

History of D.C. Hand Dance
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To significantly cover the history of D.C. Hand Dance (DCHD), as I and countless others lived it, let's identify the critical what, when, who, why and where of the dance, as follows. (Note: Hand dance is actually a compound noun (hand-dance), but has always been shown as two words. Both usages are in this document.)

What Is D.C. Hand-Dance? DCHD is a regional and time-period specific version of the American swing/jitterbug dance. DCHD originated in the Washington, DC, Metropolitan area (DC, MD and VA) in the early to mid-1950s. Swing dance has existed in many different styles, versions and cultures since swing music began. From its beginning, DCHD was referred to and called "D.C. Hand-Dance/Hand-Dance", "D.C. Swing", "D.C. Style" (swing), "SE Style", "Queenstown" and "fast dance" (all meaning DCHD). This was the first time a version of "swing" dance was termed "Hand Dance".

DCHD is characterized by very smooth footwork and movements, and close-in and intricate hand-turns, all danced to a 6-beat, 6-to-8-count dance rhythm. It is a close-contact swing dance. The footwork consists of smooth and continuous floor contact, sliding and gliding-type steps (versus hopping and jumping-type steps). Partners move to and from each other in slotted/track movements, and around each other, while executing smooth footwork, various hand-turns and other dance moves. The partners' hands (either one or both) are usually joined in some way, thereby calling the dance, "Hand-Dance".

DCHD is basically a "street" swing dance with an "attitude". It is ad-libbed and non-choreographed, danced "at and for the moment as the partners' feelings to the music occur". This dance is best danced to rhythm and blues (which inspired its beginning, along with rock and roll), or other sensual-type swing music (such as funk, funk or blues rock, big band and beach music). DCHD is a "sensual" swing dance. DCHD has evolved in movement and style, but the smooth footwork and hand-turns to the 6-beat, 6-to-8-count dance rhythms remain the same.

When Did D.C. Hand-Dance Begin? DCHD began in the mid-1950s. It was going on before American Bandstand (Philadelphia, PA), the Milt Grant Show (D.C.) and the Buddy Dean Show (Baltimore, MD) were televised. When these shows came to TV, we would dance along with the dancers (at home) if we couldn't go ourselves.

Who Began D.C. Hand-Dance? Regional dancers from DC, MD and VA, from all cultures and backgrounds, hungry for a new rhythmic swing-dance expression, began this version of swing/jitterbug. DCHD is time-period and regional specific. It is also specific to the enthusiastic and creative pre-teens of yesterday and today who loved/love to dance, and still do.

Why D.C. Hand-Dance Began and Why It is Called D.C. Hand-Dance? DCHD began when rock and roll and rhythm and blues music became the craze. A new expression for swing/jitterbug dance began to the rhythmic and sensual music. Rhythm and blues music is "blues" put to expressive and sensual rhythms. Although DCHD was designed for rock and roll, rhythm and blues and funky dance rhythms, this unique swing dance is adaptable to all types of swing dance (and other dance) rhythms. It can be danced to fast, medium and slower dance rhythms. Its unique feature to break-down faster rhythms into what we call "half-time" rhythms allows for great hand-dancing to any and all types of swing and other rhythmic music. Hand-Dancing is so-called because the partners are always "holding or touching" hands in some way throughout their dance together.

Where Was D.C. Hand-Dancing Danced and Where Is It Danced Today? In the mid-1950s, most of us began learning and dancing DCHD (at about the age of 12 or 13) while attending our various area junior high schools. (I began at Paul Junior High School in D.C.) It was more or less learned "on the street" (anywhere possible), and in small gatherings and brought back to the schools. We went to our friends' and our own homes and danced. We would teach our siblings at home and practice with them or our friends. We practiced with doorknobs and doorframes when we were alone. We danced in the gymnasiums and on the ball fields after gym classes and at break times at school. Some assumed "lead" and others assumed "follow" roles.

We danced at parties and on “Hot Shoppes” and “Mighty Mo” parking lots. We danced anywhere and anytime we could. All we needed was a loud radio or record player blasting our favorite music. We danced at area teen clubs and CYO clubs. In the late 1950s, we danced along with the TV dance shows, either in person or at home (since the "swing" dance beats and rhythms were the same). In the late 1950s and early 1960s, we danced at countless church halls and firehouses, and at various D.C. area landmark armories sponsored by popular DJs (e.g., Don Dillard). In the early 1960s, area nightclubs such as the Alpine, Dixie Pig and Lions Den began holding weekly dance contests (some of us still have our trophies). In the mid-1960s through the late 1980s, many hand-dancers danced at area clubs such as the Starlite, Rand’s, Benny’s, the Hayloft, Rocket Room, Shelter Room, Gus and John’s, Sonny’s Turntable Lounge, the Crossroads and Studebakers. In the 1990s and into the 2000s, popular dance venues included David’s Supper Club, various American Legion and Elks Clubs, Coconuts, Malibu’s, Legends, Mango’s, 94th Aero Squadron, Szechuan’s, Whispers, Tuckers and Coco Cabana.

A few years ago, the D.C. Mayor announced Hand-Dance the official Dance of D.C.

Some original Hand Dancers active in DCHD for 65-plus years remain in or near the D.C. Metropolitan area. We all strive to dance and teach others DCHD, and to enjoy, love and preserve the dance like we do. It’s our sport!

Since DCHD is an extremely social sport, the Covid-19 pandemic has greatly affected our dancing activities. We’re hoping and praying we can soon continue the many diverse/multi-cultural Hand-Dance activities we once shared.

Please refer to the Club’s Website: www.dchanddanceclub.net, and Facebook Page: DC Hand Dance Club Est. 1994, for Club updates and venue information.

About the Author: Rose Manriquez is an American-Spanish-Italian lady born in Washington, D.C., in the early 1940s. She retired in 2001 after completing 30 years of Federal Service and 11 years in Private Industry. In the mid-1950s, and early 1960s, she was a Red Cross Medical Volunteer and D.C.-based USO Volunteer Hostess. Rose was a Go-Go Dancer in Hollywood, CA, when Go-Go Dancing (and West Coast Swing) were first beginning. She has been dancing DCHD since it began over 65 years ago. Rose is a member of the Metropolitan Washington, D.C., Hand Dance Preservation Society, a.k.a. D.C. Hand Dance Club (a name she suggested for the Club in its beginning). She is also a member of the D.C. Hand Dance Club's Hall of Fame. She originated the "Do It" slogan: "Hand Dancers Do It Holding Hands".