

A history of Hustle

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IN THE LATE 1960S AND THROUGHOUT THE 1970S discotheques with high quality sound systems and flashing lights became a popular form of entertainment in Europe and America. In the early 1970s dancing in the discotheques was mostly freestyle dancing similar to the “Rock” style exhibited by pop stars of the day (e.g. The Jackson Five). The Afro hairstyle, bellbottom pants and marshmallow shoes were the fashion craze of the younger generation of the time.

A small group of young adults and teenagers formed a subculture in New York City competing in the many discotheques in a variety of dance contests, mostly performing the aforementioned “Rock”. Some of the popular clubs at this time were The Contiki, Footsteps and The Red and White. These were the hot clubs where the best dancers from the boroughs of New York City would gather to dance, compete and exchange information. In early 1973 at a discotheque called “The Grand Ballroom,” a new “touch dance” without a name was being exhibited by women. It was a simple 6-count step with a very basic form, including inside and outside single turns. This was the birth of what would later be called Hustle. The young men of the club took notice, and became interested in this new “touch dance.” It was a return to romance, and quite simply a way to meet women!

The dance began to gain popularity, and as more and more people began to participate, it began to evolve. In the Latin discotheques of that day, including The Corso, Barney Goo Goo’s, and The Ipanema, disco music was used as a bridge between live band sets. In these clubs, touch dancing had always been present in the form of mambo, salsa, cha cha and bolero. As a result of this fusion, the simple 6-count dance began to incorporate the “ball change” action of the mambo. The count of the dance now became 1-2-3 & 4-5-6. The dance, although a touch dance, was now performed mostly side-by-side. It also began to incorporate a lot of the intricate turn patterns of the mambo. The dance began to include multiple turns and hand changes with a ropey feel to the arm movements. Hence the dance was now referred to as the “Rope Hustle” or “Latin Hustle”.

Although the main hub and innovation center continued to be New York City, in 1974 and 1975 the dance gained even more popularity and began to spread across the United States. Dance contests began to pop up in every city as the phenomenon spread. At the same time, the gay community began to exert its influence on the dance. Many of its members who danced the Hustle were also involved in the professional performing arts community. They added long balletic arms and elasticity to the movement. At this time, the dance also began to move from a slotted pattern into a rotational one. With the continual increase in dance contests, the young competitors were seeking an edge. Acrobatic and adagio movements were introduced into the dance for performances and competitions. A whole new field of entertainment was introduced, and nightclubs, hotels and television began to hire these young and innovative professionals to perform. This was approximately 1975. These opportunities fueled the fire, and the young dancers continued to seek out new ways to excite the club audiences. The dance became faster and more exciting, and the original 1-2-3 of the dance was dropped and just the &4-5-6 of the count was utilized in order to move quickly into and out of the tricks that were becoming so popular in the contests. Hence, “&4-5-6” became “&1-2-3”. This was the birth of Hustle as it is counted today.

Throughout the late 1970s, even though Hustle was still taught in many different forms (4-count Hustle, the old Latin Hustle or Rope Hustle) by dance studios, the most exciting form was done by the club dancers and competitors of New York City who performed the 3-count count Hustle (&1-2-3.). The New York Hustle dancers from the 1970s paved the way for the rest of the Hustle community across the United States. Throughout the late 1970s and 1980s, as it continued to evolve, Hustle began to borrow from other dance styles. These included smooth ballroom, from which it took traveling movements and pivots, as well as other partner dance forms such as swing and the Latin rhythm dances. Even today the dance continues to evolve, yet it has never lost its basic count since the mid-1970s of “&1-2-3”.

The Hustle is the last authentic American partner dance born and cultivated here in the United States.