

# Claiming Their Space: Virtuosity in British Jazz Dance

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## **Abstract**

*They were not copying black America but minting something new ...*

Robert Farris Thompson[1]

*The paper discusses forms of jazz dance that developed in British clubs in the 1970s and '80s, situating them in their social and cultural context to examine how a complex of artistic and social attitudes made it difficult for these dance forms to be more widely appreciated within the UK.*

## **Introduction**

What follows is, for me, a new step. Working in the field of theatre dance I was inspired by Clare Parfitt's consideration of the relationship between the dance viewed as art and that thought of as part of popular culture.[2] In this context I will be considering forms of jazz practised in British clubs in the late '70s and into the '80s[3] which, before the advent of b boys and girls, were used in challenges every bit as competitive as today's break dance battles. Rather than offering a detailed analysis of its forms, traditions and histories (something that warrants further investigation) my aim is to focus on how the dancers' accounts provide an additional perspective from which to view a recent era of British dance history. I will thus begin by setting this dance within a wider context before exploring, in more detail, some issues the dancers' experiences raise about how, in Britain at this time, their dancing was understood.

## **Britain 1979-89**

The turn of the '70s in Britain is popularly remembered in relation to the 'the winter of discontent' followed by the beginnings of 'Thatcherism'[4]. During the 1980s a more aggressive capitalism was given a boost by deregulation of the financial sector ('Big Bang' 1986) that sought to bring a new entrepreneurship and competitiveness to the City, a previous bastion of class and privilege. The new rich lifestyles embodied in the 'yuppie'[5] provided a contrast to those of the unemployed, the numbers of whom topped 3 million in 1982, and comprised over 10% of the workforce for the next five years[6]. The period was marked by social unrest as those not benefiting from the far reaching economic and social changes struggled for their rights. The miners' strikes (1984-85)

became the rallying point for resistance to the 'Tories' while increasing unemployment did nothing to ease levels of 'racial' tension which erupted in rioting in Brixton (1981), Handsworth (1985) and Tottenham (1985). The demand for 'gay rights' grew in response to Clause 28 of the Local Government Act (1988) and by 1990, unrest among many different groups would culminate in the poll tax riots.<sup>[7]</sup> These latter disturbances finally hastened the end of Margaret Thatcher's premiership, but the changes to British society during her term as Prime Minister would have lasting repercussions.

### **British Theatre Dance 1979-1989**

The precise relationships between this wider social context and changes in British theatre dance of the period may be difficult to ascertain, in part because so much of the discourse of the time upheld a formalist distinction between society and the autonomous work of art<sup>[8]</sup>. Nevertheless, certain ways in which social change affected dance seem evident. The post war regal standing of the Royal Ballet had already been challenged from within by Sir Kenneth McMillan, whose pushing at the boundaries of classicism, seemed to annoy elements of the critical establishment<sup>[9]</sup>. Yet from without, British ballet retained an aura of class and privilege that might be sought after by the upwardly mobile.<sup>[10]</sup> While 'Loadsamoney' <sup>[11]</sup> began to venture into the opera house, 'Contemporary' dance had come of age with British born graduates of London Contemporary Dance School challenging the traditional bastions of dance.<sup>[12]</sup> A largely middle class audience for Contemporary dance <sup>[13]</sup> was bolstered by the development of new dance degrees <sup>[14]</sup> which were founded on the principles of American and European Modern dance that fostered a predominantly Modernist aesthetic. Britain had inherited American experiments after the event so that in '60s and '70s Britain, American innovations of the 1930s and '40s seemed 'new'. The sense of an adherence to a Modernist aesthetic was also prolonged due to the issue of it being possible (if arguably erroneous) to appreciate many of the radical experiments of American Postmodern dance in the 1960s and 70s from a Modernist perspective.<sup>[15]</sup> It was these experiments that influenced many emerging British artist of the '70s who became influential in the 1980s. Elsewhere in postmodernity the divisions between high and popular culture were becoming blurred as both became orientated towards mass consumption.<sup>[16]</sup> However, this blurring of boundaries was less common in much British dance activity. While in the mid '80s artists such as Michael Clarke, Lloyd Newson and the young Lea Anderson and Matthew Bourne did their best to start breaking down various boundaries between dance, art and life, more widely ballet and contemporary dance were positioned as 'high' culture. From a sociological viewpoint following Bourdieu's analysis of the relationships between class and artistic preferences,<sup>[17]</sup> it is possible to view the retaining of strong boundaries, both between dance forms and between dance as art as opposed to social activity or entertainment, as a manifestation of class divisions. Notwithstanding the media focus on

upwards mobility, class was still an important feature of British culture.<sup>[18]</sup> Certainly a recent survey of theatre attendance suggests that in Britain while those who in Bourdieu's terms enjoy either cultural or economic capital might enjoy theatre, film and television, those limited in terms of both financial status and level of education will usually enjoy film and television but rarely venture into the theatre. <sup>[19]</sup> From this sociological viewpoint, if certain kinds of ballet, such as lesser known full length ballets and more abstract works, and the more esoteric experiments in Contemporary dance were difficult for the general public they may have served to reinforce the 'discerning' taste or 'habitus' of an elite group. In Contemporary dance such attitudes would mesh with the retaining of the values of (high) Modernist aesthetics well into the last quarter of the twentieth century.

### **Attitudes to Jazz Dance in Britain**

Meanwhile, if dance as a theatre art was a minority, largely middle class interest, *Saturday Night Fever* (1977) heralded a boom in commercial disco in the late 70s.<sup>[20]</sup> Dance continued as a popular subject for films such as *Fame* (1980), *Flash Dance* (1983) and *Dirty Dancing* (1987) and also influenced the emerging genres of exercise video<sup>[21]</sup> whilst becoming an important element within the development of the pop video.<sup>[22]</sup> It is likely that while many working class audiences would have enjoyed dancing in clubs and watching dance on film, video and MTV, fewer (perhaps only the upwardly mobile) would have ventured to theatre performances especially in the less commercially orientated theatres. Ironically it could be argued that the success of dance in the media may have served to reinforce the divide between dance viewed as art and that thought of as popular. An important element in the influential Modernist aesthetic was a concern with the negative effects of the mass media in turning culture into a commodity. This attitude is perhaps summed up by the sociologist Theodor Adorno who specifically related what he viewed as problematic to jazz:

Mass culture has finally rewritten the whole of Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit in accordance with the principle of competition. The sensuous moment of art transforms itself under the eyes of mass culture into the measurement, comparison and assessment of physical phenomena. This is most clearly to be seen in the case of jazz which is directly indebted to the sport of competitive dancing.<sup>[23]</sup>

An element in jazz dancing that would further distinguish it from British Contemporary dance of the time was the emphasis on virtuosic elements. Interestingly, Adorno's view of the detrimental effects of mass culture included a view that virtuosity had become empty and mechanical. <sup>[24]</sup> Such an attitude was echoed in theatre dance circles where it coincided with an older ambivalence to virtuosic display.<sup>[25]</sup> In Britain this may have also fed into more specific class based predilections for refined movement as opposed to what

was perhaps seen as the more crude physicality of the 'lower' classes. Beyond dance, brute physical skills were now less in demand by British industry and this, together with the legacy of colonial attitudes to labouring bodies, may also have contributed to a bourgeois antipathy to the display of physical strength through, for example, powerful jumps and multiple turns. This did not mean however that left wing artists were inclined to champion virtuosity since those set against the old elites, as exemplified in ballet, focused on the ways in which virtuosic dance excluded all but the most physically able.

Whatever their reasons, the result was a palpable horror in some dance circles of overt physical 'showiness'. So much so that as a student of Contemporary dance in the mid 1980s I remember the verdict 'It's a bit *Flash Dance*' as a very negative form of feedback. In such a context while emerging Postmodern choreographers might play on the boundaries with mass culture, in Britain at this point perhaps it was prudent for emerging artists to retain a distance from the more overtly virtuosic, spectacular aspects of the latter in order to preserve a work's status as art. In America by the mid '70s Twyla Tharp was already choreographing Postmodern works that more readily incorporated virtuosity, the gloss of show business and references to a broad range of dance.<sup>[26]</sup> However in Britain the acceptance of a virtuosic, spectacular and genre breaking Postmodern dance seems to have taken longer to have been generally accepted.<sup>[27]</sup> This would have implications for those jazz dancers interested in crossing over into theatre and in other ways traversing the boundaries between different dance styles and contexts.

### **Jazz Dance in Clubs**

During the late 1970s and early '80s, it was in the club scene in the UK that a form of virtuosic dancing emerged that developed its own synthesis of influences ranging from popular dance to ballet, drawing on the cultures of the Caribbean, America and Europe. To a large extent the stimulus was a generation of Black British youths who were the result of the wave of post Second World War immigration to the UK. There is general consensus that those members of the British population whose families came from Britain's previous colonies faced extensive racism and a not unrelated poverty. One result of this was that their entertainment centred on house parties or events at local community centres which drew strongly on their own cultural traditions. The children, creeping downstairs to watch their parents party, or dancing alongside them, had thus grown up with the rhythms of ska. However, via television they were also introduced to a variety of music and dance so that for at least one of these young people, the choreographer Irvn Lewis, his earliest memories of dance were not only of his local Chapel Town community but also of the musicals shown on television on a Saturday afternoon, while programmes such as Soul Train and the broadcasting of ballet further widened his dance experience.<sup>[28]</sup>

Growing up predominantly in the poorer parts of Britain's cities, the cultural focus of

many young men and women of African Caribbean parentage became the clubs in which they danced alongside other, generally less affluent, youths. Initially funk and soul had been the main styles but a form of jazz became popular in the late 1970s, which by the '80s had a specialist following and dedicated club sessions. 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 musicals and ballet. The film of *West Side Story* seems to have been particularly influential<sup>[29]</sup> engendering a rage for knee spins when shown on television. While more than one dancer has admitted to wearing a hole in their bedroom carpet practicing spinning in an adapted ballet pirouette.<sup>[30]</sup> The style danced in many jazz clubs in the late '70s, and that continued into the mid '80s in the north was sometimes even called 'ballet style', presumably in tribute to the moves incorporated. By the '80s in London however a new style had emerged out of funk and jazz with an emphasis on fast footwork rather than balletic turns or leaps. IDJ exemplified this 'fusion' style and they in turn inspired Brothers in Jazz, three dancers from the north<sup>[31]</sup> who developed what they called Be Bop by incorporating the faster footwork of fusion with mambo, northern (ballet style) jazz, funk and soul even mixing in the balletic beats that the dancers were now learning in dance school.<sup>[32]</sup>

Dancers in groups like IDJ and the Brothers in Jazz were able to capitalize on their success with opportunities to perform in music and fashion shows, on TV and in film. Where dance had previously been a route to a form of social and cultural capital within a specific community, for some, it became a route to both economic and a more widely recognised cultural capital highlighted in such appearances.<sup>[33]</sup> But for most of the jazz dancers their success as performers was short lived. For some there was a genuine preference for the club context that meant perhaps they were not committed to careers as dancers in the more conventional sense.<sup>[34]</sup> However this was not the case for all the jazz dancers. Dance being ephemeral in nature and dependent on physical skills many dancers have short careers, but there also may have been other factors linked to the particular social dynamics of the time. Given the high proportion of dancers who were Black that racism played its part seems self evident. Certainly even those organizations working within the more established arts sector to support the dances and dancers of African Caribbean heritage struggled with the attitudes of the time, <sup>[35]</sup> while racism in its most overt forms affected the club dancers. <sup>[36]</sup> However exploring this issue reveals a complex interplay of the social dynamics of race, class and gender that are not only pertinent to the experiences of these dancers.

### **Competition and Dance in a Post Industrial/Post colonial society**

One element that distinguishes this dancing from much other dancing at the time was the

overt intensity of the competitive element. For the children of the 'Windrush' immigrants, some element of rivalry seems to have been part of the culture of music and dance from the start. Lewis 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. By the 1980s, as if to capture the spirit of the new harsh economics, this competitive element intensified. The desire to 'out dance' one another would lead to a heightened level of challenge and an intense atmosphere which Lewis described like a football pitch or rather, 'like 1000's of pitches in one club' 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.[\[37\]](#)

This competitive element is similarly evident through many other accounts. As Lewis explains many of these jazz dancers were battling to 'have something' when there was 'nothing to have'. The combination of high unemployment and racism meant jobs were scarce and good ones rare.[\[38\]](#) For many dancers, the chance to prove themselves was an important part of what drove them to dance:

Challenging was what it was all about. Like in the martial arts. In order to be the best you have to fight the best. Simple. [\[39\]](#)

However there were various attitudes to this intense battling. David Okonofua (Oki) for instance, inspired many a younger dancer but tired of people who would 'get in your face when you're just trying to get lost in a track'.[\[40\]](#) Steve Edwards of IDJ was much more interested in performance than fellow group member Gary Nurse, and similarly uninspired by battling were Edward Lynch, a founding member of Phoenix and de Napoli who founded RJC.

That the initial members of Phoenix also experienced dance at school was noted by Lewis:

They were different because someone had come along and trained them at school.... They had to do Modern. That was the reason why [they were different]. They were getting trained and we weren't trained. We were more street

dancers I guess.[\[41\]](#)

It might be argued that the Phoenix dancers' education had inculcated something of a Modernist aesthetic that, even though they would draw on the moves they learned in the clubs, would be at odds with the competitive nature of that arena.[\[42\]](#) The contrast Lewis makes also suggests the club dancers may have been suspicious of those external agencies attempting to organize cultural activity. In this context the club dancers' appropriation of ways of dancing from ballet and musicals and even LCDT on their own terms have significance in relation to controversies prevalent at the time in the established arts sector about how to define (and fund) those dances that drew on traditions from Africa and the Caribbean. These were not unrelated to wider concerns with the impact of immigration on British culture and how to view British identity in a visibly culturally diverse, postcolonial society.[\[43\]](#) Writing about racism in Britain in the 1970s Paul Gilroy outlines the many ways in which the legacy of colonialism affected attitudes towards 'race' in this period.[\[44\]](#) Given the politics of race relations of the time and the fact that Black ballet dancers were almost unheard of in the UK, [\[45\]](#) the alacrity with which young Black dancers would appropriate aspects of this erstwhile 'dominant' culture is notable. Their actions do not fit neatly into the accepted narratives of multiculturalism promoted at the time or to the Africanist resistance that surrounded reggae subculture[\[46\]](#) or to the kind of dancing promoted in education.

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, could be perceived 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 bruised egos could mean dance challenges might 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 lot and your all-dayers. We've been watching....[\[47\]](#)

With such a reputation this dance scene was unlikely to gain a widespread acceptance in mainstream media or dance studios. Moreover the combination of young, predominantly Black males involved in a competitive activity made it perhaps difficult for some people

to see anything more in their dancing than a testosterone fuelled display, that those beyond the scene might enjoy as spectacle but be at a loss to identify its artistic values.

Consider two different videos of Brothers In Jazz. One filmed in Britain in 1986 features the dancers battling an offshoot of IDJ, the Backstreet Kids[48]. Here, area pride (the North v London) had become tinged with a more economic imperative since the Wag Club, where the dancers regularly battled, was popular with media professionals. To make sure, in this representation of their challenges, that the competitive element was emphasised the dancers were placed in a boxing ring. The dancing that had been born of the intensity of their struggles was turned into ‘spectacle’ and the dance groups responded with out and out ‘show’. The second, three years later was filmed in Japan.[49] The slowed down camera work suggests a whole different attitude to Black male identity that there is too little space to delve into here save to suggest that it allows for the appreciation of the aesthetic qualities of the dancers’ moves. The emphasis is on *how* they dance, revealing subtleties in their movements and the close, positive relationships between the dancers. This attention to the more subtle aspects of style was also important to the Fusion dancers. Here is the inveterate challenger Gary Nurse, of IDJ recently discussing what he recognises as important to him:

There is beauty in all expression in terms of dance ...We are always trying to explore new ways of dancing. Today power seems to be setting the tone for most dance forms, but I feel that style, finesse and connecting the music through the movement is something that is quickly becoming obsolete. [50]

Viewed in their terms it seems as if these dancers worked towards values that were as much concerned with the ‘sensuous moment of art’ as their counterparts in Contemporary dance studios. However the social and cultural contexts within which the competitive traditions of their dancing developed made it difficult for this to be appreciated.

### **Battling under Britannia’s Shadow**

The jazz dancers in British clubs battled for a space in which, however briefly, they could create new dance forms through a unique synthesis of different cultural traditions in which overt virtuosity was celebrated rather than viewed with suspicion. The combined effects of racism and high levels of unemployment resulted in a lack of opportunity elsewhere and this intensified the competitive atmosphere of the dance floor. The occasional violence connected to this arena meant the dancers were unlikely to be positively represented in the mainstream media. Where the dancing itself was the subject of positive media attention the danger was that it would be solely for the more obviously spectacular aspects of their dancing. Where they crossed over into a performance rather than club context, this spectacular element made it difficult for the artistic qualities of their dancing to be appreciated within the discourses of (high) Modernism. In contrast, much of the Contemporary dance at that time drew on predominantly American and European traditions. Further a marked reticence in relation to ‘showy’ moves may have

had roots in a complex of attitudes to art, class and cultural identity that, in Britain, still carried the legacies of nineteenth century divisions of 'class' and 'race'.

Today the next generation of club, or street, dancers have succeeded not only in gaining widespread media coverage for their break dance battling but, in the new spirit of postmodernism, are taking a more central place in the culture of British theatre dance. Whether this marks the final absorption of all dance into mass consumption or suggests audiences have become better at valuing artistic subtleties in a broader range of dance forms are questions for future consideration.

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[1] Cited in Cotgrove (2009)

[2] Parfitt (2010)

[3] A theatrical presentation of this dance can be seen in Irvn Lewis' *Ignite* (2001-)

[4] Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister in 1979, following the strikes of the preceding winter.

[5] 'Yuppie': Young upwardly mobile professional

[6] <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/articles/nojournal/Analysis.pdf>.

[7] These were in response to the local government finance act of 1988.

[8] For example see Adshead (1983)

[9] Parry (2009)

[10] My experiences of studying at ballet school in the '70s and teaching ballet in a stage school in the East end of London in the 80s, suggested to me that for many people ballet carried a sense of aspiration.

[11] 'Loadsamoney was a comedy character played by Harry Enfield in the late 1980s. An East End 'lad' who had made his 'wad', he liked to show his money around and was a fan of Pavarotti' <http://www.bbc.co.uk/cult/ilove/years/1988/tv3.shtml>

[12] For example, Richard Alston, perhaps significantly also an arts trained old Etonian, was director of Rambert from 1986 -1992..

[13] Recent audience participation data seems to support the correlation between ballet and financial status and contemporary dance and educational attainment. Chan, Goldthorpe, Keaney and Oskala, (2008).

[14] For example the degree programme at Laban was validated in 1977 and the Place 1982 while ones in ballet did not start until the '90s.

[15] See Connor (1997) for discussion of postmodernism in relation to American dance in 1960s and 1970s.

[16] Jameson (1991).

[17] Bordieu (1984/1979).

[18] Goldthorpe and Llewellyn (1977).

[19] Chan, (2005). Chan, Goldthorpe, Keaney and Oskala (2008).

[20] In 1979 the disco industry was worth an estimated \$4bn - more than movies, television or professional sport - and accounted for up to 40% of the singles chart.

[21] For example compare the participants in Jane Fonda workout video (1982) with those in jazz dance classes.

[22] Buckland (1998/1993).

[23] Adorno (1991/1981) p. 75

[24] Adorno (1991/1981) p.55

[25] Noverre,. (1975/1760) p.19. Fokine M,(1981/1916) p.142 .

[26] *Deuce Coupe* (1973) *Push Comes to Shove* (1976). *The Catherine Wheel* (1983).

[27] For example, Matthew Bourne's choreographic career started in the mid 1980s but his *Swan Lake* was produced in 1995 which perhaps marks the weakening in the UK of boundaries between mass culture and dance as a theatre art.

[28] 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.

[29] Cotgrove (2009). Lewis (2010).

[30] Cotgrove (2009). Lewis (2010).

[31] The 'Brothers' were Irvn Lewis, Wayne James and Trevor Miller.

[32] They all attended Urdang but after they had become well regarded battlers in the Jazz scene

[33] Trevor Miller (cited in Cosgrove 2009) p.269) suggests they could receive £100 per minute per dancer.

[34] See Nurse in Cotgrove (2009) p. 259.

[35] While some companies such as Irie, which has been presenting work since 1985, survive other companies such as Ekome and Maas movers 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.

[36] Lewis 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

[37] Lewis (2010)

[38] Lewis (2010) remembered his peers as being on YTS (youth training scheme) or having a manual job, or being in prison.

- [39] Gary Nurse from IDJ Cited in Cotgrove (2009) p. 259
- [40] Cited in Cotgrove, (2009) p.110.
- [41] Lewis (2010)
- [42] There are issues here about some of the tensions regarding the identity of Phoenix..
- [43] Gilroy (1982)
- [44] Gilroy (1982)
- [45] The first Black ballet dancer to be employed by a British company was Brenda Edwards in 1987 at LFB but few followed. Some dancers noted the distinction between ballet companies and LCDT in this regard (131).
- [46] 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.
- [47] Cited in Cotgrove (2009) p. 137
- [48] *Jazz Fusion Battle Part One*
- [49] *Northern Jazz, Be Bop, Fusion*
- [50] Nurse cited in Lewis (2010b )

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