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DISCO: AFRO-AMERICAN VERNACULAR PERFORMANCE

LeeEllen Friedland

"Disco" summons a variety of images to the minds of urban dwellers in the United States today. Many people think of teen-agers carrying portable stereo tape players, sometimes called "ghetto blasters," and recall how their loud and pulsating presence unceremoniously overwhelms all human life along their path. Some think of chic, glittering couples dancing the night away in dark discotheques. Whatever the image, disco is perceived as a style—of dancing, music, clothes. Disco is a social scene, a fad, a craze.

Disco is also, undeniably, a multi-media phenomenon, depending not only on the direct contact of social relationships but information and services transmitted by different forms of mass media. The movie *Saturday Night Fever* (1977) was possibly the single most important mass media event in heightening public awareness of disco dancing in the last several years. But every day, networks of media and entertainment industry ideas are negotiated and guided out to the public at large. These negotiations involve interplay between national and local television, the recording industry and local radio, local radio and the public, and then several levels of inter- and intra-community relationships. Popular images of disco are a conglomerate of data from these myriad sources.

In locating disco as this kind of public, popular, media culture, we can understand it in relation to an anonymous populace that is theoretically representative of contemporary American society. Little information about disco in a non-public sphere seems to surface amidst the profluence of media messages. This paper will offer a glimpse of disco in an urban black community in Philadelphia, exploring the interrelationship of vernacular performance genres and the interface between community and public culture. Both specific examples and generalizations are based on my fieldwork in this Philadelphia community.

While the glittering disco couples in Hollywood and New York City train to be trendy, the radio is playing in a black neighborhood in "West Philly." WDAS-FM, "the heart and soul of Philadelphia," is the favorite choice and it is unusual to hear another station compete for the air waves. Differing broadcasts tend to be tapes of popular records, and almost always they are steady rhythmic dance tunes rather than slow songs or ballads. Music is a meaningful presence, underscoring the rhythms of everyday life.

This type of music is loosely called "disco" or "disco funk," and more recently, "funk punk." These terms are the reckon-ing of the kids in the community and are used in a peculiar intermixture of media fashion-consciousness and what can appear to be local verbal ambivalence. ("Kids" is used here as an emic term, signifying a group that includes both teenagers and younger children.) The kids claim this music as their own: it is Afro-American music and its prominence in the entertainment industry is a source of pride. It is also a source of inspiration, both musically and ideologically.

Music is an important means of cultural expression and an animate force in community life. In the same way that gospel music provides a common focus through which a community can share in religious worship, secular music also provides a forum for community interaction. In the case of disco, popular dance music and songs, it is a matter of sharing rhythm and melody. Musical elements such as rhythm and melody are tangible quantities in Afro-American culture, differing in subtle yet distinct ways from the perceptions of mainstream, European-derived American culture. This difference in Afro-American musical experience is essentially what anthropologist Richard Waterman has called the "metronome sense" (1952:211), that is, an internal sense of a rhythmic pulse that forms the foundation over which other rhythmic behavior is layered. Whether the rhythmic impulse is manifested in music, dance or verbal arts does not matter; the process is the same and expressive qualities are understood in relation to this shared cultural base. So when music is heard playing on a radio it is not an intrusion from the outside, but a confirmation of what is inside—it is cultural and rhythmic discourse.

Music is often integrated into daily activities as a secondary focus. The radio is sometimes left on all day and becomes an accompaniment to domestic tasks, schoolwork, resting or socializing. The degree of involvement with the musical accompaniment varies according to the demands of the partner activity and an individual's attitude. This degree of involvement can be seen as a continuum: at one end, an example of low involvement is someone absorbed in a work task with the music as little more than background. Moving toward a middle range of involvement is someone less absorbed in performing a task so that the music shifts in and out of primary and secondary focus, as when someone suddenly sings along with the chorus of a certain song or interjects a rhythmic, stylized walk across the room to continue dusting. An example of high involvement is someone actively listening to the music, giving it primary attention or dividing primary attention between it and a less demanding task. High involvement with music

tends to affect the performance of other activities, however, as musical contours extend beyond their generic frame and permeate the sphere of ordinary endeavor.

The entire range of involvement with music affords opportunities for community interaction, though some are more obvious to outsiders than others. Perhaps the most obvious type of community interaction takes place when there is a high involvement with music: rhythmic body movement. In fact, the clear infusion of musical elements into seemingly non-musical behavior, in instances where there is a high involvement with music, also takes place along lower levels of the continuum. Although the results are not always observable in immediate physical behavior, they are absorbed into a repertoire of resources for future performance. Community interaction takes place on this shared basis of repertoire; it is a tangible, culturally meaningful level of ideas. In the low or middle ranges of involvement with music the shared interpersonal experience is either 1) more internal (repertoire) and less overt, or 2) expressed outwardly in simple rhythmic body movements that are more significant than a casual view might allow. These rhythmic responses might include clapping hands, tapping a foot, rhythmic weight shifts, gestures with the arms, rhythmic torso movements; each of these movements can be employed in dancing but by themselves do not constitute dancing as such. By themselves, these movements are just *being rhythmic*, the personal extension of receiving rhythmic impetus from hearing music. Rhythm is a kinesthetic sense and can be experienced in a range of physicality that includes both internal pulses and visible manifestations of those pulses.

There are several different genres of body movement in Afro-American culture as evidenced in this community. Three of these movement genres—1) being rhythmic, 2) movement play, and 3) dancing, are important in disco and are often blended in the process of performance.

Being rhythmic, as described above, consists of performing rhythmic movement motifs. These movement motifs are directly analogous to musical motifs and may be understood more fully by examining the musical definition. A motif in music is:

> A short figure of characteristic design that recurs throughout a composition or a section as a unifying element. A motif is distinguished from a theme or subject by being much shorter and generally fragmentary. In fact, motifs are often derived from themes, the latter being broken up into shorter elements. (Apel 1969:545)

A movement motif is a short unit that is either dependent on being incorporated into a longer movement sequence (as when a head gesture is used in a complex stepping combination), or it is an independent sequence (such as clapping hands) that is used in conjunction with other longer movement sequences. Like musical motifs, movement motifs are recognized in relation to longer units; movement motifs are acknowledged on the basis of a common performance and observation repertoire of movement sequence structure and design. Being rhythmic happens when these motifs are performed in isolation, outside the context of longer movement sequences.

The kids of the community do not have a single, specific term for this performance genre, though it is distinctly *not* dancing: it is "just moving your body," or "moving to the music." In these comments lies a key to the unique qualities of being rhythmic as a movement genre. Like musical motifs, the movement motifs that constitute being rhythmic are unifying elements. But whereas musical motifs establish an internal reference system between variations in musical structure

in a composition bounded by musical form, movement motifs unify a rhythmic entity that extends across communication systems. In being rhythmic, movement motifs are performed in primary reference to musical rhythmic structures and secondarily in reference to other movement structures. This type of cross-system reference between performance genres, in this case sound/body movement as systems and music/being rhythmic as genres, is a critical feature to understand in the vernacular configuration of disco.

A second movement genre, movement play, is a prominent form in community interaction. Movement play includes a broad range of movement behavior, from tumbling and other acrobatic stunts to pantomime and mimicry. This genre is always characterized by one (or both) of two distinctive qualities: 1) the movement sequences performed are self-contained and require sophisticated physical skill, and do not necessarily relate in any way to outside (musical) rhythmic contours; 2) the movement sequences performed display recognizable social commentary on other realms of life, including other movement forms. Considering these two distinguishing features, movement play includes all forms of tumbling that the kids happen to learn in school or at recreation centers, notably several variations of flips, hand stands and somersaults. Martial arts-style stick twirling is also cultivated by some. Other acrobatic maneuvers include sequences called "ground stepping" or "floor floating," in which a performer is down just above the ground (or the floor) supporting his or her weight on the hands. From this position different series and combinations of moves are performed, including foot tapping, leg gestures, turns and twists of the torso, and partial low-level flips (changing support from hands to feet to hands while remaining close to the ground). Ground stepping is also used in dance sequences and usually provides a spectacular contrast to other more reserved dance stepping. Ground stepping is also frequently performed in combination with "the freeze," when a performer will freeze in a certain position. These positions are often comical or impressive in some way. The freeze is employed as punctuation in an active stream of movements and is a powerful focus for aesthetic engagement between the performer and non-performers.

This combination of what kids in West Philly call "ground stepping" and "the freeze" is very similar to what is known in many parts of New York City as "breaking" or "rocking" (see Banes 1981). In this Philadelphia community, the term "breaking" is unfamiliar though some vaguely recall a social dance that might have had a name like it. The terms "rock," "rocking," or "rocking out" are often used in a general way to refer to dancing. Perhaps the most interesting point to consider is that breaking, which in New York City is performed against a background of verbal rapping and a recorded disco rhythm track, is apparently the most publicly visible vernacular movement form. It is not clear whether this public visibility is a result of the vicissitudes of mass media exposure, or if it is a product of vernacular design and community intent. Banes (1983) has commented recently, however, that she believes media exposure is indeed responsible for catapulting this form into the public eye. Further, it may have arrested the vernacular process of development and change, freezing breaking—as a performance genre—in a media-made time warp. Whatever the case, the result is that to the general public breaking appears to be more important, highly developed, and formally organized in the spectrum of vernacular performance genres in New York City communities (however those communities are defined) than its lexical counterparts, ground stepping and the freeze, are in West Philadelphia.

The freeze is a pivotal form in relation to the generic contours of movement play in that it often encompasses charac-

teristics of both acrobatics and social commentary. It is acrobatic in that a performer can freeze in a position that appears to an observer to be physically impossible or at least terrifically difficult to support in stillness. The freeze is also common ground for portraying incongruous body images, such as a teenage boy striking a stereotyped pose of a sexy woman or a girl assuming the overly confident macho stance of an adolescent male. Both of these characteristics contribute to the freeze being an effective device in a movement sequence.

There are several forms of pantomime and mimicry that extend the possibilities for graphic depiction in movement play. Pantomime tends to be comparatively limited, and routines consist of very realistic, stylized simulations of everyday recognizable phenomena. Examples of common pantomime skits include 1) walking up to a door, opening it, poking your head through and carefully examining what lies beyond, walking through the doorway, closing the door, and proceeding on your way; 2) walking along and encountering a high, and practically invisible plate of glass in your path, feeling the glass with carefully placed, flat, and outstretched hands; 3) trying to find a way around a wall of a building and exploring the curve with your hands, pressing your body flat against the wall and smoothly slipping around the corner. The repertoire of ideas used in this type of pantomime is fairly standard among kids in the community, and seems to be local renditions of what they have seen on television, in occasional school programs and street performances. There are sometimes one or two individuals who have a particular talent for this kind of pantomime and they will develop new ideas or simply work out more complicated versions of a common theme, often as a duet. These new creations generally remain the special property of their innovators, at least until those innovators are no longer interested in performing them, at which time they will be passed along to a younger performer. Of the three pantomime examples given above, numbers 1 and 2 are in the common domain, but number 3 is credited to a specific person.

Mimicry is more widespread than pantomime in the community performance repertoire and is possibly the most highly developed form of movement play. Whereas pantomime requires the performer to assume an anonymous role and enact a physical encounter (usually with an object) in a standardized, stylized format, mimicry is open to individual, personalized interpretation, style and commentary. General mimicry includes a wide range of imitation and mockery in which individual talents are applied to rendering critical, though humorous, representations of local personalities, national celebrities, or cultural stereotypes: movement styles are exaggerated, characteristic gestures are copied, attitudes are parodied. The success of such a performance is measured by an audience's acknowledgement and appreciation of an effective, skillful imitation, and recognition of the specific qualities being mocked. This type of mimicry must establish a socially meaningful rapport between the performer's intent, the audience's experience, and the popular image of the subject on display. The degree of rapport tends to be most intense within the age and peer group to which the performer belongs, but is not limited by these boundaries.

Another prominent type of mimicry is called "the pop" or "popping." The pop is unique in that it is a kind of umbrella term that refers to more than one distinct style of movement performance. It also includes other assorted kinds of general mimicry that are sometimes considered to be part of the pop and sometimes not, depending on the performance context. The most important, and indeed the most distinctive style of the pop is one in which the performer moves in robotlike segmentation, executing simple tasks like bending, turning or walking in mechanized rhythms. The body-machines are carefully oiled and body parts click into new angular positions —the body pops. This popping is reflexive: Through a movement form performers mimic natural body movement, annotating the visible anatomical process. Elaborate routines and skits are worked out in this popping style, which layers multiple levels of meaning and interpretation over the basic exposition on physicality.

In addition to the kind of general mimicry described above, there are one or two other important movement styles that are used in mimicry and that are also sometimes associated with the pop. One of these is rendering ordinary activity in slow motion or in multiple time frames when the body appears to divide into sections that have different rates of operation, as when the legs walk on at a brisk pace and seem to leave the rest of the body behind. A variation of this type is a routine that is often identified as being similar to a social dance called "the worm," when a performer moves the legs as in walking forward but actually slides smoothly backwards; sometimes this is done in conjunction with dramatic facial and arm gestures, as if the performer is surprised and perplexed that his or her steps are progressing in the wrong direction. This wrong direction stepping and the slow motion type of interpretation can be integrated into a longer popping routine or used in between other popping sequences. When used in this way, all the various styles are loosely called the pop. When the more secondary styles are performed outside of a longer popping routine, however, they are not referred to as the pop, but are singled out by individual names or are distinguished otherwise, when a style lacks an individual name. The important points here are that: 1) while native, community definitions of movement forms or styles are consistent, native community terms are not consistently assigned according to those definitions; and 2) the same movement form or style can be known by different names in relation to different performance contexts.

One other type of movement mimicry deserves mention, the "gigolo." In the gigolo, a performer releases an inner trembling, beginning in the very center of the torso and spreading out through the limbs, which appear to have no will to resist it. The gigolo is always self-contained, always called by its own name, although it might be included in a sequence with other styles; it is never performed in combination with anything. To do the gigolo you stand still and let the trembling overtake you. The only kinds of variations or elaborations the gigolo will sustain are: a surprised facial expression, again portraying the performer's realization that his or her body seems to have a will of its own; holding the face in both hands with wrists almost touching below the chin and hands stretched upward along the cheeks while the trembling forces the hands to alternately slap either side of the face as the head shakes from side to side; holding the face in both hands as above, but the hands alone are miraculously unaware of the trembling and attempt to hold the shaking head still with little success. The gigolo almost always builds a climax in a performance, riveting audience attention on the performer and intensifying performer-audience interaction. The effectiveness of the gigolo is due to two factors: the movements of the gigolo are unusual and not commonly seen in everyday life; and the movements of the gigolo have distinct social meaning in relation to an age group and a social context that are quite different from the performance contexts in which kids use it. Although it is not possible to confirm the exact associations and meanings of the gigolo at this time, there is evidence that both these youthful performers and their black audiences of all ages do associate the movements of the gigolo somewhat with the movement style appropriate to

Philadelphia street dancing club Disco Queens and Kings performs outdoors at a local recreation center. Here a dancer uses a white painted stick as a phallus and sends the audience into an uproar.
Photos: Robert Blair St. George.

older women and possibly women of a certain body type (big or obese). There is also evidence suggesting that the movements of the gigolo are more common in the context of religious worship, possibly as expression of religious possession or "being in the spirit." Whether or not these suggested associations are confirmed in the future, it is certain that the gigolo is an effective device when performed by kids because by performing those movements, the kids are crossing social categories and commenting on their relationship to those categories.

Although the kids in the community do not use any term resembling "movement play," they distinguish clearly between the movement forms and styles described above and those considered unequivocally to be "dancing." Their definitions and distinctions are lucid in both their actions and their words, but many kinds of verbal explanations, beyond their names or lack of names for things, must be considered. The kids have their own motivations for naming things based on a shared system of cultural and community understanding. They are not interested in discussing what they do as it is being discussed here. They think highly enough about what they do, however, and its relevance to extra-community or outside cultural interests to be supportive of, if sometimes bewildered or impatient with, an outsider who has different motivations for discussing what they do. It is in this process of trying to present an insider's structure without the benefit of the insider's system of understanding or frame of reference that overlaying outside or analytical terms can be useful. These terms can help to illuminate the connections and social relationships that exist in everyday life with no need for labels.

In everyday life in this West Philly community, movement play is quite visible—in the playgrounds, in between games or tag or inside on a rainy day. All the movement forms and styles described above are used in play activity, not only by children in the same immediate age group, but also in groups of kids ranging in age from toddlers to teenagers. Sometimes

one kid will perform for the group, and then another will take a turn performing for the group; sometimes one kid will perform and then run an impromptu teaching session to instruct whoever is interested in the intricacies of a particular move; sometimes more than one kid will perform at the same time (or in succession) in a kind of friendly challenge, each trying to outdo the other, the spectators taking delight and judgment in the relative merits of each individual's actions.

As play, these movement forms and styles provide recreation and leisure-time incentive to master and perfect performance skills. As a movement genre, movement play is structured independently of musical considerations, as such, though it is just as likely for music to accompany this type of play activity as not. Each type of movement play, from tumbling to the pop, has its own internal rhythmic structure. Some are more easily adaptable to or influenced by musical contours than others. For example, tumbling and martial arts are not generally adaptable to music, whereas most of the other types of movement play can be accommodating in some way. Often the musical influence does not extend beyond keeping a general pace with the music's duple beat or phrasing a dramatic pause or effect to coincide with a similar phrase in the music.

As part of disco, however, movement play figures importantly in several respects. When there is a high involvement with music and kids are inspired to channel their energy through body movement, forms of movement play are frequent choices in performance. This is due not only to the fact that movement play is so well established as a kind of recreation and is widespread in the community performance repertoire, but also because all forms of movement play are recognized as requiring a high level of physical skill and expertise and, therefore, afford a certain measure of prestige to those who perform them well. This prestige is readily transferred to dancing contexts, into which forms of movement play are often incorporated, often becoming the climax of a given

A dancer performs a flashy leg flip as part of a ground-stepping sequence.

sequence or routine. All forms of movement play are used in dancing contexts, although ground stepping and the pop both occupy rather celebrated positions in the performance repertoire hierarchy.

Besides the issue of prestige, movement play allows music-inspired performance to focus on being recreational, which is in contrast to dancing in which the focus is much more on developing social relationships. The generic features of movement play include not only the demands of physical skill, but also the exhibition of some sort of social commentary. In forms like the freeze, pantomime, and different types of mimicry, the pursuit of effective commentary in performance succeeds in diffusing the personal identity represented by the performer in his or her movement. That is, the performer is moving in a role rather than as his or her own personal self; the performer is acting as a kind of social critic, a dutiful narrator of community thought. A talented performer is praised for performance ability and conceptual acumen, rather than for displaying an attractive personality. In dancing, as a movement genre, body movement is considered a direct presentation of personal self. This contrast between the recreational/non-personal and socializing/personal meanings of body movement in different performance genres is particularly significant in gender and age group relationships.

Dancing is the third movement genre important in disco and is the most prevalent in overall, music-inspired community interaction. Social dancing is the consummation of the impulse expressed in being rhythmic; it is the context in which the full rhythmic interaction between body movement and musical contours is developed. Dancing is someone moving his or her body rhythmically in relation to other rhythms— rhythms in music, percussion playing, the sound of machinery, or rhythms culled from the shared, internal repertoire. Dancing must also be composed of sequences or combinations consisting of a minimum of two movement units. These units are defined in a cultural system that assigns relative value to physical progressions. Elements that can be varied without affecting the definition of these units are considered matters of style, whereas the units themselves are the matter of form. There are cultural rules, patterns and preferences for structuring units into longer sequences and combinations, and through this potential of structural design arises cultural meaning. Although the single movement units that are performed in being rhythmic are not actually integrated into longer movement sequences, they are understood in the context of extended structural design and are therefore transformed into elements with interpretive significance—movement motifs. In summary, dancing is direct rhythmic interplay between at least two communication systems, one of which is always body movement, and which is manifested in movement sequences or combinations that include a minimum of two movement units. *

There are two general types of dancing in this community,

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*Regretfully, the description of minimal movement units is not practical here, outside of an extended description of the whole cultural system of body movement. This general discussion of movement units and their use has been included in the hope that the reader will garner some general ideas; more specific discussion will follow in future publications.

social dancing and exhibition dancing. Social dancing is characterized in part by its being a personalized form of expression for the individual alone, in relation to musical inspiration, and also interpersonally, between more than one individual and their mutual musical involvement. As a movement form it embodies an intent to be sociable, to socialize, to be involved with others in the pursuit of rhythmic fulfillment and kinesthetic artistry.

In this community, the whole body is used in social dancing, though not all parts are used in the same way at the same time. There is a repertoire of appropriate movements for different body parts and rules for creating sequences and combinations. The primary rhythmic pulse is centrally initiated through the torso and generally focused in pelvic movements. The most common pelvic movements are 1) tilting—in which the pelvis (that is, the upper rim of the pelvic girdle) tilts forward, backward, or to the side and then back to an upright position; and 2) rotation—in which the pelvic region (between the waist and the hips) rotates to one side, and then front. Movements of the legs and feet are usually confined to simple patterns of weight shifts and steps, which are sometimes elaborated with brushing a foot forward or pivoting to various degrees on one or both feet. Flexion of the knees plays a particularly important role in shaping the rhythmic phrasing and accents of lower body movements. The upper torso is used in a variety of ways ranging from being held erect while the entire body turns to face a certain direction, to leaning forward (by bending at the waist) and rotating in directions that contrast the movements of the lower torso, or undulating as a rhythmic impulse progresses sequentially through each vertebra while the shoulders are lifted and lowered, moved forward and backward, or in a circular motion to augment rhythmic complexity. The arms and hands move in constant response to upper torso movements, but are also an important active part of dancing performance. The arms are always flexed at the elbow to some degree, often enough so that the forearm is held at a ninety degree angle in front of the body. Arm gestures beginning and ending in this position are common, such as the arm moving backward or forward of the body, often as if propelled by the elbow, with varying degrees of flexion, or the forearm reaching up or down, or to the front diagonal. The hands do not commonly perform significant gestures that are truly independent of forearm movements, but mostly function as the end of the arm unit, completing and sometimes ornamenting arm gestures with rotation and varying degrees of flexion at the wrist and finger joints. When the hands do perform more significant gestures they tend to be mimetic or dramatic in some way and almost always relate to the content of the accompanying song lyrics, such as shaking a scolding finger at a partner. The arms and hands are also sometimes employed in clapping, though the intent to actually produce a sound can vary greatly. The head and neck are used in various ways, including: 1) tilting—in which the crown of the head is inclined towards a direction other than straight up; 2) shifting—in which the head remains vertical and moves in a straight line (in the horizontal plane), usually forward or backwards, as much as individual motivation and anatomy allows; and 3) rotation.

While it is not possible to give a comprehensive inventory of body part movement repertoire here, the representative sampling above offers an overivew of the range of movements that can be employed in social dancing. During any dancing performance choices must be made regarding which elements of the repertoire to incorporate. At the minimum, social dancing performance will include at least two movement units, one of which will almost always be a stepping or weight

shifting pattern. These choices are shaped by both musical factors and factors pertaining to the internal structure of the overall cultural movement system from which dancing movements are drawn.

For example, there are four musical factors that influence an individual's dancing performance: 1) Tempo—the speed of musical performance, or the amount of time between pulses of the basic beat relative to clock time (e.g., beats per minute, as might be indicated by a metronome marking). Tempo can influence the likelihood of developing rhythmic subdivision or elaboration of the primary duple pulse in dancing, a slower tempo being somewhat more conducive and a faster tempo less so. 2) Rhythmic structure—the rhythmic patterns played by individual instruments or voices and their interrelationships in forming a rhythmic whole. Rhythmic structure can influence the choice of rhythmic patterns that different body parts perform and the rhythmic relationships between body parts. 3) Phrasing—the non-metrical aspects of music insofar as they affect the nature of a rhythmic statement, such as melodic contour, timbre, dynamics, articulation. Phrasing influences the effort qualities or the character of the energy used in body movement, as well as articulation. 4) Lyrics— the words that are incorporated into musical performance, whether in singing, speaking, or rapping. The content of song lyrics can influence dancing performance by prompting a dramatic or generally representational gesture, facial expression, or body attitude.

More than any other performance genre, dancing is a pointed display of body movement as a meaningful, self-contained communication system. In a sense, social dancing is the purest movement form in that its primary reference is equally divided between musical rhythmic structure and the structure of the cultural movement repertoire. In being rhythmic, movement structure is a secondary reference while musical rhythmic structure is decidedly of primary importance; in movement play, neither movement nor musical rhythmic structure is a primary reference, but rather movement is a vehicle towards illuminating cultural concepts that are not generally related to movement as a cultural system.

Dancing performance is a context in which an individual can capitalize on the cultural concepts associated with specific movement sequences, combinations and styles to portray his or her skillful involvement with music. Cultural meaning is not generally invested in movement units, but in stylistic features and larger structural design. Within the community, certain movement styles and patterns are associated with different gender and age groups, and although these classifications are flexible and not mutually exclusive, they do influence individual choices in dancing performance. An example of the shared awareness of these categories is young boys and girls (ages 5-7) beginning to consciously cultivate the "grown-up" movement style of their respective genders, and in their overzealous renditions of the stylistic stereotypes succeed in greatly amusing older spectators. The source of amusement is that in the youngsters' overcompensating efforts to identify with and perform in the manner of their gender role models, they end up performing in a style that is too mature, and downright incongruous, for their young age.

Another important influence shaping an individual's choices from the movement repertoire are the body images and movement styles garnered from mass media presentations of popular performing groups and star entertainers. If integrated in the community repertoire with skill and subtlety, these media images can be persuasive factors in bestowing prestige or recognition on a talented performer. Promotional photographs such as those used on record covers, posters and adver-

After the formal performance, the audience is invited onstage to jam. Most of the kids are doing some form of the pop.

tisements are one type of media source of these images, but by far the most important source is television. Of all the variety shows that feature musical performers, however, "Soul Train" is undoubtedly the favorite. In the same way that the kids devote a kind of possessive pride to disco music, so do they look to "Soul Train" as affirmation of Afro-American identity in the performing arts and the popular media. Elements of the movement styles used by performers on the show are particularly impressive: these black performers have "made it" and that helps to validate the potential value to be gained from emulating their performance styles. The performances of the Soul Train Dancers are also influential: their dance styles range from the black vernacular to Hollywood sexy-lady/macho-man hype, but if it looks good on "Soul Train," it's cool by the kids' standards. These kinds of media images most often influence body attitudes, specific gestures, and larger concepts of performance design.

A final factor that influences individual choices in dancing performance might be called personal interest. Social dancing is a personal endeavor and it is expected that an individual represent his or her own ideas, motivation, and understanding. Personal interest is usually responsible for what comes to be considered as an individual's style or trademark; an individual can have personal goals in mind when choosing and building from the cultural movement repertoire. In social dancing this personal interest is often responsive to the dynamics of the interpersonal interaction between partners or

within a group of individuals, whether all dancers or dancers and spectators.

Interpersonal interaction in social dancing is perhaps the most literal translation of the concept of community involvement with music; it pertains not only to the interrelationship between individuals dancing as partners, but also to the general company, whether dancers or spectators. The definition of participation is not based on whether or not someone is actually dancing, but on shared knowledge of the movement repertoire and performance genres and the resulting active understanding of movement artistry and significance.

When two or more individuals dance together as partners the factors influencing individual choices in performance are compounded. That is, the aspects of both musical and movement systems that help to shape individual performance can be paired or combined in any configuration between individuals, and thereby influence interpersonal dancing performance on yet another leel. In addition to the factors discussed above, there are several which are particular influences in interpersonal performance. Much more so than in individual dancing performance, social context plays an obvious role in guiding certain types of choices made by dancing partners. One factor is what is the occasion and who is present; for example, is it a house party where you know most of the people personally and the people you do not know are connected by a personal relationship to someone you do know; is

it a block party where there are many people you know per-
sonally and many people who are only neighborhood ac-
quaintances or who you know only by reputation; is it a pub-
lic dance held in a commercial institution where you do not
know anyone personally except perhaps the people you came
with. Other social and logistical circumstances also figure im-
portantly, such as where the dancing takes place: in a crowded
living room, outside, a spacious, spotlighted dance floor;
when is the dancing taking place: during the day, on an
evening during the week, on a weekend evening. Another sig-
nificant factor in interpersonal dancing performance is the
non-dancing relationship between the individuals functioning
as partners. Factors such as these are assessed and calculated
in relation to an individual's personal interests and affects the
choices that partners negotiate in performance.

Exhibition dancing contrasts with social dancing in several
respects. Perhaps the matter of most consequence is that ex-
hibition dancing is done expressly as a theatrical type of dis-
play, separating performer from audience. Exhibition danc-
ing can sustain an entire performance event, or can be a
temporary focus in a social dancing event, but in either case is
recognized as being specialized and not necessarily within the
capabilites of everyone present. Though exhibition dancing
may require showy, physically demanding performance skills,
unlike tumbling or acrobatics it also requires a high degree of
musical consciousness and adaptability. And though exhibi-
tion dancing is strongly influenced by musical factors, unlike
social dancing it is not a presentation of personal self; the
individual is playing a self-conscious role as "Performer" and
non-dancers become the "Audience." Performer and Audi-
ence are not separated by the degree of their mutual involve-
ment or active participation in the event—they are separated
by protocol and by the requirements of fulfilling different
roles in the social theater.

The hallmark of exhibition dancing is fast stepping. There
are two types of fast stepping: 1) tapping—in which perform-
ers wear shoes with metal taps attached to the sole at the heel
and toe, and the steps are designed to navigate the taps across
a hard surface, orchestrating dancing patterns in percussive
sound; and 2) "GQ"—in which performers wear any flat
shoes without taps, and the steps are designed to make no
sound but to look flashy, incorporating relatively complicated
rhythmic patterns, different sorts of leg gestures, jumps, hops,
leaps, and other various combinations, often including other
body parts, props or assistance from other performers.

Fast stepping is not only the core of the exhibition dancing
repertoire, it is also used as a marker. An exhibition dancing
performance will incorporate other highly skilled movement
forms, including any type of movement play. The actual
movement forms do not change, but they are considered to be
dancing when bounded by sequences of fast stepping. One
critical factor that does change, however, is the aesthetics of
presentation. Fast stepping signals a shift to a kind of show
business mentality where media images reign supreme, es-
pecially in the process of shaping presentation format and
stereotypes of Performer-Audience rapport. Though media
models are a significant influence on exhibition dancing, it is
coupled with a community tradition of specialized perfor-
mance. It is nothing new for this type of Afro-American per-
formance tradition to be responsive to forces in mainstream
popular entertainment; the preceding generation of this type
of dancing performance, for example, has been discussed at
length by Marshall and Jean Stearns (1968). The peculiar
characteristics of the contemporary performance milieu called
disco are that image and information sources are primarily
forms of mass media, and rarely is there any first-hand con-

tact with popular entertainers in theaters or clubs. Conse-
quently, the community-based attempt to fulfill media mod-
els with vernacular materials sometimes lacks a sufficiently
realistic foundation, and incongruities go unreconciled.

Nonetheless, disco is strong and thriving in West Philly. In
addition to the performance genres discussed above, it in-
cludes a specific type of event, called a "disco." A disco is a
dance party and is distinct from a house party or other non-
specific social occasions in that it requires the services of a DJ
(disc jockey). Along with the DJ comes a complete sound sys-
tem, a record collection, and expertise on the "wheels of steel"
or turntables. The DJ, usually a local teenager, acts as a
master of ceremonies, choosing which record cuts to play and
arranging them in an order appropriate to the mood and
needs of the dancing throng. Several elements integral to a
disco, the event, add new and interesting dimensions to disco,
the overall cultural complex.

In general, more than half of the music played at a disco is
not what is current on commercial radio, even WDAS-FM,
the station most directly oriented towards Philadelphia's black
community. The other music is also considered by the kids to
be disco music, but it consists almost exclusively of rap records.
These records feature a rhythm track of drums and bass
guitar, varying fullness of orchestration and melody played
by the rest of the band, and one or more vocalists rapping
along with the music. Rapping is a rhythmic, usually non-
rhyming, semi-melodic type of recitation that tells a story,
describes a scene, or comments on some state of affairs. Raps
are usually composed in parts but are also considered fair
ground for improvisation. Rapping not only adds another
rhythmic layer to the musical performance, but is also signifi-
cant on another level—as verbal artistry. Not only is the con-
tent of the rap interesting to listeners, but the way thoughts
are expressed is also important. Good rapping incorporates
(among other things) clever turns of phrase, quotes, references
to well known songs, cliches, common cultural images, and
perfect timing of word significance to rhythmic or musical
intensity. Rapping is disco verbal art.

This type of extension of the musical repertoire is character-
istic of discos, as is the prominence of rapping, both recorded
and live. It is not uncommon for the DJ or other individuals
to rap at a disco, using a microphone to broadcast through
the sound system over the background rhythm track. Some-
times a DJ will specifically bring along one or more individu-
als who are rappers; sometimes other people from the dancing
crowd will take turns rapping.

Another important aspect of discos to be considered is the
mixing that a DJ will do in the course of the event. Mixing is
more than making sure that one song plays after another; it is
also a sophisticated art and to be good on the wheels of steel is
akin to being a good musician. DJs generally use two turn-
tables, and both are on, turning constantly, even when one is
not in use. Often mixing is just a matter of coordinating the
beginning of a new cut with the end of one finishing. It is
important not to leave any silence in between and to continue
pushing the wall of sound, building toward a mutual rhyth-
mic climax between music and dancing. DJs also do more
complicated mixing using both turntables at the same time:
sometimes parts of two different records are alternated; some-
times two different records are played simultaneously, creat-
ing a measured chaos of sound and rhythm. The turntables
can also be controlled by hand, usually with thumbs pressed
flat against the outer edge of the wheel. This is done in order
to slow the speed of a record, to make the speed irregular, or
make it stop and start. Irregular speed is also sometimes con-
trolled by a finger pressed down on the top of a record, turn-

ing or stopping it at will. Any of these maneuvers can be elaborated on by rapping or other impromptu percussion playing such as beating drumsticks on a chair, or even some tap dancing steps. Considering all the possibilities for rhythmic innovation, it is almost overwhelming to realize that many of the flip sides of rap records are remixed instrumental versions of the same song, that is, a recording of a DJ in the studio mixing multiple versions of that same song in any number of combinations. When a DJ at a disco mixes an already remixed recording, the levels of internal reference multiply and the rhythms thicken.

In West Philly, disco is more than just music or dancing or rapping or mixing records. Disco is a milieu of rhythm that extends across different performance genres and different communication systems. To the kids of the community, disco is part of life. At the same time that it succeeds in uniting community, distinctly Afro-American ethics of performance, it is also a vehicle that somehow brings them closer to an exciting world outside their community—a world that they synthesize from electronic media, graphic and plastic arts, and their own vernacular values. An exciting world that is part reality, part self-fulfilling, but wholly inspiring.

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