

Dancing With Demons

> Essays at the intersection of
> Dance, Music, and Video Games

>

> by Nat Quayle Nelson



Second Edition



This zine's soundtrack includes songs by Danny Baranowsky, FamilyJules, cupcakKe, Masked Intruder, Thutmose, Post Malone, Swae Lee, Blackway, Black Caviar, Jed Whedon, and Neil Patrick Harris.

Listen to it before/after/while reading the essays:

Spotify

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<http://tiny.cc/g3ydez>

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The art on the cover is by Ted Martens and comes from the game *Crypt of the NecroDancer* by Brace Yourself Games.

More credits and thanks at the end.

Dancing with Demons

I'm pining for a girl who fights with double-edged swords.

The second time I saw her, I was late for class, rushing past the Performing Arts Building, and there she was on the lawn, sparring in a full fencing suit. I wasn't expecting to run into my crush on campus *holding a sword*, so I choked and passed by in silent embarrassment. I wanted to say, "Hey, I know you! We met at a party two weeks ago and I heard you were bi, so I asked if you wanted to get coffee. You said yes, but you never texted me back. Remember?"

In class, I used my phone to brush up on fencing. If I'm being more precise, I guess I'm pining for a double-edged girl who fights with a *foil*. And why do I call bi girls double-edged? One: I've learned to always warn myself, *bi girls aren't looking for trans folx. Just give up already*. Two: The previous isn't technically true, but all the bi women I've known who *would* date trans, just didn't want to date *me*, and that was even worse.

My first year, I lived in a men's dorm. It crushed my spirit, so I came out of the closet in search of femme friends. My second year I went to student club fairs and gazed at sorority tables from a distance—picturing \$5,000 in annual dues, and a life of awkward conversations. Third year, I found a loophole: Phi Sigma Pi, an academic sorority with a brand-new local chapter. I say sorority despite the technical term being "all-gender fraternity": a group that happened to be all women, but didn't need to really see me as a sister to let me in.

At first, I wasn't sure if I should flirt with all of my Phi Sig Sisters, or none of them. Eventually I came to the conclusion that, most of them being straight, it was better not to risk getting romantic. I gave up on dating straight women after swiping past the third Tinder girl whose bio expressed a burning and specific desire

to find the right “mans.”

When the chapter president announced that each initiate would be paired with an existing member, or “Big,” I hoped that *she* would be my Big: the happy, outgoing, dancing girl who always owned the room. But now I have to admit it was a pairing that wouldn’t have made much sense. Better the depressed trans lesbian ended up with the thirty-seven-year-old Black woman who didn’t fit in either, and was also depressed. Even though I’m white, we understand each other in ways the other sisters never could. But I’ll be honest that my Big has never cheered me up, and I sometimes wish she could.

The next official sorority meeting is in an hour but I haven’t showered in two days and my intense obsession with *Crypt of the NecroDancer* shows no signs of stopping. It’s an indie game where you play as a young woman fighting her way through a dungeon by timing her movements perfectly to the beat of an electronic soundtrack. You can play it with a normal keyboard but it’s meant to be played by stomping on a dance pad like *Dance Dance Revolution*—and that’s what I do. For hours on end. How do I find the cardiovascular stamina? Maybe I’m more at home in this disco dungeon surrounded by evil skeletons than I am in a room full of my best cis woman friends. Am I supposed to keep pretending I don’t always feel like Link from *Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*, wearing awful drag to sneak my way into Gerudo Town, where only women are allowed?

I met the double-edged girl at a party where everyone was nostalgically playing *Dance Dance Revolution: Mario Mix* on an old Nintendo GameCube. I thought we hit it off talking to each other about dance and video games, geeking out about the *Undertale* soundtrack. She said she had just come out and was newly single, had just started swiping for women on Tinder. Maybe I thought if I

became a dancing demon slayer power femme I could impress her enough at the next party that she'd date me instead of one of the gorgeous, gold-star cis lesbians she must be matching with in droves—the “real” girls who I assume are stealing all the bi girls I never match with.

Words like “steal” imply that I feel entitled to romance with whomever I want. I constantly catch the demons in me using words like that, and I wonder if this is why trans women will never be truly welcome in Gerudo Town. I'd be scared of me, too.

In any case, it's ironic I thought my excellence in digital fighting might impress this girl. That was before I knew she could kick my ass in a swordfight IRL.

I can still make the meeting, but I need to shower first. I break away from *NecroDancer* and strip down in the bathroom. I see how my underwear is visibly drenched with sweat, and I imagine this is why no one wears a chainmail bikini in actual combat. It'd start to glisten.

Stepping out of the shower, I realize I've also just soiled my only cute pair of jeans with sweat. I have another pair, but it's a men's size, and it hangs loose, triggering the internalized beauty standards that tell me I have freakishly skinny legs, even for a girl.

I throw on a pair of pajama bottoms and pick my crumpled Phi Sigma Pi shirt off the floor. I could leave now and be ten minutes late to the meeting, but can I stand to let my sisters see me bedraggled in my pajamas? And will they even notice if I'm not there? My Big is inactive now, and none of the new recruits wanted me as *their* Big—not even our first other trans member!—so I don't feel quite beholden to anyone at the moment.

I think I'll just stay inside—a damsel in distress, I'll be dancing with my demons, dreaming of the double-edged girl who will one day save me.





TOP DEFINITION

ephorize

To have complete influence over

Very Serious Album Review

Why is the second K in CupcakKe capitalized? Everyone I know pronounces her name “Cupcake,” but the best theory I can come up with for the orthographic innovation of the second K, is that it’s really pronounced “Cupcockay”, a la “bukakke,” or the communal sex act in which several penis-owning individuals blow their loads on the same person’s face at once. That would make sense to me given how kinky her lyrics are.

Like me, CupcakKe’s album *Ephorize* is viscerally repulsive, but once you get to know it, you might find it bizarrely, intensely endearing.

Within a week of first hearing it, I was so engrossed that I was listening to Ephorize everywhere I went. I was so desensitized to the grosser parts of it, that I felt personally offended when my two

best friends made me stop blasting “Duck Duck Goose” in the car because CupcakKe’s loud orgasms in the background made them uncomfortable. Come on, what’s the big deal?

After so many years of wondering why other people were so shy about talking about sex, there’s something so incredibly affirming about how confidently she belts out “*This that submarine pussy, Mr. Clean pussy / This the I’m ‘bout to fuck you longer than a limousine pussy / High Self-Esteem Pussy, It’s a dream pussy.*” She makes me feel like I might not be the only pod person out there who feels the need to confess seriously weird thoughts to total strangers.

I’ve had a hard time connecting with popular hip-hop music, maybe largely for two reasons: I’m white & as a kid I was almost never **exposed** to Black culture, and I’m transfeminine, so I never connected very well with the macho themes that characterize mainstream rap culture. So non-male rappers like Angel Haze and CupcakKe have done amazing things to bridge the gap between myself and the genre: at least we can agree on a couple things: that men suck, and that life is sometimes hard for reasons that are more internal than societal. So give me a song like “Self Interview” and I will dig into it like none other. “*Most people already skipped this song cuz it ain’t about sex or killin’*” -- hey, I love the songs about sex and killin’ (when it’s a girl talking), but give me something meaty like “*They always ask if my tats hurt, but the hurt why I got tattoos*” and I’ll have (Duck Duck) goosebumps for the next month.

CupcakKe understands my struggles with depression and loneliness so well she could turn them into earworm anthems that are somehow uplifting, energetic fight songs without cheaply waving the negative feelings away. I’ve been ghosted so many times in the last three years when I meet new people I feel like my distrust might overcome me. “*What is it worth, is it worth not bein’ solo? / How much love can you give me, what’s the total? Ima need the total, total, total...*” One thing’s for sure. CupcakKe gives me enough love to be worth not being silent.



Lady Icarus

Tiffany was a bad dancer. So she thought, and since she never ventured very far outside of her own head, so it was. She kept scraping against the way the other girls' clothes fit them snugly, tracing their curves. Her own clothes sagged limply, or when she wore tights, revealed a bulge between her legs. "Cameltoe," her roommate had called it, and she had never felt less elegant.

Tiffany knew she wasn't like the women in her class, all of whom had been born through a vagina, with a vagina, and over decades, became women. Tiffany had willed herself into existence where no person had existed previously. Without years to devote to refinement, she remained an awkward little girl for the time being.

On Tinder she could walk through two different worlds: one a sensitive straight man's, the other an awkward ugly lesbian. In both, she felt unwanted, but it felt more realistic to hope someone would love her in the first world where she had the junk to prove herself. That she could "trick" another lesbian felt unrealistic, and also wrong. And wasn't it just as superficial for someone to love her for a performance as to love her for an assigned identity? She saw a gorgeous woman looking for a "boy toy for the meantime" and something felt so appealing about the powerlessness of being a toy. She pressed the blue button to Super-Like. She could be a boy if it meant getting fucked by someone so beautiful.

She had thought briefly about uniting her body and mind, but the doctors told her the hormones would make her infertile. Aside from the little chromosome mix-up, she was proud of her genetic makeup and couldn't surrender the fantasy of one day raising beautiful non-binary daughters of her own.

Tiffany was a woman*. She'd tried writing that word without the asterisk, but found that it was a smudge she couldn't quite wipe away. Writing her own story, neither could she bring herself to write the word "I" instead of "she." She lacked the self-evidence.

The first time she'd worn a skirt, her boxer briefs had peeked out from the hem to laugh at her with the onlookers. A day after that, she'd taken scissors, thread, and a needle, to eviscerate the legs and sew together the fly in her underwear, the word "infibulation" coming to mind. It was easier than shopping alone again and having the Nordstrom lady keep apologizing that they didn't have any less girly headbands (girly being the entire point).

She hurt herself for the first time in dance class, toppling all the way over in a handstand. They hadn't even gotten to the phrase with the cartwheels yet, and she knew without a doubt she would embarrass herself. When she fell, the other girls gasped and worried over her, from a distance she felt inexplicably grateful for. Not wanting to be seen as vulnerable, she always got up quickly. A routine held over from years living as a man.

In the moment before her fall, though--she had done the handstand, and held it! A real handstand--I mean, who was to tell her whether anything was or wasn't a handstand as long as she really tried to do one, but sometimes language and willpower weren't enough and it felt great to be the actual thing, and seen that way by others--but good god, she had done the handstand. And she'd really gone for it the second time, too, before her legs stretched too far forward and brought the whole thing tumbling down to bruise her elbow and she refused to put ice on it.

(S)he thought back to the time when he had fallen off his longboard--the one time that viciously barking dog hadn't come out to chase him, and he fell because he had looked back to wonder where it was. He'd broken his arm and been in such godawful pain, wanted to give up on everything--

She. She. (By itself, the word quickly started to sound strange.)

She reminded herself.

Back to the memory, but with confidence. She had wanted to give up, but never did. She took her essay finals on a laptop, not on paper, and got better scores for it, eventually learned to

masturbate with her left hand, and felt unashamed that she needed to do so in order to stay sane. She wasn't Galatea, made of stone. She was Icarus: Lady Icarus, she might have fallen, but first, she had flown with the sun. Not just that, she had risen, she was Lady Phoenix. Did the pain matter, then?

High on a new metaphorical self, she still paused to reflect, knowing euphoria, too, is a danger. Maybe Lady Phoenix didn't have to implode completely before every time she rose again. She bought an ice pack for her bruises, and abstained the next day in Dance from doing any new moves that felt too risky. Still reckless at heart, though, she found herself on her longboard again--it had been so long--and the cycle would continue, but today, she did not fall.

Her favorite feeling, the illusion of a story ending.



My Stockholm Syndrome Love for Masked Intruder

When I saw Masked Intruder perform at The Depot (SLC, 4/6/19), I'd never seen or heard of them before. From the get-go I was trying to grasp their bizarre stage persona. They wore indistinct black clothing and referred to each other by the color of their ski masks: Red, Blue, Green, and Purple.

"Yellow couldn't be here, but we brought someone new! Purple right here. She's a lady, which is cool."

I wasn't sure if Purple was a permanent addition to the band or not, but it seemed kind of weird to immediately highlight her sex/gender like that. The shtick made more sense to me after they played a few songs. Their music is mostly about lonely, possessive, and romantically inept love. But not in the 2000's emo music, "my mom thinks I'm cool," kind of way. Masked Intruder know they are dorky, weird, and even creepy. It's probably satire?

They even brought a hype man in a cop costume, who trolled the venue acting authoritative like he was about to arrest the band and all their fans for breaking and entering (a recurring theme in their lyrics). My Dad caught me on camera giving him a good shove in the mosh pit. #CrimingWhileWhite



But seriously, 40% of cops are domestic abusers.
<http://tiny.cc/tn1dez/>

So anyway, they asked for a "cute lady from the crowd" to come on stage and sing some song called "Heart Shaped Guitar" with them. To their credit, they didn't just pick the most conventionally attractive woman to raise her hand--the gal was a bit plus-sized, and I thought that was pretty woke for however cringey it could have been.

Before launching into the song, the frontman asked the volunteer a series of questions.

"So you know the song, right? You can sing along with us?"

"Yeah, I love it!"

"And tell me, true or false, I've never seen you before in my life?"

"That's true!"

"And true or false, even though we've never met, I've got an awkward crush on you and it's making you feel uncomfortable."

"That's true too!"

I thought to myself, What the hell is going on?
And then they sang it:

Heart Shaped Guitar

Masked Intruder

Front man:

Girl, ever since I first saw you, I knew you were the one for me
I just want you to know how I feel
That's why I'm standing here

At three AM out in your front yard
Singing you a love song on a heart shaped guitar
I hope you hear me and I hope you care
And you put on a smile and you come downstairs

2nd verse,
sung by
Audience
Lady:

Dude, you're freaking me out
Seriously, what the fuck's wrong with you?
I don't even know you
I'm calling the cops
Why are you standing there

At three AM out in my front yard
Singing stupid love songs on a heart shaped guitar?
And I don't want to hear it cause I don't even care
The police are on their way, so just stay right there

I had no idea what I was watching. Was this three prominent male performers owning up to and lambasting toxic softboy masculinity as the centerpiece of their oeuvre? It was so in-your-face and divisive! I kinda actually loved it.

After they left the stage I overheard someone (who looked pretty queer/non-binary, so I cared about their opinion) grumbling "Yeah, joking about objectifying women. Real funny. Idiots."

In the next month, along with many mixed feelings, Masked Intruder's albums became a part of my heavy rotation. Yeah, three albums of debatably self-aware stalker-adjacent gimmick lyrics is probably problematic. I can see how it could even be triggering for some. But also... I am all of these songs.

In high school, I crushed like crazy on a girl I'd never spoken to. I told my best friend about it. He would often make fun of me, but in a loving way. Let's call him Effortless Chad. When he heard about my hapless heartache it got him thinking he could help me "man up" and win her heart.

"All you have to do is talk to her. We'll make sure she bumps into you in the hallway and then you just say hi and introduce yourself."

Well, time after time we made carefully orchestrated "random encounters." But each time, I'd get so nervous, I couldn't even open my mouth.

I think Chad thought if the stakes were higher, he could make me overcome my fear. So he made my crush a meme. He'd pass me in the hallway and shout her name to egg me on and embarrass me—with the amicable subtext that "This will be a thing until you find your courage and say something to her." I was constantly mortified.

I can only imagine she happened to overhear Chad shout "Nat loves [REDACTED] at least once, and it freaked her the fuck out.

Around this time, we found out she had a Dance class during my free period. I convinced Chad—or he convinced me, or both—to skip class and come with me to "audit" the class and finally talk to her that way. I knew this was basically stalking but I was out of other ideas. I have rarely felt more like an awkward trainwreck in my entire life.

We'd heard the Dance teacher was lax and welcoming, so we just opened the door in the middle of fourth period, introduced ourselves as prospective dancers, and asked if we could jump in. We hopped in among a class composed entirely of cis young women. Facing a wall-length mirror, I watched in horror as I tried to mimick the moves of the group, moving my body like an off-putting wooden puppet. After the length of just one song, mortified, I grabbed Chad's arm and pulled him out the door, still without having spoken a word to my crush.

(Fun fact: Two years later I enrolled in the same class on my own terms, and it was life-changing.)

The next week, her brother found Chad in the hallway and told him, "You and your little friend need to stay the fuck away from my sister." Fair enough; we did everything possible to deserve that!

I am still awkward, needy, possessive, obsessive. I fall too hard, too fast. I'm trans lesbian but I don't usually shave, so most women probably feel my presence as just another male gazer. Resting Creep Face. Social cues go right over my head—I basically don't speak body language, and because of that I've made multiple people uncomfortable by blundering to act on my feelings. I feel like a Masked Intruder myself, like the kind of person who could only find love from someone with severe Stockholm Syndrome. ("Stalk-home syndrome"?) I am constantly terrified that I'll hurt all the femmes in my life.

Sometimes I can't tell if Masked Intruder celebrates that grossness, drags me deeper into the problem, or if it's cathartic, excising those demons in a safe artistic context. Most of the time I'm sure they do both. I love their work. Is that so crazy?

*Maybe even we
Could rob a bank or three,
Ain't no tellin' what we could get away with*

*Use the money to get married,
Maybe even start a family,
We could get a little place down on the beach
Maybe even*

WHEN YOU KNOW THE WORDS TOO WELL

In the first scene of *Spider-Man: Into the Spideverse*, Miles Morales jams out to a total banger, and I jam along. It's catchy but it's also tinged with that beautiful sort of sadness. It speaks to me, *understands* me. Maybe a film critic would call the song a microcosm of the film's thematic essence.

After the movie, I find the soundtrack online and listen to the whole thing over and over again. The song is called "Sunflower" by Post Malone and Swae Lee. It calms me, but it also *energizes* me. How can it do both? I realize the music is instilling me with the same deadly duality Miles Morales learns to command. As a millennial I must be multimodal.

Spider-music permeates my life, makes every moment feel so heroic and individual. This spell is finally broken the first time I hear "Sunflower" playing in the background during the most mundane of moments—at Smith's, while I shop for groceries. I realize it has gone mainstream, and I wonder if I should be miffed—but the music's spell resumes mere moments later.

Months pass. Something breaks inside me when my sorority announces the mentor pairings for this semester. I canceled a trip to Bozeman, Montana so I could take a Little this semester. And yet, I haven't been given a Little at all. Someone else got twins! I wonder, was it the personality test we all took? Am I too eclectic to be compatible with any of the recruits? What about the rankings we filled out, was I not lovable goofball enough in meetings for any recruit to put my name down as 2nd or 3rd preference? Did I just come off as too intense? (*You're a sunflower / I think your love would be too much.*)

No more reason to stick around for Big-Little Reveal. I uncanceled the trip to Montana. I find myself miles from home, wandering a strange city on a Sunday night with no one to talk to. Then I stumble on a movie theater. *Spider-Verse* is still playing there. I decide to see it for a second time. It's been so long I've forgotten the movie itself, but the soundtrack is deeply ingrained in my brain now. I suspect the songs will steal the show, and the rest will be boring.

I'm wrong about that. From the very beginning, I hear that familiar song and, with the rest of the crowd, I start to sing along. Everyone loves this song, and everyone knows the words--except for Miles Morales, who mumbles along to it with gibberish, the way we all do when we hear songs we like but not well enough to memorize. We all feel like nerds when we realize we know the song better than Spider-Man himself. After all the soul-searching this song has inspired, that feeling is goddamn hilarious.

Back at the hotel I call every one of my sisters to say I miss them. I'll be flying back in the morning, and for once through all the self-doubt, I know they'll be happy to see me.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The first readers of this zine asked me why I keep going back to Phi Sigma Pi after not getting a Little. Rest assured that it wasn't as big a deal as it sounds, and that I am mutually loved & cherished in our li'l group of weirdos. Thanks @etanubros!

Almost all of these essays were workshopped by the Salt Lake City Writers Group. They did a great job, and any mistakes/offensive parts remaining in the text are my fault.

With love,

—NQN, SLC, 10/11/19

Bonus page! here's a list of awesome Salt Lake City bands that are cool



This is a
ROOFTOP FRIENDO
zine



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