

TURN UP THE BASS

AN IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS OF DANCE MUSIC IN NEW YORK CITY'S UNDERGROUND CLUBS 1969-1987



BJORN KLEIN

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New York City's Underground Clubs
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Turn Up The Bass

The floor is vibrating. Sparks of energy pulsate around your shuffling feet, driven by the rhythm. The room is intermittently bathed in mellow specks of light. Intimate twilight of the otherworld.

Strike the pose!

Bodies are moving, bodies are touching. A lot of naked skin. Perfectly stylized bodies. The power of artificiality and aesthetics, impeccable hair, tight skirt. Beads of sweat.

Set me free!

Synthesizers and strings frantically whirling around, the bounce of the bass relentlessly spurring you on.

The message is love!

You are high on life, high on drugs, high on the music. You express yourself freely, no restraints, no inhibitions. An exploration of identity and vulnerability.

You can feel the shared bond, the invisible connection between you and the others. Total abandonment of the Self.

The bass drum is kicking you hard. Sophistication of the orchestration, multi-layered rhythms. All stress is falling off you.

Thrust your hips!

Grind.

Anything goes.

Sexiness of the underground. You raise your hands in the air in ecstasy.

Please don't stop the music!

Please don't, or there will be no tomorrow!

The dancefloor stream of subconsciousness has reached us all in our lives. More than 40 years of pounding, groovy music have left indelible marks, not only on the dancefloor, but also on the music business in general. Michael Jackson, Rihanna, Jamiroquai, Enrique Iglesias, P!nk, Katy Perry, Beyoncé – the megastars of the music industry have caused the borders between the world of pop and the world of the dancefloor to blur, turning pop songs with a dancefloor appeal into one of the most lucrative genres in the world. The undisputed queen of the dance club has been Madonna who has been dominating the dance charts since 1983 with fourteen year-end top-10 listings on the Billboard Dance Club Charts.

Remixes of popular songs have also become the norm for successful pop-stars, who know that a dancefloor version of their song will go a long way of making it even more successful. Some of them, such as Beyoncé Knowles and Iceland's Björk, have even used the medium of the remix to release entire remix albums, Beyoncé with *4: The Remix* and Björk with *Telegram*. While often remixes are simply produced to milk the dancefloor cash cow and to keep yourself in the news, stars have also proven that remixes can be a wonderful tool to explore new facets of old songs.

Today we take remixes, DJ culture and dance club culture for granted. They have become an inextricable part of the modern urban scene and music's mainstream pop-culture. However, it was only a few decades ago, when early DJs broke new territory with what they were doing. Hidden away in obscure underground clubs in New York City back in the late 1960s/early 1970s, dancefloor music and the DJ were regarded nothing more but strange novelties belonging to a thriving subculture that was yet too small to be noticed. As is often the case, the early days of something new are the most painful but also the most exciting. You have to develop everything from scratch, which allows you the freedom to shape the culture, the environment and the music to your liking. Creative times indeed!

The rise of the DJ and dancefloor culture happened incredibly fast. The pioneers of DJing and dancefloor music pushed the development in key areas of DJ and dancefloor culture at breakneck speed: Quick technological advances were made with respect to the development of DJing equipment, such as turntables and DJ mixers, but also with respect to the development of club sound systems which offered a unique, powerful sound experience. Also DJing techniques, such as seamless beat mixing and the effective use of EQing controls and crossovers, evolved quickly over time.

These advances allowed DJs to create a new kind of music by experimenting with recycled materials. This might sound absurd at first – creating something new from used materials. But that is exactly what the early DJs did. They invented an entirely new genre, the dancefloor genre, by mixing together funk records, soul records and basically everything that had rhythm at its core. Little later, the concept of mixing selected elements together was taken to the studio and entirely new dancefloor songs were created. However, at the beginning DJs basically had to create the new dancefloor genre by hand by mixing together parts and elements of different songs ‘live’ on their turntables.

Turn Up The Bass is a book about the new genre of dancefloor music that emerged from the DJs’ turntable experimentations in underground clubs in New York City between the late 1960s and early 1980s. The historical circumstances under which dancefloor music was created, as well as the social, technological and structural context which contributed to the creation of this new musical style, naturally, need to be considered when analyzing the music of underground dance music recordings.

However, it is the analysis of the music itself that lies at the very heart of this book. What musical characteristics define underground dance music recordings? What are the musical roots of underground dance music recordings? What instruments are used? How are they used? What is the formal musical structure of dancefloor songs? How do dancefloor songs of that time work with the concepts of tension-release

and musical spacing? These are questions that will be addressed in this in-depth analysis of underground dance music songs which were played in underground dance clubs in New York City from 1969 to 1987¹.

¹ The term 'underground dance music' shall be defined in this book as a type of music, which was played in New York City underground clubs from 1969 to 1987. It is a term which was first coined by author Kai Fikentscher in his outstanding book "*You Better Work!*" – *Underground Dance Music in New York City* (2000). Expressly excluded by me is the genre of house music, as well as subsequent electronic dance music.

Part I

Music in context

Social-psychological, technological
and structural framework of
underground dance music

1.1.3. Active participation – The significance of dancing and spirituality in underground dance music

That underground dance music dancers ascribe a spiritual dimension to the experience of these underground parties has first of all to do with the individual, as well as collective borderline experience during dancing. Secondly, it is connected to the fact that the underground dance music scene is deeply rooted in the African-American music tradition (especially gospel, soul and funk music). This demands for a cultural discourse on gospel music and its concepts of spirituality and salvation, as I will delineate in this chapter.

A lot of African-American music, and that includes underground dance music, is performance-based music, which unfolds its real meaning when everybody within a momentarily shared social space participates in the formation of the performance. Different from the traditional Western-European way of thinking, composition and performance in African-American music are not two separate, fixed entities, but interdependent parts of a commonly shared, creative, holistic performance, which is actively formed and interpreted by *all* participants. In other words, the dancers influence the performance through the creativity and response of their dance moves as much as the DJ does with his skills and selection of records. Music is regarded as an active process, during which the music is continuously re-constructed, re-formed and re-shaped, and ideally mutually felt by everybody. This shared, mutual feeling of music is crucial in creating a collective vibe, because the music is not dismantled cognitively and analytically as is often the case in the music tradition of Western-European art music: “What we feel about the music is what it means”, as Simon Frith (1996: 139) highlights the meaning of music within the African-American music tradition.

In the context of this cultural continuum, dancers respond directly with their emotions to the performance of the DJ by expressing them via

their dance movements. They respond directly to the expressive-stylistic elements of the African-American music tradition, for example the intricate layers of (syncopated) rhythms and the emotionally charged and inspiring soulful singing style (derived from gospel music). The participation through dancing thus obtains an important social dimension in underground dance music. This social dimension is, on an individual, as well as collective level, a significant tool to explore, confirm and celebrate identities and interpersonal relations, as well as socio-critically challenge persisting societal norms. Furthermore, the dancers find a valve through which they can release, shed and forget their everyday problems and sorrows, which must be considered as one of the main reasons, why the dance experience – in the underground dance music club, as well as in the African-American church – is tied to the term of salvation.

In addition to that, the music and dancing become a direct instrument of communication between DJ and dancers, as well as among the dancers themselves, as *Paradise Garage* dancers attest: "... to ME we [were] telling a story [through our dancing] ... We knew we were telling a story, we were talking to one another" (Ramos 2005: DVD 2, chapter 2). The potential for communication here lies within the poly-rhythmic, as well as the polyphone/poly-instrumental nuances and subtleties of the textures and different layers of the songs that the DJ is playing, which the dancers take on and incorporate in their dance interpretations. Via the selection of particular records and the underlying messages of underground dance music songs, which lie within the lyrics, as well as within the general feel and the poly-rhythmic, poly-instrumental and textural orientation of the songs, the DJ decides in which direction the performance will develop and literally speaks to the dancers.

As I will argue in the second part of this book, this poly-rhythmic and poly-instrumental arrangement, as well as the formal structure of underground dance music songs are important elements that determine the creative interpretations of the dancers. Through this complex structural, textural and rhythmical interlocking of different musical

elements and layers, a broad panoply of interpretative options are available to the dancers, to which they can react to individually or as a group⁷. Furthermore, due to the repetitive structure of underground dance music songs and the targeted driving of certain tension elements to climactic points within the structure of the songs, the experienced dancer expects certain musical occurrences at particular moments in the songs, and even unexperienced dancers can instinctively anticipate these moments in which the musical tension is released, and they can align their dancing movements accordingly.

The dancers will, for example, usually anticipate the reentrance of the bassline after the breakdown (during which all instruments, except the percussive elements of the song, will stop playing) and therefore direct his/her movements with increased energy towards the reentry of the bassline. At the same time, the continuity of certain repetitive elements (such as the continuously on every quarter note pounding bass drum) establishes a framework, which also synchronizes dancers to a certain extent. Thus, an overlapping of individual and collective performance comes into existence, which is in constant flux, especially also because the dancers react to the movements of the other dancers, adopt or discard particular dance elements, interpret them in new ways or offer completely new creative movements.

The dancers act on the DJ's choice of records and translate them into expressive dance movements, which unfold into a rhythmic counterpoint to the already complex musical matrix. Furthermore, underground dance music dancers also include (besides their bodies) instruments such as tambourines, whistles or maracas, as well as their own voice (simple singing along, but also more sophisticated vocal improvisations) into their

⁷ Mark Butler follows a similar approach in his book *Unlocking The Groove* with respect to the analysis of electronic dance music. However, in this genre of music the inherent interpretative possibilities are for the most part limited to the intricate interplay of rhythmic patterns, since electronic dance music mostly abstains from using a broad range of different instruments.

dance performances, as could be witnessed at the *Loft* and *Paradise Garage*. This “feedback” is again taken up by the DJ and this way an exchange and flux of communicative and bodily energies takes constantly place. Dancers speak in this context also of a collective sharing of energies or the creation of a so called “vibe” – an attempt to melt the mental energies of every single dancer and the DJ into one united entity. This sharing of collective mental energies is enhanced through bodily exhaustion, sensory overstimulation, the repetitiveness and expressivity of the music, as well as the use of drugs⁸. The tension can be heightened to such an extent that it might all end in some kind of spiritual climax or peak-experience.

It is important to understand in this context that the interplay of tension and release is essential for building-up such a peak-experience. In underground dance music, this alternation between tension and release is incessantly carried out, on a micro-level, as well as on a macro-level⁹. On a micro-level it means that tension is constantly built up and released again within the framework of individual parts and phrases of songs or within songs in their entirety.

An example for these mechanisms can be seen in the song *Ten Percent* by Double Exposure (compare figure 1)¹⁰. It is typical for underground dance music songs that a densification of instruments (bars 65-72), as well as a momentary static remaining within this density (bar 72) takes place before the transition from one part of the song (in case of the song *Ten Percent* that we are looking at, the 1st verse; bars 57-72) into another (in our example the second chorus; bars 73-80). This way the returning to the common verse-structure is being delayed which

⁸ Regarding the use of drugs in the subculture of underground dance music, please see chapter 1.2.4.

⁹ We will cover this aspect of tension-release in more depth at a later point in this book, in connection with the discussion of the musical characteristics of underground dance music.

¹⁰ “Ten Percent” by Double Exposure; Album: *Classic Salsoul Mastercuts volume 1*. Beechwood Music Ltd., 1993. Start listening from bar 69 (minute 2:12).

Turn Up The Bass

70

Vocals: words and I do an - y - thing but you

Strings

Horns

Bass Guitar

closed/
open Hi-Hat
Snare Drum
Bass Drum

72

Stasis bar

Vo. must be true oh. Ten Per - cent of some

Str.

Horns

B. Guit.

closed/
open HH
SD
BD

Chorus 2

Detailed description: The image shows a musical score for a piece titled "Turn Up The Bass". It consists of two systems of staves. The first system covers measures 70-72. The second system covers measures 72-74. The instruments are: Vocals, Strings, Horns, Bass Guitar, and Percussion (closed/open Hi-Hat, Snare Drum, Bass Drum). The score includes lyrics and musical notation for each instrument.

Figure 1

leads to an enormous build-up of energetic tension, which is released with the eventual transition into the verse. The creation of tension on this micro-level leaves the dancers metaphorically hanging off a cliff for a short but intense moment, before salvation is attained in form of the second verse. The very moment of transitioning from tension to release is

the decisive element here, because the dancers translate the release in tension into a sheer explosion of energy in dancing and continue their dancing for a short while on this increased energy level.

On a macro-level the same principles of tension build-up and tension-release apply, however on a much larger scale, over the course of several songs or even entire DJ-sets. One has to bear in mind here that these DJ-sets used to be of enormous length in the New York City underground dance music scene. We are talking about 6-7 hours or longer on average. The structuring of tension and release moments within such large sets therefore has to be done with the utmost deliberation and care, because the DJ cannot constantly push his audience for a long stretch of time to the limit and expose the dancers to a constantly high level of intensity. This would inevitably lead to the dancers being exhausted after an hour or so. That is why most of the experienced underground dance music DJs, such as David Mancuso, arranged their DJ sets in a wavelike form (others also speak of a 'peak-and-valley'-progression):

"I like to do it kind of ... like, peaks and valleys ... like, bring it up slowly. So you'll kind of start out slow – sometimes ... sometimes I just bang it – [and] kind of pick them up; let them down; pick them up higher; let them down. Yeah – I like to ... midway through the set I just want them to be out of their minds".

(DJ Shiva on the structuring of her DJ-sets, Butler 2006: 251)

The dancers are taken up by a musical wave of tension for a certain period of time, carried away, and brought down again. This game of wave after wave of tension and release is repeated time and time again, while every new wave lifts the dancers a little higher on the intensity scale, until finally the spiritual climax is reached. During a very long dancing night it is also possible that the DJ aims for more than one energetic climax. Once this phase is reached, the dancers transcend the normal limitations and restrictions of the individual Self, as well as the

conceptual constructs of time and space. The awareness of one's own Self, as well as of the worldly surroundings and environment gradually dissolve. All sorrows and concerns of everyday life drop off the dancer and he/she melts with all the other dancers into an extremely intimate unity of spirit and body. Individual differences and distinctions disappear.

These moments are intimate in the sense that the dancers are receptive and vulnerable at the same time during the spiritual climax. The working up towards a peak experience represents a total passionate abandonment and dismantling of the inner Self, including all of its inhibitions and protective shields. Intimate also with respect to the sensually stimulating, physical closeness of the other dancers. The dancefloor of the *Loft* or *The Sanctuary*, for example, used to be so packed at every single party that the touching of bodies was inevitable and indeed an intimate blurring of the individual and the collective would take place in the truest sense of the word. Only by being vulnerable and by opening oneself, a shared energetic bond and vibe is eventually formed between dancers. This way a strong feeling of mutual understanding and community on an existential level is cultivated, which in its sum is greater than the energy of every single person alone and which can take on this spiritual dimension of a 'peak-experience'.

The parallel that crystallizes here with respect to the significance of the African-American church to African-American church-goers and the importance of the underground dance music club to its homosexual and African-American devotees is remarkable. For many African-Americans which were part of the underground dance music subculture, both institutions stood in the context of an unbroken cultural continuum. A similar statement can be made with regard to the black music tradition in which the first spirituals, gospel music, underground disco music and electronic house music likewise all have to be perceived within the context of this unbroken cultural continuum. If one so wishes, the experiencing of spirituality and salvation in the underground dance

music club is a forceful continuation of the sacral practice of spiritual celebration on a secular level.

The African-American church certainly has to be seen as one of the most central institutions in the history of African-American culture. With its emergence in the invisibility of the underground during the time of slavery it served as a place of cultural reliability and safety and autonomous cultural expression against the dominance of the white 'masters' and the Puritan church. The dominant Puritan church stipulated that one had to follow the priest's sermon while sitting in absolute silence. This however completely conflicted with the cultural self-conception of the African-American community. That is why this community searched for a place of their own, in which they were allowed to celebrate the holy mass in a way which was of cultural significance to them. A space in which they could freely express their feelings via the music of the spirituals and gospel, as well as through dancing and active participation within the community. Feelings of pain and sorrow, but also of joy and love, which they could share in the community and through the relinquishing of which they found hope for salvation and inspiration. A space in which their African-American identity and common values could be celebrated, explored and strengthened and in which they found spiritual unity and a common way of (mass)-communication.

A similar place did the African-American and homosexual minorities find in form of the dance club in the 1970s. As we have already established, the underground dance music subculture follows in its essence the core principles of this cultural practice. It is remarkable how both institutions resemble each other in the spiritual significance that they have to their respective audiences. New Yorker underground dance music DJs such as Larry Levan and Frankie Knuckles always talked about how they wanted to inspire their dancers through the songs and performances that they put up. For them dance clubs were indeed almost synonymous with church. At both places spiritual unity and salvation were reached.

At the same time however this spiritual dimension which the underground dance club definitely held for this subculture was mixed with aspects of openly displayed physicality and sexuality, which had formed out of the homosexual context. Furthermore, there was the otherness of the club music, which led to the creation of some interesting new forms of stylistic expression in dancing, which however adhere to essential principles of the sacral tradition, such as the communicative principle of the ‘call-and-response’ of gospel music. To conclude this chapter, I would like to point out two of these practices of underground dance music culture, which evolved out of the context of dance clubs, namely the ‘dancing in circles’ and the ‘voguing’.

The ‘dancing in circles’ has its origins at *Paradise Garage* and this early practice soon developed in the underground dance music scene into a permanent ritual, in which a large number of guests were involved. The ritual would basically demand that the dancers would get together and form a large circle. One dancer after the other would step into the circle and give a short individual dance performance. The dancer would step out of the circle again and make room for another dancer. The dancing skills and the body control that many of the dancers exhibited were highly developed and nothing short from being acrobatic. Some dancers would incorporate somersaults, backflips, the splits, extremely fast rotations around the own axis, and highly complex movement patterns into their performances.

The ‘dancing in circles’-ritual had nonetheless not necessarily a markedly competitive character despite the incredible display of dancing skills and finesse. The dancers clearly insist that it was less about competition but that it was more important to personally contribute to the performance in its entirety, in an atmosphere that was rather based on the foundations of a big friendly family than on competitive rivalry:

“Jumping in the circle has to do with the camaraderie, it’s a camaraderie thing ... You’re giving it all and it doesn’t matter if your moving isn’t as

nice as the other kid ... It doesn't matter who's better ... You were in there, you gave your best”.

(Ramos 2005: DVD2, chapter 2)

Like in the African-American church, emotional participation and a sense of belonging and community are of great importance. The typical call-and-response structure that can be observed here – a dancer makes an expressive statement, which is answered by another dancer who steps into the circle, and so on – directly derives from the tradition of gospel music. As we already discussed in the course of this chapter, this call-and-response practice should not only be understood in a figurative way, but it forms a forceful instrument of actual communication.

The practice of voguing also has to be perceived as coming out of the same cultural continuum of the call-and-response tradition. Different from the ‘dancing in circles’ ritual however, voguing is a form of dancing which undoubtedly is deeply rooted in fierce competition. Voguing first originated in a dance club by the name of *Footsteps* in New York City. When some African-American drag queens were throwing shade¹¹ at each other, one of the drag queens, Paris Dupree, reacted to it by pulling an issue of the fashion magazine *Vogue* out of her bag and imitating the different poses of the models from the magazine in line with the beat of the music. Other drag queens quickly followed suit and responded in a similar manner. At the beginning it was merely the freezing of certain poses, but dancers soon also began to incorporate elements of ballet, jazz dance and acrobatics into their performances. In

¹¹ Throwing shade at one another originates from the African-American homosexual scene and basically means ‘to throw insults at each other’, however on a non-verbal level and in a highly affected, camp manner. The vogue-dancer Willi Ninja offers the following definition for the concept of ‘throwing shade’: “Shade is basically a nonverbal response to verbal or nonverbal abuse. Shade is about using certain mannerisms in battle. If you said something nasty to me, I would just turn to you, and give you a look like: ‘Bitch please, you’re not even worth my time, go on.’ All with a facial expression and body posture, that’s throwing shade”. (Rose 1994: 174)

addition, they also started to include all kinds of movements from different fields which fit into their performance in their aesthetic flow, for example aspects from martial arts, from fashion shows or mime.

Subsequently a new artistic form of dancing developed from this initial experimentation, which the dancers on the basis of the fashion magazine *Vogue* started to call 'voguing'. This new art form mainly spread in the African-American and Latin homosexual underground, at gay dance balls and at underground dance music clubs, such as the *Better Days* and *Paradise Garage*. It represents a further example for the innovative continuation of African-American (call-and-response) tradition in a fresh cultural context, through which these 'double' minorities explored, substantiated and celebrated their identity in a for them culturally significant manner.

Part II

The Sound

of the underground dance music
scene in New York City

2.2.2. Bass

The electric bass, together with the drums and the percussion group, forms the rhythmic backbone of underground dance music songs. A few typical patterns of play can be determined for the bass guitar which I would like to introduce in this chapter.

Firstly, there is the direct adoption of the ‘fragmented basslines’ from the funk genre that we already learnt about when discussing the early musical influences on the underground dance music scene in chapter 2.1.1. These fragmented basslines are not the most typical in underground dance music recordings, however they can nevertheless be found relatively often in songs like Camouflage’s *You’ve Got The Power*, John Davis Orchestra’s *Bourgie Bourgie* or Instant Funk’s *I Got My Mind Made Up*. You can see the basslines for the last two songs notated in figure 18 (*Bourgie Bourgie*)⁵⁹ and figure 19 (*I Got My Mind Made Up*)⁶⁰.



Figure 18



Figure 19

⁵⁹ “Bourgie Bourgie” by John Davis Orchestra; Album: *Disco Spectrum*. BBE Records, 1999. Start listening from bar 18 (minute 0:35).

⁶⁰ “I Got My Mind Made Up” by Instant Funk; Album: *Classic Salsoul Mastercuts volume 1*. Bethlehem Music Ltd., 1993. Start listening from bar 36 (minute 1:14).

As can be seen in the notation both basslines keep with the familiar patterns known from funk recordings. Both are kind of patchy in their structure, which is why I have dubbed this style of play as ‘fragmented basslines’. Both basslines are played staccato and grind directly against the straight 4/4-groove set by the drums with their sharp syncopations, which lends the basslines a distinct percussive note. And both develop a certain hypnotic effect due to the repetitiveness of their rhythmic motifs. The bass pattern of *I Got My Mind Made Up*, for example, picks up the endless rhythmic loops of the funk style of play, as the short one-bar pattern is always repeated in the same way, with the exception of bar 4 of the period. The bassline of *Bourgie Bourgie* on the other hand slightly breaks with this strict pattern looping, as the bassline keeps the rhythmic 1-bar motif but continuously progresses upwards in its tonality. Also another stylistic element of the funk way of bass playing is used in the underground dance music genre, namely the slapping. This can, for example, be found in the aforementioned song *I Got My Mind Made Up*, in the fourth bar of each period on beat 2+, but also in many other songs, like for example Loleatta Holloway’s *Love Sensation* (compare figure 20)⁶¹. Through the slapping the songs get an even greater percussive feel, and constantly make your legs twitch due to the vivid funkiness.



Figure 20

We can also find another characteristic style of bass play in Loleatta Holloway’s song *Love Sensation*. It is a kind of bassline that I have

⁶¹ “Love Sensation” by Loleatta Holloway; Album: *Classic Salsoul Mastercuts volume 1*. Bethlehem Music Ltd., 1993. Start listening from bar 29 (minute 0:58).

dubbed ‘octave bass’ (compare figure 20 again) which basically runs through most parts of the song. Most striking about this kind of pattern is the contrasting effect of changing timbres and the rhythmic effect which is created through the constant immense change in pitch – the non-stop up-down, up-down, up-down. That is to say: On the one hand the bass guitar supports the four-on-the-floor beats of the bass drum with its falling octaves landing powerfully on the straight beats 1, 2, 3 and 4, thus giving them even more thud and spacing volume. On the other hand the ‘octave bassline’ also clearly works and pulls against the straightness of the bass drum, because a marked syncopation effect is created through the extremely short, staccato attack of the eighth-notes on the off-beats 1+, 2+, 3+ and 4+ in combination with the large spacing of the octave intervals. Maybe due to this contrasting interplay of fast changes in different tonal range and the resulting rhythmic accentuations, the ‘octave bassline’ is one of the most commonly used bass patterns in underground dance music songs. It can, for example, be found in First Choice’s *Double Cross*, Two Man Sound’s *Que Tal America*, Sparkle’s *Handsome Man* and many other songs.



Figure 21

In the song *Handsome Man* the ‘octave bassline’ stands out against the overall sound pallet very prominently⁶². Here another stylistic characteristic of underground dance music recordings becomes evident: The promotion of a rather simple bassline to a melody-carrying or even melody-leading element (compare figure 21). This is a direct consequence of the sound aesthetic that the underground dance music

⁶² “Handsome Man” by Sparkle; Album: *Larry Levan’s Paradise Garage*. Bethlehem Music Ltd., 1996. Start listening from bar 1 (minute 0:00).

genre is striving for. Instruments along the low frequency spectrum (foremost bass drum and bass guitar) are all mixed very loudly to the front, which is intensified even further in the clubs with their use of separate sub-woofers (compare chapter 1.2.2.). On the other hand it is also remarkable how the bass motif in *Handsome Man* is introduced and continued, as well as how it is set in relation to the other instruments. Beginning with the very first beat of the song, the bassline is clearly the dominating and initially the only melody-bearing element. It is merely accompanied by hi-hat and bass drum. Gradually other instruments are added, like handclaps, tambourine and electric guitar, while the bass continues repeating its 4-bar motif in a repetitive endless loop. The bass changes to a more flexible bass pattern beginning with bar 29 which is however still clearly tied to the first motif. This intro eventually leads into the first verse of the song. It is here, after 1:13 minutes (!) that finally the vocals start singing. At this point the bass has already established itself as such a strong element and it continues to push itself into the foreground with its sheer volume that one in all earnest has to ask the question which of the two, vocals or bass, is actually playing the leading role here.

Even if this principle of ‘bass-as-melody’ is formulated in *Handsome Man* in a very distinct, extreme way, it is by no means a singular occurrence in underground dance music recordings. In the song *Love Sensation* by Loleatta Holloway one could already clearly hear that the distinctions between bass and melody increasingly blur. The bass plays the little melodic “love sensation”-fragment of the vocals – the main melodic motif of the song – in unison with the vocals of the background singers. It continues playing the melodic motif solo in the verses without being coupled to the melodic line of the vocals and, in general, constantly competes with Loleatta Holloway’s vocals for the leading role with its persistent octave-bass riff. With this aesthetic of promoting the repetitive bass motif to a carrier of melody, the underground dance music scene of the 1970s provided an early blueprint for the following house music

genre, where the vocals would often disappear entirely from the songs and the bassline became the dominating melodic element.

One can document this transition of underground dance music recordings of the 1970s towards house music recordings by analyzing the underground dance music song *Let No Man Put Asunder* by First Choice, released in 1977⁶³. During the entire vocal parts of the song the bassline is extremely audible and competes with the vocals for the leading role. However, only when we reach the breakdown of the song, the bass fully usurps the leading role and becomes the sole melodic carrier (compare figure 22). The house song *Jack Your Body*, released in 1987⁶⁴, which ‘recycles’ or ‘steals’ the bassline of *Let No Man Put Asunder* shows us how house music adopted and further developed the ‘bass-as-melody’-aesthetic of underground dance music recordings. In *Jack Your Body* the bassline has entirely taken center stage and is merely complemented by another synthesizer motif, while the vocals have been completely reduced to only the 3 words of the song title. This was a development which was already heralded in underground dance music in the 1970s and which then found its ultimate formulation in such house songs.



Figure 22

Next, we shall discuss the ‘rolling bass’, another typical pattern that can be found in underground dance music recordings. It has been dubbed ‘rolling bass’ by me because the bass conveys to the listener/dancer the impression of a continuously rolling run-on feeling with its cyclical, repetitive style of play condensed within a relatively

⁶³ “Let No Man Put Asunder” by First Choice; Album: *Classic Salsoul Mastercuts volume 1*. Beechwood Music Ltd., 1993. Start listening from bar 78 (minute 2:35).

⁶⁴ “Jack Your Body” by Steve Hurley; Album: *Jack Your Body*. DJ International, 1986.

small note value (mostly that of a half note). The dancer is kept captive within a short endless bass loop until the bass exits this perpetual figure and transitions into another (more free) pattern. This way a lot of energy is dammed up which is only released with the arrival of the new, more flexible bass pattern.



Figure 23

This principle can be beautifully observed in the song *How High* by the Salsoul Orchestra⁶⁵. As can be seen in figure 23, the bass repeats its half-bar pattern for 16 bars, with the tenacious persistence of a perpetual motion machine until the very end of the first verse of the song is reached. After that it pursues a more flexible, free pattern with the beginning of the middle part of the song (anticipated through the little rhythmic motif in the alto saxophone). It releases the dancers from its cyclical claws for a short time, only to force them once again into the straitjacket of the cyclical bass groove a short time later. In similar fashion this kind of ‘rolling bass’ can be found in numerous other underground dance music songs, for example in *Peace Pipe* by B.T. Express or Double Exposure’s *Ten Percent*.

The last bass pattern that needs to be mentioned is – together with the octave basslines – the most common one in underground dance music recordings. It can be found in a large number of underground dance music songs, for example in Andrea True Connection’s *More, More, More*, Sine’s *Just Let Me Do My Thing*, Musique’s *In The Bush* or Revelation’s *Feel It*. I call this type of bass play the ‘four-on-the-floor’ bass pattern (in line with the four-on-the-floor groove of the drums that we have already gotten to know), since the bass in this pattern, similar to

⁶⁵ “How High” by the Salsoul Orchestra; Album: *Larry Levan’s Paradise Garage*. Bethlehem Music Company, 1996. Start listening from bar 11 (minute 0:23).

a human heart beat, accentuates all four crotchets of a bar in unison with the bass drum. Not for nothing do DJs speak of the bass drum as the pulse and the bassline as the artery of dance music, which chase the dancers around the living organism that is the dancefloor with their incessantly pumping energy flow. It is exactly what this kind of bass playing does: The bass is relentlessly pumping its pulsating low frequencies into the dancers' bodies on every single crotchet and thus virtually insists on a physical reaction from the dancers.



Figure 24

Let's have a look at such a 'four-on-the-floor' bassline using the already familiar song *In The Bush* as an example⁶⁶. In figure 24 one can see the 2-bar pattern outlined. As we have observed many times with underground dance music songs, the bass here plays an endless 2-bar rhythmic loop for 16 bars before breaking out of this pattern with the start of the new song part. The bass in this case plays in sync with the bass drum and its four pumping beats per bar the entire time. Even the addition of the two quavers, which are thrown in for variation in the second bar on beat 3, are played in perfect sync by both, bass drum and bassline, together. Different from the other bass patterns that we have examined before – e.g. the fragmented bass or the octave bass, in both of which the syncopations on the off-beats had been highlighted percussively – the bass guitar in this playing pattern leaves the rhythmic embellishment of the traditionally weaker beats to other instruments; in the case of our example to the congas, organ, rhythm guitar and hi-hat. The role of the bass within the structural fabric of the song has shifted. It establishes a rhythmically-straight, synchronizing framework for the song

⁶⁶ "In The Bush" by Musique; Album: *Prelude – Deep Grooves*. Sequel Records, 1993. Start listening from bar 31 (minute 0:54).

together with the bass drum. This keeps the song together but also extremely pushes forward, while all the other poly-rhythmic layers of the song incessantly twitch at the dancers and prompt them to incorporate them into their dance performance. That way the song keeps a balance between the straightness of the bass guitar/bass drum and the rhythmic off-beat accentuations of the other instruments. Thus a driving groove is generated albeit in a different way as we have seen with the previous bass patterns.

In conclusion we can sum up the following characteristics for the different styles of bass playing found in underground dance music recordings:

- Adoption of 'fragmented bassline'-patterns from the funk genre → Playing style is very percussive (extremely staccatoed and syncopated patterns); Use of slapping technique.
- Use of 'octave bass'-patterns → Paradoxically leads to the accentuation of all 4 straight beats of the bar, as well as the simultaneous creation of a syncopating effect through the accentuation of the off-beats.
- Use of 'rolling bass'-patterns → Gives the dancers a kind of perpetual run-on feeling.
- Use of 'four-on-the-floor bass'-patterns → Pounding, very powerful and aggressive type of bass play which aims directly at all 4 straight beats of a bar; Creates a synchronizing, straight rhythmic structure.
- Repetitiveness of bass patterns.
- Bass as a carrier of melody.

2.2.6. Strings

The string instruments, as well as the vibraphone, are those kinds of instruments which hold responsible that underground dance music songs retain this dreaminess and elegance that is so characteristic of the overall sound palette, despite their strong focus on the rhythmical components. It is typical for the strings to play long, sustained arches of sound which the strings use to architecturally fan out grand layers of sound. Thus, they connect single elements of the song structure with each other. Furthermore, the songs become more voluminous with the use of strings and gain a graceful, floating quality. These long arches of spacious, musical phrases can occur: a) as components that are directly linked to the vocals and are oriented to support the melody of the vocals, and b) as melodically-independent, autonomous elements of the song structure.

Lead Singer

17 Run - a - way, you bet - ter not he - si - tate, bet - ter

Strings

20 hur - ry don't wait now. Run - a - way, be - fore you find it too late. Cause you

24 know how love slows you down.

Figure 39

The former can, for example, be found in the song *Runaway* by the Salsoul Orchestra⁸². In figure 39 we can see that the strings are directly coupled with Loleatta Holloway’s vocals. They play the melody almost identically. Important to note is that this direct linking of the two elements results exactly in the effect on the overall sound that has just been outlined: On the one hand the vocals become far more voluminous and are underlaid with a mellow foundation. On the other hand the strings create extended, uninterrupted 4-bar arches that elegantly bridge the gaps and rests in the vocals.

Figure 40 shows a musical score for the song "Runaway" by the Salsoul Orchestra. It consists of three systems of music. Each system has two staves: "Lead Singer" (top) and "Strings" (bottom). The key signature is one flat (B-flat) and the time signature is 4/4. The first system starts at measure 29. The Lead Singer part has lyrics: "Dance a lit-tle closer. Let's ro -". The Strings part plays a melodic line with triplets and arches. The second system starts at measure 33. The Lead Singer part has lyrics: "mance till the night is o-ver. Then you,". The Strings part continues the melodic line. The third system starts at measure 38. The Lead Singer part has lyrics: "you will dis - co-ver this fee - ling of love". The Strings part continues the melodic line with triplets and arches.

Figure 40

The independent, more autonomous playing type of the strings can, for example, be seen in the first verse of the song *Come On Dance*,

⁸² “Runaway” by the Salsoul Orch. featuring Loleatta Holloway; Album: *Classic Salsoul Mastercuts volume 1*. Beechwood Music Ltd., 1993. Start listening from bar 17 (minute 0:36).

Dance by the Saturday Night Band (compare figure 40)⁸³. We can again notice the long-spanning, spacious arches played by the strings, similar to the previous song. These arches create a continuous sound texture spanning several bars, but this time vocals and strings depart from each other and follow two melodically different paths. The strings take on such an autonomous role that they sometimes even push the actual melody of the vocals into the background. This is certainly also due to the fact that the vocals always sing only short phrases while the strings, with their long-spanning melodic arches, fill out the soundscape very pervasively, resulting in the listener being torn between two threads of musical-language. The interpretative ambiguity that thereby opens itself up to the dancers due to the interwoven polyphonic threads played by various instruments is very characteristic for underground dance music recordings. New interpretative possibilities and threads are constantly offered to the dancers which they can pick up and integrate into their dancing.

It is absolutely typical for the strings to be appointed the role as a sweetening, voluminous-spacing element in underground dance music songs. However, it is nonetheless important to realize that the strings do not only serve the purpose of ensheathing the songs with a smooth, thickly-layered sugar coating. Rather their playing style often also aims at driving and spurring on the dancers. A for underground dance music songs very typical way of playing is hereby a musical phenomenon which I call ‘spiraling string-helices’. These ‘spiraling string-helices’ are especially used immediately before musical juncture points. They form a potent, effective tool to build up energy before such a junction.

Let’s have a look at these ‘spiraling string-helices’ in the case of Double Exposure’s *Ten Percent* (compare figure 41)⁸⁴. In this example

⁸³ “Come On Dance, Dance” by the Saturday Night Band; Album: *Prelude – Deep Grooves*. Sequel Records, 1993. Start listening from bar 29 (minute 0:52).

⁸⁴ “Ten Percent” by Double Exposure; Album: *Classic Salsoul Mastercuts volume 1*. Beechwood Music Ltd., 1993. Start listening from bar 49 (minute 1:33).

the strings first play a long-stretched arching phrase, which is autonomous of the melody of the vocals, for three bars. They then take a run up in bar 52 and whizz upwards with their ‘spiraling helix’ which leads into the next part of the song fully laden with energy. There the dancers are welcome by a new mood, in particular due to the change from a closed to an open hi-hat pattern, which picks up the increase of intensity created by the strings and carries the heightened intensity on for three further bars until bar 56. At this point a second increase in intensity follows, created by another ‘spiraling string-helix’, which culminates in an emphatic energy release in form of the last crotchet that the strings play, which is vigorously accentuated.

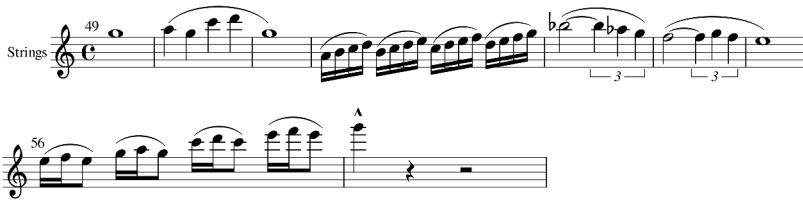


Figure 41

Especially highlighted with regard to the formal structure of these ‘spiraling string-helices’ should be their comparatively fast speed, as well as their (most of the time) ascending sequential structure. As can be seen in figure 41, these ‘spiraling string-helices’ are most of the time comprised of long chains of semiquavers which are divided into one-crotchet-long segments. The course of the melody is almost always leading upwards. Due to the resulting velocity and the purposeful, emphatic playing towards beat 1 of the new measure, as well as due to the ending of the ‘spiraling string-helices’ in a very high pitch range, a lot of energy is build up within the shortest of times. The termination of the ‘spiraling string-helices’ at the release point therefore inevitably demands a physical response from the dancers. Noteworthy is also that these kind of ‘spiraling string-helices’ in underground dance music recordings often

follow in quick succession. This can also be heard in the song *Ten Percent* where after the first ‘spiraling string-helix’ the next one immediately follows 4 bars later. The ‘spiraling string-helices’ are therefore a suitable means if one wishes to increase the intensity of a song rather quickly. This phenomenon manifests itself even more extreme in First Choice’s *Double Cross* (compare figure 42) where the same ‘spiraling string-helix’ is played in immediate succession 4 times and which even gets an additional boost as the bass drum plays on beat 1 each time, igniting the spark⁸⁵.



Figure 42

A second rhythmic type of playing by the strings that is very characteristic for underground dance music songs are the short, accentuated string stabs. In this playing style the strings are almost used like horns, as they only ever play short, isolated quavers that they hurl at the dancers like little rhythmic pinpricks. Often these string stabs are played in a syncopated rhythm as we can, for example, see in Loleatta Holloway’s song *Love Sensation* (compare figure 43)⁸⁶. This syncopated rhythm in combination with the forceful attack of the strings holds responsible that the strings spur on the dancers very effectively. In contrast to the ‘spiraling string-helices’, which presented a means to dam up energy, these string stabs most of the time are used immediately after musical juncture points, as well as at the beginning of new musical units or phrases. With their mostly descending course of melody, as well as

⁸⁵ “Double Cross” by First Choice; Album: *Larry Levan’s Paradise Garage*. Bethlehem Music Company, 1996. Start listening from bar 5 (minute 0:07).

⁸⁶ “Love Sensation” by Loleatta Holloway; Album: *Classic Salsoul Mastercuts volume 1*. Beechwood Music Ltd., 1993. Start listening from bar 84 (minute 2:50).

their sighing quality, caused by the short attack of the strings, they support the ultimate release of the dancers' energy.



Figure 43

In conclusion we can sum up the following characteristic elements of how strings are used in underground dance music recordings:

- Use of long, sustained musical arches and sweetening, spacious soundscapes. There are two kinds of variations for this: Firstly, long musical arches that are closely linked to the melody of the vocals. Secondly, long musical arches that are melodically autonomous → Strings often used as melody instruments.
- Use of 'spiraling string-helices' as a means of spurring on dancers; most of the time in an ascending, sequential structure; normally used immediately before musical juncture points for energy build-up.
- Use of short string stabs as a rhythmic, pushing element; most of the time in a descending, sequential structure; often use of syncopations; normally used immediately after musical juncture points for energy release.

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