ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How did teen dance shows and the Twist influence American culture?

OVERVIEW

As Rock and Roll became increasingly popular in the mid-1950s, so too did television. By the end of the decade, more than 67 million American households owned a television set. Television programmers sought to draw in the newly emerging teenage market by capitalizing on the growing demand for all things Rock and Roll. Teen dance shows, airing in the late afternoons as the target audience came home from school and featuring fresh-faced teens dancing to the latest hits, soon became common among television’s offerings.

At the head of the pack was American Bandstand, which originated as Bandstand, a local show in Philadelphia in 1952, but went national in 1957 on the ABC network. Local shows abounded as well, from Baltimore’s Buddy Deane Show to Steubenville, Ohio’s Teen Time. The shows brought Rock and Roll into America’s living rooms and had a profound impact on the way teenagers viewed themselves and their world.

Shows such as American Bandstand had the power to create new trends and establish hit records. In 1960, a relatively unknown artist named Chubby Checker was invited to perform the song “The Twist” on American Bandstand, when Hank Ballard, who wrote and had originally recorded the song, was unavailable. Checker’s performance propelled the song to number one and ignited a national dance craze that would last several years. (“The Twist” would reach number one a second time, only two years later.)

As a dance, the Twist was easy enough for almost anyone to do. If performed by an African-American artist and based on African-American dance traditions, it proved enormously popular with white audiences. Despite this cultural cross-fertilization, most TV dance shows remained segregated during the height of the song’s popularity, often featuring white teens dancing to the performances of African-American artists.

The Twist caught on as a fashion. It broke down age barriers, becoming popular among adults. It inspired a new freedom of movement that defied the traditional male-female roles of earlier dance forms. And, as Elvis Presley had several years earlier, it invoked the wrath of critics who labeled its liberal hip-shaking “vulgar” and “obscene.”

In this lesson, students will investigate the vast cultural impact on American culture of teen dance shows in general, and the Twist in particular.
Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

1. **KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):**
   - The rising popularity of television and its growing power as a cultural force in 1950s America
   - The popularity and influence of televised dance shows aimed at teenage audiences
   - The influence of the “Twist” dance craze on popular American culture.

2. **BE ABLE TO (SKILLS):**
   - Evaluate how television shows reflect and influence the values and norms of the society in which they are shown
   - Analyze popular dance and how it reflects the historical period from which it emerged
   - Common Core: Students will study primary sources, both written and visual, to write a short paragraph explaining the influence of televised dance shows (CCSS Writing 2; CCSS Speaking and Listening 2)
   - Common Core: Students will read a newspaper article and summarize the key supporting ideas in response to discussion questions (CCSS Reading 2)

**PROCEDURE:**

1. Divide students into groups of 3-4. Explain that they will work together to examine various examples of television dance shows and dance styles from the 1950s and early 1960s.

2. Display the chart below, and discuss:

   - What does this chart indicate about the number of households with televisions in the United States in the 1950s?
   - What do these numbers suggest about where Americans were likely to get their news and entertainment in 1950? In 1959?
   - How do you imagine this trend might have affected teenagers in particular? What things might they have been exposed to that they had not been exposed to in earlier times?
   - How do you imagine the people who were in charge of television programming might have tried to engage teenage audiences?

3. Distribute Handout 1: Television Dances Shows in the 1950s-1960s. Explain to students that they will work with their groups to analyze a series of clips from dance shows that aired in the 1950s and early 1960s, and complete the graphic organizer.
PROCEDURE: (CONTINUED)

4. Ask for a volunteer to read the first two paragraphs of the handout aloud. Instruct other students to follow along and underline key words and phrases as they listen.

5. Play the following clips:
   - American Bandstand, 1957
   - The Buddy Deane Show, 1960
   - Seventeen, 1958
   - Teen Time, 1967

6. Allow groups sufficient time to address the discussion questions and complete the graphic organizer. When all groups are finished, briefly go over discussion questions and findings with the class as a whole.

7. Distribute Handout 2: The Twist to groups. Ask for a volunteer to read the introduction aloud. Instruct other students to follow along and underline key words and phrases as they listen. Inform students that you will play several videos and display several images before they discuss the questions on the handout with their groups.

8. Play the following videos:
   - Chubby Checker performing “The Twist” live
   - Chubby Checker demonstrating how to do the Twist
   - Chubby Checker performing “Slow Twisting”

9. Display the following images:
   - Arthur Murray Dance Album

10. Allow groups ample time to discuss the questions on Handout 2. When all groups are finished, briefly go over discussion questions and findings with the class as a whole.
**SUMMARY ACTIVITY:**


2. Ask for volunteers to read it aloud, alternating by paragraph. Instruct other students to underline key words and phrases as they listen.

3. Discuss the following:
   - What does the author mean when he calls Checker “the perfect racial-crossover ambassador”?
   - Think back to the videos of the dance shows you saw earlier in this lesson. Were they racially integrated? What does this suggest about the influence of African-American music and dance on American culture in this period? In what ways was it limited? How might the popularity of artists such as Checker and dances such as the Twist helped pave the way for integration down the road?
   - According to Wolcott, what accounted for the popularity of the Twist?
   - Why does Wolcott suggest that the Twist was “democratic”? In what ways?
   - How do you predict this “democratic” aspect of the Twist would influence later styles of popular dance in the United States?
   - What does the article suggest about the ways the Twist changed teen dance habits?
   - Why does the author claim these changes were empowering for teen girls? Do you agree or disagree with this assessment?
   - How might the Twist have represented a new kind of freedom for teens? Would doing a dance such as this have been just about dancing, or about something more?
   - If the Twist did represent a kind of freedom, was it complete freedom? In what ways might it still have been limited?

4. Distribute Handout 4: Exit Tickets, which ask students to complete this phrase: Television dance shows and popular dances such as the Twist changed America by____________________________. Collect completed tickets as students exit the class.

**WRITING PROMPT:**

How did televised dance shows and the Twist influence American culture in the early 1960s? Think particularly about teenage identity, issues of race, and issues of gender.
EXTENSIONS:

1. Ask students to continue working in their groups to design advertising posters for TV dance shows. Each advertisement will be targeted to a specific group of people. Posters should include an image, a slogan advertising the show, and a short paragraph describing the show. Students will present this work to the class, discussing how they made decisions about what to put on the posters and why they believe the poster would appeal to a certain demographic group. They may use the information in this lesson and/or additional research. Instructors may decide if they will allow the students to decide for themselves which types of programs to advertise or if they will assign different programs to different groups to ensure that all are represented.

2. The 1988 cult film Hairspray, and the 2007 movie musical version, tell the fictional story of Tracy Turnblad, a teenage girl in 1962 Baltimore who desperately wants to appear on a local dance show (based on the real-life Buddy Deane Show, discussed in this lesson). The films reflect many of the themes in this lesson: Tracy, who is overweight, does not fit the stereotype of the other dancers who appear on the show, and is uncomfortable with the racially segregated nature of the “Corny Collins Show.” Teachers may ask students to watch one of the versions of the film (both are rated PG) and discuss their representations of dance and teen culture of the early 1960s, and how they relate to larger issues of American culture and society.

3. Have students research other dance crazes of the early 1960s, such as the Mashed Potato and the Frug. Show the video of Chubby Checker doing the “Pony” while performing his song “Pony Time.” Why might Checker have tried to follow up “The Twist” with another dance song? What do these dances have in common? Why do you think they became so popular? What does this suggest about the popularity and influence of Rock and Roll in the early 1960s?

STANDARDS

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

_Reading 2: Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas._

_Writing 2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and_
analysis of content.

*College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening for Grades 6-12*

Speaking and Listening 2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

**SOCIAL STUDIES – NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR THE SOCIAL STUDIES (NCSS)**

Theme 1: Culture

Theme 2: Time, Continuity, and Change

Theme 7: Production, Distribution, and Consumption

**NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR MUSIC EDUCATION**

*Core Music Standard: Responding*

Select: Choose music appropriate for a specific purpose or context.

Analyze: Analyze how the structure and context of varied musical works inform the response.

Interpret: Support interpretations of musical works that reflect creators’ and/or performers’ expressive intent.

Evaluate: Support evaluations of musical works and performances based on analysis, interpretation, and established criteria.

*Core Music Standard: Connecting*

Connecting 11: Relate musical ideas and works to varied contexts and daily life to deepen understanding.
VIDEO RESOURCES

• Chubby Checker – How To Twist (1961)
• Chubby Checker – Slow Twistin (1963)
• Dean Martin – That’s Amore (1953)
• The Fantastic Johnny C – “Boogaloo Down Broadway” On Teen Time (1967)
• The Four Esquires – “Love Me Forever” On American Bandstand (1957)
• Chubby Checker – Pony Time (1961)
• Chubby Checker – The Twist (1963)
• Gene Vincent – “I Got a Baby” On Seventeen (1958)
• Al Brown’s Tunetoppers – “The Madison” On the Buddy Deane Show (1960)

FEATURED PEOPLE

• Chubby Checker
• Dick Clark

HANDOUTS

• Handout 1: Television Dance Shows in the 1950s-1960s
• Handout 2: The Twist
• Handout 3: Excerpt from “A Twist in Time”
• Handout 4: The Twist Exit Ticket