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UNDERWHELMED

Fascinating Rhythm

By **Sandy Asirvatham** | Posted 11/14/2001

These days, the high point of my week as a second-time-around college student often comes on Wednesdays at 3:30, when I get to sit at a horribly detuned yet somehow loveable old Steinway grand for two hours as the pianist for Towson University's student Latin-jazz ensemble. Although I get to take solos on every tune we do (and am encouraged then to get as creatively "individual" as my imagination and technique allow), much of time I am merely a cog in the machine: I hammer away at simple, repetitive, syncopated figures (called *montunos*) that mesh with the various interlocking patterns our percussionists are beating on congas, bongos, timbales, claves, and other assorted noisemakers. If you have listened to any salsa or Afro-Cuban music and consider it to be absurdly repetitive (even by the standards of dance music), you're not exactly wrong. What you may not have realized--what I did not realize previously--is that this repetitiveness is a source of pure joy for those of us on the bandstand.

The ensemble is taught by trumpeter Alex Norris and pianist Tim Murphy, Peabody-trained musicians of the highest caliber and members of Rumba Club, a longstanding Baltimore-based Latin-jazz ensemble. Rumba Club records on the Palmetto label and has achieved a decent audience across the country, but it still plays regularly at local venues.

Tim is an extremely skilled pianist and an inventive, adventurous improviser who's been a part of the local jazz scene for a long time. I'm sure he could easily be the star of his own successful gig (the Timothy Murphy Exploratory Octet or something like that), dazzling audiences with two-handed runs and alternative harmonies borrowed from avant-garde classical composers. But the other day he told me that he has never been as happy, musically speaking, as when he's playing with Rumba Club. Alex, meanwhile, is that rare and enviable creature, a young jazz musician who's good enough to live in New York (which means you can safely assume that he has backed up his talent with inestimable amounts of hard work). It's not terribly convenient for him these days, but Alex still battles the I-95 traffic on a regular basis to play with Rumba Club.

What is the glue that keeps this band together? Is it the same ineffable, addictive stuff that makes it so fun for me to play the same basic *montuno* 100 times in a row while Barry slaps a *guaguanco* pattern on the conga, Len keeps that gently rocking, perpetually syncopated *tumbao* going on the bass, and the rest of us conform to our prescribed rhythmic roles?

My best hope for an answer derives from a book I once read called *Keeping Together in Time: Dance and Drill in Human History*, by William McNeill. A World War II conscript, McNeill took great interest in the powerful psychological effect of the deceptively dull-seeming practice of close-order drill. "Marching aimlessly about on the drill field, swaggering in conformity with prescribed military postures, conscious only of keeping in step so as to make the next move correctly and in time somehow felt good," he writes. "A sense of pervasive well-being is what I recall; more specifically, a strange sense of personal enlargement; a sort of swelling out, becoming bigger than life, thanks to participation in collective ritual."

Later, as a military historian, McNeill concluded that the superior effectiveness of some armies was in large part due to marching and drilling--a simple practice that created a hard-to-break sense of cohesion and mutual identity among troops. He postulates that "the emotional response to drill was an inheritance from prehistoric times, when our ancestors had danced around their camp fires before and after faring forth to hunt." Collective rhythmic motion, especially in tandem with synchronized vocalization (chanting or singing), "may provoke echoes of the fetal condition when a major and perhaps principal external stimulus to the developing brain was the mother's heartbeat," he suggests. "If so, one might suppose that adults when dancing or merely marching together might



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arouse something like the state of consciousness they left behind in infancy, when no distinction is made between self and surrounding."

McNeill goes on to trace the importance of rhythmic motion through many times and places--from the nationalistic parades of the Nazis to the calisthenics of modern Japanese factory workers to the behavior of crowds at sporting events (the wave, for example)--in the creation of group identity. (I might take it one step further to include the "rhythmic bonding" of sex, undoubtedly a large part of what turns two people into a "we.")

What's clear is that this ancient form of community-building is a morally neutral instrument; once created, a "group consciousness" can be used for good purposes or bad. Although I normally guard the boundaries of my individual personality closely, I don't mind the sensation of losing myself in an ecstatic musical groove. I try not to think too hard about the similarity between the life-affirming euphoria I'm feeling and, for example, the fervent and terrifying things that Osama bin Laden's loyal minions undoubtedly feel.

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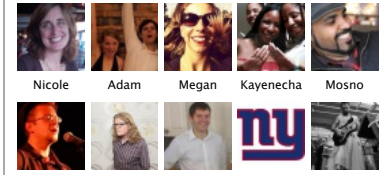
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