

**State of Independence**  
**by Christoph Cox**

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From about 7<sup>th</sup> grade on, I was an art-rock kid who filled his hours and days with Yes's *Fragile*, Genesis's *Selling England By the Pound*, and Emerson, Lake, and Palmer's *Brain Salad Surgery*. The base materiality and mindless exuberance of the standard 3-minute rock song amped me as much as any other guy born in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But Yes's "Heart of the Sunrise" did something more. Its hazy, enigmatic expansiveness filled me with that "oceanic feeling" that Freud diagnosed as the true source of all religious belief and desire.

One Christmas, my older sister read Nietzsche to me; and, a few months later, her boyfriend returned from a trip to England with debuts by the Clash and the Specials. It wasn't long before I had converted to punk rock and had forsaken airy spirituality for real-world politics. I sold my crates of vinyl to a stoner down the street for enough money to buy a few Gang of Four LPs and figured I'd made out well. Punk rock found its way onto Milwaukee's airwaves only through the student-run radio station at a local engineering college that, on Sunday nights, hosted a 3-hour reggae block. (Despite the general funklessness of my musical tastes at the time, reggae had been legitimated for me by English punk and 2 Tone, which drew me to political acts such as Black Uhuru, Steel Pulse, and Linton Kwesi Johnson.) One Sunday evening, the West Indian DJ's playlist took a detour and landed on Donna Summer's "State of Independence," whose only connection to reggae was a buried rocksteady piano. With its spongy disco bass and lite-jazz sax fills, the song was something I knew I should revile. But I found myself totally entranced by it, and mostly by the song's second half, which swells to a totally vague but soaring vision of romantic union, spiritual apotheosis, and political freedom—an apocalyptic fantasy that, it occurred to me, was what drew me to Genesis's inflated art-rock epic "Supper's Ready" and to Bad Brains' punk-reggae outburst "Coptic Times."

It was years before I came across *Donna Summer* in the 25-cent bin of a used record store. I bought it and filed it away—not in alphabetical order alongside the rest of my records, but in a "miscellaneous" category reserved for novelty records and spoken-word LPs. Now and again I listened to it—never the whole record, just that one track—and only later discovered that the song had originally been penned and performed by Jon Anderson, lead singer and lyricist for Yes. Though I've lost all trace of the religious and of apocalyptic fantasy, I still have a fondness for that "oceanic feeling," which comes to me mostly by way of musical minimalism, dub, noise, and immersive sound installation. I still love "State of Independence" and not long ago passed it to my friend Pablo, an artist and DJ who, for extra cash, occasionally spins 80s records at a nearby bar. Pablo's musical tastes are enormously broad; yet, a few days after his gig, he returned the record to me with disdain, making it clear that I had violated his musical trust and publicly embarrassed him. I have yet to come across anyone else who likes the song, which

continues to hold a mysterious power over me, serving as a biographical and musical meeting point of things I have loved and continue to love.