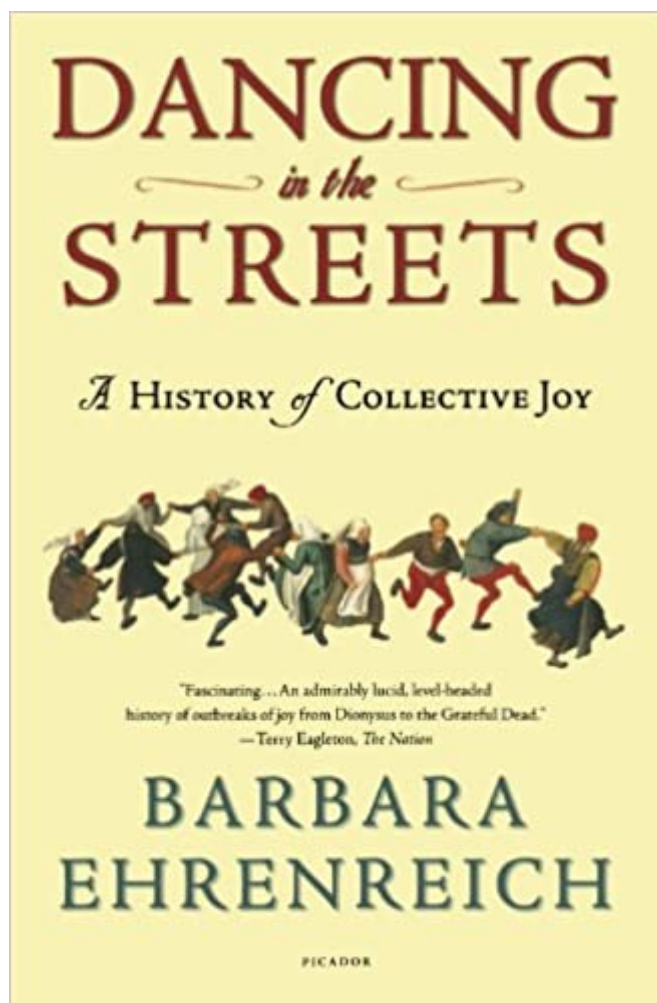


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Dancing In The Streets: A History Of Collective Joy



Synopsis

"Fascinating . . . An admirably lucid, level-headed history of outbreaks of joy from Dionysus to the Grateful Dead." —Terry Eagleton, *The Nation* Widely praised as "impressive" (*The Washington Post Book World*), "ambitious" (*The Wall Street Journal*), and "alluring" (*The Los Angeles Times*), *Dancing in the Streets* explores a human impulse that has been so effectively suppressed that we lack even a term for it: the desire for collective joy, historically expressed in revels of feasting, costuming, and dancing. Drawing on a wealth of history and anthropology, Barbara Ehrenreich uncovers the origins of communal celebration in human biology and culture. From the earliest orgiastic Mesopotamian rites to the medieval practice of Christianity as a "danced religion" and the transgressive freedoms of carnival, she demonstrates that mass festivities have long been central to the Western tradition. In recent centuries, this festive tradition has been repressed, cruelly and often bloodily. But as Ehrenreich argues in this original, exhilarating, and ultimately optimistic book, the celebratory impulse is too deeply ingrained in human nature ever to be completely extinguished.

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Customer Reviews

Starred Review. It is a truism that everyone seeks happiness, but public manifestations of it have not always been free of recrimination. Colonial regimes have defined spectacles as an inherently "primitive" act and elders harrumph at youthful exultation. Social critic and bestselling author Ehrenreich (*Nickel and Dimed*) teases out the many incarnations of sanctioned public revelry,

starting with the protofeminist oreibasia, or Dionysian winter dance, in antiquity, and from there covering trance, ancient mystery cults and carnival, right up to the rock and roll and sports-related mass celebrations of our own day. "Why is so little left" of such rituals, she asks, bemoaning the "loss of ecstatic pleasure." Ehrenreich necessarily delineates the repressive reactions to such ecstasy by the forces of so-called "civilization," reasonably positing that rituals of joy are nearly as innate as the quest for food and shelter. Complicating Ehrenreich's schema is her own politicized judgment, dismissing what she sees as the debased celebrations of sporting events while writing approvingly of the 1960s "happenings" of her own youth and the inevitable street theater that accompanies any modern mass protest, yet all but ignoring the Burning Man festival in Nevada and tut-tutting ravers' reliance on artificial ecstasy. That aside, Ehrenreich writes with grace and clarity in a fascinating, wide-ranging and generous account. (Jan. 10) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to the Audio CD edition.

At a time when social scientists are lamenting the loss of a sense of community, Ehrenreich offers an absorbing look at the joy of life expressed in communal rituals of dance and celebration. From cave drawings through the celebrations of weddings, religious rites, healing, and war preparations of various cultures to modern "carnivalization" of sports celebrations, she traces the appeal of synchronizing individual movements to a group. Western culture, with little understanding of the ecstasy of love expressed in group celebrations, has looked on such celebrations as primitive hysterics and banned them among African slaves, Native Americans, and other cultures. But Ehrenreich details a long history of such celebrations in European cultures, from the festivals of Dionysus to those of medieval Christians. She also explores other cultures' reactions to dance celebrations they viewed as somehow socially or spiritually subversive, whether it's Protestants banning carnivals or Wahhabist Muslims frowning on ecstatic Sufism. Given the social nature of humans, Ehrenreich is optimistic that the drive to "civilize" will never fully eliminate the impulse for group celebration. Vanessa Bush Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved --This text refers to the Audio CD edition.

Barbara Ehrenreich's *DANCING IN THE STREETS* is both a celebration of dancing and a condemnation of the authorities who are trying to prevent large groups of people from running amok in the interests of law and order. This wonderful book is a potted history of dance, from its roots back in the misty past, through various ancient civilizations and up through the present day. Ms.

Ehrenreich conveys how natural it was to dance and how this is a knack that many of us have lost today. People who either live in Northern Europe or can trace their ancestry from that part of the world have difficulty loosening up enough to dance even for a few minutes, let alone for hours or days. And since this somewhat Puritanical attitude has pervaded the world, all of us suffer from a lack of dancing in our lives. I am in awe of how much research Ms. Ehrenreich has done for this book. Of course, dancing is not just about dancing. In the ancient past, it was used to cure people of sadness. Since the early Middle Ages, it seems to have taken on more political overtones, and people who danced often did so for reasons of social justice. In fact dancing impinged on so many aspects of people's lives from religion (where people danced to their prayers) to the military, to sports. And what is fascinating is how Ms. Ehrenreich argues that relatively recently the young men and women of the 50s and 60s who would not sit down in their seats during a rock concert, were merely reaching back (albeit unconsciously) into a Dionysian past. For those of you who have often wondered about dancing, and its various social incarnations, this book is for you. Five stars.

Ever heard of Trance Dancing? Sound like fun? You can get together with your friends and try it for yourself. Yes, this is a well researched book about the history of "muscular bonding" among small (tribal) and large (the Roman army) groups and everything in between. This is the history of the "rave

What is it about the human psyche that almost demands that one take off the social mask, shed inhibition, and engage in behavior requiring sizable kinetic energy, behavior of which is sometimes totally beyond the pale of acceptable standards of conduct? Is this behavior an intrinsic human need, or maladjustment that requires tuning or even rescuing by those cultures that do not stoop to the writhing and bodily contortions of the primitive, backward cultures that do? Is stillness, is the sterile boardroom composure that appears settled and refined, an acid test for rationality? Can one indeed be rational and still indulge periodically in the drunken-Mount-of-Ephesus-like ecstasy of the ancient Greeks? Is dance a sign of social decadence or proof of social health, and if the former why do so many people throughout history risk reprisal by authorities by joining their friends, neighbors, and strangers to "dance in the streets?" This book provides an excellent context to begin to answer these questions. Although the book is short, and frequently provides only anecdotal evidence for its assertions, both its statements and conclusions are plausible, and the author exhibits an intellectual honesty that is becoming rare in today's intellectual circles. She is very aware, and admits so throughout the book, that much more evidence is needed to conclude some of the claims that are made between its pages. It is a book that puts human movement on a pedestal, as an object or

worship and as an activity that respects tradition as well as rebels against it. When one reaches its final pages, one becomes more convinced that dance, that is, dance with no inhibitions or restraints, or "dancing in the streets", is part of being human, a necessity like air, food, and water. A culture that has it is a vibrant and confident one. A culture where it is absent is a dysfunctional one. But as the author details in the book, many attempts are made to suppress the out-of-equilibrium ethos of dance, sometimes by persuasion or intimidation, but most often by force. And most of the world's major religions have been all too happy to assist with this. They demand stillness in their subjects: movements resembling even in the slightest the ignorant savages of tribal cultures are an anathema. One must not be too elemental-to close to the jungle, if one is to have a higher, organized, rational culture. But even the most zealous of efforts fails to rid the world of the pestilence of dance. It reappears, as the author shows, in the sports stadiums throughout the civilized world, and in the high fidelity, high-decibel, trance-inducing rock concerts of the same. The author ends the book lamenting the state of the planet and hoping for a revival of the translation of potential to kinetic energy that is the street dance. Her concerns are to be noted but there is really no cause for worry. There is plenty of energy, plenty of activity, plenty of innovation, plenty of action in this ruckus of scientific and technological advancement, in this incredible outpouring of creativity that is stirring up the conceptual dust. In this carnival called the twenty-first century.

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