

The background of the cover features a repeating pattern of stylized, light green leaf motifs on thin stems, scattered across a pale yellow-green gradient. The motifs are positioned at various angles and sizes, creating a subtle, organic texture.

# **ROCK 'N' ROLL DANCES OF THE 1950S**

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**Lisa Jo Sagolla**

 **Greenwood**  
PUBLISHING GROUP

**Rock 'n' Roll Dances  
of the 1950s**

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# Rock 'n' Roll Dances of the 1950s

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Lisa Jo Sagolla

The American Dance Floor  
*Ralph G. Giordano, Series Editor*



**GREENWOOD**

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*To Richard Pirodsky*

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# Series Foreword

From the Lindy hop to hip hop, dance has helped define American life and culture. In good times and bad, people have turned to dance to escape their troubles, get out, and have a good time. From high school proms to weddings and other occasions, dance creates some of our most memorable personal moments. It is also big business, with schools, competitions, and dance halls bringing in people and their dollars each year. And as America has changed, so, too, has dance. The story of dance is very much the story of America. Dance routines are featured in movies, television, and videos; dance styles and techniques reflect shifting values and attitudes toward relationships; and dance performers and their costumes reveal changing thoughts about race, class, gender, and other topics. Written for students and general readers, *The American Dance Floor* series covers the history of social dancing in America.

Each volume in the series looks at a particular type of dance such as swing, disco, Latin, folk dancing, hip hop, ballroom, and country & western. Written in an engaging manner, each book tells the story of a particular dance form and places it in its historical, social, and cultural context. Thus each title helps the reader learn not only about a particular dance form, but also about social change. The volumes are fully documented, and each contains a bibliography of print and electronic resources for further reading.

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# Introduction

Dancing to rock 'n' roll music was an expressive, emblematic, often defiant, and profoundly defining act for the teenagers of 1950s America. However, unlike the 1960s, the 1950s did not yield any vast variety of new rock 'n' roll dances. Fifties teens could sometimes be seen doing freshly invented dances, such as the Stroll, the Hand Jive, the Bop, the Slop, the Madison, and the Twist. But the dance most commonly performed to 1950s rock 'n' roll was the Jitterbug, that same Swing dance the teens' parents had done throughout the '30s and '40s. The Swing moves were simply adapted to the rock 'n' roll beat. Yet, while they may have been dancing the same steps as their parents, how they danced, where they danced, when they danced, and why they danced made the Jitterbugging of '50s teens a truly original event: a vivid reflection of the bracing cultural trends then shaping American life.

The 1950s was an era marked by simmering tensions born out of contradictions between the traditional values of those in power and the new ideas of young innovators who were instigating changes in social relations, technology, business, the arts, and entertainment. The decade is often called the Eisenhower Era, after Dwight David Eisenhower, who served as the nation's president from 1953 to 1961, yet was born in 1890. Throughout the 1950s, most of the country's leaders had, like Eisenhower, come of age in early 20th-century America and were driven by a vision of the nation reminiscent of their youth.<sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile, America's flourishing post-war economy was spurring all kinds of cutting-edge developments that were radically altering what it meant to be an American. The mass migration of African

Americans to northern cities following World War II spawned a fascination with urban black culture. There was an increased and potent impact of black culture on American life, notably in sports and in the visual, dramatic, literary, and musical arts. A 1954 Supreme Court decision outlawing school segregation incited dramatic changes in social relations between the races.

Inventive technological advancements generated an array of new products that Americans rushed out to buy: homes in the suburbs, fancy cars, fast food, household appliances, and television sets. Consumer spending was abundant as the population turned away from earlier, Puritan-inspired and Great Depression-influenced ideas of restraint. A new generation arose, which had more money than its predecessor, freer spending habits, and a confidence in prolonged prosperity. With little interest in the strict moral codes or otherwise conservative behavior of their parents, the teenagers of the 1950s emerged as an economically significant demographic whose new tastes and interests were beginning to exert strong influence on American business, particularly in the music and entertainment industries.<sup>2</sup>

But underlying the optimism of the Fifties youth was a constant struggle to move forward in an era when power was still largely in the hands of an older order. Though the decade is commonly remembered as a quiet, conformist period, that is largely because of the media's depictions of happy Fifties families, such as in the popular television show *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*. In reality, the 1950s was a period of great social stress. It was via the revolutionary invention of rock 'n' roll music and the liberating dancing that was performed to it that the pressure of the 1950s exploded. The rock 'n' roll dancing of the era, therefore, can function as a wide-angle lens, offering an animated view of the decade's overall cultural climate.

The emergence of the younger generation as a new and influential social group was signaled loudly and clearly by the teens' adoption of rock 'n' roll as a defining badge, which branded them as a generation distinctly separate from their parents. When they got up and moved to "their" music, the teens were proclaiming their independence, in defiance of the musical tastes, social attitudes, and cultural behaviors of adult society. While publicly embodying the beat of rock 'n' roll—a musical genre born out of a blending of black and white styles—the teens of the '50s were also acting out their support of racial integration, at the same time that issues of school desegregation and civil rights

were charging onto the nation's political forefront. The conflicts and controversies sparked by adults' reactions to the Jitterbugging teens unveiled the deep-rooted racial prejudices harbored by many Americans of the time, as well as the conservative sexual innocence that has come to be associated with the era.

Many adults violently objected to what they perceived as rock 'n' roll's vulgar qualities: its hard-driving beat; the sexual innuendos in the song lyrics; its roots in African-American rhythm and blues, then referred to as "race" music; and the association between rock 'n' roll and juvenile delinquency being put forth by Hollywood films. Parents were horrified enough by their teens' interest in listening to rock 'n' roll. But when their kids began to dance to the music, that was even more frightening. In adults' eyes, as teens moved to the rock 'n' roll beat, it was as if the dancers' young bodies were invaded by the vulgar sounds, their youthful physicality becoming a very visceral expression of all of the music's objectionable connotations.

In addition to signifying an act of adolescent rebellion and a thwarting of social conventions, dancing to rock 'n' roll in the 1950s also illustrated how economic factors stemming from the culture's latest technological developments contributed to teens' newfound independence. It was in the mid-1950s that transistor radios first became available to the general public, making it easier for teens to go off alone and listen to music of their own choosing. They were less likely to have to sit around the family radio in the living room and submit to their parents' programming tastes.<sup>3</sup> Without little portable radios, rock 'n' roll would surely not have taken off as speedily as it did. As radio stations popularized the latest rock 'n' roll songs, the teenagers ran out to buy them on 45 rpm singles, a new, inexpensive record format that made the disks affordable for the teens, who then used the records to provide soundtracks for their social dance parties.

The extensive role played by television, most notably the famed teen dance program *American Bandstand*, in the dissemination of rock 'n' roll dance styles shows yet another way in which this dancing provides a lively vantage from which to observe the larger cultural phenomena of the times. With its real-life participants and its soap opera-like emphasis on their personal lives, *American Bandstand* can be considered a forerunner of the reality shows that became a staple of television programming around the turn of the 21st century. Although *American Bandstand* included appearances by popular rock 'n' roll performers of

the day, the program's tremendous success in the 1950s relied essentially on viewers' fascination with watching ordinary teenagers in the act of dancing. The 1950s was a landmark era in the history of television and is often referred to as the medium's "Golden Age." *American Bandstand's* pioneering role in television history (it can be seen as a precursor to music videos as well as reality TV) is yet another feature of the cultural climate of the '50s that is unearthed through the study of the era's rock 'n' roll dancing.

Setting the stage with an opening chapter tracing the explosive birth of rock 'n' roll music, this book explores the many ways in which Fifties rock 'n' roll dancing mirrors critical artistic, social, and political aspects of the decade. The book includes specific descriptions of the steps, rhythms, and other choreographic characteristics of each of the dances executed to rock 'n' roll music during the 1950s. However, the main purpose of this book is to show how it is not knowledge of the dances themselves, but an understanding of what the execution of those dances represented that constitutes the real value of studying the topic. Such understanding can prove beneficial to almost anyone interested in learning more about life in America during the 1950s.

The book's second and third chapters, therefore, introduce Fifties rock 'n' roll dances by situating them firmly within discussions of such social-history topics as the emerging youth culture, changing racial relationships, and the increasing influence of television on many facets of American society. Chapter 4 brings the book's investigation of the Fifties dances to a close with the extraordinary story of the Twist, a dance that not only reflected the cultural climate of the late '50s, but foreshadowed much of what was to come in the 1960s.

Though the subject of this book is delineated as rock 'n' roll dancing of the 1950s, its scope does not correspond neatly to the historical period from 1951 to 1960. Instead, as rock 'n' roll music did not emerge until 1954, the book's treatment of Fifties rock 'n' roll dancing starts from that date and extends to 1963, which was when the popularity of the Twist, the final rock 'n' roll dance invented in the 1950s, waned.

While this book is designed primarily to serve students of American social dance and those looking to find new ways of examining the history of the 1950s, it may also be useful to readers seeking to learn more about the legacy of that decade and its impact on future generations. The book's final chapter focuses on the presence of rock 'n' roll dancing in the Fifties nostalgia movement that began at the end of

the 1960s, became a driving force in the entertainment industries and popular culture of the Seventies, and inspired the periodic resurfacing of '50s rock 'n' roll in films, Broadway shows, and TV programs of the next 30 years.

The most important aspect of dancing to rock 'n' roll in any era, however, is the skintight relationship that has always existed between the music and the dance movements. It is impossible to overestimate the importance of the music to anything and everything the rock 'n' roll dancer does. The music is the rocket fuel that propels the dancing, and that music–movement relationship is not only unbreakable, but also irresistible. Many claim that it is impossible *not* to dance to rock 'n' roll music.

Therefore, any serious investigation of rock 'n' roll dancing must begin with an understanding of rock 'n' roll music, that incendiary art form that burst onto America's popular music scene in the mid-1950s. Where did rock 'n' roll come from? Who invented it? And what made it such an unconquerable catalyst for social dancing?