

**House Music:
How the Pop Industry Excused Itself From
One Of The Most Important Musical
Movements of The 20th Century**

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Abstract

In the words of house music legend Frankie Knuckles, house music was disco's revenge. What did he mean by that? In many important ways, house music continued where it left off when it was dramatically cast from American society in the now infamous Disco Demolition Night of July 1979. Riding on the wave of many important social upheavals of the 1960s, disco laid a few important foundations for dance music as we know it today. It also challenged the pop industry power-structure by creating new avenues for music to top the Billboard charts. However, in the final analysis the popularity of disco became its undoing. House music continued to ride on a few of the important waves of disco. The longstanding success of house, however, was in a new development: the independent artist/producer. Young people who began to experiment with early consumer electronic instruments were responsible for creating this new genre of music. This new and exciting sound took hold in Chicago, Detroit and the UK before spreading around the world as the sound we know today as house music.

Thirty eight years after the term "House Music" was coined in 1982, the genre has incontestably become a global musical and cultural phenomenon. Few genres in music history can claim this kind of influence. Where did this style come from?

Frankie Knuckles, often referred to as 'the Godfather of House', famously said that house music was disco's revenge¹. What did he mean by this? Two inferences can be made from his statement: 1) house was a continuation of disco and 2) disco suffered some sort of injustice. To fully understand house, one must understand it through the lens of disco. How are they similar? How are they different? What happened to disco? What was this injustice?

Thursday, July 12, 1979 was a dark day in the history of disco. A recently fired and disgruntled radio DJ named Steve Dahl gathered over 50,000 fans at a White Sox game in Comiskey Park in Chicago to attend what was to be known as Disco Demolition Night. After

¹Brewster, Bill. "Frankie Knuckles obituary." *The Guardian*, 1 April 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2014/apr/01/frankie-knuckles>. Accessed 15 May 2020

rising from the underground in the early to mid-1970s to topping the charts by the end of the decade, Dahl and others were frustrated by what they saw as a subversion of rock and roll as the dominant American musical force. As an expression of this outrage, Dahl gathered tens of thousands of his adherents with the agreement that each would bring a disco record and after the first game, all the records would be collected and literally blown up in the middle of the field. The explosion proceeded as planned; however, thousands of attendees rushed the field in a fervor, prompting riot police to be called for support. The event prompted a dramatic shift in American musical consumption away from an increasingly ravenous disco consumption back to rock and roll. Many view July 12th 1979 as the day disco died.

What happened? How did disco music grow to be so pervasive as depicted in the iconic movie, *Saturday Night Fever*, and then come to its demise even more quickly by many of the same people who had embraced it? In one of the first articles authored about house for *DJ Magazine*, Phil Cheeseman writes:

Like it or not, house was first and foremost a direct descendant of disco. Disco had already been going for ten years when the first electronic drum tracks began to appear out of Chicago, and in that time it had already suffered the slings and arrows of merciless commercial exploitation, dilution and racial and sexual prejudice which culminated in the 'disco sucks' (also known as Disco Demolition Night) campaign. [...] disco eventually collapsed under a heaving weight of crass disco versions of pop records and an ever-increasing volume of records that were simply no good.²

As evident from Frankie Knuckles's insight, house and disco have a degree of shared DNA. How was house able to establish a foundation that has allowed it to remain a dominant force in the global music market thirty eight years after its inception when disco went down in

² Cheeseman, Phil. "The History of House." *DJ Magazine*, April 1993, http://music.hyperreal.org/library/history_of_house.html. Accessed 27 April 2020

flames after less than a decade? These are the questions that must be asked and pursued to fully understand what Frankie Knuckles meant when he said that house is disco's revenge. Many of the interlocking components that formed disco were carried over into house: the DJs, the clubs, the people and culture. However, aspects changed: the labels, distribution, and relation to radio broadcasting. Beyond these, however, one component stands out as the cornerstone of house music: the tracks, the songs were created by independent artist/producers rather than by groups of producers and artists hired by labels. It was a family affair: groups of friends making music that they enjoyed listening and partying to, out of the purview of labels and the industry at large. They were free to create the sound they heard, unconstrained by the commercialism that had both rotted out and carried over the music of disco. Other factors can be attributed to house's rise, but this one of the most important. While house completed this coup d'état, it is essential to recognize the many groundbreaking areas where disco changed the face of the music industry, laying the foundation for house to grow into the global movement that we see today.

The story begins in the late 1960s. The 1960s were a decade of great social change, most notably generated by the American civil rights movement, the anti-Vietnam War movement, the gay liberation movement, and the women's rights movement. Overall, these movements were monumental in their importance, bringing about a sense of social acceptance not seen before in the history of the country. They opened the door for new freedoms in the 1970s. Legendary disco producer Nile Rodgers remembered: "When the 70s came in, it was sort of the celebratory decade. The Vietnam war ended, we were making forward movement in the civil rights

campaign, the women's movement, the gay movement. [...] It was probably, in my humble opinion, the most liberated period in the history of the world."³

In New York City, the Stonewall Riots signaled a change for the gay community both in regard to social acceptance but also the law. Described by one of the DJ pioneers of the era, Nicky Siano: “There was the Stonewall Riots in The Village, which changed the cabaret laws because it was illegal for two men to dance together until those riots in 1969. All of a sudden, men were able to dance with men, women could dance with women, and it just because a time when people [thought], 'well let's just experiment with this, let's see where this goes.’”

Gays were no longer confined to underground establishments. Many gay-friendly nightclubs and parties opened at this time to service a newly-liberated clientele. “In 1970, partly responding to gay liberation [...] Seymour and Shelly – who owned a series of gay bays in New York’s West Village – bought Sanctuary, a failing discotheque and re-opened it as a place that welcomed gay men.”⁴ Noteworthy is the fact that Sanctuary was home to resident DJ Francis Grasso, famous for inventing cross-fading as a DJ technique. This was one of the many innovations that can be credited to this era, but more on that later. Besides Sanctuary, The Loft was probably the most important club in defining the cultural soil that nourished the roots of not just disco, but dance culture.

The Loft was the private home of David Mancuso, who ostensibly created it with the ethos of providing a safe space for young minorities, but really for anyone to dance and enjoy themselves. Described by Alex Rosner, who designed the sound-system at The Loft: “It was

³*When Disco Ruled the World*. Written by Kaplan, Ben. VH1, 2005. 4:00

⁴ Stokes, Paul. “6 Ways Disco Changed the World (Interview with Tim Lawrence).” *BBC Radio 6* <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/23hgH64c0cvLlwYjfmzcztJ/6-ways-disco-changed-the-world> Accessed 15 May 2020

probably about sixty percent black and seventy percent gay...There was a mix of sexual orientation, there was a mix of races, mix of economic groups. A real mix, where the common denominator was music.”⁵ Besides being one of the first gay-friendly clubs post-Stonewall, it really was more of a passion project for Mancuso than a commercial-oriented business. In his own words:

The loft was a community, if you didn't have money, as long as you had an invitation, you got in. Last thing [you want] is be broke, you want a beer, be with your friends, you can't go out, you can't do this, you can't do that oh, yes, you can still go out and see your friends that night. Write down an IOU, people didn't abuse that system. So you never had to worry about missing a party if you didn't want to. ⁶

The Loft became the standard for many clubs to follow. Many individuals who became influential in the disco movement found their original inspiration at The Loft. One individual was Nicky Siano, who would go on to open The Gallery and foster Larry Levan, perhaps one of the most influential DJs in history. He retells his first night at The Loft, having been brought by his brother's girlfriend:

647 Broadway. I'll never forget it. David Mancuso's loft. We go in this little hallway and open the door and I move onto this dance floor and as the record is playing it comes to a peak and these bright lights go on and then everything goes off and I hear this sound. This perfect sound. I knew in my soul, in my heart, in all my body that that music was moving me to my core and I knew it was going to move a lot, lot of people and that, for me, was the beginning of dance music.⁷

Besides the welcoming space and incredible energy inside The Loft, David Mancuso had hired Alex Rosner, a professional sound system engineer to rebuild the sound system. Originally it had

⁵ Brewster, Bill and Broughton, Frank. *Last Night a DJ Saved My Life: The History of the Disc Jockey* (New York: Grove Press, 1999) pp. 120–122.

⁶ *Maestro: The History of House Music & NYC Club Culture*. Directed by Ramos, Josell. Artrution Productions & Door A, 2003. 22:15

⁷ *I Was There When House Took Over the World*. Directed by Sumner, Jake. Pi Studios, Alldayeveryday, BBC Channel Four, 2017. 3:00

been a good-quality consumer Hi-Fi system, but together with Alex, they set a new standard in club soundsystem design.

The precision of the sound system which Rosner and Mancuso created between them has subsequently become the accepted standard for every nightclub in the world. 'It's just a matter of quality,' says Rosner. 'See, I was an audiophile. I applied audiophile techniques - hi-fidelity - to commercial sound, which until then had never been done. Most commercial sound systems sounded lousy. I made it sound good by putting in good components. There were no secrets; it was just a matter of persuading the owner that he had to spend the money to up the ante and put in the proper components. I knew where to put the loudspeakers. I knew how many to use and how to make it sound good.'⁸

Many historic clubs that were to open in the future would feature sound systems designed by Rosner, or another important designer, Richard Long.

Another defining component of the disco era was the role of the DJ. This role continued to be as important in the birth of house music. The energy of the newly liberated audiences who were found at clubs actually inspired the innovative mixing techniques of Francis Grasso. "It was never exclusively a gay club (Sanctuary), but they made it clear they were welcome. And this new crowd changed the dynamic of the dance floor. In fact Francis Grasso said his new DJ mixing technique was inspired by this new crowd. The energy was so high, he started mixing together records so there was no gap. So disco, with its freedom, became a way for gay culture to find an expression."⁹

Besides developing DJ techniques, disco began to have effects that were felt even beyond the dance floor - in the fundamental power structure of the music industry. Up until this time, radio dictated what was popular and what wasn't. What radio played became popular and sold

⁸ Brewster, Bill and Broughton, Frank. *Last Night a DJ Saved My Life: The History of the Disc Jockey* (New York: Grove Press, 1999)

⁹Stokes, Paul. "6 Ways Disco Changed the World (Interview with Tim Lawrence)." *BBC Radio 6*
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/23hgH64c0cvLlwYjfmzctJ/6-ways-disco-changed-the-world>
Accessed 15 May 2020

records, which was reflected in the Billboard charts and brought home the bacon. According to Thelma Houston, a popular disco artist of the time: “If you have a record out but you ain’t on the billboard, then you ain’t happening, that’s how powerful the billboard chart is.”¹⁰ Basically, radio held the keys. Disco changed all of this. One night people would hear a song in the club, and the next day be searching record stores over the city to find the record. Nicky Siano retells a great example of this:

We were hanging out with the promotion guy for 20th Century Fox. We went to his office one day and we saw albums, just tons of them, and they had a woman with a big afro on it. We thought it was a kitschy kind of picture we could have and hang on our walls. So my friend David said, 'What's that?,' and he said, 'Oh, we're throwing these away' and I said 'OK, give them to us.' And it was "Love's Theme" and it was Barry White. And we started playing them and it went to #1 (On the *Billboard* charts). And this something they were going to throw away. And we took it and made it a hit record.¹¹

Over time, DJs would become more important than the radio. It was the clubs that made artists. Another instance was when the release of “Never Can Say Goodbye” by Gloria Gaynor, started to sell out in New York City record stores without ever hitting the radio airwaves. This marked a new wave in disco’s prominence in American culture. *Billboard* began to take notice of this new phenomena. Tom Moulton, one of the pioneers of the remix explains:

And now all of a sudden, there was another market that they had no control over that they were forced to play. 'We Never Could Say Goodbye' when that started to hit, the radio stations weren't playing it, so then in Billboard they put a whole page saying, 'Will somebody explain to me how a record can sell 20,000 copies in New York City a week, and no radio station is playing it? How can this be?' And suddenly, the radio stations started playing it.¹²

Rolling Stone was the first publication to catch up with what had been simmering underground. In 1973 Vince Aletti wrote the first article about Disco titled, “Discotheque Rock

¹⁰ *The Secret Disco Revolution*. Directed by Kastner, Jamie. Cave 7 Productions, 2012. 12:30

¹¹ *Ibid.* 19:00

¹² *The Secret Disco Revolution*. Directed by Kastner, Jamie. Cave 7 Productions, 2012. 23:45

'72: Paaaaarty!"¹³ "Because these DJs are much closer to the minute-to-minute changes in people's listening taste, they are the first to reflect these changes in the music they play, months ahead of trade magazine charts and all but a few radio stations."¹⁴ The industry began to notice that the game had changed. More and more, DJs overshadowed radio as the dominant tastemakers. Radio was increasingly made to follow what had become popular in the clubs. This trend not only changed the role of radio, but also of independent labels. "By 1978 disco was outselling rock music in America which came as a huge shock to the music establishment, because it was heavily backing rock. When disco broke through it didn't have any of the major corporations backing it. Initially it was DJs clawing around finding records to play. So independent record labels were crucial for the development of disco."¹⁵

Originally disco had been danceable R&B;¹⁶ many East Coast cities had their own unique flavor of this kind of music. However, it was a studio and label both owned by Henry Stone in Miami that released what is known today as the first disco record. According to Henry Stone, "[We] made a lot of good R&B records that also had a very good dance beat. [...] Harry Wayne Casey, he loves to hang around my little studio, and I put him together with a young engineer and that's how "rock your baby" was born [...] It was #1 in every country in the world. [...] It was the first real disco record. It really launched the whole disco era."¹⁷

¹³ Mentzer, Robert. "Disco Stays Alive: The glimmering sounds of a remix artist and an influential DJ." *Tiny Mix Tapes*, 6 June 2006, <https://www.tinymixtapes.com/features/disco-stays-alive>. Accessed 16 May 2020

¹⁴ Brewster, Bill and Broughton, Frank. *Last Night a DJ Saved My Life: The History of the Disc Jockey* (New York: Grove Press, 1999)

¹⁵ Stokes, Paul. "6 Ways Disco Changed the World (Interview with Tim Lawrence)." *BBC Radio 6* <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/23hgH64c0cvLlwYjfmzczTJ/6-ways-disco-changed-the-world> Accessed 15 May 2020

¹⁶ *Pump Up The Volume: The History Of House Music*. Directed by Hindmarch, Carl. BBC Channel Four, 2001.

¹⁷ *When Disco Ruled the World*. Written by Kaplan, Ben. VH1, 2005. (6:45)

As the sound of disco grew in popularity and started to demand the air-time of radio, labels tried to get a piece of the pie. Many of their releases were rock and roll and ignored by club DJs. One of the first labels to attempt to rebrand one of their acts for the disco market was a New York City-based label, Salsoul. For the first time, DJs began to take a lead role in the creation of new popular music. As author Tim Lawrence describes,

Salsoul in 1976 commissioned a remix of Double Exposure's song Ten Percent and this was an explosive moment in music making. The key difference was they invited a DJ, Walter Gibbons, to remix the record for the dance floor. This proved scandalous and lots of producers took great offence. Up to this point they'd been in control of music making and they really resented what remixers were doing to their work, especially because they were DJs without studio training who couldn't play instruments. However the labels understood the DJs were in a much better position to do remixes because they were there at the clubs selecting music in response to the dancing crowd's energy and could see what made dancers come to the floor. So the remix, which is now ubiquitous, came to the fore thanks to disco.¹⁸

Disco began to make an incredible amount of money for the labels that shifted over toward releases geared for that market. Casablanca Records, most famous during the disco era for Donna Summer and the Village People, "had more gold and platinum records than the top three labels combined."¹⁹ Beyond the increase in demand for disco records, the cost effectiveness of making disco was far more efficient than rock and roll, in part because of the model of production, but also because the labels would squeeze as much disco into the market, including music that was of inferior quality. Larry Harris, VP of Casablanca Records at the time, recalled: "Disco, as I felt was a producer and a concept situation. We could deal with one guy who was a producer, usually without a problem. And we could also get numerous projects out of them. Not

¹⁸ Stokes, Paul. "6 Ways Disco Changed the World (Interview with Tim Lawrence)." *BBC Radio 6* <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/23hgH64c0cvLlwYjfmzczJ/6-ways-disco-changed-the-world> Accessed 15 May 2020

¹⁹ *The Secret Disco Revolution*. Directed by Kastner, Jamie. Cave 7 Productions, 2012. 31:40

just one artist. It wound up that we could do a disco album for \$20,000 or \$30,000, when a rock album was \$100,000 or \$150,000.”²⁰

In reality, this was the beginning of the end of disco. Many of the top record companies wanted to jump onboard this lucrative model. However, the quality of the music decreased and according to Vince Aletti, “very quickly there were a lot of really horrible, formula records.”²¹ It was at this time that the extreme popularity of the movement inspired the hit film *Saturday Night Fever*. With this increased attention, the stream of poor quality being fed into the market increased. Nicky Siano explained:

Every record company had their version of this cover (film shows a record cover with "Disco Single" printed on it), and this is a nice tasteful one [...] "and the Atlantic one covered half of the thing. People would go in the store, and unplayed, un-listened to, don't know the record, and a hundred thousand copies would sell just because it said this ("Disco Single") on it. They started putting this banner on every piece of shit they wanted to sell. And after two years of that this became really a bad taste in people's mouth.”²²

The artists suffered as well. For example, Earth, Wind & Fire lamented that they “had to do a disco release just to get on the radio.”²³ Vocalists, most of them female, felt that the music making process was completely out of their hands. Said Thelma Houston, “As a female artist who did not write my own songs, you don’t have a base of power to come from. I had to rely a lot on getting material, and a lot of times, it was material that other people thought ‘this would be great for Thelma’. And, it may or may not be great for Thelma.”²⁴

For many, the disco music that was perpetuated by the pop industry was starting to become an obnoxious presence. Describing the Village People, Nicky Siano said: "They were

²⁰ *The Secret Disco Revolution*. Directed by Kastner, Jamie. Cave 7 Productions, 2012. 31:40

²¹ *Ibid.* 35:00

²² *I Was There When House Took Over the World*. Directed by Sumner, Jake. Pi Studios, Alldayeveryday, BBC Channel Four, 2017. 7:30

²³ *When Disco Ruled the World*. Written by Kaplan, Ben. VH1, 2005. 29:00

²⁴ *The Secret Disco Revolution*. Directed by Kastner, Jamie. Cave 7 Productions, 2012. 38:00

like a caricature of everything the club scene was supposed to be about. [...] I never played “YMCA”, I never played “Macho Man” in my club. It was just a commercial.”²⁵ Similarly, Ethel Merman’s disco version of “There’s no Business” or “Disco Duck” (a disco-style track with a duck voice singing), caused many people to tire of disco.

One of the final straws was the negative publicity attracted by the shutdown of Studio 54. In 1977 Steve Rubell and Ian Schrager had opened what was to become the most opulent and bacchanalian club in New York City. The who’s who of New York culture were regulars: Andy Warhol, Truman Capote, Liza Minnelli, among many others. The club was famous for copious amounts of drugs and people having orgies in the balcony. Studio 54 was a stark departure from the ethos represented by The Loft. The club became notorious for its entry policy: entry was solely at the discretion of Rubell. He would hand pick people to enter with the aim of curating the most wild assortment of personalities for the party inside. The famous song “Le Freak” was angrily composed by Nile Rodgers and Chic after being turned away from Studio 54 by Rubell. As with many things, the more people were denied access, the more they wanted entry. There are stories of people climbing on top of neighboring buildings with mountaineering gear and rope ²⁶ with the hope of sneaking in past the front door. An employee recalled, “One man was less lucky. ‘This guy got stuck in the vent trying to get in. It smelled like a cat had died. His body was discovered in black-tie attire.’”²⁷ Nicky Siano describes his experience at Studio 54:

I’ve never seen so much cocaine and drugs and people fucking all over the place. I mean I go downstairs in the VIP lounge and you see big stars screwing the bus boy. It was pretty strange. [...] Our experience in the clubs in the early 70s was 'look inside yourself, enjoy,

²⁵ *The Secret Disco Revolution*. Directed by Kastner, Jamie. Cave 7 Productions, 2012. 28:00

²⁶ Runtagh, Jordan. “Studio 54: 10 Wild Stories From Club’s Debauched Heyday” *Rolling Stone*, 26 April 2017, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/studio-54-10-wild-stories-from-clubs-debauched-heyday-198626/>. Accessed 17 May 2020

²⁷ Ibid.

celebrate life,' and this was like 'abuse yourself, don't celebrate life, but abuse life, abuse who you can, use everyone.' That was what it was about.²⁸

These sorts of stories began to make their way into the media. The public's patience with disco was running short. This bad publicity came to a peak when, just three years after the club's opening, Rubell and Schrager were convicted of tax evasion and sent to prison. Studio 54 closed shortly after.

Anti-disco sentiment came to a head with Disco Demolition Night of July 12, 1979.

There are many perspectives on the underlying intent of the demonstration. The general consensus was that it was an act rooted in racism, homophobia, and xenophobia. Proponents of the disco/dance movement since its budding in the early 1970's hadn't even coined the named disco (it came from a *New York Magazine* article in 1974²⁹), yet they found themselves in the crosshairs of an angry mob. Nile Rodgers reflects, "It felt to us like Nazi book-burning. [...] This is America, the home of jazz and rock and people were now afraid even to say the word 'disco'. I remember thinking - we're not even a disco group."³⁰ Vince Lawrence, soon to be one of the first house music producers felt it was anti-black. Disco Demolition Night was,

more about blowing up all this nigger music [than] destroying disco. Strange enough, I was an usher, working his way towards his first synthesizer at the time. What I noticed at the gates were people were bringing records, and some of the records were disco records and I thought those records were kinda good, and some of those records were just black records, they weren't disco, they were just black records, RnB records, and I should have taken that as a tone for what the attitude of these people were. I know that nobody was bringing Metallica records by mistake, they might have brought a Marvin Gaye record which wasn't a disco record and that got accepted and got blown up along with Donna Summer and Anita Ward, and so it felt very racial to me.³¹

²⁸*The Secret Disco Revolution*. Directed by Kastner, Jamie. Cave 7 Productions, 2012. 1:05:00

²⁹ Ibid 22:30

³⁰Easlea, Daryl. "Disco Inferno." *Independent*, 11 December 2004,

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/disco-inferno-680390.html>. Accessed 16 May 2020

³¹ *Pump Up The Volume: The History Of House Music*. Directed by Hindmarch, Carl. BBC Channel Four, 2001. 9:50

Gillian Frank, author of *Discophobia*, viewed it as anti-gay:

Rooted in antigay prejudice, the systematic collection and destruction of records at the Disco Demolition on 12 July 1979 sent a message to the American public that listening to a genre of music that was openly identified as gay was unacceptable and that an overt gay influence would not be tolerated. The antidisco actions by radio programmers further expelled an audibly and visibly gay genre from the American mainstream. Following the Disco Demolition, gay men were no longer collectively visible in popular music and nightlife, and by April 1980 popular music had been reclaimed, at least momentarily, by straight white and male rock fans.³²

However, Vince Aletti, viewed it as less hateful:

I don't think it was a social decision that we don't want to have these gay people dancing in our clubs. That movement came from radio, from people at the radio stations who were really not happy to be playing music that they couldn't relate to.³³

Whatever the underlying intent, the movement accomplished its goal and effectively brought about the end of disco. From this point on, radio stations started to play top 40 rock again, labels renamed their "disco" divisions "dance" and many disco DJs found it impossible to get work. That being said, this is really only the beginning of the story. It was from these ashes that the house music movement rose. While disco as a genre was no longer being pursued by the record labels, the dance music culture that had spawned with Sanctuary and The Loft in the late 1960s--early 1970s continued to thrive, just without the pop industry and mainstream America. Recalling the dramatic shift of 1979, Joe Shanahan of Smart Bar in Chicago said: "All of a sudden there was sort of a 'them' and 'us' and I think that 'us' was strong because we went further underground, we went deeper."³⁴

³² Frank, Gillian. "Discophobia: Antigay Prejudice and the 1979 Backlash against Disco" *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (May 2007): p. 305

³³ *The Secret Disco Revolution*. Directed by Kastner, Jamie. Cave 7 Productions, 2012.

³⁴ *I Was There When House Took Over the World*. Directed by Sumner, Jake. Pi Studios, Alldayeveryday, BBC Channel Four, 2017. 9:30

Rather than a death sentence, Disco Demolition Night enabled dance culture to free itself from the commercialism of the record labels. They lost interest in disco; however, people hadn't lost interest in dance music. The year prior, one of the three most important clubs to herald the new era of house music had opened in New York City. Despite the ruckus that was going on at Studio 54 at the time, founder Michael Brody built Paradise Garage with much of the same ethos as David Mancuso's 'The Loft'. Mel Cheren, Michael's partner speaks of the intent behind the new club: "Michael and I would say: 'If people can dance together, they can live together, and that's why it was so important to bring all kinds of people, black, white, straight and gay together with music.'"³⁵

A year earlier, New Yorker Robert Williams, opened The Warehouse in his hometown of Chicago. He was a friend of David Mancuso and, after lamenting the lack of quality parties in Chicago, followed Mancuso's advice and started throwing his own parties in Chicago.³⁶ These parties became known as the Warehouse. In the footsteps of The Loft, the Warehouse implemented a membership-only, invitation-based admittance policy. Honey Dijon shared, "The Warehouse was a members only club. They want people to go there and not bring any of that outside shit in. No homophobia. No sexism toward women."³⁷ In addition to gay enthusiasts, just like in New York, an increasing number of straight club-goers found themselves drawn to the energy of Chicago's first after-hours club. Again and again, they would come back to experience the exquisite music selection of club DJ, Frankie Knuckles. The interaction of a gay, straight and mixed race demographic began to open people's mindsets. Said Duane Buford, "I think at the

³⁵*Pump Up The Volume: The History Of House Music*. Directed by Hindmarch, Carl. BBC Channel Four, 2001. 3:35

³⁶Mirani, Czarina. "Who is Robert Williams?" *5Mag.net*, 1 December 2005, <https://5mag.net/features/who-is-robert-williams/> Accessed 16 May 2020

³⁷*I Was There When House Took Over the World*. Directed by Sumner, Jake. Pi Studios, Alldayeveryday, BBC Channel Four, 2017. 10:15

time it changed a lot of people's perception of stuff. I think that a lot of straight people found like, it's ok, you can talk to somebody that's gay."³⁸

Although the name "house music" was coined by the Warehouse audience, Frankie Knuckles wasn't actually playing any new kind of music. For the most part he was playing old disco hits, songs that, due to their superior quality, managed to survive the disco meltdown. Soon after the Warehouse closed down, Frankie Knuckles opened his own club, the Power Plant, and Robert Williams re-opened the Warehouse under a new name, the Music Box. He brought in Ron Hardy as the new house DJ. Around this time, young club-goers got the idea that they could create their own music that imitated the four-on-the-floor style of the old disco hits they heard at the Warehouse and the Music Box. Joe Smooth, one of house's early creators, remembers, "People just figured, hey, let me just make up my own kind of beats or rhythms to compensate for the lack of music."³⁹

In 1984, history was made. Jamie Principle had made a song about his girlfriend at the time and, with the help of a friend, got the tape in the hands of Frankie Knuckles. Frankie played it at the Power Plant and it was a hit. Soon, thousands of bootleg cassette copies had spread all over Chicago. House music producer Marshall Jefferson recalls "Your Love": "My friend had a copy of a copy of a copy of a copy of a copy of a... one guy would get a copy of a tape from Frankie and it would be copied thousands of times all over the city."⁴⁰ From Derrick May: "Everybody was singing along with the song, everybody in the whole crowd, and it was the shit. The track was bumpin. It was the shit."⁴¹ Frankie later worked on releasing an official version

³⁸*Pump Up The Volume: The History Of House Music*. Directed by Hindmarch, Carl. BBC Channel Four, 2001.

14:20

³⁹ Ibid. 20:00

⁴⁰ Ibid. 29:00

⁴¹ Ibid. 29:15

with Jamie: “This song is so special to so many people. It’s probably the benchmark of house music, I think. As I’ve had so many people tell me, it’s probably the single most influential song in house music.”⁴² When people realized that Jamie was a young local musician, their expectations were turned upside down. Marshall Jefferson shared his own reaction, "Jaime was god to us, we had no idea that he was a kid in his bedroom making music, I thought Jamie was a millionaire in Europe somewhere, I didn't even know he was black!"⁴³ Although this was the first original house song, it was years before it was actually released on vinyl, and so it was not the first house record.

House music had its first real release with “On and On” by Jessie Saunders. Just like “Your Love,” “On and On” was an at-home production by 22-year-old Jessie Saunders and his friend Vince Lawrence. They had to figure out all aspects of the production process from composing the music, starting a record label, to getting the song pressed and selling the vinyl.

Saunders recalls:

Vince is the type of person, he's just Mr. Information, he goes, 'oh, we do this, my father has a record label, and Ed does this, and the pressing plant is here, and this is how you do the labels, and this is what you do this and blah blah blah and I'm sitting there like, ‘OK, uh huh, uh huh’ [...] I recorded the drums here and the bass and put overdubs of the keys, all kinds of effects synth stuff there and then Vince and I did this corny little rap. ⁴⁴

They managed to get their song on the radio and into the clubs. When it came time to convince Import Records, the local record store, to buy some of their pressings at a good price, it was already a local hit and they struck gold. Lawrence shares:

⁴²Mao, Jeff. “Frankie Knuckles On The Warehouse, Def Mix And A Career In Music” Video interview with Frankie Knuckles. Recorded 2011 by Redbull Music Academy.

<https://www.redbullmusicacademy.com/lectures/frankie-knuckles-lecture>

⁴³*Pump Up The Volume: The History Of House Music*. Directed by Hindmarch, Carl. BBC Channel Four, 2001. 29:30

⁴⁴ Ibid. 29:35

And they're like 'where did you get this record?' And we're like, 'We made it! It was us! We did it! We did this record!' and the guy said, 'Really, what do you mean?' 'We made the record, it's our record, it's on our record company, see? That's my handwriting on the label. [...] He goes, 'How many do you got? I'm like, 'You might want to think about it because I've got 1000 of them in my car, how many do you want?' And he says, 'I'll take them all, how much do you want for them' And I very quickly thought to myself, 'OK it cost us a dollar to make the records and I want to get two dollars at least, because then I'll make 50 cents and Jessie will make 50 cents and we'll be cool. I said, 'Four dollars' thinking the guy would want to negotiate me down. And he said 'OK' and he wrote me a check for \$4000. Jessie and I walked out of the store, got in the car and screamed.⁴⁵

That was it. History was made. Two kids from Chicago, created the first record of a new genre of music in their home, on their own label, without any backing from the record industry. After their first sale, had to go back to the pressing plant repeatedly to order more copies as the record stores continued to sell out. They unlocked the door of what was possible, opening the way for many to follow in their path. From house producer Marshall Jefferson, “That was the single most important record to me of the 20th century because it let the non-musician know that he could make music.”⁴⁶ Another producer, Chip-E, shared a similar sentiment: “I don't think house would exist without “On and On” having been pressed. Before that, I don't think any of us ever dreamed we could make a record at home.”⁴⁷

The final switch in the circuit had been closed, the coup d'état completed: the creation of music no longer no longer needed the blessing of the record industry. Previously, record labels usually had to front substantial sums to cover the production of music at recording studios and pressing plants. Being a business, the business end and the artistic end came in conflict with each other, as was seen in the culminating days of disco. Jessie Saunders and Vince Lawrence

⁴⁵ *Pump Up The Volume: The History Of House Music*. Directed by Hindmarch, Carl. BBC Channel Four, 2001. 35:00

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 36:40

⁴⁷ *I Was There When House Took Over the World*. Directed by Sumner, Jake. Pi Studios, Alldayeveryday, BBC Channel Four, 2017. 22:30

surmounted the final hurdle, thereby creating a new musical ecosystem where the content was generated exclusively by its own: the artist/producers and the DJs. Disco had succeeded in shifting power of tastemaking away from the industry and to the DJ. However, besides their work as remixers, it was still the labels that chose what music would enter the marketplace. With “On and On”, the last pillar supporting that old power structure collapsed. The artist/producer could make the music of their imagination, get it to the hands of the DJ and see the crowd go wild. They could create their own labels and profit directly from record sales. The greed and narrow-mindedness of the labels was unable to interfere with house in the same way it had done with disco. Music had finally been liberated.

This breakthrough opened the way for an entire new sound in music to be created, a sound that had its ear on the heartbeat of its audience so directly that it could speak, unfettered, in a language that would create an explosive symbiotic energy previously unimagined. Shortly after “On and On”, Chip-E and Joe Smooth created “Time to Jack”. They brought it to DJ Farley “Jackmaster” Funk in the hopes of getting it played live. Chip-E recalls:

I can remember the first time I heard it played in a club. It was a club on Rush Street called the Mars Bar and Farley was playing there and I took it to him and he looked at it, he put it on, he listened to it in the headphones, about 5 seconds later he slammed the fader and you just hear this thump, boom - boom - boom - boom, and then all of a second you hear 'time to jack'⁴⁸, the crowd just went fucking wild, people just lost their minds.⁴⁹

Before this musical liberation, would it have been possible to create music that spoke so directly to an underground dance community? Using their own jargon, “time to jack”? This new dynamic

⁴⁸ At the time “jacking” was a word that referred to a movement on the dance floor, partially humping, partially throwing one’s body against another person or object. From Chip-E, “It was just part of the language, part of the culture.” *Pump Up The Volume: The History Of House Music*. Directed by Hindmarch, Carl. BBC Channel Four, 2001. 26:45

⁴⁹ Ibid. 37:50

of the closed circuit DJ and artist/producer relationship to this day has continued to generate a new creative energy that hadn't existed previously. New house music could be created at home by people who were enthusiasts and passionate about the music, the people and the scene, and without an intermediary, bring their creations to life at the dance club.

It wasn't long before this creative dynamic spawned house music's first sub-genre: Acid house, which featured a gnarly synthesizer-based sound. Duo, Phuture, recall the making of "Acid Tracks":

We started using a 303 just to make bass lines, because when we first started making music it sucked. [...] [I told Spankey] I still can't figure out how to work this thing and it's still doing this weird sound, I don't know how to program it. He said maybe you can figure out how to program it because it ain't come with a book. Instead of trying to program it I just started turning knobs, and he's like, 'watcha doing?' 'I dunno, I'm just turning knobs' 'Just keep doing it' We were just sitting there for like 30-40 mins, I'm turning knobs, like 'I like that, I like that'.⁵⁰

After they made the track, the next step was to get it played in the club. They continue:

If anybody would be daring enough to play this it would be Ron Hardy. He ended up playing it four times that night. The first time he played it, people didn't really know how to react to it. He played it again, people are looking like 'hmmmm, I guess it's early, he's playing some crazy stuff'. The fourth time, they lost their minds, and that was the birth of acid right there.⁵¹

Simon Reynolds in *Generation Ecstasy: Into the World of Techno and Rave Culture*, describes the unusual sound of "Acid Tracks":

Eleven minutes and seventeen seconds long, "Acid Tracks" is just a drum track and endless involuted variations on that bass sound: somewhere between a fecal squelch and a neurotic whinny, between the bubbling of volcanic mud and the primordial low-end drone of a didgeridoo. The 303 bass line is a paradox. It's an amnesiac hook: totally compelling as you listen, but hard to memorize or reproduce after the event.⁵²

⁵⁰ Pump Up The Volume: The History Of House Music. Directed by Hindmarch, Carl. BBC Channel Four, 2001. 41:30

⁵¹ Ibid. 42:45

⁵² Reynolds, Simon. *Generation Ecstasy: Into the World of Techno and Rave Culture* (London: Faber & Faber, 1998)

Would this new sounding kind of music ever have stood a chance in finding an audience during the days of the record label's formulaic disco releases?

Their ability began to grow beyond the scope of just turning knobs. "Love Can't Turn Around" became the first house song to achieve international success (#10 on the UK singles chart). Farley "Jackmaster" Funk, Jessie Saunders and Vince Lawrence teamed up to do a new song loosely inspired by Isaac Hayes' "I Can't Turn Around". They needed a great singer. Vince found the perfect one:

I had recently recorded a song with this guy Daryl Pandy [...] and this guy was a motherfucker of a singer and I had heard somewhere that he had played the cowardly lion of the local performance of *The Wiz* [...] and he had a big bellowing voice [...] so we thought he would go over like gangbusters in the club so we brought this guy in and he sang the fuck out of that tune.⁵³

Beyond creating new music with sequencers and drum machines, house producers began to create instrumental styles of house that featured vocalists and could be performed live, with real instruments. This was 1986, and the same year that the first article on house came out in *Billboard Magazine*⁵⁴, ironically, around the same amount of time it took for disco to receive its own press in *Rolling Stone*. Although house hadn't become a household name, the music had taken a firm foothold in the UK, which would soon become a vessel for house music to grow exponentially beyond where it had arrived at in 1986. In fact, the UK would become the country that launched house throughout Europe, although it would be some time before it exploded in the US.

⁵³ -Pump Up The Volume: The History Of House Music. Directed by Hindmarch, Carl. BBC Channel Four, 2001. 3:40

⁵⁴ George, Nelson. "House Music: Will It Join Rap And Go-Go?". *Billboard*, 21 June 1986, <https://books.google.com/books?id=gyQEAAAAMBAJ&lpg=PA36&vq=nelson&pg=PA27#v=snippet&q=nelson&f=false>. Accessed 27 April 2020

The spell had been broken. The music had been freed. What was created could reach its audience without the risk of being trashed by an executive. The independent artist/producer had opened up this new reality. From Trax Records owner Screamin' Rachel Cain, "I just believe that house is the mother of them all. We made this stuff on nothing and look what it's done."⁵⁵ However, one key element in bringing about these new abilities was the technology: "I think technology, it broadened the capability of what we could do because we could really be experimental."⁵⁶ said Chip-E.

Also important was the sense of community among the DJs and artists. They were competitive in seeing who could release the next hottest track, but they recognized that they were all in it together. Community took priority over commercialization. Quality was above competitiveness. Said Nile Rodgers, "When house came in, they had that thing we seemed to have lost. We got caught up in the commerciality of it. But people, they don't really care how you make it, they just want it to move them."⁵⁷ Riding on the energy and spirit of liberation that spawned disco, house producers understood keenly that their movement transcended the individual. Perhaps it was this ethos, so keenly sensed by the founders of house, that has enabled the torch to burn brightly as it is passed from country to country and generation to generation, giving rise to countless subgenres and artists around the globe. DJ Pierre describes this ethos:

People like Daft Punk, Arman Van Helden, these people have taken stuff and they've been real creative, and you can't say that these people haven't been more or less creative than we were. People say 'Pierre, you started Acid, how do you feel about these people doing this and that and taking your sound and.. 'I'm like', 'who's sound?' once it's on a

⁵⁵*I Was There When House Took Over the World*. Directed by Sumner, Jake. Pi Studios, Alldayeveryday, BBC Channel Four, 2017. 39:30

⁵⁶ Ibid. 39:15

⁵⁷ Ibid. 38:15

record it's like shareware, you're sharing it and allowing other people to add their own ideas.' Whatever I did I got I guarantee I got it from somebody. ⁵⁸

Disco laid the foundation, house completed it and, no pun intended, built the house. As is often said, success is the best revenge. House was disco's glorious revenge. Disco spawned a new dance culture that emerged from the hard-won struggles for justice in the 1960s, laid the blueprint for the modern day club, and took soundsystem design to new levels thereby creating ways of enjoying music that hadn't been experienced before. It also elevated the DJ to a sort of musical Robin Hood untethered by any loyalty except that for the people thereby creating an entirely new way of listening to music, the mix. Additionally, it flipped the power structure traditionally held by radio and introduced the indie label as a major contender in the industry. House completed what disco had set out to do: liberate music from the sometimes narrow-mindedness of the pop industry that had sunk the disco movement. As the disco story reminds us, the pop industry has the tendency to look at music and see black ink or red ink, but that's not how artists see music. It gave the artist the freedom to create music for an audience that didn't have to adhere to the expected profitability scale pre-determined by the industry. It is that freedom that has allowed house music to become what it is today.

⁵⁸ *Pump Up The Volume: The History Of House Music*. Directed by Hindmarch, Carl. BBC Channel Four, 2001. 43:00

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