

Dragging home to Toledo with KLINGER

The Yale coed
who puts sizzle
in *Flashdance*

A tough new
report flunks
U.S. schools

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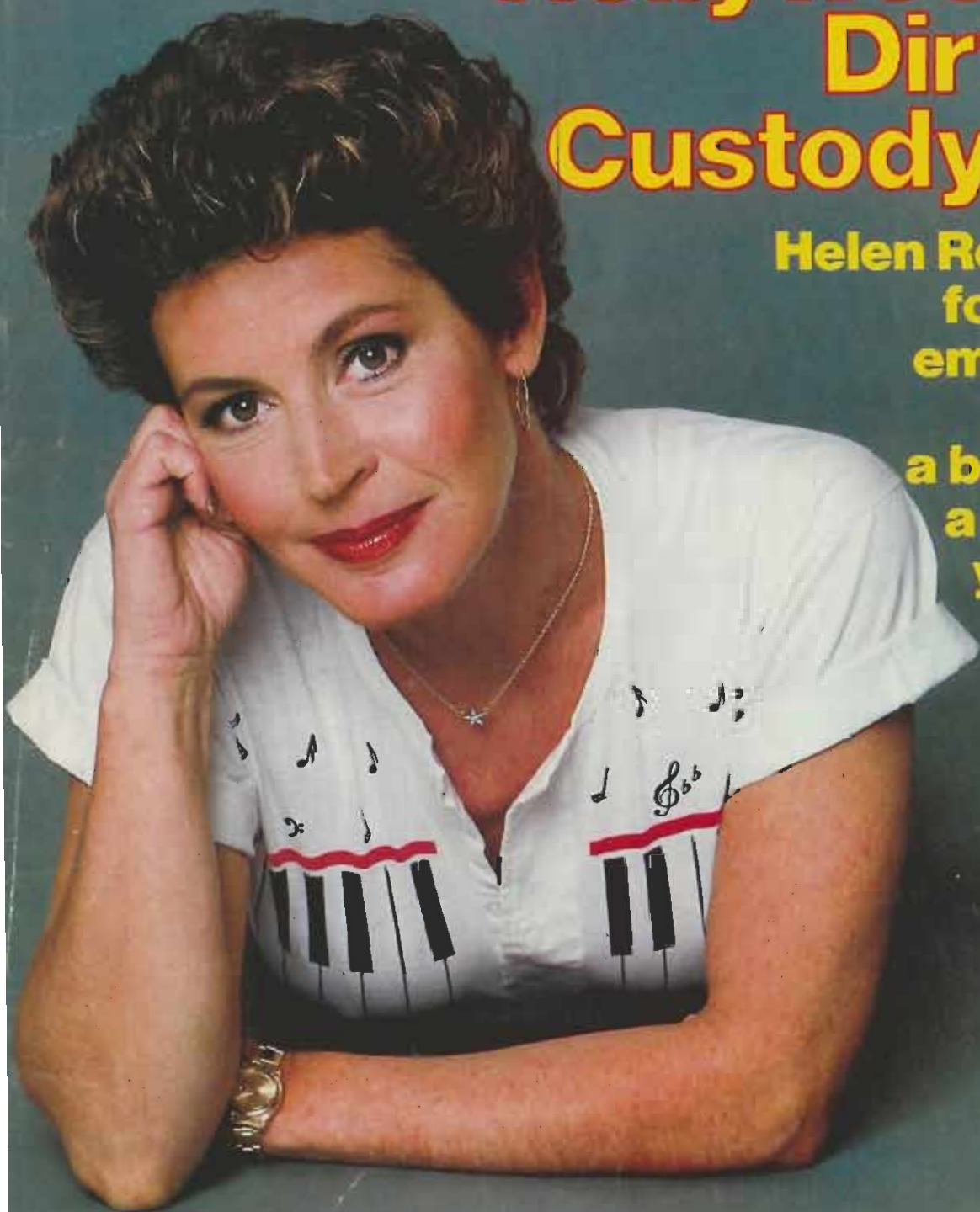
People

weekly



Hollywood's Dirtiest Custody Case

**Helen Reddy's fight
for her son is
embittered by
violence,
a break-in and
a threatened
young lover**



People

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Helen Reddy is woman, **Jeff Wald** used to be her man, and 10-year-old **Jordan** is their child, all caught in a devastating and dirty custody battle that has turned the air blue with foul charges and filthy talk

Cover photograph by ©Tony Korody/Sygma. Inset: Maddy Miller

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COVER CREDIT for Helen Reddy: Makeup and hairstyle by Jerry Munchweiller

PEOPLEWEEKLY (ISSN 0093-7673), published weekly, except two issues combined in one at year-end, \$41 per year U.S. and \$65 per year Canada only, by Time Inc., 3435 Wilshire Blvd., Los Angeles, Calif. 90010. Principal office: Rockefeller Center, New York, N.Y. 10020. J. Richard Munro, President; E. Thayer Bigelow, Treasurer; Charles B. Bear, Secretary. Second-class postage paid at Los Angeles, Calif. and at additional mailing offices. Authorized as second-class mail by the Post Office Dept., Ottawa, Canada and for payment of postage in cash. Direct subscription inquiries to PEOPLEWEEKLY, Time & Life Building, Chicago, Ill. 60611. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to PEOPLEWEEKLY, Time & Life Building, 541 N. Fairbanks Court, Chicago, Ill. 60611. Send all other mail to PEOPLEWEEKLY, Time & Life Building, Rockefeller Center, New York, N.Y. 10020. The editors assume no responsibility for unsolicited photographs and manuscripts, which must be accompanied by a self-addressed, stamped envelope if the material is to be returned. ©1983 Time Inc. All rights reserved. Reproduction in whole or in part without written permission is prohibited. PEOPLEWEEKLY is a registered trademark of Time Incorporated.

THE SOUTH BRONX WAS GETTING A BAD RAP UNTIL A CLUB CALLED DISCO FEVER CAME ALONG

It's 4 a.m. Friday, and up in the deejay's booth at Disco Fever—the rap capital of the Solar System, not to mention the South Bronx—D.J. Starski revs 500 dancers into action with Michael Jackson's *Billie Jean*. He does it using only the first eight bars of the song, cutting back and forth between two copies of the record. When he's got the whole house rocking to the

rhythm, Starski opens the mike:

"What's that word when you're bustin' loose?" he shouts.

"Juice! Juice!" 500 voices chant.

"And how do you feel when you got that juice?"

"Loose! Loose!" comes the reply. Right on the beat, too.

The beat goes on, night after night, at Disco Fever, the home of the rap-

pers and the hottest hot spot in New York today. Located some 15 subway stops north of Studio 54 and the rest of the pleasure palaces of midtown Manhattan, Fever is the tom-tom heart of the South Bronx, one of the few places its disenfranchised citizens can go to forget the harsh reality of their lives.

The South Bronx, of course, has been the national emblem of urban decay since Ronald Reagan toured its rubble-strewn landscape as a presidential candidate in 1980 and proclaimed, "I haven't seen anything as bad as this since London after the blitz!" Things have improved some since then, but there's still as much accuracy as self-interest in club owner Sal Abbatiello's assertion that "the only things happening in the South Bronx today are Yankee Stadium and Disco Fever."

Disco Fever has emerged as the headquarters of rap music, which is usually heard on city streets. Rappers transpose street slang into chanted couplets. The words are spoken (or "rapped"), not sung, over a stark, rhythmic base and deal with topics as diverse as unemployment and birth control. The first international rap hit was 1979's *Rapper Delight*, and the music has so matured since then that an apocalyptic rap anthem called *The Message*, by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, was selected by the *New York Times* as the most powerful pop single of 1982.

Disco Fever is mentioned in *The Message*, and on almost any night of the week, whether they've just finished performing at some chic underground *boîte* downtown or returned from a tour abroad, Flash and the Five can be found "chilling out" at the Fever in the company of other rap stars such as Kurtis Blow, Afrika Bambaataa and the Soulsonic Force, the Sugarhill Gang and the Fearless Four. Blow (born Kurt Walker), 23, had one of his earliest club gigs there as house emcee in 1979 and still insists, "The Fever's where I go to get ideas for my albums. You get to see what the street likes." Russell Simmons, Blow's 25-year-old manag-



Some 500 Fever Believers pass through the turnstiles an evening. Owner Sal Abbatiello estimates the clientele is 90 percent nonwhite.



Feverish patrons let loose as they do the Smurf, a current dance craze modeled on the cartoon show.

er, is even more emphatic about the club's role in the business: "If a rap record doesn't go around in the Fever, it's fake."

But rap alone cannot account for the fact that the Fever has become, in Abbatiello's words, "the YMCA of the Bronx." Last fall the community-minded club raised \$8,000 for the United Negro College Fund with its own 27-hour "telethon." The Fever also organizes bus rides to local prisons so that families and inmates from the neighborhood can visit. And last month the club opened its doors to some 250 youngsters for an Easter party with free admission, refreshments and gifts.

The Fever draws its clientele from a community where nearly 55 percent of the total population has been officially unemployed for so long that they are no longer considered part of the work force. With admission rarely more than \$5 per person, the club is packed six nights a week (closed Mondays) from 10 p.m. until 4 a.m.

CONTINUED



"This ain't just a disco," says Abbatiello, in his office with rapper Kurtis Blow. "It really means a lot to the neighborhood."



D.J. Starski (Kevin Smith) has been spinning discs at the Fever for four years.

Self-described Fever Believers include people like Dino Gary, 25, who works as a cook and cashier at a local McDonald's. When Dino gets off work at 3:30 in the afternoon, he goes home and sleeps until midnight or so, then hits the Fever and dances till dawn. "The Fever's like a center," says Dino. "The music is good, and everybody here is family."

Cecily Garner, a 27-year-old mother of four and part-time cashier at a department store, tries to participate in all of the Fever's various Thursday night entertainments, like *Name That Tune*, *The Dating Game* and a *Gong Show*, each one fueled by local talent. Garner entered the Fever's bathing suit competition last year, "but," she

reports, "I turned out to be pregnant so I had to drop out of the finals a few weeks later." Cecily considers her thrice-weekly pilgrimages to the Fever her vacation. "I don't get to go away in the summertime," she says, "so this is my summertime."

The unlikely head counselor at this year-round summer camp is Abbatiello, 30, a hip and energetic Italian-American. He is not surprised to find himself running a club where the clientele is almost totally black and Hispanic. "The nightlife is in my blood," he says, black nightlife in particular. Sal's father, Albert, runs two black nightclubs in the Bronx, and it was he who started Disco Fever in March 1978. The club failed to catch on right away, so

Sal convinced his father to let him take a crack at running it the following September. His first move was to bring in rappers to perform on a steady basis. "No one else would hire them," he recalls "because they drew such a dangerous crowd." Abbatiello's life revolves around Disco Fever. He spends 12 to 14 hours a day on the Fever's business. "I separated from my wife over this club," confesses Sal. "The club is my wife now."

Abbatiello is aware of the uniqueness of his position. "Some of my customers," he says, "had never even spoken to a white person before me. Once a girl came up to me and asked, 'Can I touch your hair?' My white friends asked me how I get away with it. I tell 'em I don't get away with nothing. Just show my customers a little kindness, and they act all right."

Even so it comes as no surprise that the Fever's staff includes people like Michael Lewis, better known as Mandingo, who at 6'4" and 260 pounds is head of security. Lewis, 35, says that he's spent almost 15 years of his life in various federal and state jails. But "ever since Sal picked me out of the crowd to work here, I've learned how to deal better with other people and I've learned how to respect myself more," he says. "This is the first time I've been on the street for four years straight since I was 12." Lewis feels that the Fever succeeds in some

CONTINUED ON PAGE 49



This polka-dotted pair were among the 250 children who turned out for the Fever's Easter party. At left, a trio of local boatboys "chill out."

cases, where places like Attica and Sing Sing (both of which he is familiar with) fail. "Big as I am," he says, "I've only had a couple fights here in all that time. I feel that we rehabilitate people." This sentiment echoes an observation of Russell Simmons: "People rap to stay out of trouble, like people who play basketball."

The Fever's most enduring feature is the optimism it generates, an optimism that is often expressed in rap. One such passage occurs in *Yes, We Can-Can*, a single released by a group of Fever regulars, the Treacherous Three. They sing:

*Although there's heavy odds
against us I still have to say
That we're not out 'cause
wherever there's a will
there's a way
But the strong will survive and
the weak will die
And the only ones who make it
are the ones who try.
Because we can, I know we
can-can, yes we can-can.*

BILL ADLER

One patron sips bubbly through a straw, while Wayne Garland (right) shows off Charlie, "America's only wooden rapper."



Crystal Spivey won a recent edition of the Fever's Gong Show with her rendition of *One in a Million*.

