

## C'mon to my house: Underground-House Dancing

Sally R. Sommer

The media attention surrounding Raves in the last couple of years has brought the subject of nightlife and dancing to the foreground of American consciousness. Yet even as dancing and nightlife were enjoying renewed popularity, a national crackdown on clubs was taking place. Almost concurrently, and partly in response to the crackdown, a nostalgia movement arose among the new generation of clubbers for the utopian ethos of the 1970s and 1980s "Underground-House" scene. These new "Househeads" yearned for the carefully cultivated constructs of the "family," the "vibe," and the distinctive styles of House music and dancing—all of which they were attempting to recreate in their parties in 2001. Since the September 11 terrorist attack and its devastating aftershocks, the longing for a safer, golden past has intensified.<sup>1</sup> As eloquently demonstrated by the tremendous popularity during the Depression of escapist movies, in hard times people seek good times and the reassurance of nonviolent congregations.

This bodes well for Underground-House, which for thirty years has centered on creating a convivial "*communitas*," as anthropologist Victor Turner termed it, which was and is explicitly stated in the music and inscribed by dancing bodies. Several aspects of Turner's *communitas* (both "*spontaneous*" and "*normative*" *communitas*) apply to the nature of club gatherings and the community of dancers. The phenomenon of Underground-House clubs and dance practices represents unique, contemporary, "*liminoid*" *rites of passage*, with vivid stages of *separation* and *liminality*; especially fitting are Turner's ideas about the nature of play in *ludic liminality*.<sup>2</sup> His formulations of initiates as "liminal or marginal people" (he calls them "edgemen") striving "to rid themselves of the clichés associated with status incumbency and role-playing and to enter into vital relations with other men in fact or imagination" (Turner 1969, 128) aptly describe hard-core Househeads and why they come together to dance.<sup>3</sup>

Although the Rave and Underground-House share some of the same sensibilities, they are different in function. One major distinction between them lies in the nature of the altered state of mind, the "zone." The hard-core House dancer does not fall into the protracted, hours-long dance-trances characteristic of the Raves. The ubiquitous Rave drug-of-choice, Ecstasy, offers

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the optimal path to reach and stay in the zone, inducing the individual to relinquish self-identity to the collective. “For those exposed to the strobes and rhythms, hooks and speeds of the rave scene’s night, autonomy is no longer the issue. Spectators see only the surface, but the ravers are already part of the scene, in the machinery” (Sadie Plant, quoted in Rietveld 1998, 194). Submerged within the crowd gestalt and wash of sound, Ravers dance alongside each other while maintaining the introverted concentration needed to savor the perceptual-physical sensations heightened by the drug.

Side-stepping the luscious loss of self of the Raves, the goal of the die-hard Househead is to be a part of the group yet maintain a sense of individuality—to seek the good vibe and hit the zone through the physical rapture of hard dancing. Because the forms of Underground-House dancing are interactive, performative, and improvisational, the dancer strives to keep a sense of objectivity. This is not to say that there is no drug use. But for experienced, hardcore House dancers who come to the clubs to “work” (i.e., dance hard), drugs and alcohol are viewed as “very expensive dehydration” (Burnett 1998).<sup>4</sup> The heavy demands of the virtuosic competitive dancing in a tight circle dictate sobriety—and so do the other dancers. In the body dives and the sweeping floor work, the dancer must be able to judge speed, distance, and attack within millimeters.

A couple of well-established and tacit rules confirm that dancing is the prime identifier. Clubbers can dance together for years and know neither each other’s given or family names, nor their addresses or phone numbers. “Do not ask about my job. Do not ask what I do. Judge the way I dance” (Burnett 1996). No one is assessed on outside accomplishment, no expectations transfer from the outside world. The only worthy thing is what one can add to the party. This parallels Turner’s “leveling,” the “denuding” or the “stripping” of the ritual subjects in the *rites de passage*: “[S]igns of the preliminal status are destroyed and signs of their liminal non-status applied. I have mentioned certain indicators of their liminality—absence of clothing and names...In mid-transition the initiands are pushed as far toward uniformity, structural invisibility and anonymity as possible” (Turner 1982, 26).

Of all the formal qualities that constitute the essentials of House, nothing could be more ephemeral or more powerful than the vibe, the defining building-block of the Underground-House scene. The vibe is an active communal force, a feeling, a rhythm that is created by the mix of dancers, the balance of loud music, the effects of darkness and light, the energy. Everything interlocks to produce a powerful sense of liberation. The vibe is an active, exhilarating feeling of “now-ness” that everything is coming together—that a good party is in the making. The vibe is constructive; it is a distinctive rhythm, the groove that carries the party psychically and physically. “[H]ouse is a feeling and no one can understand really unless their feet moved to the sound of our house. Can-you-feel-it?” (song lyrics by Heard and Roberts, 1988, quoted in Rietveld 1998, 5). Because rhythm coheres the whole, the vibe is mutable, in flux, controlling the ebb and flow of the night. The beat means safety. It pulses through bodies, causes the floor to bound and rebound; because everyone is moving in synchrony, it avoids disharmony, eschews collisions and fights.

Central to the dancing and the vibe are the improvisational exchanges between DJ and dancer, and between dancer and dancer—the playfulness, the fast-moving exchanges and game structures, the imaginative sonic and physical dialogues—all realized through the activity of hard dancing. Musicmaker and dancemaker exist concomitantly as producer and consumer, subjective and immediate. The sound has been engineered (“equalized”) so that some

of the deep bass lines are not heard but felt as vibrations in the sternum, so that the dancer literally embodies the music.

House music has been specifically created as *dance* music—nonstop music drives nonstop dancing. “The music reinvented itself, again and again, until it gradually dawned on people that house wasn’t just another phase of club culture—it *was* club culture—the continuing future of music. The reason? It’s simple: people like to dance to house” (*italics mine*; Phil Cheeseman, quoted in Rietveld 1998, 39). Underground-House encompasses a wide range of musical and dance styles. But its fundamental premises are baseline tempos that hover around 125–130 beats per minute versus the slower 100 bpm of hip hop or the faster 150–180 bpm of Electronic-techno Rave music, “speed nuts.” An important characteristic of House music is that the vocals (if any) ride the sounds of the music and enhance the beat. Words are not as important as the sound of the voice, the prolonged high wail of rapture. The lyrics tend to be self-referential to the “underground” scene: “C’mon to my house, my house on the hill” or “I’m Living my Life Underground.” They can also insistently repeat a single upbeat idea, such as “Stay Together.” A few of the variations are jungle house, hip hop house, hard house, and Jersey house, which Brahams La Fortune describes as featuring uplifting vocals like “the sun will come out tomorrow” delivered in repetitious, gospel-like incantations. Vocals only enhance the beat and are meant to push the dancers onward, the complete opposite of rap lyrics. The insistent repetition of a few words, the fixed rhythm, and the style of song-wailing conspire to obscure meaning. Decontextualized, the lyrics seem decidedly flaccid and stupid. But coupled with the high emotionality of the music, the words take on a rhythmic intensity and meaning, a kind of narrative-exhortation that propels the dancers.

To be fully realized, house music must be *danced to*. House exists as a dialogic interaction. “The skill and art of the DJ are based, partly, on an ability to be attuned to the moods of people and to play with those emotions until the crowd allows itself to be taken on a trip of rhythms, sound bites, audio textures and lyrics” (Rietveld 1998, 191). Kai Fikentscher—scholar, Househead, and DJ—describes the DJ’s compositional transactions from his insides: “[T]he response from the dance floor, in the form of the sum of individual responses, is continually evaluated by a DJ who, for hours on end, is involved in structuring his or her musical program. Thus, the uniqueness of underground dance music lies not only in a particular combination of musical mediation and musical immediacy, but also in the positioning of mediated music at the heart of a complex whole in which music and dance, performance and reception, production and consumption are inextricably intertwined, and simultaneously, and often spontaneously, enacted” (Fikentscher 2000, 79–80).

This sonic-tactile fusion situates the receiver in a psychic-physical space very different from the everyday. Several pieces of redemptive transformations are contained in this paradigm: the redemption of *communitas*; the redemption of total body sensuality without rampant sexuality fostered by hard dancing that engages body and mind; the redemption of the vital aliveness of playfulness and fun. In Underground-House, playfulness and fun cannot be overemphasized. They are the potent magnetic forces that draw the dancers to the club and hold the groups together. In Turner’s strategies, play and fun exist most fully in the transitional states of *ludic liminality* (“*ludic*,” i.e., playful; out of the everyday), which are “potentially, and in principle, a free and experimental region of culture, a region where not only new elements but also new combinatory rules may be introduced” (Turner 1982, 28–9). Mikhail Bakhtin writes about folly’s corrective power: “Folly is, of course, deeply ambivalent. It has

the negative elements of debasement and destruction...and the positive element of renewal and truth...It is the other side...of official laws and conventions...a form of wisdom... free from all laws and restriction" (quoted in Rietveld 1998, 202).

A close parallel also exists to Sigmund Freud's theories about games and play in prepubescent latency. In Underground-House the physical interactions are an adult version of play, and the dancers are very forthright in talking about play as a primary structure. According to Freud:

Should we not look for the first traces of imaginative activity as early as in childhood? The child's best-loved and most intense occupation is with his play or games. Might we not say that every child at play behaves like a creative writer in that he creates a world of his own, or, rather, re-arranges the things of his world in a new way which pleases him? It would be wrong to think he does not take that world seriously; on the contrary he takes his play very seriously and he expends a large amount of emotion on it. The opposite of play is not what is serious, but what is real. In spite of all the emotion with which he cathects to his world of play, the child distinguishes it quite well from reality. (Person et al. 1995, 3–5)

The terms "Underground" and "House" are replete with multiple allusions. Adding to the confusion is the fact that in dance/club circles, "underground" and "house" tend to be used interchangeably. The word "House" signifies homey feelings, and in the original parlance of gay clubs, the dancers were sometimes referred to as "children." Some view the DJ as a priest, a shaman who musically ministers to the dancers enjoying a temporary regression from adult strictures. Others view the DJ (especially in the gay clubs) as a sexualized Mother to the whole-body, sensual state of the dancer. But the good family-feeling is central. "The club is family. The club is safe haven. The club is everything home is *not*. It's the kind of family you wish you had" (Green 1996). Well-known House DJ Tony Humphries, states, "When I spin music at the club [it] should be as comfortable for you as being at my house" (Humphries 1995).

Underground is the name given to the clubs where house dancing takes place—it also signifies a way of life. This life takes place after dark, out of sight, and has its own codes and transactions. The name carries historical implications: The "underground railroad" was the secret path of escape for slaves seeking freedom. Merging the historical into the hip, Ejeo Wilson says, "House is some freedom dancing, that's what House is!" (Wilson 1994). People go underground to hide. "Underground" figures are thought of as gangsters, lawbreakers, pimps, and whores or, simply, the marginalized. And since 1999, under the Drug Enforcement Agency's newly expanded interpretations of the "crack house" laws, clubs and dancing can be criminalized. "'I'm beset by the hounds of City Hall,' adds Jim Chu who owns Den of Thieves, a progressive music bar on the Lower East Side. Last year, inspectors from the Department of Consumer Affairs issued several summonses because people were dancing in the bar which has no cabaret license. 'People dance at Taco Bell if there's a good tune on,' Chu insists. Nevertheless, he remodeled the entire bar to discourage dancing" (Owen 1997).

The Golden Age of Underground-House in New York City lasted from the mid-1970s through the early 1990s. The most famous club was Paradise Garage (1976 to 1987).

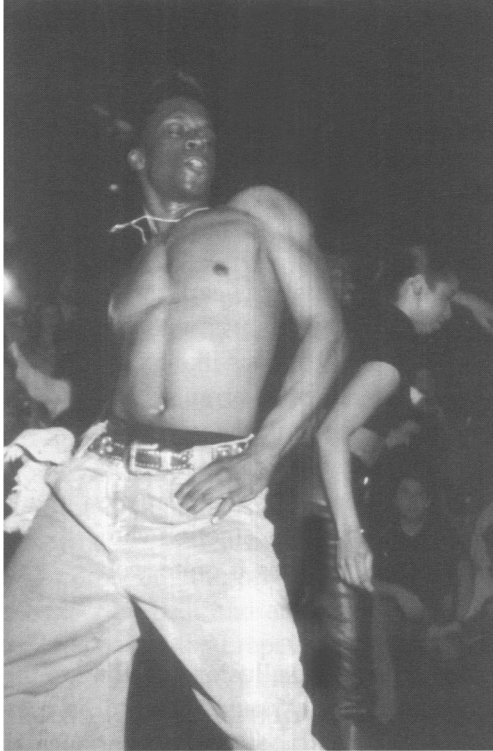


Plate 1. House dancers Archie Burnett and Irenia Herrera dancing at the Vienna Volksgarten dance club in Vienna, Austria, in a special performance as part of an international conference on hip hop. 1996. Photograph by Raphael Barth.

Affectionately pronounced “Gay Raj,” it catered to the gay crowd, although it was not exclusively gay. Even today, the Garage has recognizable cachet (a London club and a recent form of Rave music are called “Garage” in homage). In addition to dancing, the Garage was a “scene.” It was a style, a fashion—a place to scope and be scoped. Certain designated nights featured special parties: Pajama parties, Toga parties, Beach parties, Fifties parties, and so forth, in addition to all the holidays.

For the hard-core dancers, however, there was another place to go—David Mancuso’s Loft. Less expensive than the Garage and less visible, the Loft began, literally, as a party in Mancuso’s living-loft. It was famous for attracting dancers as well as a more mixed crowd of blacks, Latinos, whites, gays and straights, men and women, and dancers of all ages.<sup>5</sup> “It was my first experience in a very cool atmosphere,” says Archie Burnett, who began his club life as a Lofter (plate 1). “Not too white, not too black, not too straight, not too gay, you know—truly cool” (Burnett 2000). Unlike the Garage, the Loft was not a place to display, to dress up and pick up. “You came to dance your brains out” (La Fortune 1993).

In contrast to the Garage, with its gorgeous scrutinizing doorman who determined who could and could not enter, the Loft had bouncers. “Loft

bouncers were just *big*. Not mean—just tall. All those guys had to do was just stand there.” Entering the Loft was simple. A friend vouched for you. “The philosophy was that friends of friends don’t fuck up, that someone you call a friend will act in a proper manner and add to the party rather than detract from it” (La Fortune; Burnett 2000).

The Loft style was sensible. Dancers wore work clothes that could take sweat and dirt and were comfortable to move in: sneakers, loose pants (elastic waist and cuffs) in army green or workman blue or subway orange, topped with T-shirts or tank tops. Little idiosyncratic “flavors” like a hat, colored shoes, hot socks, or colorful underwear lent individuality to the clothes (plate 2). Lofters carried duffel bags with a change of clothes, a towel, and baby powder (to speed up the floor or dry the body), signifying they were in for the long haul and big sweat. But in the powerful and tacit codes of the club, participants had to arrive clean and cologned. Clothes got soaking wet and the rule was/is that you could sweat, but don’t stink.

At the Loft’s biggest, longest-lasting location (in Manhattan’s SoHo district), there were two huge floors for dancing. They had black walls, and the black ceilings were covered with flotillas of multicolored balloons. Each floor had its own DJ, distinctive musical sound, and mood. However, by the early morning hours the cream of the crop, the hardest of the hard-core dancers, headed to the basement, the deepest underground, where the best dancing took



Plate 2. House dancer Barbara Tucker in a toe stand. Photograph by Andrew Eccles.

place. To this day the dedication to inclusiveness, attracting a mixed crowd, the dedication to the music, the dancing, the inexpensive balloon decor, and the practical styles of dress and demeanor serve as models of production and consumption for the Underground-House.

In the 1980s House was exported to Europe, where it provided a valuable matrix of material and production for the music, dancing, and social discourses of the clubs. Transmogrified through the European (especially the English) sensibility, House got exported back to America as Raves in the early 1990s—a recycling of music and styles that continues to this day. Around 1997 Raves became large-scale mainstream dance events, with massive gatherings in the thousands. These could take place in legitimate clubs or in moveable “secret” outdoor and indoor venues whose locations were broadcast through an underground network of phone numbers and the Internet that everybody seemed able to access.

Subsequently, a flurry of articles and TV reports highlighted the phenomenon by explaining the “new” dance craze or by warning about the dangers of the drug Ecstasy. For example, during a brief six-month period, from December 1999 to July 2000, the *New York Times* published eighteen articles about Raves (mostly positive). During the same period, three Rave films were released. Given the adversarial position hegemonic moral and political forces have always taken toward social dancing, what is surprising is that so many positive responses to the Rave’s aesthetic and social elements were actually written. Ironically, the positive social factors that elicited favorable responses in 2000 had originated thirty years earlier in the Underground-House movement, when they were dismissed or reviled.

During the same six-month period in 1999–2000, many New York City clubs were closed. Indicted under Mayor Rudolph Giuliani’s “Quality of Life” laws of the 1990s, clubs were targeted as unlawful and immoral. But this was only a recent example of the continual intracultural efforts by the mainstream to colonize the marginalized “edgemen.”

A well-documented practice, at least since the 1830s in New York City, the dancing and dancehalls were voyeuristically scrutinized with curiosity and condemnation. Moralizing “tourist” reports from the 1830s describe nefarious underground clubs in the rough Five Points district of Manhattan (at the south tip of the island) where hundreds of beer and dancehall joints existed in the cellars of tenement buildings. Just as in present-day clubs, these early clubs attracted mixed groups. More disturbing to the reformers, however, was that they attracted mixed races of sailors from around the world whose ships unloaded at the docks surrounding the neighborhood. *An Account of Colonel [Davy] Crockett’s Tour to North and Down East*, anonymously written in 1835, said the “cellars was jam full of people, and such fiddling and dancing nobody every saw before in this world...black and white, white and black, all hug-em-snug together. I do think I saw more drunk men and women, that day, than I ever saw before.... I thought I would rather trust myself in an Indian fight than venture among these creature after night” (quoted in Sante 1992, 291). Seven years later Charles Dickens visited Five Points and in *American Notes for General Circulation* described “lanes and alleys paved with mud knee-deep; [and] underground chambers where they dance and game” (quoted in Sante 1992, 293). Carolyn Cooper, recounting the suppression of Jamaican culture in the nineteenth century, describes the same transaction:

The pornographic impulse to simultaneously expose and conceal the prurient exotic facts of native life [substitute “club life”] is barely suppressed. Travel writing of this age is essentially a colonizing fiction, civilizing savage land-

scapes—but only so far. Domesticating difference...feeds the eroticized *conquistador* fantasies of the voy(ag)eur/reader safe at home...and tames the feminized, alien landscape. (Cooper 1995, 21)

The 1997 crackdown on clubs focused not only on the illegal social clubs, but also on “the hundred or so licensed clubs that dot Manhattan, identified by police as a magnet for drug sales, underage drinking, loud music and other conditions which create an atmosphere conducive to crime” (Owen 1997). Most disturbing, however, was when the war on clubs got merged with the war on drugs. Local sanctions were transformed into a national antidrug campaign aimed at nightlife and dancing, which criminalized the clubs and the people who danced in them:

In January [2001] as part of the DEA’s new Operation Rave Review, two New Orleans promoters were indicted under a 1986 “crack house” statute created to target drug dens where owners “knowingly and intentionally” allowed drug use to take place. The feds claimed that the sale of over-priced bottles of water (which kept a person on Ecstasy from dehydrating) and the presence of drug information groups like DanceSafe and on-site ambulance...were evidence that the State Palace Theater operated “as a crack house,” the New Orleans plea states that glow sticks, dust masks, as well as vapor rubs and inhalers—all typically associated with raves—can be considered drug paraphernalia. The feds also nixed massage tables and “chill rooms” or “areas in the theater which are purposely kept 15 degrees cooler than the rest of the theater.” (Romano 2001)

In backlash to the closings, and disgusted by expensive, slicked-up mainstream clubs, a nostalgia movement has sprung up in New York City. Clubbers are “Bored Shitless With the Club Scene,” the *Village Voice* announced. They want to experience “house roots” and return to the positive feelings and identifications associated with the origins of the House “family.” Along with a good number of Japanese and European Underground-House purists, these new nostalgic clubbers seek out everything old-House and try to recreate the old feeling in new parties (Owen 2001). This nostalgia represents a major paradox of social dance culture. While it is completely fascinated by the futuristic (summarized in one 1999 Rave film’s cyborg techno-bionic title, *Better Living Through Electronic Circuitry*), dance culture feels equally drawn toward the past.

It’s obsessed with roots, origins, and all things “old school.” Reinvoking the “original principles” of the New York dance underground, nights like Body & Soul, Together in Spirit, Journey, and Soul-Sa [different house parties that take place at various clubs] appeal both to disenchanting veterans of the original scene and to neophytes who feel the romance of a lost golden age they never actually lived through. With clubbing tourists coming from all of the world to experience “the real thing” as a sort of time-travel simulacrum, New York’s 70’s style dance underground has become a veritable heritage industry similar to jazz in New Orleans ... what exactly is the allure of this period?



“It’s that whole mythic aura thing,” says Hill. “None of these people went to the Loft in the 70s or the Garage in the 80s [two famous house clubs] so the spell can’t be broken. It’s like some mad idyllic party that they can’t ever have attended. (Reynolds 2001)

Befitting their position in a disapproving society that legislates against them, Underground clubs are located in unattractive, nonresidential, light-industry districts. Unremarkable and anonymous from the outside, Underground-House clubs do little advertising beyond the postcards or fliers handed out on the sidewalks. Although they open at 10:00 p.m., they remain empty until midnight or 1:00 a.m. Outside there are no signs, no visible addresses, no fancy lighting—just a couple of black doors. What makes them recognizable is the barely discerned thump of the bass penetrating the brick walls, plus the cluster of people in front. Seeking to stay “below the radar,” the clubs are elitist and secretive, or they are fluid events, whose organizers throw special “parties,” hosted by well-liked DJs, that move from club to club. The dancers also shift and navigate through a series of clubs on a single night, staying in one place until it closes or until they get bored. Then they move to another club that stays open later or has a better vibe. Recently, a lot of the parties have moved to Brooklyn, and as the night progresses, the dancers move deeper into the heart of the borough: “By eight o’clock in the morning—or two in the afternoon if you’re lucky—we’ll be deep in Brooklyn,” says Brahams La Fortune (“Check Your Body” 2001).

Within the hierarchy of Underground-House clubs, there are different levels of visibility. Serious dancers tend to patronize the lesser-known and less visible spots. In New York City, hard-core House dancers would not patronize the infamous Limelight or the recently closed Twilo, which claim to be “underground” but which the dancers consider too “touristy.” “Touristy” means too many nondancers and a crowd that chooses a club because they believe it is “in” rather than a great place to hear music and dance.

An important part of the Underground-House rite of passage is the body check at the door—emblematic of cleansing, of releasing weapons and the combativeness of the streets before entering the safe haven. “It means I come in peace. I am open to what the DJ has to offer me” (Burnett 1993).<sup>6</sup> This formally separates the outside from the inside, demarcating the secular from the sacred, marking the transition from a secular-temporal space to an untemporal place. The newly frisked and denuded initiate makes the transition by moving either through a metal-detector arch, entering a poorly lit foyer or darkened hallway, and/or by actually going through a set of doors in order to reach the inner sanctum of the dance floor. “That’s when I begin to smell the familiar smells of reefer, sweat, and feel the heat. The bass drums flutter in my stomach like butterflies and I am about ready to jump out of my skin” (Burnett 1993). Inside, the outside world drops away. One crosses into a place with different codes, rules, judgments, and games, into an environment that is acoustic, olfactory, and tactile.

Once inside, the body vibrates as the bass resonates in the bones. On the floor, strobe lights pixilate space and action, light cones probe the darkness, and whirling light-flecks reflect off mirrored balls to produce visual and physical disorientation. Perceptual modes shift—sensing with the skin and seeing in the dark. Everything is in motion. The only way to get balanced and centered is to move your feet. House music is “produced so that it must be ‘listened to’ with the body” (Rietveld 1998, 10). As the song lyrics say: “[N]o one can under-

stand really/ unless their feet move onto the sound of our house. Can-you-feel-it?" (song lyrics by Heard and Roberts, quoted in Rietveld 1998).

Terry Eagleton stated that "Aesthetics is born as a discourse of the body," and in Underground-House the body is not a metaphor for something else, it is the object (quoted in Rietveld 1998, 2). "The whole thing—the sweat, the pain, the gasping for air—works as a systems check, lets me know I'm alive" (Burnett 1996; 1997). Because it is impossible to talk or to hear, movement and gesture become language, become identifiers.

What keeps the floor alive and dancers alert are the improvised dialogues of movement that define the vibe of a House party. Interactions arise then disappear throughout the evening. They can be as simple as an exchange between the music and a dancer or maybe just two people dancing, or as big and rambunctious as a circle of dancers in fierce competition. Whatever the modality of relating, interactive, improvisational play is always present. It is manifested in acute attentiveness (something less merged, perhaps, than Turner's "direct, immediate and total confrontation of human identities" in *communitas*, which shatters the boundaries of "*I-thou*," as Martin Buber termed it), and in a respect for another's invention (Turner 1982, 46). It is that thrill of recognition when one dancer gets "topped," then retaliates by topping one better.

Precisely because Househeads maintain a sense of individuation and observation, and engage in convivial competitions, House produces extremely sophisticated and varied dancing. Club dancing is not only thrilling physical virtuosity and improvisational play, but also an extremely serious expression. Club dancers dance to worship on Sunday mornings when dawn hits outside and the DJ decides to spin some "gospel-House" mixes. When his father died, Archie Burnett escaped to the club and the solace of dancing as a way of working through pain and loss. Brian "Fast Footwork" Green and friends danced hard the night a dancer got shot for a jacket: "Without dancing and the club there would have been a lot of violence that night" (Green 1996). Conrad Rochester memorializes the dead in his dancing: "I took their moves...and changed them up in my own little way. And when I do those moves, it's the way I show my love for them...to let them know we are still out there rockin' for them and the dance, and to let them know that their spirit is still strong, and will never die" (Rochester 1993).

Safety and variety are built into the basic contexts and structural modalities of the dance forms. The ways in which the dancers use challenge circles, improvisations, and humor mediate and censor the shifting modalities that assist them in maintaining a balance between "zoning" and interactive dancing. This process reflects Freud's concepts about how the creative process functions, which is explained and elaborated upon by psychoanalyst Ernst Krist's work, "Regression in Service of the Ego": "This form of regression was seen as a controlled realization of certain ego functions, but it can also be regarded as controlled realization of the censorship between the present unconscious and consciousness. It is by no means a psychological regression, but rather one in which contact with reality is readily accessible (to the artist)" (Krist quoted in Person et al. 1995, 65).

Something edgy yet grounded is created by the competitive nature of circles. In 1842 Charles Dickens wrote in his *American Notes* detailed descriptions of a dancer and dancehall in Manhattan's Five Points district,<sup>7</sup> in which the circle formed the prime structural element (a common Underground-House practice familiar to any clubhead today):

[T]he sport [the dancing] begins to languish, when suddenly the lively hero dashes in to the rescue. Instead the fiddler grins, and goes at it tooth and nail; there is new energy in the tambourine, new laughter in the dances. Single shuffle, double shuffle, cut and cross-cut; snapping his fingers, rolling his eyes, turning in his knees, presenting the back of his legs in front. Spinning about on his toes and heels like nothing but the man's fingers on the tambourine; dancing with two left legs, two right legs, two wooden legs, two wire legs, two spring legs—all sort of legs and no legs—what is this to him? And in what walk of life, or dance of life, does man ever get such stimulating applause as thunders about him,... he finishes by leaping gloriously on the bar-counter, and calling for something to drink, with a chuckle of a million of counterfeit Jim Crows, in one inimitable sound. (Dickens quoted in Sante 1992, 293–294)

A soloist separates from a group, a circle (a.k.a. “cipher”) forms, and, if he is good, he is acknowledged (“does man ever get such stimulating applause as thunders about him?”) (plate 3). Today there would be less applause and more whoops of approval. And, if the solo were extraordinary, the watchers would slap the floor to show honor and respect. Then, without a break, another dancer would enter and the cipher would continue.

“Cipher” is a term rich in connotations. It denotes fast-moving riffs (verbal, physical, sung, or percussive responses) that can spring up anywhere, and any time—in the street, in a car, in the subway, or at the club. The word also applies to the actual circle that forms around the action or person when something creative is happening. The circle is the most important structure in the liminal and *spontaneous communitas* of the club, inscribing the essential inter-

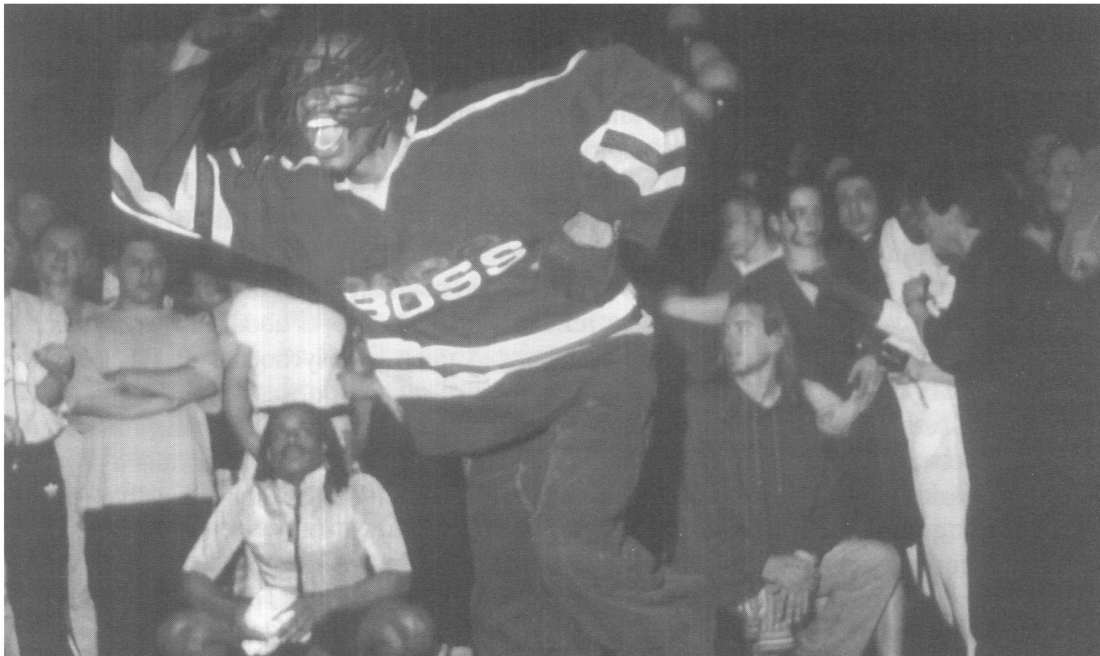


Plate 3. William "Quick" Reynolds, at the Vienna Volksgarten club in Vienna, Austria, performing within the circle. 1996. Photograph by Raphael Barth.

personal exchange. The circle forming around and supporting the good performer (and, conversely, a circle not formed) is the physical emblem of important social and aesthetic mediations, described by Robert Farris Thompson: “Thus call-and-response, and solo-and-circle, far from solely constituting matters of structure are, in actuality, levels of perfected social interaction. The canon is danced judgment of qualities of social integration and cohesion” (Thompson 1974, 28).

Humor exists in several layers. In interactive social settings, because humor is improvisational and immediate, it is also productive and speculative, and invents strategies to enact alternative human realities. Analyzing House interactions, Hillegonda Rietveld writes, “Fun, as well as celebrating the body rather than the mind, can have an undermining effect on any unitary belief of a particular kind of hierarchical world order” (Rietveld 1998, 201). Among Househeads, humor is most pointedly made by mimicking and commenting, in dance, on the other guy’s style. Yet, because of the overriding sense of inclusion, the quality of the humor can be wickedly accurate but rarely rancorous and cruel. Humorous exchanges often involve props—a roll of toilet paper, a balloon, and so forth. For example, someone’s shirt gets swiped and is passed around in a contest of “keep away.” It becomes a handkerchief to blow the nose on, a dress, a wig of long hair tossing in the breeze, a waiter’s towel.

Immediately recognizable material and characters are appropriated from popular sources; Kung fu movies, circus, capoeira, video games, television advertisements, movies, and magazine ads are speedily encrypted into the funny, furious language of iconographic gestures or phrases. As dancers radicalize images, they recontextualize the familiar in unconventional ways. The connections must be perceived, then instantly physicalized in order to keep the flow of the image-exchanges.<sup>8</sup> The art is to keep the response-rhythms fast (as in *Dirty Dozens*), or better yet, accelerate the tempo. The most important mode of demolition is a quick wit, literally “thinking on your feet.” The choices must be apt, well coded, readily readable, and executed in a nanosecond with physical-mental agility and improvisational skill—displaying the players’ easy familiarity with popular images and all their multivocal significances. This is a fast game of magic and wit that recontextualizes and changes meanings, transforming the mundane into the extraordinary.

The body is instrument, signifier, and site of regeneration in Underground-House styles. In this subculture, winning space within and against the hegemonic order is articulated in the symbolic challenges of dancing—dances of imitation, derision, and parody. Because it creates alternative structures, it revitalizes and, as it moves away from the norm, also moves toward a new condition. It asserts a promise. It also poses a threat.

Yet in many ways Underground-House is an archaic throwback. Rather than being radical in production and ethos, it is very conservative in its structures, idealistic even—the circle, the physicality, a state of preverbal exchanges. The environment is specifically created to maintain a singularity of purpose, and House, as signified by its name, denotes a place of life and interaction, and imbues the experience with a sense of safety and play.

Freud wrote, “When the child has grown up and has ceased to play, and after he has been laboring for decades to envisage the realities of life with proper seriousness, he may one day find himself in a mental situation which once more undoes the contrast between play and reality” (quoted in Persons et al. 1995, 3–5). When people mature, they cease to play, to their detriment. But whosoever understands the human mind knows that nothing is harder to give up than a pleasure once experienced. Actually, we can never give anything up; we only

exchange one thing for another. Hard-core Househeads have recreated that liminal and almost ideal transitional world in which they experiment with multiple states of mind and shifting identities, through total body and athletic endeavor. This is not a display of the person, clothes, or status, but of movement and imagination. They gather to dance, and Underground-House provides them with a redemptive social space in which to attain individual and communal harmony.

The information in this article is based on my research on social dance and the clubs that has been ongoing since the mid-1970s. More specific to this essay is the research done since 1992, which has concentrated on a group of dancers from the Underground-House scene in New York City who were the main subjects of an hour-long video documentary, *Check Your Body at the Door* (created and produced by Sally Sommer). Although the majority of these dancers are African American and/or Hispanic American, together they form a multigenerational, multiracial group of exceptionally stable, self-defined Househeads who have been, since very early ages, serious club dancers devoted to their chosen craft. All of the dancers are people the author has known for years (some for as many as twenty, others for as few as six). The subjects and the focus of *Check Your Body at the Door* is to record something of the lives and dance craft of these extraordinary dancers and dances that comprise the vibrant Underground-House scene of New York City during the 1990s.

### Notes

1. As anecdotal evidence, Archie Burnett, Chris Buxenbaum, and Brahams La Fortune all said they were noticing an increase in club attendance since “911” (i.e., terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001). As Burnett observed, “People need to bust out more than ever, now” (“Check Your Body” 2001).
2. Turner’s work is inconsistent in its italicizing of key words. For the sake of consistency throughout this essay, however, I have chosen to italicize these words.
3. Turner has eloquently refined and extended the premises of Arnold Van Gennep’s initial work, *Rites de passage* (1908), with its three stages of seclusion, transition, and incorporation. While it is difficult to separate out parts from the accumulative gestalt of Turner’s writings, two sections have been particularly useful: one about *communitas*, *liminality*, and *low status* (Turner 1969, 125–141); and “Liminal to Liminoid: In Play, Flow and Ritual” (Turner 1982, 20–60).
4. Several of the dancers I follow have done drugs in the past, but they have been clean for many years. It’s a case of “been there, done that.” They watched friends die, they survived, they changed. Others have never done drugs or alcohol. Barbara Tucker says, “I don’t do drugs. I don’t do alcohol. But I do Jesus” (Tucker 1996).
5. Lewis Vargas is a proud, “real” Loft baby, brought to the Loft in the 1980s by his mother, Josie, when he was eight years old. “I loved it! And I’m still clubbing today” (“Check Your Body” 2001). Archie Burnett confirmed this, saying that he used to babysit Lewis and his brother at the Loft, “Yeah, we used to play with the balloons” (Burnett 2001).
6. Archie Burnett verbally plays with the pun and multivocal meaning of “rites of passage,” which he also uses as a “right” of passage (i.e., the right to pass must be earned).

7. To emphasize that the establishment was a dancing place, Dickens referred to it as “Almacks,” an allusion familiar to his readers, since Almacks was a famous London dancing assembly.
8. Turner engages in a useful and interesting discussion about Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s theories about “flow” that is more useful than other contemporary commentaries on Csikszentmihalyi’s work.

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### **Interviews**

Many of these interviews were conducted over several years during the filming of the documentary *Check Your Body at the Door* (created and produced by Sally Sommer); they exist on videotape and have been transcribed. Others occurred as part of a public panel discussion or by telephone. All were conducted by Sally Sommer except as indicated.

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