

## Trance Dance

It's 1975 and the sound of Billy Thorpe and the Aztecs rocks the Kings Theatre in Mt Gambier, South Australia. I am on the dance floor lost to the beat, my hair flying – my body knows the timing, the rhythm, as if we are one. The song is over I open my eyes and there is a space around me; my fellow revellers have given me room to move. That is how it was for me in my teens in the 70's. Abandoned to the beat of Rock, transcending the moment. In the turbulence of my teenage years, this was my refuge, my home; to dance.

In hindsight Trance has always been in my life, it was my connection to something bigger than me, something that made me feel good. It took me out of whatever I was stuck in, for a while. It didn't have a name then, the concept of Trance did not exist in my little world; in a town in the South East of South Australia.

Many years later when I finally found Middle Eastern Dance (MED) I also found Tribal and Trance. I found the names for this feeling of oneness. The Egyptian Zaar, the head spinning, the hair flying, it was just like being on that dance floor, by then I had grown up, I had left that world behind and had made a new life with a family of my own, in a city that connected me to a bigger world and a big cultural melting pot.

As I explored MED and all its technicalities, I always came back to the tribal indigenous aspect of it, which included Trance. I learnt about the healing aspect of these dances, I learnt about how cultures used them for these purposes and that dance; ecstatic dance, propels you to another consciousness. I have come to understand myself and why I am drawn to Trance dance and the importance of it in my life and how as a tormented teenager, it kept me sane and alive.

Trance or dance is my meditation. It is where I can release my thoughts . . . and go within. The older I get the clearer it is. Something that is an issue can be given over to the dance and a solution will show itself, without effort or thought, simply through dance.

Gabrielle Roth, leading exponent of Ecstatic dance and creator of the "5 rhythms", has this to say about Trance:

"I mean for me God is the dance. God is energy, motion, energy in motion, motion is energy and that's all one thing for me. And I can rely on it, because there's no dogma in the dance. There's nothing to believe there is nothing to hold onto. There's only a force, a current, a wave, a cycle, a pattern to continually surrender to and to allow that to shift and change us, to take that which is disparate or divided and make it whole". \*

When Gabrielle talks about dogma she is referring to the constraints of organised religion and particularly Catholicism. Being brought up a Catholic myself, I understand what she is saying. What Catholicism has done for many of us "Once was Catholics", is to take us on a spiritual quest for our own meaning of God. In the name of God many religions that originally practised dance as a way to God banished it. Catholicism and Islam are two such examples.

Trance dance takes place all over the world, all indigenous cultures have their own version of it. The characteristic of Trance music is repetition, simple repetition. The driving beat is a constant, something your body can trust so that your body can keep responding and releasing. In modern Western society, electronic music and the pursuit of Trance have created Rave gatherings. What make Techno Rave gatherings like Earth Core and the Rainbow Serpent Festival so appealing is the constant loud driving beat and a place to be totally wild and abandoned. Personally, I can only take the Techno doof beat in small doses. After a while I long for the human touch, the emotional

content, I respond more to the organic sounds that come from the skin of a drum or a person directly creating the sound. But for the thousands who go to these events it is their Trance.

Krusty, DJ, convenor of Rainbow Serpent Festival has this to say;

“You’ve got absolutely amazing frequencies coming out of those speaker boxes. And once you start dancing for a while you just start to resonate with those frequencies, they go right through your whole cellular structure, so that your whole body starts to vibrate. And when you’re all dancing en masse, with a number of other people, you all start to vibrate with that frequency, then the whole dance floor becomes a single organism.” \*

That is what is great and in our ever-changing world, caught in a war between terror and trust, to be dancing with all of those people transcending is the best place to be.

I am very fortunate to have the opportunity to dance with musicians who also love to play transcendent music. Musicians are one with the dance, it is a pulse that works together as we play Sufi music, “Sufi music means any music that connects with the heart. It is the music of submission and surrender that bonds humans to God and transcends all religious boundaries. The sound of the Ney (reed flute) symbolises the lamenting and longing for the Beloved. The constant rhythmic beat of the Dafs (frame drum), the daf’s frame or circle symbolises the circle of love and each of the rings inside the Daf symbolises each one of us. The Zikr, a sacred phrase “La Ilaha, El Allah Hu” is spoken or sung aloud, and means “There is no reality, except God” The chant HU is the ancient name for God, a love song to God. When Soul has heard this sound, Soul yearns to go home. From this place I whirl around my axis. Then the Ney ends and the percussion builds up and the Ayoubi beat gets faster and faster. I become the Zaar, and I begin to release my bones, my thoughts, and my body vibrates to the beat – it is not just me is all of us. Till finally I hit the floor.

The Egyptian Zaar’s movements are common to many North African cultures. An example of this is the Hadra ritual from Morocco. The Hadra is a healing trance ceremony in which music and dance are aimed at the attainment of ecstasy. It has its roots in Sufism. The Haddarat women of Essaouria sing and chant invoking holy men and spirits, communicating with other worlds. Each rhythm has many symbolic meanings, from healing powers to exorcism.

“When the rhythm starts, you feel like something is coming into your body; like something shaking. You don’t remember anything when you are in trance. You will be sitting with people and when the rhythm starts, that’s the last thing you remember, until you come to, when the incense is smoked over you” Lala Aicha \*

In our performance of Zikr and Zaar we cross cultures from Turkey to Egypt. We are inspired by the Whirling Dervishes founded by Jelaluddin Rumi, who was inspired by love to write spiritual poetry and to whirl. This is taken from *The Essential Rumi* translated by Coleman Barks with John Moyne. “The Turn”, the moving meditation done by Mevlevi dervishes, originated with Rumi. The story goes that he was walking in the gold-smithing section of Konya when he heard beautiful music in their hammering. He began turning in harmony with it, an ecstatic dance of surrender and yet with great centred discipline. He arrived at a place where ego dissolved and a resonance with universal soul comes in – Dervish literally means ‘doorway’. When what is communicated moves from presence to presence darshan occurs, with language inside the seeing. When the gravitational pull gets even stronger, the two become one turning that is molecular and galactic and a spiritual remembering of the presence at the centre of the universe. Turning is an image of how the dervish becomes an empty place where human and divine can meet. To approach the whole the part must become mad, by conventional standards at least. There ecstatic holy people, called matzubs in the sufi tradition, redefine this sort of madness as true health.”

As an entertainer/performer I have performed whirling and the Zaar many times. It is very challenging to do this, as in its purity it is not a performance. When I am not performing and just in my dance it is a very different experience. Over the years it has been a huge challenge to go into myself and to marry the consciousness of performer with the abandonment of the moment.

Last year I performed at the launch of the film *Dances of Ecstasy*. I spent the week prior to the event preparing myself. I ate lightly, I made myself a special dress. My intention was to be centred and focused and on marrying these two elements: the performance and the trance. I did two performances one at the beginning and one close to the end. The whole evening was an incredible journey. It began with the whirling, me; a white figure appearing in the middle of a room full of hundreds of people. The people are watching; I am being watched, but I am also somewhere else. I then leave the venue for a while to then return and do the Zaar. I call upon the spirits of the Haddarat women featured in the film, and as the rhythm begins and I come out into the middle of the crowded dance floor, I come to feel my myself transported to the desert, to that place in my spirit memory and to the dance floor in 1975. When I finish I can barely walk off the dance floor – if I could have, I would have stayed there on the floor. Krusty's speakers begin to pump a tech beat and everyone goes wild. Many hands help me off and I collapse on the floor back stage. I was as high as a kite, lying on my back with this euphoric smile on my face I don't know how long I stayed there I know that for the duration of my dance, I had taken the crowd back to the Moroccan women and the Hadra.

Trance dance ultimately is a personal journey. There are no rules to your response. Two people could have a completely different response at the same time. I give workshops in Zaar, Whirling and Trance. Although there is no technique or steps as such, there are important things to consider. In my workshops I encourage participants to eat lightly or to fast beforehand. Before we abandon to the beat, we prepare. Firstly we need to Breathe. The breath is everything; the breath allows you to release tension in your body and your mind, to bring you into your centre and to feel where you are at on a cellular level. From the breath we begin to find ways to access release in our muscles, bones and thinking mind. From there you are guided through various process to induce a physical and mental trance state.

I will leave you with one of Jelaluddin Rumi's poems

Dance when you're broken open.  
Dance if you've torn the bandage off  
Dance in the middle of fighting.  
Dance in your blood.  
Dance, when you're perfectly free.

Reference

Barks, C. (trans.) with Moyne, J. (19 ) *The Essential Rumi* Castle Books

\* Quotes are taken from the film *Dances of Ecstasy* by Michelle Mahrer and Nicole Ma.  
This is available on DVD. Go to <http://www.dancesofecstasy.com/>