

Let's Twist Again!

Chubby Checker revisits hit tune & dance craze that helped transform the dance floor

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It took just 2 minutes and 42 seconds to help launch a dance revolution that continues nearly a half century later.

It was 1959, and a televised segment of the wildly popular "American Bandstand" song and dance show featured a teenager nicknamed Chubby Checker belting out a Hank Ballard tune and urging viewers across the United States to "do The Twist."

In the days that followed the song's meteoric rise to the top of the pop charts, the American public suddenly shirked the ages-old tradition of dancing in pairs, choosing to replace synchronized cheek-to-cheek movement with more cheeky styles that favored individualistic responses to the beat.

"The 1960s was an incredible decade," said Checker, now 66. "The British invasion came ... there was Woodstock, Motown, the whole hippie movement, a few assassinations including JFK, man going into space — and the biggest song of the entire 60s was "The Twist."

An integral part of rock 'n' roll's rise and what Checker terms "dancing apart to the beat," "The Twist" was both a top tune and a dance craze that many industry analysts over the years say helped pave the way for the hip-hop generation's rhythm-based grooves and dance-floor moves.

"How many artists can say some things are still here because we came along?," Checker said. "It's still right here today as we speak. To me, that's off the hook."

Born Ernest Evans in 1941, the performer, the story goes, adopted his famous "Chubby Checker" moniker after "American Bandstand" host Dick Clark's wife suggested he adopt a twist on the name of a big-name music star of the time, Fats Domino. Checker, who still revels in the nickname, laughingly adds, "I love food. I love to eat," during a recent interview with NH Weekend.

Eager to introduce a new generation to the song that helped drive early rock 'n' roll dance parties, Checker will make two Granite State appearances this week. The only artist to have had the same song reach No. 1 twice ("The Twist" in 1960 and 1962), Checker will perform his new dance tune, "Knock Down The Wall," which reached No. 4 on Billboard's single sales chart last week, when AIDS Services for the Monadnock Region presents Dance for a Cure! in recognition of World AIDS Day and the 20th anniversary tour of the AIDS Memorial Quilt on Saturday, Nov. 24, from 7 p.m. to midnight in Heberdon Hall on Winter Street in Keene.

Host DJ Parker Springfield of WKNE will serve as emcee with a house party dance mix. Opening the program will be hip-hop artist J-Menace, who will take the stage with his recent hit "Ting Ting," and Universal/Motown quartet JADA, which plans to release its first single in January.

In addition, Granite Staters can meet Checker at a cocktail party from 6 to 7:30 p.m. Friday, Nov. 23, at EF Lane Hotel on Main Street in Keene.

The perennial performer, the only artist to have had five albums in the Top 12 simultaneously, said his first hit was both a blessing and a curse at times throughout his career as it threatened to pigeonhole him.

"I never said I didn't want to perform it any more, I just



Chubby Checker, shown here doing his signature dance move, is the only artist to have the same song hit No.1 twice. "The Twist" first topped music charts in 1960, and then again in 1962.

said it screwed up my life," Checker said with a laugh, "because people think you got no talent, that you are a fluke. All they say is 'The Twist,' 'The Twist' ... But I have 31 chart songs. What about the rest of it?"

Still, he's not begrudging the impact that one highly recognizable tune had on his life, and delights in discussing what he views as the wide-ranging influence "The Twist" has had on public consciousness, from its influence on music trends, dance styles and, even, the modern lexicon.

"There are always people using (the word) 'twist' and they didn't start doing that until we came out with (the song)."

"The Twist" is the biggest event in show business," he said, adding he often draws parallels between how the hit song and dance craze impacted the burgeoning rock 'n' roll industry and how famous figures in history made their marks on American culture and technology.

"Before Alexander Graham Bell ... (there was) no telephone. Before Thomas Edison ... no electric light. Before Dr. George Washington Carver... no oil from seed or cloning from plants. Before Henry Ford ... no V8 Engine. Before Walt Disney ... no animated cartoons. Before Chubby Checker ... no 'dancing apart to the beat,'" an enthused Checker contends.

The revolution began, Checker said, with his performance on "American Bandstand," a blockbuster afternoon TV show that for the teenage generation became a trendsetting forum

for everything from music and dance moves to fashion and fads. "The Twist" soon made Chubby Checker a household name and revolutionized movement on the dance floor. Partners who previously moved as a unit, arm in arm, now stood apart, though interacting through various, and often, suggestive steps.

"The 'Twist' is putting out a cigarette with both feet (and) wiping off your bottom with a towel to the beat of the music," Checker said of his signature move. "If you were 10 years old or older in 1960, you all danced apart to the beat. You looked at your guy and he looked at you and you did your own thing. Before Chubby Checker, that wasn't here, and people are still doing that to music as we speak."

Throughout his career, Checker's hits have brought with them their own dance crazes, including "The Fly," "The Pony" and "The Hucklebuck." These moves continue to influence today's hip-hop generation, he said.

"Dancing apart to the beat' is doing your own thing, exploring your sexuality while being fully dressed in front of your partner," Checker said. "We have a song called 'The Fly,' and in modern terms (the associated move) is categorized as 'throw your hands up in the air, like you just don't care'. This is what we brought to music scene. 'The hucklebuck' is a mating dance. It was around since 1949 but ... these words were not a dance. We put all this stuff together and it paid off for me and everyone else."

Checker contends the "Twist's" influence extends to wide-reaching facets of today's economy, with the name commonly used as a marketing tool to denote products that offer "twists" on standard fare, such as fruit drinks and snack food.

"Go in the grocery store and you'll see it everywhere," he said. "People are familiar with the word."

To that end, Checker said he has been at work literally developing a shape to help define the word that inspired a legion of fans to sing, shake and shimmy over the past handful of decades. He plans to shop to the commercial world a pattern that would be used as a marketing tool for a host of products, from beverages packaged in twisting bottles to pasta, cheese and cookies stamped into the same form.

"I have provided the shape that fits the word," he said. "It's taking 'twist' and turning it into something you can touch rather than just talk about. How would you like to have a cranberry twist drink in a twist bottle or how would you like to go get a nice hot dog and the shape I'm giving to you will be the twist? It's a fun thing for people to eat."

Checker tried his hand at the restaurant business, but now prefers independently to market a handful of products, including beef jerky, water and candy bars.

"Forty thousand products come out every year, and how many products make it to success? There's a very few," he said. "But thinking about that ... I didn't care. It didn't matter to me. It's a very tough business but I understand it. And I'm a fighter. I go after things I believe in. What are you going to do, sit and home and watch TV all day? I prefer to go after my dreams. I work to make it happen."

Doors to Saturday's family dance party will open at 6 p.m., with the event set for 7 p.m. Cost is \$10 for students (with ID) in grades six through nine and \$20 for those in grades 10-12. Cost is \$20 per adult or \$25 per two adults. Admission to Friday's cocktail party at EF Lane Hotel is \$10. Reservations for either program can be made by calling 357-6855. Log onto www.asmrnline.org for details.



"Come on baby, let's do the twist. Take me by my little hand and go like this."

