"The Twist" was a hit song that led to one of the biggest dance crazes of the 1960s. The song was written and originally recorded by Rock and Roll pioneer Hank Ballard in 1959, but became a No. 1 hit when a cover version by Chubby Checker was released in 1960. (The song hit No. 1 again for two weeks in 1962.)

The Twist dance is based on traditional West African dance movements, and on dances popular with slaves in the American South. The word “twist” appeared in a number of popular blues songs. The basic movement of the dance is fairly simple, although there are many variations. The popularity of the Twist led to other popular Twist-themed songs, including “Let’s Twist Again,” “The Peppermint Twist,” and “Twist and Shout.”

While the Twist proved extremely popular, it had its fair share of critics. Movie star Ginger Rogers, who had a highly successful career as a ballroom dancer in Hollywood musicals, called the Twist “ungraceful, vulgar, and exhibitionism personified.” In an interview with the Tuscaloosa News in 1961, she said, “I think it’s terrible. I think it’s a scandal. It is the most obscene dance I’ve ever seen, worse than the shimmy ever was. If people realized how bad they looked while doing the twist, they would not do it.”
As you watch the videos and view the images, discuss the following with your group:

- How do audiences seem to react to Checker’s performances? What happens after he completes his performance of “Slow Twisting”?
- Who joins Checker onstage in the first Twist video? How are they dressed? What is their race? Gender? Socioeconomic class?
- What does the announcer in the “How to Twist” video call the Twist? How popular does it seem to be?
- Look at the album covers. What groups of people do they appear to be marketed to? Are they just for teens? How are the people on the album covers dressed? What does this suggest about whom the dance was popular with?
- What does the fact that an entire comic book and magazine were devoted to the Twist suggest about its popularity?
- In 1962, First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy was photographed with fashion designer Oleg Cassini doing the Twist. What conclusions can you draw from this about how mainstream society regarded the Twist phenomenon?
- Why do you think this dance became so popular?
- Overall, who seems to have been the target audience and fan base for the Twist? Why do you think the Twist was so popular with middle-class white people?
- What do the videos and images suggest about the influence of Rock and Roll on mainstream American culture in general – not just on teenagers?
- How does the popularity of the Twist reflect the growing influence of television on American society? Do you think the dance would have become as popular without it? Why or why not?
- Why might someone such as Ginger Rogers, who made a career from traditional ballroom dancing, have disliked a dance like the Twist? Are her objections justified? Why or why not?
- Why do you think she calls the Twist “vulgar” and “obscene”? What specifically is she referring to?
- Recall that the Twist was inspired by traditional African-American dance forms. What does Rogers’ quote suggest about race relations in the United States in the early 1960s?