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The cultural politics of dance music

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David Hesmondhalgh examines new forms of production in the music business, and asks what we can learn from the dance music boom.

In 1990s Britain, dance music is at the very centre of contemporary youth culture. But for many commentators, dance music is despicable, and its recent popularity only makes it more so. Of course, it might be expected that the right would see dance culture as dangerous, or banal, or both. But the left too has failed to engage adequately with it. For an older generation of intellectuals, who located the politics of music in lyrics, or in the public actions of rock stars, dance music's anonymity and hedonism can seem regressive. Yet dance music culture in the 1990s has enormous credibility amongst those still committed to the notion of 'oppositional' popular culture, in a way that would have been unimaginable twenty years ago. So how did dance music culture come to be understood as counter-hegemonic? How do the politics of its production and consumption match up to the sometimes Utopian claims of its proponents?

The rising credibility of dance music in the 1980s

In the late 1970s, the dominant form of dance music at the time, disco, was the target of derision for rock fans. The audiences and institutions of dance music showed considerably less interest than the punks in the political issues of the day. There was no dance equivalent to the Rock Against Racism movement associated with punk

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and reggae, and punk garnered much more attention and credibility in left circles than dance music. Journals such as *Marxism Today* and *New Society* provided extensive and positive coverage of punk. But there was no such acclaim for disco.

For some sections of the left to embrace dance music culture in the 1980s and 1990s, a shift had to take place in the way the politics of popular culture were understood. At the centre of this change was a developing analysis by cultural studies writers of the relationship between pleasure, dance and politics in black music. Typically, this contrasted the subtle, pleasurable eroticism of black dance music with the thrusting machismo of rock.¹ This new politics of pop drew on feminist and gay activism's emphasis on the body as a potential site of 'resistance'.

Such concerns were reflected in the work of a highly influential generation of music and style journalists. In magazines such as the *NME*, *The Face* and *i-D*, writers such as Barney Hoskyns and Stuart Cosgrove (now Head of Arts and Entertainment at Channel 4) were propagating similar ideas about 'the politics of dancing'.² Rock's embarrassment about dancing was being slowly transmuted into a celebration of dancefloor sexuality. Music journalism and academic populism formed an alliance which found new kinds of authenticities in dance music, around not only class (as in rock) but in connection with sexuality, gender and ethnicity too. Partly as a result of these interventions, new cosmopolitan audiences were attracted to dance music, alongside the working-class and lower middle-class audiences who continued to attend discos and soul events.

So, when the dance boom hit Britain in 1987-8, dance music had already come to be construed as oppositional. The terms used at the time to describe the new dance culture, 'rave' and 'acid house', now sound as out-of-date as the phrase 'beat combo' must have done to early '70s hippies. But both draw attention to discourses which putatively gave dance spaces an added radical edge in the late 1980s.

The term 'acid house' was widely understood to be a reference to drugs. A tedious debate continues to this day about whether the term derives from LSD or from a more esoteric reference to the distorted bass lines of a dance sub-genre developed in Chicago. Whatever the origin of the term, imported American house

1. One influential example was Richard Dyer's 'In Defence of Disco', first published in the magazine *Gay Left*, in 1979.
2. Many of these writers were intellectuals who referred to the names and theories most influential in British cultural studies at the time: Barthes and semiology, Hebdige and subculture, Kristeva and psychoanalytic feminism.

music and the more commercial British version became associated with illegality and marginality. 'Rave' was a term used for big, often unlicensed dance events, usually held out-of-town. In the early 1980s, parties in abandoned warehouses had been the subject of extensive and glamorous coverage in the UK style press. Raves extended this movement away from the restrictions of licensed city-centre premises, out into the unregulated outer-city and rural areas of Britain.

For many commentators, rave confirmed the subversive populism of dance. Its dangerous reputation was sealed by a 'moral panic' in the national press about the drugs associated with the scene, especially ecstasy. Accompanying this panic, though, was an especially strong Utopian discourse of collectivism and equality within club culture, which stressed the breaking-down of ethnic, class and gender differences. Dance events had long been viewed as rituals of togetherness and inclusion, but the new dance culture went further, and the rhetoric at least was genuinely democratising: 'No performers, no VIPs, we are all special', was one typical slogan from a club flyer. Many dancers attribute the feeling of unity and love at late 1980s raves entirely to the physiological effects of ecstasy. Such pharmaceutical determinism ignores the crucial role of subcultural *discourse* in framing such events, but there can be little doubt that ecstasy did help to bring about a strong sense of collective abandon on the burgeoning scene. At many clubs, people started to dance in a much looser, uncontrolled way. The music comprised, at first, rhythmic offshoots of disco, imported mainly from Chicago, Detroit and New York City. House, techno and garage are the three terms which have stuck. Pop producers, increasingly dance-oriented since the early 1980s, picked up on these black American subcultural styles, and dance music's centrality to the most popular songs intensified.³ This made the dance sound all the more loathsome to those within rock culture who still felt resistant to rave/acid house. Dance-pop production team Stock-Aitken-Watemian became a new metaphor for mass culture, both amongst those still affiliated to rock culture, and to dance audiences who preferred more 'underground', 'experimental' sounds.

Dance music culture and the left

Over the past fifty years, musical cultures associated with British youth have had a complex relationship with political movements. Punk represented an

3. *The Economist* (30 May 1992, p34) reported Gallup figures showing that dance accounted for 23 per cent of singles sales in the UK in 1988 and 33 per cent by 1990.

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unprecedented overlap between the left and popular culture: the 'movement' produced its own organic intellectuals who drew on leftist thought; and it encouraged intellectuals to rethink their relationship to popular culture. (Punk was also, of course, contradictory: violently misogynistic at times, and appropriatable by far-right groups as an expression of working-class reaction.) The left in Britain has had a much more distant relationship with dance music culture. This is ironic, given that it was the central strand in contemporary subcultural music during a period when the left was congratulating itself, in the pages of *Marxism Today* and *New Socialist*, on having developed a new sensitivity to popular culture. In fact, the very split that such magazines sought to heal, between a political left (Labour Party and trade union activists, journals such as *New Left Review* and *Socialist Review*) and a cultural left (organic intellectuals in the style and music press, such as *The Face*, and academics drawn to postmodernism and/or post-structuralism) still seems to be with us. Both sides of this divide have failed to develop an adequate understanding of dance music culture.

The cultural left saw (and heard) the significance of dance music in terms of *innovation* (the music was centred on rhythm, far more than the voice - and-guitar fixation of rock) or as a matter of *a new collectivism* amongst club audiences. This focus on audiences was characteristic of a more general movement amongst intellectuals to reinvigorate left politics by looking to consumption rather than production, to leisure and play rather than work. So commentary on dance music from the cultural left has located its politics mainly in what happens in clubs and raves - the sites of consumption. At its best (for example, Simon Reynolds' work for *Melody Maker* and *The Wire* on the sexual politics of rave) this has popularised a sophisticated aesthetics of the body. But rave has also provided fertile ground for the excesses of postmodernist theory. Many journalists and academics have commented on the intense hedonism of club crowds, and on the adoption of childish symbols. The postmodernists read this hedonism, which they term 'disappearance', using the fashionable jargon of Jean Baudrillard, as offering more threat than mere oppositional activism to the established order. This is because, according to one academic collection, by refusing the whole idea of meaning, subcultures engaged in such regression refuse even to acknowledge authority.⁴ But this crude romanticisation is by no means confined to academic

4. Steve Redhead (ed), *Rave Off*, Aldershot 1993.

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comment: such views of the politics of hedonism run through the music and style press's coverage of dance music too. But when researchers started to bother asking dance audiences what they thought, it turned out that ravers saw the new dance culture as anything but 'meaningless'.⁵

But the political left's treatment of dance is equally lacking. It has treated dance music as a mere soundtrack for activism. Typical of this was *The New Statesman and Society's* treatment of the Luton activist collective, Exodus, during 1993-5. The magazine at least was prepared to give regular coverage to the new 'politics of protest' - but dance music itself was treated as a new folk music, a means of rallying the troops. How the music sounded, what these sounds implied about the culture, and how the culture was made, sold and circulated were all invisible in such political-left coverage.

The political left has treated dance music as a mere soundtrack for activism'

The principal theme, instead, was to treat dance music as the target of moral panic. In the most sophisticated work on dance music culture to date, Sarah Thornton has provided a critique of moral panic theory with regard to dance music culture.⁶ Thornton argues that, rather than providing a threat to youth subcultures, unfavourable coverage by 'mainstream' media actually sustains them, by generating credibility amongst potential audiences. Moral panic theory, says Thornton, fails to take account of the way competing niche media (such as the dance music press) use tabloid outrage to muster what she calls 'subcultural capital'.

But Thornton's critique shows signs of the cultural left's intense suspicion of traditional left politics. She overlooks the degree to which such coverage can help to generate consent for the intervention of the state, in the form of police raids and road-blocks aimed at controlling youth leisure, and the introduction of parliamentary measures designed to increase police powers. Two laws have quite rightly been seen within dance music institutions as an attack on the 'right to party'. The first was the Bright Bill, eventually passed as the 1990 Entertainments (Increased Penalties) Act. The second was the Criminal Justice Bill, passed as the Criminal Justice

5. See Maria Pini, 'Women and the Early British Rave Scene', in Angela McRobbie (ed.), *Back to Reality? The Social Experience of Cultural Studies*, Manchester 1997, forthcoming.
6. Sarah Thornton, *Club Cultures*, Cambridge 1995.

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Act in 1994- The aim of these new measures was primarily to control a new culture of free parties, political protest and 'alternative' lifestyle. In spite of her marginalisation of these political concerns, Thornton's argument is important. It criticises the functionalist view of the state and media held by many within dance music culture (who are not nearly so uninterested in politics as the cultural left claim). Her book is currently being snapped up eagerly by students and other readers hungry for intelligent comment on dance music.

The production politics of dance music culture: three myths

Thornton's study, however, is typical of a reluctance on the part of the academic cultural left to engage with issues of production. Indeed, cultural studies academics often claim that an interest in cultural production is a sign of an unreconstructed, old-fashioned Marxism (the cliché of the 'cloth cap' often emerges at popular culture conferences when the issue of capitalism comes up). And the political left has done little to discredit such facile links, at a time when the commodification of culture and information is becoming an increasingly important part of the strategies of globalising multinationals.

Dance music is a particularly compelling example of the need to think more carefully about the politics of cultural production, because those drawn to dance music culture feel strongly that its methods of production are counter-hegemonic. That so many dance fans are interested in the notion of 'underground' and 'alternative' production is significant: it suggests that dance music's utopianism is not confined to the club, the site of consumption many academics have been concerned with. Rather, it is common to hear a number of claims, which represent a set of hopes about how people might carry out creative work under capitalism. However, there are important omissions in the common-sense beliefs of dance music fans about how the music is put out. I dispute them here, in order to clarify, rather than to dismiss, dance audiences' views.

The following passage contains some of the most common characterisations of the way dance culture has supposedly democratised the production of popular music. (Ironically, it appeared in the former political left-flagship *The New Statesman*, written by a journalist who was keen to persuade the magazine's political left readership that their suspicion of dance music culture was misplaced.)

[T] here's a fundamental subversiveness at the heart of dance music ... No longer is pop music something produced and - crucially - *owned* by musicians recording 'original' tracks based on melodic and harmonic principles. Ambient and techno can be made on computers in bedrooms, and are more concerned with *texture* than melody. House music can be created purely by mixing together other people's records, using sampling technology. Many records central to E-culture aren't even available commercially - they're DJ-only 'white labels'. Much of what's played at clubs is created on the spot by DJs. There is no 'original'. Dance music can be imitated, even co-opted, but it remains, by nature, subversive.'

Three key, inter-related themes in discussions about dance music's production politics emerge here. Firstly, there is the idea that dance music production challenges notions of authorship and originality. Central to such claims is the practice of remixing - the practice of taking a master and altering the arrangement of sounds to create a new version of the record. This has an ambivalent status in claims for the radicalism of dance music culture. There is a tendency for dance music audiences to disparage the practice, but for some commentators remixing acts as a subtle deconstruction of the notion of the 'original'.⁸

Secondly, there is the image of the 'white label' as a form of recording which transcends or escapes commodification by being circulated only amongst DJs, or by resisting the personality cults associated with the star system. The 'white label' is simply a 12-inch vinyl record which contains little or no information about its contents. The prestige of the 'white label' has declined as the dance divisions of major record companies have flooded the market with promotional copies, but even in its heyday (1988-91) the practice seemed to confirm dance music's opposition to the emphasis on personality and 'image' in the rock and pop world. Thirdly, there is the increased access to music-making allowed by the 'bedroom studio'.

All these claims are difficult to sustain. In fact, remixing can best be thought of as an attempt to *extend* authorship, rather than to challenge or disperse it. By associating the name of a star DJ or mixer with an indie track, for example, the dance audience can be encouraged to buy, as well as the rock/pop fans. And the

7. Toby Manning, 'Meet the E-culturati', *New Statesman and Society*, 23 February 1996.

8. E.g. Simon Watney, 'Cover Story', *Artforum*, October 1994.

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white label's radical status was very quickly undermined by its use as a promotional strategy by big dance companies. This is not simply a case of the major labels co-opting something authentically subcultural: the emphasis on obscurity and secrecy in dance subcultures was always convertible into a form of elitism, an attempt at distinction (this is the aspect of dance culture of which Sarah Thornton is most critical). Will Straw has pointed out how this investment in secrecy is a mark of a male-dominated culture of connoisseurship, rather than a sign of democratic egalitarianism.⁹

The 'bedroom studio' provides a more complex case. The images of access and decentralisation evoked by the notion of musicians working in their own living spaces are powerful ones, and are fundamental to the notion of democratisation in dance music culture.

If punk's metaphor of access (borrowed from American psychedelic pop-rock) was the garage, dance music's is the bedroom. The image refers to real changes in the availability, expense and sophistication of recording technology. But to what extent can these changes be thought of as *democratising* music-making, as many dance pundits claim?

Dance music and new digital technology

A number of important developments in the commercial organisation of music technology meant that it was possible by the late 1980s for records to be produced extremely cheaply. Together, *sequencers* and *samplers* add up to a radical reconfiguration of musical creation, by combining storage and composition. Sequencers are 'word-processors for music', which allow various instrumental tracks to be co-ordinated easily. Samplers allow extracts from other musical works to be transferred, without loss of quality. In the 1980s, the costs of these useful computer tools plummeted and by the end of the decade, semi-professional production in domestic studios was relatively affordable.

Because of the rising credibility of dance music outlined above, music journalists in the late 1980s were able to portray the compelling rhythm lines of house and techno as radical. Sequencing equipment meant that these repetitive beats could be reproduced relatively cheaply. Coverage in magazines of the speed and ease with which house-style records could be made encouraged musicians to 'have a go' themselves. Musicians would record their own tracks at home; perhaps test them out on DAT (digital audio tape) at a local club; press up 500 to 2,000 copies

on 12-inch singles; and distribute these records informally to networks of specialist retailers in an area.

So there is certainly some truth in claims that dance music has brought about a new era of Do-It-Yourself music-making. But the bedroom and the cottage are romantic images of autonomous production, which evade the dialectical complexities of music as a commodity. The notion of the bedroom studio draws powerfully on the Internet-driven technological utopianism prevalent amongst the US libertarian left. It neglects the importance of distributing and publicising these cultural goods to achieve significance beyond a small, self-contained niche. Beyond very small runs, large distribution firms are needed to get the product out, and to help publicise it - and many dance companies choose to collaborate closely with the major corporations they sometimes profess to despise. The early success of small dance labels was largely due to the low promotional costs allowed by the special subcultural credibility available for dance, through its connections with a rebellious youth culture. But dance music's move into the mainstream should not be understood necessarily by an authenticity/co-optation model, whereby the nasty majors polluted a pure, unsullied youth form. Rather, dance music always has had a profound ambivalence about being popular, about being a mass form. And the dance music press very rarely paid critical attention to fundamental issues of music production: co-operating to form new, long-term outlets for creativity, for example, or providing less exploitative contractual relationships than are possible in the major-dominated mainstream.

'If punk's metaphor of access was the garage, dance music's is the bedroom'

The politics of ethnicity in dance music

Ethnicity has been another area in which the claims of dance music insiders have been exaggerated and, again, left intellectuals have failed to provide coherent alternative analyses. For cultural left commentators, the post-house British dance scene was validated by its roots in the work of (often gay) black American DJs, and by the supposedly high degree of racial integration at raves

9. 'The Booth, the Floor and the Wall: Dance Music and the Fear of Falling', *Public 8*, 1993.

during its 'golden age' (1988-1990). Whether or not rave really did bring about a temporary reconciliation of black and white dance scenes, there is little doubt about the very great degree of segregation between white dance music culture and black music institutions (sound systems, shabeens and blues parties) before and after these dates. This segregation is apparent in the British dance music press, which prints many pictures of white clubbers, but where black faces - other than those of American house DJs and musicians - are few and far between. Magazines oriented towards black readers (such as *Hip-Hop Connection* and *Touch*) feature hip-hop, R&B and reggae. Both British-Asian and British-Caribbean youth seem to have found more affinity with these other dance styles than with rave-related dance music culture.

Dance music started to fragment after its eclectic golden period in 1991. A sub-genre called hardcore techno started *to use* hip-hop-style breakbeats, often sampled from recordings, rather than the programmed rhythms of house variants. This meant that hardcore techno became the one part of British dance music culture which drew significant black audiences. Ironically, the dance music press (generally staffed by those brought up in the 'soul boy' tradition of dance music culture) reacted against the perceived lack of sophistication in hardcore techno, and the scene received very little publicity between 1991 and 1993.

But in 1993-4, the sounds which had been developed on this underground scene gained exposure, as the music press and the national media picked up on the latest subcultural trend (accompanied by a minor moral panic about guns at clubs). Hardcore techno 'crossed over', and as it did so, the term 'jungle' became widely used for it. Just as house music gained credibility from its origins in a black, underground scene, jungle gained much of its significance for white audiences from its roots in 'hidden' black British institutions: pirate radio stations, and dance clubs attended by predominantly black crowds. It incorporates some important elements of British-Caribbean subcultural production and consumption, previously confined to the world of reggae and ragga sound systems, such as the use of dubplates (tracks exclusively produced for a particular DJ) and the demand by dancers for 'rewinds' of favoured tracks.

Jungle/drum & bass is the most important black British sound and genre of the 1990s (though there are important and respected white musicians involved). In terms of the ways its commodities are produced and circulated, it has much in

common with post-house dance music culture: it is digitalised, producible for relatively low costs, and is reliant on a network of dedicated shops, promoters and labels. And, significantly, it is being analysed by intellectuals in ways which recall the treatment of earlier forms, such as house and techno.¹⁰ But the same questions need to be asked of the institutional politics of drum & bass, as of dance music culture: has it made a serious difference to who produces popular music, and where the money goes? Has it resulted in a democratisation in the making *and* distribution of recorded music in Britain? The greater sophistication involved in producing drum & bass breakbeats means that production costs are higher than in other dance forms. But the main problems facing drum & bass musicians and musics derive precisely from the genre's current status in media coverage as the most fashionable contemporary subculture. Drum & bass faces the same trap which has faced many other black music forms this century: as soon as the passage is made from margin to mainstream, the genre gains prestige, and produces pride for the communities creating it. But at the same time, the style becomes prone to appropriation and exploitation. 'Jungle' remixes of the most banal pop hits are now common. The music's combination of frantic *percussion with* smooth vocal and bass lines have seen it adopted as yuppie cocktail music. Nevertheless, drum & bass must not be dismissed: it is a distinctively black British style, expressive of new identities, an often thrilling mixture of the dark and the uplifting, offender humanity with a street-tough demand for respect.

Meanwhile, in another lineage of dance music culture, a mystical anti-intellectualism prevails. The most absurd ramblings of neo-hippie rave culture portray the DJ and other artists as magical shamen, rather than people who earn a living through cultural communication." Audiences are 'tribes' - and the pre-industrial term reflects a sentimental nostalgia amongst its users. In order to counteract such nonsense, it is important that intellectuals interested in popular culture work towards an integration of approaches. Whereas the cultural left have concentrated on textual innovations and on new forms of audience behaviour,

10. Benjamin Noys, for example, concentrates on formal innovation and audiences, and sidelines production. He insists on an analysis of jungle's textual features as the most important route for investigation. What he finds there is the 'refusal of meaning' supposedly present in house and techno (though he may mean simply that there are no lyrics); and, more intriguingly, new fusions of race and sexuality: 'Into the "jungle"', *Popular Music* 143, 1995.

11. The New Age dance music figure, Fraser Clark has made many such claims.

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the political left have tried to understand the relationship between dance music and new social movements. Of course, the distinction between these tendencies blurs at times: some dance music magazines, such as *Mixmag*, have covered political issues widely; and the political left are occasionally willing to publish articles about dance music (while, if *Red Peppers* recent issue on music is a reliable index, apparently believing that Britpop's retro-rock is the most important development in contemporary popular music). But more attention will have to be paid to unfashionable issues about commodification, and the place of cultural production within changing forms of profit-making. As the cultural industries become an increasingly vital part of the strategies of global corporations and national governments, it will be all the more important to understand where emerging cultural producers are pinning their hopes of developing alternatives.