

History of the Prom

(difference between a formal and a prom)

There's lots of speculation and myth about where the phenomenon started and what it's really supposed to be.

Both Australian and American culture and society originated in Britain. It goes to follow that many of the traditions and social experiences we retain today were handed down from there.

In Victorian and Edwardian culture, it was customary for families of higher society to send their 16 year old daughters to finishing school. This is where they would learn to walk, talk, dance and behave like a lady. Upon completion, they would be presented to the wider community as a group in a special function known as the "Debut". A debutante is a girl making her "Debut" or otherwise being presented to society as a new lady for the first time.



The purpose of the debut (or Deb Ball as it's known today) was to present eligible girls to young and wealthy bachelors for the purpose of matchmaking for society marriages.

The debutante girls would wear white gowns, which looked almost like bridal gowns, and be escorted by formally dressed boys, all in the same tuxedos. These were usually boys considered too young to marry but able to show off the girls well enough. They would form a huge circle and the debutantes, with escorts, would promenade around the circle, almost as if they were models on a catwalk. With any luck, a debutante would catch the eye of a wealthy bachelor watching from the audience and the courtship may begin thereafter.

The slow leisurely walk around the circle of the debutante ball was the highlight of the night and became known as the "Prom".

Many people think that the word "Prom" is an American cultural invention. That's actually a myth. The word Prom is short for "Promenade", which means to casually walk, stroll or stride. It's as British as Cricket!

As with many things considered "fashionable" at the time, society was fascinated with all things French. The French had a similar tradition as the debut but they incorporated the "Cotillion", which was a patterned dance step designed for couples in multiples of 4. Many people decided that the best way to catch more attention for their debutante daughters was to have them learn and perform these dance steps at their debut.

Once dancing in couples became a mainstay of the Debut, this became the "Debutante Ball" or Deb Ball for short and dancing became a highlight too.

When it became apparent that dance practice for the Debut was essential, and also quite fun, schools began to run mock balls to prepare couples for the debut. Although it was essentially just dance practice, it was really a dress-rehearsal for the debut so everyone would have to dress up in their best formal attire and this is where the term "School Formal" was introduced.

As western society came to accept women as equals and finding a good husband was no longer the priority for families of 16 year old girls, more and more girls stayed on to graduate high school and develop their education. This meant that finishing high school was a celebration that could be shared equally among all teenagers. The most popular way to celebrate was with a graduation party, and to dress up and dance in couples was the natural thing to do since they'd been practicing that at school formals for years.

The Debut, The Cotillion, The School Formal and the Graduation Party eventually became merged into one event by mainstream society. That's what we recognise today as the Formal or Prom.

Australian and American cultures developed in only slightly different directions. Although the event remains the same, Americans call it Prom and Australians have most often called it Formal.

When you understand the history, it makes sense that "Prom" is actually the more correct name for the event as a "Formal" is just a rehearsal for it.