

## Nile Rodgers: Navigating Production Space

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“Why I like working with Nile so much is he does let the artist go through his own thing and if the artist has some quite definite ideas, Nile will roll with those and just get them activated.”

David Bowie (*Black Tie, White Noise*).

This essay’s title highlights Nile Rodgers’ ability to inhabit and enhance the sonic spaces of several genres in his work with recording artists. Given the industry’s usual resistance to seeing artists or producers beyond particular limited stylistic boundaries, his achievement is all the more remarkable. It reveals an ability to negotiate pathways through the recording industry’s business and creative obstacles in his production projects. He also refers to the organic aspect of record production as “celestial navigation” (Personal interview). This analysis focuses primarily on the aesthetics of Rodgers’ production style, encompassing economic realities and ways in which focused creative experimentation can produce both artistically and commercially satisfying results.

Nile Rodgers is one of the few black producers to achieve creative and commercial success across multiple genres *and* decades, but the scope of his contributions rarely attracts detailed analysis despite an enduring influence, partly evidenced by significant sampling of his work in the digital era. The discussion here emphasizes the crosscultural nature of his work, selectively connecting his production characteristics to his often accompanying roles

as songwriter and musician. The map-illustrated cover of his 1983 solo debut album, *Adventures In The Land of The Good Groove* which he co-conceptualised symbolises a career cartography involving explorations into uncharted aesthetic territory. This crafted cover and its ornate lettering also echoes Rodgers’ studio creation of aural worlds in eloquently fabricated spaces.

A distinguishing feature of his work is the foregrounding of organic human creativity, and making technology support this objective. Though it might be argued that several other producers create finished product with an approximately similar descriptive profile, Nile Rodgers’ idiosyncratic aesthetic execution marks a crucial difference. His use of musical space is imbued with a sophisticated sense of economy focused on the primary rhythmic and melodic essentials, yet the interaction of these elements also produces artistically unique work.

At the risk of turning funk into a Freudian semantic exercise, when considering ideas of space in the context of Nile Rodgers, it is both useful and necessary to consider several applicable interpretations of the concept. The idea of a free, unoccupied area has relevance to his cross-genre versatility and pioneering impulse. Rodgers’ elusively fluid rhythm guitar style replete with accents and textural nuances clearly operates in a realm beyond notation.

We might also include the capitalistic context of commercial space as an area rented or sold, highlighting the producer’s mediatory role between art and business.

All of this provides a tangible means of grasping how Nile Rodgers' production style meets the ears of audiences as both highly musical in its formal character *and* transcendent of the medium's traditional, practical confines. Or, as Chic biographer, Daryl Easlea suggests in relation to one particular project, "[T]he whole trick of the production in the first place was to leave so much space" (Easlea 2004: 252).

Rodgers' creative history in the studio reveals a remarkably successful artistic production expansion from dance music to pop/rock, although some of his finest work has barely reached the ears of mass audiences. There's a great deal that can be learned about Nile Rodgers as a producer from his more marginal, less commercially influential projects. As one particular example, his work on *Slam*, the 1989 album from the Dan Reed Network, reinforced aspects of Rodgers' production breadth that previous high-profile projects had not emphasized. Based on his body of productions up to that point, this is an album with instances of atypical colour and character, as exemplified by the foregrounding of acoustic guitar on a track like "Lover".<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, in totality, *Slam* also represents consolidation of the bridges between funk and rock with high production values which also underscore Rodgers' multi-genre versatility. He simply describes this album as "brilliant" (Personal interview).

Unlike most of his successful black contemporaries, Rodgers' reputation as one of the world's most in-demand freelance producers (working with David Bowie, Jeff Beck, Mick Jagger, Duran Duran, and Madonna among many others) transcends R&B, and remains highly credible in the pop/rock world. In retrospect, this is not especially surprising given

Rodgers' roots in the 60s rock influenced band, New World Rising, and his fanaticism for the music of Jimi Hendrix with whom he actually jammed in Greenwich Village (Easlea 2004: 37).<sup>2</sup> *Guitar One* magazine underscores the creative connection, noting that "More than any other black performer with the exception of Jimi Hendrix, Rodgers is associated with his guitar" (Gulla 62). Although it is arguably rarely the central focal point for audiences, the guitar's rhythmic centrality often functions as a spatial axis generating momentum and energy for other sonic elements in his productions.

## Chic & Production Identities

Nile Rodgers is probably best known for his work as a founding member of disco-era superstars Chic, though his use of his extensive musical vocabulary with the group favoured a direct commercially appropriate approach. Chic's records with their highly polished production are also arguably more inherently musical in performance and arrangement than most other disco era recordings, perhaps partially explaining their longevity. Typically, the apparent simplicity of melodic and rhythmic intent in Rodgers' productions masks a deeper underlying creative alchemy. Without conveying any sense of ironic incompatibility, he expresses a passion for the harmonic complexity of jazz while being similarly attracted to the fundamental kinetics of funk (Personal interview).

The utility of Chic's sound is clearly reflected in the albums of Italian-American group Change (Harley 1993: 215). Change's calculated replication of Chic's aural contours even extended to using several of the band's background vocalists (including Luther Vandross and Fonzi Thornton), but the

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<sup>1</sup> This album was co-produced with Dan Reed, but it is a decidedly funkier than the group's major label debut released in 1988, thereby suggesting the impact of Rodgers' rhythmic and spatial approaches.

<sup>2</sup> In an incidental, but rather ironic twist, one of Hendrix's percussionists at Woodstock, Jerry Velez, is now a member of Chic's touring band. Chic also covered Hendrix's "Stone Free" on its *Live At The Budokan* album (1999).

emergence of Change in 1980 on the edge of the post-disco era demonstrated that the glossy production and stylistic mechanics of Chic commercially survived even through imitative articulation. Furthermore, the recording of many Change backing tracks in Italy by Italian musicians indicated that transatlantic space was no obstacle to accurate sonic cloning, although closer inspection suggests that Change lacked the funky fluidity which Rodgers' guitar and production styles contributed to the distinction of the Chic identity. Notably, one account also suggests that Rodgers was initially approached to produce Change, but declined due to other commitments requiring the skills of the Chic Organization production team (Easlea 2004: 174).

Nile Rodgers operates as a highly involved, hands-on producer whose musical awareness heavily informs his production consciousness. Discussing the critical relationships of song structure and groove to his work, Rodgers emphasizes that:

“the bass and the bass drum are an integral part of the foundation of my compositions and arrangements. The stronger that foundation, the more artistic freedom you have. If the bottom is strong – if the foundation is solid – it will support a larger structure, so it's almost like a law of physics” (Massey 2000: 175).

So the spatial potentialities central addressed here are themselves an integral part of Nile Rodgers' own perception of his work with an instinctual response to where space should be occupied or left vacant. Tony Visconti, a recurrent producer of David Bowie, gives his appraisal of the Chic sound:

“Nile would use few instruments, but make them sound really important. If you listen to Chic records, the drums and bass were great and he had that funky guitar and the backing vocals and there was little else” (Easlea 2004: 218).

The relevance of these two authoritative descriptions is clearly demonstrated in Rodgers' work on the Carly Simon track, “Why”, recorded for the *Soup For One* soundtrack album in 1982 when Chic was on the verge of dissolution and transitioning towards digital technologies. The instrumental accents (many of which employ reggae phrasing) are underpinned by programmed drums, and yet the bass, rhythm guitar, piano and synthesizers suspended above the digitally percussive framework interactively cohere, creating sparseness where clutter might otherwise exist. The clarity of execution achieves an holistic effect that functions in commercial terms.

The fusion of this pragmatic approach is also skillfully displayed in the opening seconds of the frequently recycled 1979 Chic hit, “Good Times”, which also demonstrates a conscious utilisation of spatial dimension. Discussing the song's memorable introductory piano flourish in a radio interview, Rodgers described it this way:

“It's a gigantic glissando starting at the lower portion of the keyboard and going as far as you can in that couple of seconds. And then we have the women's bathroom at the Power Station, our famous studio that we recorded in, as the big echo chamber. We fed the signal into the ladies bathroom. It was very reflective in there. It's all tiles and stuff like that, so it makes this swirly sound that's bouncing back and forth. So it's a cool thing. It's a subtle technique that winds up becoming this grand, big statement” (Rodgers BBC interview).

He further notes that Chic lived for “the breakdown”, which he describes as “the stripping down of the tracks so that people could see how we built them up” (Rodgers BBC interview). In relation to “Good Times”, he notes that the dance crowd's enthusiasm would be ignited by the song's deconstruction and gradual reconstruction (Buckley 2001: 392). The transparency of this production approach is extended by the direct transference of the

distinctive Chic sound, shaped with co-producer & bassist, the late Bernard Edwards, to records by other artists, practically as a commercial brand expanding its own marketplace space on records with Sister Sledge and Diana Ross. Rodgers is quick to recognize the key to this sonic consistency, emphasizing that:

“The thing that mainly connects it is the fact that we wound up playing it as well. Imagine if we had written those exact same songs for Diana Ross, but meanwhile let some other band play them. They were the same songs, but I guarantee you they wouldn’t sound like that. I promise you.” (Rodgers BBC interview).

In discussing this component of Rodgers’ creative identity, it is also evident that his muse surfaces clearly even in session work on records he is *not* producing. Although his playing never overwhelms other artists’ records, it exudes distinctive kinetic and tonal characteristics and a rare stylistic economy demonstrably transferred into his production.

His immaculately phrased rhythm guitar contributions to Steve Winwood’s “Wake Me Up On Judgement Day” from 1986’s *Back In The High Life* are indicative not only of his unique tone and style, but also of his ability to extract maximum effect from minimal application, another essential production trait. In particular, the first and second choruses from Winwood’s song illustrate this point by emphasizing the range of funk accentuation which Rodgers coaxes from his guitar. He emphasises one chord out of the three he utilises in this segment of the song, percussively punctuating the minute spaces between phrases magnifies the song’s energy.

His ability here to function within and infuse a limited aural space demonstrates how his individualistic versatility mirrors his organic work methods, and the pervasive influence of his performance sensibilities on his own

stripped down productions.<sup>3</sup> Commenting on his approach to session work, Rodgers actual prefers not to be specially prepared, leaving scope for spontaneity. But his specific statement perhaps implies what he expects from musicians involved in his productions:

“[W]hen I walk into a session, I walk in blind. I’m a tool for the producer and the artist and they can use me however they please. I don’t want to color the session with my stuff until I find out what they have and what they need” (Gulla 64).

Much of what Rodgers brings to any production is his innate kinetic sensibility which is not necessarily tied to dance music, but which allows for a wider range of rhythmic and textured flexibility. As one example, in 1991, he produced a cover of Pink Floyd’s “Money” from *Dark Side of the Moon* (1973) for the Dan Reed Network on *The Heat*. The introductory sound samples of ringing cash registers and jingling change become integral components in a pulsating funk transaction which immediately establishes an entirely distinct character from the original version, but which still succeeds in recalling Pink Floyd’s performance by utilising comparable sonic references. Moreover, the “Money” intro is funk assembled through raw sound rather than melodic song tonality, suggesting that Rodgers’ stylistic articulation as a producer extends and transcends the aesthetics of the guitar role with which he is so closely connected.

It’s a percussive mechanical realisation achieved through technology which Rodgers harnesses and successfully integrates into the fabric of the song. In this sense, his sonic sensibility might be broadly compared to the mixers of dub reggae production, arguably the masters of postmodern ultra-futuristic spatial reconfiguration in popular music.

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<sup>3</sup> Rodgers’ session performance on “I’m The One” by Material (1982) is similarly illustrative of the transformative effect of his playing in guest capacity, and the power of his sonic trademarks as a musician.

## Production Philosophies & Commercial Crossroads

Perhaps the most fundamentally important philosophical characteristic of Nile Rodgers' production is the imperative of moving the artist forward into new territory; he emphasizes, "I always try to make the artist's next record and not their last" ("How To" 2006: 70). In some cases, he creates instrumental soundscapes which bear few central similarities to the artists' previous work that established their aural identities. Despite David Bowie's well advertised R&B affinities (evident on his 1975 *Young Americans* album co-produced by Tony Visconti), no-one else has produced his performances with quite the same textured groove resonance as exemplified in the intro of "Don't Let Me Down & Down", included on the 1993 set, *Black Tie, White*.

Rodgers confronts the perennial issue of enhancing artists' work and not obscuring their creativity with a huge producer's imprint. In one interview, he stresses that:

"Production for me is very psychological. It's taxing. When I'm in the studio, I'm trying to make the best record I can. I'm not trying to show how great I am, but how great the artist is." (Flick 2000).

"A great artist makes a song better; a great producer makes an artist better; and a great artist makes a producer better" (Massey 178).

When asked in 2006 about the most important contributions of a producer in enabling the artist to achieve their sonic objectives, Rodgers notes that you must:

"See the artist's vision with clarity, so that when they're going off the path you can get them back. If the car is going straight, you don't have to steer. To me the artist always has the final word: it's their picture on the cover of the record." (CM 71).

Despite best intentions, conflict potential between artist and producer is ever present, either propelling a project forward through catalytic friction or creating immovable obstacles. In the case of Rodgers' work with Bernard Edwards on the 1980 Diana Ross album, *Diana*, not only was there discord over the producers' suggestion that her voice was flat, but moreover both artist and record company subsequently exerted their veto powers to alter the audio mix (Personal interview; Easlea 180). In so doing, they produced a slightly different soundscape from the text of its Chic creators, and also demonstrated the extent to which even a successful production team can find its aesthetic priorities subverted by business imperatives.

Producing David Bowie's *Let's Dance*, Rodgers had to overcome the considerable post-disco prejudice still lingering in the industry, and the recurrent implication that collaboration between himself and Bowie was artistically incompatible (Easlea 2004: 216). However, Tony Visconti, as an earlier Bowie producer, explains where he sees the creative affinity:

"David wanted that kind of sparse economical sound that Nile could do which was really opposite to the way David and I work, so he was absolutely right to choose Nile for that because I most likely wouldn't have done that." (Easlea 2004: 218).

Rodgers enthusiastically recalls the *Let's Dance* sessions with Bowie which eventually re-established him commercially, and re-emphasises the significance of stylistic individuality:

"When I worked on "Let's Dance" with David Bowie, we were in Switzerland and we were playing with fantastic musicians and as good as the demos sounded I said to him, David, when we get home I guarantee you...once my guys play those exact same songs it's gonna sound very, very different. It's gonna make you *feel* different." (Rodgers BBC interview).

Rodgers' later production work with Bowie a decade later was arguably more aesthetically varied, but similar as an atypical record for the artist (which says quite a lot in the context of Bowie's numerous phases and personae).

His production experience on *Black Tie, White Noise* was reportedly a frustrating affair since Rodgers and Bowie disagreed on the album's creative direction (Buckley 2001: 486-487). In effect, the producer and the artist occupied separate psychological spaces which resulted in a more fragmented album than *Let's Dance*. However, one critic's characterisation of "Don't Let Me Down And Down" as 'trite' does gross discredit to Rodgers' classy production and arrangement (Buckley 2001: 490). The atypical nature of the record left Bowie fans without much stylistic precedent from his catalogue, and many seemed unwilling to take the journey into new territory. Ironically, Bowie describes an interesting contrast between the two projects in which he characterises *Let's Dance* as:

"Nile's vision of what my music should sound like, and I'd provided the songs. This time around it was more my vision of what my album was gonna sound like, and Nile provided the buoyancy and the enthusiasm for the project." (*Black Tie White Noise*).

Rodgers' most commercially resonant project to date has been Madonna's *Like A Virgin* album. It's especially interesting that the rhythm section on the hit title track comprised Bernard Edwards on bass, Nile Rodgers on guitar, and Tony Thompson on drums: in other words, Chic with a different vocalist (Easlea 2004: 232-233). By late 1984 when Madonna's album was released, Chic had disbanded in the previous year having fallen out of commercial favour. But their contribution to the pop fabric and subsequent enormous sales of this record (in excess of 10 million copies in the U.S. alone) with Rodgers at the production helm reaffirms the validity of his spatial economy, reemphasising his focus on utilising organic performance. A fairly basic and sparse

enterprise, the title track is another telling example of Rodgers' willingness to consciously leave several sonic crevices available:

"That was a very simple record. If you look at the track sheet, you'll see that there aren't very many tracks used – it's just bass, drum kit, one guitar, keyboard pad, one keyboard overdub and Madonna's vocal, plus one other vocal with Madonna to double herself in the chorus only – that's it." (Massey 175-176).

"So to me, the foundation of this record isn't the kind of foundation where you need to put a lot of stuff on top of it. [It's] like a bamboo house. It's a building that lives in the confines of its environment." (Massey 176).

In Rodgers' audio-vision, the applied minimalist production concept derives its strength from a relatively skeletal framework.

Notably, while academic volumes have been written about Madonna's messages, images and shifting personae from feminist perspectives, little appears to have been said about the crucial role of male producers on her first three career-making albums, with Rodgers' contribution to *Like A Virgin* as a prime example.<sup>4</sup> Conversely, there's evidence that the popular music press identifies the separate realities of the artist and producer roles in this context. A *Billboard* magazine review of the album described Madonna as "a pop provocateur regardless of her musical gifts" while emphasizing that:

"This second album brings considerable muscle to the equation, thanks to producer Nile Rodgers' sleek but sinewy rhythm

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<sup>4</sup> Her debut was mainly produced by Reggie Lucas who achieved successes with R&B singer Stephanie Mills, with tracks reconstructed by John "Jellybean" Benitez. The career consolidating third album, *True Blue*, encompassed both the production and performance skills of Patrick Leonard whose stylistic trademarks pervade the record.

arrangements, burnished to surgical sharpness by crisp digital sonics.” (Review).

The 1987 self-titled Outloud album (co-produced with fellow band members Philippe Saisse and Felicia Collins) was the group’s only release, but a very lively, densely textured funky pop excursion. Interestingly, when the CD is ‘read’ by iTunes, its genre is listed as “Unclassifiable.” Considering Rodgers’ highly successful commercial performance as a producer by this time, Warner Bros. surprisingly showed very little faith in the project, reportedly calling it “too artistic” (LeRoy). In “Fundamental”, we can hear the highly accented keyboard centred intensity inclusive of synth bass, the multitracked vocal layers, and aggressive drum programming, all subtly underscored deep inside the mix by rock guitar power chords. One review suggested that the group was “Armed with more hi-tech equipment than the Pentagon” (Fleischmann & Robbins). At first then, this particular production seems to contradict the notion proposed earlier that Nile Rodgers style is predicated on the creative exploitation of space. However, the evidently layered density of the Outloud project simply represents another aspect, with all of the components rhythmically harnessed echoing Tony Visconti’s observation about Rodgers’ emphasis on the sonic *size* of a few elements.

The detachment from artistic content and the “commercial manipulation” attributed to the record company by one group member perhaps account for the anonymity of the abstract illustrated album cover which excludes all group members. Remarkably, the release was reportedly recalled from the stores and shelved indefinitely (Collins interview). Essentially, for a pop album, Outloud’s release was too progressive, although conversely this makes a positive statement about the scope of Nile Rodgers’ production work. Although this outing utilized a vast amount of what at the time was cutting edge technology, the machines were

made to serve the *songs* rather than dictating their outcome in a deterministic *fait accompli*.

## Future Frontiers

By 2002, Nile Rodgers employed both his creative and entrepreneurial instincts in establishing Sumthing Distribution and the label Sumthing Else Musicworks, and largely functioning in an A&R/Executive Producer capacity while also controlling the finances. In this role, he has been working with white teenage female rapper Lanz who is signed to a joint venture deal with Interscope Records.

He suggests that forming the company was a socio-economically important move because of the historical lack of black control of distribution. Most significantly, the company’s profile has been built on videogame soundtracks, with *Halo* frequently cited as the best selling release in the history of the genre. When recently asked at the 2007 MIDEM conference in France about the production contrasts between conventional records and videogame soundtracks, he highlights the latter’s “non-linear format” as the equivalent of “working with a different language” (Personal interview). The user’s experience of the soundtrack is truly interactive, with progress in the specific gaming experience aurally signified by new musical variations.

Rodgers occupied this commercial space before its vast economic potential had been widely recognised, underscoring his visionary aura. During a panel conversation at MIDEM, he cited his days with Chic as a key catalyst in his videogame awareness, identifying the resonance of experiences at an arcade near the Power Station recording studio in New York .

Rodgers’ recent investment in a luxury resort complex containing its own top-grade recording facilities in the Turks & Caicos Islands further demonstrates a significant personal and financial investment in

“having some faith that the music business will never go away. I think it’s more robust than it’s ever been. You just have to figure out how you’re gonna participate in it” (Personal interview).

Technology has always consciously played an important role in Nile Rodgers’ work, and in many instances he has actually been an early adopter of unproven devices (such as the Synclavier). Placing his artistic relationship with technology in perspective he prioritises the necessity of building on a valid idea:

“Organically, whatever I say comes from my fingers and my heart. Only after that do we bring in the technology” (Gulla 2006: 64)

“I believe in technology. But it’s only a tool to aid you. The fact is, when you’re on a boat you have to have great gear, but you should also learn celestial navigation, in case something goes wrong.” (Gulla 2006: 64).

Significantly, this concept of spatial flexibility inherently accommodates exploration. Rodgers recalls his participation in the pre-digital era of studio performance and recording, noting that many formerly organic processes have now mutated as a result of sonic mediation via computer-based technology. Even now, his recording process centres on live group interaction (Massey 180).

Others have applied similar spatial stylistic approaches in production, but no one has executed them with quite the same flair, aesthetic versatility, funky finesse, or distinctive sonic features. What separates his artistic persona from others, inclusive of his production identity, is the space he creates for uniquely human elements to emerge in the musical text, becoming an inextricable part of the foreground.

Like most producers, his artist relationships are not always harmonious, and

some of the earliest outside work in the days of Chic drew complaints about the alleged intransigence of Rodgers and Bernard Edwards, resulting in scrapped projects (Hardy & Laing 1990: 681-682). It’s also ironic that the success of Rodgers’ freelance production work was almost in direct proportion to the rapid commercial decline of Chic whose work had brought him to wider attention in the first place. However, he has suggested that creative tension, the contestation of space for one’s own ideas, is what ultimately contributes to the positive qualities of the finished work (“How To”, 72).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> His recent production efforts have been focused on producing video game soundtracks such as Halo for his label and distribution company, Sumthing Else.



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