

Pre-show notes:

“Zydeco Dance in Houston: Black Cowboys, Trail Rides and Creole Roots,” a six-minute film capturing the zydeco dance culture in Houston, shows a range of styles. Sometimes the two-step is small and held in, virtually in place, while at other times it’s wide side-to-side motions, a shoulder-length breadth or more. Dancers sometimes dance with their arms around each other, sometimes stretched away and holding one hand or both, and sometimes separated—either facing each other, or side by side. The energy is jaunty, with loose hips, but there’s also a contained quality to the movement waist up, and upper arms are frequently tucked in against the torso. Sometimes the energy of the dance is like a coiled spring, just ready to bust out, while other times it’s freer and more bouncy. [Note: Descriptions of dancers are worded to reflect how each dancer identifies.]

The video opens with a young woman and man holding each other tightly as they twirl each other around several times. They are dancing outside and sun flares burst behind them. The shot transitions to another couple, also spinning in a circle.

Karina Houston, a young Black woman with braids to her waist, dressed in a cerulean blue spaghetti-strap tank and delicate gold necklace strands, invites us to join her with a big smile and a curved arm swoop.

A quick montage of clips from Houston zydeco cultures shows dancing couples in a crowded club; a musician strumming his corrugated-metal washboard vest (called a vest frottoir); a man riding horseback; a below-the-waist shot of a couple’s legs and feet as they dance on a sandy floor; a group of people waving from a large open flatbed vehicle; two women dancing together; a young woman playing a pearly blue accordion; a close-up shot of floral teal and tan-colored cowboy boots stepping; a woman with red short hair smiling to camera, with one hand snapping in the air; and a couple wearing baseball caps and jeans dancing on a sandy floor.

The screen divides into a horizontal triptych for the video series’ title sequence—on top is a street level view of a dancer’s leg and sneaker spinning and rotating across the frame; in the middle, a queer Black male vogue dancer flips his long braids as he swiftly waves his arms and the words “If Cities Could Dance” appear over his image; and on the bottom, three women dancers of color stand in line and arch back, cradling one another. The words, “our history, our culture, our moves” appears over a montage of quick cut dancers from across the country, including a jookin’ dancer, a Native American (Seneca and Muscogee Creek) hoop dancer in eagle formation; two Chicago

foot workers dancing in sync; and a trio of hip-hop dancers performing group choreography in front of a street mural with graffiti art. The sequence culminates with queer cis woman vogue dancer looking into the camera, waving her arms and pointing her finger toward the viewer.

A Houston cityscape appears at dusk with a freight train passing in the foreground.

TEXT: Houston Zydeco

Karina and her partner energetically dance in a busy dancehall, as Karina begins to talk about zydeco. Quick cuts show different couples dancing and musicians playing. Strings of round bulb lights festoon exposed inset ceiling beams. Long narrow slab wood tables full of red plastic cups and food containers line the room. A big-screen TV plays a football game. A JAX Grill logo is projected onto the smooth wooden floor.

Some dance tightly in place, some are more swiny and loose, some stand and watch. Expressions range from reserved to jovial. A man in a teal button-down has a shoulder shrugging style as he spins his petite partner. One man is kneeling as his partner leans back. A close-up on another couple dancing close: man in braided brim cowboy hat, partner with big gold hoop earrings.

Different types of attire and footwear are visible: sneakers; leather boots—both ankle and knee-length; tight crisp jeans tucked into boots; and loose ones worn over boots. We see Hoodies, tees, team shirts, button-down Western-style shirts, cowboy hats, and billed caps.

Karina and her partner begin a spin together. He wears a black tee with the iconic Superman logo, jeans, and a ball cap which he tips with a flourish toward the camera as their spin finishes.

A couple dances outside in a parking lot, alongside an unassuming long, low, gray building with brick-red roofing.

TEXT: Cedric “One Step” Jones

Cedric is dancing outside at dusk with Stacie, a tall Black woman his same height. Cedric, a Black Creole American, has a husky build and a broad smile. He wears a black ball cap with the bill in back, a black tee with the ASL sign for “I love you,” and baggy jeans. Stacie has braids which are partially gathered at the top, then fall to her beltline. She wears a V-neck salmon-colored top tucked into her distressed jeans and cowboy boots. As Cedric talks about his nickname, he dips her to the side. As they

straighten, they pull back from each other while still holding hands. The shot is in slow motion: With feet in place, their knees open and close, like elbows in the chicken dance. They spin on the balls of their feet.

A moving drone shot of Houston's skyline at dusk transitions to a colorful "Greetings from Houston" mural. Inside the blocked letters are images of an oil well, a longhorn steer with a five-point star on its forehead, a loosely looped cassette tape, a rocket blazing into space, and saguaro cacti.

Business and street signage announces The Eldorado Ballroom on Emancipation Avenue.

A young smiling couple dances outside, casting their shadows on the side of the Big Easy. They spin around in circles, in fast motion, holding each other tightly.

TEXT: Alexis Jolivette

Alexis, a young Black woman, wears her hair in a medium close-cropped afro. She has gold and diamond-studded earrings and a diamond nose piercing and is dressed in a loose white rayon top with a crisscross back, dusky rose-colored cotton leggings and ankle-high boots. Her partner wears a ball cap with the bill to the side, a white tee, cutoff jeans, and sneakers. They take tight two-steps. They sometimes dance with their arms wrapped around each other, sometimes stretched away from each other holding one hand, and sometimes separately.

Alexis smiles wide as she holds up a large black-and-white portrait of her grandfather and musician Wilfred Chevis, a serenely smiling man wearing a weathered bowler hat.

Behind her, the faded tan brick building has large lettering reading "The Big Easy."

A historic, black-and-white photo shows Chevis and another zydeco musician on stage.

Alexis and her partner continue to dance.

We see a Houston cityscape with a low blanket of cotton-ball clouds.

In a laid back, easy manner, an older man and woman dance in the driveway of their suburban home.

TEXT: Joseph Norman

Joseph, a Black Creole American man, wears a broadly striped polo shirt and faded jeans; his female partner wears a cream-colored tee with a blue and red graphic and dark blue denim. Her hair is pulled back into a small bun at the nape of her neck.

We see a map of Texas and Louisiana, showing Opelousas toward the ankle of the boot-shaped state.

Old black-and-white archival film footage captures two Black Creole American men, one with an accordion, the other playing the fiddle and singing. Segue to the smiling faces of Joseph and his partner talking and laughing as they dance. Cut to retro footage of more formally dressed couples dancing in a club and musicians in ruffled shirts and sparkly gold vests. A woman in a tomato-orange polyester knit sweater with gold buttons and a gored, diamond-patterned skirt dances with her partner who wears russet paisley-patterned corduroy trousers. As they twirl in a tight circle on the dance floor, footage seamlessly shifts back to Joseph and his partner mid-spin in their driveway.

The map reappears, showing a line from Opelousas heading west to Houston. Retro film footage from a car passes a family along a Southern roadway, and transitions to present day driving footage of downtown Houston's cityscape. The image segues to a neighborhood shot of cream-colored homes, then a large four-panel Fifth Ward mural featuring portraits of historical community leaders.

As Alexis discusses Frenchtown, an opaque graphic of Texas appears superimposed on a neighborhood street scene. The text "Houston" appears, with a small yellow highlight in the four o'clock position.

The yellow highlight expands to fill most of the screen; the text "Greater Fifth Ward a.k.a. Frenchtown" appears with an orange square shape in the middle of Houston.

Alexis stands in a street in Frenchtown. A historic church can be seen behind her. A slow driving shot shows downtown skyscrapers appearing in the distance.

A montage of historic photos depicts two horses pulling a large wooden cart full of family and household belongings; another cart from behind; people congregating outside the "Our Mother of Mercy" church; a strolling man in a beige flat top porkpie hat, crisp white shirt, baggy pleated trousers, holding several wire coat hangers; couples in formal dress attire dancing in a club where musicians play under a banner that reads, "Eldorado Ballroom Third Ward Houston, TX" in classic art deco font.

Color archival film footage begins of artist Clifton Chenier driving, smiling to the camera and holding up the peace sign in the wind. In black-and-white film footage he speaks to

a crowd from stage as he clutches an accordion. He sings into a large padded microphone in front of him.

More black-and-white historic photos slide on and off the screen: a couple dancing in the club, their hands in the air; another at an outdoor gathering, the man in fancy Western shirt and white cowboy hat; the Zydeco Diner with a sign that reads, "Eat here to put a spring in your step" (established 1988); Zydeco musicians play at the Big Easy; close up shots of hands on a washboard (or frottoir) vest; and Clifton Chenier's accordion, with his name in bold block letters across the center.

A moving drone shot of the Buffalo Bayou in the foreground slowly approaches Houston's downtown on a sunny day. The scene transitions into a montage depicting trail-riding culture, including Black cowboys and cowgirls riding horseback in the streets of Houston. A man rides a very high-stepping chestnut horse, with more horses following; a man in a crisp pale-yellow shirt waves at the camera from his gray horse; a white pick-up full of waving folks in the back pulls a large, covered float-like flatbed truck packed with more smiling, waving people. Folks dance alongside the truck as it rolls.

The float reads "Non Stop Riderz Texas." Some of the people dancing alongside wear shirts that read the same, along with "Population Bunch of us. # StepitUp"

More horses are captured; a pristine white horse pulls a man in an elegant buggy; he waves as they pass.

People are shown smiling and laughing, as we see singles, couples, and families dancing and socializing. A woman wears her red braids in a ponytail, it swishes as she sways. A series of cuts: a couple dance outside their car, a woman shimmies her shoulder at camera; a dancer rhythmically adjusts her glasses as she gets down; a teen shyly smiles at the camera from her perch on the float; a cowboy rides through frame; a cowgirl smiles to the camera from her horse; two women dance together alongside the stopped float; a toddler with a sippy cup looks around while hoisted on the hip of the woman while a teen looks on; a woman in an orange button-down shirt tied at the waist is belly laughing.

A slow moving drone shot zooms out as the sun sets over Houston, revealing the city's suburbs. A closeup of the moon through clouds.

Outside of Houston, at Diamond Hall Ranch, dancers fill a crowded hall. Long tables are set up with wares for sale: brown leather cowboy boots; belts; T-shirts with logos.

Dancers showcase their different styles: some undulating, some more bouncy; some holding tight with one leading and big twirls out like in Western swing; some in simple two-step; and others embellishing with more complex steps.

A line of dancers drink from their plastic cups as they zydeco.

More shots of dance floor action. A group dances in matching lemon-yellow hoodies, another in orange with sparkly silver lettering. Karina and her partner dance side by side with boxy two-step footwork.

Focus is on a couple in an open, more brightly lit area. The woman wears a pouched brown leather cap, and the man a tobacco-brown long-billed cap. They have a distinctive style of dance with swivel in their hips, juxtaposed with powerful, tightly controlled swings out, and snaps back in together. When dancing close their knees look as if they intersect. When spinning the woman keeps her hand firmly on her partner's back, palm out. They dance close, step back, move back in, join hands, stretch out, let go. They join hands again, spin, stay wrapped closely to dance in place, their knees intertwined. They resume their spin and continue to circle as the film ends.

Credits appear on the bottom part of the screen. Additional featured dancers: Jermar Berry, Jr.; Stacie Dancy; Jeremy Hawkins. Director: Jessica Jones. Cinematographer: MJ Johnson. Additional Camera: Jessica Jones. Producer: Charlotte Buchen Khadra. Editor: Jessica Jones, Charlotte Buchen Khadra. Additional Editing: Elie Khadra, Rachel Boyoung Kim. Associate Producer: Vivian Morales, Masha Pershay. Production Assistants: Chinwe Oniah; Tomeka Winborne. Graphics: Masha Pershay. Archival: Photographs by James Fraher, from the books "Texas Zydeco" and "Down in Houston: Bayou City Blues" by Roger Wood, University of Texas Press. Canray Fontenot and Alphonse "Bois Sec" Ardoin at the 1966 Newport Folk Festival; from the Alan Lomax Collection at the American Folklife Center, Library of Congress; used courtesy of the Association for Cultural Equity. "Dry Wood" and "Hot Pepper" ©1973 Les Blank with Maureen Gosling. Prelinger Archive, Library of Congress, Houston Chronicle. Featured murals: "Greetings from Houston" by Daniel Anguilu, "Fruits of the Fifth Ward", created by Wheatley High School students/Museum of Cultural Arts Houston. Music: Chris Ardoin, Clifton Chenier, Lil' Nathan and the Zydeco Big Timers, Rusty Metoyer, Step Rideau and the Zydeco Outlaws. Special Thanks: Carol Trahan, Joseph Rossyion, Philip Isaacs, Roger Woods, Harrod Blank. Senior Producer: Kelly Whalen. Executive Producer: David Markus. Support of KQED Arts is provided by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. Support is also provided by the members of KQED. A production of KQED Arts © 2020 KQED.

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