**Rock 'n' Roll Dance**

**Summary**

Rock 'n' roll dance was a major American dance form that became prominent in the 1950s and soon thereafter spread to the United Kingdom. The dance was performed to a new musical style that was a combination of country, gospel, and rhythm and blues, and was associated with both black and white musicians, including Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Bill Haley. Rock 'n' roll dance was also a cultural phenomenon that galvanised a large, primarily white, youth culture. The dances themselves, which were disseminated nationally through the modern invention of television, were mostly of African-American origin and displayed a new configuration of body movement involving pelvic and hip rotations, greater use of the arms and torso, and call and response patterns. The Twist was one of the most iconic solo dances of the era, while popular line dances included the Madison, Stroll, and Hand Jive.

**The History and Politics of Rock 'n' Roll Dance**

The history of rock 'n' roll dance is intertwined with the music, a combination of country, gospel, and rhythm and blues. A large black migration from southern to northern parts of the U.S. created the conditions for an urbanised, electric rhythm and blues that served as the breeding ground for famous rock 'n' roll musicians such as Little Richard and Chuck Berry. The propulsive 4/4 beat, augmented by the tenor saxophone and electric guitar, was eminently danceable and helped to revolutionise the social dancing body. Record retailers, jukebox owners, and disc jockeys discovered a huge market for African-American-derived rhythm and blues music and dance among white adolescents who used the music and dance to signal their break from the dominant middle-class morality of the 1950s.

It is significant that the rise of rock 'n' roll dance coincided with the beginnings of the civil rights movement. In the same year that Bill Haley’s ‘Shake, Rattle, and Roll’ sold one million copies and crossed over into black and white markets, *Brown v. Board of Education* outlawed segregation in public schools. The expectant political atmosphere was reflected in the bi-racial youth culture in which both black and white teens were partaking of black-derived music and dance. Yet interracial association did not mean racial or political equality. As with integrationist measures, there was a fierce backlash against rock 'n' roll music and dance, which became linked to fears of juvenile delinquency and, less overtly, miscegenation.

In addition to the urbanization of rhythm and blues as well as a burgeoning youth culture, several white enthusiasts were pivotal in bringing rhythm and blues sounds and movements into American mass popular culture: popular impresario and deejay Alan Freed, who helped create a mass, racially-mixed youth audience in his influential ‘Moondog Rock 'n' Roll Party’ of the early 1950s; Bill Haley, whose version of ‘Shake, Rattle, and Roll’ topped both white and black record charts in 1955; and Elvis Presley who broke into the pop music scene in 1956, particularly after his televised appearances. His suggestive pelvic gestures and hip rotations at first scandalised the country, but soon became the basis for dances and steps picked up by the dancing public.

Furthermore, the mass media had a profound effect on the dissemination of social dance styles in the 1950s. Among the most popular vehicles were televised teen dance programs, such as *American Bandstand*. Hosted by a young and clean-cut Dick Clark, the show featured live black and white recording artists and singers, rate-a-record segments, and other activities, and of course dancing to the top rock 'n' roll hits. *Bandstand* and similar shows around the country captured a sense of an emerging teen consciousness and attracted young TV viewers who took vicarious pleasure in this virtual community of their peers.

**Rock ‘n’ Roll Dancing**

Like rock 'n' roll music itself, the dances were mostly of African-American origin. In the early fifties, the basic rock 'n' roll dance was a modified 1940s Lindy Hop (whose African-American antecedents may be traced to the Texas Tommy and the Charleston). Both solo and partner dance forms involved an activation of the shoulders, torso, and pelvis, often moving in opposition to one another; some of the popular line dances, such as the Hand Jive and Madison, drew on call and response variations. The dances, which had a strong rhythmic flow and encouraged independent improvisation, proliferated at an astonishing rate and represented a radical break with past styles of dance.

Many rock 'n' roll dances were disseminated on live television dance shows, after being first performed by black youth, at school dances or at local dance hops, and then copied by white teens, modified, and brought to these shows. For example: In the Bop, partners faced each other and took small jumps in place as they ground their heels into the ground as they landed; The Hand Jive, sung by rhythm and blues pioneer Johnny Otis, was a group dance that employed slaps on the thighs and crossing of palms; The Stroll, performed to the Diamonds’s hit song of the same name, was generally performed in two parallel lines that advanced with a simple, basic step pattern.

As the decade progressed, the movement trend was towards a general flexibility in the body (bent knees and a pliable torso) and away from strictly closed couple dancing. The Twist became an icon of this type of dance. With its hip rotations and grinding footwork, the Twist was a relatively simple dance whose popularity cut across generational and racial lines. The song was originally recorded in 1959 by Hank Ballard and the Midnighters and in 1960 turned into a major dance hit by Chubby Checker. In the early sixties, a second wave of rock 'n' roll dances emerged, including the Skate, the Swim, the Chicken, the Fly, the Watusi, and the Pony. Some were Twist clones; others were more like pantomimes or charades that enacted the song’s lyrics.

By the mid sixties, after the arrival of the Beatles, rock 'n' roll turned into rock, but a similar spirit of newness and youthful rebellion permeated the dance culture. During the rise of feminism, black liberation, and the civil rights and student rights movements, improvisation was taken to new heights. Couples casually faced one another, without making direct eye contact, yet still remained connected to each other as well as the larger dance floor collective.

**Legacy**

Rock ’n’ roll dance’s legacy lies in its powerful association with cultural, social

and economic forces. The dancing, fueled by the insistent beat and rhythmic force of the music, became increasingly individualistic and improvisational and fostered a greater sense of freedom and independence. This freedom of movement inspired a devoted and massive youth culture which, spurred by the post-war financial boom, rejected tradition and established social norms and expectations. Perhaps most important, rock ’n’ roll dance, which took place against the backdrop of the civil rights movement, enabled African American styles of music and dance to be brought to the forefront of cultural consciousness; these forms and styles are now recognized as an intrinsic part of American social dance.

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**References and Further Reading**

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**Paratextual Materials**

1) Excerpt of Lavern Baker singing "Jim Dandy" on The Milt Grant Show

see 1950s Teen Dance Shows Vol. 1

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2) Entertainment (photo/still image)

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Elvis Presley Listen to Bill Haley Tune Guitar

10/58

http://www.corbisimages.com/Search#cat=19&p=1&q=Bill+Haley

3) RM Historical (photo/still image)

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Chubby Checker Dancing

1961

http://www.corbisimages.com/Search#cat=19&p=1&q=Bill+Haley