THE AFRO-DIGITAL MIGRATION:

A DJ'S JOURNEY FROM HIP-HOP TO HOUSE MUSIC

BY DJ LYNNÉE DENISE

DJ Larry Levan and Grace Jones at the Paradise Garage

Vintage flyer from "house" party in Chicago

It was Sean 'Puffy' Combs who sent me running into the arms of house music, hands up, betrayed, like a wounded lover.

I spent the majority of my childhood writing out the lyrics to my favourite rap songs, making up dance steps with friends and dreaming of having a mic to one day speak my truth on the world stage. Hip-hop provided me with a credible summary of almost every corner of Black life in America. And there were many different iterations of Black life to be found in this sound. Hip-hop showed the world that we were building a movement in the basements, parks and modern juke joints of our communities, a movement that thrived off of the multiplicity of DJs, dancers, graffiti artists and emcees: most critical to the art form's well-being was the diversity among them.

The culture gave a voice to socially silenced people and was powerful because it was rooted in ghetto based philosophy and secret codes of resistance. We had crews, colours, new names and new skills by which to express our chosen discipline from the four elements of the culture. This period, though the dates are debatable, has been aptly described as the 'Golden Era,' and I had a stake in it. For me the 'Golden Era' was between 1979 and 1995. And during this time I discovered the musical roots of hip-hop by learning that much of what was being 'sampled' could be found in my parents' and in their parents' record collection. I spent hours coming to understand the intricate ways that hip-hop producers pulled from funk, soul, blues, jazz and other forms of Black American music developed in underground spaces, to carve hip-hop's own place in the legacy.

It was 1995 when hip-hop and I parted ways, and without telling too many details about the breakup, I'll share a few moments in its history that led to my indifference. It starts with MTV. Though once an exclusive space for white rock and then later, with some nudging, black pop, MTV finally opened its arms to hip-hop with the 1988 launching of *Yo! MTV Raps*. My friends and I watched it daily after school, like part of our

homework included studying interviews, videos and the live performances of each artist featured. The show was aired for the last time in 1995, a heartbreaking symbol of decline. *Yo! MTV Raps*' final episode was an indicator that even in its purest, most political form, hip-hop was a real contender for occupying a 'legitimate' place in the American musical imagination.

The second fatal break happened in 1995, when Puffy's Bad Boy Records began functioning as an empire. Bad Boy had a roster of both R&B singers and rap artists, including one of the most celebrated emcees in rap music today, the Notorious BIG, Biggie for short. Faith Evans, an artist in her own right and Biggie's wife, along with Mary J. Blige, affectionately known as the 'Queen of Hip-Hop Soul,' were singers who with Puffy's help secured a hip-hop Hollywood status but the remaining acts on his label had fleeting careers that functioned more like fillers to grow the brand. The fillers, in my head, were mediocre artists who by topping the music charts lowered the standards of the craft. As far as I could see, the sun never set on Puffy's empire. Bad Boy could be heard and seen on every music television network, heard on every urban radio station and read about in most music magazines. With this shift, the nature of the hip-hop culture, or at least the culture the masses had access to, began to change. The lyrics were less creative, the videos more extravagant, and these changes proved lucrative for music executives/distributors, who saw their profits multiply with Puffy's Midas touch. The fact that Arista Records/Clive Davis bought a 50 per cent stake in Puffy's label symbolizes the industry's confidence in his ability to create pedestrian listeners.

Musically, I needed more than what America could offer. I worked at music stores during my high school and college years, where I was exposed to genres of music from around the world. I developed an intimate relationship with classic rock, bebop jazz, roots reggae and so many other forms of music, but it was drum and bass, introduced to me by the UK's Everything but the Girl, that allowed me to escape the sterility of American hip-pop and indulge other youth-led music movements. I started diggin' through the catalog of Everything but the Girl, in awe of their range and evolution as artists. I was feeling deeply moved by music that had a totally different social and cultural context and in it I found myself becoming a global citizen.

I had transferable skills that I developed as a B-Girl (research skills from chasing samples) that made it easy for me to learn about UK soul with the same ferocity I did hip-hop. Doing my homework allowed me to discover who were on the front lines of what was being called 'electronica music.' My curiosity led me to cities like Bristol (St. Paul) and Brixton, listening in heavy rotation to artists such as Loose Ends, Massive Attack, Portishead, Goldie, Björk (UK transplant), Roni Size, Roots Manuva and Soul II Soul. From there, I expanded my UK repertoire to include garage, a subgenre of dance music.

By 2000, I had purchased turntables, headphones, needles and speakers and decided I would create collages (mixes) that represented the interconnectedness between music migration and culture travel. I had enough information and confidence to officially accept the responsibility of being a DJ, a position that would require me to teach by way of exposing my audience to new and highly contextualized music. It had become clear to me that most of the UK electronic music I felt drawn to was influenced by traditional and contemporary music of the African Diaspora. For example, similar to hip-hop, drum and bass at its core is a hybrid of reggae, dub, dancehall and computer technology. Garage was a 'mesh up' of UK soul, New York City's Paradise Garage sound and Chicago house music. There was a form of diasporic dialogue happening between Black Americans and the Black British and this transnational exchange inspired a new question for me: How was music travelling across and between what Paul Gilroy refers to as the 'Black Atlantic'? Essentially, I had to leave America, first symbolically, then physically, to discover a genre of music that would eventually become the primary focus of my DJ scholarly attention—house music.

House music developed beneath the radar of commercial and pop music and claims lineage to disco, gospel, soul, funk and the African drum. Characterized by repetitive 'four to the floor' beats, it was nurtured by the hunger of artists and post-disco club patrons who were marginalized by the marginalized: Black and Brown gay folk. Black and Latino queer culture shaped house music, and the culture around it was informed by the compromised and often dehumanizing social positions of queer people. One of the most important films highlighting the role that house music plays in queer communities and in creating safe spaces is *Paris Is Burning*, a documentary that explores aspects of New York City's 1980s ball scene. The ball scene functioned like a secret society where one could witness and take part in gender performance and build identities drawing from a range of transgressive gender practices.

A commonly overlooked fact about the story of house music is that two

Queer men from Chicago's early house days.

of its most celebrated DJs/producers of this period, Larry Levan (Paradise Garage) and Frankie Knuckles (The Warehouse), were members of the New York City late 1970s ball scene. Larry Levan and Frankie Knuckles became popular while spinning during the disco era, getting their first gigs at the famous NYC Gay Continental bathhouses. My belief is that part of why this is rarely discussed is because the retelling of this particular musical history has been limited to a privileged class of people who have access to the financial and social resources that allow for a dominant narrative, one that historically leaves out the voices of queer people, people of colour and women.

It is true that there were very few women DJs who established themselves as household names within the story of house and that the music is an integral part of the Black gay male experience, but we were there, even if in smaller numbers, as patrons and performers. There were women DJs, producers and promoters who lent their skills to house music as cultural producers and not simply passive bystanders. Most of the oral history and literature I've read about house music, even stories told by Black and Brown queer men, claims that women were 'few and far between.' They share that the predominantly gay male disco and early house scenes preferred women to play a limited role in their entertainment, but there's still a history there and I've had an active role in trying to unfold it. Through my prodding I've learned about women DJs Stacey 'Hotwaxx' Hale and Lynda Carter from Detroit, who played alongside the 'founding fathers' of techno, also known as the Belleville Three: Kevin Saunderson, Derrick May and Juan Atkins. In Chicago Lori Branch and Celeste Alexander spun alongside Andre Hatchett, Ron Hardy and Frankie Knuckles. I've also travelled extensively in search of women DJs and found that we were there, in smaller numbers, but part of the culture and the development of house for the past three decades and we're still here. I've spun alongside DJs Rimarkable, Reborn, Sabine Blaizin and Selly in NYC. I've spun alongside Miz Buttons and DJ Satori in South Africa. I've spun alongside Tora Torres and Cha-Cha Jones in Atlanta and I've spun alongside Keithy 'Lady SpecialK' Antoine, Sweet La Rock, and Amrew Weekes in Montreal. There are many more of us and it's become impossible to wipe our faces from the story of DJ culture as a whole.

So yes, in the interests of racist institutions and heteronormativity, the Black and Brown queer roots of house and the women who played a

Vintage flyer from Frankie Knuckles party in Chicago.

role in the development of the culture have been lost in its translation. Addressing the longstanding history of homophobic rhetoric and erasure of queer cultural movements, Frankie Knuckles famously said: "House music is disco's revenge." This was a direct response to the 'disco sucks' movement, a movement that spoke to an irrational concern over the reshaping of masculinity and the centring of female sexual pleasure; two social developments that disco symbolizes. In 1979, Radio disc jockey Steve Dahl famously organized a public detonation of disco records inside Chicago's Comiskey Park baseball stadium to the chant of thousands of rioters screaming; "Disco sucks." Steve Dahl was a rock jock frustrated by being replaced by a disco DJ, and while he was personally affected by disco's rise, his Comiskey Park 'ceremony' did not happen in isolation. There were similar rallies and movements launched across the country, on the street level, on a political level and on the music industry level. Record company executives began to witness a decline in disco record sales brought on by the 'disco sucks' movement. Chicago politicians were notorious for shutting down parties and creating obstacles, in the form of new policies around liquor licenses, sound ordinances and curfews, to deter promoters from creating underground spaces where gay folks could gather and disco and early house could be heard. The message was clear; racism, sexism and homophobia helped build the momentum of the anti-disco movement. But at the same time Black and Brown queer people came up against the racist and exclusionary practices within the disco movement. The fact that disco originated in Black gay clubs did not stop White entrepreneurs from instituting racist door policies, especially in NYC disco venues like the Flamingo and Studio 54. In response to increasingly unwelcoming spaces in the mainstream disco scene, Blacks and Latinos organized separate events where not only the racial politics differed greatly, but so did the music.

In 1977 New York's Paradise Garage was born, and over the course of ten years it established itself as a never-to-be-missed party where cultural, ethnic and musical differences could be celebrated and developed. Under the leadership of DJ Larry Levan, club-goers, most of them male and queer, were challenged and educated on the dance floor. At the Paradise Garage could be found an incredible sound system that helped to enhance the already euphoric experience,

along with the liberating sexual politics, drugs and celebrities that circulated through the room. Larry Levan was famous for spinning nonstop inter-genre music that made soulful links between funky gospel groups like The Clark Sisters and the Krautrock group Kraftwerk. This eclectic mix of music later became known as 'Garage music' in underground dance music circles and was the foundation for the UK Garage movement.

When a former student of the Dance Theater of Harlem, Robert Williams, moved to Chicago from New York City, he reached out to Larry Levan to start a DJ residency in Chicago that would be based on the loft parties he had experienced in NYC. Larry Levan declined to join the project, but encouraged his DJ partner Frankie Knuckles to take the job. In 1979, Knuckles accepted the offer and moved to Chicago, with his own DJ signature heavily influenced by David Mancuso's Loft Parties and Larry Levan's Paradise Garage sound. Frankie Knuckles became the resident DJ for the acclaimed 'Warehouse Parties,' bringing a new aesthetic to Chicago nightlife. Between 1979 and 1981 Knuckles became a household name, particularly among Black gay club kids. The book *Last Night a DJ Saved My Life* explains the scene: "In Chicago, as the seventies became the eighties, if you were Black and gay your church may well have been Frankie Knuckles' Warehouse, a three-story factory building in the city's desolate west side industrial zone. Offering hope and salvation to those who had few other places to go, here you could forget your earthly troubles and escape to a better place. Like church, it promised freedom, and not even in the next life. In this club Frankie Knuckles took his congregations on journeys of redemption and discovery." According to longtime students of dance music, Frankie's DJ style introduced the term 'house music'; in other words, house music became the word used to describe Frankie Knuckles' sound. Chuck E, who was working at Chicago's Imports Etc. record store during the years 1979–81, claims: "People would come in and ask me for the old sounds…the Salsoul that Frankie used to play at The Warehouse, so we put up a sign in the store that said 'Warehouse music....' It worked so well that we started putting it on all sorts of records that we knew he played and shortened the label to 'house.'"

So while these histories are more nuanced, essentially, NYC 'Loft and Garage music' migrates to Chicago and morphs into Ware 'house' music and this is how Frankie Knuckles becomes known as the 'Godfather of House Music.' Frankie was a part of the first wave of DJs 1979–1983 in Chicago, but prior to his arrival, Chicago had its own dance music scene and a dynamic history with jazz and blues produced by the southern musicians (including artists like Sun Ra), who made their way to the urban north as part of the Great Migration.

In 1983, Frankie Knuckles left The Warehouse to the disappointment of Robert Williams, who then began a desperate search for a replacement DJ. He combed the city looking for and listening to DJs until his search ended with Ron Hardy. Ron Hardy was from the South Side of Chicago, which is important to the discussion of house because of the tension that grew from Knuckles' New York-based domination of a Chicago music scene. Ron Hardy was hired to preside over 'The Music Box,' a weekly event from the second wave of house music parties. However instead of simply replicating Knuckles' sound, Ron Hardy brought his Chicago brand of music to the mix, incorporating more dance floor jazz and electro funk into the queer club scene. He also sped up the tempo of the music, manipulated the sound with a DJ mixer and added sound effects like the sound of an approaching train. At this time, local Chicago club patrons were beginning to dabble in the production of what they called 'beat tracks.' Frankie Knuckles was known to almost snub the original music (beat tracks) that Chicagoans would bring to him, choosing instead to play the familiar disco and funk that he had brought from NYC, or the Italian Disco and Philly Soul he had acquired over the years. Ron Hardy, however, would play the music that helped spawn Chicago's first wave of house music producers. It was Ron's willingness to include locally produced music in his mix that garnered the attention of Trax Records, one of the first record labels to distribute house music on a global level.

As house music moved into the early '90s, after enjoying success in a number of European countries, it became clear that this genre of music and the culture around it would never receive the commercial success it deserved. The scene, a reflection of gay communities at large, began to take an unfortunate turn. I like to refer to this period as the fatal pleasure era. Fatal because the liberating sexual politics that shielded the community from prudish notions of sexuality eventually led to the loss of thousands of lives as many partygoers, producers and DJs lost their battle to AIDS. More sad was the number of people who went from the recreational use of drugs to life-threatening addiction. I write this without judgement and with the utmost understanding of the role that drugs played in helping people move through the depression associated with being attacked, ostracized and

alienated by family and mainstream culture as a whole. Drugs also helped to provide a cinematic journey to dancers who wanted to be taken away from the earthly dance-floor and teleported into magical places free of judgement and oppressive conventional concerns about what they did or did not do with their bodies.

Both Ron Hardy and Larry Levan died in 1992 from complications related to intense drug use and, in Ron Hardy's case, an additional battle with AIDS. Ron and Larry are famous for the undeniable mark they left and for the way they shaped the culture, but what I'm struck by is the number of nameless people who made up the 'scene' and who will never have the opportunity to share their stories, or to solidify their places in this slice of human history. AIDS remains a taboo topic, which makes it difficult to access the stories of people who are currently living with HIV/AIDS, or people within the scene too traumatized to relive the pain of losing hundreds of folks to what, at the time, was an unknown and understudied disease seemingly aimed at a very specific and vulnerable group.

Recently I've shifted my position on the Golden Era of hip-hop, which is huge for a DJ: inflexibility is a hidden struggle that many of us have, but rarely admit to. We pride ourselves in knowing exactly what happened musically and when it happened. I decided that I would no longer limit the discussion of the Golden Era to hip-hop music and culture. The truth is, most of the electronic music I love was being shaped and formed during this particular moment in time, and house music simply became my muse. And while it will take years to thoroughly examine each city's relationship to house music and the important ways that Black queer culture hammered the movement into shape, I am happy to discover all of the secrets of hip-hop's Golden Era and house music is one of them. Buried beneath the story of hip-hop is the story of house and I'd like to thank Sean 'Puffy' Combs for inspiring me to discover it.

DJ Lynnée Denise is a cultural producer and independent scholar who uses DJ culture to create forums exploring music of the African Diaspora. Her work is informed and inspired by underground social movements, theories of escape, and afro-futurism. Lynnee is the founder of WildSeed Cultural Group, an organization whose mission is to provide 'entertainment with a thesis.' Through an interdisciplinary approach, including podcasts and lectures, she examines the migration of Black cultural products, people and ideas. In 2011, Lynnee began developing the award winning Afro-Digital-Migration project, in which she travels, conducts ongoing research and produces events that celebrate the presence of house music in New York, Chicago, Detroit and South Africa. In 2012 she coined the term 'DJ Scholarship' to explain how "diggin' in the crates" and "sample chasin" are credible forms of academic research.