Chapter 11

Axé

Axé pra você (axé to you).

—Bahian greeting

In order to understand spirituality-in-motion on the Circuit dance floor, it is not enough to look at the history of dance by itself. Rhythm and music are the sources of energy that fuel the performance of dance in the Circuit and, like dance, have African roots. Music is also the primary means for participants and performers to transmit Africanized spirituality into Circuit spirituality.¹

The Brazilian African Yoruba term *axé* refers to spiritual power and authority. In *Meu Tempo É Agora* (My Time Is Now²) *axé* is defined as “power to accomplish by means of supernatural force” (poder de realização através de força sobrenatural).³ Robert Farris Thompson says that *axé* is “spiritual command, the power-to-make-things-happen, God’s own enabling light rendered accessible to men and women” (5). Axé makes the world go round. It is in all things at all times.

But axé does not exist in all things at the same level of intensity. Jim Wafer describes axé as mobile: “Axé moves around,” he says, “A thing that ‘has’ *axé* at one moment may lose it in the next. From this

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1. Usually these Circuiteers and performers are African Americans who grew up attending Spirit-filled churches, or are Latin Americans with connections to Africanized Latin music, dance, and possibly New World African religious communities. Some European Americans bring it as well; there are many White DJs who pick up on the Africanized spiritual vibe and work it into their sets and remixes.

2. *Meu Tempo É Agora* was written by Mother Maria Stella de Azevedo Santos (iyalo-rixá Mãe Stella de Oxossi of the House of Axé Opô Afonjá). Mãe Stella is one of the most respected religious authorities in the Candomblé community.

3. Mother Stella would also point out that a proper Candomblé ritual should not be confused with a folkloristic show that dramatizes Candomblé or *carnaval* songs that tap into Candomblé rhythms, music, and dance. Candomblé is serious business with a festive flair.
perspective *axé* has a lot in common with fashion ... it is not entirely predictable” (Wafer 19). Lorenzo de Almeida describes its use in common *bahiano* speech: “Axé is peace, good energy. In Bahia, axé can be used in a greeting, ‘Axé pra você’ (‘Axé to you’) or describing something as powerful, as in *muito axé*” (much axé) (interview, January 2008). If one wants to effect change in this world, there may not be enough axé to make things happen. There must first be a sufficient amount on hand. In classical Yoruba Orixá religion, axé is generated through rituals that incorporate plants, utilize the lifeblood of animals through sacrifice, and include rhythm, music, and dance.

According to *babalorixá* scholar Júlio Braga, “There is nothing more divine than dance, than music.”6 Rhythm, music, and dance generate currents of axé among participants. Such an obvious manifestation of axé is not as readily apparent in Orixá rituals of sacrifice and purification that do not incorporate dance. Techniques using rhythm and music are the principal strategies by which the gods are manifested in the dancing body-minds of mediums. It is difficult to overestimate the importance of merging with the beat as sacred expression, experience, authority, and a source of power.

There is an understanding of *Spirit* in Black charismatic or Spirit-filled church that parallels axé. In Africanized Christianity, spiritual power and authority are personified in the dynamic presence of the Third Person of the Holy Trinity, the Holy Spirit, who is seen as the living supernatural agent made manifest-in-motion when a congregant “catches the Spirit,” is resplendently “Spirit-filled,” or is rendered unconscious and “slain in the Spirit.” The Spirit is in all things at all times but is made manifest more strongly in some people than in others, and during certain moments more so than others. The ritualized accumulation of power in classical African religions that comes with accessing the life force of plants and the lifeblood of sacrificed animals, however, is not recognized by most African American Charismatic Christians as appropriate praxis, and neither is the multiplicity of legitimate spirits. Africanized rhythm, music, and dance are forms of spiritual expression in the divine performance repertoire that get transmitted cross-culturally from classical African religions to Africa in the New World, and from New World Africa to the Circuit.

Like axé and the Spirit, Circuit fierceness is fluid, sometimes radiantly intense, other times absent, but always potentially present and

4. Bahian, as in people and dialect from Bahia in Brazil
5. *Babalorixá* or *pai-de-santo* refer to the priest-father in charge of a Candomblé House.
6. “Porque nada é mais divino do que a dança, do que a música” (interview, March 1996).
readily transmittable. The vital importance of the cherished minority of African American Circuit participants and performers (including African American songstresses and quasi-drag performance artists) in the production of Circuit spirituality should not be underestimated. It is their fierceness, their own transformation and expression of axé/Spirit within the communal transcendence of the Circuit that gives the Circuit its distinct spiritual flavor, its own fierce solidarity.

In *Infectious Rhythm*, Barbara Browning describes adroit syncopation as an important dynamic of axé/Spirit:

**African diasporic possessional music is syncopated—that is, it produces a regular irregularity in the rhythm—and that rhythm is further “broken” in order to facilitate the entrance of the divinities. This means, in part, the sharp slap of a stick or the palm of the hand where a beat is unanticipated. (103)**

Syncopation is a key feature of music-and-dance spirituality in classical African religion and Africanized charismatic Christianity, a feature that is remixed into various genres of underground dance music and energizes the body-minds of participants in the spiritual performance of masculinity found in the Circuit. The “regular irregularity” of African and African diasporic music is repeated deregulation of the beat that destabilizes the participant and breaks down barriers between participants. It is the un-disciplining of the pulse in order to re-discipline it anew through repetition. The irregularity is regularized, intensified, and absorbed, undermining the day-to-day rhythms of participants’ body-minds so that communal forms of transcendence can impose their own patterns on individuals, who are in turn given the freedom to develop new kinesthetic disciplines.

In a Candomblé festa, a Pentecostal Holiness church, or a Circuit party, syncopation is one reliable source for the highly prized innovation, deregulation, and subversion of static disciplines that separate one individual from another. Syncopation fosters axé/Spirit/fierceness, which in turn sets the stage for the community to create, re-create, and reinforce its own regulations of solidarity.

It is not unusual to hear Circuit boys, especially those of African descent, to exclaim “Work!” when they see people expressing themselves

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7. Not all African Americans come from such a background. As Chris Davis told me, “Black people raised in a conservative Catholic environment do not have the same basis of freedom as someone raised in more evangelical Protestant environs. I do believe that conservative Catholic African Americans can observe the behavior of more liberated brethren and sistren and take that on, the same way that a White person can observe the emotion involved with ‘work’ and take it onto their persona” (personal communication, July 2007).
with unusual vigor. Kai Fikentscher, author of “You’d Better Work!” *Underground Dance Music in New York City*, defines “work” as it is used in the club scene:

Dancing (also deejaying) is frequently referred to as “Working (it) out,” as “Work it!” or as “You better work!”—the corresponding encouragement or compliment to a particular dancer’s (or DJ’s) performance. (64)

Within the rich verbal heritage of African Americans and other cultures in New World Africa, there is more to “work” than just encouragement. In the Deep South, “working a root” refers to casting a Hoodoo spell. *Trabajo* and *trabalho* (“work” in Spanish and Portuguese, respectively), refer to ritual magic in New World African religious communities such as Cuban Lukumi-Santería and Brazilian Candomblé. In one sense, the exclamation “Work!” or “Work that body!” on the dance floor is evocative of casting a spell, or simply the recognition that a spell is being successfully cast. The intensity of a well-done performance (to “work” as in “she worked the crowd”) by a dancer or DJ can be entrancing, magical, enchanting. When people work their bodies, they summon forth their own intensity and show the world how good they look in motion. To work a dance floor is to conjure something from within oneself and enchant those who watch. And it is through work that axé/Spirit becomes fierceness.

**Multiple Africas**

Circuit music can be traced to three major multicultural sources: African American R&B/disco music; African and African-Latin music and rhythms from Cuba, Puerto Rico, Haiti, Jamaica, Brazil, and West/Central Africa; and the Africanized Christian music of Black gospel. All three of these sources have profoundly spiritual roots that tend to surface during the ecstasy of dance, even when the music takes a decidedly secular turn.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, disco music is designed to help people from different cultures and backgrounds dance together. The songs are tailored to seamlessly blend one into another, allowing dancers to immerse themselves in a continuous rhythm for hours. I can remember the reactions of older White people around me when they heard it: they thought disco was just a bit too catchy and complained that it was subversively hypnotic. They also found it too Black for their tastes. As one of my disgruntled White elders once put it years ago:

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8. Cuban-born DJ César Murillo (Toronto) said he wants to bring many more Cuban rhythms to the Gay male dance scene, but he must do so gradually because non-Latin/non-African Canadians were not yet ready to hear them all at once (personal communication, April 2008).
when he heard disco music played during a wedding reception, “Are we in Africa?”

Some scholars say that the first disco song was “Soul Makossa” by Manu Dibango of Cameroon (1972). The success of “Soul Makossa” inspired a flood of R&B songs by Black artists with the same format of a strong, non-stop, central beat that can easily be matched up with other songs of the same genre (a distinctive trait of military marches, which can be played nonstop, one after another) and interwoven with catchy polyrhythms and melody. Groundbreaking disco songs include “Rock Your Baby” (George McCrae), “Love Train” (O’Jays), “Who’s That Lady” (Isley Brothers), “The Sound of Philadelphia” (MFSB), “You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)” (Sylvester, an openly Gay male disco singer who performed in drag), and the first disco remix: “Never Can Say Goodbye” (Gloria Gaynor), all by African American artists.

Disco music could be separated roughly into two different styles: R&B and European. The difference lay in two areas: European disco emphasizes the marching beat as its main percussive component. Since many of the first European disco songs were produced in Germany, the Teutonic fondness for the sound of military marches found both in parades and in Fasching drinking songs is quite apparent, but with a decidedly effeminate flair. R&B disco music in the United States would often downplay the marching beat in favor of more elaborate syncopation wedded with gospel-inspired vocals and elements of fusion jazz. European disco, on the other hand, favored lush orchestration. The lyrics of European disco tended to be formulaic (highly repetitive lyrics about dancing, sex, and romance), while R&B disco covered a broader range of topics. As to be expected, there were more than a few songs that tapped into both styles.

Almost as fast as they had opened in the mid-1970s, Straight discotheques across the nation began closing at the end of the 1970s, while Gay dance clubs increased in number. When European disco fell out of favor with the general population (in part due to the flood of formulaic songs in which a monotonous beat and simplistic lyrics became oppressingly mindless), R&B was still strong, producing dance music that was

9. “Theme from Shaft” by Isaac Hayes is another candidate for first disco song. With its initial release as an extended version song in 1971, it anticipated disco 12” single remixes. Also, the horn section and lush strings mark it as an early disco prototype.

10. I am not sure I have the language to describe what I mean by the effeminate sound of European disco. Suffice it to say that, instead of hard, aggressive rock-'n'-roll riffs, there were flowing orchestral melodies. The string section replaced the electric guitar.

11. Early R&B disco used a lot of orchestral music, especially in what was labeled the Philadelphia sound.
essentially disco but no longer labeled as such. African American musicians such as Inner City; Earth, Wind, and Fire; Patrice Rushen; Chaka Khan; and Michael Jackson (and European groups such as Kraftwerk and New Order) continued producing dance hits with a recognizable disco format without calling them disco. These songs were the direct precursors of house music, which today includes “disco house” as its own genre.

As mentioned earlier, disco was rooted in Black, Latino, Western European, and Manhattan Gay musical/dance sensibilities. Most of the songs that DJs put into continuous play at these venues were African American soul and soul-influenced disco music. The DJ culture that fostered disco music started in Gay male dance venues. Two of the most important figures in early DJ culture were Larry Levine and Frankie Knuckles, both of them Black Gay men. Many DJs today, both Straight and Gay, trace their trade back to the genius of these two legendary figures.

Circuit music is predominantly remixed house music with some Top 40, deep house, and techno on the side. But tribal is one musical genre that has flourished in the Circuit more so than in any other community. Pioneered and invigorated in remixes by DJs such as Tony Moran, Victor Calderone, Ralphi Rosario, Abel, and Paulo, the tribal sound is heavily percussive, usually with a techno edge and few vocals, inspiring those who do not care for it to label it “pots and pans.” In terms of music, a good tribal house track is espresso for people who can dance. It often loops strong African Cuban, African Brazilian, and West African percussion riffs with bursts of synthesizer keyboard notes (called “synth stabs”).

Some tribal songs incorporate classical African religious music. “Chango [Inle-Gue]” is a popular Circuit tune that includes a praise-song, appropriately enough, to Xangó, the masculine Yoruba god of thunder, drums, and dance. Claude Monnet marries tribal with Haitian Kreol in “Voodoo Bounce,” a song that invokes Dambala, the Vodoun Lwa (god) of the Serpent and Rainbow. Others suggest Africanized spirituality, such as Victor Calderone’s remix of Angelique’s “Holy Water.”

Another genre of dance music that has strong African/African American influences is the aforementioned deep house, which incorporates gospel, jazz, Cuban/Brazilian beats, and African traditional music in a manner that is more melodic than what one might find in a tribal house track. Favored by older participants and a fiercely loyal cadre of African American Circuiteers, deep house is the most romantic musical genre of the Circuit and the underground dance scene. It is also considered the most spiritual and uplifting. New World Africa is well represented; one outstanding example is Haitian musician Jephte
Guillaume, who incorporates the rhythms of Vodoun into deep house classics such as “Ibo Lele.”

During the March 2008 Winter Music Conference in SOBE/Miami, I went to the Jellybean Soul party at the Hotel Victor sponsored by John “Jellybean” Benitez. This event was a deep house happening and featured the best dancer-participants in any event I have attended for several years. People brought in two conga drums, wooden clap-sticks, and a tambourine to keep time with the music.

As if to confirm my notions of *axé*, the music at the Jellybean Soul party included gospel-inspired, jazz-inspired, and Greater African-inspired electronic dance music. There were live performances by the soul icon Ambrosia as well as the Yoruba-British diva Wunmi. At the height of the party, a Santeria-Lukumi devotee, dressed completely in white and wearing the beads appropriate to his deities, came in and joined the drummers. Nobody batted an eye. A gospel choir could have easily fit into the mix that night as well. In fact, this happened, sort of: on the spur of the moment, three gospel-trained men came together and sang three-part harmony for Ambrosia as she sang her deep house classic, “That’s How Much I Love You.”

Gospel and jazz influences in Circuit music are often in the vocal tracks found in what DJ Chuck Q of Columbus calls “screaming diva” or “Black diva”12 music (interview, January 2002). Devotion to Black divas includes mainstream superstars (Janet Jackson, Whitney Houston, Mary J. Blige, Debra Cox) and Circuit superstars (Martha Wash, Pepper MaShay, Ultra Naté, and Inaya Day, to name a few).

The importance of Black women in Circuit music brings up the question of why, exactly, Gay men are so attracted to Black divas. Perhaps it is because these women often sing about the men in their lives. Many songs have lyrics that reflect themes to which Gay men can easily relate in their own romantic relationships. A woman who is raised singing Black gospel can bring fierce intensity to a song, which is appealing to Circuit boys because it resonates with the intensity of the Circuit experience. It is not unusual to see Circuiteers singing along, especially with songs that affirm one’s identity in the face of romantic adversity, such as “It’s Not Right But It’s Okay” by Whitney Houston and “U Ain’t That Good” by Sheila Brody.

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12. Not all Circuit divas and performance artists are Black (case in point: Kristine W [Weitz], Sylvia Touson, Shokra, and Flava). The vast majority, however, are African American. In contrast to the divas, most DJs who have played the Circuit are White. Only a few are Black, such as Sharon White, Frankie Knuckles, Chad Jack, Power Infiniti, and Chuck Q (Quarles). Besides race, several DJs are ethnically Latin/Hispanic, such as Tony Moran, Abel (Aguilera), Ralph Rosario, DJ Paulo (Gois), Joe Bermudez, DJ Pride (Yvette Fernandez), Hector Fonseca, Oscar G (Gaetan), Eddie Baez, Ana Paula, Roland Belmares, and César Murillo.
For years, Gay men and gospel-belting, soul-shaking divas have supported each other. If one goes to any Gay male nightclub, Circuit party, or ocean cruise, one will usually hear at least one upbeat spiritual anthem sung by a powerful African American woman with one of the following topics:

- Love will save the world
- Jesus will save the world
- My God will save the world
- My man rocks my world
- My man is a self-centered, two-faced whore and I’m dumping his sketchy ass

The love that these fierce women receive from the Circuit community often eclipses anything they might get from the Straight world. A perfect example is Martha Wash, a beloved Circuit diva who started out in the club scene as one of two backup singers for Sylvester. While Martha Wash and Izora Rhodes were with Sylvester (who was quite

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13. In a scandalous example of Circuit verbal performance, Erikk Martin invokes violence to describe how Black women are fierce: “Have you ever seen a Black woman beat her children in public? I mean, those women let you know that you do not cross them. That’s why screaming diva music is so fierce. It’s fierce when a Black woman sings how her man better treat her right” (interview, July 2004).
the diva himself) before he died of AIDS, they were known as Two Tons of Fun. They later formed a duo called the Weathergirls. Their biggest hit was “It’s Raining Men,” a Gay male club classic.

Wash’s powerful voice brought her some mainstream success, but then took a vicious turn. Wash was a vocalist for two major dance music groups, C&C Music Factory and Black Box. Both groups replaced her image in music videos with that of slimmer Black women because she was deemed too large to be marketable (Bogdanov 731).

I have seen Martha Wash perform live at Circuit parties (she also performs at other Gay functions such as Pride parades). The adoration she receives from the sea of shirtless Circuiteers is matched by the energy she puts into her performance. I would imagine that when she performs in Straight venues, she rarely gets the kind of response that the Circuit community gives her.

Gospel-inspired Circuit music (sometimes called “churchy,” or what born-again Christian DJ Jeremy James calls “cha-cha praise”) can be seen as fulfilling a threefold function. The first is to uplift the crowd spiritually, increase its energy, and focus it on something more than
simply intoxication and sex. The second reason for the popularity of
the gospel Circuit sound is a bit more devilish. Christ is invoked pre-
cisely because it is transgressive to do so. Circuit parties clash with
the sensibilities of Christians who would condemn Gays. Truthfully,
the results of a gospel song played in the middle of a Circuit party full
of intoxicated, horny men can indeed be hilarious, bringing smiles
and laughter across the dance floor. Not once, however, have I heard
gospel music played in order to condemn Christians or mock God.
Those who are Christian Circuit boys (and there are many) usually
respond very well to hearing songs with divas praising Jesus. The
third reason is to create a melding of religious devotion and romance.
Donna Allen’s dance classic “He Is The Joy” can be heard in two ways:
as a song praising Jesus (who is never directly named) and as a love
song to her man.

Such double entendre can be found in the lyrics of Inaya Day’s song,
“Save Me.” “It’s sort of a prayer I wrote when I was going through a
down period,” she said (personal communication, April 2008):

From this life so cruel
From this drowning pool
I need a helping hand
Someone to understand
From this trying time
From losing my mind
Don’t know what to do
I need someone to
Save me, save me
Save me from hurt and please save me from harm
Save me from evil when wrapped in your arms
Save me from people that mean me no good
Make my way clear when I’m misunderstood
Save me

Churchy divas and African American performance artists such as
Inaya Day, Ultra Naté, Power Infiniti, Kitty Meow, and Kevin Aviance
reinterpret axé/Spirit into fierceness, the quintessential power source,
intangible authority, and much desired social commodity that flows
through Circuit performance on and off the dance floor. For many
of these artists, fierceness has strong spiritual roots. I asked Circuit
diva and deep house DJ Ultra Naté if what she did was spiritual. “I
hope so,” she said, “or I’m wasting my time” (personal communication,
May 2008).

When asked about disco evangelism and the role of Black Church for
Circuit divas, Inaya Day had this to say:
Disco evangelism! I love that phrase. I guess that’s what many of us bring to the clubs. I’ve come from, and am in, church, so church is in me. It’s where I got my chops and the spiritual inspiration behind the technical ability. We call that spiritual inspiration “The Anointing.” It’s a special blessing that God gives those who are commissioned by Him to do a certain thing. Whenever I open my mouth to sing, I invoke that spirit. Without it, for me, all else is futile. I would feel nothing and the audience would feel nothing. Vocal acrobatics are wonderful—I make my attempts at them myself. But what are those tricks if the music has no depth? When someone asks where I got my voice, I tell them, “God.” If He doesn’t see fit to sing through me, I shan’t sing at all. When I ask people, “Do you feel me?” I want that answer to be “Yes” because if they feel me through song, they feel the inexplicable presence of God! And for me, that’s what it’s all for. (personal communication, April 2008)

But the roots of some singers in homophobic Christianity can create problems for them with the Circuit community. In 2006, Kim English, a favorite African American Circuit songstress, said she did not believe that homosexuality was a lifestyle that God agrees with (Weems, “Gospel” 52). This statement raised questions within the Circuit community as to whether English should be hired to perform at Circuit events.

Most gospel-based divas are either quiet about their beliefs concerning homosexuality or openly support the Gay community. The grand disco diva, Donna Summer, is outspoken about the love she feels for Gay people, as are Inaya Day and Ultra Naté. Pepper MaShay14 has even sung a duet with renowned Gay porn star Colton Ford (Stevie Wonder’s “Signed, Sealed, Delivered,” released in 2004). Many of these women raise money for AIDS-related causes.

14. MaShay also supported the Gay community after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, when fundamentalist Christian leaders Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson said that Gay people, among others, were responsible for the attacks.
My self-description: besides the fact that I’m a diva?
I’m the manager for two big room/Circuit DJs and have choreographed big dance events for even bigger divas. I have a communications degree with an emphasis in public relations and advertising. I’ve traveled the world and been seen in seven Broadway shows and three motion pictures.

One of the advantages that I have as a Black man in the mainstream community is my ability to attend Black, Hispanic and White clubs. In years past, I’ve been exposed to the variety of ways the Gay community expresses itself. Unfortunately, you as a White man don’t always have that luxury since you are a minority in ethnic clubs. If you were to ask too many questions, people would wonder if you were some sort of federal agent or just plain weird.

Why do Circuit boys relate to Black screaming divas? I believe that it’s because big Black women are marginalized by mainstream society. Yet the divas sing about being strong through the pain. Gay men can relate to this. It’s “Somewhere over the Rainbow” belted out by Patti LaBelle. As opposed to a sweet ballad of yearning, Patti turns it into a “balls to the wall” song of defiance. It’s like listening to a record by Sweet Pussy Pauline where she is getting the shit fucked out of her and urging the man to give it to her and when he’s done she defiantly screams “NEXT!!!!” Strength in the face of adversity is always entrancing.

About the phrase “work it on out”: This is based on the call-and-response common to Protestant Black churches. “Work it” in a club is the equivalent of saying, “Preach it, preacher” when the sermon is really good, and the minister is in his groove/rhythm. Same thing happens when Black ministers say a phrase and ask the church to repeat it verbatim.

Axé is highly contagious. That is the beauty and tragedy of energy. It is a transferable entity. “Work” is more than just a word ... it’s a feeling of endorphins surging through your veins and freeing your mind to accept the energy that is being passed from one body to the next. This is a chain reaction of axé, a transference of energy.

When a DJ is connected to the energy of the crowd, the DJ puts on a record that is dictated by axé. Now, one could argue that the DJ is making an intellectual choice, not obeying a greater authority. But when the crowd’s energy is transferred to the DJ by the heat and vibes in the
room, the DJ is freed from intellectual restrictions and enters a state that is something like divine inspiration. The DJ could be inspired to play a remix of “Old McDonald Had a Farm” and the crowd would respond favorably. Axé is not intellectual choice but emotional choice. The emotional choice the DJ uses in selecting the right song for that right moment enhances the energy of the crowd. The crowd responds with the screams and yells that seem inhuman, yet filled with joy. They may feel the need to close their eyes and become one with the beat and the sound. Some people refer to this as being swept away, but I feel that with axé, you are not swept away by the music. With axé, you become one with the music, matched energy to energy, all on the same plane. Everything is in sync.