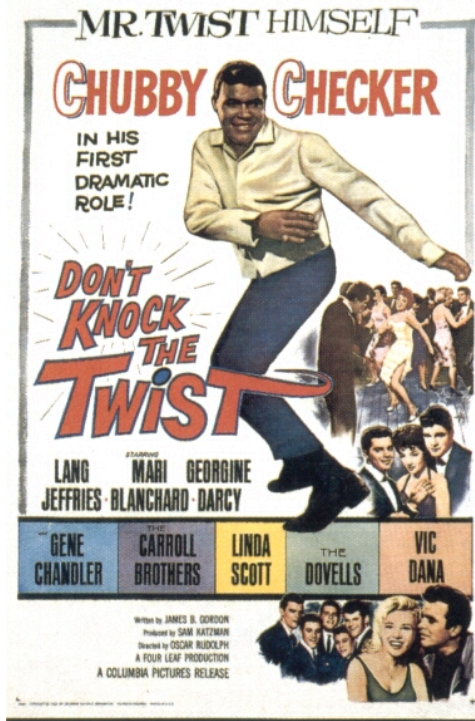


The Twist



Source: Michael Newhouse

“The Twist” was a hit song that led to one of the biggest dance crazes of the 1960s. The song was written and originally recorded by Rock and Roll pioneer Hank Ballard in 1959, but became a number one hit when a cover version by Chubby Checker was released in 1960. (The song hit number one again for two weeks in 1962.)

The Twist dance is based on traditional West African dance movements, and on dances popular with slaves in the American south. The word “twist” appeared in a number of popular blues songs. The basic movement of the dance is fairly simple, although there are many variations. The popularity of the Twist led to other popular songs, including “Let’s Twist Again,” and “The Peppermint Twist,” and “Twist and Shout.”

While the Twist proved extremely popular, it had its fair share of critics. Movie star Ginger Rogers, who had a highly successful career as a ballroom dancer in Hollywood musicals, called the Twist “ungraceful, vulgar, and exhibitionism personified.” In an interview with the *Tuscaloosa News* in 1961, she said, “I think it’s terrible. I think it’s a scandal. It is the most obscene dance I’ve ever seen, worse than the shimmy ever was. If people realized how bad they looked while doing the twist, they would not do it.”



As you watch the videos and view the images, discuss the following with your group:

- Who is in the audience watching Checker's performance on *American Bandstand*? In terms of race? In terms of gender? How do they react?
- What conclusions can you draw about the popularity of the Twist from the pictures of Ringo Starr and Jacqueline Kennedy? How might celebrities doing this dance have increased its popularity?
- Why do you think this dance became so popular?
- How do the adults at the night club react to the Twist?
- What do these pictures and the video of "The Twist Craze" suggest about the influence of Rock and Roll on American culture in general – not just on teenagers?
- How does the popularity of the Twist reflect the growing influence of television on American society? Do you think the dance would have become as popular without it? Why or why not?
- Why might someone such as Rogers, who made a career from traditional ballroom dancing, have disliked a dance such as the Twist? Are her objections justified? Why or why not?
- Why do you think she calls the Twist "vulgar" and "obscene"? What specifically is she referring to?
- Recall that the Twist was inspired by traditional African-American dance forms? What does Rogers' quote suggest about race relations in the United States in the early 1960s?



Source: eliz.avery