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SLAVE TO *the rhythm*

THE SOUNDTRACK TO JANE CORNWELL'S
ROMANTIC LIFE HAS BEEN RICH AND VARIED –
AND ALWAYS WITH A STRONG BEAT.

It was a Cuban boyfriend named Alfonso who helped me know salsa music. Christophe, a sharp-dressing African in Paris, gave me pointers on Congolese trance. Going out with Derek, a black British global music DJ, meant unofficial master classes in everything from Brazilian samba and Colombian cumbia to Ghanaian highlife and his specialist subject, the oeuvre of Joni Mitchell.

"I'd be interested in hearing which Joni Mitchell album you think is best and why," I asked Derek the first time we met, hoping to flatter him into fancying me.

He'd thought for a while; this wasn't a question to be taken lightly.

"It changes," he said. "Right now it's *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* because it's so loose. And Joni's so great on all that privileged whiteness stuff."

"She so is." I didn't have a clue what he was talking about but we ended up an item.

I like to think there's no such thing as a failed relationship, since they've all helped get me from there to here, and because all of mine, in one way or another, have involved music. Platonic, passionate, fleeting, long term ... each of my liaisons had a soundtrack, sometimes from a single genre, usually cherry-picked from many. Dating musically minded men is a bonus when you're a music writer. Long after the

man is gone, the songs you shared, the genres you explored – dub, flamenco, Latin boogooloo – still linger.

I can't think of Winston, the Jamaican gangster who got me stoned on a beach clifftop in Negril in the late 1980s (I was young, dumb and shamefully arrogant) without hearing the righteous, ziggity-boom chorus of Toots and the Maytals' *Pressure Drop*, the tune we'd been winding and grinding to at an outdoor reggae club earlier.

When I picture Rashid, my boyfriend during London's hazy-brained acid-house era, I hear ambient electronica – the Orb's *Little Fluffy Clouds* – and see us lying in the chill-out room at Heaven, a superclub underneath the arches at Charing Cross station. Remembering Jack, a curmudgeonly Scottish arts journalist and frustrated singer-songwriter, has me humming American country-folk classics: John Prine's *Saddle in the Rain*, say, or Steve Earle's weary-hearted *My Old Friend the Blues*.

Jack, like Derek, was a music nerd – the sort of guy who alphabeticised his sprawling record collection, chose friends on the basis of what music they liked, felt strongly that Nick Hornby's mega-selling *High Fidelity* might have been written just for them.

Rare is the woman who can tell you the name of the session muso who played the cowbell on the limited-

edition release that came out on the Fania label during the eclipse of 1972.

Jack and Derek could.

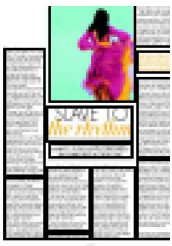
"Jeez," I'd say. "Does it really matter?"

"Yes it really does," they'd sigh.

Music has always felt vital, nonetheless. As a kid in the 1970s, growing up in Mooroolbark in Melbourne's outer eastern suburbs, I had to go out looking for it. I was the eldest; I didn't have a big brother to point me in the direction of King Crimson or Captain Beefheart like Vanessa, my best friend at Tintern Girls Grammar. Each Friday I'd go lucky-dipping in Brash's record store in Eastland, Ringwood, buying a random cassette with my allowance: electro-pioneers Tangerine Dream; grunting jazz pianist Keith Jarrett; *Horses* by Patti Smith, my idol – a poet, dreamer and high priestess of punk.

These and other artists broadened my horizons before I set out to see the world.

When I left for London in the late '80s, it was thanks to music – and an English comedian named Kevin. We'd fallen for each other at the Last Laugh, a comedy venue where I was a waitress and he was doing a show; back in Britain he compiled mix tapes in his Notting Hill studio flat and posted them to me, special delivery. Madness, the Specials, the Pretenders, the Pogues... London's



finest, fresh off the live circuit, jostling each other for rewind and repeat.

Much later, after I started writing about other music, I travelled all over. To Essaouira, Morocco, where I met Mad Bill, an African-American actor in thrall to the bluesy rhythms and peace-loving vibes of the Maghreb's Gnawa musician-healers. To Paris, where Christophe would roll his eyes at the club kids wiggling out to Konono No.1, a Congolese band that played tribal trance music on thumb pianos amplified with old car alternator magnets and were being hailed as the next big thing.

"Young people in the Congo don't like Konono anymore," Christophe would say, shrugging besuited shoulders. "They prefer soukous and rap."

To Santiago de Cuba, where I went to learn to dance salsa after I'd split up with Derek, partly to spite him, since he

couldn't dance Latin-style at all.

It wasn't until I met Alfonso from Havana in a salsa club in London that I really found my mojo. I watched him as he twirled a succession of women around the floor; he had a shiny bald head, wore a chunky gold chain and danced like he was on castors. When warning signs flashed, I ignored them. "Just feel the music, *mi amor*," he'd tell me as together we sent up sparks to timba, salsa's faster, fiercer cousin. Not long after he moved into my flat, which in hindsight maybe wasn't a great idea.

When he moved out two years later, I put away my salsa CDs, let them gather dust. Then I took out Patti Smith's *Horses* and played it over and over, until I found myself again. ●

The Whirl: Men, Music & Misadventures by Jane Cornwell (HarperCollins) is out tomorrow.

"He had a shiny bald head, wore a chunky gold chain and danced like he was on castors. Warning signs flashed."

