

Feature Story: How to Play “On The Radio”

National Standards: 1-9

Donna Summer was a singer/songwriter and actress who was influenced by the counterculture movement of the 1960s but while living in Europe met producers who were at the forefront of the disco music. Its rhythm and connection to dance were new sounding compared with the folk and rock-based music of the time, and as the 70’s dawned became the culture’s next musical wave.

Deconstructing this song will reveal a mix of strong vocals, keyboard, strings, horns and percussive elements. The premise of the In Tune story is that the strings can be emulated using one of three keyboards – the others playing electric piano and acoustic piano sounds. Because the horn parts are key to the production, and available in scholastic jazz bands, the story suggests that “On The Radio,” could be a creative choice for performance by such ensembles.

Prepare

Have students listen to Summer’s recording and identify each of the parts. Listen for the different percussion instruments and separate the different keyboard sounds,

Key points in the article:

- Approximating the original production will require two female vocalists
- Finding sounds to represent the two keyboards should be relatively easy, and replicating the song’s string section on a third keyboard should also be quite doable.
- The song’s distinct disco sound can be accomplished by a drummer learning to play a hi-hat cymbal in the “open and closed” pattern. The recording uses two hi-hat sounds.
- The horns swell as they enter, creating dramatic punctuation for the song’s chorus.

Begin

Review vocabulary words from the article below:

- DISCO – a style of pop music intended mainly for dancing to, typically soul-influenced and melodic with a regular bass beat, popular particularly in the late 1970s.
- PLETHORA: a large or excessive amount of something.
- ASTROPHYSICS: the branch of astronomy concerned with the physical nature of stars and other celestial bodies.
- CATALOGUE a collection of musical compositions.
- CONTEMPORARY: music that is being written now or in the recent past.

Discuss

Where does disco fit in the evolution of popular music from the 1960s to the 1980s?

- What cultural movements did it spawn and how did it fragment youth culture?
- What styles of music were co-existing in the first part of the 1970s, and what genre succeeded it?

Find a string sound on an electric keyboard, in Garage Band, or online that approximates the sound of an acoustic string section

Determine, play and record the opening piano part of “On The Radio”

Arrange the vocals and determine when the second voice should come in.

Ask

- What is your favorite Donna Summer song, and why?
- Why can the string part be played on a keyboard but the horn part need to be played of an acoustic horn section?

Expand

How important were disco lyrics to the impact of the era’s biggest hits. What was the most important element of disco songs?

- The word disco came from the French word “discotheque,” meaning a collection of recordings, first used in the 1920s and based on the on the pattern of *bibliothèque* - in English “library’. So, a disco was a dance hall where records were played, as opposed to live music. These records allowed for the playing music produced with complexities that made dance of a certain style more compelling.