

The Waltz

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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.

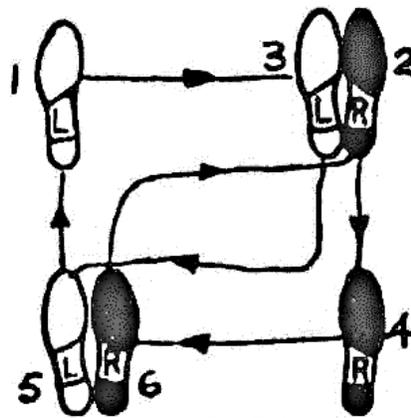
When I was a teenager, waltzing was one of the last things on my mind. Like most of my contemporaries, I attended ballroom dancing classes and learned to acquit myself, more or less satisfactorily, at formal events. But in my heart I longed to rock & roll, and had little patience with dances that required 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 labeled it, and said it lacked graceful rhythms, and had 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 favorite 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, on the other hand, 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 that 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, the most famous of which was the *Blue Danube*.

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 many other forms of cultural expression, like the blues or the tango, the roots of the waltz were to be found in peasant dances, in this case from rural Austria and Bavaria. Originally seen as vulgar and sinful by the bourgeoisie, due to the way partners held each other closely as they spun around the floor, the waltz soon overcame moral and religious objections and became a favorite everywhere in Europe. But it was still considered scandalous in some quarters.



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.”

Well! That sounds rather like press coverage of rock & roll in the late nineteen fifties. It is also reminiscent of the reaction to the Charleston in the nineteen twenties. 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. Tall and blonde, with long legs and a lovely figure, she was a natural dancer. She and her sister were thrilled when Bill Haley’s movie, *Rock Around the Clock* came to town. They took me to see it when I was about twelve years old, and I vividly remember the excitement of what to me was still an amazing new sound. My regret is that I was too young at the time to fully appreciate the stunning escort I had at my first rock & roll event.

But how, I used to wonder, did my mother and father ever get together, given their distinctly different tastes in music? The answer lay 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 make you feel just as giddy as a glass of ice cold champagne. And, best of all, you can hold your partner close—scandalously close!—and glide around the floor in a world of your own, with a *one-two-three, one-two-three, one-two-three.* ★