

Excerpt from “A Twist in Time”
By James Wolcott
Vanity Fair magazine, November 2007



With his beaming smile, booming optimism, and teddy-bear huggability, Chubby Checker was the perfect racial-crossover ambassador, making the dance acceptable for Dick Clark’s faithful assembly of wholesome white teenagers out there in Archie Comics land. But make no mistake, even milked down, the Twist flicked a switch on the body electric...

What made the Twist special?...

It was democratic. Unlike dances that came before, such as the Fox-trot and the Mambo, the Twist didn’t require professional instruction or a set of floor diagrams for fancy footwork.... The Twist was an infectious bug that anybody could catch, regardless of age..., innate musicality, or medical condition. “The rhythm was contagious,” Earl Blackwell, publisher of the *Celebrity Register*, testified in *The New York Times*. “It makes you want to get up and dance. What’s most important is that it’s an easy dance to do. Everyone can do it.”

It respected personal space.The personal space opened up by the Twist created a neutral field that nourished female empowerment. As social critic Susan J. Douglas observed in *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media*: “Chubby Checker’s 1960 hit ‘The Twist’ revolutionized teenage dancing, because it meant that boys and girls didn’t have to hold hands anymore, boys didn’t have to lead and girls didn’t have to follow, so girls had a lot more autonomy and control as they danced. Plus, dancing was one of the things girls usually did much better than boys.”