

Music Meant to Make You Move: Considering the Aural Kinesthetic

Imani Kai Johnson

Blog post published June 18, 2012 in *Sounding Out!*

<https://doi.org/10.59350/sp0z9-wh653>

Abstract

"Dance!" by Flickr user Clearly Ambiguous, under Creative Commons License 2.0 In the two weeks prior to my drafting this piece, the world lost Adam "MCA" Yauch, Robin Gibb, Donna Summer, and Chuck Brown. In their wake they leave a profound legacy of music, yes, but of dance music particularly. MCA declared your right to party while demonstrating that white MCs aren't always gimmicks.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Aesthetics, American Studies, Article, Dance/Movement, Diasporic Sound



Recommended citation

Johnson, I. K. (2012, June 18). Music Meant to Make You Move: Considering the Aural Kinesthetic. *Sounding Out!*. <https://doi.org/10.59350/sp0z9-wh653>

Copyright

Copyright © Imani Kai Johnson 2012. Distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](#), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.



"Dance!" by Flickr user Clearly Ambiguous, under Creative Commons License 2.0

In the two weeks prior to my drafting this piece, the world lost [Adam "MCA" Yauch](#), [Robin Gibb](#), [Donna Summer](#), and [Chuck Brown](#). In their wake they leave a profound legacy of music, yes, but of dance music particularly. MCA declared your right to party while demonstrating that white MCs aren't always gimmicks. The BeeGees gave you a new strut courtesy of the bounce-funky soundtrack to [Saturday Night Fever](#). The goddess Donna Summer seduced your ears with her orgasmic whispers, then pumped up the pulsating synthetic beats that brought the discotech from its urban centers directly to you. And [go-go](#)'s blaze, though not as far-reaching as disco's, grew out of Chuck Brown's musical sensibility, and burned deep in the hearts of Chocolate City natives. For all of these artists, moving to the music isn't merely a possibility or inclination, but a deeply irresistible impulse. Altogether, these artists brought music that not only called out to people to dance, but if you didn't dance you missed something essential: the inextricable ties between music and movement. One acts as a key that opens up a dimension to understanding the other.

Seeing people dance to a live go-go band taught me how to appreciate their music. When I finally heard go-go for the first time at a club in 1995, it challenged my musical sensibilities, which were more attuned to smooth R&B and jazzy Hip Hop. By then, go-go music seemed so fast, and coupled with the multiplicity of drums that I didn't know how to get inside of the groove. In the midst of the bubbling fervor I stood noticeably still as the young woman next to me ripped the shirt off her sweaty body and whipped it above her head (like a flag at carnival), never once missing a beat in her frantic jumping and pumping to the live drums while wearing only her bra and a pair of jeans. The dancing bodies of the whole club fueled my understanding, and by

extension appreciation, of what go-go does. Without them, I would have missed out on something deeper.

I am drawing your attention both to music meant to make you dance and dancing that is necessarily done to music—i.e the arena of social dance. [Julie Malnig](#), in *Ballroom, Boogie, Shimmy Sham, Shake: A Social & Popular Dance Reader*, defines “social dancing” by “a sense of community often derive[d] less from preexisting groups brought together by shared social and cultural interests than from a community created as *a result* of the dancing” (4, emphasis in original). That might include social dances that correspond to particular songs, or called and standardized steps, like the twist or the electric slide. My focus is more broadly on a visceral, embodied, kinesthetic response to dance music in a particular social space, which is not explicitly directed by the lyrics or a set of moves but by the feel of a song as a whole. In the Hip Hop social dances I write about, rather than a finite set of moves there are infinite possibilities for improvisational play within a particular style (like b-boying or popping) that the music draws out of the dancer. As [David F. García](#) states in his piece on mambo titled “[Embodying Music/ Disciplining Dance: The Mambo Body in Havana and New York City](#),” “the embodied experience of sound and movement [are] merged through the body” (172).



Break Dancing en Costa Rica, 2009 by Flickr User Néstor Baltodano, under Creative Commons License 2.0

I have come to name the frame for analyzing the simultaneity of social dance and music (and sound broadly) as aural-kinesthetics. While these words capture sound and movement separately, together I am looking to engage more than just the sensory response of moving to what one hears. The term develops out of works by music scholars like [Kyra Gaunt](#) (*The Games Black Girls Play: Learning the Ropes From Double Dutch to Hip Hop*), [Kodwo Eshun](#) (*More Brilliant*

Than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction), and Kai Fikentscher (*“You Better Work!”: Underground Dance Music in New York City*), who shift our orientation to music and rhythm by drawing on our kinesthetic responses to it. Aural kinesthetics recognize that social dance practices are kinesthetic forms within the all-encompassing aurality of an environment. I use spatial terms to acknowledge sound’s omni-directionality, coming at you from all sides and helping to actually produce the social dance place. In other words, the aural kinesthetic is also a kind of spatial practice (along the lines of Henri Lefebvre’s *The Production of Space*). For example, consider how a bomba dancer orchestrates the primary bomba drummer’s rhythms within the rhythmic arena created by the second and tertiary drummers; or how loud music in street dance performances fills the immediate surroundings and bleeds out into other areas, attesting to their capacity to claim public spaces (the volume has volume). Music in particular plays a fundamental role in establishing the conceptual performance arena that ultimately makes the physical space functional for certain dance practices.

Despite the fact that social dances necessarily have a musical component, dance is typically overdetermined by the visual, which in Western cultures we are better equipped to address. The sound and feel of dance experiences are often overridden by the spectacle of dancing, which the following clip demonstrates. In this clip showcasing the final battle from the 2007 Freestyle Sessions in Los Angeles, the spectacle of these amazing dancers distracts you from the actual social dynamics of their battle, of which music is central.



<https://youtu.be/iClzsCmxYxY>

The exchange between dancers is truncated, spliced together for dramatic effect. You focus on the center of the cypher, lost in the visual thrill of it all. The song they were actually dancing to is replaced by another that, though danceable, prevents us from appreciating a particular song’s nuances as well as the crowd and emcee’s involvement in the event. Overdubbing songs that you do not have clearance for is in compliance with copyright laws that force the video’s producers to instead play songs to which they have legal access, in sacrifice of aural-kinesthetic experiences

the videos attempt to capture. Yet even in cases of the below clip where we hear the original song, the recording cannot capture the quality of the force of the music that is loud enough to feel throughout your entire body, thereby promoting a shared sensorial experience in the room. Whether one is recording with a camera or in writing, capturing the aural-kinesthetic can be tricky.

<https://youtu.be/bp4oeObG48A>

2009 Dutch B-Boy Championships Semi-Finals between Hustle Kids and Rugged Solutions

For me, the aural-kinesthetic is useful insofar as it opens up creative space for me in writing the simultaneity of sound and movement. Scholars like [Mary Fogarty](#) (*Dance to the Drummer's Beat: Competing Tastes in International B-Boy/B-Girl Culture*) have approached the topic by distinguishing between notions of musical taste and musical competency in clarifying the contours of b-boying's dance-music relationship. In my own writing, I've tended toward storytelling and descriptive analyses. In contrast, considerations such as those of Roland Barthes' "The Grain of the Voice" (in *Image, Music, Text*) propose to expand the language on (vocal) music in general by shifting the object of analysis to create new ways of writing music, which we can extend to writing social dance.

So what is a productive approach for writing the aural-kinesthetic? I'm not prescribing a method, but I do want to consider the possibilities of shifting the focus of analysis in such a way that it allows for the simultaneity of music and movement. For example, there may be value in examining a gesture repeatedly made to a particular part of a song to understand what that song is doing; or examining the physical layout of a room and how that space gets used through the song that fills it. Perhaps coming at social dance indirectly and on multiple fronts makes for a richer depiction.

For now, let's take advantage of this digital space and collectively consider our options. Here's a task I hope you might take up: post a link to a song or a video clip that makes you move. Describe some quality of your visceral response to the song and place your thoughts in the comments section below. Include the multiple fronts that help you to articulate your experience. While music and dance have the capacity to "speak" in ways that verbal language cannot always reach, my hope is that a range of possibilities might get us there. or at least much closer.

—

[Dr. Imani Kai Johnson](#) is a Ford Dissertation Fellow, who has just completed a three year postdoctoral fellowship at NYU's Performance Studies Department. She received her PhD in American Studies & Ethnicity at the University of Southern California in 2009, where she wrote a dissertation titled, "Dark Matter in B-Boying Cyphers: Race and Global Connection in Hip Hop," which considers the cultural and performative dimensions of Hip Hop dance as a global phenomenon through cyphers (dance circles), and the invisible forces of the collaborative ritual. Dr. Johnson is currently completing a manuscript based on her dissertation.