

DC Hand Dancing  
Anise Owens  
DN 100  
TR 11:00-12:15  
Lisa Traiger

Quick step, step, step; turn quick step...the all too familiar words of my dance instructor. I embarked on a mission of learning a dance that didn't come with its own theme music. The dance didn't have a funny name nor was it an imitation of some daily activity set to a catchy hip hop beat. No, this dance had substance, it had history, and it had me longing for the nearest chair to sit in. It wasn't from some far away country too different from my own, nor did it come from some indigenous group of people who I could not relate to. This culturally rich dance came from a city only 30 minutes away from my home. It was created by young people just like myself who loved to take dances and tweak them to make them their own. Created by a generation of youngsters who took their favorite pastime and turned it into what would become the District of Columbia's official dance: Hand Dancing.

DC Hand Dancing (DCHD) is known as "a regional and time-period specific version of the swing/ jitterbug" (Manriquez). Although swing dance and the jitter bug date from the early 1900's, DCHD has existed in many different styles since the 1950's. Rosa Manriquez, writer for the DC Hand Dance Club, comments DCHD has many names. " 'D.C. Swing', 'D.C. Style', 'SE Style', 'Queenstown', and 'fast dance', " are just a few of the many names given to this local dance.

DCHD is performed to a "6 beat, 6 to 8 count dance rhythm" (Manriquez). It is almost always performed in a relaxed setting. Usually a club or another venue where strangers and friends come together to show off their dance moves, relax, and just to have fun. This swing type dance is usually performed by partners who keep close in contact. Manriquez, goes on to explain, " partners generally move to, from, around, and/or in front of each other while executing smooth footwork, hand-turns and other dance

moves.” One very crucial rule to hand dancing is that one or both hands are always touching the partner’s. The feet never leave the floor, as the “footwork consists of smooth and continuous floor contact, sliding and gliding type steps” (Manriquez). While these two rules must be applied in this style of dancing, much of the rest is left to the imagination of the dancers. Derek Orlando Ball, writer for Afro-American Red Star, writes, “The Washington style of hand dancing features...elaborate turns, arm gestures, and various other movements are improvised” (Art of Hand Dancing). Much of the dance is ad-libbed and built around the fundamental rules of the dance: never let go of your partner, and keep your feet ( and your partner’s feet) on the floor.

A unique trait of hand dancing is the way a person hand dances will usually tell people where the dancer lives, or where the dancer learned the dance in the city. “... You can be identified as to what part of the city you reside, according to the way you execute certain steps and turns” (Art of Hand Dancing). This may be largely due to the fact that many of the young dancers who made DCHD popular, invented the dance in the times segregation. This factor can still be seen in many hand dance clubs and organizations. The Washington Post highlights, “Most older hand dancers learned the moves during segregation, or the early days of integration” (Stewart, 3).

Hand dancing can be performed to many different styles of music. This music can be performed either live or can just be a recording played by a DJ. The music is the soul of hand dancing. The beat and tempo of the music, as well as the preference of type of music, will usually dictate the type of moves the couple will use and can often tell you much about the dancers themselves. White hand dancers usually prefer “ 50’s rock-and-roll music” while African American dancers choose to dance to a much wider variety of

music including Motown, Stax, blues, jazz and some modern day hip hop and R&B music. (The Washington Post). White hand dancers tend to rely on more formal European style ball room moves, while African American dancers tend to gravitate to more jazz style moves. (The Washington Post). The two different cultures of the two different groups of dancers can clearly be seen from their music preferences, their choice of moves, and even where the groups meet to dance. Today, “blacks and whites tend to dance at separate venues-the District’s Chateau and Eclipse nightclubs serve largely black clientele, and mostly white crowds make their way to VFWs, American Legions and Elk Lodges in Maryland” (The Washington Post). This makes sense because many whites moved into the suburbs and out of the city in the beginning of integration of whites and blacks (The Washington Post). Despite some ‘invisible’ lines of segregation, basic fundamentals of proper hand dance etiquette can be seen in both groups. Hand dancing was created during a time when couples danced face-to-face and not backside-to-crotch. Girls were young ladies and boys were young men. The Post notes, “etiquette still requires men to invite women to dance, and good manners generally guide women to accept.” Males usually lead in the dance and women are more inclined to follow. The dance, and etiquette of the dance, suggest that the view of the community and that of the dancers were shaped in an era where manners were expected and required. There was not a battle of equality amongst the genders. Men took the lead and women were happily obliged to allow them.

Many from the older generation of hand dancers fell in love with the dance during their adolescent and teenage years. The goal for many of those same hand dancers, who have aged considerably, is to try and bring a new generation into this DC native art form.

The Post reports, “ ‘It’s hard to get younger people into it. If nobody comes in four or five years from now, it’s going to vanish.’” Dancers have noticed, “the black groups are attracting more younger dancers” (The Washington Post). This can be attributed to the types of music being played at the various dance venues. The younger crowds tend to be drawn to the African American clubs because the choice of music is more modern while more of the white venues tend to stick to the classics. No matter the music, both groups of dancers know the urgent need to teach hand dancing to the younger generation if they wish to see the dance survive after they’ve retired their dancing shoes. The National Hand Dance Association as well as Smooth and Easy, are two organizations taking the lead in “preserving the integrity of the art” (Art of Hand Dancing). This dance is not a dance that every DC dweller is familiar with, the need to reach out to residents in local areas, exposing them to DCHD, has never been more apparent. I took the class expecting to see a room full of young black couples trying to master a dance likely their parents or even grandparents had performed for them. Instead, I was in class with a sea of older Jewish couples. Not only was I minority, ethnically, but I was a good 30 years younger than everyone else in the class. Despite sticking out like a sore thumb, I must admit I was impressed with the fluidity that many of the experienced couples exhibited. Their seemingly effortless movements made me wish I was born just a few decades earlier.

Hand dancing as an art form is unique to the DC area. It’s one of the few art forms that many DC natives can boast they created all themselves. Although, not originally from DC, I am from a suburb of the city and take great pride in knowing that my neighbors to the east, have created a dance rich in culture and history all their own. Just like any great dance form, hand dancing has its highlights and low points, but

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overall, it has managed to survive and thrive despite its young age compared to many other dance forms. While not the easiest to learn, hand dancing provides its participants with step back in time to enjoy a dance that allows for self expression unlike any other.

**Due: Feb. 22, 2011**

**Note: Absolutely no late projects or papers will be accepted.**

In this project you will research a social or cultural dance form and present your findings to the class using visual aids, including video, live demonstration, teaching and other materials.

**Instructions:**

1. Many of us have a dance form that is close to us, culturally, socially or artistically. This assignment asks you to investigate that dance form, researching its background and origins and presenting your findings to the class in a 8-10 minute presentation, as well as composing a three-to-five-page written paper.
2. Begin your research in the library, use books, videos, online sources including the online databases. If this is a form that you practice or have learned from family or friends, use firsthand sources by conducting an interview with your teacher, family member or friend. You should use at least three printed sources (i.e., books, magazine or newspaper articles, encyclopedias, online databases (not Google), etc.). Use your college librarians as a resource to enhance your research skills.
3. Consider the questions below based on your research, observations and participation in a three-to five-page typed essay. Format for written work should be followed.
4. Prepare a Dance Roots Presentation that introduces the class to your dance form, describing its history, its practice and its performance. Consider cultural practices and how those might influence the dance form. For your presentation, be sure you have visuals. That could include a PowerPoint presentation, photos, video from YouTube, your own video and/or photographs, or other creative means to illustrate your dance. Everyone should be prepared to demonstrate and teach at least several steps of the dance form they report on. Other ways to enhance your presentation include bringing in music recordings, examples of costumes or other items used in the dance, or other visual elements that help us understand the dance and its roots.

**Questions to address**

1. Why does this form interest you? Do you have a specific cultural or social connection to it?
2. When is this dance typically performed or practiced? On what occasion(s) does it take place?

3. Who does the dance? Does the entire community participate? Are there gender differences or age differences in how it is practiced?
4. Is there music that accompanies the dance? Is typically played live or recorded? Can you discuss the music's relationship to the dance? Does one drive or lead the other?
5. Do groups, couples and/or individuals do this dance? How do they congregate, dance and move about during the event? How is the dance performed in space: lines, circles, partners, patterns? Does the structure suggest anything about the cultural or social values of the community in which it is performed?
6. What does the dancing reveal about the culture in terms of values, gender roles and age identifiers? What were the relationships between men and women in terms of dancing?
7. How does it feel to participate in or observe this dance form?
8. What cultural baggage or perceptual filters did you bring with you when examining this dance form?