

7 Dance music

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In 1978, the sociologist Richard Peterson suggested that American popular music was on the verge of its third great revolution of the twentieth century. The first two revolutions, Peterson (1978) claimed, had been ushered in by jazz and rock. The beginnings of the third were to be glimpsed in the rise of disco music, which made dance clubs a powerful force in popularising new records. As Peterson made this prediction, disco records sat atop sales charts in Europe and North America, and the disco film *Saturday Night Fever* was on its way to becoming a major box-office success. Two years later, when much of disco culture appeared to have collapsed, Peterson's prediction would look like an embarrassing miscalculation. It would take twenty more years, shifts in terminology, and a whole set of technological, social and economic developments before his claim of a dance music 'revolution' seemed worth re-considering. In 1997, commemorative books and anniversary dance parties celebrated a decade of frantic dance music activity in Great Britain and Western Europe, amid signs that even white North American youth, long faithful to rock, were migrating towards dance clubs and the sounds of dance music.

Dancing has long occupied an uneasy place within Western popular culture. For centuries, as Ann Wagner's (1997) study of anti-dance campaigns shows, dancing has been the focus of ongoing controversies about 'movement, manners and morals'. Dance remains controversial because it offers us two images of human bodies in motion. In one of these, dance represents the triumph of discipline and restraint. Here, as in the aristocratic world of pre-Revolutionary France, dancing is among the most orderly of social rituals, to be learned along with the rules of dining and courtly conversation. In dancing, individuals submerge their identities within gestures and movements which are not of their own making but, rather, handed down by tradition and authority. Teaching the young to dance is thus an effective way of passing on the rules of comportment and etiquette, of moulding the individual into a good, moral citizen.

In a counter-image, dancing is the very model of social disorder. To dance is to resist the restraints of rules and decorum, yielding to passionate impulses which threaten social stability. To many of those who visited the dance halls of the early twentieth century, dance offered a glimpse of social breakdown, in which desires with no useful purpose or virtuous end were given free rein. From this perspective, dance offers the occasion (and even

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the excuse) for forms of intimacy and physical expression which would not be tolerated in most other contexts. Dance is no longer about learning the rules of good behaviour, but an occasion for violating those rules. It is this image of dancing which has aroused the ire of moral reformers over several centuries, inspiring repressive laws, cautionary pamphlets and claims that dancing is the devil's work.

In a more modern version of this debate, it is the relationship of dancing to a capitalist economic system which is often in question. Dancing is sometimes seen to embody the worst features of musical culture in a modern, capitalist age. In their attacks on disco music in the 1970s, for example, many writers saw a logical connection between the seemingly mindless hedonism of disco dancing and the formula-driven qualities of disco music itself. Both seemed to prove that aesthetic and moral standards had declined in an age of decadent materialism. Historians of jazz or rock music have often seen dance as a seductive force, luring these musical traditions from the path of artistic seriousness. Dancing is thought to weaken critical faculties by encouraging us to respond to music in ways which involve neither contemplation nor respect. Finally, dance music has been deemed a 'problem' because its own fleeting fads are at odds with the values of tradition and career longevity held high by critics and the music industry alike.

Almost as often, however, dancing will be valued because it seems to run counter to the main tendencies of modern, commercial entertainment. While television, the cinema and concert-going are sometimes accused of making audiences passive, dancing may seem among the most active and creative ways of being entertained. Likewise, while modern media are condemned for isolating individuals in their homes, or within the anonymity of the darkened cinema, dance invites us to interact with large numbers of people in public places. Dancing is sometimes considered a modern remnant of the folk cultures of the past, one of our last links to a world and time in which people gathered together in communal festivities of their own making. Dance will often serve as a focus for new communities, such as those which have taken shape around the gay liberation movement or the subcultures of acid house. Indeed, it is through dancing that music's potential for expressing social solidarity or personal liberation seems to realise itself most fully.

Bodies in movement

In setting out to talk about dance, we confront the lack of a widely agreed-upon vocabulary with which to do so. Scholarly analyses of dance are scattered among a half-dozen disciplines and fields, from anthropology

through music history, from the study of high-art choreography through that obscure sub-discipline, the philosophy of dance. The art historian Norman Bryson (1997) has suggested that we study dance as part of a broader investigation of what he calls ‘socially structured movement’. Different societies (or groups within societies) organise movement in different ways, from the most minor gestures of courtesy and respect through the parades or other rituals which mark important celebrations. Dancing, Bryson suggests, is a particularly striking example of this ‘socially structured movement’, but it should not be looked at in isolation.

This sense of a link between dancing and other ways of moving the body has long been noted. Twentieth-century choreography has often tried to break down the barrier between dance and non-dance movements, by building dance routines out of most actions of everyday life. (See, for example, many of the dance sequences in a Hollywood film like *On The Town*, from 1949.) In a much less conscious way, fans of popular music often assume that there are connections between an individual’s ability to dance and the way that individual moves in other contexts. Such beliefs are at the heart of popular stereotypes about different social, ethnic or racial groups and the degree to which they are at ease with their bodies. These stereotypes include the belief that dancing is at its most sexualised and uninhibited in non-Anglo-Saxon cultures, such as those of Latin-Americans or African-Americans. In fact, as Leopold Senghor once observed, African societies typically disdain physical contact between dancers, and such contact is more common within European social dancing. Likewise, Jacqui Malone (1996) has noted that African-American dancing maintains a constant tension between the discipline of rhythm and personal improvisation upon that rhythm. ‘Cutting loose’, in the sense of unrestrained sensual abandon, is frowned upon because it lacks the stylisation which is so highly valued within this tradition. Dancing within the white middle class has usually veered between the extremes of elaborate ritual and unbridled individual expression, from the waltz, square dance and other forms popular in the nineteenth century through the free-form abandon of hippy dancing in the late 1960s.

The places of public dancing

The history of popular dancing in the Western world is partly a history of places in which that dancing has occurred. The modern dance club has its roots in the saloons and restaurants of the nineteenth century. Over the last hundred years, dancing has moved out of private balls or social clubs and into these more anonymous spaces in which patrons gather to eat and

drink. Whereas, in an earlier time, dancers could presume a familiarity and shared social background with their fellow dancers, the dance venues of the twentieth century, like the cinema and other modern entertainments, would bring together groups of strangers in new places of public amusement. In the dance halls, cabarets and nightclubs which proliferated at the end of the nineteenth century, patrons were more and more likely to mingle with others whose social origin and moral status were unknown. Under these circumstances, dancing would come to be strongly associated with sexual possibility or sexual danger.

These new places of amusement were novel in other ways, as well. The historian Lewis Erenberg (1981) has written of the slow but important shift in notions of entertainment that occurred between the two world wars in North America. In the new dancehalls and nightclubs built to meet a rising demand, the audience itself became the main focus of entertainment, as patrons danced and enjoyed the spectacle of watching others, most of them strangers, dance alongside them. The appeal of a nightclub now depended on the character of its clientele more than the fame or abilities of the professional entertainers it featured. The effects of this shift have remained with us to the present day. In a tradition that extends from the cabarets of the 1920s through the discotheques of the 1970s and beyond, dance venues have become places where one goes to watch a crowd of patrons display their styles of dressing, posing and dancing. While nightclubs are typically thought of as places where people go to find others of similar taste or social background, they are also sites for social tourism. Visiting them, people may venture up or down the social ladder, or explore the margins and subcultures of the modern city.

The dance crazes which have punctuated the history of popular dancing in this century have done much to make dancers themselves the main source of a nightclub's appeal. One goes to nightclubs to watch an audience, usually made up of non-professionals, dance in the latest styles. In the United States, the cakewalk, fox-trot, ragtime and Ballin' the Jack crazes in the first two decades of the twentieth century spurred the expansion of dance floors in restaurants and other establishments. As the tango, Charleston, lindy hop and jitterbug fads which followed made clear, dance crazes have been one of the principal means by which musical styles of African-American or Latin-American origin have crossed over to audiences of white Europeans. (Later, the Twist, Hustle, salsa, Lambada, and dozens of others would function in the same way.)

The nightclubs and ballrooms in which dancing took place are only part of the story, however. The spread of dance styles, from one city to another, and into the living rooms and bedrooms in which dance steps are practised, is closely tied to the development of modern forms of entertainment and

communication. The dance crazes of the early twentieth century were popularised through stage shows, which often incorporated these dances into their revue-like formats. Dancing schools, which capitalised on each emerging trend, helped codify the rules for new dances and often sponsored guidebooks or records which pupils could use as they practised at home. The rise of electronic media would speed up the process by which dance styles, and the music which accompanied them, were disseminated across large geographical areas. Musical films, such as the Fred Astaire–Ginger Rogers movies, with their emphasis on solo or ‘couple’ dancing rather than complex group choreography, proved important in building and sustaining a public for social dancing. Radio was a crucial factor in building audiences for swing music in the United States in the late 1930s, and live broadcasts of big-band music from hotel ballrooms enforced the link between the new music and public dancing. Indeed, as David W. Stowe’s (1994) study of swing music in the 1930s suggests, movies, records, radio broadcasts and live performances all interacted to make swing music, and the dancing styles which accompanied it, a genuinely national movement within the United States.

Dancing in the post-war period

In their history of popular dancing in the United States, Jean and Marshall Stearns (1994) suggest that the immediate post-war period was marked by a dance ‘black-out’, a decline in the popularity of social dancing and the disappearance of many of the venues in which it occurred. Increases in the costs of labour and transportation contributed to the break up of the swing bands, who had combined success on radio and records with live performances in settings where hundreds of people might gather to dance. Ballrooms and dance halls in United States cities closed throughout the late 1940s and 1950s, as migration to the suburbs and a widespread sense that conditions in inner cities were deteriorating lessened the appeal of these venues to the middle classes. New excise taxes on entertainment establishments that featured dancing helped drive popular music towards the non-danceable alternatives of small group jazz and vocal music. In Great Britain, a variety of post-war restrictions on leisure consumption had much the same effect.

Dancing did not disappear entirely, however. It moved into other sorts of venues, into places where music was presented in a variety of new ways. These venues were smaller than the ballrooms of the 1930s, a change that reflected the fragmenting of musical tastes throughout the United States and other Western countries. Philip Ennis (1992) has argued that high

school dance ‘hops’ partially replaced the ballrooms of the swing era as major venues for public dancing, at least in the United States. They did so, however, for a much more exclusively youthful audience than the ballrooms had attracted. In this, the dance ‘hops’ helped lay the foundations for a new, post-war youth culture in which music and dancing would play an important role. High school dances would be one pathway through which post-war rhythm and blues and early rock’n’roll were popularised as musical styles and as the background for social dancing. The community youth clubs of Great Britain and Western Europe offered spaces in which youth could dance to recordings or locally based musical combos. Jukeboxes, located in bars, restaurants and cafés, allowed youthful patrons to dance to music of their own choosing.

The most important medium popularising post-war musical styles for youth, however, was radio. North American Top 40 Radio, whose programming philosophy involved playing a limited number of songs in rapid rotation, was inspired by the jukebox, which allowed patrons in bars and restaurants to hear their favourite records as often as they wished. As Philip Ennis (1992) has shown, both the jukebox and Top 40 radio were hungry for new records, and this need for an ongoing stream of new product helped spur the creation of dozens of new small record companies. The speed with which records rose and fell in cycles of popularity helped nourish the sense that music was now marked by fads which came and went quickly. ‘Rock’n’roll’, now seen to have brought about a revolution in twentieth-century popular music, was in many ways little more than another of these fads when it emerged, in the mid-1950s, and it was accompanied by new forms of dancing. The radio disc jockeys who helped popularise this music on the airwaves often took to the road, travelling to local record hops and organising large dances in which a roster of new musical performers might play short sets. As the musical rhythms and group formats of rock’n’roll or rockabilly became standardised, local bands could more easily play this music in such contexts as the high school dance or the youth club. All of these factors encouraged the spread of dancing styles and musical sounds throughout North America and much of the Western world.

In 1957, a local television programme, *Philadelphia Bandstand*, changed its name to *American Bandstand* and began broadcasting nationally. By 1959, over one hundred local stations within the United States were carrying the programme, to an audience of twenty million viewers. *American Bandstand*, along with dozens of other, locally based dance programmes, featured studio audiences of local teenagers dancing to current pop music hits. By making it easy for viewers to learn the steps of new dances, television dance programmes helped fuel the series of dance crazes

which unfolded within North America, Western Europe and elsewhere throughout the early 1960s. The best-known of these crazes, which emerged in 1960, was the Twist. Others include the Madison, the Hully-Gully, the Go-Kart, the Frug, the Mashed Potato and the Swim.

As these dance crazes succeeded each other, throughout the 1960s, they attracted the attention of middle-class adults, and spurred the spread of a new kind of night-life establishment, the discotheque. As Jim Dawson (1995) reminds us, the literal meaning of the term 'discotheque' is 'record library'. In the 1930s, the term would refer to French nightclubs in which patrons might gather to hear the latest imported jazz records from the United States. Clubs of this sort, which featured records rather than live performers, and whose appeal had much to do with the obscure, imported recordings they were able to acquire, continued to open in Western European countries during and after the Second World War. In such venues, we may already glimpse the predecessor of today's dance club disc jockey, an employee whose reputation rests as much on access to new records from faraway or underground sources as on the technical ability to operate equipment and play records in sequence.

In the 1960s, discotheques would open in major cities throughout the West. (Le Club, which opened in Manhattan in 1960, was one of the first in this wave.) During this period, the discotheque came to play the double role which has marked it ever since. On the one hand, discotheques are often havens for devoted fans of obscure kinds of music, offering the chance to hear (and dance to) the latest records and an implicit promise to stay ahead of mainstream tastes and trends. At the same time, however, discotheques are often spectacularly public institutions, attracting a broad range of any given city's night-time society. As such, they may draw together tourists, people working in the fashion and media industries, members of an international jet-set and a range of others whose interest in music itself may be neither deep nor specialised.

Discotheques of the 1960s, which sprang up to accommodate dance styles born in the working class and ethnic districts of large United States cities, confronted the tension between these two roles. The Twist may have begun as a dance style practised by African-Americans and poor whites in inner-city school yards, but within two years it was being danced by socialites and media celebrities in mid-town discotheques. Marshall and Jean Stearns (1994) suggest that, as middle-class whites took up dancing in large numbers, they gradually eliminated its choreographed, ritualistic qualities in favour of free-form expression. Dances of working-class origin, such as the Madison, with its complicated series of intricate steps, would give way to the frenzied looseness of go-go dancing in the mid-

1960s, or the unstructured self-absorption of hippy dancing by the end of the decade. Discotheques continued to open in large numbers through the mid-1960s, but the appeal of new dance crazes gave way to the promise of a stimulating, multimedia environment. Sarah Thornton (1995) has shown how discotheques during this period, whether in New York, London, or dozens of other cities, came to present themselves as sensory playgrounds. Lighting, decor and overall design became a discotheque's main attractions, but it was necessary that these be changed regularly if a club was not to lose its novelty.

By the late 1960s, one important period in the history of discotheques was over. The sense of an unbroken series of dance crazes, each of which grabbed centre stage for a moment, had come to an end. One reason for this has already been suggested: the dancing of middle-class whites had broken down into a rather formless kind of personal expression, and no longer followed prescribed steps. Just as importantly, however, the development of rock music in the late 1960s took it in the direction of more intricate and extended forms which did not lend themselves easily to dancing. (It was during this period that the idea of the rock 'concert' became dominant.) Dancing in nightclubs was to persist in the late 1960s, but venues would no longer bring together different social classes and racial groups to the same extent as had the dance crazes of the early 1960s. In a pattern that would be repeated many times hereafter, dance clubs retreated into the underground scenes of large cities. In the late 1960s, Hispanic and African-American musical styles, such as Latin soul, funk and boogaloo, were developing into new kinds of dance music which were less and less likely to interact with rock music itself. This music, like rock, was extending the limits of the song and bringing new instruments into the mix, but its long instrumental breaks and increasing emphasis on percussion and bass made it much more suitable for the new dance clubs being built in deserted warehouses or other large spaces.

In New York City, a number of new dance clubs opened in 1969 and 1970, partly in response to the new-found sense of community within gay culture following the so-called Stonewall Riots of 1969. (A major feature of these riots was the demand by gays to be able to congregate in bars and clubs without police harassment.) These clubs included Salvation, the Sanctuary and Haven, and many of their features anticipated the disco culture which flowered in the mid and late 1970s. Clubs were now just as likely to open in vacated industrial sections of large cities as in the fashionable centres of commerce and entertainment, a shift which added to the sense that nightlife involved a journey into an urban underground marked by a sense of danger. Increasingly, the disc jockeys in these clubs were

becoming celebrities of a new kind, known for their ability to create and sustain a mood over several hours, and acknowledged by record companies for their influence on the musical tastes of their patrons.

Disco and the 1970s

The disco boom of the 1970s may be said to have begun in 1974, when two singles which had received their original public exposure in dance clubs rose to the top of industry sales charts in the United States and each sold two million copies. These records were 'Rock The Boat', by the Hues Corporation and 'Rock Your Baby' by George McCrae. 'Disco' would come to mean a distinctive sound, marked by a 4/4 beat and the use of instruments (such as strings, woodwinds and brass) more typical of classical music than of rock. Originally, however, it referred simply to records designed to 'cross over' from discotheques to the broader audience for pop music. In the strategic thinking of record companies, dance clubs were a medium in which an initial audience for songs could be built, spurring the addition of records to radio playlists and the eventual sale of albums on which a song appeared. If record companies turned to dance clubs to 'break' records in the mid 1970s, it was partly because radio stations, in North America at least, had grown more conservative in adding new songs to their playlists. Dance clubs offered a venue in which the appeal of records could be tested before radio stations made the decision to include them in their programming.

At one level, the emergence of disco was a slow affair, as the sorts of dance clubs which had begun appearing in the late 1960s grew in number and were copied throughout the Western world. The musical styles associated with these clubs likewise took shape gradually, shaped by the ornate production styles of Philadelphia soul or large-ensemble funk in the first half of the 1970s. Nevertheless, disco music seemed suddenly to burst into popular culture in 1974–5, in part because record companies rushed to capitalise on the new ways of promoting records which discotheques seemed to offer. At the same time, like the cabaret owners in the early decades of the twentieth century, who found that dance floors were an effective inducement to drinking and eating, restaurant and hotel managers throughout the world moved to add dance floors and nightclubs to their facilities in the mid-1970s. The explosion of disco music would see 10,000 discotheques operating in the United States by 1976, many of them integrated within hotel chains or run as franchise operations. In 1979, Andrew Stein, chair of the borough of Manhattan, credited discos with helping to revitalise the economies of cities like New York, during a decade

in which these cities faced fiscal crises and desertion by the white middle classes. In such disco capitals as New York or Montreal, local television programmes set in discotheques combined instruction on the latest dance steps with gossipy coverage of urban nightlife and a revitalised downtown celebrity culture.

Widely varying interpretations of the disco phenomenon were put forth in the 1970s. From one perspective, discos represented a conservative return to older, even pre-war traditions of nightlife. With their emphasis on glamorous dress, couples dancing to prescribed steps (such as 'The Hustle') and lushly orchestrated sounds which bore little resemblance to the textures of rock music, discotheques evoked the supper clubs and cabarets of the 1930s and 1940s. Just as often, however, disco culture was perceived as one step on a long road of cultural decline, joining the hedonistic excesses of rock culture (such as drugs and promiscuous sexuality) to the shallow, conspicuous consumption associated with an upwardly mobile urban middle class. In fact, the success of discotheques had much to do with the degree to which they brought together patrons of very different social backgrounds and lifestyles, from suburban heterosexuals seeking a night's diversion to those who lived in inner city gay communities, from members of the white working classes to young black urban professionals.

Remixes and extended singles

In 1975, large numbers of dance club deejays received a promotional item from RCA Records, a twelve-inch record on which one song was extended over an entire side. The record was 'Dance, Dance, Dance', by the group Calhoun, and it represented the introduction of a record format with enormous effects on the future development of dance music. Extended singles were one response to a problem which deejays had faced for a half-decade or more. Improvements in nightclub audio systems since the 1960s allowed for a wider sonic range than had earlier been possible, but the 45 rpm, seven-inch singles on which dance records normally circulated could not carry this range. The new twelve-inch single allowed for wider grooves, so that bass and percussion sounds were deeper and overall tones were richer. It also allowed the length of a song to be extended, so that instrumental breaks at beginning and end were now possible. Records could be blended by overlapping these transitional breaks at the end of one record with those at the beginning of another, and by slightly manipulating the speed of turntables so that the rhythms of both records were synchronised. The twelve-inch extended single was instantly popular with deejays, and, in 1976, companies began making them available for sale to

the general public. (The record '10 Percent' by the group Double Exposure, on the Salsoul label, was the first twelve-inch single to receive a commercial release.)

One of the ironies of dance music history is that, while the twelve-inch single was intended to help promote dance records to a mass audience, by encouraging deejays to play them within dance clubs, its long-term effect has been to help isolate dance music from the rest of musical culture. For many observers, the introduction of 12-inch singles hastened the collapse of disco music as a commercial force, by giving dedicated disco fans something to buy other than the album on which record companies had placed their hopes. (The problem of 12-inch singles 'cannibalising' the sales of albums would be noted regularly throughout the late 1970s.) More importantly, perhaps, the twelve-inch dance single would stimulate the production of new forms of music which were no longer simply modifications of the 'real' versions of songs. This new format would cease being merely a professional tool, and become a distinctive cultural form in its own right.

Since the early 1970s, deejays in dance clubs had become important sources of information for record companies. They reported to such companies on the success or failure of records among nightclub patrons and offered useful feedback on emerging trends and the sorts of production techniques which worked well in clubs. By 1975, deejays in most major cities had joined together in 'pools', associations which coordinated the delivery of new records from record companies to deejays and gathered the 'response sheets' which deejays completed as a way of letting record companies know how records had fared in their clubs. Soon, record companies began hiring deejays to remix dance songs for their twelve-inch dance-club versions.

All of these changes set in place a process by which the dance club deejay came to be at the centre of dance music, rather than simply one more intermediary, like the radio station programming director, to be won over by record company promotion personnel. Deejays who began as remixers often realised they might almost as easily produce their own tracks, particularly since many disco 'groups' had no existence or recognisable public presence outside the recording studio. The sense that a twelve-inch single consisted of a conventional 3–4 minute song with a few additional elements slowly withered. Rather, the twelve-inch single offered a new way of conceiving music, by providing a format in which new kinds of rhythmic structures and sonic effects might be tried out. By the beginning of the 1980s, records which existed only in the twelve-inch vinyl single format were being produced in large numbers. Around them had taken shape a complex set of institutions and circuits of information

through which these records, and news about them, could circulate. Independent dance music stores, distribution and importation companies, tip sheets for deejays, deejay pools and specialty magazines reviewing twelve-inch singles were all in place by the end of the 1970s.

All of these developments began the ten-year process which would help make dance music a globally underground phenomenon, rooted in a world of independent labels and small-scale production teams even as it became the most popular music for youth in many parts of the world. In the late 1970s, these changes were one among many factors which made it more and more difficult for major record companies to market disco music successfully. From the beginning of the disco explosion, the record industry had worried that disco music changed too rapidly for large companies to exploit its commercial potential efficiently. The life cycle of dance records is notoriously short-lived, as deejays and club patrons tire of them and demand novelty. To market a dance record successfully, then, requires responding quickly to feedback from the club scene, ensuring that enough copies are in record shops to meet demand without spending money needlessly to press, distribute and promote records which are destined to fail. Small record companies have typically been more skilled at responding quickly to the marketplace than have major, multinational companies.

More importantly, in an industry that came to see singles as promotional vehicles of little commercial value, the problem of translating a song's popularity in dance clubs into large-scale sales for albums containing that song were acute. Most albums of disco music were seen by the public to contain a hit song and much filler, and fans of the song were too often content to buy the single in its seven-inch or twelve-inch forms. As the orchestration and production of disco records did not lend themselves easily to being reproduced in live concerts, the promotional value of tours was limited. To make matters worse, the record industry had come to realise, by 1979, that a large percentage of disco fans treated the music as an ongoing soundtrack to urban life rather than a series of separate songs to be identified as such and sought out in record stores. This 'soundtrack' was easily available from the radio stations which offered continuous disco mixes, or on the compilation records which brought together a dozen recent hits.

Dance music after disco

It is commonplace, in recent histories of popular music, to claim that disco 'died' in 1979, because record companies had saturated the market with

low quality, standardised product in a reckless desire to capitalise on a passing fashion. It is true that many of the specific musical styles associated with disco withered or evolved, in the years 1979–80, and that the clientele for dance clubs split into a variety of specialised taste groups. Nevertheless, the infrastructures of dance club culture, the specialty record stores, small record labels, and dance clubs themselves, continued to grow throughout the 1980s and beyond, allying themselves with a variety of new musical styles. The Hi-NRG sound of gay dance clubs was at its most popular in the early 1980s, and electro-funk, British synth-pop, Eurodisco, rap and many other styles flourished in dance clubs during the same period.

At the beginning of the 1980s, the most important question facing dance music might have seemed to many to be its relationship to rock. Rock fans of the 1970s typically disdained disco music, but by 1980 music industry trade magazines were already speaking of the popularity of something they called ‘Dance-Oriented Rock’, as dance clubs added records by post-punk groups such as Blondie or Talking Heads to their play-lists. The increased production of rock records intended for dance clubs was spurred by two developments within Anglo-American musical culture. One of these was the move by discotheques themselves to embrace rock-based sounds, in order to capture a new audience and survive as the disco market splintered and shrank. Disco’s rising popularity in the late 1970s had resulted in discotheques opening in suburbs, on college campuses and in other locations where the pool of potential patrons was likely to be dominated by rock fans. Less obviously, danceable rock was one response to the question (posed by punk musicians and critics) of how punk would develop and resist becoming stagnant after the dramatic gestures of 1976 and 1977. Punk splintered into dozens of new styles and movements, and several of these (such as synthesiser pop and the revival of ska music) embraced dancing and dance clubs. The history of post-punk music over the next decade would be marked by a range of more-or-less danceable musical styles, from the militant funk of the Gang of Four or Scritti Politti, through the white-boy soul of Spandau Ballet or Dexy’s Midnight Runners, the gothic rock of Siouxsie and the Banshees or the Cure, the quirky, danceable pop of the B-52s or Yello, and the stark industrial electronics of such groups as Cabaret Voltaire or Test Department.

The clubs in which this music was played, in the first half of the 1980s, differed from the discotheques of the 1970s in several important ways. Their clientele, particularly in North America, was more likely to be almost exclusively white, as the audiences for post-punk rock music and new forms of African–American music seemed to diverge significantly. At

the same time, the highly ritualised and couple-oriented nature of most disco dancing in the 1970s gave way, within rock dance clubs, to styles of dancing marked by more restrained movements and an unspoken prohibition on physical contact between dancers. Finally, while the discotheques of the 1970s had attracted people from a broad range of ages, with young adults in their twenties and thirties as a core, post-punk dance clubs, like the raves and house clubs which followed, drew a much more uniformly youthful clientele.

At regular intervals, during the 1980s, rock criticism announced the appearance of new hybrids of rock and dance music, embracing each as the sign of a new unity within youth culture. This was the case in the early 1980s, when dancing to rock records in newly vibrant club scenes seemed to suggest that the antagonism between rock and dance audiences had withered away. Similar claims about a rock–dance synthesis were popular in 1989, with the emergence of a wave of British bands (such as the Happy Mondays and Stone Roses) whose tastes had been shaped in the raves and acid house culture of the mid-and-late 1980s. In 1997, the music press spoke once again of the coming together of dance and rock, as such dance acts as the Prodigy or the Chemical Brothers offered a rough dance sound in which guitars and other rock instruments were common, and as samples from heavy metal bands turned up in more and more records directed at dance clubs.

In fact, the fate of dance music in the 1980s and 1990s has had very little to do with the ways in which it has blended with rock. The popularity of these hybrids has almost always remained internal to the musical culture of young whites, with few effects on the production of black dance music. More importantly, it seems clear that the most significant event in the history of dance music since 1980 has been the rise of house music, whose style and development have had very little to do with rock music itself. As a new musical fashion, house captured the attention of dance music fans in the mid 1980s, and helped lay the basis for the massive dance explosion which followed. The house sound, born in the clubs and warehouse parties of Chicago in the early 1980s, gave dance music a new rhythmic foundation which would remain dominant for a decade and remain a central feature of dance music all through the 1990s. The ‘four-on-the-floor rhythms’ of house offered a structure over which a seemingly unlimited number of other musical and non-musical elements could be laid. The ability of house to incorporate other sounds, and adapt to shifting tempos or new influences, is a major reason for its success. At one level, house was merely the latest in a series of dance music crazes. Like disco before it, the introduction of house music saw a flurry of records which exploited the new fashion: old songs redone with a house beat, medleys of older tunes

set to a house rhythm, and the remixing of new pop songs so as make them compatible with the rhythms of house-dominated dance clubs.

The effects of house extend far beyond its distinctive rhythmic structure, however. House intensified the process by which dance club music detached itself from other sorts of popular music. By offering a consistent rhythm, from one record to another, house music changed the nature of deejay work. More and more, the idea of songs gave way to the notion of 'tracks', records lasting from four to ten minutes in which the important things going on had to do with the relationship between a consistent rhythm and the wide variety of things which might be mixed over the top of it. A deejay might use bits of one record to offer a house rhythm; over the top of that rhythm, fragments from other records, or sounds played live on electronic instruments might be added. While the practice of assembling music out of bits of other records was not new, it had been a key element of rap music since the late 1970s. House music lent itself more easily to creating long stretches of unbroken music, often lasting several hours, as records and sounds were interwoven by deejays in a process that might be considered one of live composition.

House music has developed in innumerable directions since the mid 1980s. Styles have ranged from the busy, cluttered sound of 'sample house' through the deep, soulful styles of garage, from the manic, synthesiser-based jubilation of hardcore through the pastoral soundscapes of ambient house. House has momentarily merged with pre-existing musical styles, like rap and Hi-NRG, and been interwoven with other styles, such as techno, trance and big beat, which have flourished alongside it. Whereas there was once a sense that these various styles might replace each other, the growth and fragmentation of dance music culture has meant that almost all of them now continue to develop, each with its specialised clubs and record labels, and each allotted a review section in the dozens of magazines which have emerged to catalogue and evaluate new dance records.

Rave culture and the trans-Atlantic divide

The explosion of dance music culture has not been uniform throughout the Western world, however. By the late 1990s, this boom had made Great Britain the international centre for dance club music production, and a laboratory for the cross-fertilisation of dance music styles, but it would widen the gulf between the musical tastes and buying habits of Europe and those of North America. There are many possible reasons for this gulf, and the relative weight of each is difficult to assess. Some trace the under-

development of dance club culture in the United States and Canada to a continued musical segregation of audiences along the lines of race. They point to a well-entrenched split between white rock culture and an African-American music dominated, since the mid-1980s, by hip-hop or more pop-like strains of rhythm and blues (such as so-called 'swingbeat'). Others trace these differences to the relatively small geographical size of Great Britain, and the presence of a lively and influential music press, factors which allow for a quicker spread of fads and a constant generation of excitement around new sounds and new records. The tighter population densities of Great Britain, and of Europe in a broader sense, have nourished the popularity of dance club tourism, which takes club-goers and deejays from one city or vacation resort to another for marathons of dancing often stretching over several days. As well, dance music has a much greater presence on radio in Great Britain and Europe than in North America, a possible effect of dance music's greater popularity which may, over time, have become one of its causes.

In the mythologies which surround the new dance culture, North America and Great Britain each figure differently. Until the emergence of drum and bass and trip-hop, in the mid 1990s, the major styles of dance music could each be traced to a United States birthplace: house to Chicago, techno music to Detroit, the garage sound to New Jersey and New York City. These musical scenes have all remained the stuff of legend, even when the most important developments of these styles have clearly taken place elsewhere. Great Britain's place within dance music mythologies is bound up with the ways in which the rave, as an event, has given dance culture the features of a genuinely revolutionary subculture. Sarah Thornton (1995) and others (e.g. Benson 1997) have described the emergence of the rave out of reggae sound systems and the warehouse dance parties which became common in Great Britain in the early 1980s, when rising costs of real estate and a backlash against the elitism of big-city nightclubs led promoters to hold dance events in abandoned warehouses. Harassment by local police forces limited the spread of warehouse parties, and promoters began seeking other places, less susceptible to police intervention, in which dance events could be held. New kinds of events, called raves, were held in wide-open spaces, such as fields or parking lots. The locations of these events, which might attract 5,000 people or more, were frequently kept secret until shortly before they began.

Since 1995, a number of books, almost all of them British, have documented the history of raves, and offered claims about their revolutionary impact. The rave helped to spread the notion that dancing might take place at spectacular events, rather than at clubs whose decor and musical styles

remained unchanged from night to night. In this respect, dance culture has taken on some of the features of the rock concert, just as raves and outdoor dance parties have come to stand as modern equivalents of the rock festival. While vast numbers of people continue to dance to Top 40 music at local discotheques, raves enshrined the idea that dancing and dance music might be both mass phenomena *and* the central focus of new undergrounds. The fact that new kinds of sensory environments (music, lighting, decor, and so on) have gone hand in hand with newly popular drugs, such as Ecstasy, has allowed rave culture to define itself as the basis of a new counter-culture, if not of a broader mutation of knowledge and experience – and not merely a passing trend in youth leisure. Raves help popularise the notion that patrons come to dance over several hours, organising their weekends and their consumption of beverages and drugs accordingly, rather than simply spending a couple of hours in a club between other night-time activities. As a result of the legal and judicial opposition they have confronted, dance culture and the rave have helped shift the focus of popular music's politics, away from the age-old controversies over authenticity and commercialism common in discussions of rock, and towards more concrete battles over the right to occupy public or quasi-public spaces and congregate in large numbers.

The importance of raves in Great Britain further solidified the differences between Britain and North America. Raves remained uncommon in North America until 1992 or 1993, and then encountered a number of developments which have limited their growth. One such development has been the opening of new, more conventional night clubs to capitalise on the rising interest in dance music among North American youth. Another is the growth in North American tours by celebrity deejays, large numbers of them from Great Britain, who perform in large events which resemble raves in scale and format but are more likely to be above ground and legal. In 1997, it appeared that alternative rock, which had been hugely popular among white North American youth since the early 1990s, was losing its appeal, as audiences turned towards the sorts of dance music which had been popular in Great Britain for a decade. While North America may, indeed, be at the beginning of its own dance 'explosion', the movement of dance music styles to the heart of North American rock music culture has often involved a disavowal of the sense that the appropriate place to hear such styles is in the dance club. The term 'electronica', introduced to describe the electronically based club music newly popular among North American youth, seems more and more like a label for music designed for quiet contemplation or concert-like performances.

The stable fragility of dance club culture

In his history of swing music, David Stowe (1994) wrote about the tendency of swing fans in the 1930s to become connoisseurs of big-band music, comparing solos and musicians with almost as much fervour as they would master new dance steps. Even as they appear to be losing themselves in physical abandon, dance music fans are often notoriously judgemental, quick to announce the passing of a style and denounce the growing commercialisation of dance music culture overall. Dance clubs have survived and mutated over the past forty years, despite the claims, which have come in regular intervals, that dance music is dying, the victim of too much hype or of an invasion by club-goers who are drawn to the fashion rather than the music. As thousands of dance clubs and hundreds of small dance record companies come and go, and as dance music styles themselves are made obsolete or fragment into a dozen variations, the fragility of dance music culture often seems all too obvious. In fact, it might be argued, venues for live rock performances and radio formats for broadcasting popular music have undergone just as many changes over the past four decades. From the twist clubs of the early 1960s through the ‘speed garage’ scene of the late 1990s, dancing in public places, to records played by a deejay, has been a consistent and vital feature of youth culture.

Further reading

Writing on dance is scattered across a range of fields and academic disciplines, but three important strands in this writing are worth noting. One consists of historical studies of particular dances, such as Jim Dawson’s *The Twist: The Story of the Song and Dance That Changed the World* (London: Faber, 1995), Marshall and Jean Stearns’ *Jazz Dance: The Story of American Popular Dance* (New York: Da Capo, 1995), and Marta E. Savigliano’s *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995). A second strand consists of work, much of it very recent, in the field of dance studies. The anthology edited by Jane C. Desmond, *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997) is perhaps the best of these collections. Finally, the last few years have seen an explosion of writing on rave and house music culture, mostly in the United Kingdom, best exemplified by such books as Hillegonda C. Rietveld’s *This Is Our House* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998) and Jeremy Gilbert and Ewan Pearson, *Discographies: Dance Music, Culture and the Politics of Sound* (London: Routledge, 1999).