longer a diva, no longer a sex goddess, no longer locked into the music of the 1970's. After several years without making a record, she has released one album, is starting another and plans a concert tour in the new year.

"There's life in the old girl yet," she said with a laugh.

Ms. Summer, who will turn 55 on New Year's Eve, has won five Grammy awards and had three consecutive No. 1 platinum albums. (She is the only artist to accomplish this.) She has also just published an autobiography, "Ordinary Girl: The Journey" (Villard Books), which chronicles a turbulent life that included a suicide attempt at the height of her success. "We all have pain, including me," Ms. Summer said in a recent interview at a Beverly Hills hotel.

Her new album, a two-CD set, "The Journey: The Very Best of Donna Summer" (Utv Records), includes her hits of the 1970's as well as two new songs. It is a reunion after 22 years for Ms. Summer and Giorgio Moroder, the Italian-born producer who met her in the early 1970's in Munich, where she was performing in "Hair," and worked with her to create disco's sound and singing style. One new song, "Dream-A-Lot's Theme (I Will Live for Love)," is from "The Legend of Dreamway," a children's musical she has created.

Ms. Summer, who wrote many of the songs she recorded, said she wanted to complete another musical, also called "Ordinary Girl," about her life. "Deep down I was this ordinary girl," she said.

Ms. Summer, who describes herself as a born-again Christian, has been married for 23 years to her second husband, Bruce Sudano, a songwriter. She has three daughters, two from her marriage to Mr. Sudano and one from her first marriage, to Helmuth Sommer, an Austrian actor. (Born LaDonna Adrian Gaines in Boston, she changed her name from Donna Gaines to Donna Sommer and later to Donna Summer as part of a makeover in the 1970's by her manager at the time, Neil Bogart, who died in 1982.)

Ms. Summer and Mr. Sudano have lived in Nashville for nine years, partly to accommodate his songwriting career. The couple have three homes in the area, including a farm.

Ms. Summer said she had few illusions about her own career. She said the diva image was fake. "At a certain point I began to push out the fakeness and just force people to deal with who I really am," she said.

She expressed little patience with current divas like Mariah Carey and Jennifer Lopez. "Believe me, I'm not putting anybody down," she said, "but I do think some performers need to have that attention. They live for that."

"They think all that attention will keep their success at its peak," she added. "Well, you know what? Everybody's success is going to wane at some point."

Ms. Summer grew up listening to jazz, country, rock 'n' roll and even classical music. In the heyday of her disco career she still sang and recorded ballads, rock and other music for

Casablanca Records. "The disco songs were the singles, which they promoted," she said. "That's how we got people to buy the albums." At AIDS benefits and other events today, she may sing ballads, but disco nostalgia is ever present: audiences always demand her old hits, like "Last Dance" and "On the Radio."

Could disco ever return? "I'm sure it will," said Ms. Summer, now a grandmother. "This music will always be with us. I mean, whether they call it disco music or hip-hop or bebop or flip-flop, whatever they're going to call it, I think music to dance to will always be with us."

Ms. Summer, still charismatic and glamorous, spoke without bitterness about the rise and fall of disco and, to some extent, of her career. "Music just evolves, people just get tired of it, and they move on to something else," she said. "In that period people were in a dance mood. They wanted to be lifted up, they wanted to have fun, they didn't want to think."

"You were coming out of the Vietnam war, the 60's, the protest era, and I was coming out of it as well," she recalled. "I think people were just in a different mind set. When dance music came out, with that beat and that movement, it was a switch."

### Donna Summer, with a book, a new album and soon a tour.

In her book, written with Marc Eliot, Ms. Summer says the lowest and highest points of her life were simultaneous: in 1976, after her voice began igniting the disco craze. She said she found herself seriously depressed over the breakup of her first marriage, an abusive relationship that followed, health problems and the "sex goddess" image Casablanca Records created for her.

Feeling alone, late that year Ms. Summer tried to leap from a window in the Navarro Hotel on Central Park South but caught her leg in a drape. Then a maid walked in and talked her back to reality. Doctors later told her that a chemical imbalance was causing her depression and prescribed medication that helped. The experience set her off on a religious quest, which culminated in 1979, when she became born-again, she said.

Ms. Summer's suicide attempt came at the end of two years of extraordinary success. Her first major disco hit was the overtly sexual 17-minute song "Love to Love You Baby," from the album of the same title, released in 1975. The song, she said, was an effort to imitate the breathy voice and style of Marilyn Monroe. With Mr. Moroder producing and Mr. Bogart, who ran Casablanca Records, guiding her, Ms. Summer released two more albums in 1976, "A Love Trilogy" and "The Four Seasons of Love," which solidified her disco and pop audience.



Donna Summer, now an author.

One song, "Last Dance," from the 1978 film "Thank God It's Friday," became the emblem of disco. The song won an Oscar and a Grammy for best R&B female vocal performance. It was the first of her Grammys, which she won in four different categories.

The peak of Ms. Summer's career was in 1978-79, when she achieved four No. 1 records: a revival of Richard Harris's hit "MacArthur Park," "Hot Stuff," "Bad Girls" and "No More Tears (Enough Is Enough)," a duet with Barbra Streisand.

Critics have been alternately kind and harsh to her music. Rolling Stone, reviewing a reissue of "Bad Girls" last August, said Ms. Summer had created "a new idea of international pop," adding: "Madonna's career without Summer and 'Bad Girls'? Unthinkable." But other critics have spoken of the banality of much of disco music and the "emptiness at its core."

An online music site, Wilson & Alroy's Record Reviews (warr.org), said this of Ms. Summer: "The only superstar performer disco has ever produced. Summer has a good voice and substantial songwriting talent, but her great gift is acting: she projected a hedonistic sexual image so effectively she became the poster child for 70's excess." The review added that Ms. Summer was "basically just a top-flight nostalgia act."

Nostalgia or not, Ms. Summer has a loyal fan base, much of it gay. She said she was a little uncertain why she and performers like Cher, Tina Turner and Bette Midler seem so popular with gays.

"I think it's the people doing the music," she said. "There's something about who they are as people. Sometimes a song becomes a backdrop for your environment or a moment in your life when times were good or bad or joyful or sad. The song embraces you. And when you hear that song, or see that performer, you relate to them."

Does she miss the disco era? "People didn't want to look at the realities, did they?" Ms. Summer replied.



The cover of Donna Summer's new album, a two-CD set, and a photo of her in her 1970's heyday from "Ordinary Girl," her autobiography.