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So You Think You Can Dance: The Phenomenon of Library Flash Raves

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The Fox musical series *Glee* tells the story of teenage life through William McKinley High School's show choir New Directions; in the Season One episode, "Bad Reputation," a few members lament their omission from a list circulating around the school regarding the sex appeal of their fellow singers. One of those members, Kurt Hummel, calls a meeting in the choir room with a plan to rectify the situation by following the old PR adage that there is no such thing as bad publicity; "what is the worst thing a student can do at this school?" he asks. "*Be a disruption in the library.*" A few scenes later the conspirators gather in the school library with a boom box and spontaneously break out into a performance of M.C. Hammer's "U Can't Touch This," complete with choreography and parachute pants. The librarian's reaction is to complement the troupe and invite them to perform for her church service the following Sunday.

Why was the librarian's reaction so unexpected to the New Directions or to the audience? Perhaps because it did not fit the stereotype that popular culture has built around libraries and librarians; quiet places for the purpose of serious research and scholarship, overseen by stern taskmasters "shushing" unruly patrons. The expected reaction would be for the students to be reprimanded, receive detention, or at the very least become grist for the gossip mill. Instead the librarian defused the situation by allowing it to happen and then showing tacit approval.

While this reaction by the fictional librarian may have been surprising to the Glee Club and some viewers, it probably wasn't all that uncommon to the thousands of college students around the country who have participated in so-called "library flash raves." Thanks to user-generated content and social media networks, these events have spread across university and college campuses, serving as part stress relief, part pep rally, and part publicity and recruitment tool. In this paper I will discuss the depiction of dancing in the library in popular culture, how social media has brought this previously fictional phenomenon into real life academic settings,

and how libraries have made the most of these events, utilizing both the raves themselves and the social networks used to promote them to reach out to students.

“Getting Your ‘Glee’ On In the Stacks”: Dancing in Libraries in Pop Culture

Probably the prototype of the stereotypical librarian in popular media, “Marian the Librarian” is both a main character and the title of one of the pinnacle performances in Meredith Willson’s 1957 Broadway musical *The Music Man*. Con man Harold Hill attempts to flirt with Marian Paroo while poking fun at one of the traits of the stereotypical librarian; the propensity to chide patrons for talking loudly. As illustrated in the lyrics: “It’s a long lost cause I can never win/ For the civilized world accepts as unforgivable sin/ Any talking out loud with any librarian” (Willson). By the end of the song the other young patrons have swept her up in their dancing while mockingly shushing each other, and she is in a frazzled state by the time Harold leaves.

Generation X saw two significant film depictions of dancing in the library. The first was in the 1985 John Hughes movie *The Breakfast Club*; an impromptu dance performance in the school library during detention helps to bond five students who otherwise wouldn’t associate with each other. While some could argue this shouldn’t count since it was after school hours, the opposing argument could be made that the dancing was even more defiant considering the disciplinary circumstances. Ten years later popular culture would be introduced to a different type of librarian. In the 1995 cult classic *Party Girl* directed by Daisy von Scherler Mayer, the free-spirited rave planner Mary gets a job as a clerk in a public library in order to repay her godmother for bailing her out of jail. In one musical moment, scenes of a rave are interspersed with Mary shelving books and organizing the card catalog with some fancy footwork.

Besides movies, several music videos take place in libraries. In the same year of *The Breakfast Club*’s release Tears for Fears came out with their breakthrough album *Songs from the*

Big Chair and its accompanying “Head Over Heels” video; the storyline closely resembles the romance of the aforementioned Harold and Marian. Libraries and librarians also play prominent roles in videos by acts She & Him (“In the Sun”), Taylor Swift (“The Story of Us”), Ludacris and Van Halen. And then we come full circle back to *Glee*. By their third-season Michael Jackson tribute episode, members of the New Directions marched back into the library during their performance of “Wanna Be Startin’ Something.” With no librarian or other faculty member visibly present, the character Blaine Anderson serenades fellow *Glee* students while they study, eventually leading them out through the stacks like a Pied Piper of the King of Pop.

As viewers have watched these musical productions play out on stages, televisions and movie screens over the years, they have been decidedly one-sided. Whether the scenes were taking place in a library or other setting, the performance has been wholly separate from the observer. Enter the advent of YouTube. This video-sharing social media platform has led to an explosion of user-generated content and created a “diffused audience” where the line between observer and performer has blurred (Muse 11). This has also helped to feed an appetite for a phenomenon that until YouTube had been fairly limited to urban areas—the flash mob.

The Evolution of the Library Flash Rave

The earliest roots of library flash raves can be traced to “smart mobs” like those used to organize the election protests in Iran; smart mobs can be defined as “any group that uses distributed technology to arrange people or information” (Muse 10). Flash mobs, acknowledged to be an invention of *Harper’s* senior editor Bill Wasik, add the element of “intentional irrelevance” and have no explicit political value. For his first mob Wasik sent out a mass e-mail directing participants to go to Macy’s Department Store, where they would tell the salespeople they were looking for a “love rug” for their commune (Wasik 57). In recent years those that have

received most publicity are those that reflect the musical theater ideal of breaking out into song in an otherwise “ordinary” place; they try to bring that “irreverent logic” into our real world (Muse 14). A choreographed ode to “The Sound of Music” in an Antwerp train station, a recreation of a Beyoncé video on a busy London street to sell gum, and college students dancing to “Jai Ho” from the movie *Slumdog Millionaire* during lunchtime in the food court are three examples that have gone viral fairly quickly.

The earliest example of a flash rave in an academic library to be documented on YouTube was in England at the University of York’s undergraduate library, posted on January 26, 2007 (Minyall). The York event lasted for only a few seconds and was a “silent” rave where participants dance to their own music through headphones on a portable music device. The flash raves that most students are aware of are more conventionally related to traditional raves, with the added elements of surprise and brevity. The date and location of the rave is spread via social networks, and dance music is provided by a D.J. (“U.S. & International News” 32). The goal is to rush in, conduct a full rave for between 10 and 20 minutes, exit the area quickly and quietly and return to regular activity. The first rave of this sort was held at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill’s Robert B. House Undergraduate Library on December 9, 2008 (Cackalacky789).

Just a couple of days later library raves also occurred at the University of Virginia (Yoshikai), the College of Charleston (Apanos77) and the University of North Carolina-Charlotte (Mdantism); these had an added element of rivalry and one-upmanship, as indicated by some of the comments left on the YouTube videos. At the end of the 2009 spring semester the trend had spread beyond the east coast, and by December libraries began to expect the raves thanks to being plugged into social networks themselves. That semester saw the highest number

of raves posted on YouTube, from small colleges to large flagship schools. Marquette University's Raynor Library, for example, was prepared for the 700 students coming to their building thanks to Facebook and even contributed an extension cord. The library's dean called the event "a great way to end the semester" ("Marquette" 62). Not all library flash raves have gone off without a hitch. In April 2009 at the University of Tennessee-Chattanooga, the library locked the doors and refused entry; the crowd began chanting "let us in!" and some students climbed the façade, jumping into the throngs to crowd-surf. Overwhelmed campus police finally dispersed the mob with pepper spray and made five arrests (Hadro, "Questions").

So how are flash raves that take place in public locations like student unions, cafeterias and other common gathering areas for students different than those that take place in a library? Unions are generally acknowledged as social gathering spots and are usually loud and bustling; while a flash rave or mob in the union would certainly draw attention, it probably wouldn't be perceived to be as much of a "disturbance." Not only do libraries have the aforementioned quiet stereotype, they become a central part of a students' life during the time of final exams and end-of-the-semester projects (Hadro, "As Finals"). This may result in the library becoming a symbol of the stress they already felt coming into college. One study reported 29 percent of surveyed incoming freshmen feeling "overwhelmed" and a record percentage of students ranking their emotional health as lower than in years past (Pryor, et al.). Being in a flash mob or rave fulfills a participatory need, but raving in the library during finals has the added benefit of sharing that release of frustration with fellow stressed-out students (Hadro, "As Finals").

"RAVE in the Mitchell Memorial Library"; One Rave Story

In August of 2009 word began to circulate among the students at Mississippi State University (MSU) of a possible flash rave at the main campus library, Mitchell Memorial. A

Facebook event was formed and thanks to the site's algorithm recommending groups to like or join based on factors such as workplace and school network, other librarians at MSU were notified. After some discussions on the event's "wall" about notifying the library, the leader of the group came to the Dean and the Library Administrative Council (LAC), who appreciated the advanced notice. According to Administrator of Systems Stephen Cunetto, the LAC did their own research, spoke to administrators at other institutions that had hosted raves and reviewed online videos. They also discussed the incident at UT-Chattanooga; determining that closing the doors would not be an effective deterrent, they decided to allow the rave instead (Cunetto).

The rave leaders and the LAC met twice more to sort out logistics and set conditions, both for the safety of the students and to minimize property damage. The Stacks Maintenance staff moved all furniture and display cases out of the main floor where the rave would take place, as well as the Christmas tree. The rave would be limited to 10 minutes, and student organizers brought in their own audio equipment, speakers and D.J. and volunteered to clean up the area after the rave ended. In addition to announcing the rave over the building's public address system, the library used their Facebook page to let students know where "quiet" areas would be located during the rave. They invited participants to upload their own photos and videos to the Facebook page and to tag themselves in photos taken by the library's staff photographer (Cunetto).

The rave not only was featured on the library's web page, but also the university's main site. Comments on both the library's and the rave's Facebook pages were positive; many students were pleasantly surprised that the library allowed the rave to happen, giving the library some positive PR. Because of the success of the previous rave the group returned to the LAC to plan another rave in 2010. This time the university administration got involved; they had seen

how large the 2009 event was and felt more restrictions needed to be put in place. The fire marshal and campus architects put a limit on how many participants could be in the building; they also decided to restrict the 3rd and 4th floor mezzanines to non-participants. Both the fire marshal and campus police were present and with the exception of one “under-dressed” participant there were no other incidents (Cunetto). Still, the mood was not quite the same as in that first year, and after the original leader graduated, there was no rave in 2011.

Libraries, Raves and Relevance

As library raves further spread across the country and their videos went viral, a couple of things happened. Libraries recognized the underlying reasons for these raves and saw an opportunity to reach out to students dealing with stress. In addition to allowing and even sponsoring raves, libraries have devised other strategies to help students cope. Carleton College provides massage therapy, pastries and hot chocolate breaks during reading week; the University of North Carolina-Greensboro has “stress-free zones” featuring refreshments and board games (Hadro, “As Finals”). MIT is one of many schools that have brought therapy dogs for students to pet and play with (Denny). The University of New Hampshire library hosted a “primal scream therapy” session and was sure to notify patrons in advance using the building’s public address system (UNHVideo).

Other libraries and their universities saw the promotional potential of these raves and flash mobs; rather than students coming to the libraries to ask permission (or going ahead and just hoping for forgiveness) now the administrators were coming to the students. The Cook Library at the University of Southern Mississippi contacted the Student Government Association for help in hosting one in October of 2010 to promote Breast Cancer Awareness (Bailey). Ohio State’s officially sanctioned flash mob, performed in the union to *Glee*’s version of “Don’t Stop

Believing,” featured professional camera work, the school’s president Dr. Gordon Gee and their mascot Brutus the Buckeye; it drew millions of YouTube views (Ensign A6).

These authorized flash mobs however may have inadvertently caused the more spontaneous library raves to peter out; fewer student-run raves have shown up on YouTube since the Ohio State video (Ensign A6). Some of the raves were short-lived traditions due to varying circumstances; UNC still does a rave at the end of each semester, but they have since been moved out of the library and into a common area. Yet other schools such as Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas consider their annual library rave “an important tradition” (Yale 818). Flash raves may go the way of other college trends such as piling into phone booths and streaking, but they have had a strong residual effect on how libraries conduct outreach with students and other patrons. They are a phenomenon born out of a perfect storm of social media, changing and adapting libraries, new stresses in academic life and a growing collaborative student community.

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