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The House Detroit Built: House Music In Techno City

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THE HOUSE DETROIT BUILT: HOUSE MUSIC IN TECHNO CITY

by

KEATON SOTO-OLSON

THESIS

Submitted to the Graduate School

of Wayne State University,

Detroit, Michigan

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

MAJOR: MUSIC
DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to the next generation of house heads, embrace the history of this music.

Dig deeper, listen with your heart, and move your body.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Experiencing house music in Detroit changed my life. Before I moved to Michigan and began my graduate studies at Wayne State University, house music was largely unexplored territory. I loved Daft Punk but hadn’t investigated the genre or its roots in any sort of depth, I certainly would have never expected that it would become the topic of my thesis. Early on in my time in Detroit I had a few transformative evenings on dancefloors around the city that lifted me up high enough to see what I had been missing, and I had been missing a lot. There is an undeniable spirit to this music, requiring only that we open ourselves up to it and that it’s played on a speaker system capable of delivering the message. House music allows me and so many others the opportunity to “Heal Yourself and Move.”¹ My experiences moving and healing on the dance floor gave me the animus to pursue this research. I am forever indebted to the Detroit DJs, producers, labels, record stores, magazines, promoters, clubbers, and clubs that created and cultivated this music scene that I have come to love. Special thanks to Stacey “Hotwaxx” Hale for granting me an interview and being so generous with her time and insights.

I owe a great debt of gratitude to the Wayne State Department of Music. This work would not be possible without the support and opportunities provided by the department. Special thanks are due to my program advisor Dr. Joshua S. Duchan for his guidance and encouragement through my thesis project and graduate career. I’d also like to acknowledge the funding from the Music Department, the Graduate Professional Scholarship, and the Lisa McKinney Endowed scholarship, without the help I received this work would not have been possible.

¹ This is one of my favorite tracks by Theo Parrish, a great example of hypnotic deep house.
I would also like to thank my partner Kristen for introducing me to the Detroit electronic music scene, for her continued love and support at home, and for her exemplary record digging!

To my family, parents Jose and Peggy, and brother Cooper, I am forever thankful and grateful for you. A few sentences won’t encapsulate the depths of your contributions to my life and how much your continued love and support sustains me. I hope to pay forward the encouragement, grace, and love that I have received from you all to others.

With Love,

Keaton
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Detroit is Techno City. Birthed by the Detroit Four (Juan Atkins, Kevin Saunderson, Eddie Fowlkes, and Derrick May) and carried on by subsequent waves of Detroit DJs, producers, and labels, the techno sound has become a pillar of the city’s musical legacy. Although this is certainly warranted, it seems that techno’s shadow has slightly obscured the contributions of Detroit’s house music scene. Certainly the electronic music associated with Detroit, for most, is Techno. But, as soon as the first house tracks from Chicago made it to Detroit in the early 1980s, a foundation developed. Detroit producers were making their own house records, Detroit DJs were playing house music on the radio and in clubs, and a scene was developing.

Fast forward to 2021 and the house scene in Detroit has persisted. New venues like the Spotlight, opened in 2019, cater specifically to house heads with a weekly party called “A Spotlight on House” and bookings featuring older DJs like Hotwaxx Hale and John “Jammin” Collins, alongside younger DJs in the city like DJ Holographic. Taking a cursory scan of the bookings for local clubs for any given weekend reveals that although Detroit is “Techno City,” house music is well represented. A night out in Detroit could start with house music and chardonnay at Motor City Wine, and end with minimal techno and bottled water in an abandoned warehouse. Although house and techno are identifiably different both sonically and aesthetically, they have coexisted since their inception, and both remain integral to the clubbing ecosystem in the city. Certainly some fans, DJs, and producers have their preferences, but the two styles are not, by any means, mutually exclusive.

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1 I have opted to use “The Detroit Four” as opposed to the more common “The Belleville Three” to include Eddie Fowlkes as an integral part of the origin of techno.
The Movement Festival in 2020 was a great example of the strength of Detroit’s house and techno scenes. Due to Covid-19, the festival was scaled down significantly. Instead of the Mega-festival in Hart Plaza, seeing visitors from all over the world, Movement returned to its roots of the original Detroit Electronic Music Festival (DEMF): it was free, all local, and glorious.

Re-named “Micro Movement” the festival featured only Detroit talent and took place at several local clubs. It was incredible to bear witness to Detroit’s grit, revelry, and musical prowess on display that weekend. Without the huge stage productions, international DJs, and travelling crowds that typify the Movement weekend, all that was left was the city and its music, and that was more than enough. For a city of its size, Detroit has continually produced an outsized amount of stellar music in a variety of genres. Whether it’s punk, hip-hop, jazz, new wave, rock, Motown, or house and techno, one can find a wealth of music of high caliber created in Detroit.

It is my hope that this work will shine a light onto important figures in Detroit house music history, while also examining the overlap between house and techno production in Detroit, and provide a baseline understanding of house music’s genesis in Chicago. Although this thesis is not a definitive history of the genre in Detroit, it will serve as a useful starting point for those unfamiliar with the Detroit house music, highlighting people and places that may be unknown to many. Detroit house music has received recent recognition in larger publications like the *New York Times*, Red Bull Music Academy, and Pitchfork, but these features are not a substitute for scholarly
research. While Detroit techno has its seminal historical account in Dan Sicko’s *Techno Rebels*, Detroit House lays in wait for recognition on that scale.

**Literature Review**

Detroit house music may not have a definitive historical text at this moment, and Detroit techno and Chicago house have been far more well-trodden by journalists and historians alike. As mentioned above, Dan Sicko’s *Techno Rebels* still stands as the preeminent account of the creation of techno in Detroit. Sicko’s access to the progenitors of the genre, and analysis of the ways that techno was exported and marketed across the United States and Europe, are real strengths of the text. Sicko’s analysis of the impact of techno on the rave scene in England from 1989-1991 is especially compelling. During this time frame, techno was very much an obscure, niche genre without much media coverage or major label interest, but both acid house and techno gained footing all around England and eventually other countries in Europe. London may be the major metropolis in England, but Sicko finds that the more important connection point for Detroit artists was really Sheffield. He writes: “The parallels between Detroit and Sheffield are numerous: The struggles with an industrial base and near-fatal dependency on it, great musical traditions (Detroit’s Motown and Sheffield’s synth-pop), limited options for youth, and so on.” Sicko displays an ability throughout *Techno Rebels* to acknowledge the major touchstones (Belleville Three, Virgin

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4 Sicko, *Techno Rebels*, 76.
UK’s Techno compilation), while being highly attuned to the nuances and deeper history of the genre.

In Bill Brewster and Frank Broughton’s *Last Night a DJ Saved My Life*, a broad scope is taken in charting the history of the DJ and the cultural impact of DJing and club culture. Not limited to electronic music, the authors start from the beginnings of the radio disc jockey with the first radio broadcast in 1906, when Reginald Fessenden transmitted music and speech from Boston to United Fruit Company ships in the Atlantic. From there, Brewster and Broughton provide a history of the club, with a similar broad historical perspective. The rest of the book takes a genre-specific approach, tackling Northern Soul, Reggae, and Disco before continuing through the various electronic music styles of the ‘80s, and ‘90s. The genre-centered approach to the history of DJ music and culture means that there isn’t a focus on any specific region, although there is attention to the locales in which each genre was invented and flourished.

House and techno both have their respective chapters that distill down the major historical landmarks in each genre’s development. One comes away from Brewster and Broughton’s work with knowledge of the major clubs, tracks, and DJs in Chicago and Detroit. Special attention is paid to Acid House, the subgenre that fueled the raves during the “Second Summer of Love” in England during the summer of 1988. As for techno, Brewster and Broughton start from the musical impetuses of radio DJ The Electrifying Mojo, Cybotron, and Kraftwerk before charting techno’s rise from high school parties to its exportation and explosion in Germany. The breadth of the work is impressive, but the flipside to such a broad scope is that the text does not go in-depth on any one city or scene and does not acknowledge Detroit’s contribution to house music, instead focusing on

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Chicago’s and New York’s contributions to the genre. Additionally, the benefit of a region or city-specific approach allows for a more comprehensive history of the genre to be told, a la Sicko’s *Techno Rebels*.

In contrast, Simon Reynold’s *Energy Flash* takes a narrower focus in terms of historical time-period and genre.6 *Energy Flash* is expressly concerned with the development of electronic dance music and rave culture from the mid-‘80s onward. The book’s name comes from a classic Joey Beltram track, “Energy Flash,” which makes unveiled references to MDMA throughout. For example, the only lyrics in the song are a low pitched voice repeating the word “ecstasy.”

Certainly, ecstasy was a revelation for many clubbers, but for many of the creators of Detroit techno specifically, drugs and alcohol were not a part of the scene. Seminal Detroit club The Music Institute was alcohol free, and from the accounts of Jeff Mills, Detroit was not a particularly druggy scene to begin with.7 Sicko affirms that many in Detroit felt that their music had been co-opted by druggier scenes abroad: “Drugs were almost completely absent in Detroit’s techno scene, small as it was, and the artists were undoubtedly a bit shocked to find their music fused with any kind of drug-related experience.”8 There is no doubt that drugs like ecstasy, LSD, and cocaine played a role in the development of the party/club scene surrounding house and techno, but it is equally important to remember that they played a less prominent role in the creation of the music in Detroit.

Despite the druggy overtones, Reynolds gives Detroit its due in terms of musical impact, at least as far as techno is concerned. The book starts with the development of Detroit techno and

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7 See the Red Bull Music Academy interview with Jeff Mills: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-K0tVVnXfn4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-K0tVVnXfn4)
8 Sicko, 79.
has another chapter, entitled “The Future Sound of Detroit,” dedicated to some of the second wave of Detroit techno producers and labels in the early ‘90s. Reynolds is also able to provide analysis of the aesthetic differences between sub-genres, acknowledging their distinct sounds while giving a historical sense of the progression of genres from impetus to novel innovations. Additionally, Reynolds acknowledges the connection between Detroit and Chicago early on in house music’s development.

Another important strength of Reynolds’s work is noting the spiritual aspect of the rave experience. However, I think Reynolds misses the importance of a broader point by analyzing the “spiritual revolution” of the rave movement by placing so much emphasis on the drug Ecstasy, rather than people’s ecstatic experiences through music, drug induced or otherwise. Indeed, feelings of spiritual connection, love, and euphoria are effects of taking MDMA, effects that are often heightened by the rave environment, but it is wholly possible to experience these feelings at a rave or dance club without any chemical enhancement. The true beauty of the dance floor and rave culture is the music and the connection it makes with people, these bonds far outlast the six hours of an ecstasy high.

*Do You Remember House?: Chicago’s Queer of Color Undergrounds*, by Micah Salkind, provides a wealth of information about the beginnings and early development of the house music scene in Chicago. Salkind’s approach is interdisciplinary, covering the DJs, radio stations and producers that made the music, the dancers who filled the floors of clubs like the Warehouse, the fashion trends that emerged, and the physical spaces (studios, juice bars, clubs, and record stores) that sustained the scene. Relying primarily on oral history interviews, with plenty of basis in

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ethnomusicology and gender theory, Salkind constructs a historical account of house music in Chicago that is cohesive and comprehensive without being fixated on the drug scenes. Salkind sets the scene of the Disco Demolition at Comiskey Park in Chicago and the broader cultural narratives of homophobia surrounding disco at the time. The two main clubs in Chicago house history, The Warehouse and The Music Box, receive a thorough examination with thorough analysis of Frankie Knuckles and Ron Hardy.

The second half of Salkind’s book deals with contemporary issues related to Chicago house music and queer spaces. Of particular highlight is the final chapter, “Dancing in Brave Spaces.” Salkind constructs an autoethnographic account of learning to dance in the Chicago house styles, balanced with oral histories of social dancers in Chicago’s queer of color undergrounds. Salkind’s work is a worthy a template for how to write a multifaceted music history text that focuses on a specific city, and Do You Remember House? is a worthy example for what a truly extensive history of Detroit House music could look like.

Detroit electronic music has been represented in scholarly work as well. Carla Vecchiola (University of Michigan-Dearborn) has contributed several pieces that stand out and were of great help to my work. In her article, “Submerge in Detroit: Techno’s Creative Response to Urban Crisis,” Vecchiola subverts the narrative of Detroit as “urban failure” by examining the success and resilience of Submerge Records.¹⁰ For Vecchiola, Submerge is an example of “grassroots urban revitalization.” Grassroots is a key word here as much of the urban renewal endeavors in many cities, Detroit included, have been spearheaded by outside interests, gentrifying areas and reaping the spoils. Vecchiola finds that Submerge was a response to the difficulties that Mike

Banks and Jeff Mills faced in working with other record distribution and manufacturing companies. Vecchiola also points out that Submerge helped many smaller labels in Detroit, some of which were struggling with the business side of producing music. Submerge also served as a template and inspiration for independent labels and distributors in Europe, Japan, and Australia.

Submerge is legendary in Detroit, after starting in a basement in 1992 the company has become a staple of the electronic music community in Detroit. Today the company distributes Detroit records domestically and internationally, operates a physical record store, and houses Exhibit 3000, a historical exhibit dedicated to the city’s techno tradition. Although musical analysis is not the focus of her work, Vecchiola points out some general musical differences between house and techno, and that both genres are made in Detroit and Chicago. These two revelations were key in the construction of my chapter, “When Techno was House.”

Perhaps the most central text that has influenced my analysis of electronic music performances, Mark Butler’s Playing With Something That Runs focuses on DJ, laptop, and other types of electronic music performance. Butler takes an analytical and ethnographic approach, using interviews with musicians and DJs as well as analysis of their techniques, aesthetics, and performances. His work fights against the trope that DJs and laptop musicians are just “checking their e-mails” on stage. Butler offers several useful concepts that inform my analysis of Stacey Hale’s DJ performance.

Part of the problem with viewing electronic performances is that it is often unclear what performers are doing. Audiences cannot see the laptop screens or MIDI controllers that are in use, so it would not be clear that a DJ was improvising on the fly rather than executing a preplanned

playlist. Improvisation is a central interest of Butler’s; though most often associated with styles like jazz, improvisation plays an important role in just about every style of electronic music. The degree to which performances are improvised can vary depending on the context of the performance and the gear being used, but most performances are some mixture between the two. Butler’s work is important and valuable because it emphasizes the interaction between people and technology, without giving primacy to either.

In *Discographies: Dance, Music, Culture and the Politics of Sound*, Jeremy Gilbert and Ewan Pearson’s goal is to “respond, from the point of view of ‘cultural studies’ and ‘critical theory,’ to some of the effects which dance culture has generated over the last twenty years” (for reference this text was published in 1999 so the attendant time range would be 1979-1999). Much of the text has a philosophical bent, for example Plato, Barthes, Kant, and Derrida are all tied into discussion about the metaphorical role of the voice in music. Techno and house get attention directly in chapter three, “The Metaphysics of Music,” in which the authors describe how house, techno, and selected sub-genres make unique aesthetic choices that upset the typical priorities of music in the west. Additionally, Pearson and Gilbert muse on the different ways in which the musics push the listener to “jouissance,” a term adopted from Roland Barthes’s meaning, more or less, ecstasy. The musics may not all sound the same but they seem to share a common, “metaphysical” destination.

Methodology

In addition to the sources listed above, I have taken several different methodological approaches in my work here. First, I had the honor of interviewing Stacey “Hotwaxx” Hale, who was incredibly gracious with her knowledge and her time. Throughout my work, primary source interviews play a large role, especially in the discussion of Hale and Ken Collier. My interview style was informed by ethnographic interview methods and strategies outlined by Barbara Sherman Heyl in the *Handbook of Ethnography* and Amanda Coffey in *Doing Ethnography*, both of which were integral to the way I framed my questions and conducted the interview. In addition, I consulted print interviews from a variety of dance music and LGBTQ-centered publications, and a panel discussion hosted by the Michigan Electronic Music Collective (MEMCO) at the University of Michigan, which featured Ms. Hale. I also analyze a live performance of Hale’s (available on YouTube) and have created a listening/watching guide for the performance.

For my research on Ken Collier, several sources proved useful. The archive of the Detroit Sound Conservancy featured an interview and DJ set of Collier’s. I also used SoundCloud to find a DJ set of Collier’s from the ‘90s and utilized the user comments to investigate how his work continues to resonate. Although there is not an abundance of video from Club Heaven, there are a few that I have referenced and cited that will help the reader develop a picture of what a night out at Heaven might have been like.

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Another important part of this thesis is the analysis of house and techno records. I use harmonic analysis and also examine the timbral choices the producers make (with synths, drum sounds, etc.) in order to explore the ways in which house and techno from Detroit distinguish themselves in practice. My analysis is supplemented by consulting Hale and interviews with Mike “Mad Mike” Banks, where they offer their conceptions of what distinguishes techno and house, as well as the timeline of the divergence of these two genres.

I have chosen to refrain from using Western notation throughout this study. This choice reflects the fact that Western notation does not lend itself to describing what happens during a DJ set. DJing, after all, is not a music-making activity that requires reading music; there isn’t a music stand or sheet music to be found during most DJ performances, unless the DJ is accompanied by live musicians, something Hale explores in her group, Nyumba Muziki, where she DJs alongside string players and other instrumentalists. These types of performances are outliers, however. Most club nights consist of a DJ, their equipment, a soundsystem, and the audience. When discussing music production, I have opted to follow Rick Snoman’s strategy in the Dance Music Manual, and use the MIDI piano roll in lieu of standard Western notation. While Western notation is able to depict much of what happens in the course of a house track (e.g., drum patterns, chords, melody), the MIDI piano roll is the lingua franca of modern electronic music producers and is able to convey much of the same information as Western notation (e.g., pitch, rhythm, harmony, volume). Readers who are familiar with Western notation but unfamiliar with reading MIDI should be able to catch on quickly to reading “the grid” of the MIDI piano roll. Additionally, my choice to notate house

drum patterns in MIDI follows the University of Indiana’s use of MIDI to depict drum patterns in popular music.\textsuperscript{15}

Some writers opt to use Electronic Dance Music (EDM) as a catch-all term for electronic styles, including house and techno. While on its face the term “EDM” is accurate enough—after all, house and techno are electronic music styles made primarily for the dance floor—I find it is important to discuss house and techno as specific entities. House and techno have their own distinct (but related) histories and sounds. Using “EDM” to describe techno and house music obscures their unique influences and histories. Additionally, the term “EDM” has come to describe various sub-genres of electronic music, some of which bear little-to-no resemblance to house music and pull from a completely different field of influences. To add to the ambiguity of the term, “EDM” is often used as an analouge for “popular music” of the electronic variety, sometimes sounding like a poppier (Hale calls it “mayonaise”) version of house and/or techno, but could just as easily be referring to dubstep, trap, or drum’n’bass. In certain instances there may be utility in using EDM, and the metamorphasis of the term to encompass a variety of musical styles is certainly worthy of examination, but in the case of my work I have opted to avoid the term.

CHAPTER 2: FLOOR PLAN

The Genesis of House in Chicago

“\textit{I view house music as disco’s revenge}” -Frankie Knuckles\textsuperscript{1}

Although my work is centered around Detroit, the story of house music begins in Chicago. Understanding the genre’s origin story will provide context for later discussions about house music in Detroit. The two cities and the electronic music they are known for, house and techno, are inextricable from each other, so a cursory history of house music’s genesis in Chicago is a necessary starting point.

Looking back to the quote that precedes this chapter, one might ask “\textit{Why did Frankie Knuckles view house as disco’s revenge?}” Well, on July 12, 1979, Chicago radio DJ Steve Dahl, a transplant from Detroit, carried out the so-called “Disco Demolition Derby” in the middle of a double-header baseball game between the Chicago White Sox and the Detroit Tigers at Chicago’s Comiskey Park. As part of the promotion efforts, fans were offered discount tickets to the games if they brought a disco record to be sacrificed. Despite the stated target of disco, patrons brought soul and R&B records as well. To Vince Johnson, an usher during the game who would eventually become a producer of house music, it seemed that any black genre was eligible for incineration. As Dahl took to center field, dressed in army fatigues and riding in a camouflaged Jeep, the militaristic overtones were clear. After the detonation of more than 100,000 records, hundreds of intoxicated—seemingly all white—fans rushed the field to revel in the ashes of black music. The

\textsuperscript{1} Bill Brewster and Frank Broughton, \textit{Last Night a DJ Saved My Life: The History of the Disc Jockey} (New York: Grove Press, 1999), 312.
situation was out of control and the field was ruled unfit for play, causing the second game to be forfeited to the Tigers.²

The underlying racism and homophobia that fueled such an aggressive and public display, reminiscent of the Nazi book burnings in the 1940s, was thinly veiled beneath a supposedly “race-neutral” critique of disco music and culture. Although Dahl claims he was not motivated by racism and homophobia, we must consider that disco is a genre incubated within the primarily gay and black club scenes in New York and other major cities. The “disco culture” Dahl sought to destroy was invariably of color and gay, and the pile of records in center field served as an effigy for those communities.³

Disco’s popularity in the late ‘70s threatened the white Chicago rock scene culturally and economically. Disco records topped the charts and rock radio stations, including WDAI in Chicago, had started programming all disco formats. Disco was rapidly growing and the rockers felt the squeeze, opting to ignore the music industry practices and machinations that promoted commercial disco while taking aim at the sound and culture of the music. Micah Salkind writes that “as disco skyrocketed in popularity, critics and promoters alike noticed that whitened, hetero-masculine rock music and culture could be gainfully promoted as its antithesis.”⁴ For most, the message of the Disco Demolition was clear: the incursions of disco into white popular culture would not be tolerated. The cultural fallout of the event resulted in a severe waning of major label and radio support of disco.⁵ It seemed, at least for the moment, that disco was dead.

³ Salkind, 26.
⁴ Salkind, 25.
⁵ Salkind, 32.
House music emerged from the underground against this backdrop of “discophobic” displays from rock radio DJs and broader cultural hostility. In early 1977, Knuckles was recruited to DJ for a new club opening in Chicago called The Warehouse, which would become the namesake of house music despite only being open for a few years. In March of that year, Knuckles left New York, where he had been DJing alongside Larry Levan at a gay bath house called the Continental Baths and at a more traditional club named SoHo, to play the opening two nights at The Warehouse. Levan was originally contacted for the gig but was unavailable, focused on his new club in New York and planning the concept for what would become the Paradise Garage club, so he recommended Knuckles for the job.

Both nights at The Warehouse were a success and Knuckles ended up with a permanent gig, sweetened by financial interest in the club. Within a few years, both Knuckles and the club were famous in Chicago and the name “house music” was being used as short hand for “music played at The Warehouse.” Despite the 600-person capacity of the club, on a good night one could see as many as 2,000 packed into the famously dark, repurposed factory space. The patrons were almost all black and the majority were gay (both sexes). The scene of a majority black gay club with a black gay DJ at the helm led some in the wider Chicago club community to brand the Warehouse and Knuckles as “fag music,” continuing, and arguably making more overt, the strains of anti-gay rhetoric leveled toward disco.

6 Reynolds, 16-17.
7 Brewster and Broughton, 314.
8 Brewster and Broughton, 314.
9 Brewster and Broughton, 313-317.
Nights at The Warehouse were marathon sessions. Patrons would arrive around midnight on a Saturday and, fueled by the music’s energy (as well as stimulants and hallucinogens), the party wouldn’t stop until midday on Sunday.\(^1\) At first, Knuckles was spinning disco and R&B records from labels like SalSoul and Philadelphia International, but, by 1981, the post-Demolition decline in disco and dance music output, especially from the major labels, created a shortage of new material.\(^2\) Knuckles recounts that “by ‘81, when they had declared that disco is dead, all the record labels were getting rid of their dance departments, or their disco departments, so there was no more up tempo dance records, everything was downtempo. That’s when I realized that I had to

\(^{11}\) Reynolds, 17.
\(^{12}\) Brewster and Broughton, 316.
start changing things to keep feeding my dancefloor. Or else we would have had to end up closing the club.”

Thus, house music was born of necessity and required both ingenuity and experience to execute. With the help of Erasmo Riviera, a friend who was studying audio engineering, Knuckles began experimenting with a reel-to-reel tape machine to make new edits of older music. With a keen and creative ear for what would work on the dance floor, Knuckles extended intros and breaks, re-arranged song sections, and added additional sounds that breathed new life into records that many perceived to be dead. He became proficient in his re-editing technique and in the early ‘80s he was playing his new edits at clubs and parties alongside post-disco records from New York and obscure Italo-disco imports from Italy and other European countries. In addition to tape techniques, Knuckles employed DJing techniques he had picked up in New York, using cutting, mixing, segues, and sound effects to weave an eclectic sonic tapestry and create one-of-a-kind moments on the dance floor. Although cultivated earlier in New York, these techniques were new to Chicago audiences.

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13 Brewster and Broughton, 318.
14 Broughton and Brewster, 317; Reynolds, 17.
As the tape edits morphed into increasingly complex remixes that supplemented familiar songs with completely new basslines, synth textures, and drum patterns, DJ technique was also undergoing a metamorphosis. The blossoming Chicago party scene offered regular events occurring at several clubs in the city. The competition to innovate in the DJ booth led to more complex techniques, like Ron Hardy’s dramatic EQing (cutting and reintroducing frequencies to emphasize certain moments in a song), signature sound effects such as Knuckles’s steam locomotive, and the incorporation of live drum machines into the DJ setups of Knuckles and Farley “Jackmaster” Funk. The novel sounds emanating from clubs like The Warehouse, The Loft, The Music Box, and The Playground inspired others to produce music of their own that emulated the mixes and re-mixes that they were hearing. In just a few years, the stylistic indicators of classic Chicago house music would codify into a recognizable genre that would see continued innovation.

15 Frankie Knuckles Foundation: [https://www.wbez.org/stories/what-was-it-like-to-dance-at-the-warehouse-club-in-chicago/5abf2722-abac-47ea-804e-1ff1ea154c00](https://www.wbez.org/stories/what-was-it-like-to-dance-at-the-warehouse-club-in-chicago/5abf2722-abac-47ea-804e-1ff1ea154c00).
by producers from Detroit, New York, and Europe. These indicators included a rhythm track (likely made with a Roland 909 drum machine) consisting of a pounding four-on-the-floor kick drum (a.k.a. Farley’s Foot, influenced by disco kick drum patterns), drum machine claps on beats two and four, sizzling syncopated hi-hats emphasizing the “and” of every beat, synthesizer chords, powerful synth bass, and “diva” vocals—all typically delivered at around 120 beats per minute.

![Figure 2.3. Basic 2 house drum pattern, expressed in MIDI notation by author.](image)

“On and On”

“On and On,” by Jesse Saunders and Vince Lawrence, is widely recognized as the first house track released on vinyl. Written in 1983 and released a year later via Saunders’ newly minted Jes Say label, the records were pressed at Precision Printing Plant, Chicago’s only record pressing plant at the time. The plant had been recently purchased by Larry Sherman, who would go on to found the Trax record label in reaction to the demand for house music. Trax would become an important label in Chicago house music, releasing numerous landmark records, but its reputation

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16 Reynolds, 17-18; Broughton and Brewster, 321-327.
17 This list is my own. For a great explanation of the elements of classic Chicago house and several popular subgenres see “The ingredients of a classic house track,” Vox, youtube video: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FrqIA0PpAy8&t=499s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FrqIA0PpAy8&t=499s).
18 Reynolds, 17-18; Broughton and Brewster, 321-327.
was tarnished by shady deals, poor quality pressings, and mistreatment of artists, many of whom were foundational to the development of house as a genre.  

“On and On” sparked many upcoming Chicago producers, but the reason is not exactly flattering. Revolving around a sample of “Space Invaders,” by the Australian group Player One (a song based on the music for the arcade game, Space Invaders) and a basic rhythm track, “On and On” was a hit despite its rough mix and unpolished production technique. The volume levels of the vocals vary, the transitions are choppy, and the overall mix sounds more like a demo than a fleshed-out production. But in spite of its flaws, it remains a milestone track. Chicago house producer Marshall Jefferson (responsible for the dance floor anthem “Move Your Body”) explains, “That’s what inspired everybody about Jesse. They saw somebody make it big but not be great. When Jesse did his stuff, everybody said, ‘Fuck, I could do better than that!’”

Despite Jefferson’s dig at “On and On,” it remains a touchstone for many DJs and producers. The Godmother of House music, Detroit’s Stacey “Hotwaxx” Hale, cites the influence and popularity of “On and On.” The use of a recognizable sample, one that young people would likely know from the video game, provided a relatability and familiarity to the house music style that was developing. The ascending bass line that anchors the song is an extremely catchy earworm, which imitated disco bass lines using octave jumps throughout—a motif that can be heard in the chorus of Abba’s “Gimmie, Gimmie, Gimmie” and The Jackson 5’s “Blame It On the

21 Brewster and Broughton, 327.
22 Author’s interview with Stacey Hale, see Appendix.
Boogie,” two popular disco tracks from the late ‘70s. Instead of saving the most exciting part of the bass line for the chorus, Saunders’s use of the repeating octave bass throughout the song signaled a departure from pop/disco conventions.

Figure 2.4. Author’s MIDI transcription of the eight-bar bass loop from “On and On.”

While “On And On” opened the door for subsequent waves of house producers, it was Jamie Principle’s work that set the high-water mark for production. Born Byron Walton, Principle’s background in drums and sound engineering resulted in crisp, well-crafted productions that often pulled from a different field of influences than disco-indebted tracks of the era, such as Marshall Jefferson’s “Move Your Body” (1986), Chip E’s “Like This” (1986), or Farley Jackmaster Funk’s “Love Can’t Turn Around” (1986). Principle’s musical guideposts of Prince, David Bowie, the Human League, and Depeche Mode informed classics such as “Your Love” (1985) and “Waiting On My Angel” (1986). The lush synth sounds that Principle chose are similar to Depeche Mode and Human Leaugue’s sound selections, Principle’s drum programming evokes Prince’s work with the Linn drum machine, and the vocals are reminiscent of Bowie’s “White Duke” era of soul. Principle’s tracks had been circulating on cassette tape years before being

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23 Brewster and Broughton, 327.
pressed to vinyl, before the creation of “On and On,” and by the time “Your Love” and “Waiting On My Angel” made it to wax they already had a reputation among Chicago DJs.24

Following Saunders’s and Principle’s landmark tracks, house music production exploded in Chicago, resulting in a trail of hits including Lil’ Louis’s “French Kiss” (1989), JM Silk’s “Music Is The Key” (1985), and the first house record to reach number one on the UK charts, Steve Hurley’s “Jack Your Body” (1986). Almost immediately, Detroiters were in on the action as the music traveled via radio from stations like WBMX and WGCI, and through trips Detroit DJs and producers took to Chicago clubs and record stores. Thus, although the floorplan for house music was drawn in Chicago, a strong foundation would be built in Detroit.

24 Brewster and Broughton, 327.
CHAPTER 3: FOUNDATION

House Comes to Detroit

Theoretical Notes

Mark Butler conceptualizes DJ equipment as a series of “mediated interfaces,” a useful approach for understanding what it is that Hale and other DJs are doing beyond simply playing records. Interface, for Butler, denotes any equipment used to perform live, which, depending on the performer, could involve analog turntables, digital turntables, drum machines, synthesizers, mixers, laptop computers, and various MIDI controllers.\(^1\) Interfaces are described as “sites of possibilities, rather than as pieces of hardware that generate outcomes determined by their physical properties,” driving home the idea that human mediation is an essential feature of electronic music performance. Mediation, therefore, is understood as the dynamic relationship between the performer and the recorded sound.\(^2\) Furthermore, Butler identifies two “axes of mediation,” between the performer and the sound he or she creates and between the performer and the audience. In the example of Stacey Hale’s a live-streamed performance where there is no in-person audience (examined later in this chapter), the primary focus is on the first axis of mediation, the relationship between the performer and the sound being created.

Hans and Theo Bakker look at the DJ performance through a semiotic lens, arguing that DJing is an example of “the pervasive human ability to engage in symbolic communication and in meaning-making (i.e. semiosis).”\(^3\) Hale’s command of her equipment, knowledge of the


\(^{2}\) Butler, 72.

different venues and DJs, and use of evocative and powerful vocal samples makes her performance an enlightening case study that illuminates the intricacies of a DJ performance and bolsters the work of Butler, and Hans and Theo Bakker.

**Ken Collier: The Godfather**

“*Ken was our Larry Levan, our Frankie Knuckles, our Tee Scott, and Ron Hardy, all rolled into one.*” - Stacey “Hotwaxx” Hale, Godmother of House Music

There are few figures in the history of Detroit music that have been as loved, lauded, and revered as Ken Collier. Before his untimely death in 1996 due to a diabetic condition, undiagnosed for most of his life, Collier had cemented a legacy in the city of Detroit spanning nearly twenty-five years. More than half of his life was dedicated giving Detroit some of the most awe-inspiring DJ mixes, cultivating seminal clubs and spaces for the gay community, and mentoring of two generations of influential Detroit DJs and producers including (but not limited to): Stacey Hale, Delano Smith, John Collins, Alan Oldham, Al Ester, Juan Atkins, Eddie Fowlkes, Kevin Saunderson, Kelli Hand, and Mike Huckaby. Throughout his life, he remained steadfastly dedicated to his community in Detroit, but Collier’s profile was starting to rise internationally just before his death, with a rousing set at the Tresor club in Berlin in 1995 and a forthcoming booking at that city’s Mayday festival.

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6 Marke B., ”Ken Collier: The Pivotal Figure of Detroit DJ Culture.”
In the years since his death, the narrative of techno and “The Belleville Three” have overshadowed Collier and other pioneering progressive/house Detroit DJs. Only passing mention of Collier is made in Brewster and Broughton’s Last Night a DJ Saved My Life and Reynolds’s Energy Flash. When Collier is mentioned, he is situated within larger discussions surrounding early techno, framing Collier as a supporter of the nascent genre and as an influential Detroit figure but ultimately placing the focus upon on those he mentored. Observers more attuned to Detroit’s DJ history—like Techno Rebels author Dan Sicko, Detroit Sound Conservancy founder Carleton Gholz, and veteran DJs in the Detroit scene like Alan Oldham, John Collins, and Stacey Hale—have pointed to Collier’s direct influence on techno and house music in Detroit and his legacy as a mentor in more depth.8 Hopefully, this chapter will bolster efforts to recognize Collier as a central figure of the history of electronic music and DJ culture in Detroit and acknowledge his impact beyond the early days of techno.

It is true that Collier mentored the young Detroit techno scene’s DJs and producers, taking trips to Chicago to see Frankie Knuckles, and it is true that he was one of the first to play early techno tracks. At Todd’s, a bowling-alley-turned-dance-club owned by an interracial gay couple and one of many clubs where Collier held residencies, Collier broke (played for the first time) songs like Model 500’s (aka Juan Atkins) “No UFO’s” and Derrick May and Michael James’s “Strings of Life.”9 Collier certainly deserves to be mentioned in the origin story of techno, but that shouldn’t obscure the fact that house music was at the core of his taste as a DJ. In a 1995 interview

8 Gholz, “The search for Heaven,” and Sicko, 31; see list of interviews in appendix for more commentary from Detroit DJs.
with *KICK!* Magazine, a black LGBT publication, Collier points to Knuckles and The Warehouse as a primary influence, as well as Larry Levan and Tee Scott, two DJs important to the house music scene in New York. As for his tastes in house music, Collier says “I like strong, vocal, underground sounds. Not—there aren’t really many male, good singers, most of them just do a lot of screaming. There are a few…But there are a lot of females, strong female house artists always. If she’s screaming the right note, then the message usually gets in.”

Collier was born on January 9th, 1949, to parents who had migrated separately from the south to Detroit as teenagers. The household was steeped in the legacy of two important Detroit musical traditions: the Black Bottom neighborhood, known for its thriving jazz scene through the 1930s and 1950s; and Berry Gordy’s Motown records, which became one of the most important record labels of all time. Another big musical influence in the house was gospel. According to Ken’s brother Greg, who also became a great DJ in his own right, their mother was a “traditional Christian” who didn’t care for secular-sounding gospel music. While Ken sang in choir, he also soaked up the gospel music that straddled the line between secular and sacred. This early influence of gospel shows in Ken’s perception of music’s purpose: for Collier, “in music there should always be a message…it should leave you with something.” The titles of some of his favorite house tracks at the time of the *KICK!* interview, “Testify,” “Rejoice,” and “Rise to the Top,” clearly incorporated gospel messages and sounds.

Collier’s start as a professional DJ came in 1973 with an organization called True Disco, which included two other foundational DJs on Detroit’s gay (and primarily black) club circuit,

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10 Samson, “Legendary House.”
11 Marke B., “Ken Collier.”
12 Samson, “Legendary House.”
Morris Mitchell and Renaldo White. However, Greg Collier remembers Ken playing records as far back as 1969 and there is documentation of Ken playing at house parties like Zana’s Place, put on by Zana Smith, in the years preceding his time with the True Disco crew. In the early ’70s, DJ technique was quite different from what we see in the DJ booth today. The technology was limited, the now-standard setup of two turntables and a mixer wouldn’t be utilized to mix records together and play without breaks until the middle of the decade. In the earlier years, DJing involved simply playing one record after another with breaks in between, with the DJ talking over the microphone to introduce the next record and recap which one just finished.

Collier was the first Detroit DJ, and one of the first nationwide, to present a continuous mix of music. Greg Collier recounts Ken using the mixing technique early on in Chicago: “Even when we started doing it in Chicago, everybody played one record, then they played another record, there was no mixing and continuous music. When we started doing that, it just opened up a whole different door.” Even before Knuckles migrated from New York to work at The Warehouse, Collier had showed Chicago crowds the potential of this groundbreaking mixing technique.

Collier perfected his technique of mixing two records together to cut out breaks between the music while he was the resident DJ of the Chessmate, an after-hours gay club located near Palmer Park, one of Detroit’s gay neighborhoods, and subsequently at Detroit’s Studio 54. From

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13 Marke B., “Ken Collier.”
14 Stacey Hale interview, see Appendix.
16 Not to be confused with the club of the same name that existed in New York.
there, Collier DJed at several important clubs in the city. There was Todd’s, the Downstairs Pub (run by Zana Smith of Zana’s Place), the Rich and Famous, and Bookie’s.

But the club Collier is most often associated with is Club Heaven. Located at 7 Mile Road and Woodward Avenue, it was a quintessential after-hours establishment (not open before 2 AM) and featured Collier as a longstanding resident DJ. The club served a primarily black and gay audience, although crowds were mixed, sometimes featuring famous celebrities of the day (including a young Madonna). The legacy of the club is multi-faceted. From its opening in 1984 until its closure a decade later, Heaven served an important function within the gay community in Detroit, a community in the throes of the AIDS epidemic.

Damon Percy, head of Detroit Sound Conservancy’s campaign to restore the club’s sound system, remembers the importance of Club Heaven to the community. “The club was legendary. It was a safe space where we could be free and be who we wanted to be…At that time during the early ‘90s it was still not as open as it is now…we were taking that step to be free.”17 Inside Heaven it was a sanctuary of self-expression, but getting to and leaving from the club could be risky. Percy recalls: “This was East 7 Mile and Woodward. You could still get beat down. We had to fight a lot, too. When you came out in the sunlight, people going to church would see you. Straight people were sometimes waiting to jump you.”18

For its patrons, the risk was unquestionably worth it. Part of the reason was Club Heaven’s sound system, a state-of-the-art setup unrivaled by anything else in Detroit at the time. Mike Fotias, president of Audio Rescue (a company that now provides sound for the Detroit Jazz Festival and

18 Marke B., “Ken Collier.”
the dance music festival Movement), explains that, at the time, “you couldn’t just order a complete system like now. Heaven’s sound was built up brilliantly, level by level, from different elements that you really had to seek out. That’s why the effect was so memorable.” The powerful and well-designed sound system was at the core of the experience; other clubs utilized systems geared toward rock acts while Heaven’s system was designed specifically for the music that DJs at the club were playing. This process of building up a custom sound system for a dance club and the music that was played there was similar to what Alex Rosner and David Mancuso had created at The Loft in New York City during the mid-’70s. The precise and powerful speaker system set Club Heaven apart from other nightlife experiences in the city. The club represents another example of new genres and new spaces spurring technological innovation and adaptation.

The state-of-the-art system and vibrant community coalesced in another defining feature of the Club Heaven experience, “The Circle.” The Circle was, in part, exactly what it sounds like. A crowd would form a ring on the dance floor and dancers would take turns in the middle, dancing in early kicking style, a dynamic move associated with vogue-style dance developed in the black gay community in the early ‘80s and popularized by Madonna with her 1990 hit “Vogue.” In a video from a night at Club Heaven in 1991, available on Youtube, The Circle can be seen in action and Collier can be heard DJing and MCing the proceedings of the dance contest, making sure that security gives the circle enough space, polling the crowd about performances, and announcing the

19 Marke B., “Ken Collier.”
21 Madonna attended a few nights at Club Heaven, along with other celebrities like Dennis Rodman and Bobby Brown. Heaven was renowned as a destination dance club, even for the celebrity elite; Marke B., “Ken Collier.”
contestants.\textsuperscript{22} Dancers take turns for rounds of about twenty to thirty seconds, and several of the contestants are clearly adept “kickers,” displaying athleticism, flexibility, and keen sense of rhythm as the kicks accentuate the hand claps on beats two and four of the music. The contestant called “Skyscraper” is particularly dynamic, with his long legs and tall, wiry frame the nickname is fitting, and his long limbs make his kicks all the more dramatic (see figure 3.1). From the DJ booth, Collier would communicate to the crowd by playing certain records that would indicate it was time to circle up and let dancers show off.\textsuperscript{23} This musical signaling shows the syncretic relationship between DJ and dancefloor that developed at the club. Collier was the maestro, and the crowd his orchestra.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image}
\caption{A dancer performing at Club Heaven.}
\end{figure}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{22} DJ Tony Peoples, “Club Heaven 1991 in Detroit 7 mile and Woodward Ken Collier Part 2 of 2,” youtube video. \url{https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FEvYBw0Qpc\&t=45s}.
\item \textsuperscript{23} Marke B., “Ken Collier.”
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
Figure 3.1. Dancer, “Skyscraper” in “The Circle,” at Club Heaven, 1991.24

It seems that for Collier, this feel for the crowd was innate, or at least it felt that way to him. On the role of the DJ, Collier said: “DJs are the performers, entertainers, and you have all these folks that you have to keep dancing all night long. So, you have to become a mind reader, you have to look out to your audience, see what they’re doing…You have to have the ability to know what to do. I’ve always had that.”25 Emphasizing Collier’s years of experience and his impact as a DJ, Dan Sicko writes: “Collier played through decades of parties and clubs, using his knack for knowing exactly what to play to transform simple nights out into religious experiences.”26 The musical and spiritual alchemy that Collier was able to engineer from the DJ booth shows that the moniker of “The Godfather” was hardly hyperbole.

According to Collier himself, and confirmed by Stacey “Hotwaxx” Hale, Collier was given the “Godfather” moniker by none other than The Electrifying Mojo.27 Mojo was a trailblazing radio DJ, appearing on several Detroit stations through the 1970s and ’80s, and his “Midnight Funk Association” segment became a signature. Membership to the association even came with membership cards. Described by Juan Atkins as “an underground cult hero,” Mojo’s shows were adventurous both musically and programmatically. He also opened his platform to younger DJs (both Collier and Hale made mixes that Mojo would play on his shows in the early ’80s), granting them, and the new music they were breaking, a serious endorsement. Having Mojo play one of the music

24 Photo by DJ Tony Peoples, video available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FEvYBVw0Qpc.
26 Sicko, 31.
your tracks or mixes was the ultimate Detroit seal of approval. Having Mojo give Collier the moniker of “The Godfather” was even weightier.28

The title of “The Godfather” works on two levels. First, Collier was extremely accomplished and skilled in his own right, widely regarded as the city’s foremost DJ during his career. Derrick May recounts being blown off the decks by Collier during a party called the Pink Poodle, at the Downstairs Pub in 1981: “We’re playing 7-inch singles on decks with the rubber mats still on them, not one person is dancing. Ken Collier arrives, puts a real slip mat on, cues up a record, pulls back and boom. In ten seconds, the floor was full.”29 Secondly, Collier’s legacy of mentorship is vast and deep. Famously gracious to younger DJs, Collier would often let up-and-coming DJs hone their craft during his sets. His brother Greg recalls: “That’s the type of DJ Ken was. He opened up his heart and his turntables and would let everybody come in there and play at his clubs when he played. He gave everybody an opportunity. And I think that’s something that he should always be remembered as.”30 The sheer number of careers that he helped flourish is impressive—even more impressive is that many of his mentees went on to make history themselves, including the Godmother of House, Stacey “Hotwaxx” Hale, the subject of the next section of this chapter.

Delano Smith is another example of a DJ that Collier mentored who would go on to make distinct contribution to Detroit’s electronic music legacy. Smith started DJing before the inception of techno in Detroit; in 1981 he was holding a residency at Club Luomo at only eighteen years old. Although Smith was, and is, a central figure to the scene, he is not included in the mainstream

29 Brewster and Broughton, 350.
30 Gholz, “#RecordDET Interview: Greg Collier.”
histories of the origins of techno in Detroit despite Atkins and others citing Smith as an inspiration.\(^{31}\) His omission from popular accounts of techno history could be, at least in part, due to his five-year hiatus from music in the mid-‘80s, just as techno was starting to come into its own (he started to notice the saturation of new DJs in the scene was affecting his ability to find paying gigs). Once Smith returned to DJing in the early ‘90s, he more than made up for lost time as he honed his craft and added music production to his skillset. In 2002, Smith was featured on a landmark compilation with tracks from noted Detroit colleagues like Norm Talley, Eddie Fowlkes, Rick Wilhite, and Theo Parrish titled “Detroit Beatdown (Volume One).” This compilation, and Smith’s track, “Metropolis,” would show that Detroit producers had range beyond fast and hard techno tracks. Slow, melodic, and brooding, the “Detroit Beatdown” sound was another novel iteration of techno and house pioneered by Detroiter.s\(^{32}\)

For Smith, seeing Collier perform was the impetus to learn the fundamental DJ techniques of mixing and beatmatching. During Smith’s residency at Club Luomo, Collier would take the decks to close the night, which meant an opportunity for a young Smith to observe Collier up close. This experience was formative and since Smith encountered Collier on the “straight” scene, their relationship is a reminder that Collier’s influence extended beyond the gay club scene. Smith learned by observation and osmosis, but Collier also provided some direct technical advice. Smith recounts: “He taught me things that have stayed with me throughout my career. He told me to pitch

\(^{31}\) Here, “mainstream histories” refers to Brewster and Broughton’s *Last Night a DJ Saved My Life* and Simon Reynolds’s *Energy Flash*. These are the two of the most popular texts that address house and techno, among other electronic music genres.

down the record gradually when I was mixing and he taught me to keep the volume way down in my headphones, just enough in my cue ear to match the mix with the floor.”

Much of Collier’s work behind the decks remains on tape in personal collections like that of DJ and archivist Cynthia “DJ Cent” Travis, not yet fully digitized and available to the public. There are a few publicly available Ken Collier DJ mixes on YouTube, SoundCloud, and in the archive of the Detroit Sound Conservancy. Listening to the sets that are available reveals Collier’s penchant for powerful, soul-stirring, and often euphoric vocal house, nearly all of which features female vocals. Smooth mixing and blending technique accentuates stellar track selection. Many listeners left comments on a recording of Collier at Heaven in the early ‘90s that is on SoundCloud. User “fungamesandplay” asked for a track identification for one of the songs in the mix, an indicator that Collier’s taste still resonates with modern audiences. For others, like Duane Folmar, listening to the set transported him back to attending nights at Club Heaven. He commented at around nine minutes in that “The kicking circle would be in full effect right now!” DJ Eddie Flud emphasized Collier’s mixing ability: “No where else did you get exposed to the genius of Ken's Mixing capabilities. No Where else where the tunes were A-one at all times! Yes Many Many Memories! Heaven! where you hear it no better!”

Though only the audio is available, one can imagine the fervor that Collier was able to work up in the club. A set played by Collier at Club Heaven from the early ‘90s provides a snapshot. Midway through the set, Collier can be heard interrupting the music to call security to the dance floor (a common occurrence when the crowd would incur on the space for The Circle).

33 Marke B., “Ken Collier.”
before diving right back into the mix.\textsuperscript{35} The set displays Collier’s ability to weave together various house sub-genres and present an array of emotional themes. There are moments of gospel choir breakdowns, classic house directives to “wave your hands” and “move your body,” melancholic and yearning deep house, and a downright raunchy sequence at the end of the set featuring “Short Dick Man,” by 20 Fingers, and “Who’s Dick is This,” by Princess Di.

Taken as a whole, the set is a potent blend of the sacred and profane. Salkind notes this sort of blend in the work of Knuckles, stating that the “sonic juxtaposition of the sacred (gospel, spirituals) and the profane (r&b, funk, and disco) became central to the ways that house people were worshipping under Knuckles’s musical supervision.”\textsuperscript{36} Collier displayed this ability as well, and, as in the example above, explored both ends of the spectrum within a set. For Collier, his experiences at church held an influence in the way he presented music, saying that “I’ve always been involved with the church for many many many years. Maybe that’s why it lets me feel, let’s me feel what I feel with certain records. The way they’ve been delivered that the gospel is right there in me all the time. I’ve always had it, probably always will have it, till I die.”\textsuperscript{37} Knuckles put the comparison of house music and church as such: “For me, it’s definitely like church. Because when you’ve got three thousand people in front of you, that’s three thousand different personalities. And when those three thousand personalities become one personality, it’s the most amazing thing. It’s like that in church... when things start peaking, that whole room becomes one.”\textsuperscript{38}

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{35} “Ken Collier- Club Heaven, Detroit (early 90’s) Pt. 1,” Soundcloud recording, Deific Records, \url{https://soundcloud.com/deificrecords/ken-collier-club-heaven-pt1}.
  \item \textsuperscript{36} Salkind, 62.
  \item \textsuperscript{37} Ken Collier “Kick Interview.”
  \item \textsuperscript{38} Brewster and Broughton, 312.
\end{itemize}
There are ongoing efforts, by the Detroit Sound Conservancy and others, to preserve Collier’s legacy and that of Club Heaven. After Collier’s death, friends founded the Ken Collier Memorial Foundation in 1997 and would organize events, fundraise for diabetes-related causes, and put on concerts. The organization lasted for almost a decade, disbanding in 2004 under unclear circumstances.\(^3^9\)

Collier is one of the most consequential figures in Detroit DJ culture, the history of electronic music, and the history of gay clubs in the city of Detroit. As the sands of time continue to fall, it is imperative that observers continue to acknowledge the contributions and cultural importance of figures like Collier. It is unconscionable that a man with so much importance to the history of Detroit music is treated by some texts as a mere footnote to techno, when so many of those who were actually there to know him (including those who pioneered techno) have recounted the deep historical, musical, and cultural impact of “The Godfather” before, during, and after techno’s inception.

**Stacey Hale: The Godmother**

“I didn’t do it to be the first woman doing it, I did it because it was inside of me.”

- Stacey “Hotwaxx” Hale\(^4^0\)

Being first may not have been Stacey Hale’s motivation for learning the craft of DJing, but nonetheless she was, in fact, the first woman to play house music on the radio in Detroit. However, her legacy in the city goes well beyond breaking barriers on the airwaves. Hale has made an impact in just about every facet of the city’s house music scene and remains one of its premier DJs,

\(^3^9\) Gholz, “The search for Heaven.”
decades after she got her start. Hale once asked Ken Collier if there was a female DJ of his stature on the scene. He answered, “Oh, no Miss Stacey, not yet.” Hale replied that it would be her. Now recognized as the “Godmother” of House music, history has proven her prophetic.

From DJing at Detroit’s storied clubs and radio stations, to mixing and producing records, to reporting on Detroit music for *Billboard*, to creating educational programs for young women and organizing the landmark Detroit Regional Music Conference in the 1990s, Hale’s contributions are far-reaching, impactful, and enduring. I was lucky (and persistent) enough to interview Ms. Hale in 2020 and much of this chapter draws upon that interview (the full transcript is featured as the appendix). In addition to highlighting Hale’s career, an examination of one of her recent livestreamed performances offers the opportunity to explore the ways in which Hale’s performance demonstrates several theoretical concepts. Along with a detailed analysis of the first ten minutes of the performance, I expand on the Butler’s analysis of DJ equipment as “mediated interfaces” and Hans and Theo Bakker’s semiotic approach to analyzing a DJ performance.

Even before she saw Collier and the True Disco crew mixing records at the Chessmate in the late 1970s, a sixteen year-old Hale had worked out her own solution to the problem of pauses between songs when playing vinyl records. To provide a continuous flow of music for guests at her basement parties, she used a reel-to-reel tape machine to pre-record her track selections and edit out the silence in between records. This workaround showed initiative and ingenuity, especially for someone so young. The experimentation started after receiving a turntable and receiver at age twelve from her brother, Keith, her second eldest sibling who had returned home

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from military service in Vietnam. But the seeds of Hale’s interest in technology had been planted years earlier by seeing her eldest brother’s collection of records and audio components in the home. She was captivated by the equipment. She wasn’t allowed to touch any of it, but her brother would let her listen to his collection of jazz fusion records by the likes of Jean-Luc Ponty and Miles Davis.

After about a year of basement parties, Hale made it to the Chessmate and heard two records being mixed together. She remembers: “It was something I had been trying to figure out on my own for a long time. I had hooked up turntables to receivers, cassette players, attempting to create this, because I never wanted to hear silence or talking between songs. I had created this on reel-to-reel tapes, but this was live.” Hale made her way to the DJ booth that night to have a peek at the equipment and, by the next day, she had her own set of turntables and a mixer. The now-seventeen-year old Hale was, in her words, “on a mission” to master the new setup, but, despite her aptitude for electronics and experience making reel-to-reel edits, learning to mix records live didn’t happen instantaneously.

Hale became a regular in clubs like Todd’s and Club Heaven, watching DJs like Collier and Duane Bradley intently. Collier, in particular, took Hale under his wing. Early on, she remembers going to his apartment in northwest Detroit, which was filled to the brim with crates of records. There, Hale received informal private music lessons. “We would sit cross-legged on his shag carpeting, facing each other with the turntables between us,” she recalls. “And we would

43 Brown, “Stacey ’Hotwaxx’ Hale.”
44 Marke B., “Ken Collier.”
45 From personal interview with Stacey Hale.
go over every break, every change, every bit about those records and how they fit together.\textsuperscript{46} This type of intense study with the city’s preeminent DJ helped Hale hone her craft. In short order, she advanced from spinning records during other DJs’ breaks to playing marathon sets during all-female nights at Club Hollywood in the early ‘80s.\textsuperscript{47}

\begin{center}
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{image.png}
\end{center}

Figure 3.2. Collier and Hale, photograph from personal collection of Stacey Hale.\textsuperscript{48}

\textsuperscript{46} Marke B., “Ken Collier.”
\textsuperscript{48} Available from https://daily.redbullmusicacademy.com/2018/05/ken-collier.
The all-female club nights at Hollywood were unique events in a scene that was predominantly male. Indeed, they were an anomaly in Detroit at the time and, from accounts of DJ Sharon White, were also uncommon in New York. Hollywood provided a venue and receptive audience, allowing Hale to hone her mixing acumen, playing music from disco and R&B groups like Shalamar and Lenny Williams. Remembering those early days at Hollywood, she says, “We’d have 800 women in there and play from 12 midnight to 6 in the morning. I’d lock myself in the booth ‘cause I was still terrified…but I loved it.”

Club Hollywood was a worthy training ground, but Hale wanted to play for the predominantly male audiences at places like Club Heaven and Todd’s, where she was studying Bradley, Collier, and the rest of the True Disco crew. Her first opportunity came when Collier was too hungover from the previous night’s excesses to make his weekly Sunday gig at the club Times Square. The club’s promoter gave Hale the call and she delivered. Remembering that night, she said, “They would dance so hard the walls would sweat!”

Hale’s start in radio came in the early ‘80s at WLBS out of Mt. Clemens, MI, an affiliate of WBLS New York. The turntable setup at the station was difficult to manage. They were far apart and the only mixing console was the main mixing board, rather than the two-channel DJ mixer that would typically sit between the turntables. Hale remembers the experience of working in the space: “I had to figure out how to make these things blend by literally running all the way

50 Author’s interview with Stacey Hale.
Hale moved on to WGPR, where she played on the radio and appeared in television programming, one of the few DJs at the station to mix records. At the time, the older technique of DJs introducing and closing (announcing the track and artist again) over the microphone was still the standard for radio. An exception is the Hot Mix 5, who were actually mixing on WBMX. In 1985, Detroit station WJLB held the Motor City Mix DJ contest, with over six hundred competitors and a cash prize. Hale took first place. The contest was an important moment in the evolution of DJ technique, as the traditional model of DJs introducing and recapping records was shown to be poorly suited to live performance. It also gave a chance for mixing DJs to show off the dynamic techniques developed in the clubs while playing underground records to a wider, more commercial audience.

The win at the 1985 DJ contest led to more opportunities for Hale, including a post as a *Billboard* reporter for the Detroit metro music scene along with colleague John “Jammin” Collins. This was no small feat. Collier and others had been local reporters and the positions were generally reserved for respected, working DJs in the area. While reporting, Collins and Hale would travel to major music industry events like the Winter Music Conference (WMC) in Miami and the New Music Conference (NMC) in New York. While attending these events, they realized that there weren’t many other African American reporters from Detroit at the conferences. Because of this

52 Author’s interview.
disparity, the idea to hold a music conference in Detroit was born, although it would take until the early ‘90s for the Detroit Regional Music Conference (DRMC) to come to fruition.53

The DRMC was held annually for five years, 1992–1997, and featured a year-round, monthly newsletter focused on Detroit music and promoting the conference. While it was operating, the conference served as a meeting ground for Detroit artists and industry professionals. Collins recalls that it was at the DRMC where Mike Banks met Cornelius Harris, a partnership at Underground Resistance that continues to this day. There were a range of events at the conference: panel discussions and clinics featuring Moodymann, Carl Craig, K-Hand, Mark Kinchen, Scott Grooves, and others; dance showcases; and awards like “Best Local Dance Label,” “Best Club (Gay/Alternative Lifestyle),” and “Best House 12 inch” (referring to a twelve-inch vinyl record), categories that did not exist for the more mainstream Detroit Music Awards (see figure 3.3).54 In addition to the conference itself, the DRMC featured a variety of parties and events around Detroit.

The end of the DRMC can be attributed to several factors. First, Collins took a step back from the organization in the final two years after the passing of his longtime partner, leaving Hale and others had to take on more responsibility. Second, financial obligations started to strain the organization, exacerbated by unfounded suspicions that the leadership was profiting handsomely when in reality the conference ran on a shoestring budget. Finally, the event did not become mainstream, in part due to its emphasis on queer culture. Although the ultimate vision for the event as a mainstay in Detroit was not realized, the DRMC laid the groundwork for cultural events in

54 Morris, “The Untold Story of the Detroit Regional Music Conference.”
dance music like the Detroit Electronic Music Festival (now known as Movement) that would come later.\textsuperscript{55}

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image.png}
\caption{DRMC awards list, year unknown.\textsuperscript{56}}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{55} Morris, “The Untold Story of the Detroit Regional Music Conference.”
The DRMC’s demise was not the end of Hale’s involvement in the community. She has remained active as an educator, mentor, and organizer. She has been involved in educational events for non-profits like Girls Rock Detroit, serving as head instructor in music production and DJ curriculum for SPIN Inc, and has been featured on numerous panel discussions for major dance music publications like *Resident Advisor* and *Beatport*, and for local student groups like the University of Michigan’s Michigan Electronic Music Collective (MEMCO). In 2019, Hale and DJ Minx created the Sheometry Music Festival, a music and arts event featuring female artists and DJs.57

**Analysis: Hale’s Beatport Performance**

Stacey Hale’s recent livestreamed performance for Beatport’s video series, aptly titled, “The Residency with Seth Troxler: Teachers,” took place in February of 2020, focusing on black history. Troxler, Michigan native and popular DJ, hosted the series featuring panel discussions and DJ performances by Hale and other renowned DJs. Hale’s live performance offers the opportunity to analyze her approach to technique and equipment, while connecting her practice to helpful theoretical lenses. The type of close observation of the DJ manipulating equipment is usually not usually possible in a club setting, where the DJ equipment is obscured or sometimes not visible at all. Livestreams have therefore become a useful source for examining how DJs interact with the equipment, thanks to camera angles that allow for careful observation of their movements.

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I use Hale’s performance to explore Mark Butler’s concept of “mediated interfaces,” which, as mentioned earlier, is useful for understanding what it is that Hale and other DJs are doing beyond simply playing records. With recent controversy within the DJ community about the use of pre-recorded sets at major festivals, it would be easy for skeptics to write off DJing as the domain of no-talent hacks based on a few high profile examples. Hale herself is critical of pre-recorded sets. “They can’t even play,” she says. “So, it becomes a, you know, a fad. And I don’t know how many big timers out there like that have been caught playing CDs or something prerecorded. I haven’t caught ‘em, but there’s people that were there and saw that.” Tacit in

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59 Author’s interview, see Appendix.
Hale’s statement is that prerecorded sets devalue the work of skilled DJs, thus doing analysis of Hale’s DJ performance will help to counter the misconception that DJing is merely pressing play.

Hale’s long career as a DJ has meant adapting to new technologies and keeping older ones, like analog turntables and vinyl records, alive. Her current setup is an integration of the old and new, a pair of traditional analog turntable sits next to a pair of CDJs (the digital incarnation of a turntable developed in the early 2000s), accompanied by a laptop. Each one of these pieces of equipment and their respective controls serve as sites of possibility for performance and improvisation. DJs work with prerecorded material, but it is important to keep in mind that much of the DJ performance is not predetermined. On her own approach to playing a set, Hale tends toward improvisation rather than a predetermined selection of songs. She explains:

Maybe cause I’m old school I play from the hip. Not that I won’t study or shop or select some music I think should go well with this particular event. If there’s some things I definitely want to play, I make sure I have them they are available but I’m always going off the grid. There’s never been ever one time that I've ever played and said “These are the ten songs I’m playing and nothing else,” that’s ridiculous you know.\(^{60}\)

One of the issues with live performance of electronic music is that, to the layperson, the tactile movements of the DJ and the resultant changes in sound are not as obvious as watching someone play the guitar, for instance, where a direct connection can be observed between the guitarist moving his or her hands higher up the neck and the resulting higher in pitch. The mechanics of a DJ performance are much more obscured, sometimes by physical barriers (i.e., a DJ booth above a dancefloor), but even when the DJ’s equipment is visible, watching him or her manipulate knobs, sliders, or buttons on a MIDI controller does not register to the audience with

\(^{60}\) Author’s interview, see Appendix.
the same immediacy as watching an instrumentalist play. However, the same general principles are at work in both situations: physical action resulting in changes in sound.

In her live performances, Hale often accentuates the musical moments she creates with her physical movements. When she turns a knob to cut a frequency on the EQ or brings in the next record on a fader, there is often a performative gesture. It could be an emphatic head bob or a raised hand pumping the air as the build-up intensifies. Each DJ has their different expressions and mannerisms behind the decks. Some tend to play it cool while others are intensely physical. When trying to decipher what the DJ is doing, it is helpful to have a general sense of the layout of a mixer and the CDJs or vinyl decks. Knowing which controls are available and where they are on the equipment helps to make the connection between changes in sound and the physical movements of the DJ.

![Basic layout for a 2-channel mixer](image)

Figure 3.5. Basic layout for a 2-channel mixer.⁶¹

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Within the first few minutes of Hale’s performance, a wealth of technique is on display. She starts by triggering an a cappella vocal from one of her CDJs. After letting the vocal play for a few seconds, she begins to manipulate the start (cue) point of the sample. Eventually, a vocal snippet (“It’s in Detroit”) becomes looped while Hale mixes in a funky house instrumental from the other channel.

Hale uses the analog turntable as well, which requires more precise beat matching to keep in-time with the digital ones. With digital DJ decks, the equipment senses the BPM of each track and has controls for syncing the tracks to be mixed together. The DJ must still operate the faders to transition between songs, but on a digital setup much of the “work” of the DJ is done digitally.

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Mixing vinyl records means that the DJ cannot rely on digital aids for matching tempos or starting the record in time. Using both digital and analog machinery requires that the mixing of vinyl be even more precise; since the digital DJ decks are on-time, any error on the analog equipment will be particularly noticeable. During some of the transitions between vinyl and digital turntables, the camera angle allows us to see Hale beatmatching with the vinyl record, finding the first beat of a measure on the record and counting off to ensure that it will be synced up.

Hale uses a vocal sample from a previous interview in the Beatport series (between Troxler and Cornel West) over another pre-existing instrumental. She uses the digital turntables to loop portions of the vocal, highlighting phrases in the lyrics, such as “Freedom and radical love” and “R-O-O-T-S.” As the addition of the vocals gives the instrumental track a humanist and black power bent, Hale conveys a message while remixing existing material in the moment (see table 3.1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Musical Events</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1:10-1:25</td>
<td>Hale starts the a cappella vocal from the CDJ on her left. With the phrase “House music, tech, techno, across the board, funk, I could go on and on” The vocal sets the stage for the rest of the set, as an introduction it tells the audience expressly what to expect. At 1:22, Hale begins to manipulate the loop, changing the starting point and length of the looped phrases.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:25-1:45</td>
<td>The next phrase, “I know you from Detroit, so you gotta jumpstart it light,” becomes the looped phrase. Hale again manipulates the loop to highlight a smaller fragment of the vocal loop, “I know you from Detroit,” which eventually is whittled down to only “Detroit” being repeated.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:45-2:35</td>
<td>Hale brings in a funky, conga-heavy, house drum loop from the other CDJ on her right. At 2:10, she uses the EQ knobs for the left channel (“Detroit”) to make the vocal loop slightly less present in the mix.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:35-4:55</td>
<td>Hale moves over to the turntable and begins to beat match with a vinyl record. The turntable is not audible in the mix so the movement required to sync the vinyl record to the existing mix (you can watch Hale count beats with the record) does not have a noticeable “scratching” sound one would expect. This portion of the set features some quick mixing in between several elements, including a speech that calls for reparations and social justice (speaker unknown).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4:55-5:30</td>
<td>The auxillary elements are stripped away as Hale reduces the mix down to a melancholic, deep house groove centered around piano chords.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5:50</td>
<td>Hale mixes in a vocal sample of Dr. Cornel West, the portion of the vocal used is from an interview that took place as part of the Beatport “Teachers” series interview. This use of material from a previous interview in the series is a brilliant and keen reference. Hale also loops different parts of the vocal sample, in a similar fashion to the earlier instances of vocal loop manipulation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7:00</td>
<td>Hale mixes in a track with a prominent kick drum and bass line, signifying a shift to more up-tempo house music from the more laid back grooves that started the set.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.1. Listening guide for Hale’s Beatport performance.
Bakker and Bakker’s interpretation of the semiotic implications of a DJ performance is relevant here. Hale’s choice of the vocal samples, and especially which lyrics become the primary repeated phrases (“radical freedom and love,” “Detroit”), convey meaning upon an otherwise purely instrumental track. The vocal samples convey meaning in different ways: the introductory repeated phrases of “House, Techno” and “Detroit” help preface the DJ set by framing the musical space (genre) and the physical space (city of Detroit). Taking into account the broader context of the series, Hale chooses vocal samples that go along with the theme of black history and empowerment. Hale’s use of excerpts from the previous interviews in Beatport’s series recontextualizes vocals that were not intended as musical objects, using fragments and longer phrases to impart meaning upon the instrumental tracks, which are simultaneously being recontextualized as tracks with vocals.

Bakker and Bakker’s identification of DJing as a “situational” manifestation also becomes clear. “Situational,” in this case, means that a DJ performance does not occur in a vacuum. Rather, it is the result of a variety of cultural factors, including the venue, the crowd, and the context of the performance (e.g., themed DJ sets, festival vs. club performances, opener vs. headliner expectations). Several factors need to be taken into account to deliver a successful DJ set: the audience, the time of day, and the DJ that is performing before or after can all affect the track selection of the DJ. Before the performance, Hale took note of the other DJs on the bill. “I saw who the other DJs were they were on the ticket, which is fine, I think it was it was me, Delano (Smith), Norm (Talley), (DJ) Minx, and Eddie Fowlkes I think. And all of us can all sound very different.”
Throughout her performance, Hale uses material that is distinct to, and dependent on, the previous content in the Beatport livestreaming series, itself is part of a larger causal chain. Hale’s synthesis of the messages from West and others with house music, a genre rooted in the black community, creates a web of meaning that is accentuated by her skillful, and musical, operation of her equipment. Understanding the performance wholly thus requires that one investigate the context of the performance. Certainly, it is possible to enjoy the performance on a purely musical basis, but Hale’s set displays the ways in which DJs can manipulate sounds to a semiotic end.

This chapter has provided a historical narrative of Hale’s journey to become the Godmother of house music and, with examination of a recent live performance, shown the ways in which a DJ can “make music with music” and create intricate webs of meaning within a set. Hale’s adoption of new technologies and conservation of old ones, commitment to the craft, and continued involvement in the community continue to cement the title of “Godmother of House Music.”
CHAPTER 4: WHEN TECHNO WAS HOUSE

Genre Distinctions and Development

Distinguishing between house and techno is not as straightforward as it might seem. The development of the genres has resulted in two distinct styles that are recognizable to the initiated. But the lines between techno and house were blurry in the beginning and with the recent resurgence in popularity of hybrid styles like tech-house, the ongoing interchange between house and techno continues.¹ It is worthwhile to understand the historical and musical factors that have resulted in techno and house becoming distinct styles, but we must also consider the interaction and dialogue between the two, especially when discussing Detroit, a place where the genres have been, perhaps, the most conversant.

The origin of the term “techno” to describe the electronic music coming from Detroit dates to 1988 when Neil Rushton, an artist and repertoire agent (A&R) for Virgin records in the UK, helped put together a compilation album with tracks from Detroit producers titled Techno! The New Dance Sound of Detroit (see figure 4.1). The original title of the album was The House Sound of Detroit, but Juan Atkins’s track, “Techno Music,” prompted Rushton change the title of the album, shrewdly capitalizing on the marketing opportunity of a “new” genre tied to Detroit.² The compilation was likely conceived as an answer to the successful compilation of Chicago house music, released in 1986 by famed Chicago house label DJ International and London Records, titled The House Sound of Chicago (see figure 4.2). The similarities in the formatting of the name and

² Dan Sicko, Techno Rebels: Renegades of Electronic Funk, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010), 68.
the strategy of releasing a compilation based on genre and geography draw a strong connection between the two, despite being released on separate record labels.

Figure 4.1. Album cover for *Techno! The New Dance Sound of Detroit*.³

“Techno Music” set the stage for house and techno to become stylistically divergent. Intentional or incidental, Atkins’s track helped delineate the Detroit scene, sonically and in name, from Chicago house. It stands out from other more house-influenced pieces on the compilation and eschews obvious house influence, instead showcasing Atkins’s penchant for electro-funk and Kraftwerk-style vocal chopping. Atkins’s use of ominous synth textures, sparing use of chopped vocals, and reliance on ostinato bass and synth patterns (as opposed to the piano-driven chord progressions of classic house music), were markers that would inform later techno producers like Jeff Mills, who would further refine techno as a distinct genre with his minimal and industrial influenced sound that bears little resemblance to house music.

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5 “Chopping” is common parlance amongst producers to describe the method of taking a larger musical sample and editing it into smaller pieces. These fragments can then be re-arranged, repitched, and further manipulated.
6 See Mills’s Waveform Transmission vol. 1.
In comparison to its counterpart from Chicago, the original title of the *Techno!* compilation and the music it features reveal that, at the time, the distinctions between house and techno were more geographic than aural. Carla Vecchiola points out that the electronic music communities in Chicago and Detroit have always influenced each other and that “early designations of what was house and what was techno had more to do with city than with style…both house and techno continue to be made in both places although each city is more widely known by international electronic music fans for its respective genre.”

Although the tracks on the compilations were meant, ostensibly, to differentiate the musical output from the two cities, they actually reinforce the connections between them.

*Techno! The New Dance Sound of Detroit* reveals that, in some ways, the original title of *The House Sound of Detroit* is a more accurate description of the music it contains. Producers from Detroit and Chicago used similar sounds. The Roland 808 and 909 drum machines were central to both, and there are similarities in the synth choices (TB-303, a Roland bass synthesizer, and Juno 106) and drum programming. Furthermore, many of the Detroit compilation’s tracks used vocals as a main element to the song, a choice that would become less common in subsequent waves of techno production; Carl Craig’s (working under the alias of Psyche) “Elements” (1989) and Mike Banks’s “The Illuminator” (1995) are harbingers of instrumental, deep, finely crafted Detroit techno.

Each of the tracks on the *Techno!* compilation brings to bear different influences and have resemblance to important Chicago house tracks. The squelching TB-303 provides the bass line of Rhythm Is Rhythim’s “It Is What It Is” and brings to mind the acid house excursions of Chicago’s

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Phuture on the 1987 release “Acid Tracks.” Blake Baxter’s “Forever and a Day” is comparable to darker-tinged “jacking” house (referencing a popular dance style of the day) like “Jack The Bass,” by Farley “Jack Master” Funk. “Share This House,” by Members of The House, makes the connection to house music overtly, including “house” in both the group name and track title. The song itself is part jacking house, as evidenced by the “jack” vocal sample in the introduction, and part funky, vocal house workout featuring a simple but effective descending bass line and soaring diva-esque vocals courtesy of Crystal Gaynor.⁸

Revealing one of many intersections between house and techno production in Detroit, Members of the House was the brainchild of Mike “Mad Mike” Banks, better known for being the co-founder, along with Jeff Mills, of the legendary Detroit techno label and group Underground Resistance (UR) in the early 1990s.⁹ Although better known for techno, Banks has an impressive track record of producing house music under the UR sub-label Happy Records, releasing finely crafted house music that pays homage to house’s Chicago roots and “deeper” strains of house with a Motown flair. Indeed, even the most lauded underground techno producers, like Banks, were active in making house music in Detroit. The notes printed on the label of “Happy Vocals” acknowledge the appreciation for house music in Detroit and the connection between Detroit and Chicago stating that Detroit was “closely linked with her sister city of Chicago, where House was born, Detroit had a deep appreciation and love of the music that, like techno and Hip Hop, had

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⁸ Discogs, “Members of the House- Share This House.” [https://www.discogs.com/Members-Of-The-House-Share-This-House/master/62398](https://www.discogs.com/Members-Of-The-House-Share-This-House/master/62398)

taken the world by storm” (see figure 4.3). Detroit is “Techno City,” no doubt, but the genre’s forebearers contributed significantly to house music as well.

Figure 4.3. Liner notes on the label of “Happy Vocals” (Underground Resistance, 2011). Photo and record from author’s personal collection.

The most commercially successful song on the compilation, Inner City’s “Big Fun,” was produced by another eventual techno legend, Kevin Saunderson, who drew on famed New York club Paradise Garage and its founding DJ Larry Levan, both known for disco and garage house (a New York house variant named after the club), as inspiration.\(^\text{10}\) Saunderson remembers:

I was originally from New York, so I would go back to the Paradise Garage and experience Larry playing great disco…I wasn’t thinking about hits at that time, it

was really about, ‘Is this something that could be played at the Paradise Garage?’
It was like ‘Is this something I could hear on a big system? Is this a track that people
could sing?’

The answer to those questions was a resounding yes, and “Big Fun” was a hit in clubs, making it
into the top ten of UK Gallup’s Top 40 of fall 1988 and hit number one on Billboard’s Hot Dance
Music chart in 1989. In line with expectations of house music, the track is driven by synth, piano,
and a strong female vocal provided by Paris Grey, who was recommended to Saunderson by
Chicago producer Terry “Housemaster” Baldwin and was well established as a house music
vocalist from Chicago. This track represents a triangulation of influence: the vocal sensibilities
of Chicago, the slick and swinging rhythms of New York garage (see Masters at Work’s dub of
St. Etienne “Only Love Can Break Your Heart” for a harbinger of New York style), and the
craftsmanship and eclecticism of Detroit.

Because of the clear house influence on many of the productions, the Techno! compilation
is not a document of techno as a distinct musical idiom. In the Dance Music Manual: Tools, Toys,
and Techniques, Rick Snoman recognizes that part of the challenge of distinguishing between
house and techno is that house music is “a genre that has become hugely fragmented and as such
cannot be easily identified as featuring any one particular attribute” and subsequently “makes it
near impossible to analyze the genre in any specific musical sense and it is only possible to make
some very rough generalizations.” But others offer some helpful guidelines. Vecchiola suggests
that, at around 120 beats per minute, house is generally slower than techno. It is also more likely

11 MixMag, “How Kevin Saunderson Made ‘Big Fun.’”
12 Sicko, 68.
13 Sicko, 54.
Group, 2019), 338.
to incorporate vocals and is often more swung than straight. For Stacey “Hotwaxx” Hale, techno conjures a more mechanical sound world than house music. And house music often relies on variations of a particular drum pattern.

Figure 4.4. Basic Techno style drum pattern in MIDI, by the author.

Figure 4.5. Deep house drum pattern.

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15 Vecchiola, 100.
16 See Snoman, 340 for another MIDI transcription of house drum programming.
Analysis: Inner City’s “Do You Love What You Feel”

Any single attribute alone is insufficient for a generic distinction. Indeed, identification using several attributes, as opposed to Snoman’s use of just one, makes the task easier and more fruitful. Additionally, making an informed and arguable distinction between house and techno is more productive than distinguishing between sub-genres within either house or techno. Aside from geographical location, a sense of the differences between house and techno can be gained by looking at the production techniques and preferences displayed in Inner City’s “Do You Love What You Feel,” a track that features a house mix and techno mix of the same song, and looking to techno that came after the compilation to find a point of clear musical divergence from house.

Saunderson is one of the most prolific producers of electronic music from Detroit. His catalog features releases under several aliases (such as E-Dancer, Reese, Tronik House, Kreem, Saunderson) and collaborations like Inner City. His list of collaborators includes many important names in Detroit electronic music and now includes his sons, Dantiez and Damarii. Much like “Mad Mike” Banks, Saunderson has produced both house and techno throughout his career, helping to forge the sonic imprint of techno while also deftly executing many varieties of house music. The following analysis of “Do You Love What You Feel” shows the utility of a multivariate approach to making genre distinctions between house and techno, demonstrating that musical analysis of the right example yields a wealth of useful information.

Released in 1989 by 10 Records, the same Virgin imprint that released the aforementioned Techno! compilation, side A of “Do You Love What You Feel” reveals that Saunderson created two separate mixes of the song, the “House Mix” followed by the “Techno Mix.” This record thus offers a snapshot of Saunderson’s conception of the difference between house and techno at the time, and, unlike the comparison of the Chicago and Detroit compilations, the house and techno
mixes are quite different. The record serves as a good reference for distinguishing between the 
house and techno styles because we are able to listen to the different mixes of the same song back-
to-back, rather than referencing songs with completely different musical material made by 
different producers.

“Do You Love What You Feel-House Mix” once again features Paris Grey’s voice. A 
strong vocal and layered harmonies during the chorus soar above a lively house rhythm track with 
deftly programmed drum fills throughout. The rising and syncopated bass line brings to mind Steve 
“Silk” Hurley’s “Jack Your Body,” while the syncopated and swinging hi-hats hearken more to 
Lil Louis’s “French Kiss.” The four-on-the-floor kick drum (with an extra kick hit on the “and” of 
the fourth beat every other measure) and alternation of claps and snare emphasizing beats two and 
four hint enough at prototypical house drum programming to get the point across without fully 
embracing convention. Harmonically, the song is built on a i-ii-iii-iv chord progression ascending 
in D minor, stated by the bass and synth stabs, an odd chord progression by pop standards,. Despite 
the minor key, the ascending nature of the chord progression and the vocal yield the uplifting 
feeling associated with house music.18

18 MixMag, “14 Feel Good House Tracks,” April 7, 2020, https://mixmag.net/feature/best-feel-
good-house-tracks-records.
As soon as the needle passes into the techno mix, it is clear that the sonic landscape has changed. Despite similar kick and snare patterns, vocals, and effects, the house and techno mixes clearly deviate. The techno mix is faster and features a more straight-ahead rhythm track. This mix also reinforces Vecchiola’s notion of techno incorporating more abstract sound worlds, as the synths in the track are harder-edged and the rhythmic elements more effected. The variety of sounds that enter and exit during the techno mix is quite striking.

A close listen to the rhythmic track of the techno mix reveals insistent sixteenth notes in the hi-hats, providing a mechanical and driving feel to the track. In contrast, the hi-hat pattern in the house mix is much more swung and sporadic, and also seems to occupy a different space in the overall mix compared to its techno counterpart. The techno mix is in the same key but is built around a vamp (repeated musical figure) rather than a harmonic progression. Diagnosing the
harmony beyond its minor tonality is not clear, as the sound selection and programming avoids stating full chords. Rather than using an ascending bass/chord pattern like the house mix, the techno mix has a vamp that walks up and down the first three degrees of the D minor scale, making for a noticeably darker sound.

“Do You Love What You Feel” was released only a year after the Techno! compilation, and in that short time, enough space had emerged between the two styles that it was possible for Saunderson to present distinct mixes of the same basic song. Techno was starting to become a different sound world, distinguishing itself from house music in ways that go beyond geography. Snoman dates the point of musical divergence to 1992. However, in a recent interview, Banks places it earlier, around early 1990. Since Banks was in Detroit making both styles of music at the time, his sense of the demarcation should arguably be the point of reference.

Banks’s year of demarcation holds up when going through the Underground Resistance discography of that year. On one hand, take the track “Your Time Is Up” (UR, 1990), for example, a grooving house track driven by swinging drums, rising synth chord stabs, and Yolanda Reynolds’s powerful vocal. On the other hand, there’s the Sonic EP, another UR release from 1990 featuring the otherworldly track, “Orbit,” which includes sequenced bleeps and bloops, no fully stated chords, relentless overdriven and effected drums, and only snippets of a vocal syllable. The track thus disrupts nearly every house music convention illustrated by “Your Time Is Up”: swinging drums, prominent vocals, and a chord progression. Tracks like “Orbit” sent techno’s

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19 Snoman, 354.
sound world into outer space, and, much like house music, the genre fissured into further subgenres built from the tracks laid by Underground Resistance and others.

There are many subgenres of house and techno that often borrow from each other, but there are important musical distinctions to be made between house and techno. Detroit producers are especially significant for being fluent in each genre. Examining the early work of house production in Chicago and techno production in Detroit reveals significant overlap. However, the sound worlds grew apart. Despite the codification of distinct styles, the genres remain in dialogue with one another. With intentional listening and analysis, and firsthand insight from figures like Banks, it is possible to locate the general timeframe at which house and techno truly diverge musically. Yet the genres remain syncretic and dynamic, one can find a variety of influences incorporated in each style as well as much inspiration shared between the traditions. The intersection of house and techno in Detroit is particularly vibrant, the city’s unique position as an early outlet for house music and birthplace of techno has resulted in rich musical histories for both traditions.
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

Detroit’s house music faces a unique challenge in gaining the recognition it deserves. On the one hand, within the genre, Chicago has garnered more attention for its house music tradition. On the other hand, the city of Detroit has become associated with techno. Thus, Detroit house music has existed in the shadow of both. In some ways this is understandable. After all, Chicago gave birth to the genre and, as outlined in chapter two, is home to landmark clubs, DJs, and record labels. Detroit techno has also had a far-reaching impact and illustrious history, and, from a marketing perspective, a new genre out of Detroit (techno) was deemed more lucrative than Detroit’s version of Chicago house. This is evidenced by Neil Rushton’s choice to use techno in the title of the Virgin UK compilation of Detroit tracks, despite the fact that the compilation included house music in addition to early examples of techno (see chapter four).

Even though Detroit is more well known for its techno, many of the techno producers and record labels made and released house music. Underground Resistance’s Happy Trax imprint and Kevin Saunderson’s work with Inner City show that, for Detroitors, techno and house were not mutually exclusive endeavors. Despite being an unabashed house head, Stacey Hale played techno alongside house music in clubs during the 1980s and still uses techno tracks from time to time in her DJ sets. Similar versatility is demonstrated by other staples of Detroit’s DJ tradition, such as Delano Smith, John Collins, Norm Talley, and Eddie Fowlkes. Many in the city of Detroit are conversant in the musical languages of both techno and house.

In terms of the history of the genre, there are certainly more figures that are worthy of attention. However, for my study I focused on two of the most foundational, Ken “The Godfather” Collier and “The Godmother of House,” Stacey “Hotwaxx” Hale. Both DJs were around for the introduction of house music in Detroit and played a role in its dissemination around the city, getting
the records and playing them in clubs and on the radio. Hale was a mentee of Collier’s, so it is hardly surprising that there are similarities in their approaches. Both prioritized music with a positive and uplifting message but were also able to tap into the more hedonistic and raunchy side of house music, walking gracefully on the delicate tightrope between the sacred and profane. Both were pioneers: Collier was one of the first Detroit DJs to play clubs in Chicago and Hale was the first woman to play house music on the radio in Detroit. Although Collier’s life was cut short, his impact on Detroit’s music scene is undeniable as he is touted by Hale and many others as the most important figure in the city’s history of house music.

Hale herself remains active around Detroit as a DJ and educator; her musical legacy is still being written. Her longevity, coupled with an appetite for new technology, has resulted in a DJ setup that marries the old with the new. Modern technology like CDJs sit alongside vinyl turntables for her performances and she uses both interchangeably. Her performances are at once a time capsule of the history of DJing and an exploration of its evolution through the digital age. It is clear she holds a reverence for the “old school” while deftly mastering the equipment of today. My analysis of her Beatport performance illuminates the fluidity with which she operates her equipment. Within that performance she creates remixes on the fly, seamlessly mixes vinyl and digital sources, and manages to deliver uplifting and poignant messages throughout.

Despite the challenges, Detroit house music has persisted and garnered significant attention in recent years, with articles appearing in electronic music publications like MixMag and Resident Advisor, and media staples such as The New York Times and GQ.¹ Beyond magazine articles and

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print features, Detroit house was also featured prominently in the most recent “Grand Theft Auto,” a popular video game series. Detroit DJ and producer Moodymann was featured in a virtual club within the game and appears as a character within the game’s storyline, donning a T-shirt emblazoned with his KDJ Records logo. Moodymann also curated a playlist for the game, which features tracks from his own discography and a composition he created exclusively for the game, as well as tracks from other Detroit producers such as Waajeed, Blake Baxter, and Theo Parrish. This is an exciting opportunity for Detroit’s house music to reach a wider audience that may have never otherwise been aware of this music.

House music has had a long standing and impactful presence in Detroit and the house music (and techno) that has been made in Detroit has influenced other DJs and producers for over forty years. Many of those who laid the ground work for house music in Detroit, like Hale, remain in the city. For perspective, let us keep in mind that Motown Records was only operated out of Detroit for thirteen years before Berry Gordy moved his business to Los Angeles in 1972. Despite this fact, Motown is still the dominant musical legacy in Detroit. As Detroit continues to be recognized as the birthplace of techno, let us remember that the house that Detroit built still stands strong. There is certainly more potential for future research revolving around Detroit house music. Any of the DJs and producers mentioned in addition to the main subjects of my thesis, and many


3 Playlist available on Spotify: https://open.spotify.com/playlist/4czU8jR6QwJxjVmnDolxl.

worthy candidates I haven’t mentioned, warrant more study. I can envision work centered around particular discographies, or perhaps a more robust deep dive into the music itself by way of detailed MIDI transcriptions. Building a catalog of scholarship around Detroit house music will help to ensure that the city’s contributions to house music are appreciated and acknowledged. It is my hope that this work represents a worthy contribution, one that honors the music’s history and employs a modern approach to music scholarship.
APPENDIX: STACEY HALE INTERVIEW

Conducted and Edited by: Keaton Soto-Olson, April 21, 2020

KSO: Miss Hale! Hello, how are you?

SH: I'm doing very well, how are you?

KSO: I'm happy to be here so happy to have you I'd like to just express my gratitude right off the bat for you taking the time to do this and and providing your Insight and knowledge and I'm happy to receive it as best I can thank you so I guess I can I'm going to try and talk about myself as little as possible obviously…

SH: It's okay you can talk about yourself, I could never know enough.

KSO: Well, you know my name is Keaton and I'm a student at Wayne State finishing up my masters in music and if all goes according to plan December I will be having a degree, so it's very exciting but as before I can have that degree I got to do a lot of writing and that's kind of how the project came about because I wanted to write about house music in Detroit and the history and so of course this is really an essential conversation and your voice is essential to it, so thank you.

SH: That means a lot. One of the strange things has come out of this unfortunate situation of the world, not only yourself, but there's many people realizing how important it is to tell the stories, and to be able to get the stories from the people that lived it. To be able to do that is just valuable. I'm finding I’m speaking at quite a few colleges and universities across the country that love this culture, or you know the instructors or whoever they are find it
important to teach the next generation that are coming up the culture into the basis of where it came from and where it’s going and things like that. So that’s very exciting to me, you know for all of my career that has never seemed important to people, that’s why I’m excited that you said that.

KSO: I had the pleasure of hearing you speak at the MEMCO (Michigan Electronic Music Collective) panel last year and then publications I know there is a Mix Mag feature about a black women and contributions to house music so it does seem like there there's an awareness, are you hopeful that's going to continue and just you know get to that point I think you mentioned in the article where it's not about black women dj's where it's just part of the story?

SH: You know I just as an anything in any kind of history I think it's important to I think it's important to tell the story the way that it is and if that person just happens to be a black woman or man or whatever it is don't eliminate that's what I find and that's just history across-the-board how they eliminate thing. I'm saying tell it all, you know, because it's the truth so just like they talk about the birth of techno being in Detroit okay we'll give it at the truth is is Belleville they talk about the Belleville Three. Which one person was from Belleville, everybody else was from somewhere else. However the callus of that pushing it out there it was not only just them, there were women doing it and it was the women doing the booking, doing the connections and making it happen. Here's your label, creating the footwork and creating, helping creating the music so I'm saying tell the whole story not just right yeah that that piece and that's fact who I think I did a memco thing again or I can’t remember, speaking in so many different the places but I just pointed those particular things out and you know I just happened to be there so I didn't make “Strings of Life” so
does that make me not make that happen and I was the first and only DJ to put that stuff on the radio when that was just taboo.

KSO: Right, that was one of my questions. How amazing is it that a line in your bio is that you're one of the first female DJ to play house radio in Detroit? What did that feel like in the moment and what does it feel like looking back now on making history like that?

SH: I didn't know I was making history, first of all I would consider myself more of a rebel. Just as life goes you know, as life goes when we’re teenagers, or in your 20’s, you tend to wannabe, whatever it is, something different. That's just the nature of humans. You have those that go along with whatever the program is. But you know if all the time that we can think of an especially in the music genre take it all the way back to the 20s, 30s, 40s, 50s, and always that generation that was from whatever was playing at that cave before we want to play some different I like this here, when rock and roll came out you know what the old folks complaining like “Oh my God it’s not the Polka!” whatever that transition of the kids going crazy and adults just going like I can't take this! So I'm no different, I guess I didn't purposely want to be different cuz I enjoy all music however I embrace change. So when I heard disco, and I came from a Jazz, R&B, Keener 13 background. Maybe you know what that is? (sings theme song) “Keener 13”. That was like a big radio station in the 60’s, WJLB, they were all on AM. Those are the only two I can remember before they came up with FM, Keener never came over to FM and I think Keener 13 was Canadian station, but they would play records like the Beatles and The Temptations and all that. You know, records and stuff that was on 45’s and I’m just like a little kid running around and so of course I love and I enjoy all this here.
By the time the seventies here comes Disco, which has zero to do with that kind of music! Like “Nuh uh, don't, get out of here! What is that?!” Ya know? I somehow embraced it, I like this here you know. (Sings) “Bad Girls”, Donna Summer and all that stuff. I’m like “Hey! I wanna be a DJ!” My brother always had tons of equipment and when I heard this other different music, which I still love the stuff to death, I wanna play this. I walked into a place called The Chessmate and heard a DJ do a blend of a mix and I went “Oh my God?! How did they do that?” and I found my way to the booth and saw your two turntables and mixer and I went on a mission, I was 17. I didn’t have nobody to teach me, I was like “Ok” since I already knew equipment from just watching my brothers. I don't know, did I answer the question or did I go off on a tangent? Oh! Anyway, that’s back to playing music. That was right there that was different that was different than what was normally happening that was different you know the people in the clubs and they were playing it with the it would be a close and play, “Oh yeah, you just heard this record by you know, Georgy Porgy, and now here's the next song by such and such” and this is same way it worked in club as well. You’d announce the record, say what it is, and you put it on in people with dance to it. And that was typically how entertainment went. And here I come, no talking, mixing. Into mainstream, and at first I thought we could strange looks cuz no one ever heard it before. And so I would never want nobody to leave the dance floor so I created this thing called “Sneak-a-Mix” I make this mix be so tight that you can't tell the record is changing. Next thing you know they’ve danced five records like “Hey! Wait a minute?!” and then I’d have to slow ‘em down.

That was my first introduction to playing differently, and different music. So when house came along and I knew that it was very different, but I liked it. And I’d go to Chicago and
fill up my trunk with records from Track Source, from DJ International, Jesse Saunders

“On and On” I knew those cats. I would go to the record store, go broke, all of that, and I would play it in clubs here (in Detroit). And I would sneak it on the radio cuz they telling you “You got to be like this!” it was very you couldn't you know just be free-spirited and playing. I would take a techno record something and I would overlay it over something they know.

KSO: So it’s similar to the idea of, kind of, not knowing when the song would change? It’s like a little buffer.

SH: Exactly you know that “Sneak-a-Mix” came in, you know, it’s like I’ll lay that over that, they don't know. So by the time they figure it out, or maybe not figured out, if I flood the Techno tracks so much with something that's similar and I have it beating together so well, now I can come out of the familiar track because you're used to that groove or whatever that groove was, and I can come back with something else, on top of that. That was always my theory and where the “Sneak-a-Mix” came from and then what I would do to make sure that I would do to introduce this music.

KSO: What were the programming expectations when you were DJing on the radio? Was that at WJLB?

SH: Yes, actually before GLPI was on WLBS in Mount Clemens. Yeah, that was my first radio gig at the WLBS, which is WBLS in New York. I mean it’s huge. God, I think about those days, just no respect for a mixer. They had two turntables, one was way over there and the other one was way over there! No mixer like what we're used to seeing today, but you had channels on the mix board and I would have to figure out how to make these things blend.
By literally running all the way across to another area. But the determination and being so happy to be able to put this music on the air, I didn't care. I would just break my neck to do it, what I'd say is whatever the challenge is I just get it and make it happen, and that's what I would do. The next station I was on was WGPR. I was on WGPR television and radio. I was one of the very first mixers on there and again it was, it was fine, but it you know, god, I just think of some of the things that I've gone through it’s just crazy. The only thing, ya know, of course no pay. The producer didn't make but $25 a set, who is this great who's a hell of a producer right now. He would produce us and I would mix the music and then they told me “Well now you have to bring your own turntables in here.” At the time I was an engineer for Xerox, and that woulda meant I had to ride around with my turntables in my car, that was not happening. First of all, so I'm not getting paid, okay I get it. “But we want to just do…” Okay, I'll do all that. But now you're telling me to pretty much pay you to come to be on there and that's when I had to go you know like “Errrrrrrrt” (imitating braking noise). Maybe some guys, would just walk around, cause they don't have jobs, so they can just wait and go down to the TV station and throw their turntables up and play. That’s fine.

I remember one particular time I played in the show, and I have them looking for the archives now, they’re trying to put all the shows up. One of the times, Bobby Brown was on there. I remember, ya know of course I would remember, it’s like “Bobby Brown, oh my god!” I remember he just didn’t have no butt (laughs). The things that stick with you forever! That and the fact that when the makeup artist was making my face up, I don't know what kind of makeup she's got, but I broke all out! I’m like, okay, I know not to let that
happen. That was my two lessons right there. You can't just let anybody make you up. I was like but I wouldn't trade it for the world, having that opportunity and learning.

So it’s when I won the contest at WJLB and I competed against 600 DJs and I took first place in ‘85. After that I became a Billboard reporter and then I got hired (W)JLB to mix. So I still had the same attitude, that Imma make you listen to this stuff, not make you, but fool you! That was my thing, to fool you. Because it's not like it is now, okay, everything goes. But one of the coolest things that I think of, ‘The Wizard’ was playing, you know him probably as Jeff Mills, was playing. I dont wanna say alongside me but coming up during this era and stuff as well. That’s why we call him the wizard. To this very day, I do not know anybody more clever than him in combining the music for creativity and just thought process. So I'm so busy trying to cover up the mix or as I say “Sneak-a-Mix,” where he was just the opposite. You would know he was fixing because he was scratching, but he was so precise with it, and so quick with it, that it was just unreal. I mean he put a country record in it, a country and western music record in it (sings a banjo-esquelick) but it would be going so tough! Hands down, I’ve never, to this very day, heard anyone that could work it the way that he did and can. And then he decided not to be ‘The Wizard’ and wanted to be Jeff Mills and make techno and that’s all good. But the man has skills.

KSO: I'm assuming you you have the chance to see him behind the decks as well and I've heard other people tell stories about it just being kind of chaotic, he’s pulling out records…
SH: And throwing them! Next! Yeah, it is, it’s true! It’s true, we worked at cheeks together you know, so I've seen him the majority of his career yeah oh yeah it's nothing like it and I can 1st hand I seen, it witnessed it, I interviewed him, talk to him, know him, all that.

KSO: That might be a nice segue to something else I wanted to ask you about. Jeff Mills obviously one of the foundational people in Detroit techno, I've been reading a lot of the histories of dance music that are out there in a lot of them ,like you kind of alluded to earlier, it stops at the Belleville three and now that's kind of it. And then further with that, house music from Detroit doesn't even really get any mention. Do you think that there's somehow a shadow of techno? Do you think house music gets overshadowed by techno’s legacy in Detroit?

SH: That's a very good question and you know that Detroit is very rich and house music and from my observation because of the development of techno coming from Detroit. Once you get that stigma, it's very hard to erase it because it's… it's planted in thought. For millions of people. Thought, Detroit’s “Murder City” everyone here is killing. Or Motown, that’s all we know is Motown. The only music here is Motown. Two things you know for a fact yourself, that its simply not true. Once you know, you get that, you have those that believe not believe. It's just the same thing how, the Festival and what started it. Detroit Electronic Music Festival, Demf to fuse it with movement you know. Are you familiar, or around when it was the Detroit Electronic Music Festival?

KSO: No, I wasn't around read about I've read some articles and things so I'm generally familiar about how it started and the change the movement but but please give me your thoughts.
SH: Well, blessed to be there at the very beginning. It was called Electronic Music, with it being a free festival, everybody in the world came. It was in the city and so it was packed and never had the numbers like that since it was a big, free festival. To be able to see the children and and the adults and all that to come in and dance to various types of music. I mean, I can't remember what was being played but I can't but it was still very progressive but that didn't mean that you couldn't play some R&B or whatever, it was music. It was a festival. Whereas today it's called the “Techno Fest” and I.... nothing's going to ever change that. Because that's perception and that's what people think about it's about the “Techno Fest”. Talk and everybody across the board with you like music or not notice what happens with that amount of people coming to the city, and a movement and the fact that we're on television 2 weeks up until, and its advertisers, in the papers, it’s everywhere and your average layperson don't have no idea who these artists are. They don’t! You look at the list, I look at it and go like okay I'll look at a hundred names that I might know ten and it's not that I'm not aware or hip. You know everybody's coming out the woodworks. You know between puttin on Mickey Mouse hats and I mean you know the head, I'll let you know, think of a fad, “Now I’m this here.” Get a good promoter behind you, especially in Europe, throw a couple a, $300,000 behind you and now all the sudden you’re god.

They don't even know how to play, let’s go there. They can’t even play. So it becomes a, you know, a fad. and I don't know how many big times out there like that have been caught playing CDs or something prerecorded. I haven't caught em, but there’s people that were there and saw that. But anyway, call it “techno fest.” So I’ve played many movements, and I play some techno, I like tech-house, but I'm house head, hands-down I'm not trying to be, ya know… I like soulful house, I like some techno, I like good music that's really what it
is you know of was at a time I thought I had to know all music, all genres, be able to play everything, and at that time I was like in a record pool, so I would get all this stuff, everything. But I wouldn't be in Hip Hop, I just always been anti Hip Hop, not that I didn’t like it. It was just me, no rhyme or reason other than “No, I’m not rapping, no!” and I can't even say I can't even say it that time, was it raunchy or not, or anything like that, then I like Heavy D, there was some artists I liked. But I guess cause of some of the content, and it was telling some stories, and I know the stories were real but I was blessed I didn't live that. So that could have been a reason why you know, I didn’t live it so I didn’t even believe it, but it's just hard for me to feel it. When I wasn't about “it.” That's all, nothing to take away from it you know, cause as I got older and I listened back I mean I became a Tupac fan after he passed. I was like “This stuff’s really good” But then I'm listen to it, and that’s why I’m saying I didn’t gravitate toward it, cause I didn’t live like that. I actually met Tupac in New York on the street one day and he autographed one of my books, I was up there doin some stuff and I’m like “Who’s this young pup running around” and I had him autograph my book. Sure did, and I didn’t know him, I mean I knew that he was some great rapper but that’s it.

KSO: You mentioned in the beginning going to Chicago to to get house records and I'm assuming at the at the early days to WBMX was maybe one of the only places playing that music? When house started coming to Detroit, where would you go in Detroit for for those records?

SH: I would go to Buy-Rite. Buy-Rite music store, Record Time, and a little bit at Peaches, Peaches record store on Michigan and Schaefer. Buy-Rite was on Gratiot in Roseville and Buy Rite which is still on seven mile near Livernois. That's where I would go. And in Chi-town, I would go to Grammaphone, to get music. Those are some good days, the things we
do to get music. And it's so different, it's so different now. I point out, when I think of purists, and not to say purists can't be born, but because stuff has become so easy it makes a difference. Like I would fly to a city and I would get records, I would order a lot of records online too. How we would we even pick those records, I don't even know. I would order records online and deliver the wax. Cause most of time a particular label with put on music and we kind of get an idea what we knew it would sound like. Like Strictly Rythym, we know it was deep, dark, bass, kickin’ track, even if we don't know what the vocals was we knew it was going to have that rich (sound). Nervous Records we know that the bass is going to be so hard on that, it would just pound us outta here. It don't matter what it was saying! It was gonna be that. It was consistent, they were consistent doing things like that. And you get some from CBS the pressing and stuff would be good but you wouldn’t be always guaranteed you going to like the record, because they were more commercial, you know C&C MusicFactory. Stuff was like, really, really, good but you can't just…I mean they put out a track on Eddie Murphy singing. Press is swell but I don't want to play that!

KSO: Do you still feel that divide between, sort of, commercial dance music today and some of the more underground artists that are releasing music?

SH: I don't know if it's a divide, you know, it's kind of, what has happened because the whole world has become a DJ, you know that right? I can DJ off my watch, my phone, everything, you can push a button and sync, or anything. But ya can’t teach how to program, that separates the women from the girls. Ya can’t teach ‘em how to program, so now you have all these different tools, and make all these different things happening. But if you're playing the wrong song, in the wrong place, for the wrong people, shoot yourself in the foot. That would definitely separate. You know that I teach and I teach my students that all the time
to tell him to pay attention to your room. Where was I going with this… it's a separation.

So what has happened or what I'm observing, is that here comes EDM. Do you know the difference between EDM Progressive techno and house? Here’s my definition EDM is a mayonnaise, watered-down version, of techno with some extra little tingling and thing we call it “Ting Ting music” I'm trying to think of a pop artist….

KSO: Katy Perry?

SH: Right, thank you and put that in there and have her doing a little sample thing in there going to this music (imitates stereotypical EDM break down) and then the audience of the girls especially, they all know that little part and go “Ahhhhh!” I pass. But I get it you know, that's that's that's that's millions of dollars and a huge business. That's why you have your Ultra Music Festival your big EDM festivals around the world. They like a top 40, here's your top 40, that's a cool thing to go and be amongst thousands of people and jumping up and in the sweat, and you hear the music that you like. You know the underground means nothing to them, it’s all about merging on there to have tons of money and you know that's what you get. Not to eliminate that. Every now and then I’ll do one of those, I don't release it but it's crazy. I didn't want to cause I had a girlfriend of mine that fell in love with some old crazy song and I took it remixed it right on the spot and she freaked out. Katy Perry but something like that I can't even remember I played it once out just so I can watch everybody freaked out.

KSO: Between house and techno that if we’re talking about distinguishing between the genres, like what about a track lets you know what side of the fence it falls on, between house and techno?
SH: I'm glad you asked me that question because the definition just keeps getting diluted. And so this is my definition. Again it is diluted because everyone's perception as to what is what, is different and you can't change that. Nothing breaks my heart more than I'm playing some Soulful house and somebody walks up to me and says “Can you take that techno off and put on something I can dance to?” and I just want to throw up. Well, in fact that's what they relate to. In their mind, what they relate to that particular sound being. Because they simply don't know any better. And so either I can teach them, or depends on my mood (laughs)! I have actually created some house heads by default. “I don't like know house, but I like what you're doing!” And it's not what I'm doing, it’s what I'm playing for that particular audience at that particular time. You know you just can't force some bangin’ techno at the polka party. You just can’t do it, you can figure out ways but it's just you know.

One of the biggest things I tell my students, you know you can have a kick-ass night and being successful, but don't think that's going to work the next night when it's a total different audience. It’s different things in this, this is where your expertise is and you have to come to learn how to read and pay attention to what’s happening. I find a lot of the younger ones they'll program their hour set and know this is what they're going to do. They're not paying attention to the crowd, and that's that's the lost art of DJing to me for them doing things like that. And maybe cause I'm old school I play from the hip. Not that I won’t study or shop or select some music I think should go well with this particular event. If there’s some things I definitely want to play, I make sure I have them they are available but I'm always going off the grid. There's never been ever one time that I've ever played and said “These are the 10 songs I'm playing and nothing else,” that's ridiculous you know.
And even playing virtually I don't... I just play. You play what feels good, to tell a story, DJing is telling a story and hopefully the story gets across to your audience. I try to do that and I'd like to think I'm 96% successful. I'm thinking like when I play movement, here it is the Techno Fest where they are accustomed to hearing techno there, but I am house head!

So I'm not going to come out of the box being techno, I like tech house but I've always liked hard house too so, both of those are kind of edgy to techno, and there's a lot of techno that's out that has a soulful feel to it and I like that stuff. Floorplan, they do you know they take a disco song and I mean it's beating hard like crazy and they put the vocal in it, Belita Woods, I'm gone crazy! And then put the Gospel House Church in this techno beat, I'm gone crazy! That's all that to me, it really is, and so I have no problem with easing into that realm of playing music, but I don't come out of the gate doing that. I build up to that so by the time you're so exhausted and I'm beating your head off, I like to end with that or something like that. I like techno that has some soul in it, and that just came along it wasn't always like that a lot of times, it was just it was just electronic noise. Many of the forms were not... if you know music theory and you know you have a 2,4,8 count, ½, you know it's different. You play music, you understand. I know, I don't write but I am aware. Much of the music did not conform to that. Especially “Strings of Life” It just didn't conform to know your your typical (structure) but now if you're a DJ or your artists and you understand do you know your music you know how to play it, because you know what change is going to come and to have it be there right when it needs to be there when something else is changing. Most of your last 20 years of DJ they don't know nothing about that, they just don’t. They just figure “Hey, why I gotta?” Whereas I’ve always prided myself on being able to write in violin or strings or something like that because I understand, I know how
to count it. To me it's just really pretty to lay that over on top of something that's not expected to be there.

KSO: I was checking out, I’ll do my best on the pronunciation, Nyumba Muziki, that sort of concept, how did that come about? And how was it working with live instruments while you while you DJ?

SH: Oh man, I'm glad you asked about that. That has always been an inspiration of mine. It was years ago, I went to New York and I heard a flute player play with Louie Vega. I went “Oh!” this is, I love this! And so I've always given opportunity, played with musicians, or had them play with me I just understood. So kind of the way Nyumba Muziki came about, I'm in the Band Black Women Rock you familiar with that?

KSO: I saw the name I did not get the chance to check out that, but I will I got homework now so I'm going to check that out.

SH: Yeah, ya do. I’m gonna tell a quick story. So what happened Jessica care Moore, who's a native detroiter, who's a poet, her name was on the Q Line, a quote from her. Big Detroit seller, all that. She got several albums out and I produced a record on her as well. Black Women Rock is about black women that play Rock. Because you think of black women you don't think of Rock, that’s just typical because you're not used to ‘em playing rock. It’s just that simple. It’s nobody’s fault, but the fact is that there are some women out here that are black and play rock and it's just off the hook. I mean just blowin’ me away. So catalyst of her doing this is to keep the legacy of Betty Davis alive. Do you know who Betty Davis is?
KSO: Yeah! Well, I was going to lead with married to Miles Davis, but she's so much more than that.

SH: You got it, that's right. You're the first person I've ever said that to me. Yeah, absolutely right most people don't know.

KSO: That funk, rock, powerful, sexy…

SH: That's right, all of that. You're the very first person to say that to me, thank you, bless you. But most people don't know, including myself. Because when she said “We’re recognizing Betty Davis” and I didn't understand because I didn't know about, you know, this Miles Davis’ wife, I had no clue. And I was talking with our original music director, I’m goin' like “Why are we?” I didn’t get it, and then when I found out who this was I’m like “Oh!” I was just as… I didn't know. So in any case, a lot of these women that are today in stuff, in there playing Rock, they know who she is because you know she didn't reach the plateau that Tina Turner reached, but she was the major catalyst of change Miles Davis. And to make it so everybody knows Miles, but nobody knows Betty. And Betty is still living. So that's part of what Jessica's commitment is to make sure that people know. That's what she call us “The Daughters of Betty.”

And so it's an all female band that’s playing the music, a drummer, and I’m the DJ and the assistant music director. An all female lineup and every time it’s like 5 women, but they're always different, and we've done 15 shows. Always different, these different singers, and so we’d have to learn the stuff and we always end with a Betty Davis track. Each time one of them come out, they sing a Betty Davis song and that's how you keep it living. Cause at first I was goin’ like, this music is crazy! I didn't get it. Now, I'm like all crazy and in love
with it and talk about it. Yeah, that's just really interesting and I'm blessed to be a part of that. When she first asked me “Come on, why don’t you be with Black Women Rock?” and I'm going to myself like, “Why are you gonna? You know I’m a house head!” I’m thinking she meant like neo-soul, you know, black women rock like, you cool. I didn’t know it really meant rock!

KSO: But it’s really rock!

SH: I was, like yeah we rock like “we cool,” I was so green!

KSO: Speaking about differences between house and techno, I've read about techno being this quote-unquote “straight” scene, and house being the gay scene. Was that a real boundary or is that something somebody pulled out of the air?

SH: See, you know what, that’s the first time I ever heard that.

KSO: It was actually in the book by a UK journalist, Last Night A DJ Saved My Life is the title.

SH: Who is it by?

KSO: Bill Brewster

SH: From where?

KSO: From the UK, I think he wrote for a magazine, I’d have to look at his bio to be sure.

SH: He ain’t know what he’s talkin’ bout. First of all, it didn’t even come from over there, so he truly doesn’t know what he's talking about. If anything it’s just the opposite. House
music was considered gay music, progressive, that, straight up. Wait a minute, what did you say he said it was now?

KSO: That techno was the straight scene and then house was like the gay scene, but he kind of made it sound like there is a divide between them.

SH: Not at all. I would say that... The reason I said that is because I went and played techno inside of the gay parties. I would play and they would like to be going for it so yeah, no I can't. Mhhm, no, no.

KSO: Great well I'm glad I have it from somebody that would know.

SH: Like I said, all of it, you know from my perspective, it all got clumped into one. You know what I mean, like I just said when I spoke to you before I said “I don’t want to hear no techno, can you play something I can dance to?”, and I'll be playing house. So no and probably the reason why it attempt to get that type of title is because... How can you classify music being sexuality preference. I just wonder how you do that.

KSO: I really wanted to ask about that as well, it just struck me, I didn't have any of the insight of being there but it struck me as kind of unlikely and a weird statement, so I'm glad you could shine some light on that.

SH: And so now I can kind of see where maybe it got that, or maybe this is what they thought. I can see. But, you know you have to look deep inside of something to know, so maybe they would equate Frankie Knuckles being at The Warehouse, you know because he was gay, and The Warehouse was, but it wasn't just that it was everybody. It was everybody. The same thing, Larry at the Paradise Garage. It was everybody. They callin it straight,
gay, but that’s what it was, everybody. Cause as time goes on, and even if you want to say “Hey, you know this only gay,” y'all not having all the fun forget this! And I’m bustin’ in and out cause I want to get this feeling too. That’s the nature of it. It’s like “Nuh uh, I ain’t gotta be gay to wanna like house music,” That's just absurd, “Oh I can't like it” it's just not going to happen. No different then, you know, you ain't got to be a hoodrat like rap. Does that mean, you have to you know… Again, I was straight-up playing in a gay male club, and I was playin techno but I didn't know it! It would be my hard house, but I would look at it, it was just a jam. Now, you call it whatever you want but it was a jam. But it turned out to be straight up techno and that was…I’ll ask you, are you familiar with the song “Elevator (Up & Down)” (Track by Interactive, 1992) (sings refrain) “Up, and down.”

KSO: No, I thought I saw that you mentioned playing that, at maybe it was it the first time you were at Times Square?

SH: Yeah, yeah, they would go berserk and the sounds and stuff that it makes is definitely techno, it’s techno, it’s what it is. Very industrial, goin’ very fast, and just… And it was ironic that this was one of the songs. And I would play some Ron Trent and some other artists that beat it hard on that line, that maybe you wouldn’t call it techno, but when I listen back to it, that’s exactly what it was. It just was. Rob Woods, that was another one. It was outta New York but it was hittin’ hard. And of course I was playin “Strings of Life” and on the flip side we called it the “popcorn song,” that’s because we didn’t know the name of it. I had a test pressing. We called it the “popcorn song,” but it was straight up techno. And we’d play it! So how do you… Good music, just play some good music, and something, you know, to dance to, and work with the audience that you have. I find when you have an audience that is very receptive, progressive, and willing to take the journey
with you, I'll throw the kitchen sink at you. I think that's the most fun. It's just the most fun. You don't have to be stuck in no one thing. That kind of gets boring. You know even playing techno non stop, no voice, not sayin nothin. It’s all (imitaties arpeggiated synth sequence) After an hour? After 30 minutes, can you say something to me? Record say something?

KSO:  Yeah, is there something that you’re going to walk away singing.

SH:  Yeah, just a word you know, just holler, something. Same thing you know, the same thing with house. I mean you can groove and you can always… you tend to think of house music, well I do, cause it’s outta the Church, got a lot of keyboards and the black sister singing, testifyin’. I mean, you know, that's, you think of House music a lot of that is related because that's where a lot of it came from. Every now and then you get a male vocalist doing it and it's really cool, but it's not usual. But even I can't listen to that non-stop you know. Come on you know, break it up a little bit. Can I get a dub? Can I hear a male singer? Do somethin. Change the rhythm, speed it up, slow it down, do somethin else! Tell a story, you cannot testify to me for no whole hour (sings) “I said! Put your hands up! On my momma! Yeah!” She may be killing it, but okay, tell me something else.

KSO:  I was listening to one of your sets from this last year and yeah I was just struck by how many different subgenres you could get into. There's some Afro, there's a vocal house, piano house, deep house, just every little little pocket and it sounds like you approached DJing that way, you're not really thinking about genre.
SH: No not at all, I’m thinking of good songs. Right, and to say “Yep” and that’s what I try to do and it depends on what the scenario is. I don't have you checked me out on techno club. Net yet?

KSO: I don't think so I've been washing stuff whatever is going on YouTube and I know there's just a Paxahau stream you did not too long ago. You might remember this one, where it started with the tribute to George Floyd. I don't remember what exactly that was.

SH: Okay, that was a worldwide stay home festival? Let's Stay Home. That was the first festival I did since we went lockdown. And I’m like “Oh my god, what am I gonna do?” That was interesting. It was fun, it was just me learning OBS I think. And cameras and all this stuff you know. So, I think I did the first one recorded on OBS, and came out as a MKV file. I had never even seen that file before. I totally freaked out and so I called my friends that make movies, “What am I gonna do with this file? Ah, I can’t do this, fix it!” I was tripping and they said converted it. Since then I've learned not only how to convert it, but the fact that it will play in OBS. But yeah I didn’t know, never seen that file. I make music. Now I’m turning visual. But yeah that was fun, I had my cat in it and everything cause she was saying, the director was my friend Karina, outta Norway and it was important to have it at home because they called it “At Home” so I made it feel at home. I’m at home with my cat, you know to give that, you know that kind of vibe. I think I was more groovy there, I didn't take it hard. If I'm not mistaken with that, I could have but I was just going like hey, you know okay. I’m cool you know, did the job. But I don't think I ever beat over 125 (BPM) in that just because, that’s again me paying attention to the audience that I don’t see. But I know who she is, and so not just for her but I had an insight as to what that program was doing across the board, and I listen to a lot of different things that happen inside of there,
and so that was why I took the direction that I did in playing the music. Going like, hey, cause I'm not...I don't want to be like everybody else, that's for sure. I am going to, you know, be myself.

I saw who the other DJs were they were on the ticket, which is fine, I think it was it was me, Delano (Smith), Norm (Talley), (DJ) Minx, and Eddie Fowlkes I think. And all of us can all sound very different. We all can play techno, I'll be soulful, but since I know their capabilities, and I think they're all great. I mean, yeah, I enjoy them so I purposely took the low road, I guess I would say? The more groovy, soulful, slower. Because I know Minx like to be, Eddie can be more, Delano’s gonna be a little bit faster and I just wanted to have, you know, difference. I didn't want us all to sound alike, not that we even know how each one of us is going to sound!

KSO: I’ll have to check out more of those streams and you're also the only DJ that I've seen in real life, since the shutdown. That day at the Detroit Historical Society, outside.

SH: Yeah that was one of my rare appearances! That’s right, yeah that was pretty cool. I think I was there, I've been to three places, three places that's it. I went there, I was comfortable enough being outside anyways, but plus I wanted to see the display. They talked me into going to Detroit Loud so I was in this... whatever it was but they had state-of-the-art $1,000 cameras, the whole crew. I mean it was television, it was huge. I went down a recorded at Marble Bar, where they’d asked me about ten times and I kept sayin “Nope!” So I finally got comfortable enough to go down and, Rock the Vote that's what it was for! So I let politics pull me out a little bit. But I can get it on here at home, the majority of things I’ve done have been right from my lap here.
KSO: Another question I had, Jessie Saunders came up earlier and when you were on one of those panels, and one of the key things I think that I took away from hearing that was about the relationship between house music and spirituality. What is that to you? Are there experiences behind the decks that you've had, that you can think of, that felt spiritual? What does that feel like? What's the deal with the spiritual connection to house music?

SH: As I mentioned before, that house music was born in the church. I'm Catholic, so I missed the Baptist experience, the gospel church. Hey, you know, it is what it is you know, you're born and raised into whatever you come up in. So, the true heartbeat of gospel music and what’s known, you know, between them spiritual hymns and stuff, negro hymns, all of that I didn't experience it as a child. I didn’t know, because of the way that I was brought up. However, I was aware of it and became more aware of it as I became an adult. We’d be the kids walking in the street sometimes we hear them, toward the church front. In there just gettin’ it, just gettin’ it! Like, wow! I always thought it was kind of cool, but I didn’t know because I wasn’t exposed. So once I became exposed and listening to house music, the message, the words that they were saying inside of it, is very positive things. Most house music, they sing about positive stuff and it makes you feel good. You know, sound can give you all kind of emotions. Not just music. If you hear a gunshot real close to you or something like that, your heart rate go up. Your emotion. What happens to your body? The emotion of that. If you hear a squawk, that is not the right pitch, whatever that sound it is it gives you emotion. Make you feel a certain way. Sounds are here to make you feel.

So playing gospel house music or just sometimes it's not even gospel house, just music make you feel. It make you feel good because the rhythm and it has something to say. “I just want, I just want to testify!” It may just be reapeatin’ that same word over and over,
but she sing in such a way, and the music is so full that’s going along with it. Did it make you feel good? You might be having a bad day and you hear this lil’ rhythm to make you just, feel good. And you'll take that. And that's the only music that I know of that consistently does that. Consistently. There’s a bazillion songs out but in the house music genre, it consistently does that because most of it is written in that realm. I mean we have other music written, and they have love stories. Love stories you know, I’m thinking your ballads. It'll make you feel, make you think about your first love and all that. “Oh I remember when I did this” you know, cause it still make you feel. That's the whole thing, it makes you feel. Whatever that feeling is, it makes you feel.

But again, with house music standing out. Because of the beat per minute of it not only does it make you feel, by the words they may be saying, but it make ya dance. The natural rhythm of your heart is 120 beats per minute. Most house music is written there, plus or minus three or four. So that’s back tapping into the human interaction, so it make ya, it makes you feel. That's why house music, and I like that feeling. I always have always will. It can give you some relaxation and let you dance too. I recall doing a fundraiser a couple years ago for a young lady running for mayor, La Flor, it was at an art museum, and I’m there I'm playing music, and I'm just enjoying what I'm playing, you know it’s not playing music for dance floor. I'm just playing some good music, and four people walked in. When I finished playing, they walked over to me and they all hugged me. And I was like, okay, woah, what's up? And they said that they had just buried their father. They came in and the music I played made them feel so good that it changed their vibe. Not that they were angry but of course they were sad, but it made ‘em feel better. By whatever, and I couldn't tell you what I played. but since I have that ideology anyway and playing, you know, mostly
positive stuff. I mean it ain't like I can't play something raunchy, you know. But again, your audience. That’s back to what I said. I played a record, it’s doin somethin’, all of the sudden it breaks down and she sayin, “I said, bitch!” But you know that's what was called for, it calls for whatever the moment was. But yeah it, and that means all the world to me. To be able to play some music and it change someone's vibe in a positive way. That's the whole reason why I do it. And I tell my students, I say, you never know who’s listening. So don't be up there being all crazy.

One of my head instructors, DJ Jungle, helped bring even more of that to my attention. From Spin Inc. he spoke with me (at MEMCO panel, University of Michigan). He's way more on it than me for the message in the music, and still teaching me something. It’s like “Ship Ahoy” from The O'Jays, I had no idea they was talking about the slave boat. I just found this out in the last three years. Because I knew the song, but I didn't listen. But you know, a lot of times he’s bringing that to my attention. Something else he said, when we was talking to the students, and I got to try to remember what this drug is. Start with a...something the kids could take and OD on? Whatever it is I don’t know, but it's a rap song that’s talking about it, praising it, or something. I can't remember the name of it perse, but the message was: why would you want to be playing this song and with your peers and, you know, or even a parent may have walked in and here you are playing the song that is praising this particular drug, and this parent just lost their child to that drug?! How do you think they feel? It’s like, pay attention to what you're playing. You never know who's listening.

KSO: Like you said how powerful it is.
SH: Yes, very powerful.

KSO: It’s like, you got the force, and do you use it for good or for evil?

SH: Exactly, exactly, yep he said that it and I said, “Dang that just really makes sense.” Why would you want to, I mean yeah.

KSO: One thing I didn’t know when I was reading about you, was the fact that there were all female clubs and club nights in Detroit like at Club Hollywood?

SH: Yes.

KSO: And again, something that just doesn't get talked about in anything I've tried to read about the subject. So, can you just tell me a little bit about that scene with Club Hollywood and the sort of all female nights? What was different about the nights or anything you can grant me some insight into?

SH: Great question. Club Hollywood, later on, Club Exclusive. It was actually opened up by... alright I’ll tell the story, rewind back. So now this is me deciding that I’m gonna be a DJ and done stood in the house and drove everybody crazy. I actually stayed on my own, but I did manage to drive people crazy trying to mix ‘cause nobody showed me. So, I would go down the street with about five or six records to this little club and give the DJ a break. And said you take a break, they was like fine. I played music and at the time I thought you mix no more than four or five records then you had to stop. I didn’t know no better. Sometimes I can remember the name of the clubs and sometimes I can’t, this is one of the times I can’t. All I know it was on Hubbell and Plymouth, it’ll come to me another time.
In any case, my uncle, Freddie Hughes owned the club called The Circus on Greenfield and Plymouth. And he told me he's about to open up an after-hour club, called Club Hollywood. So I had two uncles and then Jan Chapman and Rita Daly, they were the four opening up this club. Late night, from 12-6 (a.m). Girl club, yep, that's what it was, all female the men dominated, doin’ everything as always. As my uncle was watching me learning how to be a DJ and playing, you know, he was like “Turn it up!” That was his biggest thing, fool’s always talking bout turn up and I was scared to turn up. I was, you know, being unsure. And he said, okay, I’m gonna get you this job. They opened up, and they opened up with me being the DJ for Saturday night. My friend, BB King, was the one on Friday night, rest in peace. And we'd have 800 women in there, and I would play from 12 midnight to 6 in the morning. I'd lock myself in the booth cause I was still terrified you know, being young I'm sure you know, ain’t nothing like it is now. I was just afraid, but I loved it, I loved it. I might’ve played more disco, I can remember Chic and Shalamar and everything on those labels, Lenny Williams. The music I was playing, “Star Love” (Cheryl Lynn), disco I guess, disco/r&b kind of stuff like that. But on 12 inches, on records. Again, I’d lock myself in the booth, but it was making so much noise there around the city about this going on in this spot, that people would come to see and to hear because it was unique and it wasn't happening anywhere else. Todd’s, but it was mostly men and it was Wednesday nights or what other night, I can't remember, but I know Wednesdays for sure. That was the only time I could go see the Duane “In The Mix” Bradley. When he played there on Wednesday, when I would go down there and sit down and study him. You know, that was all they would let me do just sit and watch him. They wouldn’t tell me nothin’ but they let me watch and that was it. And professional basketball players would come, people
from other companies would come, because it would just phenomenal that all this was
going on in this room and that it was like that. I made $25 a night, I got a raise to $30 I
thought, oh! So you know that was a long time ago.

So this Kevin McAlister came in, cause he had heard about it and he wanted me to come
and audition for this group of DJs called Duncan Sound. It was a guy that owned some DJ
equipment and he had 10 DJs working for him and he would place his sound systems in
the various bars around Detroit and then rotate the DJ's. Like ok, who can play at what club
on what night. Again, this is before stuff is like it is now, I went and I auditioned and I got
the job. I mean, I don't know that people are not doing this, I think this is... I'm just catching
on. I don't know nobody else that's doing this and so that's why I was an anomaly and I
didn't know it. That was one of the first things, this dude ran out the back, Larry Jefferson
saying “Man that’s what they do in New York! That mix’n’!” It scared me to death cause
he came runnin’ out the back. They left me up in the front, you know still treating the
women, you know, like “Oh you just go on up there” I mean they really... I think back to
that, like “Yeah you know she ain’t gonna know what she doin” or whatever, I don’t know.
I have no idea what their thoughts are. But these were the guys in the back, in there building
the furniture and doing whatever, left me up in the front. I remember seein’ a quartz lock
turntable for the first time. Which I had never seen before, so I didn't know what it was. I
didn't know how to unlock it, so therefore I don't know how to drive my mix to make it
mix cause I'm moving the thing and it wouldn’t move but I'm too scared to ask. I don't want
to look dumb. I was, but I didn’t wanna... And so he come runnin’ out saying “That’s what
I hear in New York!” They’d been there and I'd never been nowhere, I just had been here
(Detroit). And that's what they’re doing in New York? “That’s I'm talking about, man!” he
went to showing off to the guys, nothing said to me and just, you know, they went to each other and so the guy that owned it, Ed Duncan, he was like “Hey!”, and, needless to say, I got hired on the spot and got put in the rotation for the DJ's going around.

There was two women that worked for him at that time, they both quit. Because I came in mixing. They were “Hi, you’re listening to so-and-so...” Close and play right, and so now this isn't, this is not working no more, the close and play. Then I was getting too much attention so they both... Harriet and Jessica, that was their names, they both quit. I couldn't believe it. I’m going like, why? I still don’t, naive, I don't get it you know. But they did.

And so I was introduced to Detroit at, ironically, at the Cleary Auditorium in Canada. By Charles Love and the Fun Time Society, that was the name of it, a big to-do. And I wasn't Hot Waxx then I was just Stacey. Introduced me to Detroit. I was playing and that was, now I'm gone mainstream. But I'm still this rebel, playing this music that wasn't, so-called, what you're supposed to be playing. I'm still slipping in from day one I was doing it. I'm playing this music that you know y'all don't know this here, but I’m playing it anyway. I ain’t never been afraid to play anything. One of the other things, songs that stick out of my head, that I’d played. There’s a few, I don’t know if you know the song “Ring My Bell” by Anita Ward?

KSO: I don’t...

SH: It's not a big deal, if you look back now it’s campy. But it’s a 12 inch, on TK Disco. (Sings) “Said you can ring my bell” And I remember playing the song and I knew they would think I had lost my mind. I was in Club Hollywood, and I had this bell and I’d run out on the dance floor, runnin’ around the dance floor just shaking this bell. And needless to say, it
became a huge hit, still out there today. I had, a couple of years ago, had a chance to meet and go by her house out in San Jose. I just happened to be in the neighborhood where she live. A one hit wonder, something like that. But it was a big song every time somebody play it, especially if you’re doing old-school or disco. Something so you can put that on and it’s happening.

KSO: I wanted to ask you about is an older mix that you did, Eddie Fowlkes “Standing in the Rain” Was that one of the first records that you mixed that came out on vinyl, or had you done some before? Late 80’s?

SH: That was not the first one. The first one I did was, “How You Play the Game” by The Housekeepers. And I think that second one was the Eddie Fowlkes one.

KSO: Is mixing in a production environment is different from mixing as a DJ? Do they help each other or do they feel like different things to you?

SH: They feel like totally different things. But the equipment has become so sophisticated now that I can remix something on the fly, just right there, and I kind of almost do. I just, you know, somethin’ will come up and I’m playing and I’d like to make this do this, and I just do it. Did you see that Beatport thing I did with Seth Troxler?

KSO: Yes, yes I did.

SH: And so I was going to try to make a song, with a doctor speaking. I didn’t have time so I just remixed it right there on the spot. Just came up with some trickery and so that is an original, done it right then, right as you see it you know. No rehearsal. Because I really loved the speech, so I wanted to take some parts in it that he spoke about, and since it was
for black history, to reiterate things that he said. So I did it on the fly. It actually opens up sayin’ that somethin’ bout... I’d have to listen back to the for me to know what, he said exactly. I know he said “I'm from the old school” and I made that loop, but I was actually playing it. And then loop something in there and then have them come back and say that, and I went back into it. Hey, that’s entertainment. So I could just go back and listen to it and make a song, I could put a track underneath it. But the equipment allows that you know. With me having the CDJ’s and stuff like that. I can create some hot cues or just you know hit them on time and make it go with the music and there's your remix.

KSO:  It looks like your setup is two CDJs and you still have a vinyl deck?

SH:  That's what I have two CDJs, two turntables.

KSO:  So it's kind of like the old and the new.

SH:  Exactly. Cause I love playing my records, I really, really do. And I think people like it too, they just do. You know I can play flash drives, sometimes I play off the computer, I can just as well plug in one of my DAWs (Digital Audio Workstations) and make that rip, you know it can go on and on. But I am still at the mindset of nobody really knows what you're playing with, nor do they care. Just what do you hear on that when it's done. And because they've taken so much music and done everything to it, nobody knows that you’re doing a trick. You just think, you know your average person they don't know and they really don't care, long as you hearin’ that tune. Think about that! So I would love to incorporate all my DAW and have like a bunch of stuff going, you’re just not gonna know. You know you've looked at sets, while you had them, you know, these high-powered techno heads and they
got walls of keyboards. Tons of plugs, all the stuff going, you don’t know what’s happening. I know you don’t. You can’t. How?!

KSO: (laughs) You know it’s on, lights are flashing but maybe...

SH: What’s going on? You don't have a clue. Even he don't, because you're taking a button and turn it up and down and it's kind of like, hey, you know so what’s the...all you know is if it sound good or not. That's what you know. How it came out is irrelevant, it just is. And so for that reason, you know, I stay away from the trickery a lot. I mean, I can tear you up with some tricks, but you ain't gonna to know it. You won’t know! Like, “Oh wow! What did she do?” I can make it sound like I'm the scratch master from the world, through technology. But you know it's kind of like, "hey, wait, you scratchin’ on my record? I want to hear the tune!" That’s just another thing, but yeah so is this just... and I think of all the tricks and stuff that are on the boards to make it flange, to make a double, to make it do all these different things. To make a break. I was doing all the stuff by hand. I could do that with two records. I love telling the kids that like, hey you wanna see? And so now they just take it, and brought that technology and put it into where you just push a button. And that’s all cool but, like, eh (shrugs).

KSO: It takes that experience to do something like that. Doing a remix on the fly, without all that experience you can't just do that

SH: You can’t just do that, that's right. I took the stuff just made it go like, yeah that was, I really, really enjoyed that.
KSO: This brings to mind another question I had. Do you think there is a signature sound to house music from Detroit? Like the Detroit producers, is there anything you hear on a record that makes you go “Detroit?” or is it too diverse to categorize that easily?

SH: It’s too...I don’t wanna say it’s diverse, but it's just it's just cause it's really good house music from here. I mean really good. And I can’t.. if I wanted to label the best house music creator here, for me personally, would be Patrice Scott. For me personally. I love the sound, I play his music, it’s just, I mean that’s it. It’s consistent. We have plenty, but they tend to spaz out into another land, and I can't say no different. I mean I'm house music but I got two techno songs out.

KSO: That seems to be common, and even going back and revisiting records that were coming out on like KMS or like Happy Trax from Underground Resistance. A lot of the techno guys were putting out house. Like Inner City, I mean some of that stuff is house. I guess my association (for Detroit’s sound) would be deep stuff and maybe that's overgeneralizing. Cause you can find examples of people doing all sorts of more jacking tracks, and harder house. It's hard, it would work writing wise, be a neat little narrative, but I don't want it if it's not accurate. Then I'm just doing what the other guys did, that wrote stuff and just kind of made it fit what they wanted to say. It's hard to categorize.

SH: Yeah, but not me. I usually just come out of whatever little bag I’m feeling at the time. And I have about five tracks in Bandcamp, but that I just need to go and master and release. A lot of people is going to look at my Bandcamp, I’m like oh shoot, you know. But I want it to be tight. I got a few on SoundCloud, people downloading them, they’re playin’ them, and I'm like oh shoot I need to tighten that up.
KSO: Yeah, you want people to play the masters, rather than the YouTube rips or whatever.

SH: Yeah.

KSO: If I could ask you one more thing and then we'll call it. You’ve been so gracious with your time, thank you again. I can't write about house music in Detroit without writing about Ken Collier. What was his importance to, not only house music but just Detroit music, and if there's any memories in particular that you'd care to share?

SH: Ken Collier. He is Detroit's Godfather of house music, hands down, single-handedly. I was blessed enough to be close to him. He was very advantageous in teaching me, I was one of the privileged few to be able to go over to his home and sit on the floor with records. Sit on the floor, cross your legs. That’s how he always played, sitting on the floor. We didn't have no (points to equipment) none of that. I was very privileged to be able to be one of the only, out of 3 DJ's, to be able to play up at Club Heaven. He didn't trust anyone else. And the man was a comedian, make us laugh so much. He was just really a good guy. I can't say enough good things about him. I mean just in his character, it wasn't him trying to be anything, but just a good guy. He was just a lot of fun. So he embraced... I don’t wanna say embraced techno, but definitely progressive. Progressive house and even whether you didn't call it that or not. But he would let somebody like Derek May in, or something, who would come to heaven and give him a record and maybe he would play it, maybe he would not. More likely he would not, but he would give it to me and let me do it because I was the more daring one. I would bring artists to Heaven, who was that, that made “Groove is in the Heart”?

KSO: I want to say Dee-Lite?
SH: Dee-Lite, yes! That's right, Dee-Lite. I actually brought Dee-Lite to Heaven one time. Because of me being deep in radio, I’m on radio between WJLB and now over at 96.3, and so, and then Billboard reporting, so I had a lot of these people at my... you know like, "Hey, we want to come here, show us a good time” or whatever the situation was. And so I actually brought Dee-Lite to Heaven. And that would be, typically nothing that Ken would play, that's like on the off cuff you know what I mean. You know it’s a jam, but it’s different, he's very progressive. And all of the sudden something comes in (sings). He would not do that, but you know me I’ll play it. Yeah, I never forget that that moment. He was always very open to my different. So much to the point that he play, you know heaven, was... Let me get everything in perspective. Heaven was after Club Hollywood, Club Exclusive. Okay, Heaven was going on but at that time it was not a black club it was a white, gay male after hour club.

Okay so now there’s Heaven, Hollywood is not there anymore. When we would all get off work, working our 9-2 jobs DJing, we’d go to late night, we’d go to Heaven. That was our ritual, all of us DJs would go. Phil who was the manager there, managed to open up and have a night Sunday night at the Time Square. That we talked about earlier. And the only reason I got the job is cause Ken was too hungover from the night before. He couldn’t get up and do the night. Cause we were drinking so much vodka and orange juice, that he could not. You know, hey, you know, you physically can't do it. And he preferred to rest. Which would be fine. So that was my first and only opportunity that I had to play for the guys, who’s energy was way off the chart. So, because I was introducing techno, in Times Square and I didn’t know, typically the kids would go back and be like “Uhhh, can you play this?” And they was asking him to play this music, he didn't know what they was talking about!
So finally, I’ll never forget it, I looked out and saw him nodding and I said “What?! You came to see me? Are you kidding?!?” and he said “Miss Stacey, girl, I had to come down here and see what you was doing, cause these children are worrying me! What is this, “elevator up?” or whatever what you know. It’s something that he had to find out.

And that's typical, that’s how playing records, folks would...I don't want to say get on your nerves, but that's a much better time of music. And not that you couldn't go hear different stuff different places, but it was very unique for me to play that to this particular crowd, because they couldn't really hear it anywhere else. There was nowhere else for him to go to hear it and now we're talking about records versus everybody having a digital copy of something and it’s all over the road. How do you even...it's no such thing as breaking a record now. How do you break a record? I don’t know how. Unless you’re Beyonce and even she left the label and did her own thing and did it you know, through social media and make it be your own. So there’s still no such thing as this record is such a hit and here's on the radio and it becomes, and you break it and it becomes this thing. That day is gone. It’s not going to happen ever again. It's going to come in a different way and as time goes on, you just keep creating a different way. But yeah, I looked up and saw Ken, that was like the most compliment of the high. To have him come to hear what I was doing. Another big compliment I got from Charles Hicks when I was playing at Cheeks, because we were over there being progressive and playing house music, and that's not what they played over at UBQ, but the chatter was going crazy like, “Can you do this? Can you do that?” and he’s like “What?” Well he had to take off work and come down there and take notes and listen. So those are two major players that took notes, to come and hear what I was doing. And I
didn't know I was doing something different, you know what I mean? I didn’t do this to be different, I just did it cause I think this is kinda cool.

KSO: And you were different.

SH: But I’m making waves, but it’s just, oh cool, to be making the waves and stuff. So I wanted to bring up something else. I don’t know if you read about me having the first music conference here.

KSO: Yes, the TurtleBugg article (in Resident Advisor). Detroit Regional Music Conference?

SH: Detroit Regional Music Conference, DRMC. That’s correct.

KSO: Did that only happen...it was a couple of years right?

SH: Five. That’s because I would go to Florida, Miami, when they had the Winter Music Conference. And I would watch all these things going on, all this talent and things. I'm going, oh my god, we have talent here in Detroit. And why can't we, you know have something like that here? Majority of people I know, they can't take off and go to fly to Florida be in all that, so it was my intention to bring that vibe, to bring it here and show off our talent. And it included all genres of music, alternative, jazz, the music that we were rich in. That's what that was and Ken Collier was over the Dance division. Yep, I put him over, it's like hey, you know, you do that. You know Adriel Thornton? He’s a big alternative guy that does a lot of different music, but he's always up on the promotion tip and stuff like that. And you know, touch bases of many different things. So you have a hip-hop, so I would give those directors, they would have last 5 parties in one night. It would be at their club doing that particular music, for that particular time. You know and
TurtleBugg has the book of pictures and stuff like that. So yeah, I had the vision to be able to do that, John Collins and I. But I was the heart beat. The crazy, it’s kinda crazy, you might say “Why would you want to do this here?” It gave me grey hair, but I just wanted to take all the tools I had and use them and pull them together to make something big. So I envisioned having a festival at Hart Plaza long before it ever happened. That was what I was trying to do. And I remember standing out there in the middle of that thing saying “I wanna have a music festival here.” And I wanted to be able to get it done by way of this here, this conference. But what am I? Getting sponsors and getting money and all that stuff it was not my best forte, you know, to be able to do that. But I sure tried. I just got a document, and it is documented, and I can’t make it up. That girl who was taking photos and putting this portfolio together for me, I had no idea, cause there was no such thing as Facebook and pictures, it wasn’t that, that didn’t exist. But she took pictures and put it in the thing, and all of us arrived at did that didn’t exist but she took pictures and she put it in the thing, and had the mind to at least keep all the books or do the best I could. All the Fliers and everything with it, so I have it. I would reach out to newspaper, radio, you know I did. But it’s like yeah, whatever. You know, I was able to have a couple of radio stations involved and they would just get me the artist. Getting the people to participate in that, it just as kind of went broke. Like okay, and that's why I had to stop it. I still have the business, DRMC it still exists, and HotWaxx production and movement music is the umbrella up under it. It still exists, so even, so then DEMF (Detroit Electronic Music Festival, now Movement) happened after that. And Carl (Craig), and everybody that I talked that we’ve been speaking about was involved in this conference I was doing. Including Kevin (Saunderson), Derek (May), all of ‘em, Ken (Collier), all of it. I brought all together, cat’s
from Chi-Town, people out of New York. It was cool, and so like the last of the big party we were getting ready to do was going to be on The Boblo Boat and they and they went bankrupt. And I sued ‘em and they didn’t they didn’t have any money. That took the air out of me.

KSO: I can imagine.

SH: It just took the air out. Oh, I know where I was going with that, so I was trying to tie it in when the festival started, DEMF. And let this be the educational part of it, to still let that happen and then we go to a festival and parties at night or whatever, they couldn’t get it together. I had all the tools and the connections and I can't make them. I’m not DEMF, I’m DRMC but I’m hearing like “Take this, come on,” I'll just make something you know. So not only did they lose it, to something else and you know these people could give less than a whatever about it.

KSO: Seems like there has been an effort to draw focus back to where the music comes from now, but it's almost like a situation where their hands were forced you know. And that's interesting to know that there was that chance to really built an infrastructure, where it's not just a party, it's a learning experience.

SH: A learning experience. That’s where I was coming from, award shows, I had Cobo Hall, you know it was a lot. I look back and go “Woah!” I almost can’t believe it. The award shows, we had the Gordy's in there, we had them escorted it. It was a lot. Doing it with no financial backing. Okay, let's just go there. There was no financial backing. All the money that was generated for it was, you know, when I get people to pay for ads, you would think that people would register. The registration was like dirt cheap it's a two or three hundred
dollars to register for Winter Music Conference, I think the registration we had it was like $40, $50, something like that. And then that mentality of people thinking, “Oh you’re going to get rich,” you know, that kind of thing. And then that lead to me not being able to target a bigger market. Well, that takes money. Because I do believe there was an audience for that, you know, something, I wasn't able to reach out past Detroit. Or if I was, like I said it was in newspapers, but marketing was not my thing. Although I knew that more people needed to know. But, you know, it's what it is. I went to school for EE (electrical engineering) instead of marketing and economics. So that’s what I get, I was better on the tech end. I paid dearly for that one. But, hey, I don't regret it. I don’t regret it at all.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


ABSTRACT

THE HOUSE DETROIT BUILT: HOUSE MUSIC IN TECHNO CITY

by

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Although house music was invented in Chicago, the genre has flourished in Detroit. Legendary DJs, like Ken “The Godfather” Collier and Stacey “Hotwaxx” Hale, helped pave the way for generations of house DJs and producers in Detroit, a city more well known for producing techno. The work of Detroit producers who made music in both styles proves a useful case study for making distinctions between the genres of techno and house. This work examines the history and current practice of Detroit house music, contrasting it with Detroit techno and Chicago house. Using scholarly literature on house and techno, original interviews, and consulting a range of print, audio, and visual sources, a focused picture of Detroit’s house music emerges.
AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

Experiencing electronic music in Detroit has been a central influence on my studies, musical output, and record collection. I have been lucky enough to perform live electronic music in the city, buy records directly from my favorite DJs, and have seen legendary Detroit DJs play in their home city. I genuinely hope that my work in this thesis will inspire readers to take their own journey into the history and current output of Detroit house DJs and producers. My musical works are available on Bandcamp (https://keatonsoto-olson.bandcamp.com/) and I have created a Spotify playlist of some of my favorite Detroit house records available here: https://open.spotify.com/playlist/2JaucFCWYbOvcZPRvpxqF?si=ecb445f6fd0f4f25