

# Interview: Jesse Saunders

From the DJ History archives: The Chicago house original talks about his early days, Ron Hardy and the birth of house



Jesse Saunders in his Chicago studio in January 1987 © Raymond Boyd / Michael Ochs Archives

While the exact origins of house music have long been a point of great debate, even within Chicago itself, all agree that Jesse Saunders played a big role in the sound's development.

In the early 1980s, Saunders was resident DJ at the Playground, one of Chicago's biggest clubs. He'd earned his stripes as part of Wayne Williams' Chosen Few Disco Corp. DJ collective in the late 1970s, before striking out on his own. Alongside his friend Ron Hardy and future "Godfather of House" Frankie Knuckles, Saunders was instrumental in producing records that kick-started the development of house.

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Records, Saunders went his own way, famously creating "On & On" in 1984. It quickly sold in huge quantities in Chicago, sparking the house music boom that followed.

In this previously unpublished interview from 2013, DJ History's Bill Brewster quizzes Saunders about his origins as a disco DJ, the birth of house and how he made his earliest records.

### **When did you first start going to clubs?**

Honestly, I don't think I ever really started going out. I was always DJing at something. I started DJing at 15. The reason why I was out was because I was playing.

Menu



### **Was it your stepbrother, Wayne Williams, who got you into DJing?**

Yeah, he was the one. Prior to that I was just making my own little tapes to play on my boom box. I started doing little pause button remixes of songs. He heard them and decided he'd approach me. That's why he recruited me.

In those days there weren't many straight people going to clubs at all. Wayne started the Chosen Few Disco Corp. years before I got involved. All I know about it is that Batman, Jamie Shelton [and others] were either throwing parties, DJing at parties or both. I'm not quite sure, prior to that. When I got involved, which was in about '77 or '78, we started DJing at parties and they weren't involved. It was just Wayne and I.



Heatwave - The Grooveline

We were playing more popular stuff like funk, James Brown, Parliament, Heatwave's "Boogie Nights" and "The Grooveline." In the beginning we weren't playing disco at all. Maybe Donna Summer – it was generally more commercial stuff. The disco part of it didn't come until probably '78. Officially it was just a couple of parties here and there for people like The Doctors, which was this dance group organisation over at Mendel Catholic High School. I think the first party I DJed at was their party at a place called, I think, the Burning Spear. We did very well and were getting calls from people in high schools for sock hops, but it was still more commercially minded. We didn't start playing the disco until we got more popular.

### **Did you know about Frankie Knuckles and the Warehouse then?**

I knew nothing about that. It was a completely different world. I didn't know anything about the gay scene at all. I was only 16 years old. It was not on my radar at all. Wayne used to go hear Ron Hardy at Den One. It's one thing I like to try and clear up with every interview I do. Everyone thinks this thing started with Frankie but it didn't. It started with Ron. He was the person who started playing that style of music long before Frankie got to Chicago. Ron moved to Los Angeles at one point. He was there for a while. That's where I met him in 1982.

### **What was Ron Hardy doing in Los Angeles?**

I'm not exactly sure. I went to school there at the University of Southern California and the music out there was horrible. We were playing really cool underground, deep stuff and everything out there was really discouraging. When I came back – which was March or April of '82 – sometime within that next six months to a year is when Ronnie came back. Then he was at the Music Box. The Warehouse had shut down, Frankie had opened the Power Plant and Robert Williams opened the Music Box. I was resident at the Playground. I started at the Playground in about May or June of '82.

### **Were you a regular at the Warehouse before it closed?**

then we'd go to the warehouse. That's how that whole thing grew at the Warehouse. So by the time '82 rolled around it was like a ritual. You'd go to the Power Plant or the Music Box.

I've never been a really big club person. Generally if I'm not playing I don't go and hang out and see other people. A lot of that is due to the fact that it pisses me off that they go to places I don't think they should be going. There are very few DJs who know how to move a crowd through the night. Ronnie I could listen to all day. He'd do things and take you to places you couldn't even imagine. You need to be an artist. Don't just play records.

### **What was so good about Ron Hardy's DJing at that point in time?**

Ronnie was very experimental. He'd innovate and do things. He touched my spirit. He felt the same way about my DJing. That's really the spirit of what Chicago DJs are about – our skill level is in a different place. Which is why you can tell a Chicago DJ from pretty much anybody else. Like remixing live, we'd battle that way and push each other. That was the difference between Ronnie and Frankie.

Frankie played music, Ronnie created the music while he was playing. I love Frankie to death. We're all part of the movement. This is what we used to say: Frankie was a great music selector, but he wasn't a good mixer. He'd train wreck all day long. On the other hand Ronnie was smooth and innovative and creative. That's why you've got diehard Ronnie fans and diehard Frankie fans and they generally don't mix.

### **How did you first start working with Vince Lawrence?**

Vince came to me. He used to come to the Playground. His father owned Mitchbal Records. As his graduation present, his father allowed him to go into the studio and make a record. And this record is known as, "(I Like To Do It In) Fast Cars."

Z Factor - (I Like To Do It In) Fast Cars (Underground Remix)

What he quote unquote “said” was that he was trying to make music like I played at the Playground. Back in those days, not having a drum machine, the drummer was playing too fast and it didn’t quite come together the way he thought. Vince was always more of a new wave type of guy than a soulful one. Anyway, he brought this record to me at the Playground and I did play some new wave records in my set.

We played electronic stuff like Italo disco, from Kraftwerk to Alexander Robotnick. I was playing the Go-Go’s, B-52’s, Men Without Hats. At that time I didn’t know anybody else who had made a record, so to me it was an honor and I tried to work out a way of making this fit so I’d play it every now and then. Somehow Vince got a job working the lights at the club and when I got this drum machine and started incorporating these tracks, which later became “On & On”, into my sets, I wanted to make a record. But I also wanted to write a song first.



Z-Factor feat. Jesse Saunders - Fantasy (1983)

I wrote this song, which was “Fantasy,” and I came to him and said, “How do you make a record?” First he wanted me to be a part of Z-Factor, which I did that summer of ’83. I did a few shows with them, but I never felt like the band was tight enough so I shied away. But the song I wrote, his father loved it. I wanted to release it on my own, but they wanted to do it as Z-Factor featuring Jesse Saunders. To this day, one of my bones of contention is that Mitchbal [Nemiah Mitchell Jr.] put his name all over it as producer and he didn’t produce it. I produced it. I haven’t been paid publishing royalties or sales royalties at all.



Jesse Saunders - Funk You Up (Club Mix)

### **What was your working relationship with Vince Lawrence like?**

Vince is cool! Vince is easy to work with. I’d say, “Vince, let’s do this.” And I’d write some music and then he’d write the lyrics. That’s initially how it started. With “On & On,” I wanted to put something on it, so I said, “Let’s write some words.” Then we did “Funk You Up.” That was born out of Duane Buford splitting up with his girlfriend. He said, “Man, I’m never going out with another pretty ¬[girl] – they fuck

rap for it and Vince wrote the chorus. So it became this writing/production thing where I'd write the music and he'd do the lyrics.



Remix By Mach - On And On

### **Let's talk about "On & On." You used to play the Mach version, right?**

Yes. I wish I could trace the origins of that record. Nobody knows where that came from. That used to be my signature record. What everyone bought it for was a megamix on the A-side. One day when I was sitting at home I thought I'd check out the B-side, "On And On." Once I'd played it, I thought that the Player [1] "Space Invaders" bassline was one of the best things I'd ever heard. I'd never heard the original at that time. It was the first record I would drop when I played. Most people didn't even know what it was, because I didn't tell anybody. So I decided to make my own version of it, with a twist. I did it on a TR-808, TB-303 and a Korg Poly 61.

### **Can you remember where you recorded it?**

Well, we mastered it at Omni's studio.



## How did “On & On” end up coming out?

What happened was, “Fantasy” I recorded originally, right. And that came out as a single... well, it was supposed to. It was supposed to be a single, not an album project. Then we recruited Screamin’ Rachael to do the vocal. This was like July or August and it was supposed to come out in the interim. Well I say interim, but I didn’t create the “On & On” track until September or October of ’83. Again, I used to use these different beats to mix with live, like the ones on the B-side of “On & On” or Z-Factor’s “I Am The D.J.” I created that to mix in and out of “Hip Hop, Be Bop (Don’t Stop).” So I made these beats to segue with other popular tracks of the time.

I was in a record pool at Importes, Etc., so I’d go down there to pick up records and to see what was new. They were always playing things in the store and people were always asking, “Oh, what’s this song called,” and so on. People were coming in and asking for stuff I’d played at the Playground.

Remember the Playground had 1,500 people week in, week out. There was never a club that big in Chicago. It was the biggest club in Chicago and it brought all of the sides together. It was centrally located and it was not a 21 and over club, so you could be 16 and party. It was revolutionary for its time.

They kept asking me about tracks that I’d been playing so I made a tape one night of my set and let them play it in the store. They asked me about the tracks and I said, “Oh, those are the tracks I created.” So Frank Sells, who was the main buyer there, said, “Man, if you can get your hands on some records we could sell hundreds if not thousands of it.” So that’s how we ended up meeting Larry Sherman. He was the only pressing plant in town.

Jesse Saunders - On and On

### **Was Larry in touch with what was going on in the clubs in Chicago?**

No. He had no idea whatsoever. Prior to going in there and pressing “On & On,” the only records he was pressing were more or less polka records for little bands here and there. He hadn’t a clue what was going on. I ordered 500 copies from him. Once we sold those and came back two days later and ordered a thousand more, that’s when interest was piqued. He was like, “Where [are] you selling this stuff? I’d like to get in on the action. I’ll press the records and be your partner.”

This is how he got his personal license to press and manufacture whatever he wanted, when he wanted, including Michael Jackson’s “Thriller,” which he probably pressed and sold 50,000 copies of. That’s how the legend of Larry Sherman came about. He pressed records for Rocky at DJ International and for every record he pressed for Rocky, he’d press two for himself and undercut Rocky. He did it with everybody.

### **What was he like as a person?**

As a person, Larry was kind of a jovial, playful, crack-jokes kind of a guy back then. Now I’m getting older, I can see that he was very calculating in what he was doing. “These kids don’t know anything, so I’ll give them a ridiculous contract.” That’s how Trax was established and that’s why there’s controversy over ownership of the catalogue. Trax was originally my label. We started it together to put out tracks and not songs.

### **Didn’t Vince Lawrence design the Trax logo?**

Vince designed everything. He did the Jes Say Records labels, he did Dance Mania, he did Trax – he did all of them. Larry had Precision Records beforehand. That’s what we did Fresh “Dum-Dum” on and it was the first thing I’d done outside of my own Jes Say Records.



Fresh - Dum-Dum

**What's the story with "Love Can't Turn Around"? Weren't you involved in making that in some way?**

Steve Hurley and Farley were roommates. They did a cover of Isaac Hayes "I Can't Turn Around." We'd play it on cassette because it wasn't pressed up yet, so it ended up that every known DJ had a copy on cassette. So the story goes, Farley being the entrepreneur thought, "If Steve's not going to put it out, I'll put it out myself." So he called me up and at the time Farley and I weren't on great terms. I can't remember why now.



## Isaac Hayes - I Can't Turn Around

I'd been running my label for two years. We'd been doing a lot of releases. We'd been selling because of our support from Hot Mix 5 and Farley, but it had dwindled a little because Farley and I had fallen out. He knew I was the only person who could arrange and produce the song how it needed to be done. For me it was more or less a favor to him, to get back in his good graces. In the studio I produced the track, set up the backgrounds and everything. We were looking for a vocalists and it was around two or three in the morning. We couldn't find anybody.

The last person we called was Darryl Pandy. The reason we avoided him was that he was a notorious gay guy – none of us wanted to bother with him, because he was always hitting on everyone. He came down and the first thing that Farley said to him was, "We want you to sound like a man on this song," because he used to do all this falsetto stuff. It took us hours to get all that stuff. Anyway, that's how it came about.

Farley said, "This was going to be a Farley song, but if we put both our names on this, it could blow the thing right out of the water." I was real hesitant about that initially. I didn't have a single out at that point. We put it out and the record went to number one all over the midwest, outselling Prince and Madonna. We allowed Rocky to distribute the track through his Quantum Distributors. I remember him coming down after 30 days and writing us a check for \$20,000 apiece. Back in those days, "On & On," "Real Love" and "Funk You Up," all of them sold thousands of copies. Even just in Chicago we could do 50,000, if not more.

Farley Jackmaster Funk And Jessie Saunders - Love Can't Turn Around (Club Mix)

**Most people don't know about your involvement with that record. Was your name erased from the credits at some stage?**

My name was always on the credits. When Pete Tong licensed it for London Records was when my name came off. And that, to this day, has been a bone of contention of mine. It wasn't like I was looking to get credit as an artist for this record, but as a producer. Yeah, I want to get my publisher royalties. Yeah, I want to get my sales royalties. That's what I fought for, for years and finally got. At the time I didn't really care – I'd just signed a deal with Geffen and I was producing lots of stuff. Farley did call me and say, "We've just licensed this to London Records – you should call them." And I called over there, kept calling and they never called back. Next thing I know, I'm on tour there [in the UK], it's on *Top of the Pops* and Darryl Pandy's doing PAs.

**How did the deal with Geffen for the Jesse's Gang project come about?**

It might have been right around the time I was doing "Love Can't Turn Around." Anyway, they had a conference in Chicago called Choice Picks and it was an Academic & Research Technology (A&RT) symposium. Because I was already a pseudo celebrity in Chicago, they asked me to host an event. I got the chance to mix and mingle with the A&R people. At one of the showcases I was backstage and met a woman who was A&R at Geffen. I playfully said, "If somebody was number one in the record pool, would you sign them? If they were number one on the sales charts, would you sign them? If they were play listed on radio, would you sign them?" And she was like, "Hell yeah!"

A month later I signed. Once I knew she was interested, I set Vince on her. Vince was the talker and he sold me to her. He also ended up getting a production deal with Geffen for his Bang Orchestra project. As usual Vince talked too much, talked himself out of a deal and only did one single for them. He and his vocalist had written some great songs. Vince had been hanging out with Al Jourgensen from Ministry and they were one of the few bands to use a Fairlight CMI. He had worked on this song with him, but it was it was very different – half Ministry, half house.

“Holiday.”

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Bang Orchestra! - Samples (House Mix)

### **Why was Italo disco so big in Chicago?**

Me and Farley used to play it so much. The Playground was huge. You got 1,500 kids a night, with lines going around the block. We had such a massive audience that there was a viral effect. This was stuff you couldn't hear on the radio. That's what Chicago became. It went from being a super commercial market to an underground one by the time the '80s rolled around.

### **Where did you get those Italo disco records?**

Importes, Etc. was the only place in town that was importing these records. Later on there were other ones but initially they were the only ones selling it.

**A lot of Italo disco records were proper songs. Do you think that had a bearing on the early records you made?**

the very beginning. “Real Love” was a track that I decided to make into a song. One thing that people get wrong about the origins of Chicago [house] is that they think I was making tracks, but I was mainly writing songs. If you look at it, every single one of those tracks that became popular was a song. I’m all about a song. It’s why I went to LA. I wanted to be with the best songwriters. I actually even worked with Cathy Dennis on her first album. She was 16. Even then I could see she was incredible.

*This interview was conducted in March 2013. © DJ History*

By Bill Brewster on March 10, 2017

On a different note



## Ron Hardy at The Music Box

How “The Party” and its enigmatic resident DJ pioneered house music culture in Chicago, and beyond



Our documentary on Disco Demolition



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