

# DISCO'S REVENGE:

## House Music's Nomadic Memory

FEATURE ARTICLE

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### ABSTRACT

This article addresses the role of house music as a nomadic archival institution, constituted by the musical history of disco, invigorating this dance genre by embracing new production technologies and keeping disco alive through a rhizomic assemblage of its affective memory in the third record of the DJ mix. This exploration will be illustrated through a close analysis of a specific DJ set by a Chicago house music producer, Larry Heard, in the setting of Rotterdam, 2007, in which American house music is recontextualised. Refining the analysis through close attention to one of the tracks played during that particular set, Grand High Priest's 2006 "Mary Mary", the analysis shows how DJ and music production practices intertwine to produce a plurality of unstable cultural and musical connections that are temporarily anchored within specific DJ sets. The conceptual framework draws on the work of Deleuze, Guattari and Foucault, as well as Baudrillard's sense of seduction, with the aim to introduce a fluid notion of mediated nomadic cultural memory, a type of *counter-memory*, enabled by the third record and thereby to playfully re-imagine the dynamic function of a music archive.

KEYWORDS: house music, DJ practices, third record, cultural memory, nomadology

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“ Each successive technology has enhanced the significance of older cultural artefacts by allowing them to be joined to others that clarify and embellish them...

—Straw (2007: 11)

Despite its demise, disco would live on in numerous other dance forms.

—Brewster and Broughton (2006: 202)

House rose from the remnants of disco.

—Garratt (1998: 45)

## INTRODUCTION

DRAWING ON HOUSE MUSIC AS A CASE STUDY, this article will conceptualise how a DJ-based music genre may be understood as a nomadic archival institution. The analysis will particularly appropriate Deleuze's political concept of the institution (1989) and Deleuze and Guattari's concept of *nomadology* (1986). Assuming that music genres retain rhizomic memory traces of the genres that are part of its formation, house music will be explored as constituted by disco's musical legacy, invigorating this dance genre and keeping it alive through a continuation of its affective memory. In this, house music may be regarded as a specific act of defiance, arising in Chicago from the ashes of the "official" destruction of disco (Rietveld 1998). By attempting to circumvent *traditionalist* linear history, a type of *counter-memory* (Foucault 1984) is produced that aims to challenge stilted notions of house music.<sup>1</sup>

The practice of the DJ draws on archived banks of pre-recorded music to create a relevant mix that continuously recontextualises these recordings. Through the creation of the third record in the DJ's mix, the recombination of (at least) two recordings, as well as a revision of disco's archival canon, house music may be perceived as a fluid musical archive, operating between the mediation of recorded musical production and lived cultural memory. Within this process, (underground) disco's fragmented aesthetic of an empowered marginalised community, arguably first established within America's version of racism, homophobia and economic division, is reworked.

In this context, I argue that house music has produced a dance musical memory of every-night empowering pleasure, which is further mapped in house music's increasingly complex, *spiral* and *rhizomic* genealogy. Although the role of disco elements in the formation of house music is of interest here, I do not wish to settle the roots of house music. Instead, Beckford (2006: 5) suggests with reference to the work of Deleuze and Guattari: "Unlike roots that

separate into segments and break, rhizomes rupture or shatter at any given point but will start up again at their old or new point, representing a process of ‘de-territorialisation’ and ‘re-territorialisation’. In relation to the third record, I will interpret “de/reterritorialisation” as processes of de/recontextualisation in which one sound recording makes comment on the next in a new and sometimes unexpected manner due to the various cultural spaces in which the mix is presented.

## MUTATING DISCO

DURING ITS DEVELOPMENT THROUGHOUT THE 1970s, the disco dance floor gained its celebratory mood, in part, from civil rights victories (Fikentscher 2000; Rietveld 2003; Easlea 2004; Shapiro 2005). By the end of that decade, as disco shifted out of the marginalised culture of night clubs into broad daylight and threatened the livelihoods of established rock radio DJs, a well documented backlash to its overwhelming success finally pushed disco back underground. This process culminated in the televised blowing up of disco records in Chicago’s Comiskey Park, a White Sox baseball stadium, in 1979 (Lawrence 2003; Rietveld 1998). In its renewed marginalised cultural position, dance culture returned to the secrecy of night culture, a creative space outside the spectacle of the major music industry, enabling it to develop relatively unfettered in new directions. Eleven years later, in 1990, Chicago’s mythologised<sup>2</sup> house DJ Frankie Knuckles reflected that,

Those guys declaring disco being dead actually was kind of like a blessing in disguise because it had to turn itself, because it ‘d just gotten too much. . . . Could you imagine what would it be like, right now? ugh—all that polyester—I couldn’t stand it (Savage 1990).

This reference to polyester is a camp, ironic, yet loaded connotation that points to artificial textile used in the late 1970s in the production of flared “smart” trousers and tight shirts, favoured by transnational disco crowds—as illustrated by the popular 1977 movie *Saturday Night Fever*.<sup>3</sup> The term was used as shorthand for the proliferation of “fake” disco styled music, from pop to symphonic re-workings, manufactured by a cynical music industry eager to follow the latest trend. In this one short remark, house music and underground disco are constructed as culturally authentic, as opposed to an industry-led disco craze that had “gotten too much”. As house music emerged during the early to mid-1980s, its distinctive electronic take on disco’s aesthetic provided a discursive nocturnal space in Chicago to a clientele that perceived itself as excluded by American society: “the people who had fallen from grace” (Prof Funk, in Cosgrove 1988: 4). In the words of DJ Frankie Knuckles, “House . . . it’s not actually disco’s revival, it’s disco’s revenge” (Savage 1990).

As an important aspect of disco music, the incessant groove has been forged within the basic functional DJ mix to keep dance music going all night long. In adapting popular music to the disco dance floor during the mid-1970s, New York’s disco DJs started to re-edit existing records to create specialist disco mixes. These would be longer than the usual 3-minute pop single, repeating the energetic parts<sup>4</sup> and making the tracks DJ-friendly for

layered beat mixing by emphasising the rhythm and minimising melodic harmonies at their intros and outros. Occasionally, such tracks would appear in official public release on 12-inch vinyl, the disco single; by the end of 1975, New York based disco chronicler Alletti wrote in *Record World* that, “You’re Just the Right Size: the 12-inch disc ‘for disco DJs only’ has been established during the past year . . . on the one hand, mere promo gimmicks . . . on the other, something of an artform in themselves” (Alletti 2009: 144). Even lengthier disco re-edits and mixes existed exclusively on the DJ’s reel-to-reel tape; DJ Frankie Knuckles brought this practice with him from New York to Chicago in 1977, when he took up a DJ residency there at The Warehouse, a dance club that mainly catered for young black and Latino homosexuals (Rietveld 1998). A well-known example is Knuckles’ relatively raw ecstatic re-edit of First Choice’s 1977 album version of “Let No Man Put Asunder”, which became a Warehouse classic. This re-edit was finally released as part of a 12-inch vinyl remix dance EP in 1983 on Salsoul Records, after Knuckles had left this seminal Chicago club space to establish the Power Plant.

Although Lil’ Louis, and Ron Hardy even before that, had also made waves as local DJs around that period (Kempster 1996) Knuckles’ music programming and DJ technique proved to be inspirational to a new generation of music makers. So much so, that enthusiastic heterosexual dance music fans also started to frequent this club. To cater for a growing clientele of aspiring DJs, local import record shop, Importe Etc, set up a new section for music played at The Warehouse: underground soulful and electronic dance music as well as European electronic dance, including Italo disco and, in the words of Scott ‘Smokin’ Silz “a lot of the stuff coming out of Germany and the UK” (Bidder 2001: 19); they named it “house music” (Hindmarch 2001).

House music eventually developed into a clearly distinguishable genre during the 1980s within the, mostly African American (and Latino) dance scene in Chicago. DJs produced electronic tracks and special mixes as components of their dance sets, basing their main mix techniques on those developed by their New York disco antecedents. Importantly, within the DJ mix, marginalised components of popular music (its breaks, riffs, intros, outros, bass lines, sexually explicit and ecstatic yelps, tranced out repetition) were and still are foregrounded in the resultant (re)constructions. A continuously shifting genealogy is thereby created from recorded music archives (components of musical memory) at the very moment of a dance event in the DJ mix. In this way, house music is forever in a state of becoming. From around 1985–86, house music’s electronic DiY aesthetic spilled to West Europe and beyond, to develop into a generic cosmopolitan dance formula across global club and party dance floors, picking up influences and mutating in the process.

Because of its fluid creative practice of mutation, I will argue that the musical aesthetic of house music functions as a nomadic, or wandering, institution, a fluid groove machine within which the musical memories of underground disco are inscribed and re-enacted, embedded and embodied. Like disco, the musical format of house music is characterised by an explicitly articulated 4/4 measure of between 120 to 140 BPM with a recognisable bass drum “foot” that kicks on each beat; a snare on the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> beat; and an open hi-hat in

even intervals between the bass drum and snare (as “AND” in: one AND two AND...),<sup>5</sup> that ranges in pace from marching through strutting to jogging. The combination of this repetitive machine beat with syncopated rhythms produces a funk impulse that frames an open sonic canvas of various cultural influences in a potentially inclusive, democratising, manner. At the same time, as the amplified bass-heavy beat unites dancers under one groove, “Dancing becomes a form of submission to this overmastering beat” (Hughes 1994: 149). Through the shared experience of surrender, the DJ produces a specific group subjectivity that, even temporarily, effaces everyday social stratifications on the darkened dance floor.<sup>6</sup>

## NOMADIC ARCHIVAL INSTITUTION

I WISH to employ Deleuze’s model of a dynamic autonomous institution as a conceptually playful entry point to gain further insight into house music’s musical memory of disco. Back in 1967, within the context of French intellectual debate regarding power and desire, Deleuze suggested that, rather than a “system of rights and duties”, an institution may be understood as a type of organisation that functions according to “a dynamic model of action, authority and power” (1989: 77) that is relatively independent of state authority. Here, Deleuze presents institutions as autonomous configurations and draws in this argument on the work of de Sade, a libertine philosopher of power, who argued that the French revolution could have been more successful if a multitude of institutions would have been set up instead of a new head of state supported by a national legal system. In the US, during the late 1960s, parallel (but not identical) sentiments regarding the state were put into practice in the psychedelic counterculture and the (sometimes psychedelic) funk scene. In their turn, such a range of counter-cultural practices fertilized the inception of disco when, for example, David Mancuso started throwing LSD<sup>7</sup> inspired dance parties in the late 1960s at his New York loft and, after a self-searching crisis, made this into a regular event in 1970, attracting a racially and sexually mixed crowd (Brewster and Broughton 2006; Buckland 2002; Lawrence 2003). According to Lawrence (2003: 86), “Mancuso’s extended sets usually opened with a range of esoteric selections that slowly built into a fully charged session of African and Latino rhythms, driving R&B, and danceable rock”.<sup>8</sup> This heady mix of ideas, people and sounds became of seminal importance to the genealogy of both disco and house music; several young aspiring underground disco DJs who later shaped the sound of dance music (including young Frankie Knuckles), regularly attended The Loft (Lawrence 2003). Disco chronicler Shapiro (2005) additionally shows that (underground) disco was a celebration of important gains made in American civil rights: black power, gay liberation and the women’s movement; yet, the claim for civil rights in itself actually confirms a wish to be recognised by state authority. Ultimately, though, disco parties took on a rhythm and life of their own, leading in the late-1970s to the commercially successful phenomenon of disco and all that this DJ-driven club music and fashion style entailed.

In identifying characteristics shared by the 1970s New York underground disco and the 1980s Chicago house scenes, three aspects of the Deleuzian institutional model will be appropriated here: use of *spaces*; dance floor *dynamics*; and production practices (this will

be addressed at length). Firstly, marginalised (urban) spaces were adapted as dance venues in such a manner that they effectively enhance a sonic experience. At a basic level, discos are social spaces where people can dance to recorded music. When the word “disco” lost its value, it was replaced by “club” and “dance party”; as Hughes states, “As long as people go out to clubs and dance to recorded music . . . disco lives” (1994: 148). When disco and, subsequently, house music, emerged, deserted manufacturing spaces (the outcome of industrial decline) were regularly appropriated as dance venues.<sup>9</sup> Within the semi-legal status of such temporary spaces, dancers could enjoy a tactical and paradoxical “ecstasy of disappearance” (Melechi 1993: 38).<sup>10</sup> In some cases, such a temporary space would become a more regular club. The Warehouse in Chicago was one such example, which retained some of its autonomous status by not serving alcohol; the consequently relative lack of licence inspections enabled the dance club to cater for a mixed, yet mainly young, ethnically marginalised, sexually experimental crowd. For many dance spaces, the visual field that, in principle, could support a “mastering gaze”,<sup>11</sup> was fragmented by smoke and psychedelic lighting. The dance floor at The Warehouse was a dark space into which people descended from the top floor, while for the Music Box, where Ron Hardy ruled between 1983–87, the space was painted punk-rock black while a strobe light created temporal disorientation. Simultaneously, the sound system would dictate the organisation of such a dance space, amplifying the DJ’s mix, the continuous sound track to dance the night away. The Music Box offered a hi-fi quality system that, according to seminal techno producer Derrick May, was “real shitty”; it was also powerfully loud, as witnessed by house music anthem producer Marshall Jefferson, who energetically declares that, “it physically shook me!” (Bidder 2001: 22-23). By enhancing the sonic dominance in the dance space,<sup>12</sup> a dynamic immersive interaction on the dance floor is achieved that enables the dancer to let go of the everyday structures of reality; in this sense, such dance clubs offer a third space, an alternative world to work and home.<sup>13</sup> Inspiring many budding DJ-producers, within such spaces the transitional potential of the DJ mix can take music to new configurations.

Secondly, the interaction between dancers and DJ on the dance floor has a particular dynamic that is simultaneously authoritarian and democratic. As an entertainer in spaces that are purely dedicated to dancing, the DJ is enabled to take on the ritual role comparable to what Deleuze and Guattari describe as a nomadic “chief, who . . . is more like a leader or star than a man of power, and is always in danger of being disavowed, abandoned by his people”; he “has no other means of persuasion, no other rule than his sense of the group’s desires” (1986: 11). The crowd bestows power to the DJ, who in turn seduces the crowd to keep on dancing.<sup>14</sup> The DJ is a musical authority in this relationship; however, the sound track, selected from available records on the night, importantly comes into existence in dialogue with the dancers. Although the DJ often employs a disciplinary continuous beat, the dance floor can be a brutal place for DJs as dancers spontaneously vote with their feet. Effective house music DJs will be one step ahead of the crowd’s desires, ensuring the musical mix is just right for a particular moment in time. In this manner, the crowd and the DJ dynamically interact in the configuration of a set.<sup>15</sup> Instead of couple dancing,

each participant dances both individually and collectively, sharing a libidinal relationship with the music within an ever-changing configuration of fellow dancers. Immersed in the music, dancers feel free to act out their embodied musical interpretations. In some cases, the DJ may also be compared to a shaman, taking the dancers on a journey in which they let themselves go with the musical flow.<sup>16</sup> Dancing all night in a transitional space, physically and symbolically, long past the point of exhaustion, can at times make the dancer feel as though spiritually reconstructed, reborn. The social organisation of both underground disco and a house music dance event may hereby be regarded as embodied examples of Deleuze's notion of the libertine institution, that "dynamic model of action, authority and power" (1989: 77), in which embodied memories are (re)produced.

Finally, the Deleuzian institutional model may be applied to production practices of house music. This is at the core of my argument and will therefore be discussed at some length, culminating in a microanalysis of a DJ set and one of its tracks. The loose networks of producers and distributors that delineate house as a genre operate within a dynamic "grey economy": some aspects legal and some others showing degrees of illegality or civil disobedience. Versions, re-edits, remixes, DJ mixes, digital samples and bootlegs are essential DJ technologies, components of assemblages which diminish distinctions between collector and producer, between curator and author. As producers and small labels ignored and subverted copyright issues during the early years of house, the memory of disco was partly invigorated outside of a legal framework.<sup>17</sup> Economic necessity is one reason; legal procedures in copyright clearance may be beyond the financial reach of underground dance DJs, while the Chicago label owners at times toyed with royalty assignments to their own benefit. Within various electronic dance music scenes, one also finds an understanding of music as a common good, a shared form of communication, in which musical outputs structurally and affectively make comment on each other. The very existence of the DJ practice is based on pre-existing recordings that people learn to love and cherish. Suiting evocative feelings and affect within specific party dynamics, the DJ's mix routines can lead to original production work, remixes or new work with recognisable digital samples and bass-lines. Although special DJ mixes and re-edits were part of disco practices since the mid-1970s, in Chicago, a combination of fierce DJ competition and accessible equipment led to the exponential production of unique mixes and re-edits, to enhance the authenticity, and thereby the authority, of DJ sets. The easiest way to accomplish a signature sound was by using a drum machine during a DJ set to support and enhance the rhythm of dance recordings. This became an especially attractive option when Japanese company Roland made such equipment relatively affordable during the early 1980s. A technical parallel occurred amongst hip hop DJs in New York, enabling the development of electro, electronic hip hop. In Chicago, the embrace of "the one", the driving 4/4 funk rhythm that had underpinned disco, combined with the (Roland) drum machine, eventually led in the mid-1980s to the production of instrumental tracks that would be user-friendly for beat and layered mixing. Groove-heavy and minimal in terms of drum programming, bass lines and a few encouraging sampled vocal phrases, such tracks would be played simultaneously with, or alternated by, existing (vocal) dance recordings.

Initially, dance tracks would include reconstructed disco elements that were recognisable to the crowd. "On & On", created by Jesse Saunders in 1983, was a very early example of such a DiY disco reconstruction; according to Garratt it was a simplified analogue electronic version of a "B-side of a bootleg megamix" of "Lipps Inc's 'Funky Town' and Donna Summer's 'Bad Girls' that his crowd would clap along to" (1998: 44). When this recording, which was far from a slick studio production, became a local dance hit with radio rotation, fellow DJs felt encouraged to also try out music production; both sparse rhythm and bass tracks (locally indicated as "jungle") and electro tracks were the initial result. From around 1987, when digital sampling became affordable, disco and self-referential house fragments were increasingly used; outside of the underground dance scene such samples could sound ghostly in their dislocated state. This practice was further adapted as part of a lucrative cross-Atlantic musical dialogue. For example, disco single "Le Freak" by Chic was remixed in 1987 by Phil Harding for UK-based pop production company PWL as house track "Jack Le Freak"; the vocals and some of the original instrumentals were combined with an additional Roland TR-808 drum box and recognisable components were "borrowed" from Chicago house hits, in particular the bass line from Adonis "No Way Back" which was released in 1986 by Chicago-based label Trax Records. In other instances, disco elements have been used more as pastiche than for their immediately recognisable and, perhaps nostalgic, content. A well-documented example is the 1989 UK dance hit "Ride On Time" by Italian male production outfit Black Box, in which samples of Loleatta Holloway's 1980 black American vocalisation of *Love Sensation*, were lifted from an a cappella bootleg. In their deterritorialised state, the vocal samples were repositioned as an anonymous signifier of diva femininity (Bradby 1993), and thereby superficially communicated a marketable aura (in its Italian version) of black American house music "authenticity". In its various electronic disco abstractions and distilled electronic funk structures, house music thus seems to function as a veritable metamorphosing musical memory machine, an assemblage that exists within the nomadic practice of the DJ-archivist.

### THE THIRD RECORD AS ECCENTRIC PRACTICE

FURTHER insight into the production of house's musical memory may be gained through the mobilisation of Deleuze and Guattari's notion of a temporary, deterritorialised, nomadic "war machine" (1986). This concept can be understood as a marginalised formation, a third space, that exists outside of the *dialectics* of the "State apparatus": "located . . . between two articulations . . . (but) 'between' the two, in that instant, even ephemeral, if only a flash, it proclaims its own irreducibility" (Deleuze and Guattari 1986: 7). Deleuze and Guattari draw here from several examples of socio-political configurations, such as religious or multinational organisations, which (comparable to Deleuze's earlier model of the institution) operate across borders and cannot be reduced to any single state. At one extreme, such organisation could exist for the sole purpose of pure war, of undisciplined destruction; on the other extreme, the war machine may be regarded as a creative movement. In this (perhaps romantic) model of the war machine, Deleuze and Guattari

relate exteriority (outsider status) to the notion of *eccentric science*, which is typified by the following three main characteristics: reality is regarded as a fluid mode of becoming, rather than a solid and stable entity; developments occur in a spiral flow, rather than in a linear fashion; and “figures are considered only from the point of view of the *affections* that befall them”, proceeding “from a problem to the accidents that condition and resolve it” (Deleuze and Guattari 1986: 19, authors’ italics). House music may hereby be eccentrically conceptualised as a nomadic war machine, both in terms of its discursive function as a music genre and through this article’s analytical method.

It is within the very heart of the aesthetic practice of mixing records that a specific nomadic dynamic is generated, which has the potential to write and rewrite musical memory. An ephemeral moment of transition between one record and another is produced, a third record that can only exist within a DJ mix; “located . . . between two articulations . . . (but) ‘between’ the two, in that instant, even ephemeral, if only a flash, it proclaims its own irreducibility” (Deleuze and Guattari 1986: 7). In house music, the dominant beat usually remains, like clockwork, while musical components of the separate records enhance, intermingle and even destroy each other within the “slow mix”, a layered form of beat mixing (Rietveld 1998).<sup>18</sup> From the selection of music that has been brought to an event, the DJ is required to know the records well enough to judge what to play next and how. Even if the DJ would play the same set and exactly the same mixes each time, every mix is different, even if slightly, as contextual parameters change: the available records, the mood of the crowd, the narrative moment in the set, the technical possibility to produce a viable mix. In brief, the third record comes into existence within the accidents and problematic of a specific moment in time. In the energetic nomadic interaction of such aesthetic practice, the irreducible third record generates a fluid *rhizomic* musical memory that is in a continuous process of becoming. From this third record, the transitional moment in the mix, new musical forms emerge—*counter-memories* that can be, at different times, nostalgic, cannibalistic, amnesic, yet are always embodied in the dancer and the DJ.

## CURATED SOUNDSCAPES

TO ILLUSTRATE the curatorial and archivist role of the DJ-producer in this configuration, the discussion will now focus on a close reading of a 2007 set at De Unie<sup>19</sup> in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, by Chicago house veteran Larry Heard (aka Mr Fingers and Fingers Inc),<sup>20</sup> which I attended on Saturday 7 April. This DJ-set offered a trip down Memory Lane, mostly recognisable tracks, a canonical mixture of deep house, Detroit techno and underground classics, punctuated by recent releases.<sup>21</sup> The newer tracks were contextualised by their musical predecessors and the older tracks were recontextualised in a contemporary framework. For example, those present heard the powerful 2006 track “Mary Mary” by Grand High Priest (vs. Aretha Franklin), followed by “House Nation”, a driving Chicago house track from 1986 by Housemaster Boyz’ and the Rude Boy of House.<sup>22</sup> On occasion, in the middle of minimalist funk-driven electronic house tracks, vocal samples yelled ecstatically, sounding like brief memory traces of soulful disco from a distant past.

Through the programming (sequencing selected tracks into a narrative order) Heard communicated his position towards the history of house music within the context of what he expected, or presumed, from a Rotterdam crowd. Making connections to the mellow dance music he is known for, Larry Heard played a selection of early American techno tracks that sounded, in hindsight, like slick electronic interpretations of Chicago house music. For example, the 1987 Detroit techno classic “Strings of Life” under Derrick May’s alias Rhythim is Rhythim, followed by techno-house track “Energy Flash” from 1990 by New Yorker Joey Beltram, and the early trance of “Plastic Dreams”, produced in 1992 by Dutch DJ Robin Albers as Jaydee. Both of the latter tracks were first released by Antwerp-based techno label R&S, while Beltram’s “Energy Flash” was also released by Detroit-based techno label Transmat, the same label as for “Strings of Life”. The creation of this specific third record aimed to reach out to a younger generation in the middle of a post-war modern city that during the early 1990s gave birth to gabber house. This is a type of dystopian body music (Verhagen et al. 2000), rooted in a specifically European trajectory in electronic dance music.<sup>23</sup> Its accelerated “um-pah-um-pah” rhythm and abstracted techno textures in many ways seemed the cultural antithesis of Chicago deep house, which Larry Heard had helped to define. In particular, his instrumental track “Can You Feel It”, recorded as Mr Fingers, was embellished in 1988 with samples from a 1981 live version of “Can You Feel It” by disco-favorites The Jacksons and, crucially, by Chuck Roberts’ manifesto, vocalised in the style of a sermon, that presents house music as a utopian inclusive church. Here, Heard attempted to make a compromise towards techno, but his DJ *style* made it a classic Chicago house music set: nostalgic in one sense, yet persuading listeners and dancers within their current context to make fresh, nomadic, connections within the archival memory of contemporary electronic dance music.

Grand High Priest’s “Mary Mary (Original Mix)” is a contemporary track that stood out in Heard’s programing in terms of its house sensibilities of electronic deconstruction that, like underground disco, is at once deeply spiritual and suggestively libidinous.<sup>24</sup> Typical of Chicago house, the structure of this version is minimalist; it mainly consists of sequenced bass, drum programming and vocal samples. Compressing the unfettered gospel vocalisation of “Mary, Don’t You Weep”, Aretha Franklin’s intense (spiritual) elation is highlighted. Traces of the original recording context can be heard, as handclaps by a choir and crowd fade in washes of audio delay at the end of each repeated sample. The effect is slightly messy, woozy like being high on poppers.<sup>25</sup> The dislocated vocals seem stripped of most of their embodied “grain” (Barthes 1977); yet the emotion in the voice is so focused that it seems to overcome this compression, projecting a distilled version of exalted womanhood into virtual sonic space.<sup>26</sup> The added electronic programming re-asserts a new “grain” within a “fierce”<sup>27</sup> masculinized framework: its marching snare drum progresses like an American Civil War army from a Hollywood movie; aggressive synthesized high-mid frequency sample stabs invade the musical space in the rhythm of an engaged computer game player; and a synthesized bass-line with an analogue texture, seems at once Chicago “old school”, yet new in its low frequency range. In brief, overflowing with an excess of overcoming and

empowerment, this track touches one's core psychologically and physically due to the unholy combination of engaged vocal performance, propelling snare, brutal stabs and penetrating all-embracing sub bass. As an assemblage it seems a hyper-real version of Chicago house, as described by journalist Cosgrove almost two decades earlier in his introductory sleeve notes of an boxed 12-LP collector's set: "The decadent beat of Chicago House, a relentless sound designed to take dancers to a new high, is schizophrenic music, it has its origins in the gospel shriek and its future in spaced out stimulation" (1988: 4).

During Heard's Rotterdam set, my personal experience of intertextuality was deepened by the knowledge that Joe Claussell, a well-known New York DJ-producer who claims to keep the spirit of underground disco alive, has produced a DJ-exclusive remix of this track in 2006, "Mary St. Mary (Sacred Rhythm Mix)". I heard Claussell "work" this version during a DJ set in London in 2006, creating a third record from a long version in which he filtered the frequencies with the EQ of his DJ mixer to accentuate an additional Hammond organ improvisation. Because its sonic texture refers to gospel church services and its unbridled performance, the roving unruly Hammond phrases emphasized the spirituality of the gospel samples. The phrases simultaneously seemed to ignore both the rationalised measures and the harmonic scale of the original track, rebelliously battling against its structure like a war machine. At once sacred and profane, when amplified and reworked on the darkened dance floor, this version induces a deep sense of release in the dancer who submits, body and soul. Nevertheless, without the additional organ, the "Original Mix", as played by Larry Heard in his Rotterdam set, is a strong reminder of the Chicago house tracks from the mid-1980s.

At the time of attending Heard's set, I only owned the "Sacred Rhythm" remix as a single-sided cut on a white label 12-inch vinyl dance single, enigmatic, without further artist or recording information, which adds to its seductive mystique. It could easily have remained an anonymous track in my collection—as so many house tracks are, outside of their original scene of production, especially in the 1980s before the World Wide Web. Further online research, however, reveals that Grand High Priest is the alias of Craig Loftis, an (at the time) 43-year old African American DJ and interior designer of clubs and restaurants, who was bestowed his DJ-producer title by the Nu Bang Clan, a collective of US deep house DJs. Embedded within the first generation of the Chicago house music scene, it effectively took Loftis 27 years to gain his first club hit, proving his faith in house music. On MySpace, an expanding web-based social network that hosts a significant proportion of the US underground dance scene, he states on his page that:

After redesigning the sound system for his club the PowerPlant 1015 he became Frankie's personal sound engineer and opening DJ for the next 4 years. . . . Craig and Frankie worked on the development of Frankie's production company PowerPlant LTD. Along with various remixes of existing songs, Craig and Frankie concentrated on producing a Chicago artist named Jamie Principle. When Frankie decided to leave Chicago in 1988, Craig was offered the position as chief engineer in charge of production for DJ International Records where he remained for the next eight years (Loftis 2007).

The Power Plant was Frankie Knuckles' follow-up club, after he left The Warehouse, which became the Music Box with DJ Ron Hardy. Jamie Principle's atmospheric electro pop recordings had been available on cassette tape for some time before Frankie Knuckles finally decided to produce his classic track "Waiting on my Angel" for release in 1985. It is therefore no surprise that despite the appearance of "Mary Mary" in 2006, it slotted so well within Heard's musical history lesson. It affectively communicated the producer's—Loftis'—specific musical journey.

Around the time of the production of "Mary Mary", Loftis worked as a DJ in Chicago where, in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, he felt challenged in weaning his black gay crowd off hip hop and back into house music. In 2006, he explained during an interview with *S Magazine* that "Mary Mary" was carefully constructed from sounds and structures that, he observed, would move his crowd, thereby illustrating how the nomadic practice of the DJ can function as a transitional laboratory to create new directions (*S Magazine* 2006). For example, the excessive (camp) snare programming in "Mary Mary" seems to invoke a workout on muscle buffing steroids. Bodybuilding is arguably an important aspect of cosmopolitan homosexual nightclub culture, where the male body is on display for sexual pleasure, both in terms of body shape and physical endurance. In an ethnography of a New York gay house club during the late 1990s, Amico observes that, "By impelling the participants to physical action—dancing which can go on for hours—the beat also engenders a performance of the construction of masculinity through a physical response" (Amico 2001: 362). Simultaneously, the insistent use of the snare functions as a vague (literally, in a nomadic vagabond sense) musical memory of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when in New Orleans marching bands provided the ragtime musicians who, eventually, inspired the driving strut of funk and disco (Shapiro 2005). In this manner, house music rhizomically remembers both gay culture and its African American heritage. The vocal samples of "Mary Mary" are steeped in African American religious culture, lifted from "Mary, Don't You Weep" an album track from Aretha Franklin's 1972 live gospel recording at New Temple Missionary Baptist Church, Los Angeles, which was re-released on CD in 1999. Franklin has earned the title of Lady Soul for her secular work in the 1960s, her vocal style influencing disco divas throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Fikentscher (2000) has also drawn connections between a black music continuum an underground disco in 1970s and 1980s New York; one of his respondents, David Lozada, remembers that in Paradise Garage (an ethnically mixed gay dance club in New York with a parallel history to Chicago's The Warehouse), "On Sunday mornings at around 7:00 A.M., Larry would stop all the dancing by putting on Aretha Franklin singing 'Mary Don't You Weep'. We knew he was giving church" (2000: 105). In this way, "Mary Mary" spirals through cultural time in a (digitized) musical memory loop.

The musical journey of "Mary Mary" has taken it beyond Chicago's house scene, making it an excellent DJ tool for Heard to communicate a nostalgic set to his Rotterdam crowd in 2007. According to *S Magazine* (2006) it first appeared in the gay clubs on pre-release, similar to disco promotions in New York in the 1970s, until it developed over several years into an unstoppable US underground dance hit. Its official release in Spring 2006 coincided

with the 21<sup>st</sup> Winter Music Conference in Miami (WMC), the yearly international showcase event for dance club music, which operates as a major network hub in the dissemination of house music's archival output. Without its intimate frames of reference in Rotterdam, this track nevertheless retained its affective textures due to context provided by Heard's programming. In the hands of the next DJ, it would be re-contextualised, generating different new meanings—for example, six months later I heard an instrumental version in the same Rotterdam space, this time played by a London DJ, IG Culture, to a jazz dance crowd: functioning as a filler, without the vocal samples, it sounded less profound than when it had been played in Claussell's or Heard's set. Meanwhile, three Chicago remixes have been released that feature vocals by Chicago's house diva Dajea, which traces the erased sampled snippets of Franklin's ecstatic Baptist consolation. Yet, although Dajea's voice is forceful and not as strongly compressed as the initially sampled vocals, it seems a vacuum imitation that has lost its initial depth of spiritual feeling and authenticating ambience. Such pastiche is perhaps more appropriate for broader youth markets where, arguably, house music cannot "be described as a cathartic outburst from socially frustrated sections of society" (Langlois 1992: 237) and where the notion of "underground" may be more a matter of marketing strategy than of a social reality (Thornton 1995).

## MONUMENTS

SINCE ITS FORMATION, attempts are made to anchor the nomadic dance machine of house music, to moor the party ship and to formalise its classic canon, as well as its proto-types. In 1989, the Chicago house sound was defined outside of its local scene by, for example, a comprehensive 12-LP box set together with illustrated sleeve notes, which leaks around the edges of genre definition by usefully including early Warehouse disco classics, Chicago's jack tracks, work from local label competitors Trax Records and DJ International, as well as other independent labels, and examples from New York electro and Detroit techno. By 1994, *Classic House* was redistilled as mostly vocal club dance on *Definitive House Mastercuts volume 1* (MC). More recently, in 2002, a small Japanese book publication, *House Legend: The Core of Dance Music*, offered brief statements about key figures and an extensive list of collectable vinyl releases. Then, in 2005, on the 21<sup>st</sup> birthday of Trax Records, the Mayor of Chicago joined in with a double-edged sword of official recognition and cultural appropriation by declaring:

I, RICHARD M. DALEY, MAYOR OF THE CITY OF CHICAGO do hereby proclaim August 10, 2005, to be HOUSE UNITY DAY IN CHICAGO, and urge all Chicagoans to be aware of the events arranged for this time (*Remix 2005*).

Such defining practices of remembering could possibly stilt dance music's promiscuous creative musical and organisational principle. Nostalgia functions as a form of romance in which musical memory idealizes the past, excavating and anchoring perfect zero moments, whilst forgetting the incidents, the messy mistakes, the experiments, the accidents, that gave rise to the carnivalesque ecstatic moments of the nomadic third record. Within

exponentially multiplying communication media, from internet forums to collector boxes, house music's complex and disjointed wanderings have been polished to a few shiny well-paved avenues of repetitive encyclopaedic knowledge that point persistently towards an intense crossroads that once catalysed an explosion of creative energy. Regardless of local debate and heated contestations by local DJ-producer talent, the dominant story of house music seems to set its moment of formation with Frankie Knuckles at The Warehouse, the weekly Chicago dance club that, between 1977 and 1983, catered for a predominantly black and Latino homosexual dancing crowd in the heart of mid-America. It is at this intense network node that New York's underground disco sensibilities and DJ techniques met with post-industrial Chicago, and with imported Italo disco and electro pop from elsewhere in Europe. Despite its unruly past, within the musical mythology of house music the memory of The Warehouse seems to have been tamed, its music digitally dissected and its locally contested reputation more or less solidified, as an anchored institution in dance cultural history. It is, therefore, important to note, that house music did not gain exportable currency through record releases until several years *after* The Warehouse closed down and that it took time for house music to crystallise into a distinguishable marketable genre,<sup>28</sup> bringing club music back out into the day light, though without the luggage of "polyester" disco connotations.

In summary, *traditional* history is usually told by winners and survivors. However, by having constructed the concept of house music as a nomadic archival institution, it is hoped that alternative memories and histories, *counter-memories*, may be heard. This article has argued that house music affectively functions as a dynamic and wandering institution. Like a religion, for example, it exists outside the State apparatus, and, as in the case of African American house music, spreads a message of both spiritual and earthly, libidinal, love. Although disco has been remembered at times through digital sampling practices, turning the past inside out like the reflections from a glittering disco mirror ball, these dislocated fragments are not always consciously recognised. More importantly, disco's emotions and affect (its passions, its struggles, its pleasures, its *jouissance*) are passed on in the memory machine of house music's rhythmical structures and DJ techniques. The nomadic third record is thereby an important *eccentric* curatorial practice, a fleeting crucial moment in the interaction between available recordings, the DJ's journey and the context of the crowd. This in turn results in new musical forms based on reinterpretations of recorded memory. Throughout the formation of house music, disco's rhizomes have been woven spirally through rhythmical time and dance cultural spaces whereby, "Chicago (house music) was the clearest example of disco being lovingly continued under another name" (Brewster and Broughton 2006: 337).

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## NOTES

- 1 Stilted notions of house music may be informed by, for example, purism of “real house music” fans or social demarcation based on sexuality and racial identity.
- 2 Frankie Knuckles has been mythologised in an encyclopaedic manner as the Godfather of house music—a point of contention amongst Chicago DJs (Rietveld 1998; Bidder 2001).
- 3 For snapshot descriptions of disco attire, see Jones and Kantonen (1999); for connections between New York City’s disco elite and the fashion world, see Haden-Guest (1997).
- 4 Compare the hip-hop DJ practice of using “breaks” (see, for example, Rose 1994). For further reading on disco and house music DJ techniques, see, for example, Brewster and Broughton (2002, 2006), Fikentscher (2000), Poschardt (1995), Rietveld (1998, 2007), as well as Kemster’s 1996 edited collection on house and techno production techniques.
- 5 For a musicological analysis of EDM grooves, see Butler (2006) and Zeiner-Henriksen (2010), as well as a wider ranging collection edited by Danielsen (2010). For a further analysis of repetition in EDM, see Garcia (2005).
- 6 See also Buckland (2002) and Rietveld (1993, 1996, 2004a). Counter arguments can be found, for example, in Pini (2001).
- 7 LSD (lysergic acid diethylamide) is a psychedelic drug, popular with the counterculture, which alters perception to a less structured mental state. A changed sense of time helps the user become absorbed in the here and now, which in turn can enhance the experience of a long night of groove-based dancing.
- 8 By way of illustration, when I attended the Loft in New York in 1983, both the crowd and the music were heterogeneous even though the majority of dancers seemed to be young Latino and African American gay men and electronic dance music (mainly from the US and UK) dominated.
- 9 This is indeed a comparable story to acid house and raves from the late 1980s and 90s.
- 10 Melechi concluded this, years later, in a critical analysis of acid house parties in the UK (1993).
- 11 See Mulvey (2009) for an introduction of the notion of the “mastering gaze”.
- 12 For further discussion of sonic dominance, see also Henriques (2003) on the reggae sound system session.
- 13 For a comparable analysis of New York’s queer clubs, see Buckland (2002: 43-44).
- 14 See Baudrillard (1990)—seduction here signifies a specific power relationship based on desire.
- 15 See also, for example, Fikentscher (2000) and Rietveld (1998).
- 16 Examples from Chicago are Frankie Knuckles and Ron Hardy and later, in the 1990s, Derrick Carter, Ron Trent, Anthony Nicholson. Similarly, in New York, seminal “shamanic” underground

DJs include disco pioneers David Mancuso and Nicky Siano and, into the 1980s, garage DJ Larry Levan; into the 1990s, house DJs Todd Terry and Masters at Work, while by the end of that decade DJs like Joe Clausell, Danny Krivit and Osunlade (also trained as a Caribbean Yoruba priest) returned to the aesthetic logic of early underground disco.

- 17 For debates regarding digital music production and distribution practices, see, for example, Katz (2005). For a comparison with other DJ practices, raising important questions regarding authorship, Schumacher (1995) offers a detailed study of how rap producers ignored copyrights during the 1980s, until damning test cases against sampling practices occurred in the 1990s. Examples of further discussion regarding a fluid notion of authorship in disco and house music can be found in, respectively, Krasnow (1995), Rietveld (1998) and Straw (1995).
- 18 On the third record, see also Butler (2006) and Rietveld (2007).
- 19 De Unie is a 1980s reconstruction of a 1920s modernist artists' café space – the original was destroyed, as was most of Rotterdam's centre, during World War II (1940–45).
- 20 Larry Heard is especially famed for the 1986 recording, *Can You Feel It*. A sermon dubbed onto this track provides house music with a manifesto:  
<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tFuujExs03A>> (accessed 6 March 2011).
- 21 See also a review of the night by Wijnstekers (2007). For a brief clip of this DJ-set and the club space, see, for example: <[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_pLTb-XT3\\_M](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_pLTb-XT3_M)> (accessed 6 March 2011).
- 22 The artist name(s) is an alias for DJ-producer Keith Farley, a self-declared Godfather of house. The recording was released by Dance Mania, a label managed by Jesse Saunders.
- 23 The harsh sounds of locally produced gabber house seem to insert, into a house music framework, the sonic memory of decades of industrial noise heard during the rebuilding and further development of war destroyed Rotterdam.
- 24 See also Johnson (2004).
- 25 "Poppers" refers to amyl-nitrate, a fleeting chemical developed to open the blood circulation in heart patients, but used recreationally in (gay) dance clubs.
- 26 For a further discussion of sampling gendered sexuality, see Bradby (1993).
- 27 Within the context of African-American gay club culture, "fierce" indicates a tough feminine attitude.
- 28 See also Rietveld (2004b).
- 29 All discogs.com links were last accessed 8 March 2011.
- 30 Although the release date was officially 1984, its producers, Jess Saunders and Vince Lawrence informed me in 1992 that this track was created at least one year earlier.

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