

Lost in the music again

Disco pioneer and man who put the funk in Daft Punk, the great Nile Rodgers tells Paul Kay why the good times are back

To the class of 2013, he's the man who helped Daft Punk unplug from the mainframe and rediscover disco on the worldwide summer smash *Get Lucky*. But for the millions who knew the name Nile Rodgers before he teamed up with Pharrell Williams and France's favourite robot duo, this latest chapter of his story is just another star turn in a glittering career.

The driving force behind 1970s disco titans Chic, whose hits include the perennial dance-floor classics *Le Freak*, *Everybody Dance* and *Good Times*, Rodgers would go on to produce some of the bestselling albums of the 1980s, including Madonna's *Like a Virgin*, Diana Ross' *Diana* and David Bowie's *Let's Dance*. Since then, he's added his producing or guitar-playing talents to a mind-boggling number of records for everyone from Paul Simon and Cyndi Lauper to INXS and Mariah Carey, while his work has been sampled to memorable effect by the likes of Will Smith, The Sugarhill Gang, The Pharcyde and The Notorious B.I.G.

In short, he's one of the most prolific artists of the past 40 years, although the word still feels inadequate in describing a man who seemingly lives to make music.

Now, after surviving cancer and having been catapulted back into the limelight, 61-year-old Rodgers is more in-demand than ever. As well as working on a new Chic album that includes another collaboration with the French electro duo de jour, he's working on new material for artists as diverse as Avicii, David Guetta, Jessie Ware, Disclosure, Chase and Status and Adam Lambert, and is touring the world to play shows at a rate that would exhaust a man one-third of his age.

As part of the current tour, Rodgers and Chic are jetting in to play Hong Kong's Clockenflap festival on Saturday in what will be the band's first

appearance in the city. Rodgers and Chic will be in town for only a matter of hours, squeezing Hong Kong between a Friday show in Shanghai and a Sunday appearance in New Delhi that requires them to head for the airport after stepping off stage at West Kowloon.

Over the phone from Tokyo, Rodgers sounds energised and just a little hoarse from the previous night's exertions at The Blue Note as we discuss his incredible career, current renaissance and the reason for his Herculean touring schedule. "We're trying to finish up playing Asia because I'm taking off after the beginning of the year to finish up a bunch of recordings, you know, with Daft Punk, with Avicii, with Disclosure, all these different acts," he says. "And of course we're doing the new Chic record that many of them will be collaborating on. So I have to get all the touring out of my system so I can go to work making my new record."

Even a year ago, the idea of a new album - never mind one with such an illustrious cast of collaborators - would have seemed a remote possibility. But after a summer that saw Rodgers receive the all clear in his recovery from prostate cancer, a critically acclaimed Chic performance at Glastonbury and, of course, the Daft Punk-powered renewal of interest in Rodgers' back catalogue, the album is not only happening but is set to be one of the most eagerly anticipated releases of 2014. And yet, despite their resurgence, Rodgers admits that Chic are "sort of semi-anonymous" - at least for now.

Adding extra fuel to the disco inferno, Rodgers recently got his hands on a





Nile Rodgers (left) is enjoying a resurgence with new collaborations and sampling of his classic material. In Paris in 1980 (above), performing live with Chic co-founder Bernard Edwards (on bass), drummer Tony Thompson and singers Luci Martin and Alfa Anderson. Photos: Corbis



collection of lost Chic recordings that had been gathering dust in the Warner Music tape library. Some of these tracks will be on the new Chic album, but the rest, Rodgers insists, will be used sparingly. "I have so much material, so much new stuff that I've written as well as the lost tracks," he says.

"One thing I've learned is that you can't bombard people with a bunch of new music; it's just too much for them to absorb. So at best I'll probably put out two tracks [on the new album]. I

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NILE RODGERS

only have a certain amount of the lost tracks, so I don't want to just put them out on one record because, for one they're sacred to me - I get to play with my great friends that are no longer here - and also the music really is almost spiritual to me. Every time I put it on, I just listen to it over and over again."

Rodgers also confirms that Daft Punk will be involved in the production of at least one of the unfinished tracks - good news for anyone jonesing for a feel-good follow-up to *Get Lucky*. In the

meantime, Rodgers is embracing mainstream EDM by working with Swedish house DJ Avicii (who Rodgers describes as "one of my best relationships in the world right now"), British electronic duos Disclosure and Chase and Status, and French superstar DJ David Guetta.

Always prolific, Rodgers says he went into overdrive when he was diagnosed with cancer. While most people would have concentrated on their health, the only thing on Rodgers' mind was music. "I was stricken with cancer, a very severe aggressive cancer three years ago, and they didn't think I'd make it," he recalls.

But "I wasn't worried about making it or not making it. The main thing I was worried about was finishing the music ... finishing the journey I had decided to embark upon. And that was to do more live shows than I've ever done in my life, maybe make Chic a little less anonymous. Even if image-wise we were anonymous, I still wanted people to know how good a band we were. So that's what I did."

The musician has not only survived but thrived, and now the world is waking up once more to the talent that almost left us - and the world, it seems, is making up for lost time.

"Right now if you look at the amount of recording contracts that I have - every single day my attorney's on the phone going, 'Oh my God, how many records are you doing?'" says Rodgers.

"Sony Publishing wrote me the sweetest letter the other day. The guy was going over my performance royalties, and [the letter said] 'I'm looking at Nile Rodgers' performance royalties and I'm already at 400 and I've merely scratched the surface.' So he's thinking, 'How many records has this guy played on?'"

Such an expansive and varied body of work means a Chic gig is akin to watching a live and finely tuned jukebox of hits from the past 40 years. As well as Chic's hits, the band also cover *Like a Virgin*, Sister Sledge's *Lost in Music*, Duran Duran's *Notorious* and many more. One song Rodgers won't be playing live however is *Get Lucky* - he'll only perform the song when Daft Punk join him on stage.

Regardless, Chic's performance on Saturday promises to be a standout highlight of the Clockenflap festival, and Rodgers says he will get as much of a kick out of it as the crowd.

"We go out on stage to have fun. We don't go out there for ego or to prove anything, we go out there just to have a great time and I think that that becomes infectious, and I think the people really feel it," says Rodgers, before signing off by swearing an oath to the Hong Kong crowd: "I say this with no ego at all: I promise you that you are going to have a good time." thereview@scmp.com

Chic, Nov 30, Clockenflap, West Kowloon Cultural District, HK\$680 (one day), HK\$1,280 (three-day pass), www.ticketflap.com. Inquiries: www.clockenflap.com

JEWELS OF THE NILE

Five famous albums touched by the hand of Nile Rodgers

C'est Chic - Chic (1978)

Following on from 1977's self-titled debut, *C'est Chic* cemented the band's place on disco's highest podium and delivered their bestselling album ever. The record included Chic's seminal hit *Le Freak*, which was snapped up by more than seven million devotees desperate for a taste of the Studio 54 vibe.



Let's Dance - David Bowie (1983)

The most commercially successful album of David Bowie's career, *Let's Dance* owed much to Rodgers' production skills that added a danceable sensibility to Bowie's trademark vocals. The title track was one of Bowie's biggest hits, while the album also spawned the singles *Modern Love* and *China Girl*.



Like a Virgin - Madonna (1984)

Rodgers pulled the production strings on the album that confirmed Madonna as a superstar. "I always thought that I'd be working with Madonna for the rest of her life," says Rodgers. "I mean, how do you do a record that sells 21 million albums and not think that that's going to be the artist that you'll produce forever?"



Notorious - Duran Duran (1986)

Despite boasting Rodgers' lush production and a title track that would become one of the band's most famous (and be sampled to even greater effect by The Notorious B.I.G.), *Notorious* didn't strike a chord with the band's fan base and marked the beginning of the end of their reign at the top of the British pop tree.



Random Access Memories - Daft Punk (2013)

With a little help from everyone's favourite French technobots, Rodgers hipped a whole new generation to the disco sound with *Get Lucky*, but also on *Give Life Back to Music* and *Lose Yourself to Dance*, which he also co-wrote and performed on. **Paul Kay**

