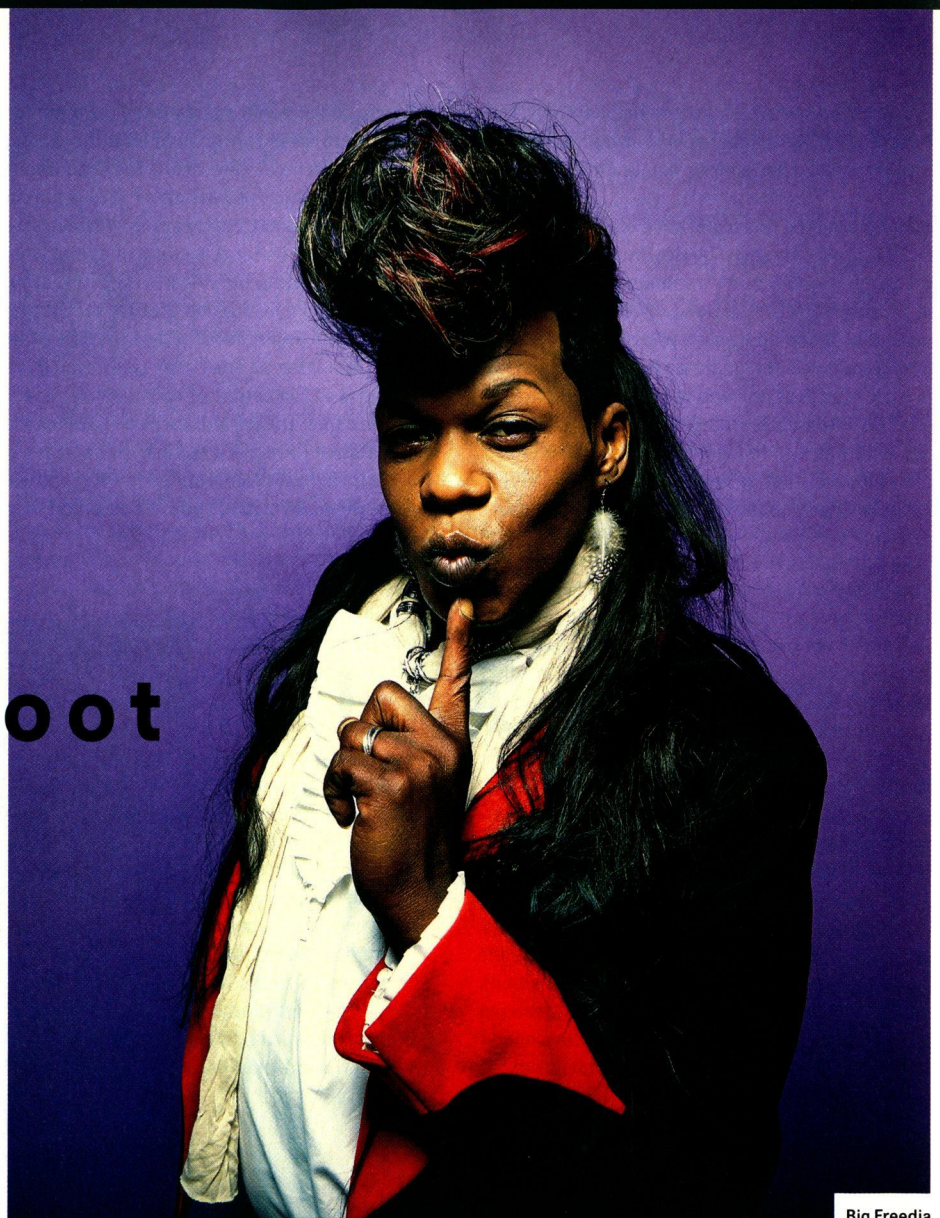


The 20th century's dancefloor moves are rooted in rhythms of worship passed down to the black church by enslaved Africans. By **Wayne Marshall**

Get On The Good Foot



Big Freedia

“The devil should not be allowed to keep all this good rhythm,” said an unattributed but oft quoted elder of the Holiness church. This intent to worship funkily has carried the benefits of such practices well beyond the church. If not for the Holiness, Sanctified, and Pentecostal churches in the US, if not for their insistence on keeping rhythmic, ecstatic movement central to religious experience, the whole world might dance differently.

In traditional West and Central African cosmologies, anthropologists have argued, there is no song or dance that is not sacred, just as there is no abstraction called music apart from communal singing and dancing. The sacred can be erotic and the erotic can be sacred. Prior to the Civil War, enslaved Africans creolised and reimagined traditional forms of song, dance and ritual, most notably in the sometimes surreptitious institution of the ring shout. Here, to shout is not to yell but, essentially, to move together. A circle of participants shuffle anti-clockwise singing call-response refrains to polyrhythms produced with any available object, from broom sticks and washboards, to hands clapping, to feet on floors – often studiously avoiding lifting the feet off the ground, crossing legs, or other movements connoting the supposedly secular realm of dance. Wherever we

draw the line between the sacred and the secular, these practices, nurtured by the ‘invisible church’ of the enslaved, would proceed to inform all manner of music and dance related activities across the US.

While we don’t tend to associate the spirituals of the 19th century with dance music, in accounts of the camp meetings where that musical genre emerged – rural, interracial gatherings of thousands that could last for days on end, sometimes with ring shouts – contemporary observers hear the spirituals possessing a troubling connection to the rhythms of work and play. As John Watson noted in his 1819 book *Methodist Error*: “The coloured people get together, and sing for hours together, short scraps of disjointed affirmations, pledges, or prayers, lengthened out with long repetition choruses.” Mashing up the hymns of the day with call-response refrains, African American worshipers enlivened these songs with the synchronising, syncopating rhythms of work songs and hoedowns (that is, breaks from work).

Many spirituals share the same polyrhythms – syncretised and strengthened in the common crucibles of work and worship – as those that underpin the contemporary secular movements of country dances, from the Virginia jig to the square dance to the cakewalk, and their caricatures in

blackface minstrelsy. Their rebirth with ragtime propelled early 20th century pop hits that got the whole nation dancing the same thrilling dances.

While the likes of Eubie Blake, Sidney Bechet and Louis Armstrong all connect it to the music of the church, ragtime also emerges as secular dance culture via the post-emancipation rise of the jook – a new, autonomous, decidedly secular dance institution. In these raucous, raunchy spaces, group dances were pushed aside by simple steps for couples like the funky butt and the slow drag. Notably, the jook enabled a reinterpretation of time-honoured ritual dances: the buzzard lope, a form of danced mythology depicting a vulture circling carrion, could be reimagined as a coquettish flirtation with a partner.

By the time we get to the early 1960s and the twist, a song and dance conceived by a black gospel quartet, one could argue that the dance – and the craze of related steps that soon followed – “owed a notable debt to black churchgoers”, as Elijah Wald contends. He continues: “Steps that looked a lot like the mashed potato and the pony had been commonplace for decades in the less sedate black churches, where congregants seized by the spirit kicked out in footwork that the go-go dancers of the 1960s could only envy.” How ironic that Duke Ellington

could be “amused to see his upscale white fans doing moves that had once been reserved for Cotton Club chorus girls” yet these same moves might be indistinguishable from movement otherwise construed as ecstatic, sacred practice.

The twist, a simple step that almost single-handedly ushered in the de-coupling of America’s dancefloors, gave women the freedom to dance on their own and to take the lead. It initiated a seismic shift in social dance norms culminating in the rise and eventual dominance of solo club dancing, an approach that comes into full flower in disco – a genre with a striking penchant for churchy divas exploiting the full range of gospel expressivity. Shifting from a single partner to a dynamic relationship with the dancing collective, this form of social dance can resemble a platonic ecstatic-cathartic release that even some church elders might approve of. According to historian Tim Lawrence, dancers at such proto-disco spots as The Sanctuary (a former church), The Loft, The Gallery and other venues did not approach the dancefloor as

“a site of foreplay ... but of spiritual communion”.

If it seems farfetched that ecstatic religious movement could resemble raving, simply seek out one of the various video mash-ups on YouTube tagged ‘church rave’. Juxtaposing footage of worshippers catching the spirit with vintage drum ‘n’ bass sessions, these videos cheekily but compellingly make the case for the sacred, ecstatic roots of modern club dance. There’s a musical kinship too: check out videos of praise breaks, those euphoric 180–200 bpm musical breakdowns at church, to hear the sacred counterpoint to gabba or punk.

Although such parallels between sacred and secular can seem purely comical, it is important to remember how blurred these lines have long been. The ragged-up funeral marches and second-line festivities that prefigured jazz offer enduring examples of African-Americans’ persistent efforts to maintain a certain spiritual holism. Today in New Orleans that torch is carried not only by brass bands but by Big Freedia and other bounce artists

who conduct twerking parties as part of a memorial service. The profanity and explicit sexuality of bounce would seem at odds with solemn religious ritual, but the elemental act of shaking one’s ass – at once, ecstatic, cathartic, expressive and free – apparently taps into appropriately deep connections to ourselves and each other. Formerly a church choir director and still a pious Christian, Freedia has described what she does as “spreading the gospel of shaking your ass”.

Like so many of her musical forbears, Big Freedia approaches this mission generously, an ambassador of booty shaking and a believer in its therapeutic benefits. Forged and nurtured amid all manner of repressions and travesties, the priceless joys of such dances constitute a hard-won prize for many, yet these deeply resonant forms have travelled beyond the circle rapidly at every historical juncture. They now stand as a kind of global cultural heritage, a way for all to dance together and transcend.

If the devil were allowed to keep all this good rhythm, we’d all be damned. □

Emigrant Song

For the ailing grandfather of **Ian Maleney** words sung in the backrooms of Irish pubs are a sole reminder of his heritage

When my grandmother came down with a touch of pneumonia last year, she spent a week in hospital. My grandfather, whom she cared for, had at this stage spent several years living with Alzheimer’s disease and was in no position to take care of himself. They lived in an isolated farmhouse about four miles from the nearest town, itself little more than some shops and a school strung along a single street. My parents’ house is next door (“I never got far,” said my father) and my aunt is a few minutes up the road. So while she was in hospital, we would all take it in turns to keep an eye on him. He had a rota of district nurses who would visit twice or three times a day to handle the more intense care work, so there was little for us to do except keep him company while he listened to the radio, getting up every now and then to throw some turf in the fire or make a cup of tea.

It is impossible to overstate just how slowly time passes in such a situation. His memory loss had worsened significantly in the previous 12 months, and now he neither recognised nor could truly even recall most of the people who came into his kitchen. He knew his wife, my father and my aunt – the most frequent and regular visitors – but everyone else was hit-and-miss, or lost entirely. In the deep quiet of loneliness, of old age, and of loss, there was not much to talk about. Few cars ever come down our dead-end road, and the kids who once played outside are now grown. There is little sound but the wind and the birds. It’s the type of quiet in which you sink inexorably – your only hope is to improve the feeling, the atmosphere, of that submersion. This is how a small stack of free CDs which had come with various Sunday newspapers at some long-forgotten point in history became

vital in keeping the clock ticking amiably toward my grandmother’s return.

The CDs contained nothing special; cheaply licensed versions of traditional Irish folk songs, that strange and familiar mix of riotous drinking song and sombre elegy. We would listen to the CDs over and over on a small, cheap stereo on the kitchen table. My favourites were the ones where he would sing along. He sang without any care for accuracy or consistency, joining in whenever a line occurred to him, usually during the chorus, and singing at whatever pitch felt right in that moment. The layering of his voice, thin and surprisingly high, against the professional recordings – themselves often records of live performances, replete with stage banter and audience noise – was incredibly beautiful. You could almost hear the gears working, the drawing back from some unimaginable depth the muscle-memory combination of melody and lyric. Really the most remarkable thing about the songs was that he remembered them. It’s hard not to imagine where and how those memories were inscribed so efficiently; the dark and smoke-filled backrooms of small pubs, or the long Sunday afternoons with only the radio for company.

Many of the songs were, of course, about the experience of emigration. Now, my grandfather lived and died in the house where he was born. In 83 years, he never left the country, so his experience of emigration is, like my own, one of watching other people leave – his brothers and sisters, his children. But much of the emigrant experience, as recounted and explored in these folk songs, is simply about distance. “*I would swim over/The deepest ocean/Just for nights/In Ballygrand*”, go the lines

in “Carrickfergus”, a song which I only came to understand in that kitchen during that week. These songs were filled with people looking back at a far-off past, dreaming about old flames and long-lost landscapes.

Often the sea is literally wide, but sometimes it is more ambiguous than miles plotted on a map. Sitting in the kitchen with my grandfather, I couldn’t but be struck by the resonance between two different experiences of exile; the emigrant and the amnesiac. As the past grew more distant and foggy in his mind, gradually disappearing over some unrecoverable horizon, the songs became more important and more accurate. They were a link with that past, that foreign country, even as they dramatised the experience of losing it.

In singing these songs, my grandfather was doing something very similar to someone muttering a prayer in a church. The experience of religion in Ireland, particularly in his lifetime, was largely one of rote learning, of repetition, of ritual and catechism. The idea of spirituality is sort of rubbed into you over time, like wood polish. The experience of music – particularly folk music, music with a core as social as any religion – can be much the same; it is repeated and repeated, and eventually embedded deep into your very being. It can be the most durable connection to others, to our friends and compatriots, and to the memories we have of them. Singing or praying, we might transcend ourselves and the losses which have accrued to us in life.

My grandfather sang like a man whose boat was filling rapidly with water. He had a very wide ocean to cross, one he could not swim over. □