

# The Deep South dance film that pops anti-American snobbery

**Alex Reuben's dance movie is designed to blow apart European stereotypes about US culture. He talks to Lemez Lovas**

**F**OR A man who does not trust words much, Alex Reuben is pretty easy to talk to. An art-school lecturer in London, with a background in design and DJing, he is best known today for his work with dancers — teaching them, choreographing for camera, and producing beautiful short films on dance.

Reuben is an original in the dance world because he cut his teeth in an unusual sort of school — the South London clubs where, as a DJ, he could observe dancers week in week out.

"I especially liked seeing people dance individually, seeing how they improvise and express themselves," he says. "Dance isn't just an expression of individuality and character, it also says things about our histories, where we come from, and what our environment does to us."

His latest film, *Routes*, released this week nationwide, is a beguiling work of art which packs a weighty political punch. In these days of big cinema documentaries such as *Bowling for Columbine* and *Supersize Me*, there is nothing unusual in that, except that this 48-minute journey across the southern USA contains no dialogue at all — not a single word.

In essence, *Routes* is road movie

about dance. It shows the wealth of beauty and subtlety in dance forms that exist across the southern states.

More importantly, the film uses the warmth of its subjects and the sheer level of talent on offer to make viewers question their assumptions about American culture — assumptions that Reuben first of all had to recognise in himself. "I went there with lots of preconceptions — mostly subconscious — but I never realised before how much I would roll my eyes every time an American says: 'Have a nice day.' Because of Hollywood and gangsta rap, there is this European superiority towards America, but culture there is not superficial at all — it is much more sophisticated, and this is what I wanted to show."

Far away from MTV and manufactured pop, vivid three-minute snapshots of different communities dancing float across the screen — from British-influenced "flatfooting" on wooden boards in the Appalachian Mountains and Native American tribal dancing, to "bucking" in inner-city Memphis housing projects — a wild mix of mime and breakdance — and the Melrose Golden Girls cheerleaders "krumping" in what looks like some otherworldly hybrid of hip-hop and street-fighting.

Reuben's camera sees things that onlookers might miss, and this eye for detail he attributes in part to his childhood Jewish experiences. "My mum's Scottish — maybe Jewish, we're not sure — and my dad's side is Ukrainian Jewish. I had a strong sense of history, but the most important thing would have been songs and music, the ornaments of silver and gold, the ceremony of the shul. Compared to the rest of the culture that I was taking in — growing up in South London, outside a Jewish community — I think it's these juxtapositions that planted a germ for the future."

The film itself ended up going on quite a journey in the editing suite — from a 90-minute narrated documen-



In *Routes* (above), Alex Reuben (right) films dancers across the southern USA

tary with interviews, to a far shorter and more ambitious, fluid piece of expressionist film that would not be out of place being screened in an art gallery.

"The first cut had a voiceover and interviews," he explains, "but I was never comfortable with it because I could never get in all the information that I wanted. Also, the political environment around the making of the film made me dislike the ways in which words are misused — events like the abandonment of local people after Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans. So now the language of the film is one of images, movement and music — dance, not words. This film became my little political statement."

As the camera travels across the South — from countryside to inner city, through musical gatherings of every background and ethnicity — it

becomes clear that the deeper message of *Routes* is not so much in how people dance, but rather the ways in which, through dance, these disparate communities have more in common than they could ever have imagined.

Is there any chance that he might turn his camera to Jewish dance once day? "Well, I have been to quite a lot of weddings and barmitzvahs," he laughs. "My uncle asked me to video my cousin's wedding once, and I didn't do it. It's actually quite a skill, doing weddings — I'm not trained in that. You know, what if I don't get the ring or something?"

*Routes* (Dancing to Orleans) is out today at the Gate Picturehouse, London W11, and then at Picture House cinemas nationwide

## Meet Israel's classical hero

**David D'Or has sung for the Pope and Bill Clinton. By Paul Lester**

**D**AVID D'OR IS Israel's Charlotte Church — only, obviously, he is male, and not married to a rugby player. But he is his nation's best-known classical singer and has, over the years, performed for everyone from the Pope and the King of Thailand to Nelson Mandela and Bill Clinton. Not surprisingly, he believes his music can make a difference.

"At a show in the Canary Islands, I sang a traditional Jewish song called *Lecha Dodi*," he says, "and there were these young Palestinians holding a huge Palestinian flag, dancing with it above their heads. It was exciting. It was like having peace through music."

The great-grandson of a prominent Libyan rabbi and descendant of a family of Jews expelled from Spain during the Inquisition, D'Or, now 42, was trained at the Jerusalem Academy of Music and Dance. He served as a singer in the Israeli army band and in 1985 was in the Israeli Army Central Command troops' entertainment group. After completing his national service, he enrolled in the Jerusalem Conservatory and began his career as a classical tenor.

Since then, he has represented Israel at the Eurovision Song Contest — "The newspapers asked the people of Israel who they wanted and they chose me," he says of the gaudy pop fest, "but I didn't like it at all" — and, through his music,



David D'Or: "I'm not a pop star"

has been an unofficial ambassador for the country. "I do my best to speak about my beloved country," he says, "to describe things the way they look to us here, because from abroad it seems different. I would like to emphasise the beautiful things, such as the cultural life, not just the bombs and the fear."

Actually, rather than speak about it, he sings about it. Backed by a band of young musicians from North Africa, the Middle East, the Balkans and elsewhere, he performs a mixture of holy music, ancient chants, Yemenite prayers and Israeli folk songs. "I have a classical background, and my dad is from Libya, so all the rhythms of the

prayers are in my blood," he says. "There have always been world elements to my music. I love to cross over. In music we shouldn't have borders, so I'm trying to do whatever excites and moves me."

Not just him — in the very church in Harlem, New York, where, in 1968 the civil-rights leader Martin Luther King gave one of his last speeches before his assassination, D'Or sang *Amazing Grace* before a crowd including former President Clinton and King's son, who was reduced to tears. "The whole audience shouted with joy," D'Or recalls.

Then there was his performance in front of the Pope — "the last Pope, not the present one," he confirms. "He held my hand and gave me his blessing. I just kept thinking: 'Here I am, little David from Israel, singing in Hebrew in front of millions of people.' It was a very powerful thing."

And yet he denies being a superstar in Israel. "I'm quite famous, but there are no screaming girls," he says. "I'm not a pop star. Nor am I a politician. And I'm not naïve enough to believe music alone can bring peace. But it is a wonderful way to communicate. So I close my eyes and, through the power of music, aim for the heart."

David D'Or is singing at Dingwalls, London NW1 on July 24. [www.dingwalls.com](http://www.dingwalls.com) He will also perform at WOMAD on July 27. [www.womad.org](http://www.womad.org)

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