

# “The Twist”—Chubby Checker (1960)

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Essay by Jim Dawson (guest post)\*



*Chubby Checker*

Chubby Checker’s “The Twist” has the distinction of being the only non-seasonal American recording that reached the top of “Billboard’s” pop charts twice, separately. (Bing Crosby’s “White Christmas” topped the holiday tree in 1942, 1945, and 1947). “The Twist” shot to No. 1 in 1960, fell completely off the charts, then returned over a year later like a brand new single and did it all over again. Even more remarkable was that Checker’s version was a nearly note-for-note, commissioned mimicry of the original “The Twist,” written and recorded in 1958 by R&B artist Hank Ballard and released as the B-side of a love ballad. Most remarkable of all, however, is that Chubby Checker set the whole world Twisting, from Harlem clubs to the White House to Buckingham Palace, and beyond. The Twist’s movements were so rudimentary that almost everyone, regardless of their level of coordination, could maneuver through it, usually without injuring or embarrassing themselves.

Like so many rhythm and blues songs, “The Twist” had a busy pedigree going back decades. In 1912, black songwriter Perry Bradford wrote “Messin’ Around,” in which he gave instructions to a new dance called the Mess Around: “Put your hands on your hips and bend your back; stand in one spot nice and tight; and twist around with all your might.” The following year, black tunesmiths Chris Smith and Jim Burris wrote “Ballin’ the Jack” for “The Darktown Follies of 1913” at Harlem’s Lafayette Theatre, in which they elaborated on the Mess Around by telling dancers, “Twist around and twist around with all your might.” The song started a Ballin’ the Jack craze that, like nearly every new Harlem dance, moved downtown to the white ballrooms and then shimmied and shook across the country. By 1928, a jazz outfit, The New Orleans Owls, recorded a number called “The Twister” and Fred Rich and His Astor Hotel Orchestra introduced “The Baltimore,” described in the lyrics as “that new twister.” Meanwhile, Jelly Roll Morton recorded “Winin’ Boy Blues,” with the lyric, “Mama, mama, look at Sis, she’s out on the levee

doin' the twist," which was apparently a sexual reference--and a line that partially ended up in Hank Ballard's (and Chubby Checker's) "The Twist." The term popped up everywhere in rhythm and blues records; for example, in Clyde McPhatter and the Drifters' "Let the Boogie Woogie Roll" from the early 1950s, McPhatter sang, "When she looked at me her eyes just shined like gold, and when she did the twist she bopped me to my soul."

These early songs must have inspired Brother Joe Wallace of the Sensational Nightingales gospel group to write what was most likely the beginning of what we know as "The Twist." In 1988, he told me:

It was something I heard my sister doing back in Williamston, [NC], when I was a boy. They'd sing, "Twist, twist" while they were playing, and it stuck with me. Me and another fellow in the group, Bill Woodruff, started having fun with it [many years later]. I put a beat to it with my little guitar and we came up with, "Come on baby let's do the twist," but then we kinda took it off in another direction.

Since the Sensational Nightingales were a popular spiritual group, "we couldn't do nothing with it," so they eventually passed it along to Hank Ballard, who corroborated Brother Joe Wallace's basic story.

Henry Ballard was born John Henry Kendricks in Detroit, Michigan, on November 18, 1927, and spent much of his childhood in Bessemer, Alabama, with his aunt. In his teens, he returned to Detroit and got a job working on a Ford Motors assembly line, where he met Sonny Woods, an older man who had worked as a utility singer with Sonny Til and the Orioles. Woods had put together a group called The Royals and recorded a couple of things for Federal Records out of Cincinnati without much success. When he asked Ballard to join as a lead singer, the group's fortunes changed. Hank was adept at writing suggestive songs like "Get It" and "Sexy Ways," which fared well on jukeboxes, but his "Work With Me, Annie" rocketed The Royals into the R&B big time and required a name change to the more raucous--The Midnighters. It inspired several "answer records," including Etta James' "Roll with Me, Henry," a No. 1 R&B hit that, in turn, triggered a No. 1 pop hit cover record from Georgia Gibbs called "Dance With Me, Henry," one of 1955's biggest sellers. By 1958, however, The Midnighters' sales had cooled, and they were expecting Federal Records to drop them at the end of their contract. While on the road, they worked up a couple of demos to send to Vee-Jay Records in Chicago. Guitarist Cal Green remembered:

We were in Tampa, Florida, and we were staying at the same hotel as a spiritual group, The [Sensational] Nightingales, and they idolized us. The guy had scribbled something on a piece of paper and brought it to Hank. He said, "We can't record this, see what you can do with it, you can have the song." So Hank says, "Get your guitar, Cal, let's see what we can do with it." The melody was already there, but it was a 15-bar blues, so we changed it to twelve bars and changed some words around.

This exchange took place in 1957. Earlier that year, The Midnighters had recorded a song called "Is Your Love For Real?," credited to Ballard and Green, even though they borrowed the melody from a 1955 Clyde McPhatter & the Drifters' hit called "What'cha Gonna Do"--a loan that both

Ballard and Green acknowledged. And why not? Although “What’cha Gonna Do” was credited to Atlantic Records owner Ahmet Ertegun, it had earlier been recorded as a gospel song by The Radio Four. In any event, the group recorded a primitive version of “The Twist” and sent it to Vee-Jay, but when Federal Records decided to renew the group’s contract, Vee-Jay tossed the tape into a vault and forgot about it for several decades.

Assisted by black producer Henry Glover, Ballard and the Midnighters finally recorded a polished version in Cincinnati on November 11, 1958. Federal’s parent label, King Records, released it in January 1959 as the B-side of another song, but disc jockeys flipped it over and turned “The Twist” into an R&B hit. The composer credit belonged solely to Hank Ballard. “I didn’t go in and sign a contract as one of the writers,” Cal Green lamented. “I was off somewhere with a woman or something.” In those days, a hit could linger for months, drifting from one region of the country to another. As Ballard recalled, it was especially popular in Baltimore, where “The Buddy Deane Show” aired on local television, and it was Deane who called Dick Clark in Philadelphia to tell him that the kids on his show were dancing to a new song called “The Twist.”

A year earlier, on August 5, 1957, Dick Clark’s “Bandstand,” a teenage dance party emanating out of West Philadelphia on WFIL, had gone national on ABC-TV under the name “American Bandstand,” beaming to 105 network affiliates and some 40 million mostly teenage viewers. Almost overnight, the 28 year-old Clark became an arbiter of which records sold and which didn’t. The Trendex Report, an early TV ratings survey, reported that “American Bandstand” was not just number one in its daily 3:00 to 4:30 p.m. time slot, but had a 35.6 share of the audience. Clark did showcase black recording artists, but he found it more convenient to promote local talent and more profitable to provide his typical viewers--young girls--with cute, safe, wavy-haired Adonises. Clark wrote in his 1976 autobiography, “Rock, Roll and Remember,” that he called a local record company man and frequent business partner, Bernie Lowe. “I asked him if he remembered the record Hank Ballard had done a year or so ago called ‘The Twist.’ Bernie said he did.” Clark suggested, “It looks like it’ll catch on. Why don’t you turn the song upside down or sideways or whatever and do it again.” The reason for a remake, which Clark left unsaid, was that Ballard was an edgy, dark-skinned 30 year-old notorious for sexually suggestive songs. He might frighten most teenage girls, along with their parents. Hank was also beyond Clark’s control.

On the other hand, Bernie Lowe already had a pleasant, light-skinned artist named Ernest Evans with the amiable disposition of a class clown. Born October 3, 1941, Ernest was himself a teenager. He did impressions of other artists, and when he made a Christmas card record for Dick Clark and his wife, Barbara, singing “Jingle Bells” in the voices of various rock ’n’ roll stars, Lowe released a similar performance of him mimicking Elvis, Fats Domino, and the Coasters singing “Mary Had a Little Lamb.” The title on the Cameo Records label was “The Class”; the artist was “Chubby Checker,” a name that Barbara Clark had bestowed upon Ernest as a play on Fats Domino. Now, on “The Twist,” he would put his gift of mimicry to the ultimate test.

Dave Appell, a local jazz guitarist who worked as Bernie Lowe’s artists-and-repertoire man, gathered several musicians and recorded the backing track in Cameo’s sixth-floor offices at 1405

Locust Street in Philadelphia. Appell recalled, "We put a carpet on the floor and rugs on the walls to dampen the sound. We had a mono Ampex machine with four inputs and a [mixing] board worth about \$10." They had to wait until after 6 p.m., when the other offices cleared out. It was there that Appell, pianist Leroy Lovett (the only black musician on the session), saxophonist Buddy Savitt, drummer Ellis Tollin, and a now-forgotten bass player sat down, listened to Hank Ballard's single a few times, and then recorded it almost note for note. "We gave it a cymbal beat, with a straight-eight feel that wasn't on Hank's record," Appell said. The date was uncertain, although some sources claim it was July 9, 1960. A few days later, they took the tape to Reco Arts Studio, where engineer Emil Corson added his touch to the mix. The Dreamlovers, a local black vocal group that would later have a hit with "When We Get Married," stood in for the Midnighters, and Chubby did an excellent job reproducing Hank Ballard's squealy baritone. A week later, Lowe released "The Twist" on his Parkway label.

Hank Ballard recalled floating in a swimming pool in Hallandale, Florida, when the song, playing on a transistor radio, startled him fully awake. "At first I thought it was me. Hell, it sounded like me.... But then I couldn't hear any drive in the voice, and the tracks were weak." Rather than have Chubby lip-synch and dance to the song on "American Bandstand," Dick Clark gave him a formal introduction on his Saturday evening ABC showcase, "The Dick Clark Show," airing from 7:30 to 8 o'clock from the Little Theater in midtown Manhattan. It was a formal setting, with performers onstage facing an audience. This was the evening, August 6, 1960, America first saw what became known as The Twist. Cal Green said that the Midnighters had a little dance routine for every song they performed, but "All that other stuff came later with Chubby." Checker claimed that he picked up the basic steps from ghetto kids at the clubs, but added the hip swivel himself and practiced it on a crowd at the Rainbow Club in Wildwood, New Jersey. As he explained it that night to the audience, doing the Twist was "like putting out a cigarette with both feet, or like coming out of a shower and wiping your butt with a towel." It was a move he might have seen anywhere, including a 1930 British film called "Cavalcade," in which a dancer used it as a turn-around at the edge of the stage. Or it could have been Elvis Presley, performing a primitive poolside Twist as he sang "(You're So Square) Baby, I Don't Care" in the 1957 film "Jailhouse Rock." In any event, the record entered "Billboard's" Hot 100 on the first of August at number 49, and climbed into the No. 1 slot on September 9. That same week, Ballard's original single, rereleased to glide in Checker's slipstream, peaked at No. 28. Eventually "The Twist" faded away, and Chubby went on to other dance hits like "Pony Time" and "Let's Twist Again."

Meanwhile, at Manhattan's dingy, Mob-owned Peppermint Lounge on West 45th Street, near the theater district, Joey Dee & the Starlites, a mixed-race group that played R&B, was drawing a slumming crowd of society folks who, as one wag put it, were tired of looking at the same old lifted faces at El Morocco and the Stork Club. Personages like Judy Garland, Marilyn Monroe, Greta Garbo, Tennessee Williams, Truman Capote, and Noel Coward showed up, along with aging European aristocrats and American heiresses, to watch the leather-clad denizens dance the Twist. New York "Journal-American" columnist Cholly Knickerbocker tattled on the celebrities who were seen on the Peppermint Lounge's tiny dance floor. Henry Glover, who produced Hank Ballard's "The Twist," sat down with Joey Dee and wrote a new song, "The Peppermint Twist," which was recorded two days later for Roulette Records. It went to No. 1.

Now there were shocking rumors of First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy Twisting in the White House. In the midst of this fever, Parkway reissued Chubby Checker's "The Twist" in mid-November 1961, but this time the parents were the ones who ushered it back to the top of "Billboard's" magic mountain. It seemed like every artist was making a Twist record, and some, like Sam Cooke and the Isley Brothers, were having hits. Two new artists, Pudgy Parchesi and Tubby Chess, joined the Twister parade, and record companies revived last year's duds by reissuing them with "Twist" added to the titles. Hollywood churned out four quickie Twist films, including two with Chubby Checker and another starring Joey Dee. James Bond Twisted on a Jamaican dance floor in his first film, "Dr. No." TV news broadcasted fuzzy images of Mercury astronauts Twisting in zero gravity. President Dwight Eisenhower pointedly condemned the dance's "vulgarity, sensuality, indeed, downright filth" in a May 1, 1962, speech in Abilene, Kansas. And comedian Bob Hope told a flock of US airmen at an Arctic Circle radar base that a guy froze to death while doing the Twist--"They couldn't bury him, they had to screw him into the ground." If you were alive in 1962, you were probably doing the Twist. The craze lasted a few more months, and although a few echoes lingered, like the Beatles' 1964 "Twist and Shout," it was all over by autumn.

Chubby Checker became a nostalgia item soon enough, and his hits dried up. However, he returned to the money in 1988 when he teamed with a popular rap group, The Fat Boys, to remake "The Twist" for a new generation. Hank Ballard and Cal Green died in 2003 and 2004, respectively, but Chubby Checker remained popular on the oldies circuit with a high-powered show broken up by invitations to audience members of all ages to come up onstage and dance with the Master Twister. More than half a century later, "The Twist" remains a part of national--and world--consciousness.

*Jim Dawson is the author of "The Twist: The Story of the Song and Dance That Changed the World" (Faber & Faber, 1995) and "Rock Around the Clock: The Record That Started the Rock Revolution" (Back Beat/Hal Leonard, 2005). He lives in Los Angeles.*

\*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.