

Battling Under Briannia's Shadow: British Dance Battles Before B Boys.

'All the best dancers came from Leeds.'

To historians of British theatre dance this assertion is confusing. Made by Edward Lynch in relation to the formation of Phoenix dance company (cited in Adair, 2007 p.53), it relates to the period before Phoenix and the Northern School of Contemporary dance were established, when nearly all the major dance companies were based in London and Northern ballet had yet to move from its previous base in Manchester. To some extent, Lynch perhaps pays tribute to the work of those educators who developed dance education in Leeds[i], but his view is best understood once another dance history is considered, that of the British jazz danced in clubs in the late 1970s and early '80s. For those who, like me, did not witness this dancing at first hand, a filmed encounter between two groups of dancers representing the different dance styles of London and Leeds in 1986, provides a useful insight into the skills and styles that were often the source of intense personal and area pride. Looking at this and other traces jazz dancing left behind, and comparing them to memories of my, very different, experiences of dance in this period, suggests how the history of British dance of the later twentieth century was 'marked' by divisions in the wider society. As a teacher, I think it is important to consider this history in terms that not only include the experiences of British dancers of the African diaspora, but also acknowledges how divisions in British society in the '70s and '80s influenced all forms of dancing

While the jazz scene was mixed in terms of gender and cultural background, a generation of young Black British males were a very important influence in the development of the forms of virtuosic dancing that, drawing on the cultures of the Caribbean, America and Europe, synthesised influences ranging from ska and funk to ballet. In part due to the racism that limited the opportunities of settlers from the Caribbean, entertainment for these young people as they grew up had centred on house parties or events at local community centres that drew strongly on their own families' cultural traditions. Watching and dancing alongside their parents and friends, the children thus grew up with the rhythms of the Caribbean.

By the '70s the cultural focus of this generation became the clubs in which they danced alongside other, generally less affluent, youths. Initially funk and soul had been the main styles in the venues they frequented, but a form of jazz became popular from the mid 1970s, and by the '80s it had a specialist following and dedicated club sessions. According to the DJ Mark 'Snowboy' Cotgrove (2009), musically the scene was inspired by jazz fusion groups (e.g. Weather Report), jazz funk (e.g. Donald Byrd) and samba fusion (e.g. Chick Corea). There were different dance styles and inspiration for moves might come from anywhere, not only from ska, disco and funk but, from the dance seen on television. It is important to remember how before the creation of internet, and in the days of only three (and later five) television channels, television programming could be so influential. For instance, the earliest dance memories of the choreographer Irvn Lewis (2010) were not only of the dancing in his local Chapel Town community, but also of the musicals shown on television on a Saturday afternoon.[ii] The film of *West Side Story* seems to have been particularly significant, engendering a rage for knee spins in the clubs following its appearance in the television schedule (Lewis, 2010. Cotgrove, 2009). While more than one dancer has admitted to wearing a hole in their bedroom carpet practicing spinning in an adapted ballet pirouette (Lewis, 2010. Cotgrove, 2009). The style danced in many jazz clubs in the late 1970s, and that continued into the mid '80s in Northern England was sometimes even called 'ballet style', presumably in tribute to the moves incorporated. By the '80s, in London, a new 'fusion' style had emerged. Exemplified by IDJ, the dancing drew from funk and jazz to

emphasise fast footwork rather than balletic turns or leaps. Determined to prove their dance skills, Brothers in Jazz [iii] responded by developing what they called Be Bop, incorporating the faster footwork of fusion with their northern (ballet style) jazz, mambo, funk and soul even mixing in the balletic beats that the dancers learned by attending formal dance training.[iv]

One important element that distinguishes all this dance activity from the theatre dance of the time was the overtly competitive element. For the children of the 'Windrush', some element of rivalry seems to have been part of the culture of music and dance from the start. Lewis (2010) remembers competitions between the sound systems,' toasters' and dancers from different areas as part of the social environment in which he and his peers grew up. American focussed historical accounts suggest how a sense of competition may, in the distant past, have been part of some traditional African dances such as the Giouba. However, they also reveal how in the Americas white slave owners capitalised on their slaves' dance skills, even betting on the outcomes of dance competitions in which their slaves took part (Stearns, 1994/68. Emery,1989).

It might be argued that even before the incorporation of the body in the consumer culture of the twentieth century (Featherstone,1982), the element of physical competitiveness that had once served as an important process within the interpersonal relationships of a cultural group, had already been appropriated and orientated towards financial gain. The legacy of slavery meant that the dancing of the diaspora had already been experienced as enmeshed in the interrelationships between power, bodily skills and capital. Whether or not this legacy was an influence on attitudes to dance competitions in twentieth century Britain, the immediate social and financial climate of Britain in the 1970s and '80s can be considered as having an impact on the dancing of a young generation of Black British dancers.

For the parents of these young dancers, racist attitudes to the influx of workers from Britain's previous colonies meant that in the 1950s and '60s they very often had to accept low skilled jobs and thus, whatever their background, became in British terms, 'working class'. High levels of unemployment combined with the continuing effects of racism meant that their children would often struggle to find any kind of work. Following the 'winter of discontent' in 1979, the new Conservative government under Mrs Thatcher determined to push forward economic and social change notwithstanding the resulting levels of unemployment that topped 3 million in 1982, and comprised over 10% of the workforce for the next five years (UK Government n. d.). Lewis (2010) remembers his peers as being unemployed, on Youth Training Schemes or in Prison. When it came to promoting the rights and opportunities of the workers, the ideal of class solidarity was challenged by racism. After the process of decolonisation in the second half of the twentieth century, the white British collective unconscious seemed to display what the sociologist Stuart Hall (cited in Gilroy, 1982 p.70) has described as 'a profound historical forgetfulness' towards their colonial past. Yet as the sociologist Errol Lawrence describes, the remnants of colonial attitudes to peoples of 'other' ethnicities nevertheless infused this general amnesia as to their place in British history, so that it was not uncommon for the presence of the immigrants to be viewed as 'an 'alien' infiltration threatening the fabric of British life' (cited in Gilroy, 1982). With jobs scarce and under a Conservative Government such attitudes persisted. That Mrs Thatcher's government's economic policies promoted entrepreneurship and competitiveness may eventually have broken down some class, even cultural barriers, but in so doing the new rich lifestyles embodied in the 'yuppie'[v] provided a sharp contrast to those of the large numbers of unemployed, a disproportionate number of whom were Black. In such a context it is hardly surprising if tensions erupted in rioting in areas such as Brixton (1981), Handsworth (1985) and Tottenham (1985).

For many young Black men, dance became one of the few avenues to prove themselves. During the early 1980s, as if to embody the spirit of the era, their dancing increased in competitive intensity. As Irvn Lewis explains, many of the jazz dancers were battling to 'have something' when there was 'nothing to have' (Lewis 2010). For the un (or under) employed, spare energy and time could be focussed on preparing for the next dance challenge. Gary Nurse of IDJ identified an ethos similar to the martial arts stating: 'In order to be the best you have to fight the best' (cited in Cotgrove, 2009). This urge to 'out dance' one another would lead to an atmosphere which Lewis described as like a football pitch or rather, 'like 1000's of pitches in one club' (Lewis 2010) in which the competition was approached very seriously with an acknowledged hierarchy of dancers and planned battles:

...if you knew you were going to battle somebody – [You knew] they had a certain move -You'd know their best move and you'd go away and do their best move better than them....You'd wait for them to do their best move and then do their best move up against them after they'd dropped it.

Also if that dancer could dance in a big space, you'd wait for your moment and get him into a really small corner: dance in a corner with him and he couldn't move....if you lost a battle you'd wait a year, six months, just wait....So it was all strategic. It wasn't luck it was calculated.

Lewis, 2010

A televised dance battle in 1986 between Brothers in Jazz and an offshoot of IDJ, the Backstreet Kids (*Jazz Fusion Battle Part One*) gives a sense of the intensity of the battling. The 'Brothers' and IDJ regularly encountered each other in challenges at the Wag Club in London and the competition was fierce (Lewis 2010, Cotgrove 2009). There was certainly an element of area pride - the Northerners bringing the battle to the Londoners. This was also combined with a more economic imperative since the Wag Club, where the dancers regularly battled, was popular with media professionals. The Brothers in Jazz had seen the opportunities IDJ were being offered to dance professionally in jazz concerts and pop videos and were determined to enjoy the same opportunities, which they felt had been all too lacking back home in Leeds. For the televised event the competitive element was emphasised by placing the dancers in a boxing ring with the promise of a cash prize. How much the context influenced the dancing is difficult to ascertain.

The whole set up demanded virtuosic spectacle and that is exactly what the dancers provided. In the televised footage (*Jazz Fusion Battle Part One* and *Jazz Fusion Battle Part Two*), there is certainly a sense of playing to the audience (and the cameras) that is perhaps more overt than I remember from visits to jazz clubs in later years. Notwithstanding, the difference in styles and the virtuosity of the dancers is very apparent: fast jazz footwork is pitted against leaps, acrobatic somersaults and countless spins. Each spectacular effort is emphasised by a strong outwards gesture of the arms or a look towards the other dancers and the audience respond with all the partisanship of the football terraces.

Such dancing attracted positive attention from a few influential figures in the media, leading to opportunities to perform on stage and in pop videos. [vi] However, unlike their counterparts in more conventional theatre, the arena within which these dancers established their style of dancing meant their activities, rather than being celebrated as culture, would more often be perceived by some as a threat to society. Issues of race, class and gender coalesced in a manner that meant youths, and especially Black, male, working class ones, were often viewed as essentially problematic. A perception of them as the cause of trouble would have only been

exacerbated when, with so much personal status at stake, bruised egos could mean dance challenges would erupt into outright fighting. In addition, a contingent who travelled to the 'all dayers' to protect area pride added to the violence and the authorities made little attempt to distinguish those whose primary focus was dancing rather than fighting. This is made apparent in an account from a dancer from Birmingham, a city rather notorious for the violence wreaked on other cities:

People say we're rough but it was the people who rode with us....It got to the stage where the police knew our nicknames and knew where we'd travel to.... A policeman would say: 'I know you Stretch. I know you go to the Electric Ballroom in London... we know about you and **[your]** lot and your all-dayers. We've been watching' ...

cited in Cotgrove, 2009

In the atmosphere of intense rivalry even the outcome of the televised dance battle was bitterly disputed, it being argued that the Northerners had been treated unfairly.

In the context of negative attitudes to Black youths at the time, the aggressive competitiveness and associated reputation for potential violence made it difficult for this dancing to have a wider sphere of influence. In contrast to the more recent promotion of Hip Hop, widespread acceptance in mainstream media, dance studios and commercial enterprises was unlikely. Looking back some dancers also recognise that they were not equipped to promote themselves professionally. However even those with acknowledged arts management skills working within the more established arts sector struggled with the attitudes of the time to support the dances and dancers of African Caribbean heritage. [vii]

In considering the history of dance in Britain in the late 1970s and early '80s, in addition to recognising the impact of outright racism [viii] it is also important to consider the sometimes unacknowledged cultural specificity of values in mainstream theatre dance. Comparing the performance styles of the British jazz dancers with those of many Contemporary dancers of the time reveals how they embody different values that, I would argue drawing on Bourdieu (1984/1979), are linked to differences in 'habitus'. That much Contemporary dance tended to fit into a high modernist or formalist aesthetic confirmed its status as art in the terms of elite tastes while, when the jazz dancers brought their dancing to the stage, it was not only its popular roots that meant it might struggle to be valued as art. Outside ballet, an emphasis on overt virtuosity was associated with mass culture. In keeping with the attitudes of theorists such as Theodor Adorno, (who specifically referred to jazz dancing (1991/1981 p. 75) the competitive nature of the jazz dance placed the spectacular physicality of this dancing in opposition to the still dominant Modernist aesthetics of much contemporary dance. In Britain the radical experiments of American dance translated into a more lyrical formalism [ix] influencing many British Contemporary dancers to focus on new ways to be 'in tune' with their bodies. In contrast the jazz dancers honed their bodies for battle (Bradshaw, n.d.). Hence in contrast to the dynamic urgency of the jazz performers, my memories of Contemporary dance at the time are of dancers working to achieve a sense of fluid progression through and around the space. An aura of calm control, whatever the complexities of the choreography, is perhaps suggestive of a cultural positioning removed from the economic and other tensions that affected so much of Britain at this time. Much Contemporary dance pursued utopian ideals from a zone of comparative safety. Indicative of these different attitudes is that while 'contact' for the Contemporary dancers suggested the shared use of weight to move together, to the jazz dancers it meant they could score points in a dance challenge by touching their opponent.

The jazz dancers while driven by individual and territorial rivalries, articulated their own sense of agency and, perhaps unwittingly, through their struggles danced a 'hybrid' identity in a British society in which racism and class divisions affected the opportunities available to them. In its appropriation of a range of dance styles, their dancing did not fit neatly into the accepted narratives of multiculturalism, or to the Africanist resistance that surrounded reggae subculture,[x] or to the kind of dancing promoted in education. While this is significant from a sociological perspective it is important also to recognise the artistic values of the different British jazz styles. This is highlighted in the recent words of that inveterate challenger, Gary Nurse of IDJ/Backstreet Kids captured on video by his one time rival, Irven Lewis of Brothers In Jazz.

There is beauty in all expression in terms of danceWe are always trying to explore new ways of dancing.

cited in Lewis, 2010 b

His point may be reinforced by comparing some footage of these groups dancing in less competitive modes than demonstrated in the dance battle cited above. Watching IDJ in the pop video for *Venceremos* by Working Week (Temple 1984) and Brothers in Jazz filmed dancing together in Japan (Northern Jazz, Be Bop, Fusion n.d.) what becomes more apparent, in these different contexts, are the more subtle skills and artistic qualities of the dancers: there are intricate rhythms to the IDJ dancers' fleet footwork and a shaping of space by 'The Brothers' that were overshadowed in the boxing ring. Moreover, what also becomes clear is the strength of the relationships between the dancers as they faced, together, the battles of the world beyond dance. As, in the twenty first century the history of British dance in the late twentieth is reconsidered, it will be important to consider the different artistic and cultural values embodied in the dancing, whether it took place in a theatre in London or a club in Leeds.

[i] In particular, Nadine Senior's work at Harehills School.

[ii] While there were emerging organisations and companies that worked to support dances and dancers from Africa and the Caribbean, their influence seems to have been limited, presumably due to their not being well enough established to be seen on TV.

[iii] The 'Brothers' were Irven Lewis, Wayne James and Trevor Miller.

[iv] They all attended ballet schools in London (West Street and Urdang) but after they had become well regarded battlers in the Jazz scene

[v] 'Yuppie' :Young upwardly mobile professional

[vi] Robert Elms featured Brothers In Jazz on his television show. ID J gained arts funding, theatre performances at the Shaw Theatre and featured in the pop video for *Venceremos* by Working Week (Temple, 1984). Temple approached them and the Jazz Defektors to feature in the film *Absolute Beginners* (Temple 1986).

[vii] While some companies such as Irie, which has been presenting work since 1985, survive, other companies such as Ekome and Maas movers struggled and were short lived. Even Adzido, the largest company of its kind that from 1984 presented large scale productions of African people's dance, lost its funding in 2005.

[viii] Lewis (2010) remembers confrontations with the National Front on his way home from clubs and Cotgrove

(2009, pp 29 and 262) reveals how to start with Black dancers in the clubs contended with racist door policies

[ix] See Connor (1887) for discussion of different approaches to post-modern and postmodern.

[x] See Hebbidge (1976) and Cosgrove (2009 p. 42) who notes the difficulties for young Blacks who lived in 'black areas' who were into jazz rather than reggae.

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