

Those City Nights

In the car, on the streets, at the club... music is the key

Jesse Saunders



Z Factor's 1984 LP, which featured Jesse Saunders, is considered to be the very first house music album. 24 years later it has been reissued and this article looks at the stories behind its standout track, 'Fantasy', and the track that came after it, 'On & On'.

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I've previously written about a couple of early Citinite projects, when I was just thinking of ideas to get my label started, but one of the earliest projects that I had planned was a reissue of the best tracks from the Z Factor album. Z Factor was Vince Lawrence's group and they had recorded the classic new wave track, '(I

Like To Do It In) Fast Cars'. (Lawrence went on to found Trax Records with Larry Sherman.) House music pioneer Jesse Saunders joined the group a little while after 'Fast Cars', and together they released what was to arguably turn out to be the first house track ever written, 'Fantasy'.

Back in late 2003 I got in touch with Saunders and he was up for doing the reissue; we were also going to include 'On & On' on the record, both the original and an unreleased version from 1984. The original version of 'On & On' was written and produced by Saunders just after he wrote 'Fantasy'. Eventhough 'Fantasy' was produced first, 'On & On' can claim to be the first house track actually released.

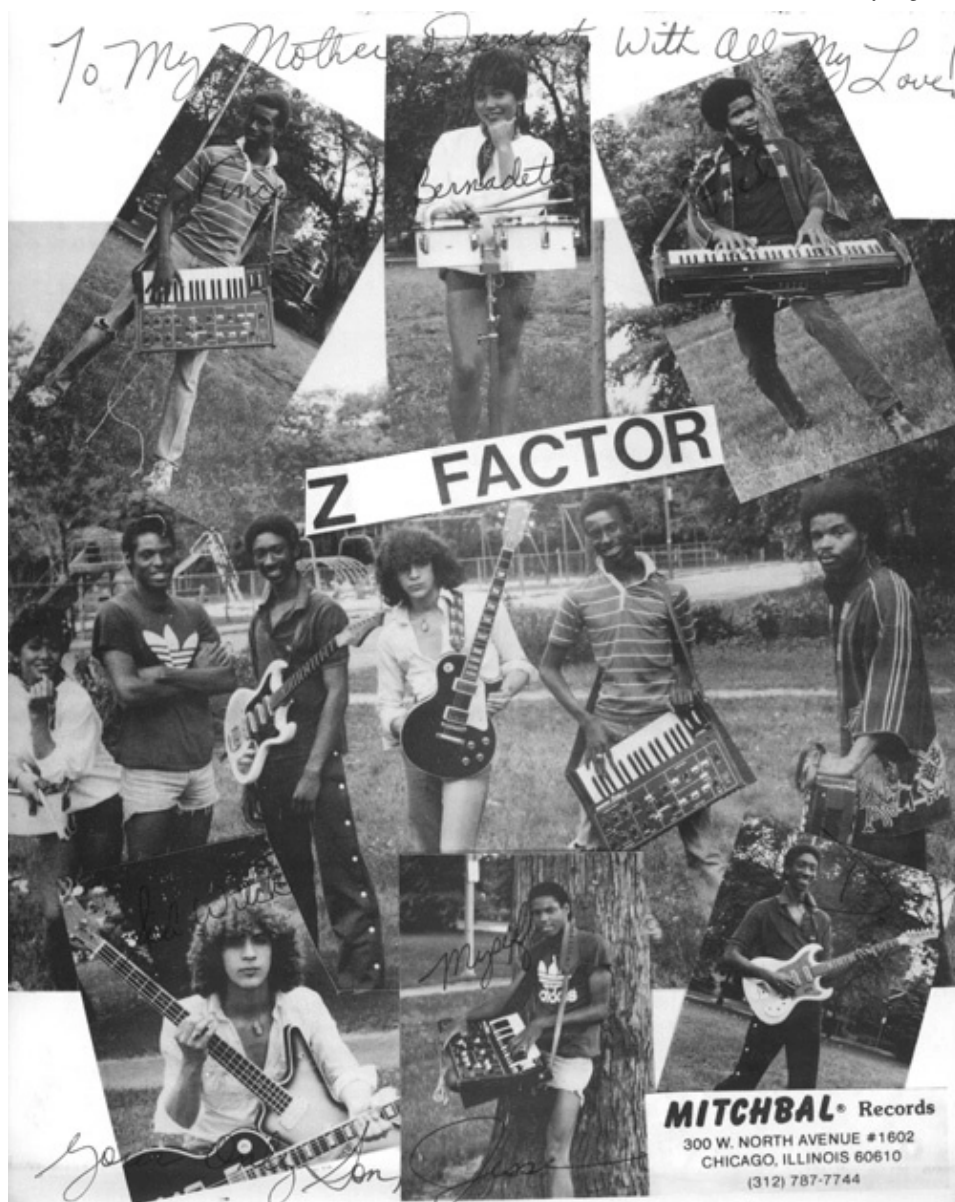
Unfortunately, Saunders didn't possess any good quality masters of any of the Z Factor album tracks so I tracked down a copy of the original vinyl release, in the hope of using that as a master source. I eventually found a copy on eBay and after an intense round of bidding, won the auction. The auction ended up being talked about on a number of music forums due to the high price that I eventually paid... \$615! I think I inadvertently made a bit of history there.

Well, when I eventually got the record it was a bit of a disaster; the quality of the pressing was typical of a lot of the early Chicago records – a thin sound with lots of surface noise – due to the pressing plant's habit of grinding down old vinyl to re-use. We tried cleaning it up but with little success. Saunders also sent me the unreleased version of 'On & On', and whilst this track was pretty amazing, the master also had some kind of interference which would have made it impossible to release without editing it.

I was unwilling to try to track down another copy, so all things considered I decided to drop it and sold my copy of the album (for \$600). I kept a recording of it so it wasn't a complete washout, and shortly afterwards I signed Robert O'Dell to the label, and so Citinite was eventually launched.

Well, today a friend of mine sent me an email; it seems that the Z Factor album is being reissued by another label. The weird part about it is that the label is called Cititrax. When I saw the details of the release, for one or two seconds I thought I'd fallen into some parallel universe, where Citinite was called Cititrax, and I'd released the Z Factor album after all. (And I literally mean that – I actually thought I was in another dimension... I've obviously been listening to too many science programmes on the radio.)

Looking at their label's website it looks like they've done a good job, pressing it on 160gsm vinyl, and they've even gone to the trouble of printing an insert sheet with the below band photo. The Citinite incarnation wouldn't have been the full album, only the best tracks, so it's nice that Cititrax have gone the whole way.



- Cititrax

I'd actually gotten as far as putting together a press release with the help of Saunders, mainly consisting of the following interview which was done in 1994 and originally published in Jonathan Fleming's book, *What Kind Of House Party Is This?*

Fleming asked Saunders how house music started:

Well, there are two ways to translate that. If you wanna speak of house as the movement, the sounds and the music that we know today, we're talking about 1983. If you're talking about what was the catalyst to make it grow to what it finally grew into, then you've got to go back to the disco days. But see, there's a very thin line between what was disco and truly what house is today.

So starting from the beginning, it all transcended from the Warehouse basically, because if my step-brother Wayne Williams hadn't gone there and heard that music, in turn he would never have taken me there, and we wouldn't have been able to grow as a company and as a force to forge this music on people and make them listen and believe in it. All I did in 1983 was actually embellish that whole thing and kinda put it together. What we did was gather all the right ingredients, and luckily I was just fortunate enough to be able to take all of that and make it into the sound we know today as house.

I mean, I had to have a vision in order to make something, but really what I was doing was just taking a little o' this and a little o' that, a little creativity, and making that one sound that became the first record, which was 'On & On'. But I can't take credit for the ingredients, you know, it's just like making a recipe – you can't take credit for basil or salt & pepper because they have always been there, you're just using them to create your recipe, and that's exactly what I did with disco to make my 'On & On', besides the original 'On & On' record that already existed.

We're in 1983, I'm at The Playground DJing, and I mean we open at nine o'clock and we don't close until the last person leaves which sometimes was seven, eight, nine o'clock in the morning, and when you're playing that long, you get into a groove but it's kinda redundant, because there's only so many things that you can play and you have to kinda keep it going. So what I would do is I would take different kinds of rhythm tracks that I made at home with my 808 drum machine, and basically I would put other records on top of 'em. A lot of the time I would take the drum machine to the club and just leave it playing the same beat the whole time and just mix things in and out, so it was always constantly the same beat underneath to keep the crowd going, but I would play a different song on top.

There was one record in particular that I used to do this with a lot, which was the original 'On & On', which was basically this bootleg record where someone had taken the bassline from 'Space Invaders', the "toot-toot, hey, beep-beep" loop of Donna Summer's 'Bad Girls', and the little horn thing in 'Funky Town', and looped them all together to make a constant loop for a whole record. This was the b-side of the record. The a-side was a big megamix of 'Don't Stop 'Til You Get Enough' by Michael Jackson, and that was the side that everyone played.

Now people like Frankie Knuckles, although he had the keenest ear for music and could break records that way, in terms of a real DJ, he couldn't mix really. His mixing was kinda all over the place. But it wasn't about the mix with him, it was about the records that he played. But I was all about doing stuff backwards, cutting' and scratchin' and the whole nine yards; so basically I was mixing and re-editing records right on the turntables without using tapes and things like that. What I was doing basically was taking the music to a whole different level and a whole new experience of listening to three or four things at one time rather than just one song.

Anyway, like I was saying, everyone was playing the a-side of this record and I just happened to flip it over wondering what was on the b-side, and when I listened to it, it was like "doom doom doom dibi doom doom doom doom, doom doom doom dibi doom doom doom doom" and I was like, "aah damn, that's a nice groove". So I was like, "okay, cool, this is cool. I'm gonna try this cut on my crowd", and when I put it on, they didn't clear the floor – everybody kinda got into the groove. Then I played it again a little later and more people got on the floor, then I played it again and people started requesting it, so I was like, "cool". So I had a drum machine going, 'On & On' going on one turntable, and I'd be bringing in another record like 'Planet Rock', when that came out, on the other turntable.

By this time, I'm doing a lot of guest spots, an hour here, an hour there, and so on and so forth, and also doing like a mix show on WGCI with Herb Kent who got me on the show to begin with. So whenever I played, my first record on the turntable would be this bootleg 'On & On' record because that was like my signature tune. When I put that on, everybody knew that I was in the place because nobody else was playing that side but me, no one even knew what it was, and I wouldn't tell anybody, even though there were a few people that had it. When I would go up on stage I would make sure that security cleared it so that no one would know what it was that I was playing. It was amazing to me that they hadn't flipped that record over and found it themselves.

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Anyway, after about nine or ten months, we had an incident at The Playground where someone broke in and stole some of my records, and 'On & On' was one of them that they stole. I was so pissed off 'cause now I didn't have my signature record and I couldn't make the crowd go wild the way I used to when I came on. So I was like, "well I'm gonna make one myself".

You see, my mother is a music major, a music teacher, so I had taken music lessons all through my life. She started me off playing piano. I had flute lessons, trumpet lessons, guitar lessons, drum lessons, the whole nine yards. So basically, DJing to me at that time was just playing records and breaking records, I hadn't really associated the fact that someone actually writes a song, goes in the studio, records it and then presses it on a record – that never really occurred to me at that time. But by the time I got a drum machine I was thinking maybe I can do a record, because I knew I could play.

That was when those Mattel Synsonic drum machines came out. When I heard about those, that was the first thing I went out and got, so that I could make a beat and do some things with it, and that's when I wrote this song called 'Fantasy', which basically was a concoction of the bassline from the 'Space Invaders' - 'On & On' thing and the bridge from one of Ronnie Griffith's songs. The lyrics were all original and I did the string arrangements at home on the piano. I got my mother to go out and get a Korg Poly-61 keyboard and I just kinda used the feel from a lot of the songs and records that I played that were hits to kinda concoct them and embrace them into this one thing, 'Fantasy'.

I just used to sit up in my den and create songs and different things, and that's when 'On & On' was done, on that Korg Poly-61 keyboard, an 808 drum machine and a TB-303 bassline machine. All of this was recorded on a four track cassette recorder, the same as the original 'Fantasy' and all the other stuff that we recorded at Jes Say Records.

Anyway, I was getting ahead of myself; that was the time that I ran into Vince Lawrence. Actually, I had known Vince prior to this from back in the days at Sauer's when Craig Thompson (who had the finance) and I were promoting parties there. Because Sauer's was becoming the hot spot, Craig had somehow formulated a deal with the owner and had booked up every Friday and Saturday there for a year. Now, how I met Vince was when he came up to me and told me that he was part of a group that was renting Sauer's prior to Craig monopolising this deal, and he said to me, "yeah, you all were slick booking up that place – now no one can get in there". That was our first encounter. After Craig and I had our stint at Sauer's and we went on to running The Playground, Vince started coming there.

This was about the time that Vince had his 'Fast Cars' record. He'd hangout at first, and then he'd try and get me to play his record, but it wouldn't fit – it just wasn't the kind of record that I could play... not to say that it was a bad record. I mean it was the first record that he had ever made so naturally a lot of things were loose, but overall for a first attempt it was good and I still worked it and tried to get it into the set and help promote it and the whole nine yards.

Then Vince came to talk to me about this and that and how to make a record – he just had all this knowledge of, like, making records because his father Mitch, had a record company and had already pressed some other blues type records and things, before he'd even put out 'Fast Cars', so Vince knew about the independent record company thing. And like I said, I wanted to kinda make a record myself, so I was kinda pickin' his brain to find out what it took to do that. I thought it was like this big involved process, but he's like, "no, no maan, it's easy – you just do this, there's a pressing plant over here, you do that, you do the labels..." and so on and so forth. So I was trying to find out through Vince how I could do that, but I got kinda side-tracked in the interim because he had heard 'Fantasy' and he was like, "this is the stuff that I've always wanted to do but I don't know how to do it".

Now Vince is one of these nerdy type of guys, but he's pretty smart, he knows how to finagle his way into situations, and to this day he never ceases to amaze me in the things that he gets himself into. I mean, this guy could talk his way into the presidency and everyone will be asking, "how did he get there?" – that's the kind of guy he is. So because he had the group Z Factor and he knew I had written 'Fantasy', he was like, "would you be interested in being a part of Z Factor?" At first I was like, "no, I'm not interested", because they had made 'Fast Cars' and that wasn't something that I wanted to do. But as I thought more about it, I was like, "well, maybe this is the way that I can get his father to put out 'Fantasy'", because his father had the record company. So then I was like, "okay, I'll try it and we'll see".

When I joined Mitch, he was ecstatic about 'Fantasy' too because he knew, first off, I was like the man in town – the big DJ – that I was playing it in the clubs, that I gave Frankie Knuckles a tape of it before the record came out, and he was actually playing the reel-to-reel tape. The Warehouse and everybody knew the record, so it was almost like he had a built-in promotion network and all he had to do was press it and sell it. But what happened was, it took him a long time to actually press the record and get it out.

In the meantime I was playing all over the place and I had been playing my own 'On & On' track now, and because I had gotten so frustrated with Mitch taking so long to get 'Fantasy' out, I was like, "well shoot, I'm gonna put out my own 'On & On' thing and make some money off of that".

Another reason I wanted to put that out so fast was that we were getting requests from the record pool I belonged to called IRS that was a part of Importes Etc, although it was in a different building. Whatever I would play at The Playground that night, people would run to Importes Etc the next day trying to find it, and this is one of the ways the record pool gets its information on what the buzz is on a record from the streets. The original 'On & On' they couldn't find, because that was a bootleg. Then, when I was playing my version, they couldn't find that either because it wasn't even a record yet. But the people knew who was playing it, because I was the only one who had it. So when I went to the record pool the guys there said, "people are requesting something we don't know anything about – why don't you make a tape so we can hear it?" So I made a tape, they played it, and sure enough someone said, "yeah, that's it", and they're like, "what is it?", and I said, "well, that's my track, that's 'On & On'". Then they were like, "maan, if you can get your hands on two or three hundred copies of this, we can sell 'em in the store like that!", and I was like seeing money lighting up in my head.

All of a sudden I thought back to Vince again, because he could get the record pressed. I went downtown to a little studio that the group called Omni had; that's where it was recorded to a quarter-inch tape for mastering, and then we pressed the record at Larry Sherman's place on the Jes Say Records label, which Vince named and did the logo for. I took the last thousand dollars I had to my name and invested it into pressing these records 'cause I knew I was gonna be able to sell them already.

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Within ten days I had five hundred records and we sold them for four dollars when the actual rate back then was only two dollars and fifty cents, so Importes Etc was selling them for six ninety nine. We used a hundred for promotion, I made six hundred dollars profit off of the first batch and Importes Etc wanted two or three hundred more records, so we went back to Larry to press some more. But by this time places like Loop records and all these other places were calling, saying they wanted the record because they heard it was selling like hot cakes. So I was like, "well shoot, we need to press a thousand this time", so we went in and pressed a thousand, and those were gone in like a week, and it just like started snowballing.



'On & On' actually came out in January of 1984, beating Mitch out with 'Fantasy' because his didn't come out until a month or so later, but he capitalised off of that whole thing. 'Fantasy' got on the radio on WGCI and he ended up selling records that way, and to this day I have never seen royalties, publishing or anything for that record. But it really wasn't a big deal either because I was making all my money from my own label, so I really didn't care so much at that point.

So then I started thinking, "if that happens with just like a track, I wonder what would happen if I do a real song", and that's when we wrote 'Funk U Up'. That came about because Duane Buford was having problems with his girlfriend, and he was like, "maan, I ain't never going out with no more pretty girls, they'll just fuck you up", and we're like, "hey, that's the name of a song", but we couldn't use "fuck" so we used "funk" instead. That was the first song that was recorded on twenty-four track.

When we put that out, that became an instant hit, because back in those days Farley was the man on the radio, he was like the leader of the Hot Mix 5 and if he played your record, it was a hit. So the whole Hot Mix 5 embraced 'Funk U Up' and it just became this big mega hit. Then I did 'Real Love' and that did ten times better than 'Funk U Up' did. In between those, I was doing Wayne's record, 'Undercover', which was like a huge underground hit that was probably one of the first records to expand us out of the Chicago area, because we started getting calls from Detroit. So we went up to Detroit to see what the club scene was like and they just embraced us. Then we went to Milwaukee, Indianapolis... then New York started getting our records and we were getting orders from there. The next thing we knew, guys from England were coming in wanting to license our product.

And that's how it all started.

What Saunders doesn't really mention in the above account is just how ground-breaking his 'On & On' track truly was. The reason why other DJs clamoured to buy his record wasn't because he had recreated the 'Space Invaders' groove, but because he had forged a uniquely futuristic sound that could no longer simply be described as "disco" ... it was something else. As genre-inspiring as 'Planet Rock' was for electro, 'On & On' was the first record to marry the synthetic stripped-down sounds of new electronic instruments with the spirit and heat of black dance music. There can't be many other tracks that are this important... and to think it was only made because a thief stole his bootleg record.

Photos courtesy of Jesse Saunders

Posted by Manny Z

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