THE COMMODORES

Title: Live!

Label: Motown

Release Date: 1977

Medium: Double Album

Availability: Very Good

Venue: Omni Theater, Atlanta, GA
Capitol Center, Landover, MD

Recording Date: 1977

Lineup: Lionel Ritchie - Vocals, piano
Milan Williams - Keyboards, trombone, guitar
Ronald LaPread - Bass, trumpet, vocals
Thomas McClary - Guitar
Walter Orange - Drums, vocals
William King - Horns, percussion

Set List: Won't You Come Dance With Me
Slippery When Wet
Come Inside
Just To Be Close To You
Funny Feelings
Fancy Dancer
Sweet Love
Zoom
Easy
I Feel Sanctified
Brick House

At their peak in the late seventies, the Commodores were one of rock's most funky and successful bands. They launched the career of Lionel Richie and ruled the record charts. Over their career, they placed 24 singles on the U.S. pop singles chart, with 17 cracking the top forty. Of these, ten reached the top ten, with two hitting number one. They placed 29 singles on the r&b singles chart, with seven reaching number one. Twenty of their singles charted in England.

They also sold a slew of albums. In total, they placed 18 albums on the American pop albums chart, with five cracking the top ten. Three of their albums have been certified platinum with three others reaching gold sales. One of their singles has also been certified gold. Fourteen albums made the r&b album charts, including a run of four consecutive number ones. Eleven of their albums charted in England. Their total record sales are estimated at 40 million copies worldwide.

Initially, the band favored a party style, patterned after Sly and the Family Stone and the Bar-Kays, and not unlike the funkmeister himself, George Clinton. However, Lionel Ritchie's ballads began to sell more than the funk and they soon became the focal point of the band. Unfortunately, some fans only remember the ballads and do not give the band credit for their rousing funk. The group survived the departure of Ritchie and are still active as of 2019.

The formation of the Commodores goes back to the a Tuskegee Institute talent show in 1968. Lionel Richie (born Lionel Brockman Richie Jr. on June 20, 1949 in Tuskegee, Alabama) had met Thomas McClary (born October 6, 1949 in Eustis, Florida) in 1967 in a line while both were registering for Freshman classes at Tuskegee Institute. Richie was the son of Lionel Brockman Sr. and Alberta R Foster. His father was a retired U.S. Army Captain who continued to work for the military as a systems analyst. His mother was a teacher. He has one sister, Deborah. The family were devout Christians.

He grew up right next to the campus of Tuskegee Institute and was cared for during the day by his maternal grandparents. His grandmother, Adelaide Mary Brown, was a classical pianist who tought Lionel

piano fundamentals. She also was the Choir Director at Tuskegee. An uncle was a big band jazz musician and arranger who had played with Duke Ellington. He gave him his first saxophone.

Richie was exposed to various kinds of music as a child, from the classical music that his grandmother loved to jazz, r&b, and gospel. While it was outside of his immediate community, he also listened to a local country radio station. While he learned how to play both the piano and sax, his first goal was to become a Minister but he dropped that idea when he discovered how much girls liked musicians. When Richie was in his early teens, his family relocated to Joliet, Illinois. He graduated from Joliet Township High School in 1967, where he was a star tennis player. In fact, he was so good that he was offered a tennis scholarship to Tuskegee Institute and jumped at the opportunity to go back to his hometown.

Meanwhile, McClary was born in Eustis, Florida in 1949. He began to play music at a very young age, beginning on a ukulele then moving to acoustic guitar. He loved to listen to guitar heroes like Jimi Hendrix, B.B. King, and Albert King and developed a style that merged elements from each of them. During his last two years in high school, he was among the first students to integrate the public school system in Lake County, Florida. The resulting racial tension was one of the factors that led him to Tuskegee Institute, which was a black only college. A friend had gone there and loved it. While he had other offers from Bethune Cookman and Michigan State, he visited Tuskegee first and decided to enroll.

McClary first noticed Richie in the line that day because Lionel was whistling a Eddie Harris song and he assumed he had to be a musician. The guitarist wanted to put together a band to compete in a Freshman talent show and Richie agreed to help him find musicians, offering his grandmother's house as an audition room. He downplayed his own musical ability but the first time that McClary heard him play sax at his grandmother's house, he knew he was the real deal.

The two put together a trio called the Mystics, with McClary on lead guitar, Richie on sax/piano and William King (born January 30, 1949 in Birmingham, Alabama), on a variety of instruments, including percussion, guitar, trumpet, flute, and keyboards. The trio played instrumental pieces with a leaning towards jazz. The Mystics won the talent show and began to play local gigs. One of their rivals was another band called The Jays.

The Jays included Milan Williams (born March 28, 1948 in Okolona, Mississippi). He had learned to play piano as a child by his older brother, Earl, who was a multi instrumentalist. He had also enrolled at Tuskegee in 1967 and formed the Jays with bassist Michael Gilbert, saxophonist Jimmy Johnson, and drummer Andre Callaghan. While the Jays were far more popular, they also were unstable and fell apart in 1968. At that point, the two bands merged. Needing a name, King opened a dictionary and randomly picked a word. It turned out to the Commodores.

The lineup of Richie, McClary, King, Williams, Gilbert, Johnson, and Callaghan quickly built up a reputation of being a top notch party band. At this point, Gilbert handled lead vocals, with Richie singing backup and playing the sax. They also used James Ingram (not the famous r&b singer) on vocals at times but he was not a permanent member of the band.

They were so good that Tuskegee sent them to NYC in 1968 to participate at a benefit talent show. One of the people who saw the show was Benjamin "Benny" Ashburn, a Harlem native who was working as a representative for a liquor wholeseller. He loved the band and introduced himself after their show. The group returned to Tuskegee for classes but were handicapped by the limited playing opportunities at home. In 1969, they decided to return to NYC.

The group had scrapped together money for the trip but it quickly ran out, with the members not realizing how much it would cost to make the trip. Things were so bad that they could not pay a $4.50 toll on the New Jersey Turnpike but were let through by a toll taker who took pity on them. Once they arrived in the city, they looked up Ashburn, who agreed to become their manager.

One of the first things he did was set up an audition at a Harlem nightclub called Smalls Paradise. The audition did not initially go well as the owner felt funk was on the way out. However, he had an unexpected cancellation a few weeks later and booked the band. When he saw how well they went down well, in part because they could play and dance at the same time, he gave them a two week residency.

Ashburn also arranged an audition with Atlantic Records. The band recorded an album's worth of material with Jerry "Swamp Dogg" Williams. Atlantic agreed to release two of the songs, "Keep On Dancing" backed by "Rise Up" in 1969, but the single did not catch on and the band returned to Tuskegee. Later that year, Johnson, Gilbert, and Callaghan all left the band. Callaghan enlisted in the U.S. Navy, leaving the band without a drummer. Fortunately, Gilbert knew a drummer named Walter Orange (born December 10, 1946 in Jacksonsville, Florida).

Orange was attending another local college and had played with a number of bands. He was playing with the T-Jays when he was recruited. Orange joined in June, 1969 right before the Commodores played a two week stand of shows in Atlantic City. Later that same year, Johnson and Gilbert were both drafted. Not needing a second sax player, they decided to only replace Gilbert. The band members knew another Tuskegee based musician named Ronald Lapread (born Ronald Lapraed on September 4, 1949 in Tuskegee, Alabama). He was playing brass and wind instruments in a local blues band called The Corvettes. When they asked him if he knew any bass players who were available, he boldly told them that he could play bass, even though he had not played the instrument. He was hired and learned on the go.

With their core lineup now in place, they returned to NYC, where Ashburn continued to find gigs, including those that he created himself on Martha's Vineyard, where he had a vacation home. As it turned out, Ashburn had grown up with a woman named Suzanne de Passe, who booked acts for the Cheetah Club in NYC. She became friends with Cindy Birdsong of the Supremes and was introduced to Berry Gordy. In 1967, Berry hired her as his Creative Assistant. One of her later assignments was to work with the Jackson Five on their wardrobe and road act. After a career changing 1969 appearance on *Ed Sullivan*, de Passe began to put together their first national tour and needed an opening act.

Ashburn and de Passe had stayed in touch and she knew that he was now managing a college band called the Commodores. She called her old friend and found out that they were going to play at an African American attorney's convention that Ashburn had set up to showcase the band. She attended the show and was so impressed that she hired them to open for the Jackson Five. The Commodores opened for the group during the 11 shows that took place in October, November, and December. Those shows went so well that they continued to open for the Jackson Five during their 37 date second tour, that began on January 2, 1971 and continued until August 15, 1971.

The band had done so well during the two tours and gained so much exposure that it was not surprising that Motown decided to sign them in late 1971. They assigned them to their MoWest subsidiary. Their debut single, "The Zoo (The Human Zoo)", was released in March, 1972. It was funk based and while it did not chart, it got airplay. Their second single, "Don't Be Worried" (1972) followed later that year. It also did not chart but did well enough that Berry decided to move them to the main label.

In 1973, they released "Are You Happy" (1973), which featured Richie on solo lead vocals. The song convinced the label and the band that Richie was more than up to handling lead vocals when needed. The Commodores finally broke through with the Milan Williams' written instrumental, "Machine Gun" (#22-1974), which was released in April, 1974. It steadily climbed the U.S. pop singles chart, reaching the top forty in early July and peaking at number 22 during a six week top forty chart run. It also reached number 7 on the r&b singles chart and peaked at number 20 in England.

The single was produced by James Anthony Carmichael, who would produce nearly all of their hits going forward. The song was featured on their debut album, *Machine Gun* (#138-1974), which was released in July, 1974. It made the American pop albums chart in late August and rose to number 138 during a nine week chart run. It also reached number 22 on the r&b album chart. The album also yielded a second U.S. pop chart single, "I Feel Sanctified" (#75-1974), which made the lower levels of the pop chart, hitting number 75. It did considerably better on the r&b singles chart, hitting number 12. A remake of their first single, " The Zoo (The Human Zoo)" (1974) charted in England, peaking at number 44.

The band toured throughout 1974, opening for huge stars like the Rolling Stones and Stevie Wonder. That exposure proved to be invaluable. Their next album, *Caught In The Act* (#26-1975), was a bona fide hit. It was released in February, 1975 and entered the American pop albums chart immediately. It moved all the way to number 26 during a thirty three week chart run. It also peaked at number 7 on the r&b albums chart and was their first album to chart in Canada, where it hit number 80.

The album yielded one chart single. "Slippery When Wet" (#19-1975), was released in the spring and soared up the U.S. pop singles chart. It reached number 19 during a seven week top forty chart run and topped the r&b singles chart. The song was written by McClary, who saw a road sign that said "Slippery When Wet" on his way to the studio and throught it would be a great song title. The sexual double entendre was an additional bonus and the song became a staple of their live show. A second single from the album called "This Is Your Life" (1975) peaked at number 13 on the r&b singles chart.

The band quickly followed with *Movin' On* (#29-1975) in October of the same year. It made the American pop albums chart immediately and rose to number 29 during a thirty two week chart run. It also reached number 7 on the r&b albums chart and hit number 55 in Canada. The album is most notable for the presence of "Sweet Love" (#5-1976). In addition to being their first U.S. pop singles top five, the song was the first hit written by Richie and was a precussor to what would become his ballad oriented style. It cracked the U.S. top forty in mid February and rose to number 5 during a fourteen week top forty chart run. The song also charted in Canada and England, hitting numbers 16 and 32 respectively.

In 1976, the band opened for the O'Jays on a 42 city North American tour. At many of the shows, they got a better reaction than the headliners. This would be the last time that they would open for any other act. The success of "Sweet Love" and the tour exposure payed off with the band's next album, *Hot On The Tracks* (#12-1976). It was released in June, 1976, entered the American pop albums chart in July and rose to number 12 during a thirty nine week chart run. It also topped the r&b albums chart and reached number 28 in Canada.

The album yielded two hit singles. Richie's "Just To Be Close To You" (#7-1976) was another U.S. pop singles top hit. It cracked the top forty in early October and rose to number 7 during an eleven week top forty chart run. It also topped the r&b singles chart, hit number 19 in Canada, and peaked at number 62 in England. In addition, "Fancy Dancer" (#39-1976) also snuck into the U.S. pop singles top forty in mid February, 1977, where it stalled at number 39 during a single week presence. The song reached number 9

on the r&b singles chart and hit number 65 in Canada. It was written by Richie and Lapread and was more funk based then the two preceeding ballads.

The supporting tour included 85 shows and lasted into 1977. In March, 1977, the band quickly followed with *Commodores* (#3-1977), which was titled Zoom in England. It was their best selling album to date, reaching number 3 on the American pop albums chart during a fifty three week chart run. It also topped the r&b albums chart and hit number 23 in Canada.

The album contained two of the best songs of their career. Richie's "Easy" (#4-1977) may be their best single song. It featured one of rock music's most notable guitar solos, courtesy of McClary, and evocative lyrics that perfectly describe Richie's up bringing in Tuskegee. It cracked the U.S. pop singles top forty in late June and reached number 4 during a thirteen week top forty chart run. It also topped the r&b singles chart, hit number 9 in England, and reached number 12 in Canada.

"Brick House" (#5-1977) may be their best pure funk song. Written by all six band members, it entered the U.S. pop singles top forty in mid September and rose to number 5 during an eleven week top forty chart run. It reached number 4 on the r&b singles chart, number 24 in Canada, and number 32 in England. It would eventually be certified gold in the States in 2005 for 500,000 copies sold. Lead vocals were handled by Orange, who had a better voice than Richie for their funkier material.

The band then made a smart move and captured their explosive live show on their first live album, *Commodores Live!* (#3-1977). It was released in October, 1977 and entered the American pop albums chart immediately. It rose to number 3 during a twenty eight week chart run. It also reached number 2 on the r&b albums chart, number 26 in Canada, and number 60 in England. A live version of "Too Hot To Trot" (#24-1977) was released as a single and was yet another top forty U.S. pop chart singlr.

It cracked the top forty in mid January, 1978 and peaked at number 24 during a seven week top forty chart run. The song also topped the r&b singles chart, hit number 25 in Canada, and peaked at number 38 in England. By this point, the band faced a crossroads. While their funk songs did well on the r&b singles chart, they did not chart as high as their ballads on the pop charts. Richie had seemingly found a formula with his recent songs and had moved out front during the group's live shows. They had supplemented their live act with a four piece horn section called the Mean Machine to accommodate this move. The Mean Machine included trumpeter Harold Hudson, David Cochrane, Darrel Jones, and Winston Sims.

The band broke through in a major way in 1978. Their next studio album, *Natural Way* (#3-1978), was released in May, 1978. It immediately made the American pop albums chart and wound up at number 3 during a thirty three week chart run. The lead single, "Three Times A Lady" (#1-1978), cracked the U.S. pop singles top forty in early July and surged up to number one, where it remained for two weeks. The song was written by Richie for his then wife, Brenda, who he had met at Tuskegee and married in 1975. It was inspired by a comment that his father made about his mother at their 37th wedding anniversary party. During a toast, his father said "she's a great lady, a great mother, and she's a great friend".

Richie initially wrote the son as a waltz and did not feel that it fit the band. However, Carmichael disagreed and the group wound up recording it themselves. It wound up topping the pop, r&b, and country singles chart in the States. It also went number one in England and Canada. The album was their third straight number one r&b album and also peaked at number 3 in Canada and number 8 in England. It had generated sales in excess of one million copies in America by the end of August.

Natural Way also yielded a second top forty single. "Flying High" (#38-1978) cracked the U.S. pop singles top forty in early November and reached number 38 during a two week top forty chart run. The song hit number 47 in Canada and number 37 in England. It was written by Richie and McClary. The Commodores were now on top and Richie was their clear breakout star.

In November, 1978, Motown took advantage of the massive sales of *Natural Way* and the two singles by releasing the band's first compilation. *Commodores Greatest Hits* (#23-1979) made the American pop albums chart upon release and rose to number 23 during a twenty week chart run. It also hit number 24 on the r&b albums chart and reached numbers 12 and 19 in Canada and England. *Midnight Magic* (#3-1979) followed in July, 1979.

It made the American pop albums chart immediately and rose to number 3 during a forty one week chart run. It also topped the r&b albums chart, hit number 3 in Canada and number 8 in England. The album yielded two massive Richie written hit singles. The first was "Sail On" (#4-1979). It cracked the U.S. pop singles top forty in mid August and reached number 4 during a twelve week top forty chart run. The song also reached number 9 on the r&b singles chart, number 3 in Canada and number 15 in England.

The second was "Still" (#1-1979). It cracked the U.S. pop singles top forty in mid October and was their second number one pop single, staying there for one week during a fifteen week top forty chart run. It peaked at number 6 on the r&b singles chart, number 3 in Canada, and number 4 in England. A third single, "Wonderland" (#25-1980) cracked the U.S. pop singles top forty in January, 1980. It reached number 25 during a six week chart run, while peaking at number 43 on the r&b singles chart, number 70 in Canada, and number 40 in England. The song was written by Milan Williams.

The hot run continued with *Heroes* (#7-1980), which was released in June, 1980. It made the American pop albums chart upon release and rose to number 7 during a thirty three week chart run. It hit number 3 on the r&b albums chart, number 36 in Canada and number 50 in England. While the album was certified platinum in the States by February, 1981, it only yielded two chart singles. The Milan Williams' written "Old Fashioned Love" (#20-1980) was the lone U.S. pop singles top forty, hitting number 20 in the summer during an eleven week top forty chart run. It stalled at number 47 on the r&b singles chart and only hit number 70 in Canada. It did not chart in England.

The second single, "Heroes" (#54-1980), did not make the U.S. pop singles top forty, stopping at number 54. It also only hit number 44 on the r&b singles chart and did not chart in Canada nor England. The song was written by Richie and Darrell Jones. By this point, Richie had broken out as a songwriter on his own. He had written and produced the massive hit single, "Lady" (#1-1980), for Kenny Rogers that same year. It was released in September, 1980 and topped the U.S. pop and country singles charts while reaching number 2 in Canada, number 12 in England, and number 15 in Australia.

While Richie was getting more and more requests to work with other artists, he continued to insist that he had no plans to leave the Commodores entering 1981. In fact, their next studio album, *In The Pocket* (#13-1981), was released in June, 1981 and was another hit. It entered the American pop albums chart immediately and moved to number 13 during a forty week chart run. It also peaked at number 4 on the r&b albums chart, number 29 in Canada, and number 69 in England. It was certified platinum by the end of 1981.

The album included two more massive hit singles. "Lady (You Bring Me Up)" (#8-1981) entered the U.S. pop singles top forty in July and surged to number 8 during a fifteen week top forty chart run.

Uniquely, it was written by William King, his wife Shirley Hanna-King, and Mean Machine member Harold Hudson. Richie sang lead vocals.

"Oh No" (#4-1981) did even better, reaching number 4 during a fifteen week top forty chart run in the fall. It was written by Richie. The two singles hit numbers 13 and 5 on the r&b singles chart, numbers 27 and 3 in Canada, and numbers 56 and 44 in England. A third single, "Why You Wanna Try Me" (#66-1982), was a minor chart success in the States, reaching number 66 on the pop singles chart. It was written by Richie and David Cochrane, yet another member of the Mean Machine.

While the album and the singles were a tremendous success, Richie still found time to work with other artists. He produced Kenny Rogers new album, *Share Your Love* (#3-1981), which was a platinum selling hit in the United States, reaching number 3 on the pop albums chart and topping the country albums chart. He also wrote, produced, and sang "Endless Love" (#1-1981) with Diana Ross for the film of the same name. It was released in August and was a platinum selling American hit, topping the pop singles chart in the U.S, Canada, and Australia, while peaking at number 7 in England.

When word leaked out in the later part of 1981 that Richie was working on a solo album, the rumors started to fly that he was leaving the band. However, he continued to insist, particularly to the other members of the Commodores, that he had no plans to leave the band. The band was placed in limbo, not able to tour without their biggest star nor work on their next album. Then, two events conspired to cause the inevitable. First, their long time mentor and manager Benny Ashburn passed away suddenly on August 17 from an heart attack. He was the one unifying force within the band and his loss could not be underestimated.

Then, Richie released his first solo single, "Truly" (#1-1982), in September, 1982. It would be become a massive number one single. His debut album, *Lionel Richie* (#3-1982), followed on October 6, 1982. Shortly after, Richie notified the band members that he was leaving. The reaction of the other five was understandable. They were livid that he had strung them along for over a year and some, particularly William King, have not forgiven him to this day. At first, the rest of the band believed that it would not be difficult to continue to have the same level of success without him but they soon discovered otherwise.

It is difficult to determine the exact reasons why Richie chose this moment to leave. Certainly, the death of Ashburn was significant and it is possible that he planned to stay with the band in deference to Ashburn, who had marshalled their success from the beginning. The singer has also mentioned that he enjoyed the freedom of calling his own shots while making his debut solo album. However, he still maintains to this day that he had intended to come back and that he left on a spur of the moment basis.

Complicating matters even further was the massive success of his solo album. In addition to "Truly", it yielded "You Are" (#4-1982) and "My Love" (#5-1982). The three singles reached numbers 2, 2, and 6 on the r&b singles chart and were worldwide hits, each charting in England and elsewhere. The album stayed on the American pop albums chart for 140 weeks and sold four million copies in the States alone in the process. It was impossible for the band to escape it and Richie's followup, the even more successful *Can't Slow Down* (#1-1983). .

However, the band soldiered on without him. They hired a new manager, Chuck Smiley, and then found singer/keyboardist Skyler Jett to tour with them. Meanwhile, Motown had seized upon Richie's departure to release a series of compilations. The first, *All The Great Hits* (#37-1982), made the American pop albums chart in early December and rose to number 37 during a twenty four week chart run. It would be

certified gold in 1985 and yielded a minor U.S. pop chart single, "Painted Picture" (#70-1982), which hit number 70 and number 19 on the r&b singles chart. The second, *Anthology* (#141-1983), was released in May, 1983. It also made the American pop albums chart, reaching number 141 during a seven week chart run.

In addition to these sets, Motown licensed K-tel to release yet another compilation, *Love Songs* (1982) in late 1982 in Europe. It was a hit in England, reaching number 5. Motown also allowed another compiler, Arcade Records, to release *The Best Of The Commodores* (1982) in late 1982 in the Netherlands. It was also a local hit, reaching number 5 on the country's pop music album chart.

The four compilations and the massive success of Richie's debut album and associated singles, made it appear to everyone throughout the world that the band was dead. In fact, the Commodores were in a no win position. They had been inactive since 1981 and now were without a manager, their lead songwriter and singer, and as they soon discovered, their long time producer.

After going through an aborted attempt to find a new manager, they hired Chuck Smiley. They then decided to hit the road. To replace Richie, they hired Oakland born singer/keyboardist Skyler Jett, who had been in the music business for many years, including a stint with Night Shift, where he played up and down the east coast. In 1982, he was auditioned by the Commodores to join their road band and was hired because he sounded like Richie. He completed a world tour with them into 1983 but was not invited to join the band.

Instead, when the group began work on their next studio album, lead vocals were shared between Harold Hudson, Orange, and McClary. The album, *Commodores 13* (#103-1983), was finished around the same time that had finished his second solo album, *Can't Slow Down* (#1-1983), and was scheduled for release around the same time as *Commodores 13*. The band members complained to Motown about the scheduling but got nowhere. In the end, *Commodores 13* was released in September, 1983 and *Can't Slow Down* followed on October 11.

While the band had been working with producer James Anthony Carmichael since their first chart single, he chose to work with Richie after he left the group. His only contribution to *Commodores 13* was to help the band members choose the final songs, which were already finished. Production credits for the new album were split between King, McClary, Orange, and Williams.

There was some interest in the new Commodores album and it made the American pop albums chart immediately. However, it was quickly overwhelmed by the massive success of *Can't Slow Down* and the inevitable comparisons. *Commodores 13* only reached number 103 and only stayed on the charts for eleven weeks. In contrast, *Can't Slow Down* (#1-1983) quickly hit number one and stayed on the American pop albums chart for 160 weeks, selling eight million copies in the process. The album did reach number 26 on the r&b albums chart but did not chart anywhere else.

The album did yield a minor U.S. pop chart single, "Only You" (#54-1983), which peaked at number 54 and number 20 on the r&b singles chart. The song also hit number 93 in England. All of this proved to be too much for McClary. At the end of a supporting tour, he left the band and was replaced by Sheldon Reynolds (born Sheldon Maurice Reynolds on September 13, 1959 in Cincinnati, Ohio). He had been playing guitar since he was eight years old and had worked with Millie Jackson and Sun before joining the Commodores.

The band finally replaced Richie on a permanent basis with J.D. Nicholas (born James Dean Nicholas on April 12, 1952 in Watford, England), who had been a member of Heatwave. They also worked with a new producer, Dennis Lambert. In 1984, the new team began work on the band's next studio album. They knew that they needed a hit as Motown was rapidly losing interest in the group. It was released on January 15, 1985 and was just what the band was looking for.

Nightshift (#12-1985) first made the American pop albums chart in mid February and rose to number 12 during a thirty seven week chart run, buoyed mostly by the success of the lead single, "Nightshift" (#3-1985). It was released in late January and was in the U.S. pop singles top forty by early March. It rose to number 3 during a 13 week top forty chart run. It topped the r&b singles chart and reached number 7 in Canada and number 3 in England. Two more singles, "Animal Instinct" (#43-1985) and "Janet" (#87-1985) also made the U.S. pop singles chart, reaching numbers 43 and 87. The two songs peaked at numbers 22 and 65 on the r&b singles chart and numbers 74 and 90 n England.

The album topped the r&b albums chart, and reached number 22 in Canada and number 13 in England. It was certified gold in the States in May, 1985. The title track was a tribute to r&b singers Jackie Wilson and Marvin Gaye, both of whom had passed away in 1984. It was written by Orange and Lambert, with Franne Golde. It won a Grammy in 1986 for Best Vocal R&B Performance by a Duo/Group. Ironically, especially given the slew of hit singles that Richie wrote, it was the group's only Grammy.

The Commodores left Motown after the release of *Nightshift* and signed with Polydor. In 1985, Motown licensed their songs to yet another compilation record company, Telestar, who released *The Very Best Of The Commodores* in England and Europe. It was a surprise hit in England, where it peaked at number 25. In March, 1986, Motown released a variation of the earlier European set, *Love Songs*, under the title *Composer (Great Love Songs Written By L. Richie* (1986). It became a steady seller and was certified gold in the States in 1991.

In early 1986, Lapread was the next core member to leave. He moved to Aukland, New Zealand and was not replaced. Their label debut, *United* (#101-1986), was produced by Lambert and released on October 7, 1986. It did not crack the American pop albums chart until late November and only rose to number 101 during a short fifteen week chart run. It did reach number 17 on the r&b albums chart.

The album did yield two chart singles, including "Goin' To The Bank" (#65-1986), which peaked at number 65 on the U.S. pop singles chart and reached number 2 on the r&b singles chart. The song also hit number 43 in England. "Take It From Me" (1987) reached number 38 on the r&b singles chart.

Now down to King, Orange, Nicholas, Williams, and Sheldon, the Commodores soldiered on. While working on their next studio album, Sheldon left. The new album, *Rock Solid* (1988), did not chart and only yielded the minor r&b chart single, "Solitaire", which froze at number 55. During a supporting tour, the band considered an over to play in South Africa. Williams was so incensed that he quit on the spot in August, 1988. As it turned out, the group never did play in the country.

Polydor dropped them after the album's release and the Commodores, now a shell of their former selves, became a touring nostaglia act. They did not release another new album until *Commodores Christmas* (1992), which was released on their own label. They followed with *No Tricks* (1993), which remains their last new studio album. Neither album charted.

While they had become irrelevant as a recording act, their compilations continued to sell. Motown released a new compilaton in 1995 called *The Very Best Of The Commodores* (1995) and it did well in England, reaching number 26. They then released *20th Century Masters: The Millennium Collection* (#155-1999) in late 1999 and it made the American pop albums chart, peaking at number 155. Surprisingly, the set sold well and was certified gold in 2004.

In November, 2003, Motown released yet another compilation, *The Definitive Collection* (#19-2003). It was marketed under Lionel Richie's name, even though it did include a few tracks recorded with the Commodores. It did very well, peaking at number 19 on the American pop albums chart and reaching number 16 in Australia and number one in England. It has been certified platinum in the States.

Since the mid nineties, the band has continued to tour annually. In 1995, they were inducted into the Alabama Music Hall Of Fame. They were inducted into the Vocal Group Hall Of Fame and are perennial favorites in Las Vegas. As of 2020, they remain very active, with numerous shows booked through the year. Their core lineup includes Orange, King, and Nicholas. On July 9, 2006, Milan Williams passed away so the possiblity of a reunion of their most productive lineup will not take place.

The Commodores are featured on several compilations. Motown's 2001 set, *Anthology*, includes 30 tracks. Motown's 1999 set, *20th Century Masters - The Millennium Collection: The Best of the Commodores*, includes a more modest 11 tracks. The same label's 1997 release, *Ultimate Collection*, includes 15 tracks. The only live Commodores set that is still in print is their first live album, *Commodores Live!*. It was reissued by Motown in 2002. The three compilations and one live set are available at a large music retailer.

My only live recording of the Commodores is their 1977 set, *Commodores Live!*. The hit album was compiled from 1977 shows in Atlanta and Landover, Maryland. The album features the Commodores original lineup and material from their first five albums. That includes some of the best funk in their catalog.

While there are some Ritchie ballads thrown in, there's also plenty of hot, nasty funk included in the set. Songs like "Slippery When Wet", "Brick House", "I Feel Sanctified" and "Fancy Dancer" feature driving rhythms, great intermittent horn bursts, funk based guitar and infectious vocals. The mid range funk is represented on pieces like "Won't You Come Dance With Me", "Funny Feelings" and "Come Inside". The group also shows their versatility on the jazzy ballad "Zoom", a concert favorite. The ballad "Easy" is outstanding, with a great rock like guitar solo by McClary. And, for all you MOR types, there's also the hit singles "Just To Be Close To You" and an elongated version of "Sweet Love".

For the most part, the band's performance on this well recorded album is good. While some of the songs feature too much audience participation sequences or drawn out sections, there's enough here to clearly demonstrate that the Commodores were a great live band. The album also contains a studio version of their last funky hit, the top thirty "Too Hot Ta Trot". This album has been reissued on CD by Motown and is available at your favorite new record shop.