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Out on the floor: the politics of dancing on the Northern Soul scene

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Abstract

The Northern Soul scene is a dance-based music culture that originated in the English North and Midlands in the early 1970s. It still thrives today with a mix of forty-year-olds and new converts, and its celebration of 1960s' soul has an international following. Centred on the detail of the dance techniques, and musical and cultural context, the analysis presented here is developed from an ethnographic study. It uses a concept of competence and the example of a classic record to explore the meanings of dance for the scene's participants. The importance of solidarity, senses of identity through gender, place and ethnicity, and the relationship of the scene with African–American culture are explored. The study draws conclusions about the way that dance can be theorised and analysed, and argues that a full analysis requires an exploration of the relationship of physical movement to space, music and senses of identity.

Dobie Gray's 1966 US record 'Out on the Floor'[1] was taken up in the early 1970s by dancers in clubs in the English North and Midlands. As well as having the beloved Motown-esque beat that dominated the playlists at the time, the song itself was a paean to the cool and hedonism of the dancefloor that these clubs celebrated. The popularity of the record[2] coincided with the spread of the term 'Northern Soul' to describe a dance scene and associated music. The scene is still active today, with club nights across the UK attracting a mix of the original participants (now over forty) with new converts to a community built on high speed dancing to obscure records mainly recorded in the 1960s by African–American singers.

The scene's development is chronicled in the pages of British specialist magazines from the 1970s like *Blues and Soul*, *Black Music* and *Echoes*, and was first summarised in a mid-1970s review of popular music (Frith and Cummings 1975). More developed accounts appeared in the early 1980s (Cosgrove 1982; Chambers 1985) and a growing body of journalistic accounts of the scene (Winstanley and Nowell 1996; Nowell 1999; Ritson and Russell 1999) has been paralleled by academic explorations (Milestone 1997; Hollows and Milestone 1998). Dancing has a very minor role in most of these accounts, which is surprising given its centrality in the scene. More recent television programmes exploring the history of Northern Soul have given a visual prominence to dancing, but restrict such representations of dance to the 'gymnastic' (Hepton 2001; Littleboy 2003). Moving and still images in these programmes are always focused on dancers doing 'backdrops', 'spins' and 'dives'. Academics share this emphasis, presenting Northern Soul dancing as a 'distinctive,

acrobatic style' and suggest a parallel with break dancing (Milestone 1997, p. 145). However, attentive viewing of the television images reveals that few dancers move in this manner, and then only for a few seconds. There is far more to Northern Soul dance than the standard representation as gymnastic movement, and even these moves need to be understood in the wider context of dancing, music and culture.

Stuart Cosgrove, in an insightful article, emphasises the way dancers 'predict almost every beat and soul clap in a thousand unknown sounds', and argues for the importance of 'the ritual elegance of a dance style that glides from side to side but refuses to adopt a name' over that of eye-catching moves (Cosgrove 1982, p. 38). Strangely, Milestone quotes Cosgrove but removes the 'glides from side to side' phrase without ellipsis, and does not comment on his suggestion that there is more here than 'acrobatic style'. She does, however, offer a number of other interesting observations upon the competitive and display nature of the dancing rituals, and the applause of appreciation that accompanies the fadeout of well-regarded records (Milestone 1997, p. 146). In this article I want to explore these rituals in their full cultural complexity by restoring the gliding movement to the centre of the analysis.

Using Dobie Gray's record as an exemplar of the Northern sound, and drawing upon participation observations of thirty years of soul dancing,[3] this article investigates the politics of the scene's dancefloors. I start with a short discussion of how the existing literature has tried to theorise dance. Building on Ben Malbon's approach to the cultural meaning of dance (Malbon 1999), I then analyse the movement and proxemics of the dancefloor routines, the relationship of the dancing to recorded music, and the way that the tension between individual display and solidarity is resolved. This approach is then extended to explore the role of gender and sexuality, and cultural identity with place and ethnicity.

Theorising dance

There are few systematic methods for studying dancing to popular music, and little developed theory that could be used as a foundation for such a method. In this section, therefore, I aim to highlight the most productive contributions. In particular, I point to the importance of understanding the physical experience of dancing, and making substantial use of Ben Malbon's excellent work in this area, I establish a template for analysing Northern Soul dancing. I end this review of literature with a consideration of issues of social identity that are undeveloped in Malbon's work.

At the outset, it should be noted that the marginalisation of dancing within studies of Northern Soul culture reflects a wider lack of attention in the literature of popular music studies. In 1979 Richard Dyer felt obliged to write 'In Defence of Disco' (Dyer 1979), and over fifteen years later, Sara Thornton was still noting the neglect of dance, dance music and dance spaces in pop scholarship (Thornton 1995). Like Thornton I see this as the result of the dominance of a 'rock aesthetic' (Regev 2002) in studies which 'tended to privilege ''listening'' over dance musics, visibly performing over behind-the-scenes producers, the rhetorically ''live'' over the ''recorded'' . . .' (Thornton 1995, pp. 1–2). Andrew Ward has suggested that this neglect reflects the response of rational scholarship when faced with non-rational activities (Ward 1997, p. 8). He argues for a focus on the embodied experience of dancing, rather than an attempt to understand dance as some form of externalised non-verbal message (*ibid*., p. 17). However, this approach simultaneously severs this experience from wider contexts of meaning created by our interaction with the music, other dancers, and the

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ambience of the dancefloor. When we dance we do so by making choices about particular ways to move from the many ways that are available. An analysis that excludes these factors is neglectful of the rounded whole of the experience of dance.

A number of writers have theorised just these interactions in physical experience. Richard Dyer argues that late-1970s disco dancing was characterised by a whole-body eroticism in contrast to the phallic focus of rock dancing (Dyer, pp. 152–4), while Gilbert and Pearson emphasise the way that sound vibrates through our bodies (Gilbert and Pearson 1999, pp. 44–7), and along with Gill (1995) and Reynolds (1998), see dance as an exemplar of Barthesian *jouissance.* It is notable, however, that most of these discussions of the ecstasy of dance are located in drug-altered perceptions of music, and not primarily in the physicality of bodily movement. While dance (and drugs) are clearly linked to senses of such intrinsic physical pleasures, they are also part of wider extrinsic cultural activities.

Attempting a synthesis of these approaches, Ben Malbon formulates dancing as 'a conceptual language with intrinsic and extrinsic meanings, premised upon physical movement, and with interrelated rules and notions of technique and competency guiding performance across and within different situations' (Malbon 1999, p. 86). For Malbon, dancing is meaningful through, and expressive of, interconnected cultural activities articulated by bodily movement and posture. He investigates these cultural meanings through concepts of identification, sociality and performability.

He relates identification to a construction of self, and notions built on the binary oppositions of the in-crowd/out-crowd, and coolness/mainstream (*ibid*., pp. 37–69). The concept of sociality explores the relationships within the club between the individual, the space of the club and the other clubbers (*ibid*., pp. 70–89). The final 'situation' is focused on the performance of dance in these wider contexts. This is achieved through the study of the physical geography of the club; the environment created by music, lighting and other factors of ambiance; the density of the crowd and the spacing and orientation of individuals within it; the competencies utilised by dancers; and the emotional spacing (*ibid*., pp. 90–101). I use all these ideas and approaches in adapted form in the analysis that follows.

Malbon is particularly effective at recasting Ward's emphasis on embodied experience as a set of 'intrinsic' meanings interacting with 'extrinsic' meanings. However, he marginalises other extrinsic meanings including the wider cultural context of power relationships of class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity and geography. Largely, this reflects a shift in theoretical interests within the academy from the modernist politics of equality and liberation struggle to a postmodern focus of locality and individualised identity through practice. While the modernist theorising ignored its embodied experience in order to emphasise its political significance, a fuller insight will not be secured by jettisoning wider power relationships. As I will show, power relationships are centrally important in the study of the Northern Soul scene.

As I have argued elsewhere (Wall 2003, pp. 188–92), we need to be aware that at different times, and for different groups of people, to dance (or not to dance) has been a significant political position deeply rooted in ideas of race, gender and sexuality, and linked indelibly to the ideas of cool/not cool that Malbon discusses.

There are some helpful pointers to how these issues could be dealt with in some existing work. The role of dancing for women in the late 1970s (McRobbie 1984), for gays (Dyer 1979, pp. 136–80; Brewster and Broughton 1999, pp. 135–80) and for different ethnically based cultural groups (Boggs 1992; Vincent 1996; Reynolds 1998), has been effectively explored. Even more interesting has been Paul Gilroy's notion of

the dancefloor as a real and cultural space in which the usual hierarchies of society are inverted, so that competencies of dance are more important than those that prevail outside (Gilroy 1991). He gives a dominant role in this space to the formation of a black British identity, to the formation of proto-feminist senses of empowerment, and to new possibilities for white, working-class, male identity. His historical narrative charts developments which significantly contextualise the birth and development of the Northern Soul scene outside of, and in opposition to, the rock aesthetic.

In what follows, I build on these engagements with existing analysis and theory, and move on to explore how dancing is meaningful within the modern Northern Soul scene. I start this examination by concentrating on the physical movements of dancers as style, focusing on the relationship of these movements to the music used for dancing, their setting within the dance floor as a physical space and a cultural crowd, and their cultural and historical location. I give a central role to an idea of competence, a term which I use to mean the state of mastery over techniques and competencies of a particular dance culture. I'll make particular use of Dobie Gray's record 'Out on the Floor' as a case study. In the second section I connect these practices to the politics of dancing and to the relationships of power and identity.

Dancing, Northern Soul style

Style refers to the *manner* of expression; it is the particular way certain actions are performed. In his semiotic investigation of style, Dick Hebdige suggests it can be understood as bricolage, homology and a signifying practice (Hebdige 1979). By this he means that style is the active use of available materials, in which each use is interconnected with other uses to produce a meaningful whole. As such, I want to explore dance style as a process of meaning-construction, distinct in its usage of available moves, and linked to other practices that make it meaningful. It is, therefore, far more important to understand how, and in what context, dancers dance, than it is to simply record what they dance, or how it feels.

I start by identifying a central set of practices which were established in the early 1970s, and (mainly because of the continuity of many of the participants) have remained the predominant way in which dance is organised within the scene. These aspects of style constitute a narrow definition of how music can be danced to, expressed by the scene's participants as a shared set of dance techniques and an associate notion of competence.

Competence and dance technique

Malbon places competence within the realm of sociality, and drawing on Goffman (1959) identifies its aim of 'successfully negotiating the trials of ''impression management'' ' (*ibid*., p. 97). That is to say, it matters what you look like when you move, and it matters what spatial relationships you produce in relation to other dancers. In fact, as I will show, on the Northern scene the idea of competence orders the spacing of dancers and variation in style in a way that it does not seem to in the post-house club culture Malbon investigates.

I noted earlier that we will not find an understanding of dance within the scene if we concentrate on the 'gymnastics' of back drops, spins and dives that impress the onlooker at a Northern night. They are the most *obviously* distinctive features, and

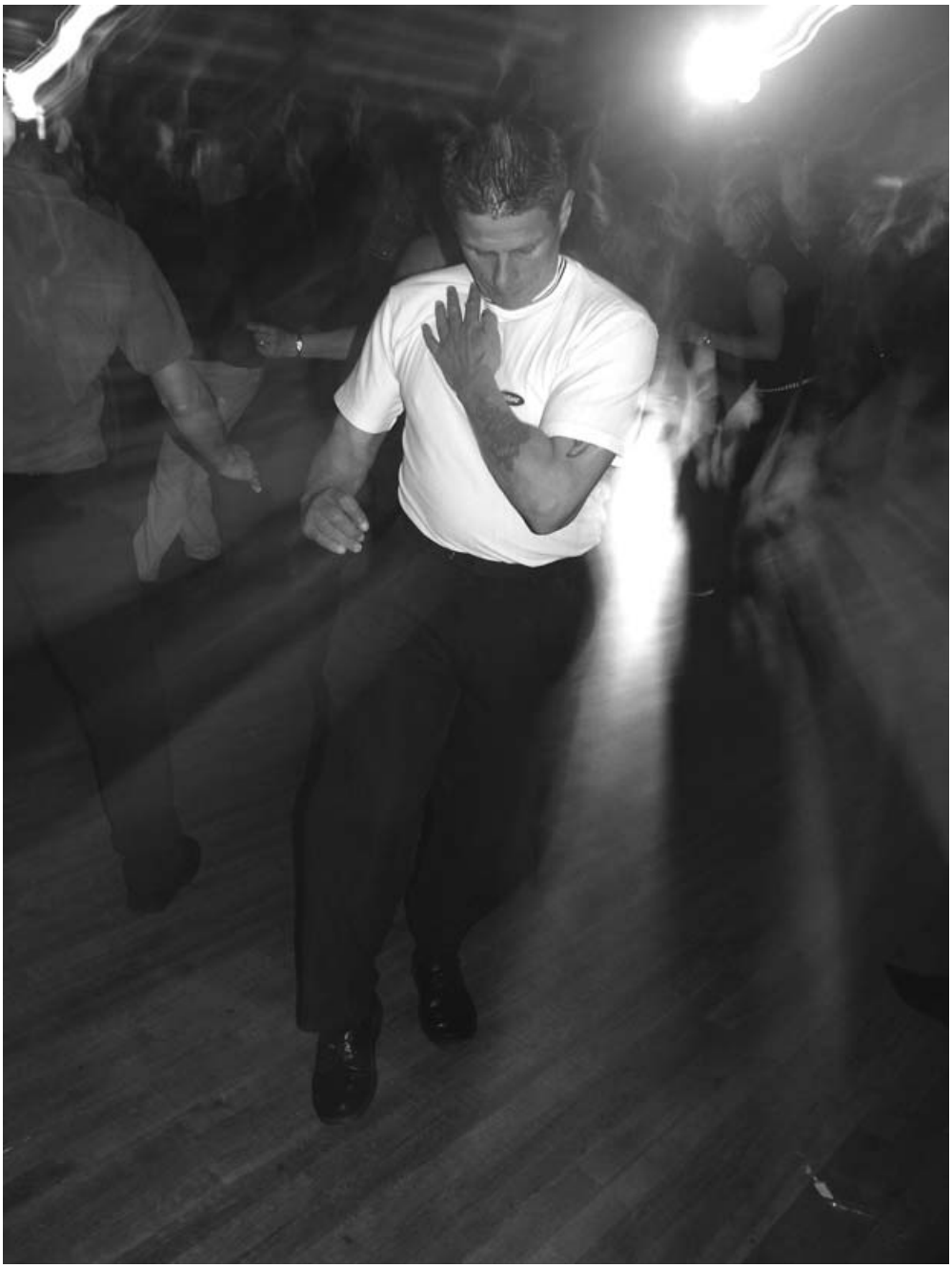

Figure 1. Northern Soul dancer. Photograph used with the kind permission of John Barrett. A collection of John's photographs of Northern dancers is available: Barrett, J. 2005, Keeping the Faith: a Photographic Journal of the British Soul Scene *(Birmingham).*

certainly they give a heroic appellation to the exponents, and a sense of the extraordinary to these dancefloors. However, even when (thirty years ago) we were younger, fitter and more practised, only a minority of dancers used these moves, and only at set

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places in certain records. Today it tends to be the older male dancers who execute them, rather than the large number of younger dancers. I would suggest that it is through this relationship that a sense of the heroic has been established.

Cosgrove tried to put his finger on Northern style by noting that the dancer 'glides from side to side' and dancers 'predict almost every beat and soul clap' (Cosgrove 1982, p. 38). The predominant 'glide' style is achieved through some core characteristics of posture and movement: rigid upper torso, eyes up and looking forward; weight back and pushing down through the hips on to the heels; moving mostly with feet, with fairly straight legs, to propel oneself across the floor (almost always sideways); arms and hands tend to follow the shifting weight of the dancer, or push against it for expressive counterpoint. It is this core competency that signals you as an insider, and not a dance tourist. Many – and at an increasing number of Northern nights, most – dancers limit their dance to these core postures and movements. There are some who do not adopt this predominant style, and I will return to them later.

There are also a series of elaborations to the core style that are available to the competent dancer. The most common are to do with the dance steps. The standard steps of the side-to-side dance movement count out the four beats of each bar of the music as a basic repetition: four beats to the right, four beats to the left. This seems to be the easiest way to interpret the steady, even, lightly syncopated beat of the up-town 1960s' soul records that characterises the music played at Northern venues. This beat is the main drive of the dancing style because it determines the even time marking which underlies Northern dance style.[4] However, by shifting weight across two beats from the heel to the toe, the dancer can momentarily keep their balance on one foot. This allows dancers to undertake steps characteristic of a more practised participant. Primarily it allows a heavy use of the ankle, rather than leg, to propel the dancer, and to use their other foot for an action that does not require carrying their weight. It is this movement which makes the dancer seem to glide, while at the same time allowing leg and foot movements that counterpoint the main beat. This puts considerable stress on the ankles and is the reason that Northern dancefloors are lubricated with talcum powder by the dancers.

It is these pieces of footstep improvisation and elaboration that form the base for the other extended bodily movements. They mostly cover a range of small shifts which have significance within the scene. These would include changing direction, interspersing short and longer sideways strides, twisting the body in a counter direction to the movement of the feet, and shifting the weight around the centre of the hips. These moves are paralleled by hand and arm gestures which play with or emphasise other aspects of the song. This is most notable in the soul clap, an exaggerated wide-armed communally executed clap, which marks out certain beats usually in the bridge of the record. These relatively simple moves can then be built up into more dramatic moves that produce the acrobatic activities of spinning, falling backwards, or diving forwards. At their most elaborate these would be combined in the gymnastic mode. So, for instance, a spin ends in a backdrop, which merges into a kick from the prone position, and a return to the vertical ends with a spin to hit the first beat of a new stanza of the music.

However physically demanding such elaborated moves are, they are not in themselves valued. There are dancers who can do the gymnastic techniques, but do not dance with competence. Along with all movements, the judgement of competence is applied to the way they are executed. While dancers are allowed quite a degree of

variation in the moves that are executed – in fact it is greatly valued – the times when they can be executed is strictly delineated. These structures of 'what is possible when' are related to the musical and performance structure of the recordings themselves. Knowledge of the structure of individual records is therefore central, and unites two forms of competence: the ability to do the moves; and the knowledge of when, in a particular record, certain types of moves can be executed.

Competence and scene knowledge

Records have been, and are, valued on the scene because they provide opportunities for the competencies of style to be enacted. Dobie Gray's 'Out on the Floor' is such a record, and so an exemplar for analysing how musical and dancing competences relate. In many ways the recording is a basic song form, but not one strong on lyrical content. The introduction is based on a transposition of the lyrical and musical material of the song's chorus cut down to four three-bar stanzas. 'Hey, hey, hey', sing the backing vocalists twice; 'Yeah! Yeah! Yeah! Everything is out of sight!' replies Dobie, as we are called to the floor. This is followed by the first verse (four eight-bar stanzas), then the chorus (one eight-bar stanza), the second verse, chorus again (this time two eight-bar stanzas), and an extended bridge section built on multiple phrases of eight bars. Moving to the fade-out, the verse and one stanza chorus are repeated, and then the lines of the extended bridge are used with new lyrics.

At a basic level, the recording's structure provides the framework for the execution of the dance: dancers use the core techniques described above during the verse; a flourish of extended techniques in the chorus; and quite developed versions of the extended techniques in the elongated bridge. This basic organisation of the dance is then elaborated through movements that interpret the shifting textures of the song, its playfulness with time and changes of emotional intensity.

For instance, competent dancers use moments of rhythmic intensification in the recording to increase the speed of their footwork. The occasional use of melisma by the singer to spread a note over one or two bars is given a prominence in the dance through slides of the feet. Differences between the organisation of the stanzas are used by dancers and echoed in the dance by visually different moves; this is particularly apparent in the last two bars of the final stanza, where the most musically intensive section is matched by the most intensive dancing. Here the drums move from keeping steady time in the verse to double time, while the vocal holds a single word, 'pushing' us into the chorus, and many dancers use this as an opportunity to display dexterous footwork, and an off-balance body movement.

Dancers also respond to the affective use of the piano in the recording. Towards the end of each stanza of verse (the song's secondary hook), the instrument plays a short musical motif matched by dancers with footwork or balance motifs. In the first three lines of a stanza, when the motif is played softly and with some improvisation against the vocal, the dancers use less intensity; in the answer section of the extended bridge, when the motif is played with full attack on the keys, dancers deploy their most energetic improvisations.

Competence in the Northern scene, then, can be understood to relate to three necessary and interconnected competencies. Of course dancers must first know what range of movement is generally sanctioned within the scene. To dance in any other way is to reveal oneself as an outsider. Then they must be able to physically perform those sanctioned movements, and to be able to do so with style. That is, the dancing

must look controlled and accomplished. 'Giving it a go' is not competence. Finally, the dancer must have a detailed enough knowledge of specific records so that they can perform certain techniques at their appropriate place in the structure of the record.

The basic, but shifting structure and the subtle elaborations of the musicians and singer which characterise 'Out on the Floor' provide abundant opportunities for dancers to demonstrate all three of these competencies. It possibly explains its consistent popularity over three decades.

However, dance is more than a combination of posture and steps, it obviously also involves moving in a space used by other dancers and marked out for different activities. This constitutes Malbon's second 'situation' of dance: the physical geography, ambience and spacing and orientation of dancers. Given what has preceded it will come as no surprise to learn that the scene also has a strong set of rules about how one moves in this space.

Moving in space

The dance spaces of the Northern Soul scene are not the mainstream clubs of youth nightlife, and they have never been so. They are based in a mixture of old ballrooms, pub function rooms, halls, and social clubs, based in communities (mainly in the English North and Midlands) which have been increasingly marginalised by the shifting economics of post-war wealth creation. Many early venues did not even have a licensed bar. The most important element was a large wooden dance floor, and contemporary Northern nights are in venues dominated by the dance floor. Bar and sitting areas usually surround the dance space on two or more sides and there is usually a space set aside for selling records and memorabilia, as watching the dancers and buying records and CDs are important secondary activities at Northern nights. The DJ desk is usually raised on a stage at the other end of the room, and all these activities are orientated to the dance floor and the dancers.

Few present-day venues are of the size, or have the scale of attendance, of the largest 1970s clubs like Wigan Casino or Blackpool Mecca. Typically, the number present at Northern nights today will be in the low hundreds, with less than a hundred on the dancefloor at any one time. Even so, with so many enthusiastic dancers in a confined space, some form of regulation is required. An etiquette of the dancefloor has developed to try and deal with the danger of clashing with another dancer. While some dancers will operate in an area as large as one or two square metres, this space will overlap with other dancers who seek to negotiate the use of the space through some sort of order to their dancing and a high degree of control over their techniques. Dancers with a developed technique and a high degree of competence hardly ever come into contact, and such incidents are usually followed by fulsome apologies. The sorts of orientations apparent in Malbon's account of 'post-house club cultures' are not present on Northern dance floors. Dancers do not face the DJ, or any other common part of the space. Dancers on the outer edges of the floor almost always face inwards, but on the inside of the dance space different dancers face different ways. Although friends often dance on a broadly similar part of the floor, they do not normally form a distinctive group, and dancing between couples is very unusual (and would produce comment by onlookers).

There is a continual churning[5] of dancers, usually based upon preferences for certain records over others. A particularly popular record will quickly fill the floor, but the two-to-three minute length of the records means that there is a change in those

dancing every three minutes or so. Dancing is therefore an activity defined not just by the physical relationship to the music, but also to the other dancers, and to the wider space through which the dancers shift their activity from dancing to sitting, watching, and offering comment. I estimate that dancers today spend far less time on the dance floor than they would have in the 1970s – probably the product of our increasing age – and the composition and operation of the floor has shifted far more than the basic dance itself.

The most notable change is the role that women occupy. Once a minority of dancers, they now constitute a majority. Although one must be careful as the 1970s-published photographic records of dancers tend to focus on the acrobatic dancing performed by men, the distribution of the dancing crowd supports the claim that it was men who predominated in numbers, in occupancy of space, and in the spectacle of dance. At a number of present-day venues I visited, a high proportion of the men occupying the floor kept to the outer edge, and women out-numbered men in the centre. Although men tended to be the ones who used the acrobatic elements in their dances, some women included spins and elaborated dance steps.

Secondly, there is far less cohesion to the dancefloor than there used to be. This is most obvious in the division between dancers in their twenties – who construct their dance identities around a revival of the dress and dance of the late 1960s Mod scene – and those in their late thirties, forties (and sometimes fifties) who link themselves much more to the Northern Scene of the late 1970s. The relative proportion of these groups varies from venue to venue, but there was not a venue I visited where the younger group were in the majority. For this reason the dominant meanings of the scene are still derived from the three decades of Northern Soul. There has been some antagonism to Mod-revivalists in the Northern scene since the early 1980s because it is perceived to lack authenticity and to be a youth fad (see St. Pierre [n.d.]; Winstanley [n.d.]), but this seems to have dissipated if my research sample is representative of the whole. Although there is some overlap in which records are danced to by different groups, the neo-Mods tend to dominate when certain records are played, and these are usually played within a themed set of early 1960s R&B, rather than the uptown soul style associated with Detroit or Los Angeles labels. During these sets there are few differences between dancers, as the older dancers curtail the more distinctive features of their style. At other times, though, the differences between styles often leads to bodily contact as it is harder to predict the patterns of different, (Northern dancers would say) less disciplined styles.

There is another sense in which the Northern scene has expanded outside its former cultural territory of exclusion, and this has expanded the backgrounds of people at Northern venues. The rare soul records which were collected and exchanged by DJs and dancers are now widely available on compilation CDs, and they have a wider circulation in radio programmes and on the soundtracks to adverts and TV programmes.[6] Further, the greater prominence of women dancers, and of dancers who do not share the traditions and history of the Northern soul scene, have made the practices of the scene less excluding, and the notion of the in-crowd less pronounced.

My main point here is that Northern Soul dancers are not just involving themselves in a physically pleasurable activity. Of course ethnographic observation and participation reveals dancing as a physically and psychologically pleasurable activity; and the sweat and physical flow of dance, the relationship to music, and physical communality are major reasons why dancers dance. However, these factors cannot explain the ordering of selected music nor the distinctiveness of dance movements.

The major part of this paper deals with the latter issue, and I will leave it to others to elaborate on the former issues.

Thus far I have followed Malbon's schema, using ideas of competence – and extending it from dance technique to dance style, and to competencies related to knowledge of rare records – as articulated through the 'sociality' of dance, and the way that it relates to the physical geography of the dancefloor. I now want to turn to his idea of identification. In Malbon's work, this is focused on a postmodern sense of self, and particularly the binary of in-crowd/out-crowd and coolness/mainstream. It should be apparent from my analysis so far that, while these are also important themes in Northern Soul, other concerns not taken up by Malbon, especially the politics of place, of gender and of ethnicity, also play out in the scene. These are equally demanding of our attention, and they are the subject of the next section of my analysis.

The politics of dancing in the Northern Soul scene

While the localised practices of dance are centrally important to understanding its meaning, so too are these wider issues of power relations and identity. I therefore want to develop the earlier analysis into an attempt to place Northern Soul dancing in the wider context of the politics of gender and sexuality, and the relationship of cultural identity with place and ethnicity. I take each of these issues at a time, but try to connect each theme to the preceding observations, and to each other, as they constitute senses of identity for participants on the scene.

Over three decades the characteristic and consistent narrative in the discourse of the Northern scene has been the idea that the scene is distinct from what is constructed as mainstream music culture. This idea is found in accounts of the scene in the music magazines from the 1970s through to the recent flush of web-based and printed historical accounts. Part of this narrative is the contention that, for 'true' participants, the music and dancing are the central focus, rather than a means to another cultural or social end.

Most significantly, these accounts usually construct a binary opposition between the Northern scene, focused on music and dance, on one hand, and the construction of a mainstream nightlife focused on the pursuit of sexual partnerships (see, for instance, Winstanley and Nowell 1996; Hepton 2001).[7] This discourse is echoed through the orientations of both the dancing and non-dancing participants on the dancefloor, and on the importance given to record buying at club nights. It may also explain why the scene has survived when the participants are now in long-term relationships, and the largest groups of attendees are made up of couples.

The relationship of masculinity to the dancefloor is more complex, however. It is certainly the case that male Northern dancers operate in a cultural space which Angela McRobbie has argued provides a rare opportunity for women's self determination and personal expression (McRobbie 1984). And in fact many of the reminiscences featured in recent documentaries on the origin of the scene carry a subtext that the individual male social dancing characteristic of Northern Soul did not fit with mainstream senses of masculinity, and sometimes that it was a transformation of usual male behaviours and identities.[8]

On the other hand, even an evening's ethnographic observation will reveal that there is a significant dimension of male competition and display which is central to understanding Northern dance. Male dancers dance with more elaboration and more

energy as the number and competency of other men on the floor increases. Male dancers orientate themselves to other male dancers, and they 'compete' to demonstrate their control of physical movement and understanding of particular records. At one level this could be understood as friendly rivalry, or masculine showing off, and as such a simple reproduction of male activities elsewhere. However, while this is a superficially convincing interpretation, such practices also work within the subculture to emphasise mutual participation. The shared understanding of the musical structure of records and the possibilities for dance they allow unites participants; and to some degree operates across gender lines. The 'soul clap' identified earlier is perhaps the best example of this phenomenon. Here the unison clap at agreed points in the music brings together the sense of communality of the scene and its shared competences by emphasising the beat of the music, and the collective experience of the dance.

In spite of these constants through the history of the scene, there have been a number of interesting but rather subtle shifts in gender identity and power relations in recent years. These are explained by the fact that women now dominate the floor numerically. Although the male-dominated dance rituals remain significant, they are now far more muted, and far more women participate in these practices of dancer orientation and dance synchronisation I outlined earlier. I would interpret this as a general downplaying of the competitive elements and an increasing orientation towards cultural solidarity. This has not, however, led to a decline in the importance of technique and competence. While the acrobatic movements are less in evidence, the other competences remain significant in the dancefloor practices. The ideas of solidarity are produced through participation on the dancefloor, and essentially in relationship with other 'good' dancers. Judgements of the quality of a particular evening are made using criteria which encompass both the music and the dancing of others. In other words, it is not sufficient to dance to 'show off'; rather it is necessary to be part of a larger whole of dance competence and technique.

Joanne Hollows and Katie Milestone have raised these issues of solidarity in relation to geo-politics in England. In particular, drawing upon ideas of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984), they see Northern Soul as 'a refusal of the South's claims to legitimacy and distinction' (Hollows and Milestone 1998, p. 88). They produce a thoughtful mapping of the cultural geographic meanings of the relationship of the Northern Soul scene with the Northern cities of the USA where the music was recorded. The authors note that by using imported records, participants in the scene could produce a culture independent of London, and negotiate the competing meanings of 'North America' in English culture to produce a relationship with an 'imagined' African–American culture structured through an interpretative community which extends from the US cities in which the music was produced, through the dancefloors of the Northern scene, and to the pop sensibilities of other consumers of soul records (*ibid*., pp. 87–94).

While these are important ideas for the understanding of this scene, their observations need some finessing. Firstly, the label 'Northern Soul' was created in London to refer to something taking place to the North of the definer's 'map of meanings'.[9] The scene was not initially based upon a self-conscious articulation of a sense of 'Northern-ness': the leading clubs of the scene in the early 1970s were to be found in the Midlands;[10] it grew out of a temporally (rather than geographically) located sense of modernism; and drew participants from the whole of Britain. It is also important to note that the significance of the term 'Northern' only became redolent in

the discourse of its participants after 1975 when clubs in Blackpool and Wigan drew members from hundreds of miles away, and the term became a commercial genre for selling records in mainstream pop.

Secondly, the relationship of the scene to the black culture of Northern cities of the US is even more complex than Hollows and Milestone suggest. While Northern DJs play music recorded by African–American artists from the 1960s to the 1970s, it is simplistic to even consider African–American culture during this period as a single interpretative community. As a number of other scholars have demonstrated, there is a richness to the politics of culture, identity and music generated in African–American communities in the 1960s and 1970s, which requires sophisticated analysis (George 1986; George 1988; Early 1995; Ward 1998; Smith 1999). Drawing on these readings of African–American culture in the 1960s and 1970s, we can see that the music played in Northern clubs is selectively drawn from the historical moment in which the aspirations among black Americans for integration gave way to aspirations for a self-defined equality. Specifically, Northern Soul DJs most often play records from the earlier period in the 1960s when a self-consciously bi-racial pop sound was developed by white-owned record labels featuring African Americans and aimed at both black and white teenagers. A large number of these records were produced to meet the teen dance fads that developed around the international success of the Twist (Wall 2006). The records do tend to be the ones originally more popular in local black communities, rather than those which featured on the 1960s national pop charts, and many feature qualities associated with the rising black conscious movement and the idea of 'soul' as an articulation of black identity. Nevertheless, Northern club playlists tend to systematically exclude records characterised by musical elements associated with the 'funkier' music[11] which followed in the 1970s, and through which black Americans developed an Afro-centric identity.

This point will become clearer, perhaps, if we return to Dobie Gray's recording of 'Out on the Floor'. Lyrically and musically, the song is an interesting mid-point between the integrationist agenda in black politics and the civil rights movement; between Ward's cultural poles of Motown and James Brown (Ward 1998, pp. 123–69). The early operation and music of Motown Records in Detroit exemplifies the internationalist cultural and political ambitions (Smith 1999) – and it is no coincidence that Motown's early records are often presented as key to the Northern sound – while Brown's late 1960s and early 1970s music embodies both the move to a more conscious celebration of the distinctive qualities of black culture and the contradictions of trying to operate in a white-dominated society and music industry (Ward 1998, pp. 388–415).

On the one hand the lyrics of 'Out on the Floor' deal with hedonism and dancing drawing upon a repertoire of black entertainment, and reference points from the broader 1960s American youth culture which were apparent in much of the black pop produced by Motown and other independent record labels that were established after the success of Rock and Roll (Gillett 1971). Gray sings them in a style mid-way between the dominating influences of Sam Cooke and Jackie Wilson, two of black pop's biggest contemporary stars, who worked in Los Angeles[12] where Gray also recorded. The production reflects many of the pop experiments undertaken by Phil Spector at the time.

On the other hand, the recording also features hints of the new developing music of soul and funk. Unusually for black pop, the lyrics feature the sorts of African–American phraseology increasingly apparent in the music of James Brown at this time

(see Wall 2003, pp. 138–41). As such, it is an example of what Brackett argues is the articulation of a new black 'soul' culture (Brackett 2000). While his vocals do not feature the high-key style which gives James Brown's singing its distinctive feel, he does use Sam Cooke's characteristic glissandi and the urgency of Jackie Wilson's blues gospel style with increasing prominence as the song progresses. Nevertheless, the song structure is characterised by the same sorts of developments found in Brown's music, where verses and choruses are increasingly dissolved into continual movement and delayed harmonic releases. The increasingly emotional black vernacular one-liners of the middle section are reminiscent of Brown's repertoire of the time, particularly the ground-breaking 'Papa's got a Brand New Bag' from 1965.

The interpretation of the musical and cultural characteristics of Gray's record in the Northern scene are instructive. It is not incidental to the popularity of the song that along with another Gray success ('The In-crowd'), the lyrics seem to celebrate the world of dance culture that gave them a new life beyond the deletion racks. More interestingly, perhaps, even the lyrics which draw on 1960s black vernacular speech are, I would argue, transformed by Northern Soul's discursive practices to articulate their own communality (rather than their connection to liberation politics). This is also apparent in the wider use of the African–American-derived terms 'right on', 'keep the faith', and 'brothers and sisters' which primarily index Northern Soul and its participants, and not African Americans.[13]

This lyrical content, then, is understood to stand for and articulate the scene as a whole, and many dancers sing these key lines as they dance. The sense of identity with Northern Soul is the product of a complex set of layered relationships: the musical structure of a record like 'Out on the Floor'; then performed as dance within a common set of competencies of dancers and shared techniques. That is not to deny that there is a sense of identification with African–American culture, just that it is much more conditional, and relates more to the cultural possibilities it offers for an English alternative identity, than any consistent support for the liberation struggle taking place in the US at the time.

Conclusions

I have shown that dance within the Northern Soul scene has a sophisticated cultural function. The dance techniques available to the dancers involve a high degree of skill and practice, and are both ordered and limited by a particular disciplined style. The techniques themselves are part of a wider set of dance and musical competences that construct both the scene and the membership of individuals. Using the example of Dobie Gray's record 'Out on the Floor', and investigating how Northern dancers perform their dances, I have been able to draw out exactly what those competences are, and how they relate to a sense of solidarity with other members of the scene and with wider issues of cultural politics.

The analysis also raises some important questions about how vernacular dance can be theorised and analysed. While work like Malbon's has significantly moved these two scholarly activities beyond the notion that dance is a totally intrinsic activity, or one that can be made meaningful through sociological polemic, there are important dimensions of dance which need to be linked to wider issues of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, geography and class.

I have, though, also highlighted important differences between the post-house dance culture Malbon examines and the Northern scene. The meaning of dance is not,

therefore, to be found in the essence of physical movement, but in distinct cultural practices and their historical and social locales. This suggests that there will be differences between other historical or contemporary dance cultures that cannot be understood without close analysis. This is an area that needs significantly more research if this aspect of popular music culture is to be illuminated.

I have also tried to show how important the relationship between the competences of music interpretation and dance movement are. We need more worked-through examples of how music and dance relate, both in form and in performance. That there is so much to be understood through the analysis of one record and how it is danced to suggests that there is more to be revealed through further such work. Though music does not determine dance, the two things are related through a wider set of developments in which music is produced and selected for certain forms of dance culture and then transformed through specific dancefloor practices. In a scene like Northern Soul, where the music was produced outside the culture, this also reveals the importance of recording and distribution, and of the way that distant popular cultures can relate. In particular, this study reveals how the meanings of the music of one culture are transformed in the cultural practices of another place and time.

Endnotes

1. Dobie Gray, 'Out on the Floor' was recorded in Los Angeles and released originally on the now obscure Charger subsidiary of the small independent label Crusader Records.
2. In a listing of Top 500 Northern records produced by a leading DJ in the scene (Roberts 2000), the record is rated as number two. Robert's comments on Gray's record are: 'The groove encapsulates the sixties ''full on'' with a stirring LA production and DG controlled vocal and Spectoresque reverb. In terms of ''feel good'' they do not come any better than this'.
3. I first started dancing on the Northern scene in about 1974, and over the decades since I have attended clubs in the Midlands, Lancashire, Greater Manchester, and London. I conducted additional formal research for this article over eighteen months at five regular Northern club nights in the Midlands.
4. This contrasts significantly with the highly syncopated style of funk (up-town soul's 1970s successor in African–American music), with its heavy emphasis on the first beat of the bar derived from New Orleans drumming styles and its requirement for different forms of time keeping; see Stewart (2000).
5. By this I mean individual dancers move onto and off the floor continually throughout the night as different records are played. The numbers on the floor therefore vary.
6. For the last few years BBC Radio 2 has featured an irregular specialist music show playing Northern; during 2003 the KFC fast food chain used Northern Soul records to promote its products; and several BBC TV programmes including *Hustle* and *No Angels* featured such tracks prominently.
7. Paradoxically it has to be noted that these are at least equalled in the autobiographic accounts by the stories of how Northern Soul fans met their life partners.
8. I would cite the example of comments made by Pete Waterman, Northern DJ-turned-music-producer, that his friends who danced all night in Northern Soul clubs were miners as operating within this discursive practice; quoted in Hepton (2001)
9. The term is widely attributed to Dave Godin, who ran a London-based record shop and wrote a column in *Blues and Soul* magazine in the mid-1970s.
10. In particular, the Catacombs in Wolverhampton, Chateau Impney in Droitwich, and the Torch in Stoke were all key clubs in establishing a distinctive scene in the period up to 1973.
11. Funk is an adjective derived from African–American slang which is usually used to mean 'redolent of the unwashed'. It has a fairly long history in black music, and was first used in the 1950s in jazz to indicate music that was understood to feature elements derived from 'black' music.
12. Because the subbed-down histories of Northern Soul always highlight the importance of Motown Records to the scene, they not only neglect the equally important contributions of the music of other Northern cities, but also the importance of the black pop of LA. It was here that Cooke recorded many of his crossover pop hits and established a formula for post-rock and roll black music success. see Hoskyns (1996), DjeDje and Meadows (1998).
13. See the pages of *Blues and Soul* magazine during the mid-1970s.

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