

The meaning of the word “hustle”

SO, WHERE DID THE TERM “HUSTLE” COME FROM? You’ve heard of “Charlie Hustle,” and “hurry and hustle over” or the expression to be “hustled” (by a pool shark) but where did the Hustle dance get its name?

The word “hustle” originates from the Dutch word meaning “shake.” It became a common street term. Don de Natlae was one of the first dancers to start teaching the Hustle back in 1973. He remembers someone asking the young dancers, in a Spanish Bronx neighborhood, what was the dance that they were doing? “Oh” was the answer, “we’re jus’ hustlin’ around.”

As the Hustle dance began to evolve it initially took the form of other social dances. For all intents and purposes, it is a hybrid dance. It lacks a documented history, formal structure and syllabus. It was similar to a six count Lindy but was embraced by the young generation of dancers as it could be danced to the new popular disco music that was beating its bass drum to new levels. This fresh new sound helped drive the Hustle dance. Since the Latin dances had such a big influence on the early Hustle dance many commonly referred it to as the “Latin Hustle”.

Once Van McCoy’s hit song “The Hustle” charged up the radio charts (it hung there for 18 weeks), the dance teachers and club owners knew that touch dancing was back. Kids of all ages responded with a new enthusiasm for partner dancing. That was 25 years ago.

The New York Times called “The Hustle” the biggest dance record of the seventies...” In the US, the Hustle dance got its biggest push in the Black and Latino bars and clubs in the New York region. Ballroom dancing was rebounding from a decade of “nose dive” business in the “hippie” 60s. Touch dancing lost its appeal but the 70s opened the door for changes in music, fashion and style. With the hippie age, rebellion and Vietnam behind us, college students and young folks yearned for structure, one-to-one relationships, a permanent monogamous relationship. Couples dancing (as opposed to freestyle) was back in fashion, then expressed as being “chic.” The music of the 60s became somewhat political, what was referred to as head music. The 70s music was for your feet.

Looking back, it appears that the timing was perfect for this dance explosion. A new sound called disco emerged, a new dance to bring people together backed by hundreds of exciting discotheques opening and new motion pictures featuring both the dance and music were in the theaters.

The term discotheque was coined in Paris. It was a play on the word bibliotheque (library). Originally, a disco was a record library, and eventually a place to dance to records in a record library, instead of live bands. Chubby Checkers (the original Twister) wrote a song called the Discotheque and was known to use the expression first back in the early 70s. The first Parisian Discotheque was called the Whiskey a Go - Go. New York followed this format with Le Club. The Hustle dance was well received by all. It represented a bridge back to ballroom dancing. It was embraced by all ages. The dance sound during the late 70s was influenced by all types of music: R&B, punk and new wave. At first, the imports and deep disco music was limited to clubs with minimal late night airplay on the radio. After the release of Saturday Night Fever and Donna Summer’s string of hit songs (five songs hit the top ten which were all recognized on Billboards Top 40), disco music could no longer be ignored.

Summers still collects nearly two million dollars a year in royalties alone from all those hits. After disco became a dirty word, the sound continued but under the guise of the name “dance music.” Everyone at one point jumped on the disco train and watered down the quality of the music, resulting in a commercial sound, which meant poor quality releases. Two musicians, Casey and Finch, wrote the seductive hit song “Rock Your Baby” which was recorded by George McCrae. The song went to No. 1 on Billboard’s pop and R&B charts in 1974. “Disco impacted everything you hear on the radio today,” says Casey. “It’s part of our culture, and it’s going to be there until the world ends.”

Madonna currently holds the record for the most dance club play singles. To date she has had 22 singles reach the number 1# spot on Billboard Magazine’s “Dance Club Play.”

Now you know.