In the House

On the dance floor, HIV positive black gay men find spiritual healing through house music.

February 1, 2007 By Kenyon Farrow

At a crowded club called Shelter in downtown Manhattan, the lights are dim and the music is thumping. Conversation is impossible, yet communication thrives among the hundreds swaying and stomping to house music. Some sing along, others blow whistles or slap tambourines. It may not look like a typical HIV support group. But as HIV positive black gay men face rejection from their churches and communities, many turn to the dance floor to heal from homophobia and HIV stigma.

House music emerged from disco in the late ’70s, adding pulsating drumbeats and soaring vocals. As HIV began to ravage the black gay community, house music parties offered men from New York to Chicago to Washington, DC, a way to maintain emotional and mental health, providing a much-needed “all are welcome” community space.

While some artistic forms can be deafeningly silent about HIV and the lives of black gay men, house lyrics tackle life and death, redemption and rebirth, often mirroring traditional gospel. On the classic track “Inspiration,” Arnold Jarvis sings, “Let’s celebrate life in the name of those not living.” Party promoters, meanwhile, give their gatherings spiritual names such as Temple and Brooklyn Mecca, suggesting that club space can be sacred.

Donald Andrew Agarrat, 36, an HIV positive blogger and photographer from Harlem, was a house fan and DJ even before his 1995 diagnosis. The uplifting music and spiritual support of the group experience helped him conquer postdiagnosis depression. “Life was a struggle,” he says, “but house music reminded me that it would get better—that I could make it better.” In church, he says, “[because I am gay], there’s always a distance between me and everyone else—my family, the pastor, the deaconess, even the organist. To bridge the gap, I would have to repent for being gay.” So he worships at house music parties instead. Moved by the driving music, Agarrat says, “I feel I’m leaving my body and this realm—[it’s] an experience shared with others; I never feel alone.”

Those familiar with the HIV issues facing positive black gay men acknowledge the power of that affirming space. David Malebranche, MD, of Emory University’s School of Medicine, says, “There are no studies, but anecdotally, many of us can attest to the healing impact of house music. It is like going to church.” Indeed, the gatherings confer soul-deep renewal, helping positive people

find health in their lives.

As house music parties attract fans across racial and gender lines, Agarrat says, the message remains: “Create community where all are valued and affirmed.” A healing circle is built,” he says, “in the communication between the music, the DJ and the crowd.” May the circle be unbroken.

Farrow suggests these CDs for lifting your spirit with house music:

- *Spiritually Speaking Then and Now* by Blaze (West End Records)
- *10 Years of Madhouse* by Kerri Chandler (CHAMP)
- *The Kings of House* by Masters At Work (BBE Records)
- *Original Chicago House Classics* by Various Artists (MCI)
- *Yoruba Records: 5 Years Later* by Osunlade (MSI)
- *Motivation* by Frankie Knuckles (DeFinity)
- *Paris is Sleeping: Respect is Burning 2*. by Various Artists (Astralwerks)
- *Hits!* by Adeva (Coolt)
- *In the House* by Danny Krivit (Defected)
- *Body & Soul Vol. 3* by Various Artists (Wave Music)

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