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The **MOMENT...**

House Music Was Born

How a stolen piece of vinyl and a primitive drum machine inspired a young Chicago DJ to invent a new genre

by Jesse Saunders

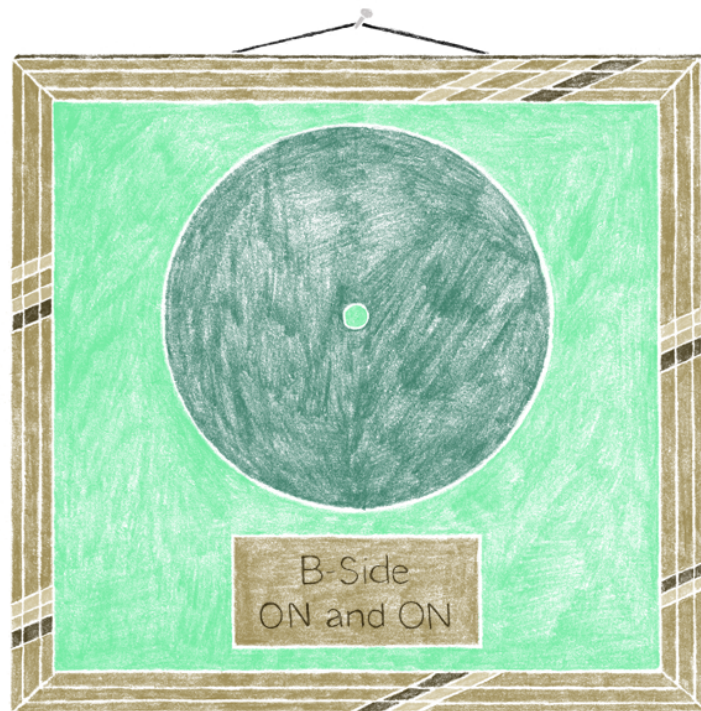
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The whole thing started with a drum machine.

In the summer of 1983, I was living in Chicago and DJing every Friday/Saturday night at one of the biggest clubs in town, The Playground, where I'd spin new wave, electronic hip-hop, disco, synth-pop and everything in between. The Playground was known for bringing together an eclectic mix of Chicagoans, people from all walks of life, and my job was to make everyone dance to equally eclectic music.

Around that time, I'd gotten my hands on a Roland TR-808, one of the first programmable drum machines, and it quickly became my pride and joy. I'd program tracks on my new toy and play them during my sets each weekend, using the club as my own private focus group. I'd watch and study as 1,500 high school and college kids moved their bodies to the upbeat, exotic sounds I'd been making.

I'd even mix and re-edit tracks right there on the turntables, using a synthesizer to add sounds. I'd add a new melody here, or experiment with different drum tracks there. Pushing the envelope with my sets and using the club as a space to explore new sounds—whether they were my own or new discoveries I made at the record store—became an integral part of my approach to DJing. It became my signature sound.






One day as I was perusing the new releases at Importes Etc, the local 12-inch store, an assistant manager name Frank Sells approached me in the aisles. As I sifted through crates of vinyl, he casually told me that people had been coming by to ask about a record I'd been playing during my sets. "Any idea what it is?" he asked.

I couldn't figure out which track he was referring to, so he asked if I'd make a cassette recording of my set that weekend. The following week, we figured out that the track in question was one I'd made using my TR-808, which would later be titled "On & On," itself a remake of a vinyl record that had been stolen from me a couple months prior.

Sells had an idea: "We could sell a shitload of these if you could get them pressed on vinyl." I was shocked. While I always knew the record was great, the confluence of events that had led me to create my version of "On & On" has been so unlikely.

The original version, also titled "On & On," had been introduced to me by my brother Wayne Williams, who was also a DJ and the inspiration for getting into the game. Wayne had bought a "bootleg" record (I don't recall the title), a mix of various disco songs that pilfered the best aspects from different tunes and brought them together to create the

ultimate disco record. The only crediting info on the record sleeve was “Remix by Mach.” Wayne used to play the A-side mix sometimes—a 15-minute-long pre-mixed version—to give us a bathroom break during our sets.

One day while sitting in my living room, I flipped the record over to check out the B-side and found a bootleg mashup. This song used the bassline from Player One’s “Space Invaders,”  the “toot toot, heeeey, beep beep” refrain from Donna Summer’s “Bad Girls,”  and the horns from Lipps Inc’s “Funkytown.”  It was called “On & On” and I knew right away that it was special. The first time I played it in a set, it created such a frenzy on the dancefloor that I immediately made it my signature record, using it as an intro every time I DJed. Looking back, it was probably the first mashup ever created.

Unfortunately—or fortunately, now that I have the privilege of hindsight—it was among a number of vinyl records stolen from the booth at The Playground. While I was devastated at the time, that record thief gave me all the inspiration I needed to create my own version.

I quickly found myself in my bedroom at 7234 South King Drive, piecing the elements of my prized record back together on a Tascam 4-track cassette recorder. I also began to see this as opportunity to take the original “On & On” and expand upon the things that made it great, fleshing it out into a more fully-formatted song. I banged out new drum programming on my TR-808; my songwriter buddy, Vince Lawrence, wrote the lyrics and the melody.

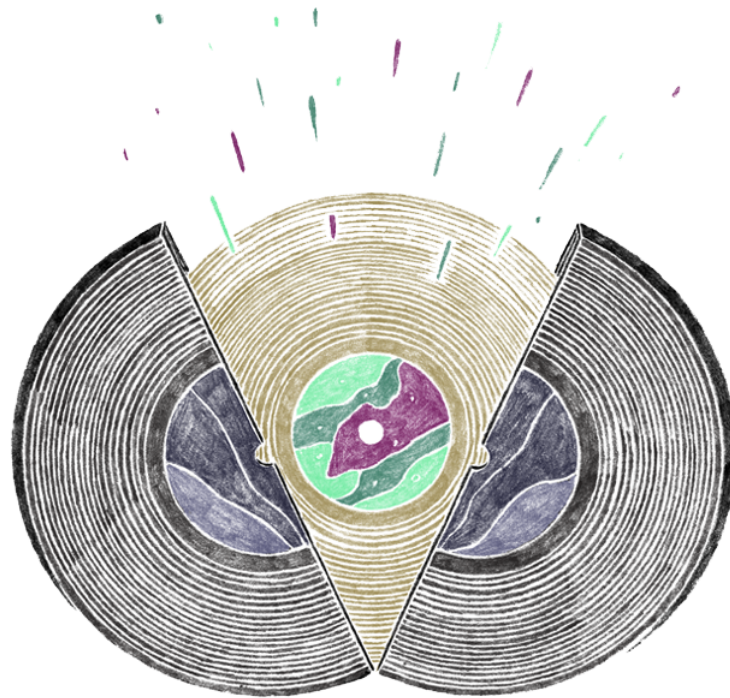
Jesse Saunders On and On



We wanted to properly evoke the feelings of unadulterated euphoria, the release associated with dancing and jacking your body in the club. House music, as we would come to know it, was a lot like my DJ sets had always been: defined by the drive to make people dance.

I even began to think about the new “On and On” as a pinnacle dance record, taking the four-on-the-floor beat of disco, the electronic thump of Kraftwerk, the pop-synth impulses of Giorgio Moroder and Donna Summer’s “I Need Love,” and arranging them into one expertly calibrated rush for the dancefloor.

I had an instinct that we might be onto something. I started playing this new version in all of my sets, and it became a massive hit.



I sought out Vince to help hook me up with a pressing plant. A week later, I was holding the first 500 copies of my version of “On & On” which I promptly delivered to Importes Etc. Considering the high demand for the record before anyone had even known exactly what it was, the original sold out in a matter of days and another 1000 copies were quickly manufactured. We distributed them to local stores and radio stations and the record began to gain traction.

And the rest, as they say, is history. A local radio station in Chicago played it, and the song took on a life of its own, spreading to other U.S. cities and to nightclubs across the world.

The influence of “On and On” has been far-reaching, both in terms of distance and time. It inspired a whole new sound, ultimately branded as Chicago House, and this new genre immediately informed recordings like “Move Your Body.” What we know as EDM today also owes much to “On and On”—both are essentially engineered for the dance floor.

Indeed, the story of “On and On” is the story of house music as we know it. It’s a story that continues to go on. And On. And On.

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Illustrations by Thoka Maer

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