

Popular African American Dance of the 1950s and '60s

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The Supremes' first Apollo appearance, 1962. Mary Wilson, Florence Ballard, and Diana Ross perform as part of one of the Motortown Revues.

The return of African American soldiers from World War II inspired a huge acceleration in civil rights activism among Harlemites. As politicians and entrepreneurs worked to advance possibilities for African Americans in social status and business, entertainers followed suit with songs and dances that demonstrated both cool, assimilationist styles and fierce black pride. Popular music and dance styles of the 1950s and '60s sought to express complex African American identities that responded to the commercial marketplace as well as to the need for black Americans to resist racism and social oppression.

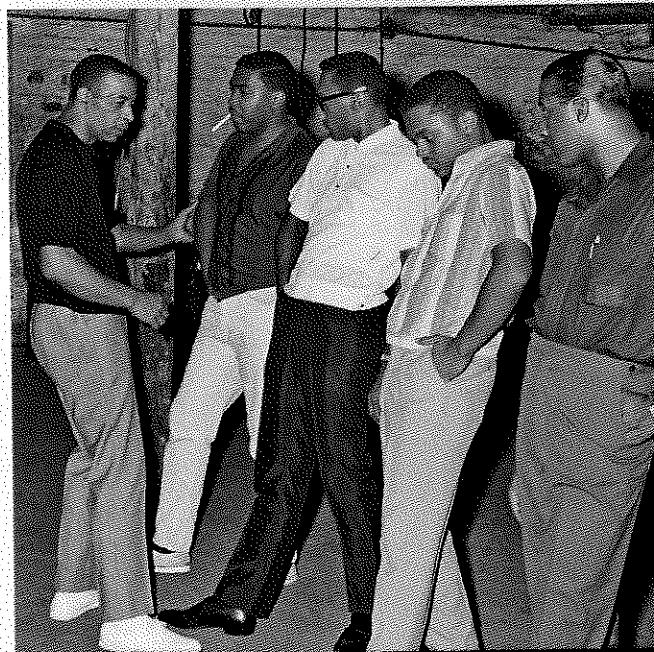
By the '50s new media technologies ensured that African American musicians could reach huge audiences of teenaged consumers. The expansive recording industry, abetted by a rise in television programming, catapulted black modes of expression into the global mainstream of popular culture more quickly than ever before. Of course, some artists tempered the vital energy of their Apollo Theater performances to suit mass markets less familiar with the ecstatic exchange of energy that African American audiences preferred. In the '50s, this meant the rise of refined "class acts" that offered elegantly dressed performers

moving with subtle clarity. Dance teams such as Coles and Atkins perfected the art of understated, polished excellence.

Charles "Honi" Coles and Charles "Cholly" Atkins began performing together in 1946 and within a decade had achieved successes that included appearances on television, Broadway, and in films. Their distinctive style of tap dance and soft shoe combined popular social dances from earlier eras with relaxed, mature personas that suggested African American cool of the highest order. Moving in a relaxed but precise unison in many of their dance routines, Coles and Atkins set a standard emulated by many mainstream Hollywood artists, who engaged a similar noticeably cool physicality.

In the mid-'50s, Atkins began to branch out as a choreographer for younger singing groups, sharing his passion for perfection with an array of emerging talents. His precise choreography for the Cadillacs earned them a spot on the *Alan Freed Christmas Show* in 1955 that wowed audiences with its synchronization of singing and movement: dazzling struts, slides, turns, drops to splits, and seemingly impossible returns to unison dancing. Atkins became the principal choreographer for Motown Records in 1965. In this role, his influence over popular culture greatly increased. He coached many groups to develop movement sequences that suited their distinctive personalities, directing rehearsals to amplify quirky movements that distinguished their energy and style. The Supremes, the Temptations, the Four Tops, and Gladys Knight and the Pips all benefitted from the Atkins touch. The routines that Motown artists brought to the Apollo stage were tightly coordinated demonstrations of his subtle, effective choreography. It could be easily argued that the synchronized group choreography that Atkins developed to define Motown style in the '60s led to the development of popular dancing singers of the MTV era, including Michael Jackson, Janet Jackson, and Beyoncé.

The crossover appeal of African American artists coached by Atkins at Motown suited founder Berry Gordy Jr.'s



The Four Tops practice a dance routine in the Apollo basement with legendary dancer Cholly Atkins, 1964. Atkins helped provide several Motown groups with sophisticated choreography.

ambition to reach the largest possible audiences. Black artists had learned about white appropriation of African American music the hard way: Elvis Presley famously adapted African American song and dance styles to his own commercial ends, spearheading the rise of rock and roll. Some white promoters tried to define rock as distinct from the obvious African American rhythm-and-blues forms that inspired it, but performers including Little Richard and Chuck Berry kept black presence in the emerging rock idiom alive. These artists brought the ferocious energy of gospel revival-style performance to the stage, encouraging audiences to cut loose in free-form, ecstatic dance.

The rise of rock and roll also coincided with the emergence of teenagers as a prime marketing demographic, which had profound effects on generational affiliations in African American communities. Social dances that would have been practiced by young and old alike in previous generations were displaced by dances designed only for the young. Buoyed by



The Temptations form a kick line, ca. 1964. They were known for their tailored suits, coordinated dance steps, and hits such as "My Girl."

television and radio programs that catered to the new youth culture, line dances, including the stroll and the madison, became popular among teens of all ethnicities. These dances allowed teenagers to socialize across racial identities, but typically without intergenerational participation.

Other teen social dances popular in Harlem were also popular all over the country. Simple social dances like the mashed potato, the Freddie, the frug, the hitchhike, the dog, and the Watusi—to name just a few among dozens—matched movements to the regular pulse of rock and pop music. The emergent soul idiom—epitomized by the spectacular abilities of James Brown—encouraged dancers to get funky with expressive, individualized dances that reimagined movements from earlier social dances. For example, the good foot of the '60s was a fast, soulful interpretation of the twisting foot movements of the nineteenth-century slow drag and the '20s Charleston. The good foot was like the mashed potato in its swiveling gestures, but unabashedly funky in its accent on the unexpected rhythmic upbeat that James Brown's band preferred.

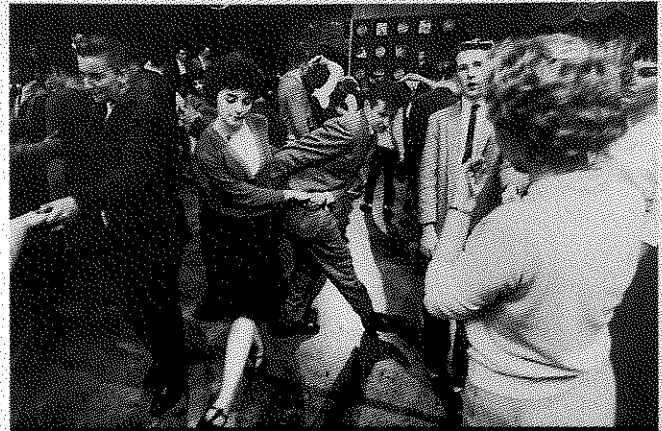
As popular entertainers became increasingly specialized in their stage dancing, the distance between dances performed onstage and dances done by audiences grew. But the dance that Chubby Checker popularized in a 1960 recording became the most widely circulated social dance of this era. The twist paid obvious homage to earlier African American social dances, including the mess around and the ballin' the jack of the 1910s. It elaborated on the improvisatory, breakaway section of partnered forms including the Charleston and the Lindy hop. In its basic movement, dancers swiveled their hips by twisting

both their feet as if putting out a cigarette on the floor, while bobbing up and down and leaning forward and back. Performed individually, the twist became the first mainstream noncontact partner dance practiced by an international audience.

The twist also numbers among the first African American dance forms significantly influenced by technologies of mass distribution. The dance first attracted national attention when Hank Ballard and the Midnighters, who recorded the song "The Twist" in 1958, performed it in Baltimore. Black youth gave the dance form, and white youth quickly copied its contents on the Philadelphia-based television program *American Bandstand*. In 1959 Cameo-Parkway Records hired Chubby Checker to rerecord the song in a family-friendly version, and this sanitized recording debuted August 6, 1960, on the nationally televised *American Bandstand*. The song became a top seller and inspired a merchandising industry that included innumerable sequel songs, low-budget films, and fashion items. As the dance gained international popularity in regions as distant as China and Russia,

many considered its hip movements provocative, and it was banned by authorities in Cairo and Damascus, among other places. The twist founded a rock and roll dance culture that led directly to the establishment of the first discotheques in New York City.

The sounds and dances of this era had huge global impact. Leaders of recently independent African nations proclaimed their love for African American popular music; teenagers in Bahia, Brazil, and Japan sought out the emergent rock and soul dance styles. Entertainers who played the Apollo Theater in this era helped to define a youth culture that valued the unabashed vitality and endless energetic innovation of the young, one that continues to be a wellspring for global popular cultures.



Teens on TV's *American Bandstand* helped popularize a multitude of dances through the '60s, from the twist to the monkey and the jerk.



A young Gladys Knight performs with her backup singers/dancers, the Pips, 1960. Left to right: William Guest, Edward Patten, and Merald "Bubba" Knight.

Ain't Nothing Like the Real Thing

How the
Apollo Theater
Shaped American
Entertainment

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and Kinshasha Holman Conwill*

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WASHINGTON, DC