

## EDGE

## interview

Gloria Gaynor



Photo courtesy of Troy Word

**H**er first Top 10 hit examined how hard it is to leave the man you love. Her signature song a few years later celebrated the act of booting him to the curb. **GLORIA GAYNOR** is all about adapting, evolving and celebrating life's triumphs, big and small. From her teen years in Newark as an aspiring entertainer to her ascent to Disco Diva, she has not only survived, she has thrived. As EDGE Assignments Editor **ZACK BURGESS** discovered, Gaynor has learned a thing or two about herself and others along the way. Still going strong more than four decades after first taking the stage, she is not an easy woman to slow down—even when examining her remarkable achievements and indelible music legacy.

**EDGE:** You have quite a résumé in Soul, Gospel and R&B. Yet most people associate you with Disco. Is that a good thing or a bad thing?

**GG:** It's kind of a double-edged sword. People who like disco music and associate me with it, I think that's great. But when people who like other genres don't associate me with those genres, well that's not a good thing.

**EDGE:** As disco faded in the 1980s, did that affect your career?

**GG:** Yes, it did. I received fewer calls from the United States to perform.

**EDGE:** During this time did you find yourself drawing strength from the





lyrics of *I Will Survive*? Did you do what you had to in order to survive?

**GG:** Oh, absolutely. On a number of occasions. I had to shift my career during this time, mostly to Europe, and also the Middle East, the Far East and South America.

**EDGE:** You just received the Golden Camera award for Lifetime Achievement in Germany. How much performing do you actually do in Europe during a typical year?

**GG:** I do a lot of performing in Europe. Probably 30 to 40 shows a year.

**EDGE:** Does your fan base differ overseas compared to the U.S.?

**GG:** Not a lot. My audience is 8 to 80 all over the world.

**EDGE:** Eventually, people came to see the classic disco songs as celebrations of an era of fun and innocence. Did you sense that change?

**GG:** Yes, I did. Throughout my career I consciously tried to sing about things that gave people hope and encouragement, to uplift them. Not a lot of other artists were doing that. I think people became nostalgic for the old songs.

**EDGE:** *I Will Survive* has become an anthem for female empowerment. It's really taken on a life of its own. When Freddie Perrin and Dino Fekaris brought that song to you, did you sense that it was something more than just a potential hit?

**GG:** Oh, yeah. Immediately. Even before I heard the melody of the song, I knew that it was a timeless lyric that people

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would be able to relate to throughout their lives. They had asked me what kind of lyrics and subjects did I want to sing about. When they heard that I liked to sing things that are powerful and touch people where they live, they said, “We believe you’re the kind of person that we’ve been looking for to sing this song.”

**EDGE:** Perrin wrote your first big hit, *Never Can Say Goodbye*, for the Jackson 5. You recorded it as part of an extended play dance record in 1974—which was really unusual at that time. Who made that decision?

**GG:** It was kind of a collaboration between me and the producer and the mixologist. Because I’m a dancer—I love dancing—the three and a half minutes of songs that played on the radio were never long enough for me. So the idea of having songs stretched out and strung together so that you would have a good 16, 17 minutes to dance was great for me. Plus, I thought about those DJ’s sitting in that little cubicle playing records and getting claustrophobic. I figured there were times when they just may need to get out of there...and every time they did, they could pull up my record!

**EDGE:** Very smart. A couple of years later, of course, everyone was doing EPs for clubs. Are you proud to think of yourself as a music pioneer?

**GG:** Absolutely. Oh yeah. I spearheaded disco along with Barry White—we’re in *The World Book Encyclopedia* for what we’ve done. I also think that we spearheaded the mixing that DJ’s do today, when it comes to stringing music together.

**EDGE:** Let’s turn back the clock now. Growing up in Newark, trying to break into the business, an important person in your early career was Johnny [*I Can See Clearly Now*] Nash.

**GG:** He was. My real name is Gloria Fowles. Johnny was like, “You know what? That is really *not* a stage name. You need to change it.” I agreed. He suggested I change it to a last name starting with G. He thought my fans would call me “GG,” which would endear me to them even more. He said *Gaynor*. I said *Good*. The first name that popped out of his mouth is the one that I chose.

**EDGE:** I read that you toured with The Cowsills in the 1960s. Seriously? I’m having a hard time picturing that.



Photo courtesy of Troy Word

**GG:** (*Laughing*) Well it was Johnny Nash’s label and he had a number of acts on there. The Cowsills, Johnnie Nash and I all toured together and it was great. We got multi-racial audiences. I still get multi-racial audiences. I suppose it started back then.

**EDGE:** Talk about Cleave Nickerson and your time with the Soul Satisfiers in the 1960s. That was your baptism by fire in the music business. How did touring with that group prepare you for what would come later?

**GG:** That prepared me for my career in a way most young entertainers don’t experience today. I went to the Midwest with Cleave Nickerson, the bandleader, for “two weeks” in January. We got back in December! During that time I honed my craft. I learned how to relate to an audience, how to work the stage. I learned how to handle a microphone. I learned how to dress. I learned how to put on a show even when there was no one on the stage but me. This is something young people don’t get today. One day they have a hit. Next day they’re on stage with no preparation whatsoever—and they are lost.

**EDGE:** You were finally “discovered” working at one of those



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Go-Go clubs off Times Square. Was that a case of it's darkest before the dawn? Or did you feel that working in the city—*anywhere* in the city—put you in front of the right people to further your career?

**GG:** It was both. I had a few gigs sprinkled here and there when I took a job at the Wagon Wheel on 45th Street in Manhattan. The club owner saw me and asked if I would work with a band called The Radio, which played there. They did Top 40 music. I told him that I would think about it. My sister was working there as the hat-check girl and she said, "You know, Gloria, if you're going to be stationary anywhere, this is the place to be. Producers from all over New York come into this club. You can be seen and heard here." And sure enough, I took the job and that's what happened. I was discovered by Paul Leka of Columbia Records, and that's how I got my first recording.

**EDGE:** The theme of this issue is Driven to Win. How much of your breakthrough in the early 1970s do you chalk up to talent...and how much do you feel was due to your drive to succeed as an entertainer?

**GG:** I think it probably was an even combination of the two. But the drive was not for success. I was driven by my love for singing and performing. And, of course, my talent allowed me to do that. So I think that it was 50–50 between drive and talent.

**EDGE:** Now a lot of your drive has to do with charity work, particularly in health-related areas. Your association with the word "Survive" makes you appealing to these organizations... but what makes this type of work appealing to *you*?

**GG:** I'm studying psychology at the moment, and I've learned that I'm at that age when you feel it in your heart that it's time to start giving back. So that's what I do. I really enjoy it. It adds meaning and purpose to my life. Even when I perform, I'm trying to give people something beyond the duration of the concert. So I'm doing that in the community—trying to help, trying to be of service to people to help them have better, longer lives. And teach them to do the same when they come to a place where they can give back, too. **EDGE**