



The beautiful black gay history of Chicago house's birth



House music at The Warehouse Courtesy of I Was There When House Took Over The World

MUSIC - FEATURE

As a new documentary about the movement launches on Channel 4, legendary DJ Jesse Saunders talk us through its beginnings in the city's LGBTQ+ black and Latino communities

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Chicago house

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On the night of July 12, 1979, 'the death of disco' was declared from Comiskey Park, Chicago. Orchestrated by local radio host Steve Dahl, the night that came to be known 'Disco Demolition Day' saw the destruction of over 20,000 disco records during a baseball game between the Chicago White Sox and the Detroit Tigers. With 'DISCO SUCKS' banners lining the stadium, the destruction sparked a near-riot on the field that ensured primetime news coverage. Some called it a promotional gimmick that got out of hand, but with the media flurry that followed, it was clear that wider social prejudices (the word 'sucks' was chosen as an intentional homophobic slur, though it's since become a badge of pride) being given a platform. In the eyes of the 50,000-strong audience of rock purists and Eagles enthusiasts, disco – born in hidden NY bathhouses and David Mancuso's haven The Loft – had been in the public conscious for too long.

In that, the LGBTQ+, black, and Latino communities were forced to find a new hedonism. And anyway, by that time disco was more closely associated with middle-America wedding receptions than the debauched manifestation of tongue-in-cheek eroticism that it once was. In New York, the demise of disco made way for the birth of hip hop, but in Chicago, a similar movement was being formed. This came to be known as house music. Founded as a members-only gay club at 206 South Jefferson Street, The Warehouse came to be the widely-regarded birthplace of house. In the late, great Frankie Knuckles, who first took the helm as resident DJ at The Warehouse, Chicago had found a new heartbeat and built a house nation.

Today, house music's formative years largely exist through dance music folklore and rare collections of audio clips on YouTube, but looking to piece together those memories created behind closed doors is *I Was There When House Took Over The World*. Charting the history of house music from year zero, the documentary explores how house rose from Chicago's South Side, travelled across the

Here, *I Was There* director Jake Sumner and house music pioneer Jesse Saunders recount how segregation and Disco Sucks in late 1970s Chicago jacked your body.

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DISCO SUCKS

Jesse Saunders: Steve Dahl reigned as the King of Rock in the late 70s, so he hated disco. It was the opposite of everything that he stood for. Back then, if you were gay, gay-friendly, or different to the status quo then you were considered not good enough for the rock movement. So Dahl decided the best way to get people to conform to his 'Godliness' was to destroy the culture they lived and breathed. It was a bold statement to basically say 'We don't like blacks, the gay community, or anybody who sympathises with them and their music.' Not only disco records were brought in, after all, but funk and soul records too. But Chicago was and is to this day a very segregated city, and that gives you a perspective of the landscape and the motivation for those followers of Steve Dahl to do what they did.

Jake Sumner: Chicago's very traditional in a lot of ways, so something as flamboyant as disco was probably frightening to a lot of people. And to many fair-minded people by 1979 disco probably did suck. It had become gimmicky, but burning records has some pretty heavy connotations and was



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THE SOUND

Jake Sumner: After Disco Demolition, suddenly commercial disco became very uncool. Depending on who you talk to in Chicago, house music has different meanings. For lots of people it's about guys like Frankie Knuckles and Ron Hardy, playing a whole range of stuff in the early 80s, everything from Yaz and Kraftwerk to Loleatta Holloway. Frankie and Ron were also making a lot of disco edits, experimenting with different sounds and manipulating records. That happened when drum machines and synthesizers were becoming easily accessible, relatively inexpensive, and allowed people with no formal training to start making music. That combination was probably really exciting for young people in a midwestern city like Chicago. It was their way of expressing themselves at that moment in time.

Jesse Saunders: Around the time of Disco Demolition I was combining all of these great genres together that I loved – new wave, reggae, funk, disco, and classic rock into a sound that could bring everyone together. I was making pause button remixes on a cassette deck for about five years at this point, extending the breaks and highlighting various sections of the record that weren't being utilised to enhance the frenzy on my dance floor. Then with Disco Demolition the best thing happened

Demolition) was to destroy the ideal of this love and coming together for the lovers of disco, it was an epic fail. House music has grown to be a million times bigger than disco, and the LGBT and black communities in Chicago have thrived because of this music. It has become a way of life for more than 33 years, and Chicagoans embrace their homegrown creations with a passion like no other. Just like New Yorkers hold their hip hop dear, so do to Chicagoans with their house music. This could have only happened in Chicago.

Jesse Saunders On and On



THE WAREHOUSE

Jake Sumner: For the producers we spoke to (for the documentary), there's definitely a sense of pride amongst them that they created a legacy we still hear in dance music today. I think what the Chicago producers did was help open up the floodgates, and I don't know if anything has been as liberating as that in music since.

Jesse Saunders: Chicago in the late 70s was full of wonder. The landscape was that of the Black Panthers, Angela Davis, the Civil Rights Movement, and there was a hope that things would get better. But at the same time, there were streets you couldn't walk down if you were black; people with Confederate flags and shotguns just waiting to see a black face infiltrate their neighborhood. So

coming together. Our total goal was to move asses on the dancefloor, and whatever high energy, funky, rhythmic sounds we came up with is what we put in our music. Chicago has always had the reputation of being a musical trendsetter – we just have a different type of ear than the rest of the world. As I mentioned before, we're more or less a segregated city, and being isolated makes you look within to see what actually moves you. That is house music.



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Watch *I Was There When House Took Over The World* online at [All 4](#)

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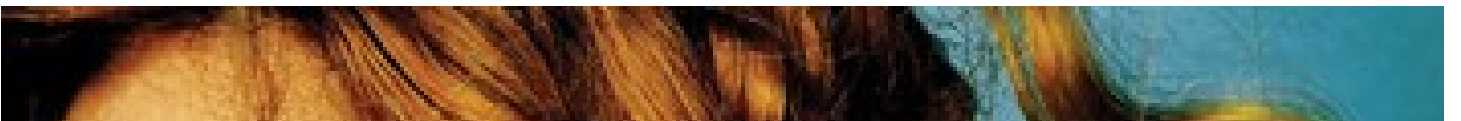
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