

## *Dance Parties – Feel the Bass*

### **Emma Jean Gilkison**

A song sounds different on different systems and in different spaces, and presumably, inside different bodies. A body has senses, cavities, liquids and faculties. In these cavities, we vibrate. Music travels spiral time and the pathways of the mind; its brain circuitry is ancient. Sometimes, a spare drum machine rhythm or a synth line can resonate with us in a way that feels known, but isn't: for a moment, we're in the studio with Susan Rogers as Prince lays down the LinnDrum through a faulty mixing console for "The Ballad of Dorothy Parker", to paraphrase her words, 'like a baby that can't stop eating food',<sup>1</sup> or we're in the booth with Rose Stone singing the hook for "It's a Family Affair", recorded when Sly & the Family Stone's band members were drifting apart. British neurologist Oliver Sacks wrote that perception is never purely in the present, but that at the same time, music evokes "worlds very different from the personal, remembered worlds of events, people, places we have known."<sup>2</sup> You're in a room with people you know, and music, and within that space, there's a filtering, a sifting. It's not so much an upside down, as an inside out.

At home, back then, you had a stereo system, with an amp, CD player and tuner—maybe a turntable and equalizer too. Now you have a waterproof Bluetooth speaker, about the size of a burrito. Here, at a party in an improvised space, the system is bigger—much bigger. Sonic vibrations move through the concrete floor you're standing on, are dampened by the throng of sweating bodies, create a space of physical sensations. In that space, you move physically. Sacks wrote in *Musicophilia*, "There are many levels at which music can call to people, enter them, alter them(...). We bond when we sing together, sharing the specific affects and connections of a song; but bonding is deeper, more primal, if we dance together, coordinating our bodies and not just our voices."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Red Bull Music Academy, "Susan Rogers on engineering Prince" (video), December 8, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ON0nQCQF08>

<sup>2</sup> Oliver Sacks, *Musicophilia: Tales of music and the brain* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

Ask some people: what is a smell or a touch they remember, from their favourite parties and clubs they've ever been to?

Who was there?

How can you access the felt memory of being in a space designed for or inhabited by music?

Did you ever inhale glycol and water from the smoke machine in a giant shed on the Wellington waterfront, shimmy down the pole at Honkytonks in Melbourne, or sit on the grass at an outdoor festival and wonder where your mates were?

How do we find each other, again? Now that the world is ever more techno-securitized, our lives digitally hyperconnected but physically unlinked, being present with each other and with music in a room made for joy and celebration feels radical. As much as dancing, lying down and resting have become an act of rebellion, especially for marginalised groups. The chill out room used to be a place to recline to the sound of Japanese ambient utopian dreams. Social psychology researchers O'Brien, Fernando et al suggest that utopias animate collective self-regulation.<sup>4</sup> UR and Jeff Mills and Coco Solid and Mara TK know it. The world can't be different unless we're brave enough to dream it.

Bodily fluids—sweat, and breath droplets—mix with dreams and adrenaline. Peoples and places meet in the dance. The joys and toil of Caribbean migrants are built into sound system culture and the bass music continuum. Te Arepa Kahi told the Spinoff that Bob Marley's 1979 concert at Western Springs is bound up with the march towards social justice for tangata whenua.<sup>5</sup> Bob spoke to members of the Boot Hill community in his hotel room over several nights, and the Bastion Point invasion occurred a month after the concert. Bob's influence on Aotearoa's music reverberates to this day. British music journalist Ian Penman wrote, "Wearing a dubble face, neither future nor past, dub is simultaneously a past and future trace: Of music as both memory or futurity."<sup>6</sup> A dub version traces the outlines of ghosts with fragments of vocal lines. The echo is full of what's not there.

Syncopation is "a temporary displacement of the regular metrical accent in music."<sup>7</sup> It's the space between the beats that has the groove to make you move—and it's the unexpected harmonies, distortion and sync-ups that bring pizzazz to the jazz. The best dancefloor moments are made up of different generations and genres, people with disabilities, all bodies, orientations and genders.

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<sup>4</sup> Julian W. Fernando, Nicholas Burden, Adam Ferguson, Léan V. O'Brien, Madelaine Judge and Yoshihisa Kashima, "Functions of utopia: How utopian thinking motivates societal engagement," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 44(5) (2018): 779–792.

<sup>5</sup> Gareth Shute, (2019, April 20). "How Bob Marley's 1979 Western Springs concert changed NZ music," *The Spinoff*, April 20, 2019.

<https://thespinoff.co.nz/music/20-04-2019/how-bob-marleys-1979-western-springs-concert-changed-nz-music>

<sup>6</sup> Ian Penman, "Black Secret Tricknology," *The Wire*, 133(1995, March): 36-65.

<sup>7</sup> Merriam-Webster. (n.d.) *Syncopation*. Merriam-Webster Dictionary. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/syncopation>.

Dancefloor magic happens at private house parties, or afterparties of film festivals, or in little bars with great sound systems. It's a spontaneous alchemy that brings us together in real time, with all its attendant ghosts, future/past traces and shapes. Come play your part.

*Back in the day Emma Jean Gilkison DJed in Wellington and Auckland, with shows on Active, bFM and George, then worked on editorial for international music platform RBMA, covering artists like Arthur Verocai and Bob Moog. Currently writing for Analogue Foundation Berlin, she is also a mother and meditation instructor.*