

“Flashdance... What a Feeling”—Irene Cara (1983)

Added to the National Registry: 2023

Essay by Dave Thompson (guest post)*



Original label

Mention producer Giorgio Moroder to most people, and their first thought will be of “I Feel Love,” the monster 1977 hit he scored with Donna Summer, and which placed his name on the National Recording Registry for the first time, in 2011.

In terms of both commercial and cultural success, however, 1983’s “Flashdance... What A Feeling” had equal impact. The theme to the movie “Flashdance,” the song reached number one in 15 different countries, including the United States, and swept the year’s awards ceremonies too. (Vocalist and co-writer Irene Cara took two Grammys, and won hearts all over when, when announced as the winner of the best Female Vocalist category, she asked the hosts, with genuine surprise, “Are you sure?”)

As irresistible as it is exuberant, “Flashdance... What a Feeling” has also transcended the milieu of popular song to become an eternal anthem of self-belief, triumph and ultimately liberation. As “Billboard” magazine put it, “*Take your passion and make it happen*’ is excellent career and life advice.”

It’s ironic, then, that Moroder was initially not interested in scoring the movie despite having worked with producer Jerry Bruckheimer on 1981’s “American Gigolo.” He told the BBC, “The word was out that ‘Flashdance’ could be a little bit of a soft porno because nobody knew what ‘flash dance’ [meant]. So I wasn’t really sure if I wanted to do it, but I said, ‘Jerry, I’m going to watch the movie, and if I like it, I’ll do it.’”

In another interview, however, he acknowledged that it was not his reaction alone that swayed him. “At that time I had a girlfriend, and she was watching it and she was crying, ‘Oh God, it’s the best movie ever. You have to do it. It’s so great.’” Moroder accepted the commission.

“Flashdance... What A Feeling” was composed by Moroder with lyrics co-written by Cara and Keith Forsey, a member of Moroder’s own backroom team and a successful producer in his own

right. Cara, too, was well-known as both an actress and a singer, roles she combined with a lead role in the 1980 movie “Fame”—where she also sang the hit title song.

In the wake of that success, “Cashbox” magazine proclaimed Cara both the Most Promising Female Vocalist of the year *and* the Top Female Vocalist of the year. But Cara returned to acting and did not consider following up her musical successes until early 1983. Apparently, she was already casting around for a producer to work with when she was contacted to co-write for “Flashdance.”

Moroder, too, had plans for the project, intending for its theme song to be voiced by singer Joe “Bean” Esposito—in fact, it was he who recorded the original demo. However, the movie producers demanded a female singer, and preferably one whose name the public would recognize. Cara, of course, fit the bill.

Cara recalled, “Obviously, [the producers] wanted an element of ‘Fame’ which was a huge success. You know, both songs from ‘Fame’ [‘Fame’ and ‘Out Here On My Own’] and the screenplay were nominated for Oscars, and we won two Oscars... So they asked me.”

She continued, “The director, Adrian Lyne, sent for me; I was living in Los Angeles at the time. [He] showed me the last sequence of the movie, the dance sequence, where there was nothing but [background] music. And I said, “Well you know, I’m not in this movie. I’ll agree to sing the theme song if I also write it. And they agreed to that, and the rest is history.”

In fact, the bulk of the lyrics were written in the car as she and Forsey drove to Moroder’s studio following that screening, and Cara admitted she had no idea what the movie was about at the time, only that it was “another performing arts film.” But what she had seen convinced her that the song should somehow encapsulate the sheer joy of dancing, a notion that, in turn, saw Forsey suggest a working title of “Dancing for Your Life.”

The remainder of the song, and Cara’s concept, flowed from there.

*When I hear the music
Close my eyes, hear the music
Wrap around, take ahold of my heart
What a feeling!*

Moroder was impressed. Indeed, having heard their initial sketch, his only key complaint was that the lyric did not include any reference whatsoever to the movie itself! Forsey and Cara partially remedied that with the line “*in a flash, it takes hold of my heart*”; and, of course, with the song’s eventual title. Ultimately, however, it didn’t matter. Released in March 1983, a month before the movie itself, “Flashdance... What a Feeling” became one of the biggest records not just of the year, but of the decade. The full album remains among the ten top selling soundtrack albums of all time.

The actual recording was quick, just a few days, with Cara nailing her vocal on the third take—apparently, Moroder was happy with those that preceded the third take, but the singer knew her strengths, and was aware she had yet to reveal them. “I had a lot to do with the melody,” Cara

later remarked, “because I sang [it] the way I thought it should be sung. Giorgio is a great composer, but he’s not a singer. So you know, singers have to interpret the music to their own way of singing. And that involves changing the melody here and there.”

Jerry Bruckheimer recalled the first time he heard the song on the “Flashdance” special edition DVD: “When you first heard it, you said, ‘It’s a hit.’ It’s one of those things you just heard, and you just couldn’t get it out of your head. And it just got us all so excited. We kept playing it over and over and never got tired of it.”

The manner in which the song blend so seamlessly into the movie’s climax was key to that. Throughout, Moroder’s soundtrack acts almost as accompaniment to actress Jennifer Beales’s character, Alexandra “Alex” Owens, as she strives to escape a life spent living in a converted warehouse in Pittsburgh, and make it as a professional dancer. It’s a long shot, she knows--her sole experience is onstage at her local bar and grill, and her only other job offers come from strip clubs.

Perseverance and luck see her through, and it is “Flashdance... What a Feeling” that accompanies--and solidifies--the movie’s finale, exploding over the action, as it accompanies Alex through her audition for the Pittsburgh Conservatory of Dance and Repertory. And she aces it.

The worldwide success of “Flashdance... What a Feeling” was not, sadly, immediately apparent to Cara. It would be 1993 before a lengthy legal process brought her the share of the royalties the song had earned--a back story that few of the listeners inspired and empowered by the lyric would have been aware of. Twenty years later, on November 25, 2022, Cara passed away, her final years, apparently, spent living as what the newspapers called “a recluse.”

As the voice, and co-writer of one of Hollywood’s most immortal theme songs, however, Cara ensured--to paraphrase the words of her other best-known number, “Fame”--that she would live forever.

Dave Thompson is the author of over 100 books, including co-writing the autobiographies of Motown legends Eddie and Brian Holland, Sylvain Sylvain (New York Dolls), Walter Lure (The Heartbreakers) and photographer Bob Gruen. His other workd include “An Evolving Tradition: The Child Ballads in Modern Folk and Rock,” encyclopedias of glam rock, alternative rock, funk and reggae, and biographies of Giorgio Moroder, David Bowie, Roger Waters, Robert Plant, Kurt Cobain and many more.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.