



HOUSE



OF



REVOLUTION

Ron Hardy's radical Music Box mixes and edits defined a new sound in dance music

by Andy Thomas



When the universally appointed “Godfather of House” Frankie Knuckles left Chicago’s Warehouse club in 1983 to start a residency at the Power Plant, Warehouse founder Robert Williams turned to a veteran of the city’s underground disco scene to pick up the reins. Although Knuckles’ time at the Warehouse in the late ’70s and early ’80s certainly laid the foundations and inspired his crowd to give the scene a name, it could be argued that the real architect of Chicago house music was in fact a wild and pioneering DJ by the name of Ron Hardy.

Between 1983 and 1987, the innovations and openness of this radical spirit at the renamed Music Box—both in terms of the records Hardy played and the way he played them—created a liberating and electrified environment for house music to grow. But although the name of the late Ron Hardy has achieved cult status thanks to live recordings posted on websites like Deep House Page, his full impact as a DJ and producer has not been fully recognized, and he remains an enigmatic figure.

Born on May 8, 1958, Ron Hardy grew up in the Black neighborhood of Chatham on the South Side of Chicago. According to those who knew him, Ron was more interested in his dad’s collection of Blue Note and Atlantic records than studying at school. His nephew, Bill Hardy, who now runs a label (ParteHardy) dedicated to preserving and promoting his uncle’s music, told Jacob Arnold of the online dance magazine *Gridface* how Ron’s vinyl habit began at an early age: “[My mother] was sister-in-law to Ron... She probably knew Ron when he was ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen years old, because he was the little brother. And she said the boy had records then, she said how he would come over with my father and use his record player.”

In the mid-’70s, Robert Williams, an ex-student of the Dance Theatre of Harlem, had been frequenting seminal New York parties like the Loft and the Gallery. It was at one of these parties, Tamberlane, that he cemented a friendship with two of dance music’s most revered figures. “I was Frankie Knuckles’ and Larry Levan’s juvenile officer,” he laughs. “I used to see them at the clubs and tell them, ‘You can’t be out this late; you’ve got to come to my office tomorrow.’ And they would be like, ‘Oh, Mr. Williams, no.’”

Moving to Chicago in 1975, Robert Williams found a low-key party scene with no after-hours club culture. He immediately searched for a venue to house a party to match those he had attended in New York. Located at 116 South Clifton, U.S. Studios took its name from the not-for-profit organization set up by Williams. With a great space but no DJ, Robert turned to his two friends in New York for help. Larry Levan had his sights set on a new venture that would become the Paradise

Garage, but after much persuasion, Frankie Knuckles eventually agreed to begin a residency at what would become known by regulars simply as the Warehouse.

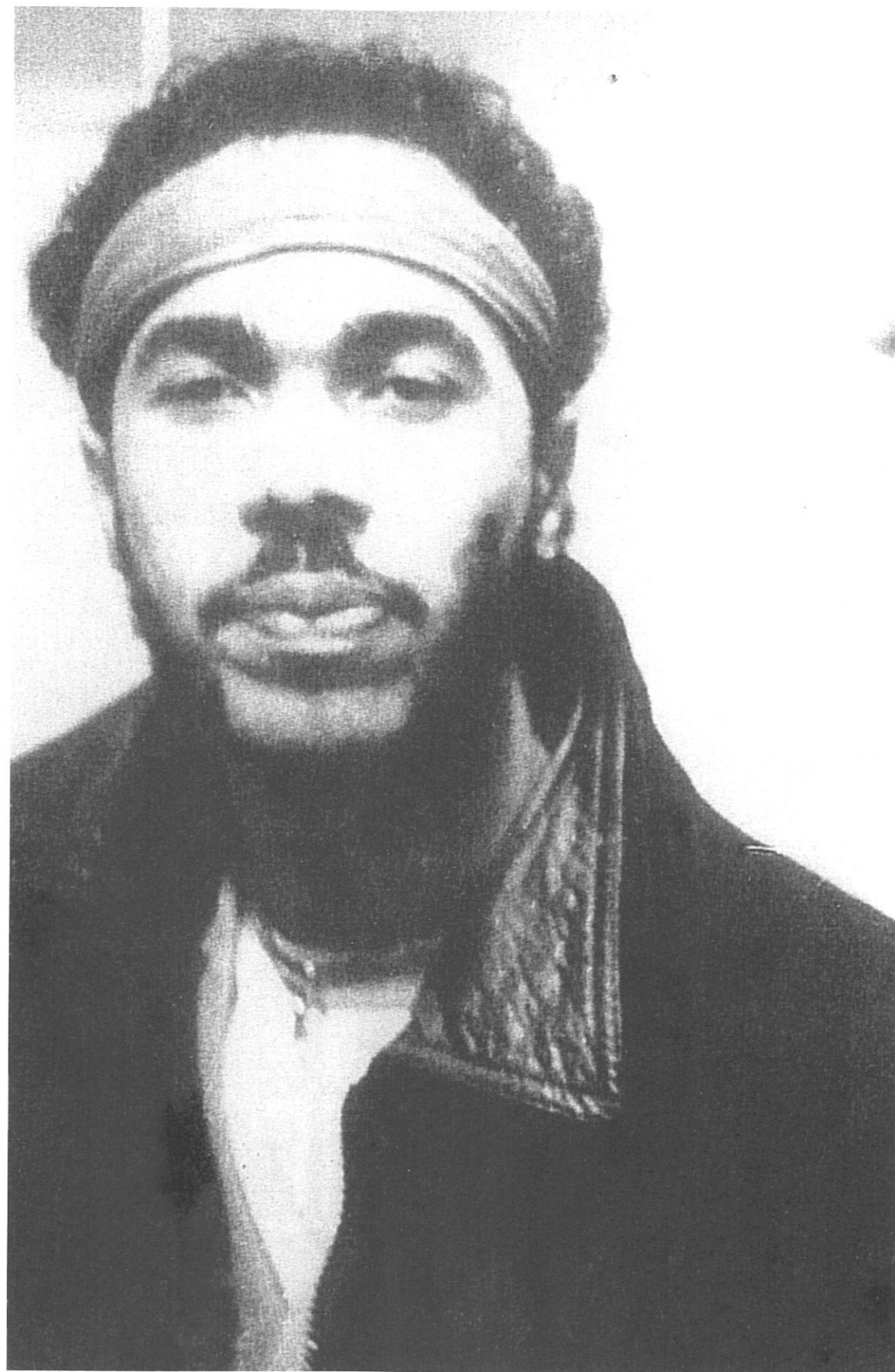
Despite the story of the Warehouse inevitably getting wrapped up in the birth of house, in the early days it was part of a close-knit gay disco scene that included clubs like Carol’s Speakeasy and Den One. It was at Den One that Ron Hardy learned his art, creating mixes to compare with those of the more celebrated DJs in the clubs of New York. However, in 1977, just as the scene was bursting out of the underground, Ron Hardy moved to Los Angeles.

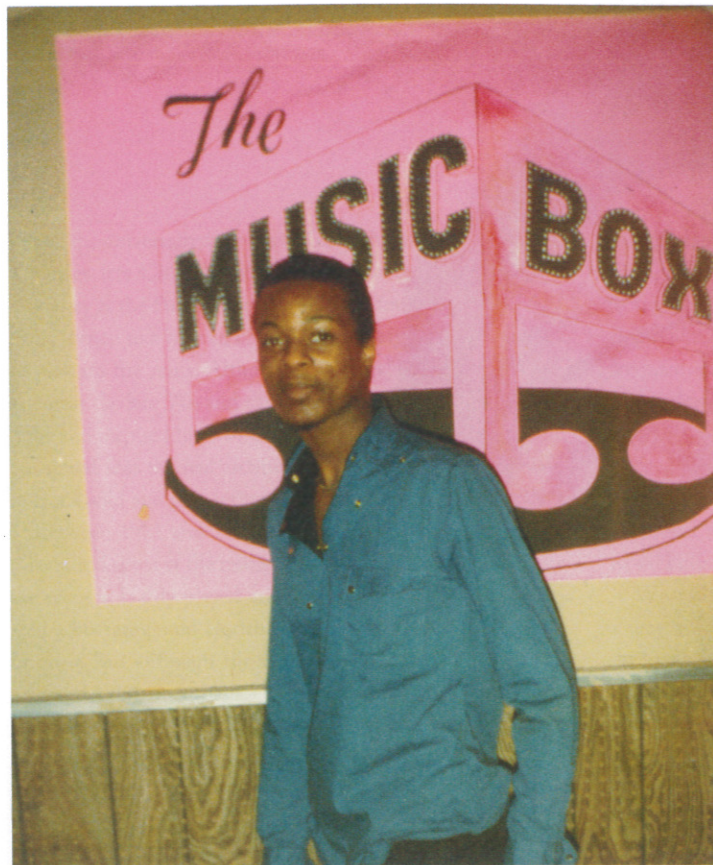
With Hardy on the West Coast, Frankie Knuckles brought a new aesthetic to Chicago nightlife. “Places like Den One, they were just bars really that ran through until around two,” explains Robert Williams. “The Warehouse, on the other hand, was a real after-hours club, so it was completely different.” With its newly installed Richard Long (RLA) sound system and devoted crowd of gay dancers, it wasn’t long before the club mirrored the New York rooms that had inspired Williams.

While the Warehouse was providing a sanctuary for many gay Black Chicagoans, disco’s infiltration of the mainstream gave fuel to the fire to those at the opposite end of Chicago’s music scene. In July 1979, during a baseball game between the Chicago White Sox and the Detroit Tigers at Comiskey Park, local disc jockey Steve Dahl led the “Disco Demolition,” which saw the ceremonial detonation of hundreds of disco records. It remains one of the better quotes through dance music’s history when Frankie Knuckles later remarked that “house music is disco’s revenge.”

At the same time, another radio DJ was weaving a vibrant and exciting tapestry of sound that would be a huge influence on the new generation of open-eared dance freaks, as disco retreated back underground. “People seldom mention Herb Kent who, to me, was the father of it all,” DJ and producer Chez Damier told Dave Stenton from the *Resident Advisor* website. “He was the one that could play disco at the same time as the B-52s and totally educate me—punk rock and disco and Italo all in the same breath.”

While Frankie Knuckles has fondest memories of the period from 1977 to ’81, it was the following years when the Warehouse really began to change dance music forever. “By 1981, when they had declared disco is dead, all the record labels were getting rid of their dance departments, so there was no more up-tempo dance records,” Knuckles explained to writer Frank Broughton in *i-D* magazine. “That’s when I realized I had to start changing certain things in order to keep feeding my dance floor.” As well as embracing the new electronic dance music of groups like the Peech Boys and D-Train along with





(top right, top left, and bottom right)
Music Box members. (middle right)
Robert Williams. (bottom right)
Outside the Music Box, circa 1986.
Photos courtesy of Robert Williams.

some of the more soulful Italian disco, Knuckles used a reel-to-reel to extend and repeat sections of disco classics. A new name for the music Knuckles was playing started to be seen around town, according to Chip E.—who was working at the Imports Etc. record store. “People would come in and ask for the old sounds,” he recalled in *Last Night a DJ Saved My Life*, “the Salsoul that Frankie used to play at the Warehouse. So we’d put up signs that said ‘Warehouse Music’... It worked so well that we started putting it on all sorts of records and shortened the label to ‘House.’”

Just as a name was given to the music, Knuckles had tired of his tenure at the Warehouse. “There was a lot of hard-edged straight kids that were trying to infiltrate what was going on there,” he told Frank Broughton dismissively. Despite the pleas of Robert Williams, Frankie left to start his new club the Power Plant in the fall of 1983.

Inspired by Knuckles, a new generation of bedroom producers had started to emerge in the city, offering their own DIY versions of what was now known as “house.” Advancements in technology meant electronic sound equipment was becoming quickly outdated. The result was gear like the Roland TR-909 and 808 drum machines became affordable tools of experimentation. As the music Knuckles played was rooted in soulful disco, many of these new productions were too raw for the refined ears of Warehouse regulars. “They would come and hear me play and then go back to their clubs, [like] the Playground, and they would do the same thing,” Frankie told Frank Broughton. “And they started putting together their own beat tracks. Which is okay, but I’ve never been one to sit back and play a bunch of beat tracks.” The Playground was the epicenter of this younger scene, where Jesse Saunders—who has laid claim to the first official house track, “On and On”—introduced many of house music’s future DJs and producers into this exciting new culture. At the head of the scene was the influential WBMX radio collective, the Hot Mix 5, who took house music out of its gay enclave and to the straight young Black kids who would be a crucial link in the house-music chain.

With the departure of Knuckles from the Warehouse, which by then had moved to 206 South Jefferson Street, Robert Williams was left reeling. However, after much searching, he found a new space in the old Schwinn Bicycle Company located at 1632 South Indiana in the industrial district. This dark, minimal room needed a DJ who could stamp his mark on the scene and provide an alternative to Frankie Knuckles’ party. By now, Ron Hardy had returned to Chicago from the West Coast. “My partner Ron Braswell asked if I would be interested in Ron Hardy,” recalls Williams. “I had forgotten

about Ron, so wasn’t really sure. At that point, he was playing at this club in the Gold Coast area of Chicago called the Ritz. So I went down there and listened to Ron and thought, ‘Yeah, he’s pretty good; I could work with him.’”

The mantle was a heavy one, and in the early days, Hardy struggled to create a following at the newly renamed Music Box. “There weren’t that many people who came to begin with, because everyone wanted to be where Frankie was,” Williams recalls. With Knuckles’ loyal crowd of hip, gay dancers following him to the Power Plant, the host reached out to a new crowd for his newly renamed club. “The Warehouse had been a gay club, but the Music Box became much more mixed, and actually I would have said it was more heterosexual,” he says. “We also had a lot of gang members coming from the nearby housing project and a lot more women.”

Moving to its second home in 1984 in a gritty after-hours club known as R2 Underground (where DJs Andre Hatchett and Craig Cannon had been holding a party), located in a basement at 326 North Michigan Avenue in downtown Chicago, the Music Box welcomed the same kids who had been dancing at clubs like the Playground. “I’d been to some of those parties like the Playground and Sauer’s, but this was something else,” recalls Stacey Collins, who went on to work the door at the Music Box and become a friend of Ron Hardy’s. “You walked in there and the volume and bass just hit you. It was this dark space with this incredible energy. It was far more underground than those other places.” According to Robert Williams, this is where the myth of Ron Hardy became a reality: “He really started to create his own style and skills. He had twenty-four-hour access to the place with all the equipment there, so he had time to practice and research music. Which in turn made him a better jock. This is where the Music Box really kicked off at.”

It wasn’t just the volume but the musical kaleidoscope that saw Hardy break out of the shadow of his predecessor. “He would play everything,” recalls Stacey Collins. “Punk stuff like the Clash and James White and the Blacks next to soulful disco. He’d play new wave like Visage and ABC, Italo disco, soul, dance-floor jazz, just a real wild mixture.” Robert Williams explains the key difference between Chicago’s two most fabled DJs: “Ron was more of a rebel. He was more adventurous. Frankie was great, but he was a much classier act. Ron also had a real ghetto streak in him.”

Marshall Jefferson, who would go on to produce the 1986 house anthem “Move Your Body” on Trax, also saw how the mood and music created by Hardy differed from that of Knuckles. “Frankie would play more straight disco, the Black disco stuff,” he told writer Bill Brewster in an article for *Faith* magazine, “but Ron Hardy would play it all, man. And at re-



Ron Hardy and Robert Williams at the Music Box, circa 1986. Photo courtesy of Robert Williams.

ally high speeds. Hardy was, like, busier with the records too. He would fuck with the EQ more. Frankie would just mess with the bass occasionally, but Hardy would mess with every fuckin' thing." Looking back nearly thirty years on, Stacey Collins explains how Hardy's artistry behind the decks has left its mark on today's DJs and producers: "He used the EQ a lot. So at certain parts of the record where there was heavy bass, he used to really put emphasis on that. And then using these tweeters, he would play with the high end and then drop the bass out. So you can see the huge influence he has on the way people play today."

High on music and a mix of psychedelics, Hardy's crowd responded with a wild intensity, as one young clubber at the time, DJ/producer Derrick Carter, recalled in *Last Night a DJ Saved My Life*. "It weirded me out," he said. "I didn't know anything about the drugs, but Ronnie would play something like

Eddie Kendricks's 'Going Up in Smoke,' and everybody would be...going up in smoke. It would just lift everybody off the ground; people would be crying, and just freaking out, they got so charged." Stacey Collins has her own personal memories of how the Music Box crowd reached the higher ground in the packed windowless basement. "Drugs were very much a part of our culture," she says. "You could go to Rialto's first, have a few drinks, buy a bottle of rush at the counter, see Freddie for some MDA, acid, or both, dance a bit, and then hit it to the Music Box. If you didn't see Freddie at Rialto's, you could still buy acid from Clarence down at the Box. That is, if you could stop him long enough from his preferred dance of twirling around in an endless circle!"

Ron Hardy reveled in this environment, working the EQs and the system to the max and delaying the breakdown until the orgasmic crowd screamed for mercy. His innovations be-

hind the decks became legendary, like famously playing songs backwards using his reel-to-reel to drive the party insane. "Ron was notorious for adding a train sound effect while playing," adds Stacey Collins. "You would hear the horn getting closer, warning you that it was on its way, and then the loud, menacing sound of the train as if it were passing right in front of you. And, oh my God, the wind off the speakers. It was magnificent!" Stacey's brother Lee Collins, who would go on to become one of the few DJs invited by Hardy to guest at the Music Box, explains what made the party unique. "Ron Hardy took what Frankie did and kept pushing the crowd so the experience was more intense," he says. "Ron used to say things like, 'Stay on those motherfuckers, and if they look like they going to faint, hit them harder.'"

Despite the wildness of the crowd, the club retained a family atmosphere with Ron's friend Avery vetting people at the door

and Robert Williams's mom, Gypsy, collecting money while manager Ron Braswell helped keep the madness in check. And at the helm was the fierce alchemist Ron Hardy, whose wild music was matched by his eccentric dress sense and personality. "Ron was an interesting character," Stacey Collins remembers. "He had a temper like you wouldn't believe. The last thing you wanted to do was piss Ron off. But if you pissed him off, he played wonderfully. When he was angry, that was when he was at his best." Despite his mood swings and increasing drug consumption, Hardy was a modest man who could never quite understand the adulation, Stacey remembers. "He was still one of the most genuine people I've known. He could be shy and often wondered why he was regarded so highly. That, I think, is a testament to his kind and humble nature."

The out-of-control atmosphere in the Music Box was augmented by the many edits Hardy incorporated into his sets. Taking old disco classics and rarities, the sound scientist would reconstruct them often beyond recognition—a raw yet soulful new music was born. Whereas Frankie Knuckles' edits were primarily intended to extend the dance-floor euphoria through soulful fluidity, Ron Hardy used the tape machine and EQ to jolt his crowd with a manic dark energy that teetered on the edge between beauty and chaos. "Ronnie was doing a lot of his own edits as well, and a lot of his edits were very repetitious. Very high energy and very repetitious," said Knuckles to Bill Brewster in *Faith* magazine. "He would take a song, and he'd run that for ten minutes, before the song even played. And then he'd go into the song or go back to another ten minutes and just played one particular part." But it was these very sound manipulations that created the wild intensity of early house as dancers screamed for mercy. Listen to Hardy's prescient edits of the Dells' "No Way Back," Nightlife Unlimited's "Peaches & Prunes," or Blue Magic's "Welcome to the Club," and it's not just the repetition that creates the dynamics, but the way he builds tension and release. And to the ears of his more youthful crowd, this was the sound of the future, and music they could truly call their own, inspiring many more to become bedroom producers. For Robert Williams, it was Ron and not Frankie who most inspired the new generation to become house music's pioneers. "It was at the Music Box that the music changed," he states. "People like Marshall Jefferson and Steve 'Silk' Hurley would come through and they would hear his edits and beat tracks. He was more influential to them than Frankie was. Ron definitely changed the sound."

While Frankie's club may have given a name to this new music, he wasn't exactly receptive to the rawer, homemade music he had helped spawn, as disco historian Tim Lawrence explained in his liner notes for the Soul Jazz compilation *Acid*:

Can You Jack? “Knuckles was relatively inaccessible, not just physically with regard to the foreboding design of his new booth, but also psychologically, with regard to his intimidating superstar status.” Robert Williams concurs with this view: “These kids were part of Ron’s school of learning. They were mainly heterosexual, and they jelled with Ron, because he would play their music and Frankie wouldn’t.” Unlike his predecessor, Ron Hardy became a supporter of these raw productions, regularly accepting and playing the untried tapes being passed to him. By 1985, the Music Box had become a breeding ground for young talent and a testing ground for the homemade music of the city’s youth, the best of which would be snapped up by Larry Sherman’s and Rocky Jones’s infamous labels, Trax and DJ International.

Adonis, whose “No Way Back” became an anthem of the scene, recalled to Tim Lawrence how important Ron Hardy was to the creative flow in the city: “I mean, you could bring him a record, he didn’t care who the hell you were. He didn’t have to be your best friend or anything. If the shit sounded good, he was going to play it. So Ron Hardy actually made people’s careers, because he had that kind of authority and power.” Chicago DJ and producer Gene Hunt—who played at another of Chicago’s important house clubs, Medusa’s—would go on to work with Ron Hardy on the track “Throwback 87,” one of Ron Hardy’s many unreleased tracks of the period. “I got doctored by a musical surgeon,” he explains. “You’d give Ron a track, and he’d take it and put other things on top of it; he’d redesign it and manifest it on everybody.”

Despite Ron’s undoubted genius and his huge influence on the scene, only a handful of his productions were officially released at the time. And his few mixes for Trax and DJ International or his Trax solo release, “Sensation,” really don’t do justice to what we are now hearing through live recordings on the Internet or the few edits that have been released. “A lot of kids tried to market their edits and music. Ron didn’t do any of that,” explains Robert Williams. “He only made edits for the party.” In the end, it was a mixture of disinterest and distrust that ensured Ron Hardy’s greatest work was never officially released. “He knew how shady people like Rocky Jones were, because I told him,” adds Williams. “So he didn’t really mix with people like that.”

It was therefore left to others to profit from house music’s rapid ascent in the late ’80s, as many of those who had gotten their education at the Music Box were invited to DJ overseas. At the same time as house music was exploding on the dance floors of England, the Music Box at 326 North Michigan Avenue was forced to close due to restrictions on operating hours for “juice bars” (which had been the way for such clubs to stay

open late), as well as increasing problems from local “boosters” robbing from neighborhood stores. Ron Hardy continued to spin at venues like CODs, but although Robert Williams moved the Music Box to a new venue on Lake Street and finally to the Power House where Frankie Knuckles had his residency, by this time, Ron had become sick. “The problem was, it wasn’t so much his [HIV-related] illness but his drug addiction,” says Robert Williams quietly. “Too many drugs and not enough medication.” Sadly, in 1991, the drug claimed another of dance music’s originals, as Ron Hardy died at his mother’s house in Springfield, Illinois, where he was being cared for in the last months of his life. “I already knew what the outcome was going to be,” adds his old friend. “We had talked about it, but he wouldn’t stop. I was upset because I had lost a friend, but I wasn’t shocked. We all went to Springfield to his funeral. Him and Abraham Lincoln are in the same cemetery.”

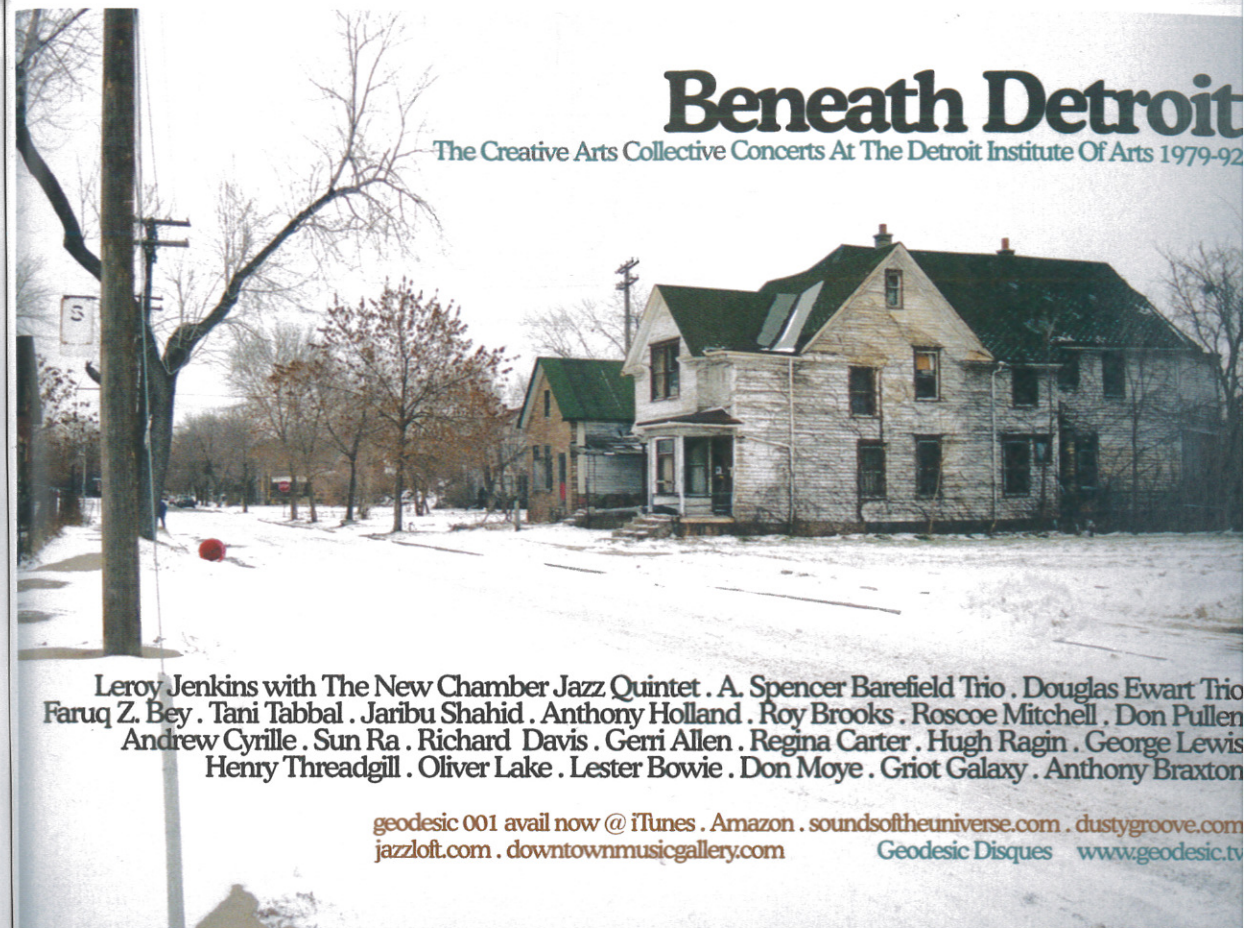
Despite Chicago house music thriving in the early ’90s with labels like Cajual and Relief, its club scene never refound the golden dust that had been scattered over the legendary floors of the Warehouse and Music Box. “Chicago lost its two most important DJs at the same time, with Ron dying and Frankie moving to New York,” explains Williams. “Unfortunately, nobody picked up the ball, so to speak. A lot of the other DJs were running over to Europe to make money out of house music, and it left a big void here.”

Nearly thirty years on from its birth, however, Chicago’s house-music flame continues to burn brightly, whether through spinners like Ron Trent or vinyl-obsessive collectives such as the Chuck Brothers and Soul in the Hole. And for the past ten years or so, Ron Watkins’s South Side club, Da House Spot, where Robert Williams can often be found, has been re-creating the magic that had originally brought the Chicago night to life back in the early ’80s. At the same time, the spirit of Ron Hardy and the Music Box can be felt through mixes on the Internet and memories of those who were there—or wished they had been—to witness the messianic DJ, eyes closed, working his congregation into ecstatic raptures.

“I run into so many people who say they were at the parties, and later [I] find out through conversations that they weren’t,” concludes Stacey Collins. “Now I realize that I should take their lies as a compliment that attests to just how bad people wish they had been a part of something so fantastic. It’s funny, because back then, none of us ever really thought it would turn into what it has. We were just there to party and have a good time, and now it’s become historic. We owe a great deal to both Ron and Robert for that. Chicago has an honorary street named after Frankie Knuckles, but not one after Ron. That is sad, very sad. He was everything to us.” ●

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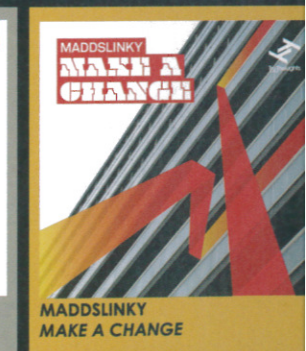
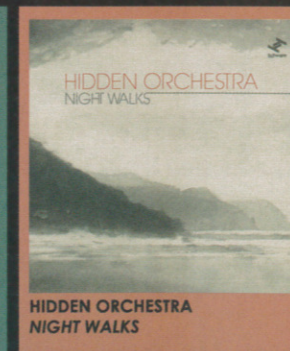
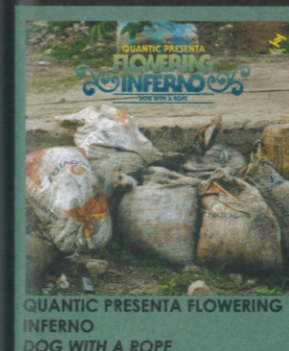
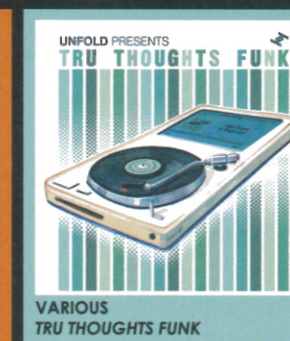
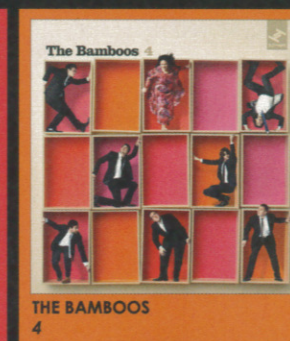


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