

BACK IN TIME

by Tony Beckwith
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THE WALTZ

My father loved to waltz. He could foxtrot when the need arose, and samba with the best of them. But he really loved to waltz.

When I was a teenager, waltzing was the last thing on my mind. Like most of my contemporaries, I attended ballroom dancing classes and learned to acquit myself, more or less satisfactorily, at formal events. But in my heart I longed to rock & roll and had little patience with dances that required me to glide sedately around the floor, mentally counting: *one-two-three, one-two-three, one-two-three*.

My father, in turn, had little patience with “my” music—“A dreadful racket,” he called it, “with no graceful rhythms, no charm, no style.” He was a broadminded man, but traditional in certain ways, especially when it came to music. “The waltz has been around for nearly two centuries!” he explained reverently. “Exactly!” I thought. “Time to bury the dreary old thing and move on.”

One of his favourite composers was, of course, Johann Strauss, Jr., the “Waltz King.” Born in 1825, in Vienna, Strauss wanted to be a musician like his father, but met the same paternal opposition that many have encountered ever since. “One musician in the family is enough,” said Johann, Sr. His mother, however, encouraged him, bought him his first violin, and taught him how to play it. Young Johann performed his first concert when he was 19, and that night the audience knew they were in the presence of a major new talent. He went on to become the Royal Director of Music for Court Balls in Emperor Franz Joseph's court and composed many of the most popular waltzes ever played, including the most famous of all: *The Blue Danube* (*An der schönen blauen Donau*).



The waltz took its name from an old German word—*walzen*—which means to roll, or to turn. It became fashionable in Vienna in the 1780s, which must have been an extraordinary time to be there, with Haydn in his prime and Beethoven in his teens. As with other forms of cultural expression that originated in rural communities or on the wrong side of the tracks, like the blues or the tango, the roots of the waltz can be traced back a few hundred years to country dances. The *Walzer*, a dance for couples, was popular amongst peasants in Bavaria, Tyrol, and Styria in the mid-1700s, and it soon caught on in the city. While the prim and proper upper classes kept on dancing the minuet, bored noblemen were slipping away to enjoy the lively dances organized in the servants' quarters. A description of life in Vienna a few years later includes this observation: “The people were dancing mad... Viennese ladies are particularly celebrated for their grace and movements of waltzing, of which they never tire.” Though originally dismissed as vulgar and sinful by the bourgeoisie

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because of the way partners held each other closely as they spun around the floor, the waltz soon overcame moral and religious objections and became a favourite everywhere in Europe. But it was still considered scandalous in some quarters. The Oxford English Dictionary defined it as “riotous and indecent” as recently as 1825.

In July 1816, at a ball given in London by the Prince Regent, the glitterati waltzed the night away. A scathing editorial in *The Times* later reported: “We remarked with pain that the indecent foreign dance called the Waltz was introduced (we believe for the first time) at the English court on Friday last. It is quite sufficient to cast one's eyes on the voluptuous intertwining of the limbs and close compressure on the bodies in their dance, to see that it is indeed far removed from the modest reserve which has hitherto been considered distinctive of English females. So long as this obscene display was confined to prostitutes and adulteresses, we did not think it deserving of notice; but now that it is attempted to be forced on the respectable classes of society by the civil examples of their superiors, we feel it a duty to warn every parent against exposing his daughter to so fatal a contagion.”

We!!! That sounds rather like press reports of rock & roll in the late 1950s. Like the backlash to the Charleston in the 1920s. Maybe the waltz wasn't so dreary after all.

My mother was barely two years younger than my father, but her taste in music was solidly rooted in her own century. She came of age listening to Glen Miller, Harry Roy, and Tommy Dorsey, and loved boogie woogie, jitterbug, and the Big Band sound of the forties. She always knew what songs were on the hit parade and could usually sing along when one of them was played on the radio. Tall and blonde, with long legs and a lovely figure, she was a natural dancer, and was thrilled when the Bill Haley movie *Rock Around the Clock* came to town.

But how, I used to wonder, did my mother and father ever get together, given their distinctly different tastes in music? The answer lay, to some extent, in the waltz. Once I was a little older, I began to appreciate what my father—and my mother—enjoyed about the music of Johann Strauss. A waltz has wonderful rhythm, and a melody you can hum along to if you are so inclined. There is a structure to the music that you can work within, but it needn't limit you if you are feeling creative and adventurous. You can swirl around the room as if you were on a skating rink, which can be just as giddy-making as a glass of ice cold champagne. And, best of all, you can hold your partner close—“with limbs voluptuously intertwined!”—and glide around the floor in a world of your own, with a *one-two-three, one-two-three, one-two-three*.

