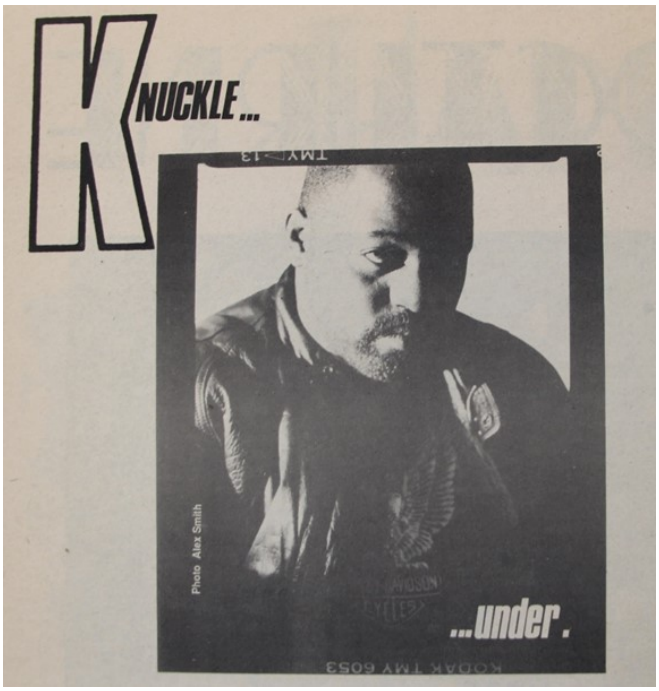
Preliminary Summary of Information

Submitted to the Commission on Chicago Landmarks in April 2023



Frankie Knuckles Spring 1988, *Think Ink* magazine.

The Warehouse
206 S. Jefferson Street

CITY OF CHICAGO
Lori E. Lightfoot, Mayor

Department of Planning and Development
Maurice D. Cox, Commissioner

Cover Illustrations:

Right: Frankie Knuckles Spring 1988, *Think Ink* magazine. (Credit: Archives of the Chicago History Museum).

The Commission on Chicago Landmarks, whose nine members are appointed by the Mayor and City Council, was established in 1968 by city ordinance. The Commission is responsible for recommending to the City Council which individual buildings, sites, objects, or districts should be designated as Chicago Landmarks, which protects them by law.

The landmark designation process begins with a staff study and a preliminary summary of information related to the potential designation criteria. The next step is a preliminary vote by the landmarks commission as to whether the proposed landmark is worthy of consideration. This vote not only initiates the formal designation process, but it places the review of city permits for the property under the jurisdiction of the Commission until a final landmark recommendation is acted on by the City Council.

This Landmark Designation Report is subject to possible revision and amendment during the designation process. Only language contained within the designation ordinance adopted by the City Council should be regarded as final.

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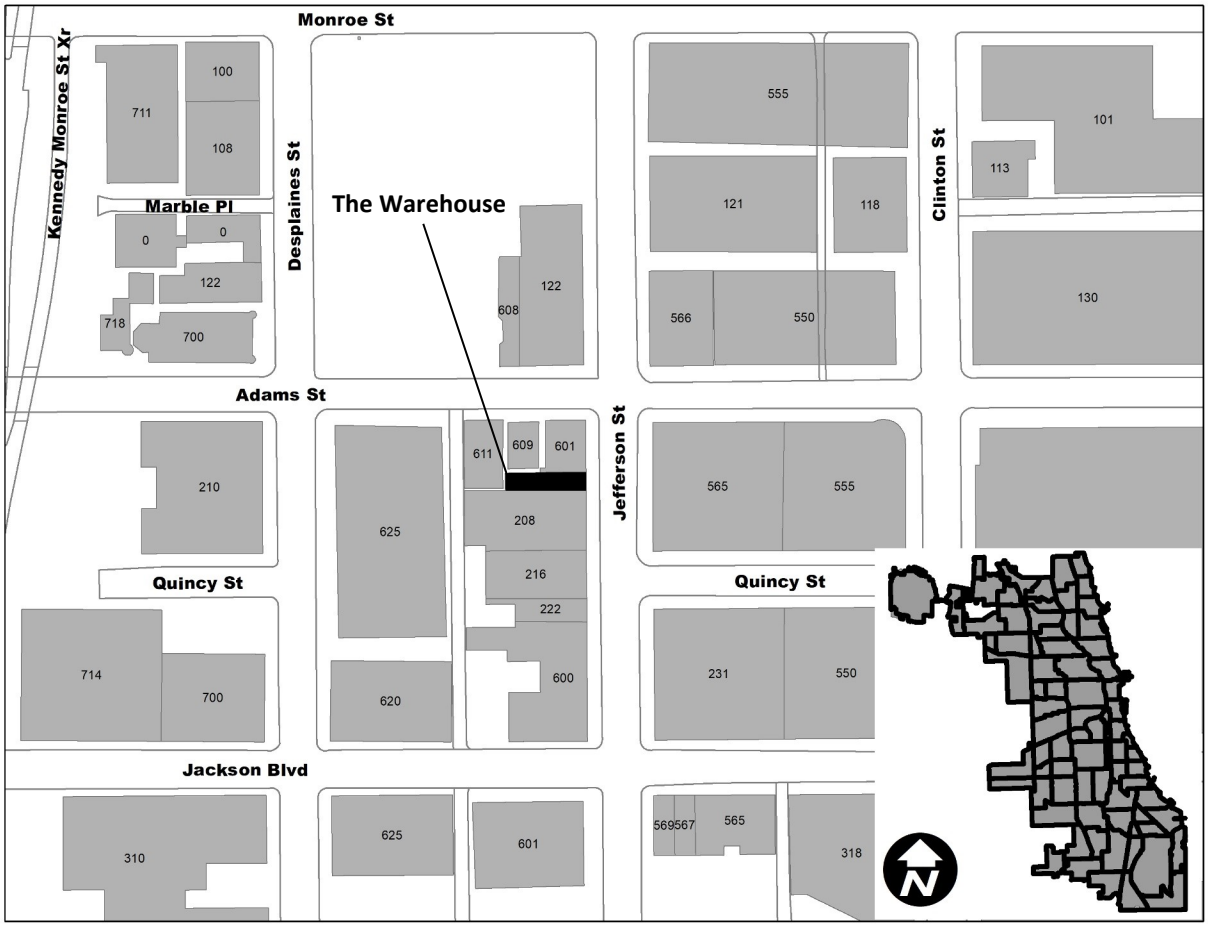
The Warehouse
206 S. Jefferson Street
Constructed: 1910
Period of Significance: 1977-1982
Architect: Vernon W. Behel

Chicagoans are proud to claim house music as one of the city's original contributions to music culture. With its driving beat, emotive vocals and lush orchestration, house borrowed from a range of musical traditions to create a new musical genre. While several DJs, dance floors, record shops and radio programs contributed to house's development in Chicago, the history of house is clear that it originated between 1977 and 1982 at The Warehouse located at 206 S. Jefferson St. by its pioneering resident DJ Frankie Knuckles (1955-2014) who is regarded as the "Godfather of house music" who went on to be an influential record producer, and Grammy-winning remix artist.

Located in the West Loop, 206 S. Jefferson St. was built as a light industrial loft building in 1910, but by the 1970s the industries that built the West Loop had moved on. New York City transplant and music promoter Robert Williams saw an opportunity to bring the discotheque dance scene that had thrived in Manhattan to Chicago. He purchased the building in 1976 for a new DJ-led dance venue known as The Warehouse. Frankie Knuckles, an established young DJ from New York City's club scene, came to Chicago to serve as the new club's resident DJ from 1977 to 1982. During Knuckles' residency, The Warehouse became a legendary night spot for cutting edge sound and late-night dance.

The Warehouse could not have such a success without loyal supporters who helped establish house in Chicago's musical landscape, especially Black and Latinx LGBTQ men and women who found in Knuckles' music community, hope, acceptance and even transcendence. With time, the revolutionary music and vibrant scene at The Warehouse appealed to a larger audience of club goers in Chicago first. As such, The Warehouse became one of the first, if not the first,



The Warehouse is located near the northwest corner of Jefferson and Adams Streets in the West Loop neighborhood and the larger Near West Side community area.

entertainment venues in Chicago that broke down the barriers between gay and straight audiences. By the end of the 1980s, house had become popular on dance floors across Europe and North America giving rise to a number of variant genres. Today, the global popularity of Electronic Dance Music (EDM) traces its origins to Frankie Knuckles and The Warehouse, in the West Loop.

Despite his success, Frankie Knuckles remained humble about his creative genius. In 1988, when an interviewer asked Knuckles to define the significance of The Warehouse, he believed it was far more about his audience than his music:

> *It's the feeling, it's the attitude. It once was a feeling and a spirit that not me alone invented or conjured up or whatever . . . it was something that people on the dance floor created for themselves. People from that particular period and that particular era, that particular club, on that particular dance floor, under that particular sound system. Its something that they adapted, and they made all their own. I mean please, all those nights that all of us spent in that club, no matter*

206 S. Jefferson St. is a small but colorful light-industrial building from 1910. From 1977 to 1982, the building was home to The Warehouse, where DJ Frankie Knuckles helped develop house music in Chicago.

what song was playing, nine times out of f ten there was an inspirational message there. And there'd be all different kinds of people in that room making all different kinds of noises . . . you know, just took the whole thing a step further.

The Warehouse and DJ Frankie Knuckles

Musical promoter Robert Williams, steeped in New York City's disco dance club scene, came to Chicago in 1973. At that time in Chicago, there were a few clubs and DJs that played disco music, yet Chicago was untouched by the DJ dance culture that was thriving in New York City. In Chicago, Williams established US Studios which hosted DJ-led dance parties at a series of of former industrial venues in the West Loop and South Loop in the mid-1970s.

US Studios' choice of the West Loop and South Loop venues was no accident. First, Williams' events mirrored the New York discotheque scene and attracted a gay and Black clientele (both men and women), who were not welcome at North Side nightclubs, so the "underground" fringes of the Loop offered safer and less surveilled locations. Second, the West Loop and South Loop were at the time devoid of residential housing, so the high volume and persistent bass of the music played by the DJs would be unlikely to be regarded as a nuisance. In a 1990 interview, Frankie Knuckles recalled that in 1976 the West Loop "was pretty desolate there was really not that much around there, so it was like the perfect place for if anyone wanted to take a loft and . . . build a night club then it was a perfect area to do it."

In 1976 Williams leased 206 S. Jefferson St., an unassuming industrial loft building for a new permanent venue named The Warehouse. Designed in 1910 by industrial architect Vernon W. Behel for owner J. J. Gallery, the three-story building measures 24 feet across its front and 100 feet deep. The building is located near the northwest corner of South Jefferson Street and West Adams Street with its primary façade facing east onto Jefferson. The colorful façade is clad in cream and dark green glazed brick with minimal terra cotta trim. Typical of industrial buildings, the window openings are large for maximum light and ventilation, though the original sash do not survive. 206 S. Jefferson stands lot line to lot line, abutting buildings on its side and rear elevations. Prior to becoming The Warehouse, 206 S. Jefferson housed a number of light manufacturers including a brass works and a lithography company.

Williams' plan for The Warehouse was highly influenced by the dance clubs he experienced in New York. Attendees had to join as members of the club, though the nightly fee for attending a set was set low at $4. In lieu of alcohol, fruit juice was offered. The absence of alcohol allowed the club to remain open all night, which at The Warehouse was once a week, from midnight Saturday to Sunday afternoon. Finally, music was provided by a professional DJ spinning vinyl and reel-to-reel tape. As professional DJs for this setting were rare in Chicago, Williams travelled to the clubs he knew well in New York City to find talent.

The story of The Warehouse begins with music promoter Robert Williams, a New Yorker who grew up in that city's disco club culture. He came to Chicago in 1973 and established "US Studios" which hosted DJ-led dance parties at a series of former industrial venues in the West Loop and South Loop in the mid-1970s.

Photos of The Warehouse from the 1970s, have not been found, but these photographs of the block of S. Jefferson Street from that time show how the West Loop was a desolate former industrial area. But according to its resident DJ Frankie Knuckles, the location was perfect for The Warehouse as it was far from established entertainment districts where The Warehouse's Black and gay clientele were not welcome.
Source: Illinois Historic Resources Survey

228 S. Jefferson

122 S. Jefferson

209 S. Jefferson

In New York, there were two young practitioners of the art of DJing that Williams knew and sought out: Larry Levan and Frankie Knuckles. Levan and Knuckles had been friends since their teenage years, and both had been working as DJs intermittently in the early '70s. In 1973, Levan landed as resident DJ at The Continental Baths, a gay discotheque. He brought his friend Knuckles to play warm-up sets and assist with lighting. Knuckles later described the creative process by which he and Levan created new sounds from existing records: "Larry Levan and I would spend entire afternoons working up ideas on how to mix songs, and how to present a record so that people would hear it in a new way and fall in love with it. To us, it was an art form." At the Baths, Levan and Knuckles established themselves as experts in the art form and New York night life figures in their own right.

When Williams searched New York in 1976 seeking to fill the new DJ booth at The Warehouse, he first offered the post to Levan. However, by that time Levan had started his own club, the first of several that were very popular in New York's club scene, particularly Paradise Garage which lent its name to the Garage genre of dance music. At Levan's recommendation, Williams offered the position to Knuckles who accepted on the condition to himself that if he did not succeed in Chicago in five years, he would return home to New York.

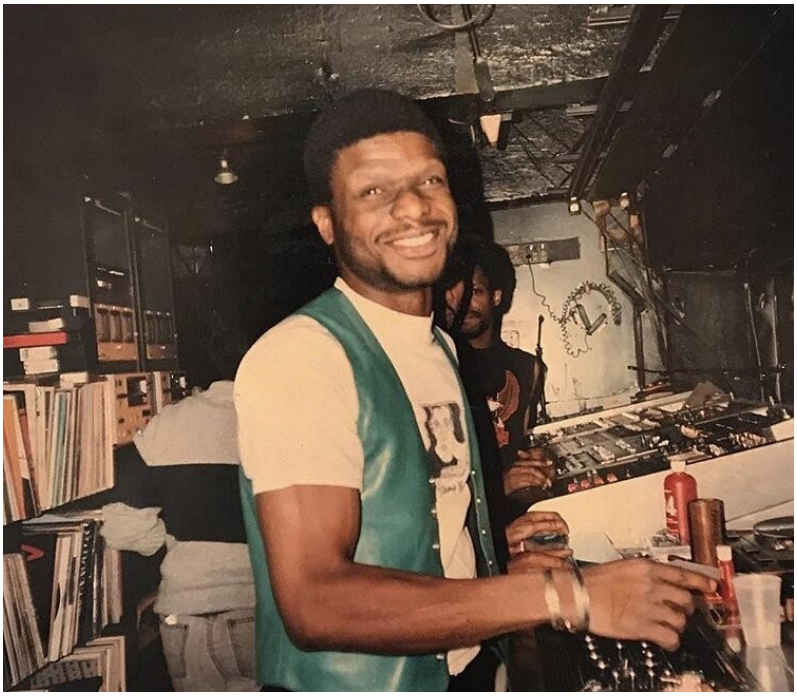
Knuckles arrived in March 1977, moving into an *ad hoc* living quarter in 206 S. Jefferson. Within the five-year period set for himself, Knuckles became the "Godfather of house Music", and The Warehouse became the cradle of the revolutionary new sound combining disco, electronic, soul, and gospel music.

Though there is some debate, most music historians agree that the term "house" music takes its name from The Warehouse. The best evidence for this comes from Frankie Knuckles who recalled that around:

> *Maybe '80, '81, somewhere around there. I was in a car with a friend of mine, going to his house on the South Side and we were at a stoplight. There was a tavern on the corner with a sign saying, "We play house music." That was the first time I heard of it. Well, I saw it. I asked him what it was, and he said, "It's the music that you play down there at your club." [laughs] I was like, "Excuse me?" He's like, "That's house music." I was like, "Oh. I didn't realize it had a name." "Well, it's the house, that's everybody's nickname for the place." That was the first time I really felt like I belonged in Chicago, that I was part of the city. The fact that people had given it a nickname, that they thought of me and that music together all in one.*

While house music developed in Chicago while drawing from a wide range of musical genres, its foundations were firmly rooted in disco, a dance music genre that emerged in New York and Philadelphia in the late 1960s which was popular with the LGBTQ, Black, Latino and Italian communities. During the mid-1970s, disco became popular in mainstream charts in America and Europe reaching a zenith in the cinematic rendering of the scene in *Saturday Night Fever* in

Frankie Knuckles at the DJ Booth in The Warehouse in the late 1970s. Source: Chicago Tribune, Reginald Corner.



Larry Levan, childhood friend of Frankie Knuckles who began successful DJ careers together in New York City in the 1970s. Source: djfrancescaharding.com

Knuckles 'crate digging' for vinyl at The Warehouse. He developed house by reassembling and extending existing songs on vinyl and tape in creative ways. Initially disco was the foundation of house and that genre was at its zenith when Knuckles arrived in Chicago. Two years later, Disco was in sharp decline and the supply of new records dwindled. In the absence of new disco, Knuckles mined tracks from older vinyl and tape, particularly African American music traditions, including R&B, soul, jazz, funk and gospel music that shared with disco emotive vocals and lush orchestration. To these tracks, Knuckles added a persistent 4 over 4 bass line to create songs that were virtually impossible not to dance to. Source: Chicago Tribune, Reginald Corner.

1977. That same year Knuckles arrived in Chicago to take the helm at the Warehouse.

A few years later, Knuckles described his work at The Warehouse as "disco's revenge" which reflected a sharp drop in disco's mainstream popularity in 1979. Disco's decline was celebrated and hastened by an infamous stunt organized by Chicago DJ Steve Dahl in 1979 known as Disco Demolition Night at Comiskey Park when thousands of disco records were dynamited between a double-header between the Chicago White Sox and the Detroit Tigers that ended in a riot. Music historians debate the extent to which Disco Demolition Night was an expression of homophobia or racism, but Frankie Knuckles recalled that the stunt – which occurred during the heart of his residency at The Warehouse – was one that the gay community would not dignify as having any meaning: "I witnessed that caper that Steve Dahl pulled at Disco Demolition Night and it didn't mean a thing to me or my crowd."

Instead, Knuckles and his audience responded by resurrecting disco on the dance floor even if it had become outmoded to the mainstream. The decline of disco's popularity in the United States compelled record labels to stop signing artists and fewer disco records were being released. To fill the gap and keep his dancefloor sets fresh, Knuckles turned to disco imports from Italy where the genre remained popular. He also mined African American music traditions, including deep R&B tracks, soul, jazz, funk and gospel music that shared with disco emotive vocals and orchestration. Knuckles also looked backward in time, unafraid of resurrecting from obscurity old standards.

Knuckles handled songs as building blocks to be presented together via their similarity, juxtaposition or overlaid on top of each other to keep his dance floor engaged: "I had to completely re-edit [songs] or rework them to make them work on my dance floor. There were records coming out that were okay, but they just didn't have enough punch to get my dance floor interested." In interviews, Knuckles spoke of his ability to understand and respond to the dynamics of the dance floor, for example this passage from the Spring 1988 issue of *Think Ink*:

> *I try to keep myself in the same place that the audience is, which is on the dance floor. That's the most important thing any disc jockey should do is keep themselves on the dance floor with the people. Not above them. Your booth can be elevated into the heavens, but you have to keep yourself on the dance floor with those people because you've got to feel the same thing they're feeling. You've got to know exactly what they want and how they're feeling about it. And it does not matter how old the s--- is. And it does not matter how often you play it. I mean please, if that's what's working your audience and that's what's making your dance floor work, and everybody is really into you for that, do what's pleasing them because that's going to keep you where you need to be for what you got to do.*

Like many DJs, Knuckles had mastered segueing from one song to another without skipping a

With help from sound engineer Erasmo Rivera, Knuckles learned how to re-edit songs on reel-to-reel tape using manual splicing techniques which required hand, eye and ear coordination. Similarly, two turntables were used to mix records simultaneously.

In the 1980s, these analog techniques were supplemented by digital electronics like the Roland drum machine that Knuckles used to run new rhythms, basslines and drum tracks underneath familiar songs to create completely new sonic versions.

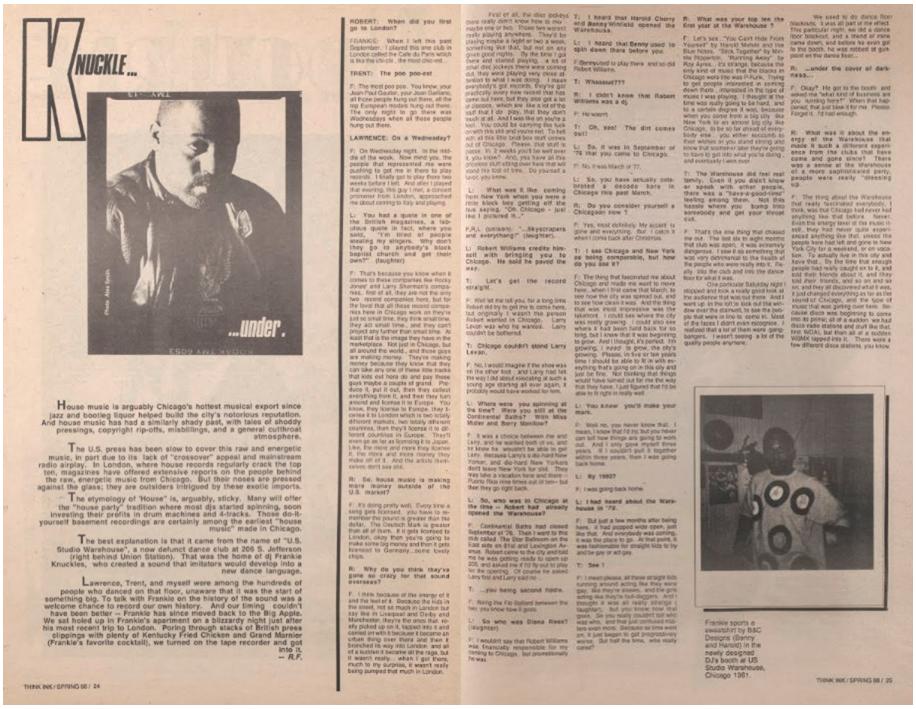
beat. Combining songs without a break was important for the dance floor. A standard three-minute-long song was fine for radio listening, but far too short for a dancer to pause and switch to a new rhythm. At The Warehouse he developed new skills in re-editing songs on reel-to-reel tape. With help from sound engineer Erasmo Rivera, Knuckles used a razor blade and sticky tape to spliced together multiple songs to create combined versions of songs. Tape splicing also allowed for cutting in break-beats from other songs to increase the tempo and improve danceability.

Reel-to-reel splicing requires skillful hand-eye-and-ear coordination that Knuckles honed, however advancements in silicon chip technology in the 1980s lowered the cost and size of electronic devices that could be programmed to generate sound such as synthesizers and drum machines, particularly the Roland TR-909 drum machine which Knuckles praised. By adding pre-programmed drum rhythms from the Roland, Knuckles gave house its essential driving 4/4 beat at 120 to 140 beats per minute which made dance virtually irresistible. The new electronic technology also allowed Knuckles a higher level of alchemy: instead of merely re-editing songs by spliced tape, he could remix sounds by weaving new rhythms, basslines and drum tracks underneath familiar songs to create completely new sonic versions. This was completely new for Chicago, and it made The Warehouse and Knuckles wildly popular.

Beyond production, another important technical consideration for house music is the venue's sound system design. For this, Robert Williams, The Warehouse's promoter, turned to sound designer Richard Long, who designed sound systems at the leading clubs of the disco era, including Paradise Garage and Studio 54 in Manhattan. Knuckles recalled that the "sound system was intense, and it was about what you heard as opposed to what you saw." Knuckles had studied the system with Long, and he mastered precise control over, observing and responding to the dynamics on the dance floor. Like the best discotheques of the era, it was also very loud. The sound waves were not just audible but physically palpable. So loud that visitors to The Warehouse who could not gain admission were able to enjoy some of the sonic experience from Jefferson Street.

As much of the effect of The Warehouse was created by lighting and sound, it seems unlikely that any of this equipment still survives in the building, which currently houses offices. The best description of The Warehouse in its prime is provided by Frankie Knuckles:

> *The DJ booth was constructed on the loading dock, at the back end of the room. It was three stories, the basement, the main floor where the dance floor was, and the lounge was upstairs. So, when you came into the building you went upstairs and then you came back down at the back of the building. So, when you got to the back of the room and you came down, that room was usually dark, and the lights were glowing. And if it wasn't the dead of winter, we turned on the exhaust fans, so all the condensation in the room would turn into natural fog, if you will. You could hear nothing but the crowd in there screaming and making whatever kind of noise it was. And that was pretty much it. Some people have these romantic notions*



Despite the popularity of the Warehouse, during the 1970s and early 1980s Chicago house remained underground and ignored by media. The one exception to this was *Thing,* a 'zine published in Chicago as a platform for black gay life that did cover house music in each issue. *Thing* also ran features on house DJs including one on Knuckles in 1988 -- well before he was known to mainstream media. Source: Abakanowicz Research Center, Chicago History Museum.

about it, it must have been all these different crazy things, but it was really, really simple.

Into this space, The Warehouse reportedly accommodated as many as 2,000 revelers who came to dance from midnight on Saturday to mid-day on Sunday. Knuckles recalled that "in the early days between '77 and '81, the parties were very intense . . . but the feeling going on then, I think, was very pure. The energy, the feeling, the feedback that you got from the people in the room, was very, very spiritual." Historians have described Frankie Knuckles as one of the finest DJs of dance music, likening him to a shaman who could lead his audiences to transcendent experiences of community.

While The Warehouse initially catered to Chicago's gay Black men and women, and to some extent Latinos, the reputation of the club's revolutionary new music attracted a wider audience beginning in the early 1980s, it was one of the first entertainment venue in Chicago where gay and straight club goers of multiple races and ethnicities shared a dance floor.

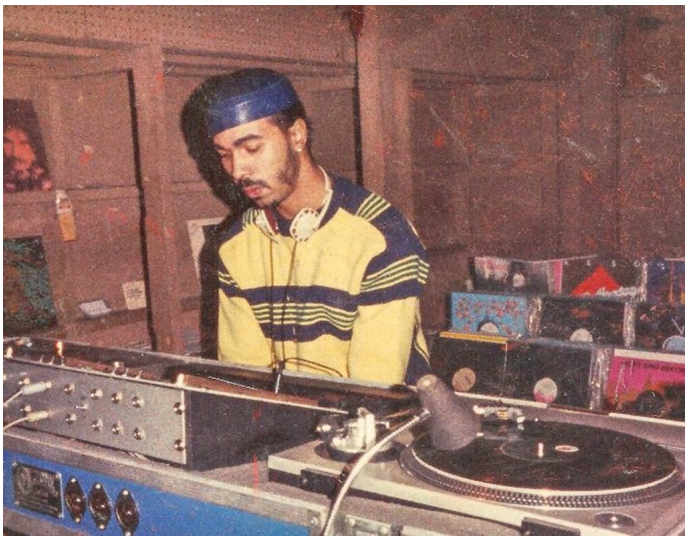
The Influence of The Warehouse

In 1983, Knuckles parted ways with Robert Williams and The Warehouse to strike out on his own, establishing his own club known as the Power Plant at 1015 N. Halsted St. on Goose Island. Robert Williams rebranded The Warehouse as the Music Box at a new location on Lower Wacker Drive and hired Ron Hardy, a legendary California DJ in his own right, as resident. Playing on different nights each weekend, Knuckles and Hardy attended each other's sets and engaged in friendly competition that helped advance the house genre while broadening its appeal.

Knuckles and Hardy influenced a number of young DJs who listened and then mastered the sound as electronic synthesizers, samplers and drum machines grew more accessible. In Chicago alone there were DJs Jesse Saunders, Vince Lawrence, Marshall Jefferson, Larry Heard, Adonis, Ron Hardy, Steve "Silk" Hurley, Farley "Jackmaster" Funk and Wayne Williams. In the early years, house music in Chicago was non-commercial and underground, only available at dance venues. By the 1980s, house records began to become available and Chicago radio station WBMX attracted a million listeners per week to its broadcasts of DJs performing live mixes on air in its Hot Mix 5 lineup. At the same time, Detroit was developing its own electronic dance music known as techno, and New York City had its genre known as garage.

After leaving The Warehouse, Knuckles continued to DJ at his Chicago club The Power Plant until 1986, when he returned to New York City and established the Def Mix production company with fellow DJ David Morales. In the 1980s and 1990s, Def Mix began producing music for notable musicians including Diana Ross, Chaka Khan, Whitney Houston and Michael and Janet Jackson, Luther Vandross, Toni Braxton. In 1991, Knuckles was signed to Virgin Records,

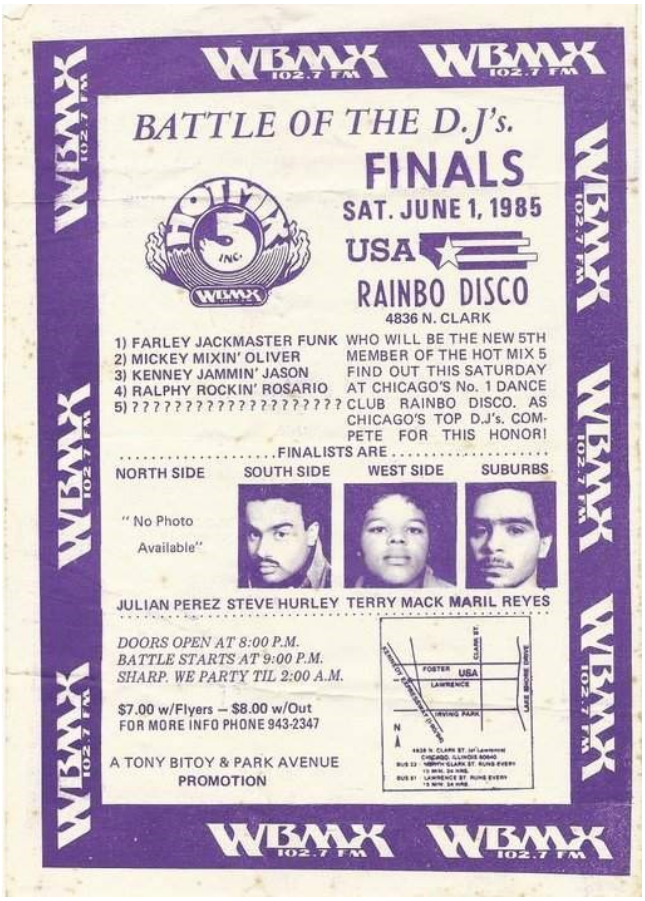
Knuckles at the Power Plant



DJ Ron Hardy at the Music Box

After 5 years, The Warehouse closed. In 1983, knuckles established his own club, the Power Plant on Goose Island. Robert Williams rebranded The Warehouse as the Music Box at a new location on Lower Wacker Drive and hired Ron Hardy, a legendary California DJ as resident. Playing on different nights each weekend, Knuckles and Hardy attended each other's sets and engaged in friendly competition that helped advance the house genre while broadening its appeal.

By the mid-1980s, house musicians like Knuckles began to record on vinyl, allowing the genre to spread..



Chicago radio station WBMX was one of first to broadcast DJs performing live house mixes on air in its Hot Mix 5 lineup, and it sponsored live DJ battles.

which released his debut album "Beyond the Mix," which contained his iconic singles "The Whistle Song," "Rainfalls" and "Workout." In 1998, the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences created a category for Remixer of the Year, Non-Classical, in its Grammy's program and Knuckles was the first recipient of that award.

By 1987, house music became popular in the UK, Holland, German, Belgium and Italy, spawning stylistics names such as acid house, deep house, rave and drum and bass. These genres were clearly influenced by house but lacked the African-American musical resonance of the genre's original Chicago sound. This European version of house was then exported back to the American market where it was met with commercial success as mainstream artists began issuing house remixes of popular songs.

Criteria for Designation

According to the Municipal Code of Chicago (Section 2-120-620 and -630), the Commission on Chicago Landmarks has the authority to make a preliminary recommendation for an area, district, place, building, structure, work of art, or other object within the City of Chicago if the Commission determines it meets two or more of the stated "criteria for designation" and that it possesses a significant degree of historic integrity to convey its significance. The following should be considered by the Commission on Chicago Landmarks in determining whether to recommend that The Warehouse be designated as a Chicago Landmark.

Criterion 1: Value as an Example of City, State, or National Heritage

Its value as an example of the architectural, cultural, economic, historic, social, or other aspect of the heritage of the City of Chicago, the State of Illinois, or the United States.

- 206 S. Jefferson was home to The Warehouse from 1977 to 1982, a dance club with cultural significance to the City of Chicago and the United States as the birth place of house, a genre of dance music characterized by a driving beat, emotive lyrics and lush orchestration drawn from a number of genres including disco, R&B, gospel and techno.

- The Warehouse is culturally significant to Chicago's LGBTQ, Black and Latino community as the first supporters of house music at The Warehouse and who found a sense of community, self expression and hope in The Warehouse's revolutionary music.

- Over time, The Warehouse became popular with a broad range of Chicago club goers, and it was one of the first venues that broke down the barriers between gay and straight club scenes.

Criterion 3: Significant Person

Its identification with a person or persons who significantly contributed to the architectural, cultural, economic, historic, social, or other aspect of the development of the City of Chicago, State

of Illinois, or the United States.

- The Warehouse is significant for its association with DJ Frankie Knuckles, influential American DJ, record producer, and remix artist, who significantly contributed to the music culture of the City of Chicago and the United States as the "Godfather of house music."

- DJ Frankie Knuckles, one of Chicago's cultural pioneers, created house by transforming existing songs by extending, combining and overlyaing them to create completely new experiences of music. Knuckles also used analog and digital technologies to alter songs to make them more up-tempo and danceable.

Integrity Criterion

The integrity of the proposed landmark must be preserved in light of its location, design, setting, materials, workmanship and ability to express its historic community, architecture or aesthetic interest or value.

The building at 206 S. Jefferson is significant for its association with The Warehouse which was located there from 1977 to 1982. The setting is somewhat altered by new construction, but many industrial loft buildings from the period of The Warehouse survive. The design and materials of the building are intact from The Warehouse's tenure between 1977 and 1982.

Significant Historical and Architectural Features

Whenever an area, district, place, building, structure, work of art, or other object is under consideration for landmark designation, the Commission on Chicago Landmarks is required to identify the "significant historical and architectural features" of the property. This is done to enable the owners and the public to understand which elements are considered most important to preserve the historical and architectural character of the proposed landmark. Based on its evaluation of The Warehouse, the Commission staff recommends that the significant features be identified as:

- All exterior elevations, including rooflines, of the building.

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Thing Magazine records, ca. 1980-1995, bulk 1987-1994. Abakanowicz Research Center, Chicago History Museum.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

CITY OF CHICAGO

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The Bureau of Citywide Systems and Historic Preservation would like to thank Patrick Pyszka, Principal Photographer, City of Chicago Department of Assets, Information and Services (AIS) for the professional photography featured in this report.