

Volume 31, 2022

Americas

A HEMISPHERIC MUSIC JOURNAL

Published by the American Music Research Center
and the University of Nebraska Press

Copyright © 2023 University of Colorado

Americas: A Hemispheric Music Journal presents a broad view of American music, one that encompasses the diverse soundscapes within the United States as well as the wider Americas, including the Caribbean. Formerly known as the *AMRC Journal*, *Americas* continues to further the mission of the American Music Research Center at the University of Colorado Boulder, but in a refocused and revitalized way that reflects the research interests of twenty-first-century scholars. Each annual issue focuses on one central theme. Recurring special sections highlight the spaces and places where music is made and the people who compose, perform, and otherwise support that music.

Americas (ISSN 2690-2214) is published annually by the American Music Research Center and the University of Nebraska Press. For current subscription rates and online ordering, please see our website: www.nebraskapress.unl.edu.

If ordering by mail, please make checks payable to the University of Nebraska Press and send to University of Nebraska Press, PO Box 880630, Lincoln, NE 68588-0630. Telephone: 402-472-8536.

All inquiries on subscription, change of address, advertising, and other business communications should be sent to the University of Nebraska Press.

Copyright © 2023 University of Colorado
All rights reserved

If you would like to reprint material from *Americas*, please query for permission using our online form, located at <https://nebraskapressjournals.unl.edu/permissions/>.

Cover design by Lacey Losh. Cover photos: © canstockphoto.com

Americas is available online through Project MUSE at <http://muse.jhu.edu>.

Information for Contributors

Please submit your article as a Microsoft Word document electronically to Susan Thomas at americaseditor@colorado.edu. Use endnotes, not footnotes, and conform styles to the latest edition of *The Chicago Manual of Style*. Authors whose articles are accepted will be asked to provide print-ready, publication-quality musical examples. Authors are responsible for obtaining and providing necessary copyright permission.

Americas is abstracted or indexed in *Academic Search Alumni Edition*, *Academic Search Complete*, *Academic Search Elite*, *Academic Search Premier*, *Academic Search Ultimate*, *Arts Premium Collection*, *Current Abstracts*, *Music & Performing Arts Collection*, *Music Index*, *RILM Abstracts of Music Literature* (*Repertoire International de Littérature Musicale*), and *TOC Premier*.

EDITOR

Susan Thomas

GUEST EDITOR

Christi Jay Wells

EDITORIAL BOARD

Jacqueline Avila

Lisa Cooper Vest

Daniel Party

Naomi Graber

Austin Okigbo

Jesus Ramos-Kittrell

Julian Saporiti

Sounding Anti-normativity, Dancing Cultural Memory

A Conversation with Percussive Dancers
Janet Schroeder and Nic Gareiss

JANET SCHROEDER AND NIC GAREISS

We are movers who engage dance practices whose impetus is sound-making. Janet is a percussive dancer and dance studies scholar with interests in the intersections of vernacular dance, concert dance, and race in the United States. Nic is a percussive dancer, musician, and dance researcher whose work queerly enmeshes ethnography and embodied practice. For nearly two decades, we have danced together, talked about dance, and supported each other's work, both danced and written. The following conversation considers layers of listening that percussive dance invites across aural, visual, haptic, historical, and cultural sensoriums. We specifically discuss Nic's solo percussive dance performances, which he stages acoustically in living rooms and dance studios. Janet has been presenting, curating, and witnessing Nic's solo performances since 2017.

Nic Gareiss: How would you describe the sensation of listening to dance?

Janet Schroeder: Watching dance is an experience that is not only visual but sensorial all the way around. When it comes to watching tap dance or Appalachian dance or any sort of percussive form, a person negotiates the complexities of processing aural and visual elements.

When I experience your solo percussive dance performances, I often feel overwhelmed by the layers of information included—what I see and hear, the ways I feel people around me experiencing your performance, having knowledge of the history of the practices and of your previous performances. Each layer makes my experience of seeing solo percussive dance overwhelming, in a positive way.

NG: My hope is these intimate solo performances do feel multisensory: sight, sound, even tactility, where people can feel dance happening through their chair. You and I know that harkens to the cultural contexts of percussive dance forms where people might get up and respond extemporaneously through movement, and the vibrations of the dance would be felt, heard, *and* seen.

JS: I perceive that you resist categorization, but do you think of yourself as a choreographer?

NG: I have a queer resistance to taxonomy! I don't feel super connected to the idea of choreography given the Greek roots of that word—dance writing. I like writing about dance. I like dancing. But dance is a mode of theorizing through movement that does something writing does not do. Maybe that's why I continue to be invested in dance, in a physical state in which things you've read or thought about can be integrated gesturally with rhythms, motions, sounds, songs, melodies. All those things can touch each other while dancing more readily than when I'm sitting at a laptop writing.

Improvisation becomes the space where those things happen—singing, speaking, moving, sounding, working with a motif, a curiosity about a step, or sometimes a recollection of the way one of my dance teachers moved and sounded. The memory of what has just happened, what I have sung or what step I did becomes a kind of archive—what was I listening to? What did I hear from myself? How do I move toward hearing that again, hearing something related, hearing something new?

I know improvising with live musicians is a practice we share. How is listening part of your improvisation, and how is listening different in improvisational contexts for you?

JS: When I'm performing with live musicians, I listen very hard. Close listening is often a matter of understanding the terrain of music that is unfamiliar to me. Also, even if musicians play the same arrangement as before, there are no guarantees that it will be the same tempo or have the same accents or dynamics. I certainly have more of an ear toward the nuances of the music when it's live. And when it's recorded, I listen more to stay with it, so I don't get ahead of it or behind it.

NG: There's different kinds of information when listening to a live musician. One person who really attuned me to that is fiddler, composer, and dancer Cleek Schrey. Through our work together, he made me aware of many things we're receiving in soundscapes both live and recorded, including the technology used in archival recordings. For example, in my solo performances, I engage recordings made by fiddler Patrick Bonner. Patrick was Irish-American. His music was part of a dance culture on what settlers called Beaver Island in Lake Michigan where he was recorded by Alan Lomax in 1938. We hear his fiddling, but we also hear the technology that was used at the time. This includes the audio artifacts of vinyl recordings, wax cylinders, or in the case of Pat Bonner, Presto K8 discs—those are sounds I really love. And they're sounds I work with on the floor, whether crunching sand on the floor, sweeping the leather sole of the shoe across the floor, or brushing my foot up and down the seam of my trouser leg to lend a kind of sibilance. Those

sounds are pleasurable for me to make/hear myself make as a way of referencing and imitating the sounds of older recording technologies.

JS: Your comments remind me of the sensorial experience I have during your performances, which I have encountered in intimate spaces. In larger environments, the nuances of your more subtle sounds are harder to capture. And your attention to sound as a performer and composer invites audiences to tune in.

NG: I like sharing that “tuning in” with people who are not familiar with the traditions that are part of my physical history: Irish step dancing, *sean-nós* dancing, step dance from what some folks call Canada, dance from the Appalachian region. Irish dancer Colin Dunne says that tradition is a bunch of people. These forms are about being in that room full of people, people who have come before and who are gone now, people who are here in this moment.

I like letting audiences learn the way percussive forms make moments through sound and motion; the way they rile themselves up or make us lean in; the way they prick our ears. I like extending the invitation: “This is a moment when you say ‘wool!’,” welcoming noises of pleasure into the space. It’s part of the social context of the forms. Historically, people witnessing Irish or Appalachian percussive dance would respond vociferously!

But you, Janet, are more than witness. Is there an anticipatory kind of listening occurring that rests on prior listenings of these solo pieces as you have curated and presented them?

JS: There is! I absolutely think no single performance of yours exists on its own. As I witnessed your hour-long performance at Tap Shop in March 2022, I noted that these are works only you can make. Whether short pieces I’ve seen before or works you’ve recently created, I can see (and hear and feel) connections across them, even as each of the pieces is its own idea.

As curator and producer, I engage another layer of listening by tuning in to other people in the room, as a good host would do. At Tap Shop I wanted to make sure my guests were comfortable and safe in this live performance in the midst of the COVID pandemic. I was also curious about how folks were encountering the performance.

Another layer of listening for me includes not just what’s happening in the space but a listening attuned to history, culture, and cultural memory. With my interest in the cultural histories of the practices you engage, I ask: how is this performance happening right now actually deeply rooted in a long history?

NG: I’m very grateful for your interest, your embodied knowledge, and also your voracious reading around culture and ethnology of percussive dance across many disciplines! How is that reading influencing your listening?

JS: My listening is informed by what I call dancestry, which I theorize as a way of tracing movement legacies we carry in our bodies, of both naming our dancestors who we know and acknowledging those we can't name, and of situating ourselves within movement legacies across generations. Considering your solo performance in the hyper-individualist contexts of the US, you might be celebrated as a singular, solo artist. But with dancestry in mind, you and I both know you are not alone on stage, and you didn't make this up out of nothing.

Could you talk about dancers and musicians you consider yourself in dialogue with? How do they sound and move?

NG: Three people I feel are present for me are dance artist Colin Dunne, whose solo work is possibly the most transformative, thought-provoking theater I've ever experienced (of any genre) in his dialogue with archival material, his intimate reflections on his own physical history, use of text, and audio processing of his own feet sounds. Also Ira Bernstein, who was one of the first percussive dancers I ever saw, and whose solo shows invited listening to dance through his meticulous attention to detail in technique, flooring, mic-ing, shoes, and the way he curated the tone of his dancing to be especially pleasurable to a listener. Another person whose work is present every time I move is Sandy Silva, who by engaging different tonalities of the surface of the floor and on her own body creates path-breaking contemporary work ethnographically and autoethnographically. Sandy allows many percussive dance forms to have an encounter in her body.

JS: I appreciate hearing those names, and I recognize their artistry in your work. I also want to acknowledge the people who maintain these traditions as communal practices whose names we don't actually know. I feel them in the room through the embodiment of cultural memory that we engage when dancing. How does knowing the cultural history of the practices we perform enrich our performance and the experience of viewing it? Engaging curiosity about cultural history through reading and viewing, we learn about particular dancers, steps, and environments. We can also acknowledge the impossibility of being able to name everyone. Still, it's an important practice—to name our dancestors as we embody our dancestral legacies.

NG: That makes me think about which dancers were documented: usually white dancers, by white folklorists, without crediting the contributions of Black and Indigenous people. In this way, the story of Appalachian dance has been impacted by white supremacy. It's crucial to listen hard to the Black and Indigenous artists who are active now as well as those in the past. Through our collaborations, Black musician and scholar Jake Blount exposed me to the work of artists like Manco Sneed, a Black and Indigenous fiddle player from Jackson County, North Carolina. I am also thinking about Algia Mae Hinton, who was a Black buck dancer from the

Piedmont, and Alphonse “Bois Sec” Ardoin, who was a Black Creole musician from Eunice, Louisiana, and also a percussive step dancer. It’s crucial that we become more aware of the vast number of unnamed Black and Indigenous folks whose artistry merits listening, as well as spiritual and material recompense.

You and I both recognize this is a conversation that needs to be had with more people. It’s urgent that we work toward a reparative approach to both history and the present through redistributing material resources, using citation, and restoring Black and Indigenous people as part of the named histories of the roomful of people that we call Tradition.

JS: I agree and look forward to conversation and action toward such reparations.

Each percussive dance practice is a part of a larger cultural footprint in our communities and our world. Our performances construct, maintain, and create cultural memory. I’m interested in your interest and investment in queering such cultural histories. You are making visible that which has always already been queer. Could you talk about queering traditional dance practices?

NG: The percussive forms I do have been cast as representative of nation and region, which is why current attacks on fellow 2SLGBTQIA+ dancers (by the public, by institutions, school boards, and police) feel connected to my queerness and the dancing I do. For forms that ground their identity in rural space, a reminder of the presence of queerness is imperative because of the historic appropriation of those dances by nationalist regimes and regionalist politics, which always write out the perspective of 2SLGBTQIA+ people.

The disjuncture comes when we acknowledge the fact that there are many queer folks in Irish step dancing and Appalachian clogging. In my solo work, I’m trying to remind us of our existence; to help people listen anew to the fact that there are 2SLGBTQIA+ people practicing those forms, which they might not have considered before because of homophobic and transphobic narratives around heritage arts. There have been queer people in those spaces and traditions for centuries. To continue to make that fact visible (and audible), I’m trying to queerly provoke the distinction between dance and music, performer and audience, tradition and innovation. I want to flow between these binaries, to remind us that they are fluid and reflexive, and that there is a built-in queer audacity about listening to dance, to the touch of feet on floor. Doing that feels pleasurable to me, which in and of itself feels like a radical act: chasing pleasure in front of other people, which in a way is erotic for everyone involved.

JS: Your performances theorize or stage the subtleties of queer possibility. Your attention to queering percussive traditional dance and your queer provocations add another sensorial layer for me. It’s the scraping of the floor, the invitation to shout or

sing when we might feel like we should silently appreciate. I experience your queer provocations in rich sensorial ways.

NG: It's both a queer invitation and provocation to come in here with us. Welcome! And it's also about dance queering the way we listen, simultaneously listening in anti-normative ways to movement.

Dr. Janet Schroeder (she/her) is a percussive dance performer who teaches seminars in dance history, theory, and culture at universities throughout the US.
www.janetschroeder.com

Nic Gareiss (he/they) is an internationally acclaimed dancer, musician, and independent dance researcher living in what some people call Lansing, Michigan.
www.nicgareiss.com