

Just What Is "Shag" Music?

By David Sessoms



There are a lot of terms that are used loosely out there to describe the music (or subsets of it) that we (Shaggers) dance to and occasionally sip a few beers to. These include "Shag Music," "Beach Music," "Smoothies," "Boogie Woogie," "Bubblegum," and even "Beach Music," which, of course, all true shaggers loathe! Since none of these terms mean the same thing to any two Shaggers, you can imagine how difficult it is for the DJ who gets a request for a "Good Shag Song," where the requester can't give a single title or artist that he can identify as the type he personally associates with "Good Shag Songs.

In fact, there is such a variety of types of music out there that is enjoyed by different people or regions, although they are all legitimate Shaggers, that I am firmly convinced that if a DJ were to compile a list of 100 proven and well known Shag songs, and then ask ten well-versed Shaggers to select their ten favorite songs, that they would generally be in agreement on about 20% of their selections. And there is nothing wrong with that! That is one of the great things about Shag music, there is something out there for everybody.

So just what is this thing we call "Shag Music?" Personally, after several years of enjoying it after the military transferred me back to in 1986, I still can't quite pin it down. Part of the reason is that the music has expanded it's R&B roots to include all types of music, as long as that special beat is there.

As a DJ, this is one of the strengths, and also one of the weaknesses of trying to play "Shag Music" to the various types of people who love it. I call it a strength because no matter what your previous personal tastes in music were before you became a follower of this special dance and music, there is something there for you. R&B, Country, Big Band, and Pop (and we can even say Latin with Hansel "Love Potion #9" and Julio Iglesias' "Moonlight Lady" and "Begin The Beguine") have been played regularly at popular Shag clubs.

It is also a weakness because there are a few out there who firmly believe that "Shag Music" is one and only one style of music, THEIR kind. Now, I have no problem with anyone who enjoys this music. Where I have a small disagreement is with anyone who tries to restrict the sincere enjoyment of this dance by others by acting as a censor on the

music by trying to pressure the DJ in a given club to play only a particular type of "Shag Music." Being forced to listen to something you really don't like does not ensure that you will learn to like it. More than likely, it merely means that you will find another diversion and location where you will devote your spare time and dollars.

I've been told (I wasn't around back in the early days of the Shag, although I sincerely regret missing it) by some that "Shag Music" should be only old hard core "R&B" as it was "in the beginning." I've also been told by others that what the dance really began with was more of the smooth Big Band sound. Now, I'm not smart enough to determine whose memory has failed them, who has selective memory retention or who is simply misinformed, but it does seem to me that what is important is keeping the numbers who enjoy it growing and making sure that it is not going to die with our generation.

So, as far as I am concerned (for what that's worth), I would like to suggest that we stop arguing among ourselves about what is a proper "Shag" song. I would propose a simple definition. That is, that a "Shag Song" is any one that makes people want to get on the dance floor and start shagging and enjoying themselves while doing so. There may be some very good Shag songs that I personally don't like, but who am I to say that it shouldn't be played if there are people out there that would like to dance to it. Besides, I can't dance to every song, so why not let those others have their time on the floor.

Having said this, I never doubt for a moment that "Shag Music" will always have a heavy R&B base, and certain standards will always be heard. But at the same time, let's take advantage of those country, pop, or even Latin songs that have our type of beat.

I've been to parties where through "censorship" imposed by either the DJ (certainly not one of our association members!) or one of the hosts, only one style of Shag music was played. The majority of the attendees/guests, or at least those who were heard to express an opinion, did not particularly enjoy the experience.

My final bit of advice is to give the DJ a request that you would like to hear. Most of us will do our best to work it in as quickly as possible. If you don't know the names of any of your favorite songs, you only know them when you hear them, try to help the DJ out in the future. Since most of us aren't clairvoyant (with the possible exception of Mike Lewis who can do anything), when you hear a song that you really like, ask the DJ playing it what it is. He would probably even be willing to write the title and artist down for you. Then the next time you want to make a request, but once again can't remember any songs, pull this out of your wallet or purse and march up to the DJ booth and make your request.

(NOTE: This article was written by David Sessoms while he was Secretary of the Association of Beach & Shag Club DJ's, and has been published in numerous newsletters and magazines.)