



THIRD STONE

Annotated Bibliography

Adonis. "No Way Back." Trax Records, 1986.

A Critical History of Adonis' "No Way Back"

One of the defining characteristics of "House" music is how many of its earliest and most respected practitioners were not musicians at all. House DJs curated music from an eclectic range of genres and geographies, but Disco provided the fundamental musical blueprint and aesthetic, and the rising popularity of disco in the mid-1970's ensured a steady stream of innovative, professionally produced music to energize dancers at clubs and parties. By the onset of the 80's, an increasing number of popular artists made use of emerging synthesizer technology (Moroder, Kraftwerk, Michael Jackson) on recordings that rapidly changed the sound and thematic focus of dance music.

The mainstream commercial success of Disco also precipitated an acute backlash eerily reminiscent of contemporary American discourse. Although Disco's appeal was widespread and based, at least in part, on its liberal use of diverse musical styles, mainstream American white audiences grew increasingly reluctant to accept the pluralistic vision on display in the records and being practiced in the clubs and dance floors. As writer Naima Cochrane notes,

It [Disco] was supplanting rock n' roll as the sound of America, and straight white men started developing that anxiety that straight white men get whenever something isn't centered around straight white men (see: everything happening in US politics right this moment). (Cochrane)¹

The anxiety Cochrane identifies came to a head at events like Disco Demolition at Chicago's Comiskey Park in 1979 and defined the surging conservative political movement that Ronald Reagan rode to the American presidency in 1980. This backlash would ultimately spawn the expansion of Nixon's Drug War and the continued physical flight of many Americans away from the urban core of American cities, but it also prompted a cadre of creative minds to begin envisioning the music that would fill this void.

Chicago house DJs populated much of their sets with disco mixed with an eclectic range of New Wave, Italian Disco, and early electronic music, but the need rapidly arose for new, culturally relevant sounds as Disco's commercialization dulled its creative edge. Writing for *The Guardian*, Alexis Petridis notes,

Retreating underground to its original audience, disco became arguably more adventurous and creative than ever.

Ironically, the most revolutionary development took place in Chicago, the city where disco had supposedly been killed: inspired in equal part by the raw disco edits of DJ Frankie Knuckles and European electronic music by Fad Gadget and Kraftwerk, former Comiskey Park usher Vince Lawrence and Jesse Saunders co-wrote the first house single, *On and On*, in 1984.²

Unable to duplicate the large ensembles that came into fashion at Disco's zenith, Chicago producers such as Marshall Jefferson, Vince Lawrence, and Jesse Saunders began experimenting with home recording equipment. Although decidedly amateur in their approach, their ability to creatively incorporate drum machines into their DJ sets and then into new compositions heightened their profiles as DJs and motivated their transition to production work.

In 1986, Trax Records, a newly established, independent dance record imprint in Chicago released a 12' entitled "No Way Back." The track's writer and producer, Adonis (born Michael Smith) had been inspired by an admixture of funk, punk, soul and early electronic music and was particularly intrigued by Saunders' record.

Gary came over his house, and they talked about the music industry in Chicago, and Adonis played some music there (he was a musician with tons of records in his house, from Blues to Jazz and R&B – but not a DJ or a producer yet), and Gary brought on a record with him which was Jesse Saunders' "On And On" that changed his life.

This early House record gave a very intense inspiration to several of these youngsters willing to take the lead on the dance music Universe. After that meeting, it gave Adonis more of a desire to create House style tracks that would be original and not copies of other records' basslines.³

Adonis, in contrast to many of his peers, was a classically trained musician but his response to Saunders' work was a sparse arrangement of Roland TR-808 drums arrayed into a basic 4X4 beat juxtaposed with a simple, repeating 5 note baseline.⁴ Although spartan in its composition, "No Way Back"'s arrangement proved infectious and would leave a huge imprint on the dance

floors of the then burgeoning Chicago House landscape and serve as a sonic template for the dozens of musical subcultures that would later grow out of the early developments in house music, most notably in Detroit, New York and London. (Millband, 17)⁵

"No Way Back" is an early example of the profound effect the lowered cost of production would have on the acoustic texture and thematic character of modern music. The marketing failure of Roland's drum machine technology in the wake of its initial release in 1980 cratered their retail value and positioned these instruments and their distinctive sounds as mainstay tools of dance music production in the early/mid '80's. The enduring legacy of Adonis' work and that of other early house pioneers is the boldness to theorize these tools as a means of self determination. The vision and hard work done to achieve it means that the wake of "No Way Back" is still broadening before us.

Notes

¹Petridis, Alexis. "Disco Demolition: "the night they tried to crush black music." *The Guardian*. 19 July 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2019/jul/19/disco-demolition-the-night-they-tried-to-crush-black-music>

²Cochrane, Naima. "Music Sermon: Disco's Revenge - How Disco Demolition Night Sparked Evolution in Black Music." *Vibe* <https://www.vibe.com/features/editorial/music-sermon-discos-revenge-657665>

³From <https://fromthecans.wordpress.com/2011/09/20/adonis-no-way-back-1986/>

⁴<https://daily.redbullmusicacademy.com/2017/03/jesse-saunders-interview>

Brewster, Bill. "Interview: Jesse Saunders From the DJ History Archives: The Chicago house original talks about his early days, Ron Hardy, and the birth of house." Although it had been used to great effect on some popular early 80's records, most notably Marvin Gaye's "Sexual Healing," the tonal qualities of the Roland 303 and 808 sounds found little favor among mainstream musicians and Roland discontinued manufacture in 1982., the quirky analog circuits produced a distinctive sound steeply driving down the retail value from \$1200 at its launch in 1980, to \$100 by the mid '80's.

⁵Millband, Thomas. *Electronic Phuture*. p.17 <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/84743839.pdf>

Marvin J. Gladney, 2021