

## **Researching British (Underground) Jazz Dancing c1979-1990**

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### **Introduction**

The jazz dancing that is the focus of this chapter emerged in the United Kingdom in the late 1970s and early 1980s. What has become collectively known as UK, or sometimes ‘old school’, jazz incorporated a range of styles that developed around a network of ‘underground’ clubs. In contrast to much previous jazz dancing that was performed by, or emulated African-Americans, these styles, even whilst recognising American influences, are also self-consciously British and, by virtue of the important part played by the children of immigrants to Britain from the Caribbean, have a sense of connection to African diasporic traditions that are not solely reliant on those transmitted via America.

My research into this jazz dancing was prompted by the work of the dancer and choreographer, Irven Lewis, who has drawn on his experiences of jazz dancing in clubs to create theatrical dances: in particular *Ignite* (2005) which recreates some elements of the dance practices he remembers. While I draw on interviews with the dancers, the attempt to speak for dancers – to aim to interpret their embodied lived experience – is bound not to fully represent experiences that dancers may themselves find difficult to describe. Changes in the institutional structures within which histories of dancing are currently produced are leading to interest in a broader range of dance practices than may have previously been considered as warranting historical analysis. Even so, many of those best placed, in terms of their knowledge and experience, to reveal the history of these particular styles of jazz dancing rarely present their histories within the established discourses of the dance academy and/or the University. In contrast to the dancers, I have only seen a few staged representations of this dancing along with short video recordings of dance events. Hence my interpretation of the dancing will be different to theirs. However, my aim is to consider the dancing in a broader context than is often considered by the dancers. In this endeavour my lack of involvement as a participant means that, in contrast to the key protagonists, I do not have a personal investment in emphasising the significance of any particular person or style to the development of jazz dancing in clubs. However, inevitably, by virtue of limitations with regard to sources and my personal experience, my research of jazz dancing can only be partial. Further it is framed by my initial introduction to the field through the

work of Irvn Lewis and by my interest in the relationship between this dancing and the more ‘mainstream’ dance practices that I was engaged with during the same period. Rather than providing a comprehensive introduction to this field, my aim is thus for my research to be understood as laying a foundation for future investigations of this part of recent British dance history.

### **The Research Process**

My strategy in researching UK jazz dancing is interdisciplinary in approach, drawing on concepts and methods from history, dance analysis, sociology and cultural studies. Writing from my perspective as a previous dancer who, even while being a contemporary of many of the jazz dancers, was not aware of their dancing during the 1980s, my aim has been not only to discover more about the dancing but also to reflect upon the historiographic processes through which recent dance history may be ‘re-remembered’ in ways that ‘assist society in better understanding a shared past’ (Bindas 2010, p.113). The historical process of re-remembering, as described by the historian Kenneth Bindas, aims for a ‘collective memory’ that is ‘more nuanced’ so as to include narratives that run counter to those dominating historical discourses (2010, p.113). As Jeffrey Olick (1999) discusses, ‘collective memory’ may be understood in a variety of ways, some of which may depend on the assumption that memories are constant, stable features of either individual experience or shared understanding of the past (Olick 1999). Recognising such concepts of collective memory as problematic, Olick suggests ‘collective memory’ is useful as a ‘sensitizing term for a wide variety of mnemonic processes, practices and outcomes’ that, in emphasising how memories are susceptible to change, recognizes how ‘all remembering is in some sense social’ (1999, p.346). Bindas’ concept of re-remembering may thus be considered to capture how, in sharing different narratives about the past, people may experience a shift in their understanding of history. Hence I will suggest how exploration of UK jazz dancing contributes to a more ‘nuanced’ understanding of recent British dance histories.

The input of the dancers is of key importance to this research process. In addition to a number of interviews previously published by the DJ Mark ‘Snowboy’ Cotgrove (2009), an opportunity to interview Irvn Lewis (2010) for *Hotfoot* (an on-line magazine published by ADAD) led to a discussion between Lewis and the dancer Gary Nurse with his twin

brother, DJ and dancer Seymour Nurse and a further interview with dancer Wayne James. Not only were these communications invaluable but the dancers directed me towards numerous video clips and articles on the web. These included Seymour Nurse's own website in which he documents his knowledge of jazz music and dance (Nurse n.d.a) and his own interviews including one with an older dancer (Nurse n.d.b). Reference to youtube clips and personal web sites may seem unconventional historical sources, but for the dancers involved these are the modes of communication they use to share their own dance interests and memories. These sources (as with any source material) are not considered as providing a fully objective record of the past, but rather offer an insight into what those who were involved in this jazz dancing consider important within this specific field. It is vital here to also acknowledge that while videos are useful sources, they do not fully represent the dancing that took place in clubs (Lewis, Nurse and Nurse 2011). Most of the video footage from the past is of staged events, or choreographed for video, and does not capture the excitement or improvisational creativity of the dancing in clubs. Moreover, while there were many dancers and styles of dancing, those most readily available to dance history are those that became more formalised into styles that could then be performed for the stage or television. For example, the focus of my discussion of the styles that follows draws on available footage of three groups whose dancing was recorded for film and television: The Jazz Defektors, IDJ and Brothers in Jazz. However, while recordings of their dancing are useful sources, it must be remembered that their dancing should be understood as a part of a wider dance culture that cannot be fully represented in a few short, and usually very rehearsed 'clips'. Further the professional groups whose dancing I analyse consist entirely of men, as are all the dancers interviewed by Cotgrove (2009). Yet Lewis and James report there were a number of good female dancers (Lewis 2010, James 2013). For instance Lewis remembers a teenage Sheron Wray, who went on to become a well-known contemporary jazz performer, dancing in clubs (Lewis 2015). However, since my analysis of the dancing is based on the available videos, I will inevitably focus on how men danced and questions regarding how, or if, gender differences were important and why women feature less in documentation of the jazz scene are set aside for future exploration.

My own approach to researching histories of dancing also draws on the theories of the

sociologist Pierre Bourdieu to consider how the synchronic and diachronic dimensions of experience and understanding intersect (Bourdieu 1993). Pierre Bourdieu's analysis is founded in his conceptual framework that proposes the interrelationships between 'habitus' and 'field' to suggest how the underlying structures of behaviour are both produced by and productive of social situations that are tacitly understood by those positioned as players within a particular social arena, or field.

....between conditions of existence and practices or representations there intervenes the structuring activity of the agents, who far from reacting mechanically to mechanical stimulations, respond to invitations or threats of a world whose meaning they have helped to produce.

(Bourdieu 1984/1979, p.467)

For Bourdieu 'the habitus is necessity internalized and converted into a disposition that generates meaningful practices and meaning giving perceptions' (1984/1979, 170). The habitus informs a grasp of structural relationships or 'schemes' that 'functions below the level of consciousness and language' (1984/1979, p.466), so that without conscious reflection a whole approach to the world is embedded within daily practices. Bourdieu is careful to emphasise that while the habitus is the means through which the structures of social behaviour are reproduced, it is at the same time productive of change. His theories have thus been utilised by historians to grasp both the dynamics of social transformation and the 'extraordinary continuity' of some underlying oppositional structures that remain resistant to change (Gorski 2013, p.17). Developing upon Bourdieu's theories, the habitus may be considered to embody a particular relationship to the social world that informs the stylistic aspects of dance. Consideration of how the underlying habitus informs differences between dance styles is therefore important to interpretation of their wider historical and social significance.

Further, Bourdieu's analysis of cultural fields provides a useful framework from which to consider how differences in practices within an arena such as jazz dancing can be understood both in relation to each other and to a wider context. For example, what Bourdieu states about the historic rise of Modern literature as a field, may equally be

applied to dance:

It is this peculiar universe... with its relations of power and its struggles for the preservation or transformation of the established order, that is the basis for the strategies of producers, for the form of art they defend, for the alliances they form, for the schools they found, in short for their specific interests.

(Bourdieu 1993, p.181)

If the British (underground) jazz dancing scene is considered in Bourdieu's (1993) terms as a 'field of cultural production', then the dancers involved may be seen as acting strategically with reference to the structural relations specific to this arena. Such strategies may not always be fully conscious as they are filtered through the habitus. For example, dancers might seemingly intuitively decide to join in particular groupings of dancers, practice certain steps, develop particular patterns of bodily coordination and demonstrate preferences in terms of the venues they attend, the music they dance to and the clothes they wear. Guided by the habitus dancers exhibit tastes and styles that may lead them to acquire 'cultural capital' that provides status within a field that, for jazz dancers in the 1980s, also comprised of club owners, DJs and later promoters and producers of pop videos.

Equally important is Bourdieu's analysis of the relationship between the cultural field and wider historical events, in which he acknowledges the different effects events in the wider spheres of economics and politics may have upon a field that has its own systems and values:

External determinants - for example the effect of economic crises, technical transformations or political revolutions - which the Marxists invoke can only have an effect through resulting transformations in the structure of the field. The field exerts an effect (much like a prism) and it is only when one knows its specific laws of operation ... that one can understand what is happening...

(Bourdieu 1993, pp.181-182)

In sum, Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, field and forms of capital bring a consideration of

how dance styles may be understood as related to (but not directly caused by) economic and social factors while acknowledging that changes in the wider sphere may have a different impact on separate cultural fields and even upon those people occupying different positions within a particular arena of artistic endeavour.

Finally, the process of re-remembering recognises the importance of a shift in historical understanding to contemporary practice and experience. Drawing upon the personal testimony of Sean Graham, a dance artist who has experience of and an interest in this jazz dancing, it will be suggested that knowledge of UK jazz dancing does not only contribute to a richer historical understanding of British dance in the twentieth century. At the intersection of the diachronic and synchronic dimensions of experience, such understanding may be understood to have potential to permeate a sense of a collective memory of dance audiences and even to inform the current habitus of young dancers. In this way the process of re-remembering can have an impact on the ways in which dancing, which is always in the present, is practiced, understood and valued.

### **The Emergence of UK Jazz Dance**

Those who witnessed the club scene first hand offer different emphases in their accounts of the development of jazz dancing. From my perspective, as someone who only later became aware of this dancing, it is difficult to prioritise the importance of any one particular dancer, venue or style to its development. Rather, it appears that UK jazz comprises different styles of dancing that seem to have emerged in British clubs during the later 1970s and early 1980s through a rhizome like network of influences. Each city had a small number of clubs with their own histories and unwritten codes that shaped the improvised dancing in that area. Yet, by virtue of dancers travelling to other cities to dance, each scene would reciprocally influence others.

What was a central influence to the development of all the jazz dancing of this period was music that broke down the boundaries between jazz and popular styles, such as rock, funk and Latin. The incorporation of electric instruments and rock or Latin beats into the improvisational and rhythmic play of jazz provided a new sound that, by the mid-1970s, was played in a number of underground British clubs. These ‘fusions’ drew on syntheses of different traditions to create

music that was richer rhythmically and melodically in comparison with much of the music playing in mainstream discos. While their styles differed, what the jazz dancers shared was an enthusiasm for the challenge of dancing to this music, responding to the sounds of jazz-funk (e.g. Donald Byrd) jazz-fusion (e.g. Weather Report) and samba-fusion (e.g. Chick Corea). To develop styles suited to this music, different groups of dancers developed the dancing they knew already: many dancers made the transition from funk and/or soul to jazz while the early jazz dancers also emulated dance they saw on television. Steps and moves seen in musicals, martial arts films and even ballet were practiced:

...when disco died the DJ started playing jazz - Weather Report and Spirogyra. Because there was a lot of ballet on TV we tried to copy the ballet moves and put them to the jazz music. We didn't know what we were doing but we tried to copy them.

(Lewis 2010)

I used to watch ballet, contemporary - all forms of dance, Kung Fu films - there's so much art and dance in those.

(Michael Brown cited in Cotgrove 2009, p.253)

In the 1970s and 80s with limited choice on television and no internet to provide entertainment, programming on British television could have a far reaching influence on young people. The jazz dancers remember not only watching ballet on television but old Hollywood musicals in which it was the dance sequences that captured their imagination (Lewis 2010; James 2013). In particular *West Side Story* is remembered as being very influential when it was seen on television: according to Lewis (2010) this film instigated a craze for knee spins in the clubs. A similarly American influence is also evident in Mark Cotgrove's account of 'ballet style' jazz (Cotgrove 2009, p.40). However a direct Caribbean heritage was also important to many dancers. In particular Jamaican traditions such as ska and lovers' rock seem to have been an influence (Carr 2012). Although UK jazz dancing attracted dancers from a range of backgrounds and drew on many different influences, much of the driving force in its development came from a generation of children born to immigrants from the Caribbean who were used to dancing at family and local community events and house parties. The dancer Wayne James (2013) remembers watching his

family dance to jazz music which his father played on a 'gram' at home. Irven Lewis (2010) recalls sneaking down to watch the dancing at his parents' house parties and Gary Nurse recalls learning dance steps from older boys at school (Lewis, Nurse and Nurse 2011). Encouraged by their parents to dance, by the time this generation of Black British youths ventured out clubbing they were equipped with knowledge of dance steps and an ability to improvise to music. Moreover, brought up with the polyrhythms of Caribbean music and dance traditions they were able to respond to the complex rhythmic structures of the new forms of jazz.

The practice of two dancers challenging one another, dancing inside a circle, is another element of the jazz dance scene that is derived from Caribbean cultures and may further be considered as a continuation of African traditions (Glass 2007, pp.19-21). The dance challenge, or 'battle' is a form of competitive improvisation that is governed by tacitly understood structures. Two dancers attempt to outperform each other within a circle formed mainly by other dancers, many of whom will be preparing for their own turn. In the jazz dance challenges of this era, Lewis (2010) explains, danced responses were not simply judged on their virtuosic complexity but in the way dancers responded creatively to one another and the music. The most respected dancers were able to take on each other's actions, ideally performing them better than the other dancer or with a creative variation upon their moves. To excel in this arena took hours of practice and a thorough knowledge of different jazz steps. In some clubs there would be a hierarchy of circles organised according to skill levels that acted as a training route within which dancers developed their skills and style as they worked their way from one circle to the next (Carr and Lewis forthcoming).

While dancers might be rivals when dancing in their local clubs, they would band together when visiting another city to defend the reputation of their home location. This fostered a sense of local identity embodied in their style of dancing and often emphasised by a style of dress. A sense of pride in relation to both personal and group identities was thus an integral part of this dancing and added to the intensity of dance challenges that sometimes resulted in wider conflicts. I have explored previously (Carr 2012) how a televised and choreographed dance challenge between the Brothers in Jazz and the Backstreet kids (an offshoot of IDJ) provides an insight into the dance battles that took place on the floor of the WAG club between the fusion

style of IDJ and the bebop of Brothers in Jazz. The outcomes of these battles, including this televised event, were taken very seriously. In order to better understand why they were so significant to those involved it is necessary to examine external events of the period and consider the manner in which they exerted influence on the field of jazz dance.

### **Britain 1979-1990**

The period 1979-1990 is the period in which a Conservative government, led by Margaret Thatcher presided over many economic and social changes. In the 1970s a long period of post-world war growth came to an end. By 1976, in Britain inflation had reached almost 17% and unemployment increased to over one million (Denman and McDonald 1996, p.7). High inflation fuelled workers' strikes for better pay and the resulting power cuts and build-up of rubbish in the streets in the 'winter of discontent' of 1978 added to an overall sense that Britain was in decline. Margaret Thatcher's government responded by promoting 'free markets, possessive individualism and self-reliance' (Martin 1992, p.126) leading to increased competition, weakening of the wage bargaining power of trades unions and privatisation of many nationalised industries. Economic deregulation, which changed the rules governing banking, aimed to increase stock market trading in the City of London and benefitted the development of the financial sector. Elsewhere the Conservative government's 'monetarist' economic reforms restricted public spending, while unemployment rose to over three million in 1982, remaining at a level of more than 10% of the workforce for the next five years (Denman and McDonald 1996, pp7-10). Many people fought bitterly against the Conservative government's brand of neo-liberal economic policies, with the miners' strikes (1984-85) becoming a focal point for resistance. Yet Margaret Thatcher twice retained her leadership of the British government and it would not be until 1990, with unrest among many different groups culminating in resistance to the poll tax, that she would lose her premiership (Mclean and Smith 1994).

During this period, not only was Britain struggling with the effect of global economic changes but also with the legacy of the Nation's colonial past. With the independence of India in 1947 spurring on many other previous colonies towards political autonomy, the sociologist Christian Joppke (1999, pp.100–140) describes how the transition from Empire to Commonwealth resulted in questions of how to manage immigration. All subjects of the British Empire were granted the

right to settle in Britain through the British Nationality Act of 1948, but the British Government became concerned about the increasing numbers of people who sought to act on this right. 'Race relations' and immigration became hotly debated political issues, underlying which was the question of how to define British identity (Joppke 1999). For Stuart Hall, the white British response to the loss of Empire is marked by 'a profound historical forgetfulness' (Hall 1978, cited in Lawrence, 2005, p.70) toward the country's colonial past, and hence to previous colonial subjects' legitimate claim to being British subjects. Yet, as Errol Lawrence suggests, negative attitudes towards many of the previously colonised populations persisted with the result that Black and Asian immigrants often found themselves viewed as an 'alien' threat to the British way of life (Lawrence 2005). Concerns regarding the effects of immigration fuelled the establishment of The National Front in 1967 by bringing together many fringe organisations committed to British Nationalism based on a white British identity. The following year, the Conservative MP Enoch Powell's 'Rivers of Blood' speech expressed antagonism to Black and Asian immigrants (Powell 2007/1968) in the most extreme terms. Powell's views were not those of his party, but nevertheless in the year prior to her election Margaret Thatcher herself articulated on the ITV television programme, *World in Action*, concerns with being 'swamped by people with a different culture' (1978 cited in Malik 2001).

Contested notions of what it meant to be British had serious implications for immigrant communities for whom racism cast a shadow upon many aspects of daily life. In the 1950s and '60s immigrant populations, regardless of their qualifications, were recruited to low-paid, unskilled jobs. Rising unemployment affected Black and Asian communities more than their white counterparts and their children faced the prospect of having no job at all (Mohan 1997, p.367). Further, Paul Gilroy has argued that in the 1980s Black youths became increasingly viewed as a problem and crime 'was gradually identified as an expression of Black culture' (Gilroy 1987, p.109). Hence when riots broke out in areas with large Black British populations, such as Brixton (1981), Handsworth (1985), and Tottenham (1985), they fuelled the mainstream media's negative view of a generation of Black British youth. Debates as to how best to resolve the perceived 'problem' can be seen in differences of opinion regarding the relative values of 'assimilation', 'integration' and 'multiculturalism.' As Gilroy (1987) discusses, the Conservative Party's initial ideal of cultural assimilation was captured in the image of a Black man dressed in

an ill-fitting suit that featured in their election campaign poster in 1983 with the slogan, 'Labour says he's Black: Tories say he's British' (cited in Gilroy 1987, p.59). The policy of enforcing the loss of pan-African identity as the route to success in British society was to be replaced by 'multicultural' initiatives that supported projects that targeted the needs of particular ethnic, cultural and religious groups. Such top down initiatives did not always bring about the harmonious 'race relations' that were intended and have been criticised for superficially masking dominant cultural values (Donald and Rattansi, 1992) and for sustaining essentialist conceptions of ethnic identities while fostering divisions between different groups as they struggled between each other to gain access to sources of funding and power (Bourne 2007; Malik 2007).

Bourdieu's analysis of the complex relationship between cultural fields and wider social and economic changes provides for consideration of how conflicts surrounding notions of national identity and the distribution of opportunities and wealth might exert a different influence upon the emerging field of jazz dance than upon other parts of the dance field. During this period jazz dancing was emerging as a field of cultural activity with distinct boundaries between it and other arenas of cultural production that may be thought of as comprising the dance field as a whole. Since the harsh realities of unemployment and/or racism had a direct impact on many dancers in the jazz clubs, changes to the economy and anxieties around British identities are likely to have played out differently on a jazz club dance floor than they did either in the established dance studios or more 'mainstream' clubs. Certainly, even while they were rivals in dance battles, the dancers Gary Nurse and Irvan Lewis seem to recognise their dancing was born from similar lived experiences within a broader social and economic context in which a generation of youths struggled to find their place in changing, competitive, and sometimes hostile, social and economic conditions (Lewis, Nurse and Nurse 2011). Particularly for Black male youths, for whom the combination of racism and high unemployment meant good jobs were scarce, dancing was an important means to acquire status.

My crowd was poor. It was about having something because there was nothing to have but that! All there was was going out and getting dressed, getting dressed and going dancing.

(Lewis 2010)

Within the jazz dance field to be respected as a dancer was an important source of cultural capital, or perhaps in relation to a club scene, 'subcultural capital' (Thornton 1995). Moreover cultural capital could lead to opportunities for its transformation into economic capital as the better dancers might gain work performing in pop videos or live stage shows (James 2013). In such ways the wider social and economic context had an impact upon dancing that drew on the dance knowledge and skills of the children of immigrants in a new British context. Hence the significance of the jazz styles that emerged may be understood not only in terms intrinsic to the field but also as related to the social and economic conditions in which they developed.

### **Styles of UK Jazz Dancing**

Drawing on the theories of the sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, I have suggested that dance styles may be understood to be informed by the habitus and as such may embody a tacit understanding of a whole set of social structures specific to a particular culture. Rather than viewing dancing as the passive recipient of habitus, it may instead be conceived as reciprocally related so that changes in one may effect a shift in the other. The significance of such changes may be understood as related (although not causally) to wider social and economic issues.

For the jazz dancers gathered in a circle around a challenge, their detailed knowledge of the dancing informed a sense of a shared experience within which every nuance could be significant. Those closely involved with the dancing would appreciate variations on steps; they might recognise a move as one created or favoured by a particular dancer and become excited when they saw something that, within the tacit rules of their dancing was 'totally new' (Lewis 2010). While this was primarily understood as significant in terms of a dance battle, I have argued previously that through innovations on the dance floor the jazz dancers may also be understood as creating new British identities (Carr 2012). These had particular significance in the context of anxieties in this era around a perceived threat to a presumed stable notion of what it meant to be British.

Distinctions between styles may be understood in terms of the tacit assumptions informing differences in the habitus of social groups. Of the styles of jazz dancing described by Mark

Cotgrove, the one that is most difficult to find a visual record of is the ‘ballet style’ jazz that Cotgrove states was widespread in the 1970s. At this time jazz dancing had yet to capture much media attention and video cameras were priced at a level that meant they were rarely available for amateur use. According to Cotgrove the early jazz dancers, including the Manchester based dancers/singers Jazz Defektors, strived ‘to look as professional as possible’ and were influenced by watching Bob Fosse’s choreography for musicals (2009, p. 40). An early video of the Jazz Defektors , *Hanki Panki @ The Hacienda* (2907 RICO 2012), reveals a style recognisably related to the theatrical jazz dancing that I remember being taught in dance schools of the period. The Jazz Defektors’ moves however are performed with a sense of relaxed urban cool that contrasts with the tense happiness projected by most stage school students of the era as they trained for jobs in ‘West End’ shows. The dancers in the Jazz Defektors’ video walk, step ball change, pirouette, twist and jive around the streets of a run-down neighbourhood, in what appears as a rather laid back, British variation on the opening of the influential *West Side Story*. Made by Factory Records (who published the video as part of a compilation: FACT 137), the style of *Hanki Panki* suggests the early 1980s. There is a light quality to the dancing with a buoyant spring and twisting hips. The performers playfully dance their way through some carefully staged mischief, portraying a cheeky, ‘bad-boy’ image as they negotiate an industrial landscape on their way to the club where they participate in a stylised fight sequence. This playfulness is accentuated in one section in the streets in which one dancer distracts a busking bass player so that the others can steal the money the musician has collected: the dancer skips up to the musician and starts to swing his hips leading into a short virtuosic dance, culminating in a jumping turn (tour en l’air) that is the cue for the others to run away with the takings. This, aerial boyish playfulness seems to have dissipated slightly by the time the Jazz Defektors were filmed dancing in *Absolute Beginners* (Temple 1986). Here, and in footage of their own stage performances as singers, dressed in suits, they seem a little more grounded and, while they perform pirouette like turns, the more balletic, expansive movements are less evident.

In the video clips cited, the Jazz Defektors’ style is very different to the faster dancing of fusion that is usually thought of as developing in and around London and exemplified by the dance group IDJ who were formed by Jerry Barry. This style, as both Nurse (n.d.a) and Cotgrove (2009, p. 41) agree, developed at the Horseshoe club in London in the early 1980s. Some of the

London dancers interviewed by Cotgrove (2009) recognise the influence on fusion of funk and the style of an earlier generation of dancers who participated in 'shuffling' battles that drew on a strong Caribbean heritage. For Seymour Nurse (2011) the transition from funk to fusion was marked by new steps, the earliest in his recollection being a side step with a low punching kick. IDJ further developed this style of dancing at the Electric Ballroom in Camden. In a film recorded for television (*IDJ: Jazz Dance From Alter Image*, 1988), IDJ can be seen dancing with an emphasis on fast, rhythmically complex, footwork combined with a strong grounded quality that is less lyrical than the style of the Jazz Defektors. IDJ's dancing utilises many strong bound actions with moments of impact and occasional direct gestures. There are stamps, taps, twists of the feet, downwards punching leg kicks, turns and occasional jumps, often with knees pulled up or holding on to a foot so that the shape in the air is compact. The strength required is made very apparent in jumps that are accented downwards on the landing and further emphasized in those jumps that lead into drops into a low squat or half splits after which the dancers then turn on the ground before springing strongly back up to their feet. At other times a fast grab of the ankle punctuates the action. In footage of IDJ dancing in a battle in the 1980s (Shokones 2006), this action is further developed into a jump in which one foot kicks through the space made by grabbing the other ankle. In contrast to the twists performed by the Jazz Defektors that emphasise the actions of the hips, the whole trunk tends to be used as a stable axis for the strong leg actions. Fusion thus provides more of a contrast, than the dance styles of the Jazz Defektors, to the jazz dancing taught in dance schools that emphasised the isolation of the hips. The torso, while relaxed, presents a solidity that is further accentuated when the dancers are seen wearing wide shouldered suits. Cotgrove (2009, p. 41) states fusion dancers held their arms by their sides, yet in this video the arms swing low in opposition to the legs. There is, however, a strong emphasis to their arm gestures that suggest they support the physical effort required to perform the leg actions. Occasional longer, direct gestures break up the sequences, often with one dancer pointing towards another.

The fusion style as performed by IDJ contains many of the qualities associated with the construction of (stereotypical) male identities. In the made for television video this is emphasised by the setting and the manner in which the dancing is filmed. We first see the dancers walking across a decaying industrial landscape of concrete slabs and steel girders. Another dancer gets

off a large truck to join them. Running into shot the dancers are seen transformed into smart suited dancers and face square on into the camera as they start to dance. As with the Jazz Defektors their playful presence disturbs the urban landscape, but the emphasis on physical strength in IDJ 's style perhaps suggests their capacity to transform the industrial decline within which they are situated.

A third style, Bebop, was developed by Brothers in Jazz as a response to fusion. Irven Lewis and Wayne James had both danced in clubs in their home town of Leeds where they made their own transition from funk to jazz (James 2013; Lewis 2010). James explains how the difference between dancing funk and jazz at this time was less in the steps used but rather in the qualities they were performed with. For James (2013), jazz dancers needed to bring a smoother, fluid quality to their dancing. On coming down to London from Leeds to take up a course in furniture design, he was encouraged by the dancer Dovel Morton to start formal dance training. With the jazz club scene dwindling in the North, Lewis joined James in London where he also studied professionally. On seeing IDJ, who dominated the London fusion jazz dance scene, the two dancers determined to forge a style that could be used to challenge them on the dance floor by combining their Northern style of jazz (which, like that of the Jazz Defektors, incorporated balletic element such as pirouettes) with fusion and elements of funk, mambo and soul. The third 'brother' Trevor Miller came from Bolton and had been a Northern Soul dancer before being inspired by the Jazz Defektors (Cotgrove 2009, p. 268).

The Brothers' style was as fast as fusion but with a more fluid, light quality. The balletic movements they had learned from television, were refined as they accessed formal training, a training they saw as useful in achieving greater physical flexibility (James 2013). These dancers were as likely to jump into a recognisable balletic turn in the air (*tour en l'air*) as drop to the floor. The emphasis on upwards elevation in their jumps is sometimes accentuated by the legs extending as they leap, while the use of arm gestures adds an overall graceful look to their dancing. Lewis (2010) describes how through a form of dance challenge in the North, in which the dancers aimed to touch each other ('contact') to score points as they danced, they had also developed a vocabulary of extended arm gestures. James (2013) recognises the influence of Bob Fosse in making him aware of the importance of 'the whole body talking'. Even though they

eschewed the exaggerated hip twists of the Jazz Defektors, the hips and the torso sometimes follow the movement of the limbs to aid the sustained flow of their movements. A video produced in Japan in the late 1980s (Lewis 2009) that slows down footage of their dancing, captures a sculptural quality and reveals a lyrical style that at other times is overshadowed by an emphasis on rapid footwork or more virtuosic turns and leaps.

It could be argued from the above descriptions that IDJ represented a more essentialist construction of masculine identity than the Jazz Defektors or Brothers in Jazz. However an offshoot of IDJ, the Back Street Kids, included a female dancer whose presence challenges fixed assumptions regarding the gender identity constructed through this style. Importantly too, as a white female she also represents the fact that jazz dancing was performed by dancers from a range of ethnicities. While many of the leading jazz dancers were Black British males, Lewis is adamant that in his home town of Leeds the jazz scene was 'mixed' and that what the jazz dancers shared was a lack of money and job opportunities: 'Black, white and Asian; when we were kids colour didn't matter and the clubs were mixed too' (2010). The video of the Jazz Defektors seems to confirm that something of this diversity was also apparent on the Manchester scene. It is worth noting here that according to Jayna Brown (2008, p. 43), during the nineteenth century white working class people in northern British cities developed an empathy for representatives of the African diaspora based on a sense that they shared an experience of similar levels of hardship. Workers in the mines and cotton mills responded positively to Black activists and fugitive slaves from America and to the singing and dancing of African American performers when they toured Northern England. It is impossible to gauge whether such views persisted, but certainly the young jazz dancers in the twentieth century seem to have countered the dominant racism that Gilroy (1982 and 1987) describes, by recognising commonalities based on a lack of economic capital. Sharing interest in dancing, this coming together of youths from different ethnicities seems to have been established on a more positive footing than the earlier, but short lived, joining of white 'skinheads' and Black 'Rude boys' that Dick Hebdidge (1976) reports occurred in South London in the late 1960s.

The fusion dancers, based in London, may have been more conscious of an explicit Caribbean heritage than their Northern counterparts. Not only does Cotgrove report the perception that

fusion derived from dancing to Jamaican Ska music, but Seymour Nurse also situates the dancing within styles performed in Jamaica and Barbados. Moreover the London based dancers were very conscious of racism affecting the 'door policy' of many clubs that limited those they could attend (Nurse n.d.a). The fusion dancers eschewed the balletic qualities of other jazz styles and Lewis suggests that the balletic flair of the Brothers in Jazz upset London based dancers:

The reason we started battling IDJ was that when we came down we were doing more balletic stuff. We looked like trained dancers and London people didn't like it.....They didn't understand. Because we were copying TV and we were doing all this balletic stuff, we looked like trained dancers.

(Lewis 2010)

Within the competitive framework that governed the relationships between different groups, Londoners were likely to seize on any difference to undermine potential rivals. Yet informing this hostility towards the perception of Brothers in Jazz as 'trained' was perhaps a tacit sense of the values and identities embodied in jazz dancing at a time when for young Black British males, identity and a relationship to a dominant white patriarchy was problematic. Within the complex and changing intersections of constructions of class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and age, in the context of Britain in the early 1980s, ballet training carried connotations associated with the (high) culture of western imperialism that might well seem at odds with working class, Caribbean influenced dance styles. Perhaps some fusion dancers understood ballet steps as a sign of assimilation into a dominant western culture or even as being too 'feminine' to be performed by males asserting their sense of status. Yet when jazz dancers such as Lewis and James came into contact with more established dance practices through gaining scholarships to dance training establishments, they retained their identity as jazz dancers. In their adoption of balletic moves and qualities, the Leeds dancers may rather be viewed as continuing a Caribbean tradition of syncretism rather than simply being assimilated into a dominant culture.

Across a whole range of cultural forms there is a 'syncretic' dynamic which critically appropriates elements from the master codes of the dominant culture and 'creolises' them, disarticulating given signs and re-articulating their symbolic meaning.

(Mercer 1988 in Hall 1990, 236).

For Kobena Mercer (cited in Hall 1990) language is the most subversive form of such practices, but dancing, by virtue of its articulation of what may be only tacitly understood, has the capacity to challenge norms of behaviour in ways that may be as important. Through their jazz dancing young people may be understood as constructing new dance identities which challenged assumptions about both British and Black identities. In parallel with a change in identity politics that recognises how ‘new ethnicities’ (Hall 1989) resist essentialist constructions of (racial) identities, dancers forged new styles of being British and /or being Black. While informed by African American traditions, their dancing was also a response to the unique dynamics of post-colonial Britain that drew directly upon Caribbean traditions while bringing them into play with a wide range of influences. The jazz dancers in clubs developed styles that were distinct from the jazz dancing being taught in dance studios even while the ‘ballet style’ jazz and bebop dancers drew on some of the same American influences. Importantly, in forging these new identities dancers could create a sense of belonging to a particular local scene while also articulating their sense of individuality. Whether they were based in Leeds, London or Manchester, dancing was about having something and being someone, defining their place within the uncertain and changing economic and social context of Britain in the 1980s.

Along with a sense of the importance of style, the dancers emphasise the significance of music and the feelings associated with dancing to different forms of jazz. Above all, what seems to have been most valued is a sense of ‘energy’, euphoria, even a spiritual sense:

...there’s always been these periods where something has happened musically that is governed by a spirit that heals. And the thing with that period when we were going out - no we didn’t have much, we didn’t. So the spirit decided to rear its head and give us a route to escape, a utopia to go to.

(Gary Nurse in Lewis, Nurse and Nurse, 2011)

A spiritual dimension to music and dance is common to much African diasporic experience, as has been the need to find solace from the various hardships and inequalities of African peoples’ histories. Talking to me the dancers were keen to emphasise the positive energy that dancing provides and were concerned that too much emphasis has been placed on the hostility between

dancers (Lewis, Nurse and Nurse 2011). This perhaps contrasts with other dancers' interviews with Mark Cotgrove, where in an all-male context the skirmishes of various dancers are described in a more light hearted context that almost valorises a 'bad-boy' image. Cotgrove also suggests that some associated violence was caused by non-dancers who went along with the sole aim of protecting area pride (2009, p.137). Nevertheless Lewis states that dance challenges could result in bruised egos with hurt feelings over-spilling into fights (cited in Cotgrove 2009, p. 265). Given the attitudes to Black male youths during this era such events would have been viewed very negatively by a wider British public and one dancer's assertion that the police kept a close eye on the jazz club scene is not unlikely ('Stretch' cited in Cotgrove 2009, p. 137).

Within the wider cultural context of Britain at this time, what is perhaps historically more significant than fights between young men, is how passionate young people, and particularly so many young men, were about dancing. My own recollection of this era within mainstream dance academies was the perceived problem that British men did not dance. Or rather, white British male identities were constructed in such a way to inhibit dancing. In contrast the jazz scene was driven by the influence of a Caribbean culture in which dancing was very much a part of family and community life. Hence, a generation of dancers (and perhaps particularly male dancers) developed dance skills and styles in a context largely external to the main dance academies and companies of the era. The importance of UK jazz dancing is thus as a field of cultural practice that, even while it drew on many influences, maintained quite strong boundaries between itself and other arenas of dance. As such, recognising it as a part of British dance cultural history provides for a different narrative of the recent past that may inform understanding of dance in Britain today.

### **UK Jazz Dancing: past and present**

UK jazz has been, and still is, comparatively little known. The DJ Colin Curtis has commented how the club dancing of the late 1970's and 1980s 'seems to have been written off' (2008) a sense that is echoed by jazz dancers such as Wayne James (2013). The jazz dancers were perhaps the original British street dancers but, within the wider dance field, when street dance became more widely known and accepted, UK jazz dancing was overshadowed by the emergence of American hip hop and house dancing. A younger generation thus have little knowledge of this

dancing. However its importance is recognised by some dancers. For example, the dance artist Sean Graham recollects his feelings on being invited to see Irven Lewis' company rehearsing:

When I walked in the studio... I was thrown back. I had been studying hip-hop independently...trying to make connections with my culture as a Black person and the arts. I never knew UK Fusion dance existed. These [dancers] were fifteen to twenty years older than me (I was around 24 at the time) so I could see that there was history. This wasn't just a showcase dance. Jazz was mostly presented as a buffoonery type [of] display for [a] white audience in my institutional education of it, but it [the dancing of Lewis' company] had roots that came from some unattended place within me and before me. I was beyond words. It connected and fascinated me immediately. From that moment I could not help myself from trying to absorb all I could. I was particularly interested in the personalized variations of styles, the different routes the pioneers took and why. I was interested in why it was so short lived-why it existed and why a broader practice of UK dancers weren't aware of it yet.

(Graham 2015)

Growing up as a young Black British male in South London in the 1990s, Graham experienced the "tail end" of the same racism that had confronted many jazz dancers and their parents (Graham 2015). When training he had found it difficult to be one of only two Black male students in his entire year group and hence the influence of the older Black male dancers was important to his development as a British dance artist. Graham explains his continued engagement with this dancing. He recognised it revealed 'the difference between the Black British experience and the Afro American Experience' (Graham 2014). He regards this 'as being highly important to the self-esteem of the young people' he has taught and equally 'as important to a culturally disconnected society of Blacks and whites in the broader context of Britain' subjects that he 'characteristically reflects in his choreographic works' (Graham 2015).

Including the history of this dancing in the wider narrative of British dance history is not only important to those wanting to locate their dancing within a Black British context. It also highlights the importance of Britain's colonial past to developments within British dance culture. When researching histories of dancing during and after the period of colonialism it is important to consider the significance of the different ways in which identities are embodied in dance.

Further, drawing on a Bourdieusian analysis of the relationship between ‘fields,’ it is possible to consider how social and economic changes may have exerted different influences on dance practices situated in distinct cultural fields. The process of re-remembering not only includes UK jazz into the wider narrative of the historical development of dancing in Britain, but allows for appreciation of the ways in which choreographic play with bodily actions in space and time may be understood as significant within the context of post-colonial Britain. In this way the process of re-remembering reveals a fuller and more nuanced history of British dance history that can inform current dance practices and how they are understood, enjoyed and valued.

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