The Fierce Tribe

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Chapter 10

Popular Dance

*If I can’t dance, it’s not my revolution.*

—Attributed to Emma Goldman

Dance and LGBTQ history go together. From molly house to drag ball to rent party, same-sex dancing inspired persecution by the state but also promoted solidarity among those within the outlaw community for hundreds of years. During Stonewall and its aftermath, dance accompanied, sustained, and accelerated liberation. The AIDS epidemic dampened the fervor for dance but did not extinguish it, as people danced to remember the dead, celebrate the living, and raise money for the sick.

Masculine nonviolence and spiritual transcendence are not simply mental constructs or ethical principles; they are performed and experienced through bodies that interact with each other in bars, on the street, in bedrooms, and on the dance floor.

The evolution of popular dance from colonial America to the Gay men’s Circuit is a movement from scripted, regulated performance to unscripted, fluid individual expression. This movement reflects tensions between acceptable and outlaw entertainment, informal and staged performance, African and European sensibilities, and Gay/ Straight festive culture.

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1. This popular saying attributed to Goldman is probably distilled from the following quote in her autobiography, *Living My Life*: “At the dances I was one of the most untiring and gayest. One evening a cousin of Sasha, a young boy, took me aside. With a grave face, as if he were about to announce the death of a dear comrade, he whispered to me that it did not behoove an agitator to dance. Certainly not with such reckless abandon, anyway…. I grew furious at the impudent interference of the boy. I told him to mind his own business…. I did not believe that a Cause which stood for a beautiful ideal, for anarchism, for release and freedom from convention and prejudice, should demand the denial of life and joy…. If it meant that, I did not want it” (56).
Most of the earliest popular dances recorded and preserved from colonial American culture\(^2\) have two major cultural sources: African and European. African American dance trends, which incorporated both African and European sensibilities, influenced (and would eventually replace) social dances from Europe.

Western Europeans and their descendants in colonial America usually relegated social dance to festivals. However, they did not incorporate it into religious ritual. They saw dance as a leisure activity—expressive, fun, nonproductive, frivolous, and suspiciously sinful—especially when the stern ethics of the Protestant Reformation concerning the body and physical pleasure as sources of sin took hold.

Initially, European-based formal dances in colonial America required equal numbers of men and women as complementary teams that would interact, pair up, and exchange partners in reels, cotillions, minuets, quadrilles, and square dances. Among the less formal dances, jigs and clogging could be danced alone or in pairs.

African American cultural sensibilities, however, tend to link dance to the highest possible spiritual experience a human being could have. In classical African\(^3\) religious traditions, the gods dance in consecrated human bodies. When African Americans were forced to abandon their beloved deities and adopt Christianity, they still held on to the means by which they accessed the divine through rhythmic movement, percussion, and song.\(^4\) Just as many forms of popular American music can be traced to African American gospel roots, the inspiration for the myriad dance styles developed in the last hundred or so years can be traced to a deeply felt connection between body, spirit, and rhythm that comes from Africa.\(^5\)

In *Steppin' on the Blues*, Jacqui Malone gives the following description of Black dance:

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2. This short history of dance has no pretensions of being anywhere near complete. The dances I mention reflect only those forms that have survived in the historical record. It does not include American Indian influences, which no doubt were there, but are nearly impossible to pinpoint.

3. Ninian Smart, a renowned scholar of world religions, uses the terms “classical African religions” (traditional African religions) and “Greater Africa” (African culture found in the New World) (346, 344). I will also use these terms.

4. More about African and African American spirituality will be said in the next chapter.

5. People with refined rhythmic sensibilities, regardless of race or ethnic background, tend to raise children with those same sensibilities. I do not believe that genetics plays a significant role in determining if somebody “has rhythm.” It is possible that education of rhythm is passed on to the child by the movements of its mother and other caretakers as they hold it, sing to it, and play with it. This education begins at birth or perhaps even earlier, while the child is still in the womb. I see it as a culture-based pedagogy that is more prevalent in some groups and families than in others.
African American dance serves some of the same purposes as traditional dances in western and central African cultures: on both continents black dance is a source of energy, joy, and inspiration; a spiritual antidote to oppression; and a way to lighten work, teach social values, and strengthen institutions. It also teaches the unity of mind and body and regenerates mental and physical power. The role of dance as a regenerative force is echoed in the words of Bessie Jones of the Georgia Sea Islands: “We’d sing different songs, and then we’d dance a while to rest ourselves.”

Unfortunately, there is not much information on the African roots of American dance because there is almost no record exactly how Africans in the Colonies danced. Malone concedes that little can be said with certainty about what African American dance was like before the twentieth century, all the while asserting the importance of African kinesthetic impact on contemporary African Americans:

Although visual source materials are not available to trace with accuracy the evolution of African American dances in the United States during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, certain movement patterns, gestures, attitudes, and stylizations present in the body language of contemporary black Americans are assertive proof of African influences. [Olly Wilson says that] African Americans “refine all movement in the direction of dance-beat elegance. Their work movements become dance movements and so do their play movements; and so, indeed, do all the movements they use every day, including the way they walk, stand, turn, wave, shake hands, reach, or make any gesture at all.”

For centuries, stigma associated with African influences has kept scholars from giving African American dance its due as an important feature of American culture. Language that describes the casual genius of movement preserved and regenerated within the African American community has yet to be standardized.

Within the Black African cultural context, the use of dance to invoke spiritual experiences and individual expression is not deviance from the communal norm but affirmation of divine inspiration. But preservation of any one African culture was undermined in the English settlements from Newfoundland to Georgia. Africans in America found themselves thrown into a collective of many different cultures from Mali to Angola (and perhaps a few from Mozambique, Madagascar, and Zanzibar). A vast range of gods, rhythms, and expressions of movement would arise when people danced together. Condemnation of their sacred religions by their oppressors would have disrupted the routine education of the young in all areas of ritual, including dance. Within a few generations,
innovations would logically appear with greater frequency because there would no longer be distinct institutions of classical African culture to certify what was proper.

European colonists exposed Africans to less sophisticated dances and often forced them to give up their own dances. It was inevitable that, given their cultural heritage, the servants would quickly outshine the masters. Malone quotes Ralph Ellison:

The slaves first sensed it. They sensed it when they looked at the people in the big house dancing their American versions of European social dances. And they first mocked them—and then they decided, coming from dancing cultures, that they could do them better. And then they went on to define what surely is the beginnings of an American choreography.... They had the freedom of experimentation, of trying things out.... And in the doing, they found ways of making the human body move in stylized ways which were different. (38)

The Africanization of social dance and music occurred all over the New World where African immigrants settled in sufficient numbers. Nevertheless, the social hierarchy that kept most Africans and their descendants in slavery would officially devalue their culture and religion. Although Whites in colonial America would admire and imitate the dances of Blacks, they ostensibly based their popular dance on trends coming from Europe. Dance was culture, and real culture was seen as the exclusive domain of European-based institutions.

Because of this bias, we know much more about European dances in America before the twentieth century than African ones. Yet, characteristics of African dance are more influential in terms of today’s popular dance. Kai Fikentscher says the African sensibilities became dominant about 1910: “The European imprint on American social dance seems to have diminished for good” at that time (24). African-based dances were often danced with the group but without a partner, and, as mentioned earlier, a higher premium was placed on personal innovation-through-inspiration rather than rigidly prescribed movement. A few African American dances from early American history have survived in the record, and we see traits in them that are present in popular dance today, most notably individual expression. The ring shout had spiritual connotations; it featured innovative dancing while moving in a circle with other celebrants. The cakewalk, a secular dance, was likewise innovative, but originated with the satirical humor of the oppressed mocking the oppressor:

6. Dancing in moving circles is also a trait of many Native American dances. We may find that the ring dance has Native American roots as well as African.
As a product of black folk culture, the cakewalk remains obscure in origin. Perhaps with African roots, it developed on plantations sometime before the Civil War, as slaves imitated the Grand March that concluded the cotillions and fancy balls given by whites. Although plantation owners often mistook the dance for childlike play, the cakewalk in fact had a satirical purpose. Promenading in pairs, dancers crossed their arms, arched their backs, threw back their heads, and strutted with exaggerated kicks. (Appiah and Gates 121) 

One European style that blended with African sensibilities was the jig. In colonial Williamsburg, the “Negro jig” apparently was a favorite at one time (Southern 44). The influx of dancing masters from France at this time to train the White folk in the formal requirements of the minuet, the grand march, and other courtly dances may have been a reaction to the Africanization of dance. In the long run, however, these attempts at European sophistication provided more material for African Americans to lampoon and incorporate into their own dances, which in turn were incorporated into mainstream dances by the rest of the population.

There was also a countermovement to have dancing banned. For a significant number of White Christians, dance was evil, or at least highly suspect. All of the aforementioned dances in this chapter, European- and African-based, were condemned at some point by Christian religious authorities, Catholic as well as Protestant.

Until the early twentieth century, dance styles were wedded to specific types of music. “Reel,” “quadrille,” “waltz,” “polka,” and “jig” refer to a type of dance and the music appropriate for that dance. People would reel to reels, dance a waltz when a waltz was played, polka to polka songs, and do the jig when they heard a jig. One reason for this was the rich variety of tempos and rhythm patterns available in the social dances of those times. Quadrilles, for example, could be in 2/4 and 6/8 time, while waltzes are in 3/4 time.

_Time signatures_, such as 2/4, 4/4, 3/4, and 6/8 determine the pulse of a song. By “pulse,” I mean the way in which certain beats in a song’s rhythm feel stronger than others. In turn, the pulse of a song influences how people dance to it. Because they are more than a little subjective,

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7. Unlike any other form of African American dance from colonial times, there is plenty of material on the cakewalk because minstrel shows preserved it; the cakewalk became an international dance craze in the late 1800s.

8. When I attended Berea College in Kentucky (1976–1981), African American classmates had a new dance that mocked European American men. They called it “the White boy.”

9. A notable Christian exception would be the Shakers, who incorporated sacred dance into their worship services.
time signatures are not easy to explain, so I will do so from the standpoint of the dancer rather than the musician.10

Only the first number in the time signature is important to the dancer. A song done in 2/4 time is used for marching because the pulse hits every two beats. A march consists of two steps. The pulse is stronger on the first step rather than the second, as in “one, two, one, two,” etc. In the United States military, this translates into stepping forward, left foot first: “left, right, left, right.” The number 3 in 3/4 time is also the number of steps for a waltz: “one, two, three, one, two, three.” A signature beginning with 4 would stress the first of four beats: “one, two, three, four, one, two, three, four.”

One of the biggest changes in European popular dance occurred in the nineteenth century when people chose vigorous couples-dancing over the stylized couples-dancing of the minuet and highly choreographed team-dancing. A corresponding relaxation in dress (no more wigs for men, less complex hairstyles for women) came with the new freedom of movement that couples could enjoy (Casey 14–15).

The waltz revolutionized dance in the mid-1840s by separating couples from the group. It also allowed men and women to face each other and maintain physical contact for the duration of the dance.12 The group no longer moved as one unit, but rather as many couples-units whose interaction was minimized to staying out of each other’s way. Initially, the waltz was considered scandalous (Van Der Merwe 237–38), but popular acceptance soon normalized it. Team dancing would fall out of fashion.

The popularity of the waltz signaled a change in attitude toward courtship and flirting. Within the public sphere of communal dance, an unprecedented degree of intimacy and independence from the group was allowed between men and women as they danced as couples. These changes reflected (and promoted) an understanding of romance based on the love of individuals for each other, not family interests or community restrictions placed on women of whom they should marry. Nevertheless, a woman expected a man to approach her for a dance, not the other way around. Though not so rigorously followed today, this custom is still part of heteronormative dance protocol.

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10. In musical terms, the 4 in 2/4 refers to what kind of note is used in a measure, which in this case would be quarter notes. The 2 refers to how many notes would be in a measure. In 6/8 time, the 8 means that eighth notes would be in the measure, with six notes per measure.

11. There is a further discussion of pulse in Chapter 12.

12. Face-to-face dancing did not originate with the waltz; it can be found in the cotilion, for example, but only for a limited portion of the dance.
**Ragtime**

The next big change after the waltz was the rise of ragtime music in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Only a few years after Emancipation, African Americans began generating trend-setting moves of their own that would become all the rage in Europe as well as the United States. Ragtime, a highly syncopated musical style that helped streamline popular dance music to the discipline of the 4/4 count, marked the first big shift to African sensibilities in American culture. Pioneered by the African American community, “ragtime” was the name of the musical style, but the dances that accompanied ragtime had many names and forms, including old ones like the cakewalk and the polka, and new ones, such as the two-step, foxtrot, and slow drag (Berlin 14–15).

The multitude of dances that developed around ragtime music gained popularity because of three factors: improved communications and travel; the success of minstrel shows, vaudeville, cakewalks, and other Black-inspired performances (with or without actual Black people); and the ease by which different forms of movement coming out of the African American community could be adapted to the 4/4 count.

Ragtime marks the beginning of global movements in African American music and dance. The basic simplicity of 4/4 upon which complex musical arrangements could be placed and diverse dance moves could be performed would eventually lead to the highly individualized dance forms found in popular communal dance today. Even with ragtime, there was a premium placed on individual style that allowed for a wide range of kinesthetic expression harkening back to the ring shout, European jig, and Africanized jig.

Composers write most ragtime songs in 2/4 and 4/4. The resounding popularity of ragtime paved the way so that 4/4 would eventually become the universal time signature for dance music. 3/4 and 6/8 dance music would no longer be trendy from that point on. The dominance of 4/4 is such that it is called “common time.”

Popular dancing in the ragtime era would require male-female couples, reflecting (and supporting) a quiet social revolution that began with the waltz. When ragtime became the rage, dancing in teams of men and women was already antiquated for most non-rural communities. LGBTQ folk would follow the “couple” format with one modification: they would introduce same-sex couples to underground dance culture.

Swing jazz\(^\text{13}\) came into scandalous fashion in the 1920s. “Swing” refers to the music and the dances, although the name does little

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13. “Jazz” has common linguistic roots with “jiz,” slang for sperm (Jarrett 81).
justice to the splendid variety of dance steps that came out of the swing era, such as the shag (“shag” also means sexual intercourse),\textsuperscript{14} jive, Charleston, tap,\textsuperscript{15} and the still-popular lindy hop. One dance that came out of swing is the “jitterbug,” which also refers to an alcoholic in an agitated state (\textit{American Heritage} 730). This association between swing and intoxication illustrates its outlaw jazz roots and reflects the connections made between popular Africanized dance, sex, liquor, and illegal drugs (Goldberg 58).

Latin-Caribbean dances came into the U.S. club scene in the 1930s. They really made their mark on the national consciousness in the 1950s with the popularity of conga lines, merengue, cha-cha, mambo, and rumba. It is reasonable to assume that these dances brought with them a more relaxed attitude toward race in general (and Hispanics in particular) than swing and ragtime. Perhaps it was the popular perception of Latin as “Brown” (i.e., between Black and White) that permitted a greater degree of tolerance for interracial interaction.

Most people are not aware that forced migrations of African populations to the Americas and African religions also play a significant role in the development of Latin-Caribbean as well as African American dance. The conga drum is both a secular and a sacred instrument. “Mambo” is a title for a Vodoun priestess as well as a secular dance.\textsuperscript{16} The major sites for the creation of these dance forms—Cuba, Haiti, Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico—also have communities that practice African religions.\textsuperscript{17}

The rock and R&B (rhythm and blues) revolution individualized popular dance. Although most communal dance at this time was still done as opposite-sex couples, a new dance called the twist burst forth on the national scene out of the African American community.

\textsuperscript{14} Like most swing dances, the shag originated in the African American community. It was considered at one time too sexual for its close body contact and suggestive moves, and was called the “dirty shag.” The shag survives today as the folk dance of well-to-do White people in the Low Country of coastal North and South Carolina. In 1984, the South Carolina legislature passed a law designating the shag as the state dance (Gray et al 282).

\textsuperscript{15} Tap is considered to be a hybrid of African dancing sensibilities with the Irish jig. During the nineteenth century, African and Irish Americans often lived together in poor neighborhoods, and tap dancing is thought to be a result of that closeness (Neal and Forman 33).

\textsuperscript{16} In the popular 1960s television comedy, \textit{I Love Lucy}, Cuban American actor and singer Desi Arnaz would sing out the sacred name of “Babalú, Bablúaye!” with his Cuban band, invoking the Lukumi-Santería god of disease and healing. Of course, only those people familiar with African traditions knew to whom Arnaz was singing.

\textsuperscript{17} Anyone familiar with Cuban and Brazilian music knows the deep connection between African worship and popular musical styles and dances, such as salsa and samba.
Brewster and Broughton describe the importance of this dance and how it changed America:

The twist caused a revolution because of its simplicity. It required no partner, no routine, no ritual, no training. All it needed was the right record and a loose set of limbs. It was an invocation to get on the floor and do your own thing. Because it wasn’t a couple’s dance, it struck a small blow for sexual equality—destroying the concept of “wallflower,” a girl awaiting an invitation to dance (coincidentally, the Pill [birth control] and the twist were launched within months of each other). Most importantly, perhaps, it unified a group of dancers. Dance the twist and you were no longer just focused on your partner, you were partying with the whole room. (54)

The enthusiastic movements required for many of the new dances that followed the twist (such as the Watusi, the jerk, and the pony) eliminated constant physical contact with one’s dance partner. Slow dancing to popular ballads, however, still required physical proximity and touching.

The 1950s and ‘60s also spawned line dances, an innovation where dancers would no longer couple up, but would form a line shoulder-to-shoulder and synchronize their movements with an identical pattern of steps. Same-sex couples-dancing for men was illegal in the United States when line dances became popular, as was couples-dancing between women that was overly sensual. Line dances were a fad that allowed people of the same sex to dance together. The Gay community may have started line dancing before anyone else for just that reason. Esther Newton says, “It is likely that the Madison, a line dance that became popular in America and Europe, was invented by [Gay residents of Cherry Grove, Fire Island] in the mid- to late fifties to get around the ‘no dancing together’ rule” (Cherry Grove 72).

Disco

R&B and rock music of the early 1960s brought forth disco, the first truly worldwide music-dance craze since the military march.18

The history of disco actually has three phases: psychedelia/Motown, disco, and house. In Manhattan during the early 1960s, certain clubs opened up that exclusively played recorded music rather than live bands. These venues were known as “discotheques,” a place of discs or vinyl records. This trend arose at about the same time as two important musical styles: the psychedelic music movement in rock, and the

18. More about the military march as the first worldwide dance craze will be said later.
soul music revolution in R&B brought on by the Motown (from “Motor City” or Detroit) sound.

Both of these musical genres refer to the soul. “Psychedelia” is a term taken from two Greek words: psyche (“soul”) and delos (“clear,” “visible”) (American Heritage 1104), which would translate as “soul vision,” an oblique reference to altered states brought on by hallucinogenic drugs. Psychedelic and soul music have strong spiritual and outlaw roots, as did the hippie and black power movements that these genres inspired and reflected. Many songs from these soul-based musical styles were dance tunes.¹⁹

The 1960s were a time of experimentation with music, dance, drugs, spirituality, and social awareness. The substances that caused the most profound hallucinogenic experiences, such as LSD and psychoactive mushrooms, were also called “psychedelic.” The close relationship between music and drugs is expressed in some of the lyrics of psychedelic rock (and some Motown soul songs) of the times. Outstanding examples in rock are “Purple Haze” by Jimi Hendrix, “Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds” (LSD) by the Beatles, “Eight Miles High” by the Byrds, and “White Rabbit” by Jefferson Airplane. On the soul side, there was “Cloud Nine” by the Temptations. Discotheques were designed to enhance the psychedelic experience with flashing lights shining on the dance floor. By the mid-1960s, DJs in Manhattan and London discotheques did something that a traditional dance band could not do: they used dual turntables so that they could play one song after another without taking a break between songs. This technique of continuous music allows the dancers to enter into a sonically-driven altered state that could last for hours, a state that can be enhanced somewhat by alcohol, but more so by other recreational drugs that did not sabotage coordination as much.

It is in the discotheques of the early 1960s that dancing became completely individualized. Not only were people free to dance without touching, they no longer needed to coordinate their dance with anyone else, or even dance a recognizable step. The inspiration of movement was to come from within each person, and involved a very intimate relationship with the music. As with the twist, the rule of dance was “do your own thing.” This was especially true with the psychedelia crowd, a predominantly European American bunch who, unlike the

¹⁹. On the psychedelia side, one need look no further than the music of the still-influential Grateful Dead. The vast majority of their songs were lengthy dance tunes, leisurely paced out and extended way beyond the 3 1/2-minute industry standard for rock songs. Brewster and Broughton go so far as to say, “The [Grateful] Dead did to rock music what the disco DJs would later do for dance music: they contorted it to within an inch of its life” (66).
African American Motown crew, was not particularly interested in generating new dance crazes. Individual movement was enshrined in the person of the go-go dancer, usually a scantily clad woman, who would dance on a box or stage by herself. Underground Gay male venues had, of course, go-go-boys, a tradition still going strong today at Gay male bars, Circuit parties, and strip joints.

When psychedelia and Motown began to fade at the beginning of the 1970s, so did the discotheque, at least for Straight people. The waning popularity of psychedelia coincided with trendsetters’ rejection of the hippie, who was often negatively portrayed as stoned on drugs and beligerently anti-establishment. For men, the hippie was popularly caricaturized as a longhaired guy of questionable masculinity. The Gay crowd, however, was full of men who regularly did drugs, were automatically labeled as anti-establishment because of their sexual preference, and whose masculinity was suspect as a matter of course.

Gay men kept the tradition of the discotheque, but with some important modifications that transitioned smoothly from psychedelia and Motown to disco.

Two things came forth from the Gay community that prepared the way for the disco movement: a design for an improved discotheque (called the “disco”) that was easily copied, and the DJ technique called the “slip-cue.” According to Esther Newton, discos were patterned after a refurbished club on Fire Island in the summer of 1970 called the Ice Palace. Like the Manhattan and London discotheques a few years earlier, the Ice Palace had two turntables. Colored lights were set up, just as in discotheques. But this time, the lights were wired in sync with the sound system so that the lights would flash to the beat. Within weeks, another Gay club on Fire Island copied the pattern set by the Ice Palace (Newton 243–45). In only a few years, discos would open across America and on both sides of the Atlantic.

The second innovation was called “slip-cuing.” This is a technique where the DJ synchronizes the beat of the song that is finishing with the beat of the new song in such a way that the transition occurs simultaneously on the pulse, the first beat of the 4–count. In other words, the pulse of the music can function like a heartbeat that is never interrupted. DJ Tom Moulton, one of the DJs credited as the inventor of the continuous mix\(^\text{20}\) in the year 1974, describes the process:

> By carefully watching how people danced, I noticed that they would always finish the step. In other words, they would go one-two-three-four and then they would walk off the floor on the one beat. The trick

\(^{20}\) This claim to fame is a contested one. Other possible candidates include Francis Grasso and Terry Noel.
was to get them to begin dancing to the next song before they realized it actually was another song. (Cheren 148)

Slip-cuing was made eminently easier with the rise of disco music. Although disco music is 4/4 with the pulse on the first beat, the genius of disco was to stress every beat in the same way that many marching bands use a bass drum. In other words, the disco 4/4 beat is underscored with a 1/4 deep-bass pulse: “boom, boom, boom, boom.” This blending of 1/4 and 4/4 signatures is further enhanced by a high-treble counter-pulse between beats. It is the counter-pulse tsssh that gives disco its distinctive “boom-tsssh, boom-tsssh, boom-tsssh, boom-tsssh” sound. The result on the dance floor was a driving beat that made it easy for people to dance.

Disco songs usually have between 115–135 beats per minute, an energetic yet comfortable pace that is a bit faster than a march but not as fast as a jog. Everything from lush orchestral strings to complex African percussion could be layered into a song with a disco format. In addition, disco songs are highly regimented, like military marches. The tempo rarely changes during the course of a song. The regularity of the disco 4/4 signature, the narrow range of beats per minute, and the unchanging tempo make it easier for DJs to slip-cue songs together. These features also make the music exceptionally accessible to people from all ages and many different cultural backgrounds. Just about everyone, from the best dancers to the worst, could move to the music in a socially acceptable fashion. This would be especially important to the Gay male community, which is composed of people from many different cultures and needed music that was accessible to all.

When DJs in the Gay male community began slip-cuing songs together to form one continuous pulse over an entire evening, they were reinventing a trend in dance that was already used in marches and jigs. Marching bands will play one tune to the next without stopping. Irish jig songs are also strung together by traditional bands so that the dancing need not stop. But there are different reasons why marchers, jig-dancers, and Gay men in discotheques use continuous song sequences. Marches are played to keep soldiers entertained as they move in tight formation for indefinite periods. The ultimate purpose of marches is to foster corporate unity with as little variation in movement within the team as possible. Irish jigs are played non-stop for contests of endurance. Rivals will challenge each other by dancing to exhaustion until only one is left.

21. This would also include those who imitate soldiers, such as nonmilitary marching bands for police and sports teams.
This is not to say that there are no pleasures in marching or jig-endurance contests. To march, to be in formation with one’s fellows, moving together with such precision that every footstep hits the ground at precisely the same time, and listening to the sing-song of a jody call\(^\text{22}\) or the steady cadence of a marching band is indeed pleasurable.\(^\text{23}\) The same could be said for competing with one’s fellows in an Irish jig contest, overcoming fatigue, weaving one’s movements around the rhythm and melody of the song, and pushing the body to its limits.

Unlike marching in unison to maintain military discipline or dancing jigs to outlast competitors, continuous mixing in Gay clubs originated solely for the build-up and prolongation of pleasure that is felt by as many people as possible as they move together into an altered state of shared communal identity. In this manner, the Gay male dance movement continues African traditions of nonstop drumming and singing to facilitate the production of spiritual trances (which are extremely pleasurable) in the dancers and enhance the experience of watching spirit-inspired dancers for the spectators.\(^\text{24}\) The focus on pleasure and altered states bordering on the spiritual are the main reasons why disco and underground dance culture caught on worldwide, and why they (and classical African religious traditions) are condemned.

Different dances came forth with disco, including line dances such as the bus stop and novelty dances like the bump. Some swing dances also re-emerged, and salsa made its debut (disco had some definite Latin impulses as well), but the old ‘60s psychedelia “do your own thing” ethos of individual expression as the preferred aesthetic was the general rule.

Disco eventually fell out of favor with the Straight crowd. Like psychedelia, it was associated with illegal drugs and questionable masculinity. But disco never really died out in the Gay male community. Jimmy Ruffin’s “Hold On (To My Love)” and Viola Wills’s cover of Gordon Lightfoot’s “If You Could Read My Mind,” both unabashedly disco songs made after disco had supposedly died, are still played in Gay men’s dance clubs, decades after disco has faded from the contemporary music scene.

**Disco’s Children**

The techniques developed in disco became Rave, Circuit, Hip-Hop, and the work-in-progress called the underground dance scene that

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22. Cadence that is sung for marching soldiers by their leader.
23. More about the relationship between marching and Circuit dancing performance will be found in Chapter 12.
24. The next chapter is dedicated to African and African American influence on disco, house music, and the Circuit.
nurture these forms. DJ culture that spawned both Raves and Circuit parties began in Gay clubs in 1970s Manhattan. The Rave community was formed when New York-transplanted Chicago house music (along with Detroit techno house) and MDMA traveled overseas to England and the island of Ibiza in the late 1980s. The scene jelled there and quickly spread to New York, San Francisco, and eventually every major city in the United States and Canada (Silcott 17–46).

Raves and Circuit parties became popular at just about the same time in the late 1980s and throughout the '90s. Both Raves and Circuit parties open the dance floor up to single dancers. Groups of friends can dance with each other for the duration of an event and never couple up if they so choose. In the fluid setting of the Circuit and the Rave scene, people have the option to go through several kinds of social interaction while on the dance floor. They may dance by themselves, dance with some friends, dance with new acquaintances, dance with a partner, or present themselves to everybody and dance on a raised platform or box.

The average age of Ravers is younger than that of Circuiteers (twenty-two compared to thirty-three years). Like Circuiteers, Ravers tend to see themselves as a tribe. DJs are stars, perhaps even more so than in the Circuit. Music can go from very slow grooves in the “chill room” (a lounge with its own DJ where the volume and room temperature tend to be lower) to fast-paced music as high as 170 bpm on the dance floor. Raves tend to have faster dance beats on average than the Circuit (perhaps attributable to the exuberance of a younger crowd). This in turn necessitates the presence of chill rooms, rarely found at Circuit parties, to give exhausted and overheated dancers a place to rest and recuperate.

Men at Raves learn quickly not to treat women the same way as they would in the alcohol-based dance culture of the typical club scene. The unwritten code that insists upon one-on-one dancing between a man and a woman is null and void. Men can learn to peacefully bond with people through the performance of Rave ecstatic dance.

Masculinity in Raves is understood differently than the Circuit. A truce exists in the battle between the sexes that extends to relations among men, as expressed in the PLUR acronym: Peace, Love, Unity, and Respect. Rave sensuality is much less sexually explicit than Circuit sensuality, which could be represented by PLUS: Peace, Love, Unity, and Sex. This is not to say that a man cannot be sexy at a Rave, but it is a radically different kind of sexiness from the heteronormative bar scene for Straight men. “Beer muscles” at a Rave will draw ridicule rather than respect. There is also less emphasis on muscle-as-beautiful and physical perfection. Bob Ganem, a DJ who made the switch from the Rave scene to the Circuit scene, says that body fascism is not a
problem in the Rave scene because “Raves began as places where misfits could go and be accepted. There is a rejection of surface values” (personal communication, October 2002). Raver clothing is looser and shirts do not come off as a matter of course. In general, men in Raves tend to use their bodies to show off how well they can dance, while men in Circuit parties use dance to show off how good their bodies look.

Hard-core Ravers that come to the Circuit are recognizable immediately by the way they dance, which has much more bounce in the step. They often incorporate interweaving hand movements, which may be due to the fondness Ravers have for glowsticks. Light toys make patterns in the air when hand movements weave in and around, an added bonus for the observer (and the dancer) who is high on drugs that enhance light and color, such as MDMA. Some of the musical styles found in Raves (gabba, jungle, drum-and-base, and techno, for example) are alien to the Circuit, which tends to privilege trance, deep house, electro-house, high-NRG, diva house, gospel house, progressive, and tribal. It is often the case that LGBTQ folk attend Raves in their youth because there is no pressure to conform to heterosexual norms.

**Ultra**

I attended Ultra 2007, a two-day electronic music festival in Miami held in March that could be considered the nearest thing in Rave culture to a Circuit weekend. Extravagantly huge and shamelessly commercial, Ultra attracts some 50,000 participants, mostly in their early twenties, with state-of-the-art music and lights, world-famous DJs, several simultaneous dance areas, and a general sense of camaraderie that typifies the nonviolent masculinity that Raves foster. The crowd was Gay-tolerant and exuberant. Some noticeable differences from Circuit events include the following four features:

1. There is a tendency for participants to face the DJ rather than each other as they dance. This tendency can be found in both Rave and underground music culture. I attribute this phenomenon to the truce between the sexes; common ground is expressed through fixing one’s focus on the DJ and not directly on the objects of one’s desire.

2. The larger performances featured go-go girls onstage with the DJs but no go-go boys. It is obvious in the way that these women were presented that the promoters were catering to Straight men, thus promoting a not-so-PLUR masculinity. However, they need not have bothered.

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25. Ravers will sometimes do solo glowstick performances for each other in which one raver will be still, while another weaves light patterns near the unmoving observer’s eyes. I was told that this was called “glowsticking.”

26. Burning Man in Nevada and the Detroit Electronic Music Festival are other such events.
I do not think that many people really cared. For the most part, the go-go girls were not terribly enthused about what they were doing because neither was anyone else.

3. There was the unfortunate presence of local celebrities who would talk during the performances of superstar DJs, saying things like, “DJ So-and-So is the SHIT, Miami! MAKE SOME FUCKING NOISE!” ad nauseum, sometimes for the entire set. There was some poetic justice when, during one such rant, the offensive celebrity was pelted with glowsticks by angry Ravers, accompanied by shouts of “SHUT UP!”

4. The men in the crowd were not quite metrosexual, but they were on their way. They were much more likely to use obscenities and exhibit macho posturing than Circuit boys. The influence of Gay dance culture was nevertheless apparent in the way that many of these men would display their shirtless torsos, even when the temperature had dropped after sundown. This appeared to be as much a display for the attention of other men as it was for women. In addition to that, there was no violence, and I heard no smart remarks made about Gays.

The cardinal rules of underground dance culture worldwide have been individualized to the point where the only requirements are to move to the beat and not interfere with other dancers as they do their thing. At its roots, it is an ethos of democracy and inclusion. Both Rave and Circuit communities adhere to that ethos, which ruled supreme during Ultra 2007.

Although a stage had been set up for Hip-Hop artists and DJs, there was a noticeable absence of deep house DJs at Ultra. An event that catered to deep house DJs and fans sponsored by Bembe and Ocha Records (“bembe” can refer to a Lukumi-Santeria ritual, and “Ocha” is the Cuban form of Orishá or Orixá) was going on at the same time as Ultra on that Saturday to make up for the deficiency.

**Hip-Hop and Ballroom**

The Hip-Hop scene is not completely separated from the Rave and Circuit scenes. One can see young Circuiteers and Ravers accessorizing “bad boy” Hip-Hop fashions. The privileging of violence in the gangsta movement within Hip-Hop, however, keeps interaction between the scenes at a minimum. Both the Rave and the Circuit scene are tolerant of same-sex sexual orientation, while Hip-Hop tends to be tolerant of homophobia and misogyny. Aforementioned choreographer Chris Davis has this to say about Hip-Hop and the Circuit:

The younger generation of Gays are definitely influenced by some of the “lite” Hip-Hop artists such as Missy Elliott, Kanye West and, to
some extent, Common. These are Hip-Hop artists that don’t Gay bash and that some Gay DJs such as Randy Bettis play in the clubs. When you see boys in the clubs with their shirts off and wearing tight ski caps and sunglasses, this isn’t just a skater boy look. It’s a look that is seen in major Hip-Hop videos and is supposed to come across as very masculine amongst other men, even in a Gay male environment. (personal communication, July 2007)

In terms of attitude and language, the Circuit has been influenced much more by Ballroom culture than Hip-Hop. Simplified body movements taken from the extravagant gestures used in voguing and runway have entered into the Circuit’s kinesthetic vocabulary. For example, one may see the adroit use of the face and the gaze in creative ways that allow the dancer to perform as observer, then instantly become the object of observation by a sharp turn of the head at just the right moment. Nevertheless, movements and poses taken from the Ballroom scene are rarely as dramatic (or take up as much room) in the Circuit party as they are at the Ball.

*How to Dance “Gay”*

Most of the trends that make the Gay men’s dance movement distinctive began almost immediately after liberation. In the decade before Stonewall, Gay men’s festive culture included an element of hide-and-seek with the law. LGBTQ folk had to be much more circumspect when they danced together than Straight folk. Some Gay men’s clubs insisted that there be at least one woman dancing with every two men. Since the pre-Stonewall dance scene was clandestine, we have no way of accurately describing what was going on, as it could have been vastly different in private homes and clubs with varying degrees of seclusion away from police scrutiny. We do know, however, that the public bar scene was vulnerable to police intrusion at a moment’s notice. Loughery describes the situation of uncertainty and anxiety that came with an evening of carefree frivolity:

By the 1960s, gay men and lesbians were chafing at the strict rules enforced within the bar (even when the police weren’t around) by the owners nervous about their licenses. If a woman was on the floor to make it seem as if the men nearby were dancing with her; if the men were in a line and never facing one another; if the monitor on the ladder with the flashlight was satisfied that no one was too close; if the red light behind the bar wasn’t flashing to indicate the sudden approach of the police—then what ensued might be called “dancing together.” (277)
After Stonewall, Gay men explored a range of movements in the privacy of their own clubs without police harassment. Disco music arose in the early 1970s with a relentlessly driving beat that would allow men from different ethnic backgrounds and dance skills to move together in unison. The basic pattern of two people dancing together would be the norm, but dance moves would resist strict codification and remain relatively informal in the manner of the 1960s. Newton describes the effect of disco on the dance scene in Fire Island:

Just when police harassment had ended and men could dance with men and women with women, disco almost dissolved the couple as the dancing unit. The dancing became much more overtly sexual and more group oriented, an indoor representation of the group sex that was happening in the [Meat] Rack. Drug use, which had begun in the gay community, as elsewhere, in the 1960s, seemed especially suited to the flashing lights and general erotic sweatiness of the disco. The traditional drug of choice in Cherry Grove—alcohol—developed rivals favored by the younger crowd, different colored pills called uppers and downers, marijuana, acid, and eventually cocaine. (Cherry Grove 244)

The patterns of dance-floor behavior set in the days of disco are kept alive in Straight clubs, LGBTQ dance clubs, and Circuit parties. Gay men at Circuit parties follow many of the same rules as everyone else in the house music club scene, except for a tendency to enhance intimate body contact with multiple partners, a fondness for dancing shirtless, and a tendency not to face the DJ. Sometimes groups of men dance together in conga-like lines composed of bodies facing the same direction but pressed against each other in what could be described as a communal body-rub (what I’ve heard some people call a “caterpillar”). They may also form a group huddle with their arms around each other. The most popular dance step is the universal side-to-side shuffle seen on dance floors around the world, which can be done solo or with a partner (or two). In the Circuit, slow songs have disappeared in favor of a strict adherence to music played between 125–135 beats per minute.

Although there are no distinct dances in the Circuit, there are definable characteristics in the ways that Circuiteers tend to dance. The best dancers in the Circuit (and in house cultures) internalize the 32–count of house music. They do not simply move to the beat of a song, but will physically signal its pulse as well. Circuit boys and girls will usually “strike” (make a bold assertive gesture) on the first beat of a 32, 64, or 128–count, depending on how the song builds up its momentum.

The most distinctive feature in Gay men’s dance, especially the Circuit, is sensual couples-dancing. It is a dance with raw rhythmic
sensuality, often expressed in crotch-to-crotch or butt-to-groin grinding and thrusting. It is not unusual for a couple dancing sensually together to become a threesome, foursome, or any number from five to ten men in the aforementioned caterpillar or conga line. At this point, adherence to rhythm as a cohesive mass tends to go out the window. Many men will scrupulously avoid such antics because of appearance. Raw sensuality that is undisciplined by adherence to rhythm implies lack of control.

Rhythmic sensuality is perhaps the clearest communal expression of Gay liberation possible to the Gay male body, and it dates back to the time when Gay men began forming their own clubs.27 “Bruising” was a dance of this sensual genre (perhaps the only one ever given a name on record) that appeared briefly in Manhattan Gay clubs in the mid-1970s. Mel Cheren, its inventor, calls it “a particularly muscular sort of dancing that featured about as much bumping and grinding as you could get outside of the bedroom, or for that matter, the boxing ring” (166). Aggressive body slamming to the beat found in bruising can still be found in Gay men’s clubs and Circuit parties. Care is usually taken, however, to not let the dance get too sexual or too aggressive, unless the dancers mean to be outrageous and funny.

Sensual dancing between Gay men goes right up to the border of what might be considered a sex act, and occasionally people cross the line. It is not unusual during Circuit parties to see men dancing together with their hands in each other’s pants. Although it is by no means a dance maneuver practiced by the majority of participants at the same time, hands-down-the-pants is probably something that most Circuit boys have done at one time or another. Less frequent is the actual performance of sex acts on the dance floor. Fear of being perceived as “messy” (out of control) usually inspires men to stay off their knees and keep their pants up.

27. No doubt, sensual dancing existed before Stonewall. There is little to nothing, however, describing how it was done.
I own a dance studio with my husband, Jeff Pitzer. We have both been attending Circuit events together for years. I studied formally at Wright State University. I am certified with the Dance Masters of America to teach.

In formal dance (that being of discipline and technique, not in academia), there are no licensing procedures. Anyone may open a dance studio offering classes as an education. You may or may not have acquired a BFA in dance. Having a BFA in dance, while it may be impressive, has little to absolutely nothing to do with the talent that you have toward the art form. Some of the most gifted artists get right into the field and begin performing and then eventually teaching with no college education at all. If you are fortunate to find a gifted teacher at an early age, then college is almost totally unnecessary to begin your career. The value that the dance society validates us with is the acknowledgement and praise that we as artists are given when we make great achievements that are recognized by our peers and, most importantly, the audiences we perform for. After all, without an audience we are nothing. And an audience that doesn’t enjoy or celebrate your work will not promote you and will eventually cease to attend.

The history of popular dance in America goes from choreography for the entire group to minimal choreography for the couple, and then to no choreography at all. The jig and some of the African American styles of dance are earlier forms of dance that move away from set choreography and emphasize improvisation. Even then, those forms require stylized movements, unlike Circuit dancing, which is more freestyle and, truthfully, less sophisticated. To dance a jig or to tap dance takes practice. Just about anyone can walk on the dance floor of a Circuit party and look just like everyone else without a day of training.

I recognize that improvisation is not lack of discipline. Modern dance does allow for more improvisation than older forms. The difference between the average Circuit dancers and professional dancers is professional dancers have polish that comes from highly disciplined training. Their movements are controlled and precise, not haphazard and all over the place.

This is not to say that there are no distinct dance moves that people use in the Circuit. From my perspective, however, there is not much discipline in their movements or the way they do them. You have to
remember; for me as a professional, dance is a discipline that requires training. It is not unregulated self-expression. When I am at a Circuit party, that’s a different story.

When it comes to time signatures and accents, a dancer does not count the same way as a musician counts. A dancer is concerned about beats per measure, beats per minute, and pulse, not quarter notes, half notes, etc. When the music is tailored to pulses that a dancer can strike on the spot in the freestyle arena of the Circuit, then that music is Circuit music.

Dance is subjective. Some consider only technical ballet to be dance. Others consider any type of movement to music (or not) to be dance. I believe that people are dancing in Circuit parties, but I am not sure if I would consider the side-to-side rocking motion done by individuals or groups on a dance floor to be dance as I teach it. I cannot critique “Circuit dance” as there is nothing to base the critique on. There are few rules or skills to follow (other than striking on the pulse) therefore there is nothing to judge a Circuit dancer by. It is impossible to pick out individuals on a dance floor and critique them. Looking out over the crowd is like looking at a blank wall.

I once got up in front of everybody at a Circuit party and began to dance like a professional dancer. People stopped what they were doing and stared at me because I really stood out. Some of them asked me if I was a stripper. I won’t do it any more. That’s not why I’m there. I’d rather feel like one of the crowd. Besides, professional dancing is my job, and I wouldn’t want another professional dancer who might be watching to critique me when I’m just out to have a good time.