

April 24, 1988---

The cool pigeon eyes at the corner of Ashland and West Madison question your presence in a neighborhood where a man can still wear a lavender leisure suit with white saddle shoes and not disrupt traffic.

You're just white and tight and trying to get loose.

There is no one better in the city to talk about soul dancing than the terminally diminutive Alvin "Mr. Twine" Cash, who has resurfaced with a new record and a new record company. Cash, who scored a national hit with the 1963 dance tune "Twine Time," is president of promotion for Triple T Records, located above Vee's Bar B-Q Rib, Tips, Links, Hamburgers, Hot Dogs and Soul Food at Ashland and Madison.

Strange names are nothing new for Cash, who sang and danced his way through obscure grits 'n' soul tunes such as "You Shot Me Through the Grease," "Burn Just a Hair" and "Funky Washing Machine."

He has also created some beautiful hipster names for his backup groups such as Alvin Cash and the Registers, and Alvin Cash and the Step Brothers. And he appeared in movies such as "Pety Wheatstraw" and "Black Jack," although his best-known role was as a member of the Five Satins in "The Buddy Holly Story."

In a business where timing is essential, Cash has chosen a good time to start singing and dancing again. The Madison line dance has made a modest comeback because of its exposure in the John Waters film "Hairspray," so "Twine Time '88" can't be far behind.

Although Cash was wearing yesterday with a lime-green leisure suit (that simply paled the garb of the neighborhood pedestrian), a brown Cossack hat and a glittering gold Christmas tree brooch pinned in the hat, he understood that the genuine innocence of soul dancing is gone forever.

"When me and my three little brothers came to Chicago from St. Louis in 1961, we danced for tips," Cash said in a colorful one-on-one.

"We went to any social club - white or black, it didn't make a difference. If there was a hustle for Alvin Cash, he was there. One time we stopped at this big old hillbilly club and this cat said, 'What do you boys do,' and I said, 'We are dancers.' And I went out there and said, 'Ladies and gentlemen. We're here from St. Louis and we're not on the payroll. So if you have to throw pennies, please wrap them up in dollars so they won't hurt my little brother's head. You know we picked up \$190 out of that club? Then we went to another club and then to another club.

"My brothers were coming up on the bus from St. Louis," he continued. "They'd get

out of school Friday, catch the bus at 4 and I'd pick them up at the bus station around 11:30. That's when our night would start. We'd hit the Trianon ballroom, and while we were there, I'd find out about all the Friday, Saturday and Sunday shows at the social clubs."

I asked how Alvin Cash and the Step Brothers got around.

Cash threw out a wide, chrome-polished grin and said, "A raggedy Nash! I'd drive and let the back seat down and they'd go to sleep. Our last show ended at 11:30 Sunday in Chicago Heights, and we had to catch the midnight bus at the Greyhound station. I think the bus driver learned to wait on us. He'd wait 10 minutes, sometimes 15, but he'd give us a chance to get there. Boy, I'd be hikin' it from Chicago Heights. That little Nash be rollin'. My brothers had to be back in school on Monday morning. Sometimes they'd be tired when I dropped them off, but they always had money when they went back to St. Louis. When they got home, they'd give my mother money."

If Alvin Cash and the Step Brothers walked into a nice Chicago music room attempting to dance for tips today, one of three things would happen: 1) They would be asked to leave, 2) they would be asked to pay a cover for the privilege of dancing for tips, or 3) they would be hassled by overserved geeks.

"If I were a kid now, I don't think I would enjoy it," he conceded. "Things are more sophisticated. Back then, if you were good, you were just like an entertainer. You know Ironing Board Sam (a New Orleans blues singer, his gimmick is to play keyboards on an ironing board). People bring all kinds of money to him. Have you ever seen the `The Sand Dance'? Here's a dance where cats carried around a box with sand in it. You'd get in it and dance back and forth. . ."

And Mr. Twine stood up and began sashaying back and forth while making the sound of brushes beating on drums.

"You could never do that today," he said. "Back then, you weren't scared to go anywhere. Like now, I've got a big diamond ring I bought at a New York City diamond center, but I can't wear it anywhere."

Cash and his brothers attended Sumner High School in St. Louis with the likes of Annie Mae Bullocks (who went on to become Tina Turner), Luther Ingram and Billy Davis of the Fifth Dimension.

"There was so much talent at that school," he said. "I used to sit behind Tina and kick my knee in her butt all the time. She'd turn around and say, `Alvin Cash, would you cut that out!' But she was a hell of a singer. Tina had two sisters who were also great singers. In fact, they all worked at a chicken place selling chicken wings and things, and they'd sing behind the counter. Ike (Turner) came in to buy some chicken, and that's when he first heard Tina sing."

Cash left St. Louis for Chicago in search of a more challenging dance floor. "We had reached our peak," he said. "We played East St. Louis with Ike and Tina and Chuck Berry. We played all over St. Louis. It was time to move on."

When Cash came to Chicago, he picked up on the Twine, a dance that started at Dunbar High School, based on the Five Du-Tones' "Woodbine Twine." WVON disc jockey Herb "The Kool Gent" Kent kept playing the "Woodbine Twine," and Alvin Cash's "Twine Time" was a natural followup.

Still dancing into the future, Cash's new extended-play record is a easy-shuffle tune called "I'm Betting," gambling on the basic and derivative dance rhythms found in Cash's "Twine Time," "Philly Freeze" and "The Bump" ("You know you're driving me crazy, come on and do the bump, bumpidi bumpidi bump. . . .")

"I got the idea of 'I'm Betting' from my mother," he explained. "She went to the racetrack and asked me to give her a number. And I said 5-3-9 (Sept. 15, 1939, his birthday). When she got back from the racetrack, she gave me \$50. I said, 'What's this for?' She won on my number. I had to write a tune about this because people bet every day, whether it is bingo, betting on the lottery, shooting dice or playing in a poolroom."

Without much prodding, you can get Cash to demonstrate the steps of earlier '60s dances such as the Barracuda, the Gorilla, the Monkey Time (from the Major Lance hit), the Watusi (spun off from the Vibrations song), the Slop, the Roach and the Funky Washing Machine.

"The Funky Washing Machine was a dance where you pretended you had a rub board," Cash said. "You'd just loosen your shoulders and act as if you were scrubbing. I still ask the kids about the latest dance. Like now, they're doing the Cabbage Patch. And that will be on my new album with 'Twine Time '88.' "

Alvin Cash kept on talking . . . and dancing.