

Detroit Techno, Chicago House, and New York Garage

Simon Reynolds

In the following selection, excerpted from his book *Generation Ecstasy*, Simon Reynolds chronicles the spread of postdisco, 1980s-era electronic dance music as it emigrated from Detroit to Germany and back to the United States, where American DJs transformed the skittering beats of “Krautrock” into the three signature styles of American electronic dance music. These styles—techno, house, and garage—were in fact microcultural movements that crystallized around the three American urban epicenters (Detroit, Chicago, and New York, respectively) of rave’s first decade.

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THE STORY OF TECHNO BEGINS NOT IN EARLY-eighties Detroit, as is so often claimed, but in early-seventies Düsseldorf, where Kraftwerk built their KlingKlang sound



Simon Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy: Into the World of Techno and Rave Culture*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1998. Copyright © 1998 by Simon Reynolds. All rights reserved. Re-produced by permission.

factory and churned out pioneering synth-and-drum-machine tracks like “Autobahn,” “Trans-Europe Express,” and “The Man-Machine.”

In one of those weird pop-historical loops, Kraftwerk were themselves influenced by Detroit—by the adrenalized insurgency of the MC5 and the Stooges (whose noise, Iggy Pop has said, was partly inspired by the pounding clangor of the Motor City’s auto factories). Like the other Krautrock bands—Can, Faust, Neu!—Kraftwerk were also inspired by the mantric minimalism and non-R&B rhythms of the Velvet Underground (whose John Cale produced the first Stooges album). Replacing guitars and drums with synthesizer pulses and programmed beats, Kraftwerk sublimated the Velvets’ white light/white heat speed rush into the cruise-control serenity of *motorik*, a metronomic, regular-as-carburetor rhythm that was at once post-rock and proto-techno. “Autobahn”—a twenty-four-minute hymn to the exhilaration of gliding down the freeway that sounded like a cyborg Beach Boys—was (in abbreviated form) a chart smash throughout the world in 1975. Two years later on the *Trans-Europe Express* album, the title track—all indefatigable girder beats and arching, Doppler effect synths—segues into “Metal on Metal,” a funky iron foundry that sounded like a Luigi Russolo Art of Noises megamix for a futurist discotheque.

“They were so stiff, they were funky,” techno pioneer Carl Craig has said of Kraftwerk. This paradox—which effectively translates as “they were so white, they were black”—is as close as anyone has got to explaining the mystery of why Kraftwerk’s music had such a massive impact on black American youth. In New York, the German band almost single-handedly sired the electro movement: Afrika Bambaataa and Soulsonic Force’s 1982 smash “Planet Rock” stole its doomy melody from “Trans-Europe Express” and its beatbox rhythm from Kraftwerk’s 1981 track “Numbers.” But while New York hip-hop soon abandoned electro’s drum machines for seventies funk breakbeats, Kraftwerk had a more enduring impact in Detroit. Their music’s Teutonic rigor and glacial grandeur plugged into the Eupophile tastes of arty middle-class black youth and fired the imaginations of three high school friends—Juan Atkins, Derrick May, and Kevin Saunderson—who together invented Detroit

techno. From Cybotron's 1982 "Cosmic Cars" to Carl Craig's 1995 *Autobahn* homage *Landcruising*, the Detroit sound still fits May's famous description: "like [funk musician] George Clinton and Kraftwerk stuck in an elevator with only a sequencer to keep them company."

Techno: The Unlikely Offspring of Germany and Detroit

"When I first heard synthesizers dropped on records it was great . . . like UFOs landing on records, so I got one," Juan Atkins has said. "It wasn't any one particular group that turned me on to synthesizers, but 'Flashlight' [Parliament's number one R&B hit from early 1978] was the first record I heard where maybe 75 percent of the production was electronic."

Atkins was then a sixteen-year-old living in Belleville, a small town thirty miles from Detroit, and playing bass, drums, and "a little bit of lead guitar" in various garage funk bands. He had befriended Derrick May and Kevin Saunderson three years earlier. "In Belleville," remembers Saunderson, "it was pretty racial still at that time, there wasn't a lot of black people there. So we three kind of gelled right away." Atkins became May's musical mentor, hiping him to all kinds of weird shit—Parliament-Funkadelic, Kraftwerk, Gary Numan, Giorgio Moroder, even quirky American New Wave like the B-52's.

Although the music they were into was all dance floor oriented, the "Belleville Three"—as Atkins, May, and Saunderson were later to be mythologized—brought an art-rock seriousness to bear on what rock fans then dissed as mere "disco." "For us, it was always a dedication," says May. "We used to sit back and philosophize on what these people thought about when they made their music, and how they felt the next phase of the music would go. And you know, half the shit we thought about the artist never even f—ing thought about! . . . Because Belleville was a rural town, we perceived the music differently than you would if you encountered it in dance clubs. We'd sit back with the lights off and listen to records by Bootsy and Yellow Magic Orchestra. We never just took it as entertainment, we took it as a serious philosophy."

The Belleville Three belonged to a new generation of Detroit-area black youth who grew up accustomed to affluence,

thanks in part to the racially integrated United Auto Workers union. "My grandfather worked at Ford for twenty years, he was like a career auto worker," says Atkins. "A lot of the kids that came up after this integration, they got used to a better way of living. If you had a job at the plant at this time, you were making bucks. And it wasn't like the white guy standing next to you is getting five or ten dollars an hour more than you. Everybody was equal. So what happened is that you've got this environment with kids that come up somewhat snobby, 'cos hey, their parents are making money working at Ford or GM or Chrysler, been elevated to a foreman, maybe even to a white-collar job." The Europhilia of these middle-class black youths, says Atkins, was part of their attempt "to distance themselves from the kids that were coming up in the projects, the ghetto." . . .

One expression of this upwardly mobile subculture was clubs and dance music. These weren't nightclubs but high school social clubs with names like Snobs, Brats, Ciabattino, Rafael, and Charivari, who would hire spaces and throw parties. Charivari was named after a New York clothing store and is said to have recorded the first Detroit techno track, titled "Shari Vari," just to play at its own parties. The social club kids were "obsessed with Italian 'progressive' music—Italian disco, basically," says Carl Craig, another early acolyte of May and Atkins. Dubbed "progressive" because their music stemmed from Giorgio Moroder's synth-and-drum-machine-based Eurodisco, rather than the symphonic Philly sound, Italian artists like Alexander Robotnik, Klein and MBO and Capricorn filled the gap left by the death of disco in America. On the Detroit dance party circuit, you would also hear electro-funk from New York labels like West End and Prelude, English New Romantic and Euro-synthpop artists like Visage, Yello, and Telex, and American New Wave from Devo and Talking Heads. "Man, I don't know if this could happen nowhere else in the country but Detroit," laughs Atkins. "Can you imagine three or four hundred black kids dancing to the B-52's 'Rock Lobster'?" . . .

Insane Mixing

Around 1980, Atkins and May started making tentative steps toward becoming DJs themselves. "Juan and I started messing around with the idea of doing our own personal remixes, as a

joke, using a pause button, a tape deck, and a basic turntable. Just taking a record and pausing it up, doing edits with the pause button. We got damn good at it. . . .

May and Atkins applied the same kind of theoretical intensity to the art of mixing and set building that they'd once invested in listening to records. "We built a philosophy behind spinning records. We'd sit and think what the guy who made the record was thinking about, and find a record that would fit with it, so that the people on the dance floor would comprehend the concept. When I think about all the brainpower that went into it! We'd sit up the whole night before the party, think about what we'd play the following night, the people who'd be at the party, the concept of the clientele. It was insane!"

Eventually, the social club party scene got so successful that the *GQ* kids found that an undesirable element began to turn up: the very ghetto youth from the projects that they'd put so much energy into defining themselves against. That was when the clubs started putting the phrase "no jits" on the flyers—"jit" being short for "jitterbug," Detroit slang for gangsta.

"They would put 'no jits allowed,'" says May, "but how you gonna tell some 250-pound ruffneck, standing about six foot four, 'you're not coming to my party'—when you're some little five foot two pretty boy? I don't think so! He's coming in! It was a *hope* that they wouldn't come! It was to make them feel unwanted. . . . West Side kids and the whole elite high school scene just wanted to keep this shit to themselves. . . . It was the beginning of the end. That's when the guns started popping up at the parties, and fights started happening. By '86, it was over." . . .

From Detroit to Chicago

Detroit techno came to the world's attention indirectly, as an adjunct to Chicago's house scene. When British A & R scouts came to Chicago to investigate house music in 1986–87, they discovered that many of the top-selling tracks were actually from Detroit. "We would sell ten to fifteen thousand records in Chicago alone," says Juan Atkins. "We were selling more records in Chicago than even Chicago artists. We kind of went hand in hand with the house movement.

"Chicago was one of a couple of cities in America where disco never died," Atkins continues. "The DJs kept playing it

on radio and in the clubs. And since there were no new disco records coming through they were looking to fill the gap with whatever they could find." This meant Euro synth pop, Italian "progressive," and eventually the early Detroit tracks. The Belleville Three quickly got to know everybody in the Chicago scene. . . .

Despite its Europhile tendencies, Detroit was always more of a funk city than a disco town. This difference came through in the music: the rhythm programming in Detroit techno was more syncopated, had more of a groove. House was propelled by a metronomic, four-to-the-floor beat, what Eddie Fowlkes calls "a straight straight foot"—a reference to the mechanical kick drum that Chicago DJs like Farley "Jackmaster" Funk and Frankie Knuckles would superimpose over their disco mixes. Where Chicago house tended to feature disco-style diva vocals, Detroit tracks were almost always instrumentals. The final difference was that Detroit techno, while arty and upwardly mobile, was a straight black scene. Chicago house was a gay black scene. . . .

In 1987, [rap group] Public Enemy's Chuck D articulated hip-hop's antipathy to house, disco's descendant, declaring: "it's sophisticated, anti-black, anti-feel, the most *artificial* shit I ever heard. It represents the gay scene, it's separating blacks from their past and their culture, it's upwardly mobile."

Music of Double Exclusion

Chicago house music was born of a double exclusion, then: not just black, but gay and black. Its cultural dissidence involved embracing a music that the majority culture deemed dead and buried. House didn't just resurrect disco, it intensified the very aspects that most offended the discophobes: the mechanistic repetition, the synthetic and electronic textures, the rootlessness, the "depraved" hypersexuality and "decadent" drugginess. Stylistically, house assembled itself from disregarded and degraded pop-culture detritus that the mainstream considered passé, disposable, un-American: the proto-disco of the Salsoul and Philadelphia International labels, English synth-pop, and Moroder's Eurodisco. . . .

In the absence of fresh disco product, Chicago DJs had to rework the existing material into new shapes. House—a term

that originally referred to the kind of music you'd hear at the Warehouse, a gay nightclub in Chicago—was born not as a distinct genre but as an approach to making “dead” music come alive, by cut 'n' mix, segue, montage, and other DJ tricks. Just as the term disco derived from the discotheque (a place where you heard recorded music, not live performances), house began as a disc jockey culture. In fact, it was an imported DJ culture, transplanted from New York by Frankie Knuckles, who DJ-ed at the Warehouse from 1979 until 1983. . . .

Intense Competition

With other regular parties emerging, competition between DJs grew fierce. To get an edge over their rivals, DJs would devise more complicated mixing tricks and employ special effects, like Frankie Knuckles's steam locomotive sound. Both Farley and Knuckles started to use a live drum machine to bolster their mixes and make the experience more hypnotic. The stomping four-to-the-floor kick drum would become the defining mark of house music. Other elements—hissing hi-hat patterns, synthetic hand-claps, synth vamps, chiming bass loops, drumrolls that pushed the track to the next plateau of preorgasmic intensity—emerged when Chicagoans started making records to slake the DJs' insatiable demand for fresh material. Called “tracks” as opposed to songs, because they consisted of little more than a drum track, this proto-house music was initially played by DJs on reel-to-reel tape and cassette.

Although many have claimed the title of “first house track,” most agree that the first vinyl release was Jesse Saunders and Vince Lawrence's “On and On” (a raw, ultraminimal version of the Salsoul classic by First Choice), which the duo put out in 1983. Saunders and Lawrence approached Larry Sherman, a local entrepreneur who had bought out Chicago's only record-pressing plant, and asked him to press up five hundred 12-inches for them on trust. They promised to return within twenty minutes and pay him \$4 per disc. Not only did they come back and pay him in full, they also asked him to press another thousand copies.

Stunned by the demand for this new music in Chicago, Sherman started the Trax label and debuted with another Jesse Saunders track, “Wanna Dance,” released under the name Le

Noiz. Sherman's role in the genesis of house is much disputed. Some regard him as a visionary entrepreneur who fostered the scene and provided work for the musicians in the day-to-day operations of Trax. Others accuse Sherman of pursuing short-term profit and neglecting the long-term career prospects of their artists, thereby contributing to the premature demise of the Chicago scene in the late eighties. . . .

The Producer Becomes the Star

House makes the producer, not the singer, the star. It's the culmination of an unwritten (because unwritable) history of black dance pop, a history determined not by sacred cow auteurs but by producers, session musicians, and engineers—backroom boys. House music takes this depersonalization further: it gets rid of human musicians (the house band that gave Motown or Stax or Studio One its distinctive sound), leaving just the producer and his machines. Operating as a cottage factory churning out a high turnover of tracks, the house producer replaces the artist's signature with the industrialist's trademark. Closer to an architect or draftsman, the house auteur is absent from his own creation; house tracks are less like artworks, in the expressive sense, than vehicles, rhythmic engines that take the dancer on a ride.

As well as being post-biographical, house is post-geographical pop. If Chicago is the origin, it's because it happens to be a junction point in the international trade routes of disco. Breaking with the traditional horticultural language we use to describe the evolution of pop—cross-pollination, hybridization—house's “roots” lie in deracination. The music sounds inorganic: machines talking to each other in an unreal acoustic space. When sounds from real-world acoustic sources enter house's pleasuredome, they tend to be processed and disembodied—as with the distortion and manipulation inflicted on the human voice, evacuating its soul and reducing it to a shallow *effect*.

But this is only one side of house culture. Just as important was the humanist, uplifting strain of “deep house” that affiliated itself with the R&B tradition, combining Philly's silky symphonic strings and mellifluous vocals with gospel's imagery of salvation: songs like Sterling Void's “It's Alright,” and

Joe Smooth's "Promised Land" and album *Rejoice*. In house, there's a divide between finding yourself (through becoming a member of the house) and losing yourself (in solipsistic hallucinatory bliss). This split could be compared to the tension in gay culture between the politics of pride, unity, and collective resilience, and the more hardcore "erotic politics" of impersonal sexual encounters, "deviant" practices, and drugs.

House offered a sense of communion and community to those whose sexuality might have alienated them from organized religion. Frankie Knuckles described the Warehouse as "church for people who have fallen from grace," while another house pioneer, Marshall Jefferson, likened house to "old-time religion in the way that people just get happy and screamin'." Male divas like Daryl Pandy and Robert Owens had trained in church choirs. In "deep house" the inspirational lyrics often echo the civil rights movement of the sixties—Joe Smooth's "Promised Land" and Db's "I Have a Dream" explicitly evoke Martin Luther King—conflating the quest for black civic dignity with the struggle for gay pride. In the Children's "Freedom," a spoken-word monologue beseeches "don't oppress me" and "don't judge me," and asks, bewildered and vulnerable: "can't you accept me for what I am?" The name the Children itself comes from Chicago house slang: to be a "child" was to be gay, a member of house's surrogate family. . . .

Sonic Impact: New York's Garage Sound

By 1988 house music was having a massive impact in Britain and Europe, but Chicago itself was in decline. The previous year, the authorities had begun to crack down on the house scene, with the police banning after-hours parties and withholding late-night licenses from clubs. WBMX went off the air in 1988, and sales of house records slowed in Chicago, eventually dwindling to an average of fifteen hundred copies, a mere tenth of peak sales. Many of the scene's prime movers became inactive, disillusioned by bad deals. Others went to Europe, where financial prospects were better. Frankie Knuckles moved back to New York. DJ Pierre moved to New Jersey in 1990 and became a major exponent of house's next phase, the New York-based song-oriented deep-house sound known as "garage."

Garage's roots go back to New York's early-seventies disco underground. Mostly gay (black and Hispanic), this scene was characterized by a bacchanalian fervor fueled by acid, amphetamine, and the Ecstasy-like downer Quaalude. It was in this milieu—clubs like the Gallery, Salvation, Sanctuary, the Loft, the Ginza, and with DJs like Francis Grosso, David Rodriguez, Steve D'Aquisto, Michael Cappello, Walter Gibbons, David Mancuso—that Frankie Knuckles and his colleague Larry Levan learned the art of mixing. Garage is named in homage to the sonic sensibility and sensurround ambiance Levan developed at his legendary club, the Paradise Garage. As a distinct genre, though, it only really took shape after the club shut its doors in late 1987.

Opened in January 1977, the Paradise Garage was named after its location: an indoor truck parking lot in SoHo. Like Chicago's Warehouse, the Saturday-night clientele was gay (Friday night was mixed straight and gay). Philly and Salsoul were the soundtrack, with the songs' gospel-derived exhortations to freedom and fraternity creating a sort of pleasure-principled religious atmosphere. John Iozia described the Garage as both pagan ("an anthropologist's wet dream . . . tribal and totally anti-Western") and ecclesiastical (the dance floor was a fervent congregation of "space-age Baptists"). Just as regulars used to call the Gallery "Saturday Mass," and Salvation was styled a cathedral, Garage veterans regarded the club as "their church." The young Levan had in fact been an altar boy at an Episcopalian church, while the Bozak DJ-mixer he used at the Garage was modeled on an audio mixer originally developed for church sound systems.

Levan was one of the very first examples of the DJ-as-shaman, a technomystic who developed a science of total sound in order to create spiritual experiences for his followers. Working in tandem with engineer Richard Long, he custom-built the Garage's sound system, developing his own speakers and a special low-end-intensive subwoofer known as Larry's Horn. Later, during his all-night DJ-ing stints he would progressively upgrade the cartridges on his three turntables so that the sensory experience would peak around 5 AM. During the week, he would spend hours adjusting the positioning of speakers and making sure the sound was phys-

ically overwhelming yet crystal clear. Garage veterans testify that the sheer sonic impact of the system seemed to wreak submolecular changes in the body. . . .

“Deep”

If one word sums up the garage aesthetic, it’s “deep” (hence tracks like Hardrive’s “Deep Inside” and band names like Deep Dish). “Deep” captures the most progressive aspect of garage, its immersive, dub-inflected production, but also its traditionalism—a fetish for songs and classy diva vocals, an allegiance to soul and R&B, and an aura of adult-oriented maturity. Of all the post-house, post-techno styles, garage places the highest premium on conventional notions of musicality. Garage has little truck with the rhetoric of futurism; samplers and synthesizers are used for economic reasons, as a cut-rate way of emulating the opulent production values and sumptuous orchestral arrangements of classic disco like Philly and Salsoul.

After the Paradise Garage’s demise in late 1987, the spirit of garage was preserved at clubs like the Sound Factory, Better Days, and Zanzibar, by DJs like Junior Vasquez, Bruce Forrest, and Tony Humphries. In the nineties, DJ/producers like Masters at Work, Roger Sanchez, David Morales, Benji Candelario, and Erick Morillo kept the flame alive. In Britain, garage thrived as a kind of back-to-basics scene for sophisticates who’d either outgrown rave or had always recoiled from its juvenile raucousness. In South London, the Ministry of Sound modeled itself on the Paradise Garage, creating an ambiance of upwardly mobile exclusivity and priding itself on having the best sound system in the world (a claim that has not gone undisputed).