

The history of Boogie Woogie and Rock'n'Roll

We can assume, that the history of Boogie Woogie began with the development of new dance- and music styles. At the 1893 world exhibition in Chicago came up dances within the Ragtime style and around 1900 the so called Chicken-wheel-dance. The breakaway, an other important fore runner of the Boogie Woogie, is a dance style done to Charleston and Swing music where the couples separated to do solo steps. The big breakthrough of the Swing music came 1934, when a white bandleader, Benny Goodman, held his famous concert at the Carnegie Hall and swept the audience off their feet. The next day, New York was in Swing fever. The rest of the work for the final music and dance euphoria was done by Hollywood of course.

The name Boogie Woogie signifies piano music with strong rolling bass runs which is said to have its origins around the mid twenties in a lumberjack-camp. The dance steps that were done to that music were called Boogie Woogie. On the famous recording "Pinetop's Smith Boogie Woogie" from 1928 you can hear him giving instructions for some steps. One of the "Boogie Woogie" steps is a figure where alternately the right and left leg together with the hips are moved to the outside in light circulating movements.

The great success of the Boogie Woogie music came overnight; once more through a concert in Carnegie Hall in New York. Mead Lux Lewis, Albert Ammons and Pete Johnson dragged New York and the rest of the USA along into a Boogie Woogie fever. The big bands that played in the ballrooms and clubs now played Boogie Woogie music in big band arrangements. Only the music of the Boogie, similar to the rhythm of a machine, satisfied the youth's wish for only the new and the revolutionary. The Afro-Americans enriched the dance at their parties and introduced kicks, jumps, hand-stands, tumbles and lifts out of the pleasure and delight for dance. There were no more limits to improvisation, variations in figures and personal impression.

The open swing dancing was forbidden in Germany from 1933. One danced to the modern Boogie Woogie. So it happened, that in Europe not only music but also the dance-style was named Boogie Woogie. Next to the terms Boogie Woogie, Jitterbug and Lindy Hop, also Swing or Jive (from the British soldiers) were used. In Germany there was no pure Jitterbug but Boogie Woogie (Swing) with Jitterbug acrobatics.

From 1954, Boogie Woogie was absorbed by the upcoming Rock'n'Roll music and resulting dance style. The disc-jockey Alan Freed claimed in 1951 to have invented the term Rock'n'Roll to sell the black music better to the white listeners. In the beginning, Rock'n'Roll was nothing more than a new word for the popular black music, for the urban Rhythm'n'Blues of the negroes, but became the big revolution in Europe through the motion picture "The Blackboard Jungle" with its title song "Rock around the clock". In the negro slang, the term Rock'n'Roll had an explicit carnal meaning. This also transferred to the music and to the dancing style and also had the purpose to create flush and ecstasy. Of essential importance in the triumphal procession of the Rock'n'Roll were also interpreters like

Elvis Presley, Ray Charles, Fats Domino Jerry Lee Lewis and Chuck Berry. Motivated by the fascination of the music and the imbedded groove, Rock'n'Roll also created a fashion movement with drainpipe trousers, striped socks, petticoats, ponytails and greasy curls.

In 1957 the Italian "Clan Bruno Dossena" and dance teacher Umberto Gallone from Milan invented the 'jump' basic. Dance teachers in Europe and America tried to absorb the wild ecstasy of the Rock'n'Roll dance by communicating cultivated Boogie to Rock'n'Roll music. The first Rock'n'Roll wave ended in 1959.

The early 70s brought the biggest renaissance of Rock'n'Roll music. In this nostalgia, the music of Bill Haley, Elvis Presley, etc. revived again. As from 1974, Rock'n'Roll was again a popular fashion dance. In the early 80s, when Rock'n'Roll transferred more and more to a highly artistic sport, Boogie Woogie (danced without acrobatics) was rediscovered. Henceforward tournaments were arranged and clubs were founded. The recognition of the name Boogie Woogie grew more and more and became the dance of the year in 1987/88. So, the term Boogie Woogie actually covers 60 years of emotional history.

Source: Ruedi Wenger