

Jitterbug Memories

Ever have the jitters?

Tom Dalzell, recognized as a leading expert on American slang, in his *Flappers 2 Rappers: American Youth Slang* (1996) placed the expression during the 1920s flapper era. "After the stock market crash of 1929, 'jitters' replaced 'heebie-jeebies' as the slang expression of choice to convey extreme anxiety. Where 'jitters' came from is anyone's guess, but the supposition that it resulted from a spoonerism of gin and bitters (thus bin and gitters) and was thus applied to a state of alcoholism is as good a theory as any since 'jittersauce' was an established euphemism for alcohol during the Prohibition."



Jitterbuggers in 1938

Another dictionary also dated "jitters" to the 1920s, but believed it to be a variant of *chitter*, meaning to shiver (Middle English *chiteren*), a gradational variant of chatter.

I found a much earlier use of the word in the *Rockford Republic*, Rockford, Illinois, dated November 15, 1906. In a piece entitled THE STORY OF A HERO, Martin Coe's Story of Cuban Heroism, an excerpt contained these words:

"for by this time his knees had the jitters."

As you can see, "jitters" meant some form of shakiness or nervous agitation, and before long, "jitterbug" became a slang term that described alcoholics suffering from these jitters. The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) found "jitterbug" to be a combination of the words "jitter" and "bug" and its first recorded use to be in the 1934 Cab Calloway song "Jitter Bug," a segment of which appears below:

"Don't you worry, they just mug,
They're poor little jitter bugs!

Now, here's old Father, a wicked old man,
Drinks more sauce than the other bugs can,
He drinks jitter sauce every morn,
That's why jitter sauce was born."



Cab Calloway and his 1934 recording, "Jitter Bug"

Then, in 1935, Paramount released a short film starring Cab Calloway and his orchestra entitled "Jitterbug Party," which further popularized the use of the word "jitterbug" and created a strong connection between music, dancing Calloway and the jitterbug.

Besides the alcoholic jitters connection, there is the theory that the word "jitterbug" may have come from observing the way dancers moved on the dance floor, hopping, bouncing and exaggerating their movements, which made them look like bugs! But *bug* could also be defined as a person obsessed with an idea or set upon an action.

By 1939 Cab Calloway *Hepster's Dictionary* defined "jitter bug" as "a swing fan; formerly a person addicted to 'jitter sauce' (liquor)." The Jitterbug dance evolved as a swing dance variation of the Lindy Hop of the 1920s, but described as not quite so acrobatic.



Pioneering musician and "King of the Jukebox," Louis Jordan And His Tympany Five recorded "Doug the Jitterbug" in 1939, part of the lyrics of which appear below:

"Just a crazy mug,
Drinks liquor by the jug,

He's alive with lots of jive,
Doug the Jitterbug!

They threw him out of school
'Cause all he learned was Tiger Rag,
He never knew the golden rule,
But boy, how he can shag!

Doug the Jitterbug,
Cuts a wicked rug,
It ain't no shame, he's not to blame,
He's Doug the Jitterbug!"



Before long, all the young people were dancing the jitterbug. Well, not every young person. Here are some comments on this new dance craze printed in an article in the *New Orleans Item*, dated December 1, 1938:

Donald Mosely, Tulane freshman: "Naw. I Don't jitterbug. It looks alright, I guess, if you like to neck in public, but maybe I just ain't got no rhythm."

Nor English 101!

Alice Westfeldt, debutante: "It's swell to watch and fun if you can do it - but not for me thank you."

**Jitters Put
On Protest
By Hop Bugs**

**On The Other Hand,
Some Think Dance
Is Just Plain Lousy**

Headline in the New Orleans Item, December 1, 1938

Marjorie Leverich, another 1938 debutante: "It's fascinating, but I don't dance it and don't believe I ever will."

Apparently, some of the young dancers saw the jitterbug as an opportunity to become "familiar" and "neck".

Martha Cooke, Wright High School junior, had this to say: "Familiarity breeds contempt, and certainly jitterbugging breeds familiarity."

Eileen Noto, Sacred Heart graduate, who danced at the Blue Room as part of the "jitterbug troupe": "Girls, who'd be wallflowers anyway, are causing most of the criticism. I go to a dance to dance, and love to jitterbug. I don't go to sit them out and neck."

Archangel Fortunato, plumbing graduate of Delgado and jitterbug aficionado, did not see that much closeness: "I work as a plumber eight hours a day at Charity hospital and dance the jitterbug at night. It hasn't hurt me any. The way we dance in jitterbug dances we're farther away from the girls than dancers waltzing even."

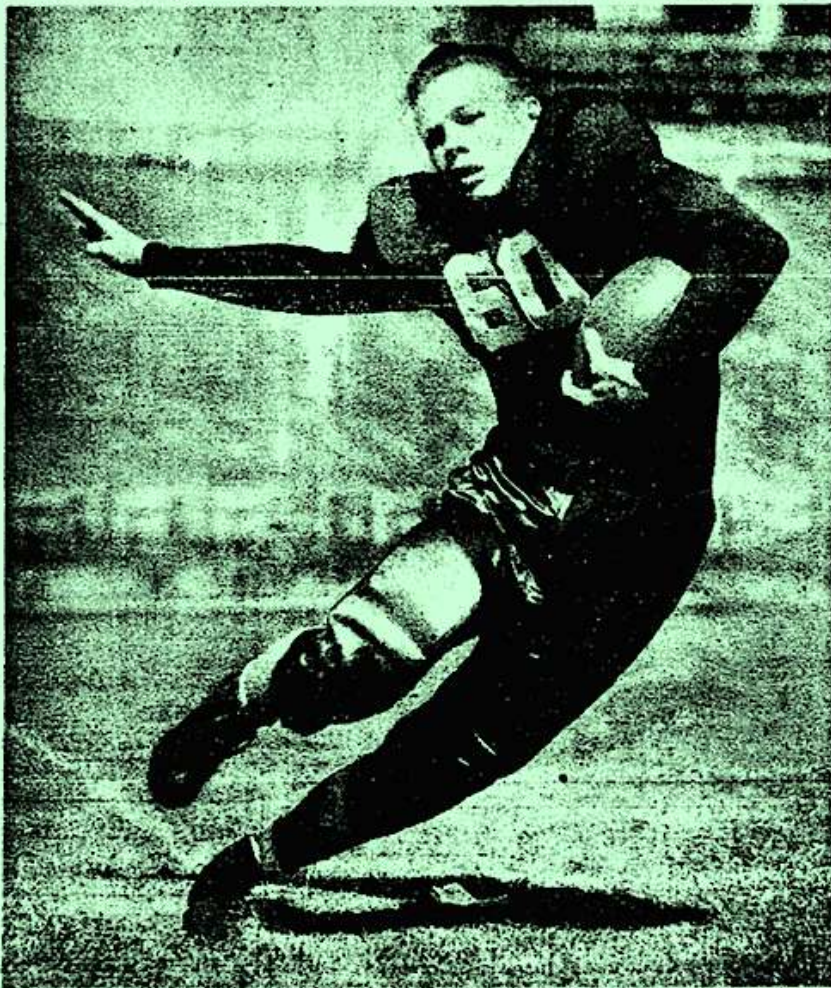
Bernard "Butch" Szold, Little Theatre Director, commented tongue in cheek: "A jitterbug reminds me of a flea with St. Vitus dance on a shivering dog."



The *Item* article also reported that shortly after Harry Batt (then operator of the Spanish Fort amusement park) announced his jitterbug contest, popular New Orleans dance instructor Peter Villeré called some of his pupils to tell them about it. The students' reply, he said, was that they had "just quit dancing that way because it's too tiresome." He did say, however, that two years earlier he had toured the local high schools "and found the undergrads danced at that time much as jitterbugs do today. Favorite steps were 'The Sacred Heart Hop,' 'The Rat' and the 'Sorority Stomp.'"

Also a big hit in 1938 was a young Tulane football player named Bob "Jitterbug" Kellogg. In 1938, he had the "most potent feet in Tulane football history," averaging seven yards every time he carried the ball. Born in Wynne, Arkansas, "Jitterbug" went on to be the star of Tulane's 1940 Sugar Bowl team and later coached at four colleges (including Tulane) and for three Canadian Football League teams. He was also the second Tulane player to return a kickoff for 100 yards.

The 'Jitterbug' Establishes Tulane Record



Bob (Jitterbug) Kellogg, whose ball carrying average in 1938 was the best in Tulane history.

The following year, 1939, a number called "The Jitterbug" was written for the film *The Wizard of Oz*, but was cut from the movie.

The jitterbug was extremely popular during World War II and the 1940s. The huge number of GIs sent overseas facilitated the spread of the jitterbug across two oceans. Not everyone was enthusiastic. In late 1945, following the departure of American troops after D-Day, British couples were warned not to continue such "rude American dancing."

Another "Jitterbug" emerged in New Orleans in the late 1940s, a kid from the streets of the Ninth Ward, Raymond "Jitterbug" Smith was a popular but extremely unsuccessful boxer.

"Aw, yeah," said legendary Fair Grounds handicapper and fight enthusiast Allen "Black Cat" LaCombe, who promoted many of Smith's fight cards, "The fans loved him ... The only thing wrong with Jit was his record. That '0' in the front didn't look too good, you know."

Dubbed "The World's Worst Fighter," Jit accepted it as his mantle.

By the mid 1950s, teens were dancing to a brand new sound, "Rock and Roll," and their dance of choice was the jitterbug. It wasn't until the emergence of "The Twist," "The Frug" and other teen dance fads in the early 1960s that things started to change, but all along the popularity of the jitterbug never totally went away. The jitterbug remained the most popular dance among young people (and older people, as well), for more than three decades, an incredible span of time.

For this author, learning the jitterbug came at the age of twelve. Two thirteen year-old young ladies convinced me I should dance with them. I turned down the initial inducement (bribe) of one comic book. It took two comic books to get me on the dance floor, and for that I shall be eternally grateful. That afternoon, I learned to dance that frenetic leftover of the swing era ballroom days, and the jitterbug has since afforded me many years of enjoyment.

My next instruction took place in 1963 at the Romano Dance Studio on Canal Boulevard. Hazel Romano may have been our instructor. I was 14 years old and about six of us, boys and girls, showed up one Friday evening. We paid \$1 each for an hour of dance lessons, which included the jitterbug, cha cha, Watusi and fox trot. It was a deal!

The Romano Dancers, many will recall appeared on the John Pela Show on WWL TV. The Pela Show was the local version of Dick Clark's "American Bandstand," a great place to watch teens dancing the jitterbug. Before Pela, Crescent City teens watched "Saturday Hop," which began around 1958 and was originally hosted by the husband-and-wife team of Jack and Ann Elliott, who appeared on the show as Jack the Cat and Jackie the Kitten.

Many of my contemporaries learned the jitterbug at Miggy's dance studio Uptown or Ice Breakers at the teen club Valencia on Valence Street. Three decades later, my daughter learned when she attended the Eight O'Clocks dance at Valencia. "Toe heel, toe heel, rock back," she remembered as if it were yesterday. That rocking back while still holding on to one's partner, that push and pull, may be a relic of an

early African American dance known as the Texas Tommy, dating back to 1910. It had a step known as the breakaway, where the dance partners pulled apart from each other and danced independently. The breakaway, despite its name, kept dancers together from the 1930s until the 1960s, when "The Twist" and its successors kept the dancers facing one another but apart completely.



Valencia, 1900 Valence, where many teens danced the jitterbug

And, I must admit, Modern Dance was one of my Sports electives at Tulane. Newcomb and Tulane students partnered up for jitterbug and other dance lessons. Dance contests at Bruno's followed.

Published in 1984, Tom Robbins' fourth novel "Jitterbug Perfume" was listed on the *New York Times* Best Seller list in 1985. Much of the story takes place in New Orleans, which Robbins masterfully compares to an oyster, "whose houses were similarly and resolutely shuttered against an outside world that could never be trusted to show proper sensitivity toward the oozing delicacies within."

There Madame Devalier, a once successful perfumer, is working to recreate an immortal fragrance. The book is now a cult favorite.

Also in 1984, "Wake Me Up Before You Go-Go" was a huge hit for the English musical duo known as Wham!, formed by members George Michael and Andrew Ridgeley three years before.

The song's lyrics begin with "Jitterbug" repeated four times in a deep voice before the first lines of the song commence:

"You put the boom boom into my heart
You send my soul sky high when your lovin' starts
Jitterbug into my brain
Goes a bang-bang-bang 'til my feet do the same"

About the song, George Michael explained in 1984, "I just wanted to make a really energetic pop record that had all the best elements of Fifties and Sixties records."

A few words must be mentioned about "Shagging," not the Austin Powers variety, but a type of swing dance which is the official state dance of both North and South Carolina. The "Carolina Shag", a cousin to the jitterbug, is thought to have originated in the 1940s along the strands between Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, and Wilmington, North Carolina. Danced to "Beach Music", which includes various jump blues, rock, R&B and pop music of the 1940s through the 1960s and beyond, the "Shag" has less "push and pull" than the jitterbug and emphasizes more action from the waist down, such as footwork. Many classic New Orleans songs are part of the "Beach Music" cannon, such as songs by Ernie K-Doe, Willie Tee and "It Will Stand" by The Showmen.

As for all the many tunes that are ideal for dancing the jitterbug, yours truly, this author, has done his part through the years by spinning countless dance classics on 45 RPM for various hops, weddings and debutante parties.

at Valencia. It was an evening filled with nostalgia...memories of good times had as teen-agers at this Uptown club, plus tons and tons of records played all through the evening by Nostalgic Ned, who really has some oldies to spin!...

The above was from a party in 1980, featured in the *Times Picayune/States Item*.

NED HÉMARD

New Orleans Nostalgia
"Jitterbug Memories"
Ned Hémard
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