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Tribal Style 101

BY HILARY GIOVALE



Over the last several years, the United States has been experiencing a "bellydance renaissance", and our art form has become increasingly popular with a variety of women. In this time, relatively new styles of the dance have gained a lot of visibility. One of these is Tribal Style. Most people are familiar with the look of Tribal Style, but I've found that not everyone is aware of the ways in which it is fundamentally different from traditional or cabaret-style dance. I have been dancing in the Tribal Style for six years; here are some of the basics I've come to understand.

HISTORY AND BACKGROUND

Like all bellydance, Tribal Style is an interpretation of ancient women's dances from the Middle East, Northern Africa, India, and Europe. These dances were done by women since pre-historic times and were used as religious expres-

sion, fertility rituals, and childbirth support and education. Unlike more culturally traditional forms of dance, Tribal Style pulls movement, music, and costuming from different regions throughout history. It does not try to replicate a dance from any specific culture, but is a new creation based in fusion.

Tribal Style was born in the 1980's, when a group of women in California began developing a new type of dance inspired by ancient movements. Carolena Nericcio, (the teacher of this group) went on to direct the troupe FatChance-BellyDance of San Francisco, and Paulette Rees-Denis (one of Carolena's first students) eventually went on to direct Gypsy Caravan Dance Company in Portland, Oregon. Both Carolena and Paulette have become world-renowned for their ingenious development and instruction in Tribal Style Bellydance. Carolena uses the term "American Tribal Style" [ATS] to describe her format of dance, while Paulette uses "Tribal Style" to describe her format and the style in general.



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From these origins, this new phenomenon became increasingly popular and many other groups began, including Kajira Djoumahna's Black-Sheep BellyDance. Today, there are countless groups of Tribal Style dancers around the world. It is particularly popular in the United States, Europe, Australia, and some parts of Asia. While groups will often base their dance style in that of one or more of the original troupes, each group develops its own unique style of dance, costume, and music choices, developed by the director and members of the group.

GROUP IMPROVISATION

The Tribal style of dance is unique because it is based in group improvisation. Within true Tribal Style, groups of 2 or more women dance together without choreography. Using a shared "language" of movement, they take turns leading and following each other. There is no such thing as a Tribal Style soloist, although you'll see short solo performances within a group context, when part of the group dances in a chorus to "frame" a single dancer.

In my opinion, the best way to understand Tribal Bellydance is to think of

it as a language that students learn over time. Going to a beginning class is like learning nouns in the new language (simple, basic movements). As a dancer continues, she learns verbs and how to conjugate them (how to apply various

movements in different sequence within the correct musical context). In an advanced class dancers are creating whole sentences with their movements (more complex combinations and improvisational techniques are used). Within a troupe or longstanding group, fluency of the language is achieved (the new language is so engrained they no longer have to think about it).

Repetition of basic movements over time is important in this style. I have found that the movements must be absorbed deeply into the muscle memory to create the level of comfort necessary for group improvisation. With experience, a Tribal Style dancer learns to quiet her mind and allows her body to take over when she leads the group, rather than frantically searching her brain for a movement. With experience, she also becomes better at following the other members of her group: she becomes so grounded in the movement, the slightest change of the leader's wrist or body



position alerts her that a change is happening and allows her to follow seamlessly.

Improvisation is fun, challenging, and engages the mind and body on many different levels. When improvising, the leader is responsible for being decisive and clear in her movements. The follower's responsibility is to mimic the leader. Their mutual cooperation enables improvisational dance to happen. When a group is able to spend a good amount of time improvising together, they develop a sense of telepathy that enables them to communicate with each other through their bodies, without words.

A WORD ON TRIBAL FUSION

Many people are familiar with the beautiful, snaky style of dance that has been pioneered by Rachel Brice. This style is known as Tribal Fusion and has some similarities to Tribal Style in the costuming and musical aesthetic. However, it is fundamentally different from Tribal Style, because it uses choreography and is usually performed by soloists rather than a group.

COSTUME

Another aspect that differentiates Tribal Style from other forms of bellydance is the costume, which tends to cover much of the body. We typically use pants and/or skirts that completely

cover the legs, tops that cover the arms and chest, and wraps or decorations that cover the head partially or completely. Sometimes tassels are used to accentuate the hips. The jewelry and makeup tend to be heavy. The costume creates an earthy and mysterious aesthetic.

Tribal Style costuming has its roots all over the world: Turkish pantaloons, 1930's Hollywood-style coin bras, Indian cholis, Flamenco skirts, and jewelry and adornment from Central Asia are a few of the influences you'll see.

MUSIC

This is a fusion-based art form, and the music we use reflects that. We dance to traditional Arabic drum rhythms such as Beledi, Saidi, Chiftatelli, and Masmoodi. We also use music from around the world, featuring a more eclectic world-fusion sound with inspiration from Flamenco, sacred Indian music, Australian didgeridoo, and more. As dancers become experienced they use a variety of zil patterns to accent their music. The music we use is a joyful mixture that finds its inspiration throughout the world, just like Tribal Style itself.

Sources: *Tribal Vision*, by Paulette Rees-Denis
The Tribal Bible, by Kajira Djoumahna
Photos by Pete Giovale

MIDDLE EASTERN, GYPSY TRIBAL COSTUMES

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