A Contemporary View on the History of Chicago House Music

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Introduction:

I chose to do my capstone project on the history of house music. Prior to beginning research, House Music was not a genre that I would normally listen to. My father was the one who inspired me to undertake this specific project as he was an early fan of house music in Chicago in the 80's and I've always trusted his musical taste. When I asked him why he found house music so appealing he said, "The music was different from what I had been exposed to. Having two older brothers, most of the music we listened to was Rock N' Roll...When House Music came along, it was different and more dance-oriented which appealed to me at the time. Several of my close friends had improvised DJ setups in their basements which is where I was first introduced to the genre" (Rosenberg). He was commercially introduced to House Music during the early 80s through a radio station called WBMX (102.7 FM). He said, "They played House Music every Saturday night from 10:00 PM to 3:00 AM. There were five DJs called the Hot Mix 5 and each of them played an hour" (Rosenberg).

According to my dad, House Music was played at any and all social gatherings, whether it be driving around with friends or at a house party. Dance clubs started popping up all over the city advertising House Music to fans who wanted to dance the night away. While my dad frequented many local dance clubs such as the Smartbar, Medusa's, and the Muzic Box, he was a regular at the Playground. In an interview he said, "I was one of the original members of a place called the Playground which is where DJs by the name of Farley "Funkin" Keith (later known as Farley "Jackmaster" Funk) and Jesse Saunders were the house DJs. Farley was also an original member of the Hot Mix 5 and went on to become a legend in the House Music scene."

While my dad's love for House Music was my original inspiration for undertaking this project, I also know that his view on the genre is vastly different from the view of those who

created it. House Music was not made for my straight, white, cis-gender father. Rather, it was made for and by the gay Black community in Chicago. The main goal of my project is to shed light on the often untold history of Chicago House Music.

Historical Background:

House Music is a genre of electronic music characterized by it's moderately fast tempo, 4/4 beat, and use of repetition. Today, House Music is often synonymous with White European Djs and nightclubs. The rise in popularity of large raves, often outdoors, with a predominantly white audience, designer drugs and over-the-top outfits has become the norm surrounding house music and its culture. There are even entire islands almost solely dedicated to these aspects of rave culture such as Ibiza in Spain. However, what many do not realize is that House Music was not created in this instagram-esque image of wealth and glamor, rather it was created in response to the homophobia and racism that threatened gay Black men on the Southside of Chicago. The origins of House Music are often overlooked and forgotten, thus, with this essay, I would like to shed light on the historical background: how House Music was created and what led to its "whitewashing".

Chicago House Music emerged following the decline of disco, which, for many, was considered "too gay." A clear representation of this anti-gay sentiment was seen on July 12, 1979 when over 70,000 people gathered at Comiskey Park in Chicago, home of the White Sox, for a doubleheader against the Detroit Tigers. However, it was not the game that attracted so many fans. The evening was billed as Disco Demolition Night and was organized by Steve Dahl, a radio disc jockey and Mike Veek, the promotions manager for the White Sox. The goal of the night was to destroy thousands of Disco records in the name of Rock N' Roll. Over 50,000 disco

records brought by the audience were brought onto the field between the two games by Steve Dahl, dressed in military fatigues and an army helmet, drove onto the field in a military style jeep. He then proceeded to blow up the crates of records with fireworks, sending fragments everywhere. While often considered the most famous anti-disco spectacle, "The Disco Demolition was not an isolated incident or an aberration; it was the climax of an anti-disco backlash that spread across the United States in 1979" (Frank, 278). Following the disco demolition, Chicago became the epicenter of the anti-disco movement, there were even anti-disco clubs that attracted thousands of members on a regular basis. However, this backlash was not directed simply at a musical genre but at the identities often linked to disco culture. "The attack on disco was informed by the general perception that disco was gay and elitist, and the discourse surrounding disco was highly sexualized and framed by 'homo/heterosexual'" (Frank, 278-9). Associating negative qualities with homosexuality had two effects, "It [helped] to provide a clear-cut threshold between permissible and impermissible behavior; and secondly, it [helped] to segregate those labeled as deviant, and thus contain and limit their behavior patterns" (Frank, 279). The popular anti-disco sentiment saw the assignment of homosexual definitions to disco and heterosexual definitions to rock. Analysis of the Disco Demolition reveals how, "acute antigay prejudice was used to stigmatize and in turn instigated the genre's rapid decline even as discophobia reflected and furthered anti gay prejudice" (Frank, 279).

The implications of the Disco Demolition and the backlash against disco greatly exceeded the destruction of many thousands of disco records. The attack on disco was the attack on the gay men whose identities were associated with disco. In Chicago, the constant fear, harassment or worse, physical attacks and murder of gay men of color, lead to the emergence of underground clubs which served as a safe space for primarily black and brown gay men to

express themselves freely. Most of these clubs developed in Chicago's Southside neighborhoods. The southside emerged following the great migration at the beginning of the twentieth century when , "more than seven million [Black] Americans left [their] homes in the South to resettle in northern and western states....[and] became increasingly part of the big cities of all regions and in those urban settings steadily gained political and cultural influence." (Gregory). However, being restricted from living elsewhere, the black population was forced to move into underdeveloped and underprivileged neighborhoods, a practice called redlining. Due to the city's segregation laws and decades of neglect and institutionalized racism these primarily poor, black, and brown neighborhoods are still often seen as synonymous with drugs, gangs, guns and violence.

Chicago's black community has, "translated these antagonisms into ritualized displays of local opposition and allegiance" (Erlmann, 20) through music time and time again. House music was created by Chicago's gay black community, it emerged in the early-mid 1980s following the backlash against disco and those whose identities aligned with the genre. Thus, as disco popularity declined, the genre went underground. In Chicago, the black gay population kept disco alive. Due to the secrecy that began to surround disco, the music itself expanded creatively without backlash from the mainstream media. Underground dance clubs provided places for the community to explore their identities away from the scrutiny of the public eye. These Dance Clubs served as a, "a crucial force for opening up [a] cultural, social, and political space for struggles over identity, autonomy, and power" (Lipsitz, 27-8). While the concept of dance clubs was not new, the well known dance clubs of the earlier disco genre, also once geared towards open-mindedness and freedom of expression, became targets of homophobia and racism. The newfound secrecy of underground dance clubs offered a place where marginalized people could exist unapologetically despite living in a world surrounded by homophobia, and a place where

black men and women could avoid the constant threat of racism. The open-mindedness and inclusivity surrounding underground house music and dance club culture quickly spread all over the country and eventually internationally as the sentiments surrounding them appealed to more than just gay and black people in Chicago. Today, house music has morphed into several sub-genres such as acid house, techno, and electronic dance music, and is dominated by white European DJs. However, despite the several sub-genres that have emerged, the basic musical characteristics of House Music remain the same.

Musicality and Technology of House Music:

      The distinct characterizations of House Music often include a tempo 120-130 BPM, 4/4 beat, also known as "four on the floor" and use of repetition to create a sound that anyone can dance to regardless of dancing experience. The creation of House Music would not be possible without the introduction of modern recording technology. Records and turntables allowed DJ's to, "bridge the transition from the analog to the digital era by redefining the turntable and sampler as performance instruments...the advent of recording technology meant that musical performances ceased to be unique to time and place" (Flickentscher, 291). Individuals no longer had to attend a concert to hear their favorite music be played, and musicians, specifically DJs, had unlimited pre-recorded sounds at their disposal for sampling and mixing. In the pre -recording era, radio shows were formatted as make believe concerts with actual musicians being recorded live on air, however as recording became more popular, "some radio DJ's began to broadcast music from recordings, thereby giving birth to the concept of musical performance as illusion (what you hear is not what is going on while you're hearing it)" (Flikentscher, 292).

Early recording technology, while undeniably important to the evolution of music, did have some fatal shortcomings such as a limited frequency range and poor acoustic qualities which left little to no room for engineers to maneuver. As the importance of sound engineering increased throughout the late 1950s, along with the invention of electrical manipulation and use of multiple microphones, the multitrack tape recorder was created. Instruments could now be recorded individually and balanced with each other to create a mix that sounds almost identical to a live performance. The elasticity of these multitrack recordings also allowed disco DJ's, who at the time were not considered a category of musician, to "experiment with audio technologies in an attempt to shrink the distance that had been created between performers of music and audiences across space and time through the pervasive use of records and radio" (Flickentscher, 294). Prior to the turntable, musicians required a certain degree of education and knowledge to be able to perform. However, as technology advanced and became more accessible, anyone with access to a turntable and some records could learn how to DJ. This opened the door for many individuals who were passionate about music but lacked the resources to be classically trained, meaning new perspectives and thus new sounds began to emerge. This new kind of DJ did not work in recording, radio or television but rather in bars and clubs where the direct communication with the audience allowed them to manipulate recordings to suit the audience's wants and needs. "This type of performance [happened] in the context of a specific evening and a specific club environment populated by a specific group of dancers" (Flickentscher, 309).

My Inspirations:

House Music focuses on the use of samples, synthesizers and turntables while disco was often played by a live band with a slightly less upbeat feel. In order to appreciate the history and

understand the distinct differences between house and disco it is important to take a closer look at a few key figures in the industry: Frankie Knuckles, resident DJ at The Warehouse, one of the most famous dance clubs of the era, DJ Ron Hardy resident DJ at the Muzic Box, another prominent dance club in the Chicago house scene and as previously stated, DJ Farley "Jackmaster" Funk, resident DJ at the Playground, my father's hangout. These musicians all played an integral role in the creation and rise in popularity of House Music. I was introduced to their music at a young age from my father who owns several of their records and considers himself an avid fan. They were my first introduction to house music and their music served as inspiration for my own composition.

Frankie Knuckles is often regarded as the "Godfather of House Music." He moved to Chicago in 1977 at the age of 22 after spending his earlier years DJing at various clubs in New York City. After moving to Chicago, he, alongside his good friend Robert Williams, opened a club called the Warehouse named after its location literally being inside a warehouse. Though no one is really sure, many say that the term "house music" is short for Frankie Knuckles, "the Warehouse". Frankie was interested in experimenting with sounds. He was often heard mixing disco classics with obscure indie-label soul music, European synth sounds and the occasional rock track. When mixed all together, these became the original sounds of "house music."

DJ Ron Hardy has less international recognition than Frankie Knuckles, however is recognized in Chicago as one the founding members of House Music. He started his DJ career in 1974 at Den One, a prominent gay club in Chicago. In 1982, after Frankie Knuckles left the Warehouse, Ron Hardy took over as the new resident DJ where he remained after the Warehouse changed its name to the Music Box. While Frankie Knuckles was known for his smooth style of music, Ron Hardy brought a new sound, playing with more energy and less regard for sound

quality. He would often mix Italian and American disco with new wave and rock tracks. He was also known for pitching records up to the point where they were almost unrecognizable (pitch being the difference between normal speed and the speed at which the record is currently playing.) Techno artist Derrick May recalled Hardy playing a Stevie Wonder track with the speed pitched +8. He was also known for playing around with the EQ and sometimes even playing a track backwards.

DJ Farley "Jackmaster" Funk, my father's personal favorite, got his start in the music industry in 1981 as one of the original members of the Hot Mix 5, a DJ team at WBMX 102.7 FM. He was a regular guest DJ at the Warehouse and later the resident DJ at the Playground. His big break was in 1986 when he and his roommate Steve "Silk" Hurley, also a prominent Chicago house musician, made a cover of Isaac Hayes' "I Can't Turn Around". Hurley focused on the instrumental arrangements while DJ Farley "Jackmaster" Funk focused on the lyrics and the mix. He changed the hook from "I Can't Turn Around" to "Love Can't Turn Around" and substituted the rest of the lyrics with words from author Vince Lawrence sung by church singer Darryl Pandy. The song "Love Can't Turn Around" eventually made it to the UK top 10 singles chart in 1986 and is often thought to be the song that popularized house music overseas.

These three musicians were the main inspiration for my own composition. However, instead of replicating the sound of House Music I wanted to acknowledge its history while putting my own modern twist on it. I knew there were general guidelines that I had to follow when creating house music; the distinct characteristics of 120-130 BPM, 4/4 beat, also known as "four on the floor" and use of repetition to create a sound that anyone can dance to regardless of dancing experience. Though there are some technical guidelines with BMP, tempo and form, I've found that the most important aspect in the creation of House Music is the feeling that it evokes.

After listening to hours of tracks created in the 80s I found what they all have in common and that is the energetic feeling of happiness that they create within the listener using repetitious beats and euphoric melodies. Dance Clubs served as a place to be free and happy regardless of circumstance, so the music had to replicate that idea of open mindedness and inclusivity. This was the aspect that I had the most trouble with, primarily since I was composing my piece alone in my bedroom during a global pandemic, not a very free or euphoric time. The pandemic made it nearly impossible for me to envision my songs being played in front of a live audience on a dance floor, something that all house musicians strive for. However, instead of completely foregoing the idea of creating a song with the same upbeat energy as those created in the 1980s, I decided to work with what I had to create something that represents the situation we are in. I still wanted my composition to bring joy and the urge to dance, but maybe with a little less energy. Another aspect I struggled with when creating my composition was trying to replicate the sound of the technology being used in the 1980s using Logic Pro X and a MIDI keyboard. It was pretty frustrating for me when, despite my best efforts, something was always a little bit off. Eventually I came to realize that my composition didn't need to sound like it was created in the 1980s and that it would be nearly impossible to replicate the original sounds using modern equipment anyway. It was these kinds of setbacks and realizations that I believe made my piece unique to the time and space in which it was created, similar to the House Music in the 1980s which was also unique to its' time and place whether that be the individual dance clubs or Chicago as a whole.

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