

Chapter Five: The Spread of House Music

The Soundscape- new DJs started to adapt their sound to the innovations of Jesse Saunders. Among those artists were Adonis, Steve Hurley, Marshall Jefferson, Mr. Lee and some of the DJs that previously held to the Disco influence like Ron Hardy. Aside from Jesse's, one of the more popular songs of the day was "Feel The Drive" by Doctor's Cat, an imported record from Italy that would really add some fusion the sound of House music.

The track I had used as my signature song (off the B-side of one of the stolen records) was called 'On & On'. I was lost without it. However, instead of curling up into a little ball, I decided to take action. After the evening was over I set about the process of finding my records again at the store, but eventually came up with an even better idea. Maybe this was a sign, I thought, that I was meant to create my own music and not just play around with the music of others. I would make my own version of On & On. I replayed the bass line from memory and came up with some original drum tracks that changed every minute or so under the groove. Vince and I added in some vocals and rap lyrics, and On & On was reborn. In the end, the drum track evolved through five different distinct rhythms on the TR-808, I also began to use these new rhythms during the rest of my DJ set as an underlying beat to different songs.

That November, Vince and I gave this kid Duane Buford a ride home from The Playground. He was a concession worker for the club, but was always talking about how he was also a musician in his down time. Vince didn't like Duane much so he jumped on the subject almost immediately and challenged Duane on how he could call himself a musician. Much to our surprise, the kid had an original Fender Rhodes piano- a classic instrument- back at his place and knew how to play quite well. Vince's opinion changed after this, he took a sudden liking to Duane and invited him to a jam session with us. He would later turn out to be another key ingredient to the foundation of House music that I was creating.

I was also participating in a **record pool** at the record store Importes Etc., the major retail outlet for twelve inch dance records in Chicago. A record pool is a group of DJs that receive new vinyl for free from record companies in order to break the records in their nightclubs. Importes was a good place to pick up new music for my sets, the head sales guy -Frank Sells- was great. He would make sure to point out every new release and give me a little info on the sound to help me with my decisions in figuring out which ones would fit best into my current set. Then one day he approached and started to ask me about one of the records I was playing at The Playground. It turned out that a bunch of people from The Playground were coming in and asking about it, but he had no idea which track they were talking about and couldn't find it for them. I wasn't sure which song they were talking about either, so I brought in a recording of my last set and he played the tape in the store so that the patrons could listen through each song. Surprisingly enough, someone recognized one of the rhythm tracks from On & On as the song that people were asking about. When he found out that the track was an original of mine, he left me with the strong impression that if I could get On & On pressed onto vinyl, he could sell the whole lot. He was getting a lot of requests, and I decided it was time to take my journey with On & On to the next level.

In December, I called on Vince and told him about the situation, giving him a version of the track that I had recorded on my cassette recorder. He suggested that I visit another studio owned by the Omni group in order to transfer the recording onto mastering tape. I planned to put the five rhythm tracks on the B-side of the record in order to provide the instrumental versions to anyone who might be interested, so we transferred those as well. Vince and I then took the master tape down to the Precision Record Labs, which was this other place you could get your records pressed that was owned and operated by Larry Sherman. I was uncomfortable with going back to Mitchball records because they were taking a very long time to press my song Fantasy onto vinyl, so I figured it was time for a change. Precision Record Labs was used to pressing seven inch records for Blues and Polka artists, so Larry wasn't quite sure what to make of the dance record we wanted pressed. But we had told him about the requests we'd had down at Importes Etc., so

Larry sat down and listened to the master in order to be introduced to the sound of House music.

With my last eight hundred dollars, I pressed five hundred copies of On & On. The label was done in black and white and we decided that the record label it would be sold under would be 'Jes Say Records'. Vince drew the logo for Jes Say by hand and put it on the cover. We then had them put in white jackets and shrink wrapped them for sale. On & On was officially released in January of 1984 on my upstart record label Jes Say Records, and became the first original House record ever pressed for sale. We proceeded to promote my record in the same fashion that we had promoted our parties, with posters on every corner and flyers passed out at the high schools, colleges and various clubs including The Playground. We initially sold 250 copies to Importes Etc., and they managed to sell them all even though the price was about seventy-five percent more than a regular record. We'd made the mistake of selling the records to Importes at \$4 per record, forgetting that the store would up the price in order to make a profit as well. At \$6.99 a record, the price Importes sold my record for was much higher than the usual \$3.99 other records of its kind sold for- records that the store bought at a lower price than they had gotten from us.

It didn't matter too much because Importes Etc. soon reordered and we were back at Precision to press more copies. Larry Sherman was astonished to find us walking through his door again only a few days after we'd picked up the first five hundred copies. This time I ordered a thousand copies and his eye brow raised. After hearing our story, he decided to offer me a deal. Instead of paying for the batch of records, he would press them for free and then take the cost of the records out of our profits as well as an extra percentage based on the sales numbers. On & On became a hit, we even got radio play from the Hot Mix 5 radio show- they were very supportive of the House movement on the local station WBMX- whom incidentally now employed Farley.

In fact, all of the DJs were friends back in those days. I passed out copies of the record to everyone and soon enough you couldn't go anywhere without hearing On & On. This

unity was one of the major reasons for the early success of House music within the city limits Chicago, we all helped each other out and made sure that no one was left behind. A few weeks later Vince and I got a call from the owner of Buy Rite record store in Detroit- Cliff- looking to order On & On for its own shelves. We shipped him up some copies, but by the next week his store was in need of more too. The record had become a hit in Detroit as well, and the store's owner insisted that I come up to do some TV and radio appearances in Detroit to help sales. So Vince, Duane Buford and I jumped in the car for a road trip and drove out to Detroit. There I would meet all of the forefathers of the Detroit scene, like Juan Atkins, Ken Collier, Duane Bradley and Stacey Hale, and see first hand how my House music was starting to spread. I now figured that if On & On sold well, then an entirely original song would probably sell just as much- if not more.

I had at this point developed a live show for performances at The Playground outside of Z Factor with Duane, myself and Duane Grant, a musician that was also on the first Fantasy track. I later went on to add Eric Bell as our drummer and Dwayne Roof on bass. While House music today is normally produced on the computer using **MIDI** technology to simulate different instruments, I was using real instruments at the time. Just as the DJ today brings out his 'band' of technological toys to the stage, we also performed the songs that we recorded live for audiences. We had the synthesizer, drum kit, vocalists and even a dance team up on stage. This sometimes happens nowadays with certain groups, but the live instrumental House performance seems to have become a bit of a lost art. Of course I would also DJ at the club and remix our recordings for the dance floor, but the live performance of our original music had just as big a role in the early days of my House music career.

The inspiration for my next song came from Duane Buford, the concession guy. He had been dating this girl who he was just smitten with, when one day he walked up to his buddies to find them laughing. When he asked them what was so funny, they said that his girl had gone out with some other guy and was tramping around behind his back. Duane was a good guy, he could poke fun at himself with the best of them, but it hurt the kid to think that he wasn't worth the girl's faithfulness. So he came to me, naturally I

was more supportive than the jackals on the corner, and we spent the night lamenting on just how much a girl can fuck you up. Then, I had this great idea. 'Fuck you up' - the phrase caught my ear and my mind started rolling. After I talked Duane down from being upset, he, Vince and I decided to write a song about it to give him some solace through **sublimation**. He released his pain into the music; captured the pieces of his broken heart, glued them to the notes of the song and sent them into the air. Of course we had to change the phrase 'fuck you up' to something else, due to the quality control of the day, and came up with the hinting 'Funk U Up (Those Pretty Girls)'.

I went to Solid Sound studios this time, where I had recorded the original version of Fantasy, and we recorded our new song, as well as a track called 'Undercover' that I wrote with my brother Wayne. Things had begun rolling and we started to get requests from many of the musicians around town who wanted to get in on the action. Most of them were horrible. However, not all of the kids from the old days were merely trying to ride our coattails. Screaming Rachel, the girl we had used on the Fantasy track, was doing very well for herself. In fact, it was she that opened another door for us. The girl had been taken under the wing of a local music attorney/manager whom she told about myself and the others in order to help us out a little. The man went by the name of Jay B. Ross, whom upon her advice ended up loaning me five grand in order to get my label started properly. He then signed me to a management deal and offered me legal representation as well.

'Funk U Up (Those Pretty Girls)' became the second release on Jes Say Records in April of 1984 and I loaded the B-side with DJ friendly arrangements just like we had for the last record. I then brought in Kirk Townshed- my cousin and DJ from the Mendel bi-level parties- to handle the promotion for the label, which turned out to be a very good move. He had received a lot of experience as a radio announcer since the old days and was great at relating to the music directors at all the local stations, having personal contacts at a lot of the major ones. We only pressed a thousand copies of Funk U Up, but Larry Sherman from Precision and Paul Weisberg- the owner of Importes Etc.- approached me with a deal to pick up the single, remix it and release it on their own

upstart label. The next deal with Larry also seemed too good for me to pass up. They would feature the record in the store with a release party, autograph signing, press as many copies as it took to promote and market the record, hire independent promotion in New York City- anything to blow the record up. So we did the remix and the track was re-released in May on Streetfire Records.

It was Kirk who actually got Funk U Up into the rotation of the Chicago radio stations. The record started to outsell everything, even mainstays like Prince who had his hit 'When Doves Cry' out at the time. But it was the promotional company Pro-Motion headed by Brad Lebeau that Larry found for us out in New York that was most instrumental in getting Funk U Up on the Billboard magazine music charts. The track became the first House track to ever make it onto the Billboard charts. Wayne's track 'Undercover' also became a hit with all the DJs after we went back to remix it and re-release in May. Duane Bradley, one of the DJs I had met in Detroit, helped remix and coordinate the release of my record in Detroit and we made another road trip up there to do some more TV performances and radio interviews. We met up with the local DJs again and went to a few club nights, it turned out that Juan Atkins was just about to start releasing records himself. Juan's successes often mimicked my own.

I performed my song live on TV, but something went wrong during the taping of one of the segments. As I got into the vocals during one of the shows, I felt something strange dangling from the front of my mouth. I was afraid it was something I had eaten at first so I used my hand to discretely wipe it away. It wasn't anything like that though, the dangling piece felt hard and somewhat secured against my tooth. I figured it would be best to leave it until after the song and just tried to hide my mouth until it was over. Well I must have accidentally hit myself in the face or something, because when I finally got backstage to look in the mirror I was shocked to see what it was that had bothered me so much. The cap of my tooth was hanging from its upper half, about to fall off. Sure enough, a playback of the video recording featured my missing tooth front and center-highlight of the night.

On a more positive note, it was about this time that ABC finally granted us the spotlight that Vince had requested the year prior. Janet Davies did the interview and an intern who would later go on to be one of Chicago's most respected anchors, Diane Burns was there as well. They showed footage of people dancing to my music at The Playground as well as displays of my records in the local stores with the caption, "They say that a Jes Say Records release can sell a thousand copies in a few days". They interviewed Vince and I and then showed more footage from one of our rehearsals. The highlight of the interview for myself was when I looked directly into the camera and announced that I, 'wanted to become the next Motown'. The story aired that night, and the next day I couldn't walk more than a few steps without someone stopping to point and look or say hello.

However, as an unfortunate result of this milestone, a snowball effect started to take place. All of the DJs that had seen me on ABC started to think about making their own records, which would have been okay, except that most people mistook what they saw. People were thinking that all I had used to make my records was the TR-808 and a cassette recorder, they simplified the process that I had built up over the years. As my brother Wayne put it, "Other DJs said 'well damn, if Jesse can come up with a drum track, I can do that too', and started making up their own tracks". Vince's dad wasn't much of a help either, summing up his viewpoint by saying, "If an asshole like me can make a record and put it out there, so can you". Everyone in Chicago would eventually start to make their own records and release them on their own upstart labels. The twinkle of greed began to appear in the eyes of every DJ around. They started stabbing each other in the back and began a nasty competition to get the better of one another. And the snowball only got larger and larger.

Prior to this time, the records I was releasing had sold tens of thousands of copies in the Chicago area alone. All the DJs were very supportive and we had formed a united front in promoting House music, but this nasty competition that started between rival DJs led record sales to diminish over the next few years. I foresaw this, and decided that it was time for me to pioneer another side of House music. I started to concentrate on my live act at this point, but things didn't stop going wrong there. We got ourselves a gig at the

Metro Club- a big time showcase of global dance music- and opened for an act called Dominatrix. Vince had some knowledge of pyrotechnics from working with the band Captain Sky and we decided to light up the stage with more than just our sound.

Literally. After the show, some girl from the audience ended up putting a cigarette out in one of the flash pots that held the gunpowder for the pyro. It exploded upon contact and the girl was burned very badly, the flash also set the stage on fire. Thank God she was all right in the end, she did sue the club later on over the incident but the club's insurance company picked up the tab. I didn't even hear about it until a few days later, but it really affected me.

My love life was suffering too. I had a girlfriend, Adrienne Clarke, who had been with me since my return from LA. Being the girlfriend of a popular DJ was hard enough, but when I released my first record and the girls started flocking to my shows, it caused a lot of problems. We broke up because of all the fans that tried to force themselves between the two of us. I started dating girls within the music scene for a while, it came to the point that the only girls I saw on a regular basis were the ones I worked with, however things like that never last. Everything was getting complicated, I needed a breath of fresh air. I decided to go back to the old Mendel bi-level parties where I had gotten my first taste of DJ life, this time to take over my cousin's role as resident DJ for the summer.

I brought in my live act for them as well and rediscovered the reason why I was doing what I was doing with life. Things were so much simpler here, the kids were gracious and they were there just to have a good time; they had no ulterior motives. One night I decided to bring in an artist by the name of Jamie Principle who was tied to the Frankie Knuckles' crew to perform with me at Mendel. Jamie had written a song entitled 'Your Love' that Frankie was playing at the Power Plant and the song became so popular that most of the top DJs in town, including myself, had a copy on cassette that we played in our sets.

I was amazed to find that an artist or song could become so popular without radio play. Jamie brought the house down and of course I held up my end of the bargain to create

one of the most memorable nights in House music history. I continued to perform live around town with Vince as production manager, I even used my brother Wayne as my opening act- who had taken the name of Dr. Derelict for his stage and recording personality. 'Funk U Up' went to number one on the charts in Chicago and I began to attack my career with a new found energy. The high school kids and people that attended my live shows had oxygenated the fire in my blood once again.

Larry Sherman began to ask me to produce records for him and he launched his own Precision Records label, moving himself up from the status of mere pressing and manufacturing ownership. I recorded two new tracks for him, 'Dum Dum' and 'The Real Love' on an EP entitled Dum Dum that we released under the pseudonym of Fresh. Frankie Knuckles and many of the other Chicago DJs had now all begun to experiment with original tracks, but still had yet to press any records. The snowball was just getting to the point at which people would start to release their music commercially, however people continued to run onto the dance floor every time a new Jesse Saunders track came on- the two new tracks from Larry's label being no exception.

Steve Hurley, the kid who my step-brother Wayne used to sneak out of the house, came to me one day with a track that he had produced to see if I could help him release it. I told him that it was a good start, but he needed to write some lyrics and record a vocal to make it commercially acceptable; something we could release through the Jes Say records label. Within a few months, one of the major record pools in town- run by Rocky Jones- had picked up Steve Hurley's track, revamped it after taking my advice with lyrics and vocals. The song was now called 'Music Is The Key', and Rocky released the group recording under the name JM Silk. Rocky decided to start his own label after this success and opened the doors of DJ International, a label which would release DJ oriented music and attract some well known artists from the Chicago Hip-House music scene (Rap mixed with House) like Fast Eddie and Tyree Cooper. I felt slighted for the first time in this young record label rivalry that would become a major issue down the road, that Steve would take my advice and then release through a channel other than Jes Say. Steve

would one day go on to be nominated for five Grammy awards for remixes of artists like Michael Jackson and Ce Ce Penniston, this was the start of that career.

My next Jes Say Records release would be a take on the track 'The Real Love' that I had produced for Larry, Vince and I got together and collaborated for the writing and recording of the song. But after the snowball had begun to get really large and DJs from all over town were making their own original tape recordings, we decided that we needed a new sound to stay ahead of the game. So we called on Farley- still of the Hot Mix 5 radio show- and asked him to do some '**scratching**', a DJ art that had only been used in the genre of Hip Hop up until this point. I could have done it myself, but having Farley in on it was much better for promotional reasons. After all, now he was Farley 'Funkin' Keith of the hit radio show the Hot Mix 5- stage three of his evolving name changes taken place. Having Farley on the record was a selling point that seemed obvious to Vince and I, so we used him to create the first ever House record to feature the art of scratching.

Larry Sherman then came to me with yet another business deal. He wanted to start a joint venture between the two of us called Trax Records. We did collaborate on this, but over time I came to have some problems with how Larry did business. He had become notorious for his bad pressings, he was getting old records that he would buy for a penny or so and grind them up to produce new vinyl. This was much cheaper than buying what we called '**virgin vinyl**'- vinyl that had never been used before- but the recycled vinyl was known for having pops and craters appear all over them after continuous use. Larry would also re-use old, used jackets for his records as well. At first I thought that the idea of getting inexpensive materials was great for the pocketbook, but I soon realized that by releasing a product of lower quality I was ripping off my fans.

I decided to go elsewhere and for the manufacturing of Real Love, I wanted to give my fans the best quality product on this song and I wanted it to be a big hit. Screaming Rachel (the singer off the track Fantasy) was once again an angel to me. She had secured an artist deal with a company in Los Angeles by the name of Warrior Records and she

hooked me up with a pressing and distribution deal. I released 'Real Love' in March of 1985 on my label Jes Say Records and found another instant success. It was added to the rotation at every radio station in the Midwest and went to the top of the charts.

I had now started to tour outside of the Chicago area with groups like The SOS Band, Atlantic Star, Ready For The World and Phyllis Hyman, and by the time the summer of 1985 had returned to Chicago on my first tour stop back home. I had a lot of stories from the tour to tell people and because there were a lot of performers at this particular show and not enough dressing rooms, I volunteered to use the field house as my dressing room knowing that my friends could then visit more easily. It was my big return and I invited everyone I knew down to the concert, as did all of the other band members. It was great to see everyone again, even though I hadn't really been gone for all that long. I was totally psyched to perform in front of all of them and show them how good we'd gotten. Everyone was having a blast, but as is usual with a bunch of young guys, we got to doing stupid shit.

A friend of somebody in the band started showing off, doing backward somersaults and things like that, he came off as really competitive. Well, I had always been a pretty competitive guy myself, so I decided to show this kid how it was really done. We were going to have this competition, doing the somersaults side by side, but I forgot to check whether or not there was room enough for two people to fit as opposed to just one. But it was my show and I had to show him up. I attempted to do not only one, but two somersaults in what little space I had, knowing that he would only try one. Well, I almost made it, but my foot caught the edge of a table on the other side. The next thing I knew the whole group of people that were there to listen to my stories were right in the midst of one of the most bizarre tales I ever had on tour. My foot was spurting blood all over the place, all over everyone in the room. My foot is throbbing and I'm spinning around and around trying to ease the sharpness of the pain. I almost cut my toes off.

When the paramedics arrived to examine my foot they wanted to take me to the emergency room as quickly as possible. "Hell no", I said to that, "I've got a show to do!"

I had been paid a deposit from my fee already and there were like 10,000 people out there, one of the biggest crowds I had ever played for. The paramedics pleaded with me, but all I said was, "If I can get my shoe on, I'm going on stage." Well, my shoe wouldn't fit, but Duane's would- we switched left shoes and I forced myself to stand. The paramedics bandaged me up, stopped the bleeding, and I sent the band out ahead of me while I got up the courage to ignore the pain. I had two bodyguards carry me out to the stage and then just sat back and waited while my intro played for the longest two minutes of my entire life.

But at that two minute mark, I stood up and ran out onto that stage with a burst of adrenaline. Yeah, there must have been some mighty adrenaline, because I managed to perform the choreography and sing for a full thirty minutes. And I never thought about my foot once, while I did one of the best shows I'd ever done... Well maybe there was a bit of pain, as I approached the point where we were about to sing 'Real Love'- number one on all the local radio stations at the time- I felt a slight burning that seemed to grow hotter and hotter. I cut the vocals short during our finale and let the band play out the rest as I limped back stage. In the end, the bodyguards carried me back to the dressing room too.

In the rush of performing for all of those people I had pushed the limits, but once back in the dressing room, I had to take off the oversized shoe I had used and take another look at my foot. It had started to bleed again and was absolutely throbbing. So, thinking clearly as ever, I wrapped it back up and headed back out to the audience to see the next act. I had the bodyguards carry me out to see D Train, I didn't want to miss him performing one of my favorite songs for the life of me. I couldn't exactly sit out with the rest of the audience, so they put me in the photographer's area and propped my foot up on a chair.

Kirk Townsend was the first to approach me once I was out there and laid right into me, "What the hell are you doing out here? You should be at the hospital!" I tried to pass him off, but he wouldn't budge. I finally promised him that I'd let his mom take a look at

my foot after the show, and if she thought it was serious, I promised that I would make my way over to the emergency room.

So after the show I hobbled over to Kirk's house and let his mom take a look. And it only took one. She turned my foot to the side, took a single look at my toes, looked straight into my eyes and said in a calm voice, "uh huh, you're gonna to need some surgery done on these". I hadn't expected this, this was terrible, so I went straight over to my buddy in med school's house over by the University of Chicago, as I had decided that I was in definite need of a second opinion. I don't like hospitals, never have, I would only go to one in the most extreme emergency situations and I was damn sure this wasn't one of those. At least until my second opinion turned out to be that there was nothing else I could do if I wanted to continue to have toes, nothing else I could do but get to the emergency room as soon as possible. Having been told this several times over the past hour, I finally decided to make them all happy and just go.

I checked into the University hospital and sat for about two hours before I was told that it would be at least another few hours until I could see someone. It seemed like every other emergency that could have possibly occurred to push back my waiting time happened that night- gunshot wounds, stabbings, anything you could think of. I was getting ready to get up and leave when my brother Wayne said that he could try and pull some strings at a hospital about ten minutes from there, turns out that he'd been working there over the past few months. We went on over and Wayne got me right in to see somebody...

The doctor took one look, and seemed to agree with everyone else. Surgery needed to be done immediately. And lets just say, he was blunt, "I'm going to have to administer some local anesthesia directly into the wound. It's gonna to hurt like hell". The nurse gave me a squeeze bottle for each hand and a tongue depressor so that I wouldn't bite off my tongue, and then the doctor proceeded to administer not one... not two... but three injections directly into the wound. I was wrong, that period back stage while I was waiting for my Intro to finish earlier that night was not the longest two minutes of my life. This was. And throughout the procedure I couldn't help but spend the whole time

thinking about how I better not ever get into a situation like this ever again because no one on this planet could ever convince me to come back to the hospital ever, ever again. Never.

And of course while this was going on, Wayne, Kirk, Duane and Vince just had to come stumbling into the room. The foursome just couldn't control themselves as they cackled while I cringed in pain. I had to listen to those hyenas howl forever as it took the doctor three full hours to finish sewing my toes back into place- he used over one hundred stitches. I wondered at several points whether or not this level of pain was equal to giving birth, and whether or not I ever wanted to put a woman through that kind of pain. I was thinking twice about having kids. I didn't even wish this kind of pain on those four jackasses- that seemed- to think- that this- was so- funny! The evening eventually came to a close.

Soon enough I was again looking for something new to do with myself and my career, so that autumn Kirk suggested that it was time to expand the Jes Say roster, which had up until this point only included myself and my brother Wayne. With the kind of success we'd had on the radio, Kirk felt that we could do a good job promoting some of the other artists around town that were looking to move a few more rungs up the ladder. He had been going out to see a local band known as Onstage and set me up to meet with their front man. After hearing one of their recordings, we signed them to **a single deal with an album option**. I had also been looking myself, mostly at this R&B group that had garnered a pretty good reputation that called themselves Midnight Sensation. The girls went crazy for them at their shows and I figured that they would be an excellent addition to our roster. Vince and I wrote a song for them to record and we expanded our recording interests into Rhythm and Blues. We had already signed the brother of a friend of ours- Rene Robinson- and his group the Homeboys, and they became the first group to release a track on the label other than Wayne and myself when their song 'It's Your Night' came out in August of 1985.

However, there were some skeletons in our closet that had begun to rattle. There were figures skulking in the shadows, wheeling and dealing me towards the betrayals I did not see coming.