



# Tribal Vision

A celebration of life through tribal belly dance



By Paulette Rees-Denis

FOREWORD BY T. THORN COYLE



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# Foreword

by T. Thorn Coyle

*The swirl of color and the flash of a smile on a painted face. The bright sound of finger cymbals working in counterpoint to feet sliding on the earth. Hips snapping out a rhythm that makes the heart beat faster still...*

I recently had the pleasure of seeing Gypsy Caravan perform after not seeing them in several years, and the experience almost moved me to tears. The presence of the master's hand guided each formation and pumped through the supremely dedicated dancers and musicians. That hand belongs to Paulette Rees-Denis.

We have been friends for decades, studying tribal belly dance with Carolena Nericcio as two of her first students. We sweated and laughed together in the back of the old church Carolena rented for rehearsals, corrected smudges in each other's makeup, and shivered through several winters under the weight of our cold jewelry. We have visited many art forms between us and, while I have chosen writing and teaching spirituality as my primary forms of soul expression, Paulette has delved further and further into the dance. It shows.

Her grace and dedication shine through her work and in the women and men who dance and make music as part of her circle. Dance is a celebration of life in all of its juicy, colorful glory. To fully engage the dance is dedication, and dedication brings the mastery I speak of.

This mastery comes from years of study and practice, of course. But that is not enough. The sheer power of effortless-looking skill comes from inspiration and the discipline that keeps one going even when times are hard. Sometimes pain, strife, or grief are present, but we dance anyway. There is a love and commitment to craft required to get one through times when the body aches, or inspiration is no longer present, or we wish everyone else would go away. Is the dance worth all this? Is dedication to anything?

For Paulette, it obviously is. She has channeled the creative force through music, art, photography, and now, dance. For years she has studied and taught, refining her craft with the help of others. There is something in her soul that is fed by the beauty of this dance form, and she, in turn, feeds the rest of us. The world needs beauty, badly. It is the only thing that has a chance of saving us from the encroaching march of mediocrity and greed, from the ugliness of war and destruction, and from the loneliness and fear in our own hearts.

A book written by a master of the dance is not the dance itself, of course. But in these pages, Paulette's dynamism seeps through, and the stories of her relationship to movement and wild music inspire us to do better ourselves, whether dance is an enjoyable pastime for us, a thing to watch with pleasure, or a burning passion that must be expressed, our arms arcing through air or our hips shimmying to a rhythm older than time.

Whoever you are, wherever you are, welcome to the world of tribal dance. I hope that, as it does for me, it will make your own life better, brighter, and more beautiful.

~T. Thorn Coyle, author of *Evolutionary Witchcraft* and *Kissing the Limitless*



# Introduction

by Paulette Rees-Denis



As women, it's our inherent right to belly dance. Historically, women from all over the world have danced a pelvic-centered dance—dances with similar movements, like the hula from Hawaii, or the belly dance from the Middle East. The pelvis is our core, our center, our life force—including the womb, the hips, the sexual center—from which we breathe and move. Listening to our heart's rhythm, we dance. Feeling our blood flow, our wombs give birth, we dance. Belly dance has never gone away, but waxes and wanes in popularity. Today, there is a resurgence of belly dance, specifically, tribal belly dance.

This book is experiential, confessional, collaborative. It is a descriptive, philosophical, and opinionated account of what I have found in my twenty years as a dancer and as a teacher of this style, this tribal belly dance. I desire it to be the guide for the passages of other woman dancers, as well as to tell of my own journey.

My experiences with tribal belly dance have been profound, sometimes phenomenally core shaking. But without all the other dancers and musicians in my world, these experiences would not have happened. This is a community-based dance that takes all of us to make the whole. Each of us is equally important. That's the beauty of tribal belly dance—it is a dance for every soul and every body.

Over time and under the overall structure of the dance, I have been able to offer a common language to unite the women of the world, community by community, tribe by tribe, hip by hip. Tribal belly dance is a powerful way of dancing together by using an underlying nonverbal language that welcomes anyone to learn the basic dance steps and rhythms. We can then release our egos to dance next to each other, with each other, synchronized, following or leading, all in the moment. This dance is about creating magic in our lives and in the world. Join us.



JK



# Ghawazee

*Move the body. Undulate. Breathe. Shimmy your shoulders. Shimmy your hips. Look into the eyes of those you are dancing with.*

*The energy builds. Shimmy faster. Keep breathing. Smile. Listen to the clicking of your finger cymbals. Ghawazee. The circle moves clockwise. You follow the leader. Everyone together. The energy keeps building. The skin dampens. Eyes are locking. The tension builds. Watch. Hips slide and feet glide.*

A **GROUP OF** dancing women, all ages and sizes, are dancing together with these evocative movements—sensuous and inviting. The flow of their bodies is mesmerizing. These dancers could be anywhere—in the woods around a campfire, in someone’s living room. Right now they are in Caravan Studio in Portland, Oregon. The women are dancing in a circle in unison, isolating and shifting various parts of the body—hips, arms, bellies—sometimes simultaneously and sometimes singly. They are dancing a style of belly dance called tribal belly dance; this is what I teach. Using a common body language and structure, the people who dance tribal style learn how to be in the moment and to watch each other closely. They learn how to listen to the core rhythm and to work different parts of their body, sometimes moving muscles they forgot they had. And they learn how to laugh.

These dancers are the modern day Ghawazee. Traditionally, the Ghawazee were the most famous traveling dancing tribes in Egypt. These outdoor dancers were also referred to as Ghazeeye, Ghaziya, and Gypsy, the latter because they were descendants from the medieval Romani travelers known as the Nawar. Today we tribal dancers swing our hips vigorously from side to side, doing our dance step called Ghawazee, keeping the spirit of these dancers of the past, often called invaders of the heart and soldiers of love.

American tribal belly dance has come into its own since its beginning in the mid-1980s in San Francisco, California. Back then, this form of belly dance did not have that name. My friend and first belly dance teacher, Carolena Nericcio, started a class down the street from where we both worked in retail shops. An acquaintance of



Urban Berbers, 2007

mine wanted me to join her in the class; we were often the only two. Then she dropped out, and I was the sole student. I rounded up Thorn (Theresa, at that time) Coyle and our tattoo artist to take the class. A few other gals dropped in. We were a bunch of tattooed and artistic women looking for something different. We were not quite sure what we had found in that dance class, but we were having a blast.

When the class first started, I was not even sure what belly dance was, exactly; I just wanted to start dancing again. I had seen a bit of the cabaret style of belly dance in restaurants, and I was not interested in pursuing that solo style. How we were dancing in this new class felt different than any other dance style I had done—isolating various body parts with rib cage rotations, snake arms, and hip bumps. Carolena would teach a few steps—Egyptian basic, Arabic walk, hip shimmy—and then we were to put them together in an improvisational way. The moves felt foreign to my body, yet somehow intuitive, a delightful challenge to my brain and body, as I had grown up dancing the choreographed styles of classical ballet, tap, and jazz. Even the music was odd, with a non-Western drumbeat and strangely hypnotic melodies. It was so different from my classically trained ears—definitely not Tchaikovsky—and yet it was deeply intriguing, like rock music had always been to me. Carolena asked us to dance with each other, to really look at each other's bodies. It was like girls' night out. We moved and laughed together. With Carolena's sharp eye combined with our desire and perseverance, our dance was becoming magical.

As I was trying to understand our dance, both physically and mentally, Carolena brought in one of the only books she could find on belly dance, a book by Wendy Buonaventura, *Belly Dancing: The Serpent and the Sphinx*. I immediately bought a copy and devoured it. This book, now out of print, has been replaced by another of Wendy's books, *The Serpent of the Nile: Women and Dance in the Arab World*. I viewed the exquisite photos and paintings on the history of the dance and dancers, transfixed by the beauty and evocativeness of the dancing scenes, and I believed this new dance could have those sensuous and delightful qualities for me.

Being completely new to the varieties of belly dance and to this style Carolena was teaching, I remember the first time I attended Rakkasah, the biggest belly dance festival in the states. It takes place every year outside of San Francisco, with vendors and dancers showcasing their goods and styles, and workshops held with leading dance instructors. I went with my dancing sisters around 1987, when our style of dance was still in its infancy, not yet called American Tribal Style.

Rakkasah was huge. Hundreds of people, mostly women, were milling about, shopping and schmoozing. Table after table was mounded high with mountains of beaded bras. What had



Thorn Coyle and Paulette, 1987



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I walked in to? Chiffon and beads were everywhere. Individual dancers performed on the giant stage, one after the other, doing variations of what most call cabaret style, or Oriental belly dance, a somewhat seductive solo performance, and some folk style dances. Loud Egyptian music, crowds, and shiny baubles surrounded us, along with dancers performing these other styles of dancing that I did not understand.

We watched from the balcony, the difference in our ideas of belly dance costuming, our personal style, and culture settling upon me. All I knew was that I was involved in a subculture of tattooed and alternative, beautiful women, and we were learning—amalgamating—a dance style sharply contrasting what I was seeing at this festival. I knew I really was in love with our group’s improvisational, mesmerizing dance.

Since those earlier days, I have been back to Rakkasah many times, sometimes as a teacher and sometimes as a performer and vendor (alongside those beaded and sequined bras!) with my troupe of dancers and musicians, Gypsy Caravan, at the invitation of Shukriya, the festival’s sponsor and organizer. Now that I have more extensive belly dance knowledge, I can truly appreciate the festival and all of the different dance styles. It is an eccentric festival, a wonderful place to shop, and a great place to meet people and renew acquaintances. Now it features varieties and fusions of belly dance, including what is now known as tribal belly dance.

The history of belly dance has always been vague. What little we do know is through romanticized paintings and artwork, some words, and even mythological tales and fables. Everyone has unique stories and opinions about what the dance was, who did it, and why. I believe forms of the belly dance were performed by women for various reasons: in honor of life’s passages within the tribe or community, as spiritual worship, as ritual for blessings and pagan-style fertility dances for the earth and people, and for fun and entertainment. Midwives could dance as sympathetic assistants to women in labor. People could dance in the fields as they prayed to their gods to help the growth of their crops. The basic form and idea about belly dance are thought to be Middle Eastern, while the names and styles vary—such as Raqs Sharqi; Raqs Baladi; Danse du Ventre; as well as Ghawazee dance, folkloric and Romani style; Danse Oriental; and a more contemporary label, cabaret.

In fact, types of pelvic dance have been documented in most countries around the world. Look at the hula from Hawaii, with its fast, circular hip movements while the dancer tells a story with her hands. The dance is accompanied with a song called a *mele*. Move toward the Polynesian islands of Tahiti and New Zealand to find island dances that use the hips, posturing, song, and hands. African dances extend off

*“I love dancing. Moving my body to the exotic music transports me to foreign lands with tribal people and their ancient customs.”*

*~Caravan student*

the ground more and are generally higher energy, but they still center around torso movements. In India, the temple priestesses, or devadasis, performed fertility rites as temple dances.

Travel across Europe with the Roma and see a variety of community and solo dances that use the pelvis, hips, feet, and arms in ways that vary from dancer to dancer and country to country. A wonderful and educational documentary film from 1993, *Latcho Drom* (safe journey) by Tony Gatlif, highlights the Romani dances and their migration through several countries, across India, through Egypt and Turkey, up to Romania, Hungary, and back down to Spain.

At some point, the dance moved from the community living room to the performance stage. Little Egypt, who danced at the World's Fair in Chicago in 1893, was the first known dancer to bring belly dance to the United States. She popularized the style, and it became referred to as the *Hoochie Coochie*, and the *shimmy and shake*. Hollywood made sex symbols of women like Theda Bara, filmed in costumes resembling belly dance dress. The early modern-dance pioneer, Ruth St. Denis (1878–1968), was inspired by divinity figures like Kwan Yin and, in her travels, by folk and classical dances and exotic clothing from India. She incorporated the styles and costuming into her sensational modern dances. In some countries, dancing was banned as women's rights and religious rites came under scrutiny, but the dances have stayed alive as they were passed on, from nomadic tribes and traveling Roma, and danced in secret or put on stage as entertainment. Why? Perhaps for three simple facts: that dancing feels good, is fun and, in a way, can be vital for physical health as well as for mental well-being.

The style I was dancing along with my girlfriends in San Francisco in the 1980s in the back room of Noe Valley Ministry has evolved into what today is called American Tribal Style (ATS) belly dance.

Since its inception, ATS has experienced several revolutionary and creative transformations away from its original style toward altered forms, sometimes consisting of more choreography and often danced solo, with a more or less structured design, and they may fall under the all-encompassing category of tribal fusion. That fusion has evolved into many directions, including gothic belly dance, fire dance, and lately even burlesque, all of which are not tribal style belly dance, nor ATS, but have been inspired by it.

My first performance with four of us from Carolena's class was in my backyard in Berkeley,



Paulette and Carolena Nericcio  
FatChanceBellyDance's first show in Paulette's backyard, 1987

California, on my thirty-first birthday, 1988. I have been performing in different capacities with dance and music almost all of my life, and Thorn and I wanted to perform what we had been dancing in class. It was so powerful and joyful that we wanted to share it. Carolena, somewhat reluctantly, agreed. We did not have matching, or even coordinated, costumes. In fact, they were hardly costumes at all, just eclectic pieces from our wardrobes: long, colorful skirts, short tops to show off our bellies, swinging fringed hip belts (I wore a long purple

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piano shawl around my hips!), and layered necklaces and bracelets with a little help from Carolena's grab bag of inviting accoutrements and her growing collection of North African tribal jewelry. That first performance was casual and fun—and a success with our friends in the audience. Little did we know where that first show would lead us. Our ideas of continuing on stage grew quickly. Several of the dancers were associated with the tattooed and art crowds, and people wanted to see what we were doing, this strange bit of dance exotica, which we were more than happy to show off.

We danced at underground parties and tattoo conventions alongside sword swallows and piercing exhibitionists—it was the Modern Primitive era—and during art gallery openings, in gay bars, and at street fairs. We drew crowds. This was not traditional belly dance as anyone knew it, because we were a group of women dancing together, with the beginnings of an ethnic-looking signature style.

Women would clamber up to us after a show and want to do this dance with us, probably not quite understanding why. Even we were not aware of our own feminine power at that time. The number of dancers who joined us on stage grew as we continued to perform. Carolena's dance classes gained popularity with the help of our shows. I recall when a young, sweet, and humbly gorgeous Rina Rall joined our classes, and then our stage. She danced with the exquisite naïveté of a youthful maiden. Along with Thorn, some of our other early group members included a spritely drummer from a rock band and a woman who had a wild snakeskin design tattooed up her leg and around her torso. It felt refreshingly hip to me and I was inspired by all this feminine beauty in our group. There was a dynamic between us that the audience could see and feel, even in our unstructured beginnings. Later, when Jill Parker joined us with her slithery grace and fantastic smile, we began to get more serious about dancing and performing.

Now given a name, FatChanceBellyDance, we began learning and developing a larger repertoire of moves, adding the use of swords as dance props and also refining our exotic costumes. A few of us could sew and, with Carolena's own sewing and weaving background, we began to make costumes. As I have never been good with a needle and thread, but being a licensed massage therapist, I would trade with Carolena, giving her massages in exchange for her sewing me costumes—quite a fair deal! We wore as much big, chunky, and ethnic jewelry as we could fit around our necks, heads, hips, and wrists. Some of us continued to get more tattoos. The look was coming together but still had that underground edge.

On a few occasions we danced alongside a group of wild musicians called the Order of Chaos, who would beat out rhythms percussively

*“How do I feel about belly dance? It’s a culmination of so many elements in my life—not just dancing, but my interests, passions, beliefs, dreams, and aesthetics coming together in this one great thing. I love the people, the art, the music, the costumes, the breathing, the barefootedness, all of it.”*

*~Kate Franken  
former Sister Caravan dancer*

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*“I experience energy building  
and channels opening.  
Acceptance of my body—  
celebration of my body, all  
bodies, as sacred!”*

~Caravan student

*“We all come together in class  
from such diverse places and  
stages of life. The dance is our  
common ground, where we learn  
to honor ourselves—and each  
other—and participate in the  
energy we create.”*

~Carolyn Lunday,  
former Sister Caravan dancer

on big plastic water jugs and metal trash cans. A few other times we would play with more traditional musicians who played Middle Eastern rhythms on their *doumbeks* and added in melodies on stringed lutes or exotic horns. Mostly we danced to prerecorded music like Aisha Ali's early field recording from Egypt called *Music of the Fellahin* (farmers) and Peter Gabriel's inspired recordings with Musicians of the Nile. Sometimes Carolena would throw in a tune by Marvin Gaye or James Brown.

Among the first dominant dancers in FatChance—Carolena, Thorn, Rina, Jill, and me—all have gone on to become worldwide influences in our dance-oriented careers, each in a slightly different genre. Carolena is still enormously influential and successful with FatChanceBellyDance and as the founder of ATS. I was the first to split from the group, moving to Portland in 1991, and began teaching and developing my own style. Then I started my troupe, Gypsy Caravan. Thorn left to pursue devotional dance, music, and writing, and she travels the world teaching Wicca and dance. Rina switched to her new passion, flamenco, and has pursued performing and teaching. Jill eventually left FatChance to start her ultrafunky, Ultra Gypsy dance troupe.

When I left that group and went out on my own, I preferred to simply call my variation on the theme—the style that Gypsy Caravan dancers have become known for—tribal style belly dance. I have incorporated many other dance styles and inspirations into the basic tribal style, adding influences such as Indian *mudras*, Spanish skirt dances, and African trance moves, along with modern dance and jazzy concepts. Where some ATS dancers use only the right side as the dominant and leading hip or foot in their movements, I have included the left side to balance out the muscle usage and to use the entire body. This allows more freedom and individual interpretation by being able to use viewpoints from every aspect of the room for the dancers to watch and dance with each other. My style has a more organic feel in the dance positioning and how we move together, without a lot of physical cues about changes to each other. But we have kept that same beautiful feeling of connectedness, and we are still based in the powerful moment-to-moment improvisational dance.

In 2004, thirteen years after that original lineup, FatChanceBellyDance had a performance reunion at my dance festival, Tribal Quest Northwest—an exciting and healing experience. Even after the separation and differences in dance styles, we could come together and dance from our knowledge and history of the common tribal language—where we all started. Through the tears and joy and pain and laughter of our relationships, these are the women who have fed the soul of tribal belly

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dance, making history. This dance has created lifestyles, friendships, jobs, and art. From our hips, the tribal belly dance world has spawned fusions, revealing a new world of creative movement and allowing women around the globe to dance together with pleasure and purpose.

*Music is pulsing. Listen to the rhythm. Everyone is smiling. Hip bump and rotate to the left. Switch feet, rotate to the right. Arabic walk. Add levels. Catch the leader's eye. Spin and stop. Silence. Glancing around the circle, now she looks everyone in the eye. Group laughter breaks out with the end of the song.*

Tribal style belly dance is made up of two defining factors: with some steps influenced by Middle Eastern folk and traditional belly dance moves, they are danced as a group, and the steps are transitioned together improvisationally. These factors have been the basis for tribal belly dance's electrifying effect since its inception.

The *tribal* part of tribal belly dance stems from its purpose to be danced in a group, a circle of dancers who come together to move with synchronized and complementary movement. It is about being connected within a dancing tribe, a family. Tribal is not a solo dance, although there can be a solo within the structure of the group. We watch each other and take delight in each other's dances. It is true that there is power in numbers, and to be part of or to watch a circle of women swaying in unison is awesome and hypnotic. The energy that comes from a unified group emanates with a spiritual energy and a beautifully collective force.

The tribal group can highlight one, two, or more dancers—or the whole group at one time. The whole cannot exist without the entire group; everyone is important and meaningful to the group, no matter what her age or size, background or economic class. In nomadic tribes, everyone is part of the community, and it takes each person's strengths and contributions to the group to complete it. We complement and support each other, in an ego-less way, with our similarities and differences.

Tribal belly dance entrances both its dancers and its audience with its improvisation. We learn structured moves, sometimes with verbal or visual cues, and then we put them together any way we want to suit the mood, the group, and the music. We cannot be distracted by our daily job or outside activities because we need the dynamics of the moment. This is the power of improvisation—evolving moment to moment, as if nothing else exists in our world at this time but our dance. It becomes a moving meditation. Learning to be in the moment is difficult in this age of multitasking, but for most dancers, it is the first step to peace found through improvisational dance. By definition, improvisation is a process of creating without any set text to follow. In our dance, we do have set

*"I've been able to embrace belly dance much more fully than I ever did any of the ballet or modern I took. I think the spiritual, artistic, historical, and social aspects of the dance help to make belly dance more than just a class I go to... There is a fullness, a complexity in the way belly dance affects me."*

*~Sarah Locke,  
former Gypsy Caravan dancer*

*"Reclaiming dance became the first step in reclaiming myself."*

*~Dawn Stearns,  
former Gypsy Caravan dancer*



*“This community has become the most important facet of my life today. It is a wonderful thing to be a part of such a celebration of life, to connect with women. We dance the beauty of the female, the power, the sadness, the joy, the depth of an ancient connection that goes far beyond our conscious memories.”*

*~Bonnie Leiser,  
Urban Berber dancer*

moves but not a set pattern or flow of the moves, as in choreography. Moving improvisationally within our structure is what gives the creative power to the dance.

I teach this dance as a nonverbal form of communication. Within the structured steps of the dance, women learn a basic language with their bodies, starting very simply. As knowledge and skill with the movements develop and the body strengthens, we watch each other, to lead and to follow the moves. We listen to the music as the rhythm or the melody changes. We move with that change as the music flows through us. We begin to converse together with our bodies. This ability to use our eyes to watch and follow, to be light on our feet and to move quickly, and to release our ego and any expectations is the art of our improvisation. This learned art is what keeps all of these dancers together.

Tribal belly dance does not have to be put on a stage. For some reason, mainstream thought dictates that, after a few belly dance classes, you should go up on stage and perform. Performance can be a part of the dance experience, but it transforms the dance into a different entity, though still powerful and beautiful. To perform, one must be an entertainer in addition to a dancer because the purpose becomes not just about the dance, but about the audience and the reason for the performance.

Another conventional thought has often prescribed to the notion that women should learn belly dance so they can perform a flirtatious dance for their lover. Tribal belly dance is a sort of innately sensual dance and incredibly feminine; just the way the hips circle in a *takseem* movement—a side-to-side figure eight—so yummy and curvaceous, pronounces the dancer’s femininity, to use however she chooses. But it is not necessarily sexual. In my classes at Caravan Studio, we first come together in our circle of women to dance for ourselves and then for each other. Simple.

The dance itself is not simple, however. It takes time, dedication, and a commitment to learn. The learning process can take years, which is a good thing. Since dance is a living, breathing art form, it grows and evolves as I continue to add, change, and adapt new ideas to our movements, a necessity in any art form. Everyone learns at a different pace, and that is part of the beauty of the dance. There is no hurry, so the dance allows each individual to learn as she can, fitting the dance into her busy life and permitting her the time it takes to work on herself.

When we start belly dancing as adults, we ask our bodies to do things they have never done—to lift the hip or to slide the rib cage to the side. Tribal belly dance moves the body differently than the classical styles of ballet or tap, although toning and strengthening go along with

any dance form. To begin to dance is to start acknowledging our bodies, inside and out, by beginning to move them in different ways and paying attention. Looking at our bodies in the mirror during a dance class is a step in recognizing that we each have a body that we can feel good in and be proud of. The womanly competition that we sometimes face in our daily lives is not present when we dance together; everyone is accepted. Belly dance in general, and tribal belly dance in particular, is home for all ages and sizes of women. We do not have to be thin, young women to be belly dancers, like the stereotypical ballerina. We can belly dance through all of our ages and life paths, and it feels good. We are accepted as we are, no matter what our body tone, flexibility, or motivation.

The process of learning the dance is as valuable as doing the dance. Bringing this dance into our lives can be a life-changing journey. Tribal belly dance looks different on each woman even though the group may be dancing the same step. An older woman can present a step that highlights her wisdom and skill, and a younger woman can show her youthful spirit and naïveté. All women are exquisite to watch.

Women come to my classes from all walks of life and seem to have a desire to gather and to find a support system. Sometimes they do not even know they are looking for this connection; they just have a void to fill and decide to enroll in a class. They are often searching for more than a dance. In these fast and often chaotic times, we have an intense desire for community. I see it in my weekly classes and monthly traveling workshops. I offer a safe place for women, predominantly, to come together, to acknowledge themselves and each other. This does not happen in the outside world too often. Instead, people race through each day and week and year, overachieving and multitasking. But to learn this dance, we must be in the moment with our fellow dancers, so tribal belly dancing gives these women the freedom to let go of their commitments and stresses for a short while and to take joy in their bodies and the women around them as they dance.

Women may choose tribal belly dance for the isolated and rounded movements—feminine, graceful, challenging. The moves look good on a woman's body, and moving the body in this way feels good. Some say that certain tribal belly dance maneuvers feel intuitive, as if we have been doing these movements for centuries. For others, the dance becomes a meditation and a spiritual connection. For some women, this dance is a way to get in shape. Still others want to dance to regain their sensuality. The dance can be an emotional release or a healing experience, even in just looking at ourselves in the mirror. Dance class provides a way to network with other dancers, laughing or sometimes crying together.



*“Belly dance is a whole culture--both as our little group in Portland, and as our connection through the dance with women from other times, other places. The many aspects of this culture and how they manifest themselves are what have intrigued me ... the connections between the spiritual, artistic, political, practical situations of women.”*

*~Sarah Locke,  
former Gypsy Caravan dancer*

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*“Dancing is an intuitive language the body speaks. The more the body speaks this language, the more fluent it becomes. Dance is natural for women. We are reclaiming this movement and becoming energized and empowered.”*

*~Carolyn Lunday,  
former Sister Caravan dancer*

Moving the body in these feminine ways creates a connection to the heart, a chance to fall in love with ourselves—maybe again, maybe for the first time.

When we dance together a powerful and energizing feeling charges the group. People who are watching or participating can see and feel that connection, and it is addictive, like a drug. If you see it, you want it for yourself. If you have had it, you want more. The distinctive, mesmerizing qualities of a tribal group dancing together draw people in—the laughter, the eye contact between the dancers, the improvisational energy, and the adrenaline rush, not to mention the costuming and ornamentation.

Women are created similar, and from our core, our womb, comes this magnificent dance. It is no wonder the dance has a universal femininity across the globe. When we dance together, it is as if we are united with a collective unconscious. It is our birthright as women to use our bodies to dance, to express ourselves, to tell a story, and to feel good in our skin.

Let’s imagine dancing around a fire pit with our tribe, under the stars, because it is what we do at night, beating on a drum, creating rhythms, and moving together in a circle. This is my idea of the primal foundation of tribal belly dance. Basic. Communal. We have given it the structure of a necessary nonverbal language, full of some simple and some complex moves, so that we can come together from different areas of the world and dance as one large peaceful community.

Is it idealistic to think that dancing together like this can bring world peace? Maybe. But dancing together in tribal style brings individual peace and group connection.

*Ghawazee. The hips move side to side. Fluid, yet strong with intention. We process down the middle of the street, in unison, as if marching, joining forces across the globe. Down, down, up, up. Right, left, right, left. Dancing women become soldiers of love. Invaders of the heart. And crusaders for the heart!*





## In the Company of Dancers

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*She listens to the words as she plants her feet on the ground.*

*“Breathe in through your nose. Fill the belly up with your breath. Expand the belly. Exhaling through the mouth, hollow your belly out. Pull the navel back to your spine.”*

*She feels connected to her whole body, through her power center, her core.*

*“Feel all four corners of your feet on the floor, pulling up on both sides of your arches, lengthening through your whole body as you inhale. Notice your posture.”*

*She aligns herself—ears over shoulders, over ribs, over hips. Feeling ten feet tall, she is ready to move.*

**EACH DANCER MOVES** through her phases of learning at her own speed, sometimes quickly, but more often, slower than expected. Many first-time students explain to me that the dance is harder than they thought it would be. They always tell me that I make it look easy. After twenty years, I hope I do. Trying to coax a beginning dancer to be patient with herself is a challenge. I remember when I started learning this style, I could not get enough of the dance. I just wanted to shimmy fast and achieve it all right away. But it would not come out of my body that quickly. My brain knew what I wanted my hips to do, but my hips just weren't ready to do it. I realized that I had to make it a meditation. And I had to practice—a lot.

Slowing down is important to the dance, just as breathing is necessary to life. Most of us move through our daily lives so quickly, focusing on instant gratification, that we don't know what to do when a task takes time. We encounter the frustration of learning a new language, this nonverbal way of communicating with our bodies. We do not achieve instant mastery, although we have instant fun. I tell the dancers to make the dance their own moving meditation—to listen to their bodies and the music and to watch their reflections in the mirror.

That itself can be scary.

Many women today do not spend time looking at themselves. Then I ask them to stare at their bodies in the mirror, while possibly wearing a short top that exposes their bellies and hips. I invite them to try to slide their ribcage around in a circle or to form a figure eight—a takseem—with their hips.

*Keep the knees bent and feet flat with your heels together. Lower the right hip down, then scoop it out to the side and bring it up and over and follow it down into the left hip to do the same. Keep it smooth and slow; this is a takseem, rounded, yummy. Arms move with the hips in a snake-like motion, up and down, out to the sides. Feel the flow all the way out to your beautiful fingertips—every part of you is dancing. Breathe and listen to the music.*



## The Music that Makes Me Dance

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*Dum ka dum ka, dum ka, dum ka. The doumbek rhythm repeats itself over and over, starting slowly, with a syncopated beat. The haunting clarinet-like tone of the Egyptian arghul joins in, playing a simple drone. The sounds of the riqq begin, with a dum on the skin and the jingles of the small metal cymbals. The song builds momentum, adding more percussion on the goblet-shaped djembe, kicking up to a faster tempo, with more players on frame drums. Her finger cymbals begin with a triplet rhythm—right, left, right—as the davul booms out the deep bass beat, bringing up the energy. Loud zaghareets escape from her mouth, crying encouragement to the other dancers and to the musicians, as if to say, “More, please! I want to dance.”*

**WHAT IS IT** about music that touches our heart or soul or body? For each of us, it can be a different reason. The sound of the voice—whether it is male or female, or the melody line, be it melancholy or snappy—can penetrate deep into our soul. The rhythm might be played in a slow, rolling pattern that takes us walking with a clipped step. Or it may be bold and heavy, making us want to jump and shake.

For me, it all begins with the rhythm. If we have nothing else, we have rhythm—our heartbeat, our life force. Listen. From that rhythm, the drum beats—repetitive, consistent.

When I hear a piece of music that moves me, my body seems to gather a life of its own. My hips might want to circle in a slow, reversed figure eight called a maya or in a staccato faster shimmy. The drumbeat may pulse into my heart, where the beat can move me up to the sky or down to the earth. The melody might be a lilting tune flowing through my body, asking me to stay in one place and do a smooth rib cage rotation with a snaky belly undulation. It may be a faster song that pushes me to move across the floor with a vigorous double hip bump and an Egyptian basic.

Music can play with my emotions. It might make my soul bleed with memories, my heart sing with delight, my voice cry out with empathy, or my hips shake because they cannot stay still. From the time I was young, I needed music in my life. I played the organ first, starting at age seven; in my early teens, I taught myself guitar. As I time travel back, I remember sitting for hours on my bedroom floor with albums spread all around me, singing along with my rock heroes while I read the poetry—and sometimes complete nonsense—of their lyrics.

My mom sang in several choirs, besides acting in plays, and she was always singing around the house. My older sister had her favorite rockers, Jimi Hendrix and Elvis Presley, and so I sang along with those records too. My brother, six years older, had his slew of musicians, from the heavy stuff...



Paulette



Jennette Kienholz



Dulcinea Myers-Newcomb, Diana Bright, Paulette, Jennette Kienholz, and Cammi Vance

1999



GH

Paulette



GH

Bruce Beaton, Cammi Vance, Paulette, Jennette Kienholz,  
Diana Bright, Adria Clark, Dulcinea Myers-Newcomb, and Jeff Rees



PRD

Mizna with Urban Berber Pamela Smith Hill and Gypsy Carol Vance at Art in the Pearl



BB

Back: Karen Hunt, Meghan Zuccarello, Carol Vance, Jennifer Mayfield-Shafer, Michele Gila, Dulcinea Myers-Newcomb, and Paulette  
Front: Gina Lee and Nicole Daddona



## Dance as Ritual

*Three steps forward, three steps back. Listening to the rhythm she walks in the circle, arms folded over her chest. Repeat. Forward, back, forward, back. Eyes half closed, the other dancers become a blur, but their bodies walking with her feel comforting. She becomes the rhythm, the drumbeat. Breathing deep, she sighs. Release. Her hips start swaying; her feet feel light on the floor. The simple movement takes over her entire body, and she allows herself this walk. Release. Feelings of peace and gratefulness wash over her as her mind quiets, she continues on her journey around the circle. Bliss.*

**TRANCE DANCING HAS** been done over the ages, not only to heal, but as a way of reaching ecstasy, to release the mind and/or the body, to create ritual, and to find peace and contentment in everyday life. Using my tribal belly dance and healing background, I ventured into starting a form of ritual and moving meditation using a variety of healing and spiritual traditions. I call it tribal trance.

Tribal trance can help reach into the eye of the soul. A dancer knows that her goal is to arrive at that point where her body no longer stands in the way of movement and expression, but becomes the tool of the soul's expression. Then the body and the psyche are working together. I believe we are always on a quest for peace, enlightenment, pure joy. Dance can be a tool for that quest. When we use movement as a sacred dance or a prayer, we can attain a sense of godhood, a spiritual renewal. We can come to a place of connection—to ourselves, to the outside world, and to each other, and possibly to the One—where our outer and inner worlds fuse into that state of pure bliss. It can be a journey, a vision quest, or a prayer. We finally allow ourselves to surrender—to the music, to the movement, and to each other. Within that surrender we may find a place of ecstasy where we can disappear...



Paulette at the Fez Ballroom, Portland, Oregon, 2003

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The dance inspires everything from simple changes to extreme transformations—some women switch jobs, move their homes, or fall in love, because of the power they now understand they possess. Some of these metamorphoses have been coming for some time, but the supportive community and the dance are the catalyst for change. The dancers realize life is about finding personal fulfillment and peace. I tell them that whatever they need to make themselves happy and realize their full potential is what they should do. I try to empower them to realize this and to take action for it.

As women pass through my studio and my life, I witness these stories unfolding. I would like to share some of their experiences.

I met Peggy Hewitt because she works for my accountant. In 2002 she began bringing her young daughter and her daughter's friend to Saturday morning class, after enjoying our first Tribal Quest NorthWest show. Peggy sat on the couch and watched while the pre-teens danced. Peggy is buxom and round and has the sweetest laugh. She seemed a bit on the conservative side, dressing casually, and I knew her to be somewhat shy. I really enjoyed her presence as she watched the dance class, and I asked her why she wasn't in there dancing with them. She could never give me a good reason, and I could see she wanted to join in.

Finally she did take a class, and she has truly blossomed into a vivacious and gorgeous dancer. She is still gloriously buxom, but now she shows it off in all of her costumed glory, dancing with enthusiasm and continuing curiosity. She is always at the front of the class, asking questions and working hard. When she dances, she shines with the joy it gives her. I interviewed Peggy to get her take on the transformations she has gone through since she started dancing. Not surprisingly, she has moved into the Urban Berbers troupe, and wears her dance and her costume with pride.

It never occurred to me to dance. I was forty; I felt like a fat mom with no self-confidence. I had never even thought about it. Then you asked me when was I going to start dancing...

I decided to try it and that was it. I loved it! It was fun, it was different than anything I'd ever done, and it made me feel good.

But I was scared that I wouldn't be able to do this dance. It was challenging and the beginning of a journey of finding myself through dance. I had never danced before, only out there shaking it in nightclubs. Belly dancing felt right, and I wanted more of this feeling, and I wanted to be better at it. That was the beginning of my awakening, awakening my body to lots of things.

This dance gets in your soul, though that did not happen right away for me. I was dancing, learning the moves, and having a good time. Getting into my soul came later; getting into my soul was like this energy... I felt more grounded. It moved down into my arms, and I could feel it in my hands. Suddenly I was finding my hands,



Peggy Hewitt



Peggy Hewitt, Urban Berber dancer

feeling [the energy] come out of my fingertips. It was like a new body awareness type of energy ...

On the outside I'm still a mom and an office manager. On the inside, I have changed—I'm a dancer. I always carry that around with me. A really big change is my concept of beauty. I never liked how I looked. This dance has opened up my eyes to the beauty in myself, and in everyone else. When I started classes, I had no self-confidence. I was just a fat person that probably could never belly dance. But everyone else could see the beauty in me and the beauty in my belly. Eventually I started getting comfortable in my own body. Now when I dance I feel beautiful. When I'm dancing with others, everything feels more beautiful; we are appreciating each other. There is this inner beauty and peace

that comes from this dance ... Connected energy. As a belly dancer, you have this talent, no matter where you go you have this connection, this sisterhood, with other belly dancers.

Myla Stauber is a gem. Living with low self-esteem after having her children, Myla restarted her life in 2003, truthfully and painfully dancing through her life's journey, wearing her heart on her choli sleeves. I admire her so much for the courage she had and continues to have as she dances, totting her baggage with her, and little by little heaving it out the door. Another woman in bloom, Myla is not afraid to share, out loud for all to hear, how she feels and what happens to her in and around the dance. I invited Myla into my office for an interview, to get her story straight from her mouth.

[Several] years ago, I saw a group of dancing women at Pioneer Courthouse Square come out on stage with swords on their heads. I had never heard about Gypsy Caravan, tribal belly dance, or anything like it. My jaw hit the ground. I thought it was the coolest thing, and in my next lifetime I wanted to come back and be that!

Having children—going through adopting a baby girl from Vietnam, fertility issues, and then physically having a child all within a short time frame—was a blessing, but also a stressful time. My body was wracked, stressed. Having children was taking its toll.

I needed something to get back into my body and myself as a woman, aside from these two infants who needed me so desperately.

I saw a Caravan Studio ad in the paper, and said, 'Oh my god, it's those dancing women, and they give lessons. Where has this been all my life?' ...

I stood in the back of the Beginner One class, wearing my long T-shirt, terrified. Now it's been over four years and, at age forty-two, I'm still dancing ...

Watching and starting this dance, I could tell it was an extremely spiritual, strong, sexy, powerful dance—all the things I knew I needed help with getting back into my life.



*Tribal Vision* is an inspired, insightful, and important account of the origins of tribal belly dance and the author's personal journey through this brilliant and artistic community. Part of this dance movement from the beginning, Paulette Rees-Denis shares her vision of its past, present, and future. This is a deeply satisfying book for experienced dancers as well as new ones—and for all readers who simply want to know more about a dance form that revolutionized the meaning of belly dance.

~PAMELA SMITH HILL, author and dancer



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