

Interview with Kay Wheeler

Interviewer: Leah Branstetter

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LB: I would be interested in anything else you can tell me about how the "bop" came about!

KW: The "bop" was developed from black rhythm & blues—this is the origin. The white teens of the mid-fifties were going to the black record stores and buying music by Hank Ballard & the Drifters ("Sexy Ways," etc...), the Clovers ("Little Mama") on 78 rpm records and dancing secretly at home or parties. This teen underground operation of THE BLACK R&B smuggled-in music was going on before Elvis really hit the scene. Of course when he came, he was the immediate "Pied Piper" of Rock & Roll and the white teenagers of the time. But the already present groundswell of Black R&B had prepared the way for Elvis.

Choreography: The main thing about the bop and the first thing that you would say to anybody wanting to learn was to "let go and feel the music and get the beat." Unlike the counting of steps in a robot fashion that we see so much of today—it was more music interpretation with the body as opposed to dance steps. It was a smooth, swaying body movement dance as opposed to stiff, marching style dancing. The most important aspect was to "get the music," "get the beat" and "let yourself go." That made dancing freestyle, fun, and uninhibited. This dance was quite a departure from the "choreographed lifestyle" that parents had for their teens in the 50s. It was pure rebellion.

I really liked the R&B black music and sometimes would just "let myself go" in the dance in the privacy of my own room; and lo, the rocknbop was born! I started dancing at parties and immediately the other dancers would clear away and everyone would watch (this happened many times prior to my dancing in the movies.) I had pretty well developed my own style and dance routine by then. So it was a "piece of cake" to do the dance in the movie. However, the movie never got my best performance, because the song they selected for me to dance to was not a black R&B song, and I had to try to make it fit the rockabilly song of Johnny Carroll. So the "real deal" was never done on the screen.

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LB: I also wanted to ask you how people responded to your performances. Since Elvis's "gyrations" caused such a stir with critics, I am wondering if it was controversial for women and girls to dance in a similar way. What are your thoughts on that?

KW: Indeed, the parents did not like any of it. But remember these were the original “Rebels Without a Cause,” the first baby “Rock Culture,” and at the end of the day, we did not care what anybody thought of us. The adults were “squares”; the teachers were “squares”—so incredibly uncool that how could they matter. We knew more than any of them! Actually as I look at the film today, obviously I was completely “fearless” in regard to my dancing—some say it is still pretty risqué even today. Maybe I was the first Lady Gaga? ■