



**a twisted tale:  
Ron Mann  
brings  
the true  
history of  
The Twist—  
and social  
dancing—to  
the screen**

**by Marc Glassman**

**“I had lots of Chubby Checker records when I was a kid. My mother got me my first one when I was four. I thought he had invented The Twist. Of course, I was very wrong.”**

Ron Mann pauses, brushes back his shock of thick, greying hair and gets up to riffle through his record collection. We're at the acclaimed documentarian's office, Sphinx Productions, so the albums he is flipping through are all rhythm'n'blues and pop LPs from the 60s. At his home, the sorting out would be far more complex. There he has a vast collection of jazz, spoken art, and psychedelic albums, records of his previous obsessions. Mann picks up a stack of old LPs and passes them to me, one by one, making appropriate comments for each audio artifact. “Here's *Twisting with Ray Charles* and one with B.B. King. It's not even a twist record, but record companies would slap the title on anything in those days.” Those days were the early 60s. Now, thirty years later, Ron Mann is nearing completion of his film about that time, simply called *Twist*.

**Hank Ballard, creator of The Twist**







What drove Toronto's aging enfant terrible to do his usual painstakingly precise treatment of what even he, in his darker moments, considers to be teenage fluff? There are several stories in the twisted tale of how rhythm'n'blues joined rock'n'roll's mainstream, and social dance became liberated from precise movements to become a free-form popular art. Before describing the convoluted, intersecting tales of Joey Dee, Dick Clark, Chubby Checker, Hank Ballard and the Midnighters, the Peppermint Lounge, high society, the Chitlin Circuit, low society,

Filmmakers Distribution Centre, to discuss the financing, creation and distribution of independent film. Jonathan Barker of the Ontario Film Development Corporation is being taken to task by several members of the audience for that organization's problematic financial policies. Suddenly a voice bursts out from the back. Rising to his feet, Ron Mann denounces his fellow filmmakers for a general lack of initiative in raising private capital and then castigates the governmental funders for lack of responsiveness to independents.

Seizing his moment, Mann

cultural community, many members of whom are all too willing to allow the hard work of producing their films to be done through government agencies. Yet this performance, and others, has garnered Ron Mann many supporters among the new filmmaking community in Toronto. Atom Egoyan, Bruce McDonald, Peter Mettler and Patricia Rozema are all friends of the director, and point to his early successes as being inspirations for their won highly innovative work.

"WHAT I USUALLY DO when I'm starting off on a film is to talk to people. When *Comic Book Confidential* came out, I did a lot of interviews, and a number of talks at universities and colleges. Everybody asked me the same question: 'What's your next film?' Of course, immediately seconds after you've finished a film they want to know what's next. So I would say, just to try things out, 'It's a film about *The Twist*,' and people said, 'Well, that's interesting.' So here it is." Ron Mann is talking before a test screening of *Twist* at Film House, a Toronto production facility. His audience this afternoon is filled with funders, critics,

**"What rock'n'roll dancing is all about is an assimilation, an appropriation of black music and black dance."**

and American Bandstand's dancers, let's segue into another scene in the life of this cinematic composer, Ron Mann.

It's early 1988. The Jackman Hall at the Art Gallery of

describes his hit documentaries, *Imagine the Sound* and *Poetry in Motion*. The first features Paul Bley, Archie Shepp and Cecil Taylor, and is a completely sympathetic portrait of the most significant jazz revolutionaries of the 1960s. Neither the CBC or the NFB had put a penny into it, nor *Poetry in Motion*, which stars such literary luminaries as Allen Ginsburg, Jayne Cortez, bp nichol and Charles Bukowski. Defiant and loud-spoken in a way few Canadians can be, Mann describes to his astonished audience the then unfinished *Comic Book Confidential*. Pointing out that financing exists from private broadcasters, international distributors and private donors, Mann concludes his intervention by welcoming whatever help the OFDC can give to independent filmmakers but suggests that all filmmakers in the audience remain exactly that—independent.

Ron Mann won few friends that night. His words were a fresh wind blowing through the stultifying air of Canada's

research and production contributors to the film.

The film explodes onto the screen with the driving force of the only pop tune to reach #1 on the *Billboard* charts twice. Over a montage of people twisting in discotheques, at parties, and on the beach, "the dance sensation that swept the nation" gets a discerning film crowd's hips shifting. The film is structured into seven parts, each introduced by a dance lesson for the audience's edification.

Through a masterful use of archival footage, contemporary interviews with musicians and dancers, and rhythmically precise visual and musical editing, *Twist* progresses from jazz choreography and "jump blues" of the early 50s, through the heyday of the early 60s dance crazes, into the emergence of psychedelic rock and freeform dancing of the Woodstock era.

*Twist* teems with characters, befitting an age that honoured individualism. There's Carol, the film's occasional narrative voice, who supplies the only reflective tone from all of the dancers who enjoyed a brief moment of idolatry as white Philadelphia teenagers dancing on American Bandstand in the late 1950s. Hank Ballard arrives as the rueful creator of *The Twist*, trying to hide his despair over the success of the Chubby Checker version of his own, self-penned classic. Chubby is present, offhandedly describing his greatest talent: "I can make anything nice. That's my gift." Joey Dee appears, "a real sweetheart" according to Mann, describing his awesome brush with celebrity. Performing at The Peppermint Lounge, off Broadway, the leader of 1961's hottest



Ron Mann

Ontario is filled with arts administrators, bureaucrats and filmmakers. A forum has been created, partially under the auspices of the National Film Board and the Canadian



New Jersey band suddenly discovered that his tune, **The Peppermint Twist**, was being danced by Danny Kaye, Julie Newmar, Anne Bancroft and Senator Jacob Javits.

The film wryly observes **The Twist** as a cultural phenomenon. Everything from shots of astronauts twisting in space to twist breakfast cereals to twisting baby dolls is given its due as this phenomenon is shown to reach truly hysterical proportions. Mann's film even-handedly captures the growing absurdity of the choreographed sequels to **The Twist**. Another American Bandstand alumna describes how she shooed away a fly while dancing with a partner. Within weeks, Chubby Checker was being taught the steps to his latest hit, **The Fly**, by the same teen-age dancer.

After **Going to A-Go-Go** had to smash against such cultural detritus as **Molecule A-Go-Go**, the white American public was left with one thing: the ability to dance freely without a partner for the first time. **Twist** concludes with two specific homages. The first is to that "whitebread" American public through a home movie of a family ranging from children to grandparents dancing to **Twist and Shout**. The second, and the film's grand finale, reflects the source of all of this artistry: Mama Lu Parks' Parkettes perform a stunningly choreographed version of **Land of a Thousand Dances**, which is where we are today.

For all of its crowd-pleasing footage, exuberantly expressionistic dancing, and wonderfully engaging rhythm'n'blues music, **Twist** is a subtle film. Ron Mann's point is, as he says himself, "What rock'n'roll dancing is all about—as rock'n'roll is all about—is an assimilation, an appropriation of black music and black dance." The story of **Twist** is the tale of that appropriation as it operated on a variety of levels. Hank Ballard, a funky rhythm'n'blues artist

most famous for the suggestive lyrics to his huge mid-50s hit, **Work With Me Annie**, was judged to be unacceptable to a white audience by Dick Clark. Checker's version of **The Twist**, described accurately by Ballard as a "clone" of his song, became one of the greatest hits of all time. Checker's celebrity as a black teen idol is viewed not only within the context of rhythm'n'blues, but within that of such white pop stars as Frankie Avalon and Fabian—apt comparisons in both cases. American Bandstand dancers Jimmy and Carol admit to the director that they learned a dance, the Strand, from black Philadelphia youth and were afraid to acknowledge it on national television. Marshall McLuhan comments on the relative coolness of **The Twist** phenomenon as it reaches absurdities in marketing in the early 60s. As viewers, you recognize that

Ron Mann has not only presented the hidden history of social dance, but also commented on the changing spirit of North American culture during a turbulent time.

What makes Ron run? Why has this veteran director spent three years night after night drinking coffee, smoking cigarettes from dusk to dawn, to create this film? "I'm trying to make unpopular culture popular. If you watch television you're getting the same message on channels A-Z. I'm looking for something between the dials." **Twist** is not only between the dials. It is between the grooves of anyone who loves dancing or genuinely funky rock'n'roll music. **T 1**

---

MARC GLASSMAN is a Toronto writer, broadcaster, film programmer for the NFB's John Spotten Cinema, and proprietor of Pages.

