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"FOR A GIRL, YOU CAN REALLY THROW DOWN": WOMEN DJS IN CHICAGO HOUSE MUSIC

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"FOR A GIRL, YOU CAN REALLY THROW DOWN": WOMEN DJS IN CHICAGO HOUSE MUSIC

By

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ABSTRACT

"FOR A GIRL, YOU CAN REALLY THROW DOWN": WOMEN DJS IN CHICAGO HOUSE MUSIC

By

Margaret Lynn Rowley

Although the disc jockey or "DJ" has been gaining prestige in the world of popular music, women DJs have remained a minority, especially in Chicago's house music. Despite many difficulties for women in this field, like male-dominated management, emphasis on appearance, and being subjects of the male "gaze," women DJs in house music are creating spaces for themselves. Many women DJs are using varieties of social resistance to gain entry into the heavily male club industry in Chicago. DJs' personal social interactions with the pubic ensure that they will have a sizable and enthusiastic crowd at their shows, and since many club owners rely on DJs' drawing power, this tactic helps to stabilize some women's careers. In the same way, forming collectives provides group support and other amenities, like shared information, shows, and equipment.

This thesis will explore the experiences of women DJs in Chicago through ethnographic fieldwork in area clubs and interviews with DJs themselves. Observation of DJs within a club environment and exploration of the social tactics that DJs use against the industry will help to illuminate issues of gender in the workplace. Finally, interviews with both DJs and advocates for women DJs will provide firsthand knowledge of women's experiences working in Chicago.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1

Introduction: The Rise of the DJ

During the last half of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first century, dance music and the DJs who create it have steadily crept into everyday culture. From disco in the 1970s to house and techno in the 1980s to the European rave scene in the 1990s, dance music originating in the United States has changed the culture of both music and dance.

Most, if not all, of the dance music from the U.S. began as an underground movement, and many electronically produced dance genres remain obscure in the popular realm. Kai Fikentscher, mourning the so called "death" of disco in the United States, noted that:

> To many who lived through the period, disco is to popular music what Vietnam is to American politics at the end of the twentieth century – a bad memory. Significantly, house music, the electronic child of disco, has not crossed over in the United States. . . . In America, house has remained largely underground, shunned by the media, and continues to be associated with an urban, primarily non-Caucasian and/or gay core following.[1]

While house music as an isolated genre may still hold this underground status, its influence does not. House had a direct impact on many other genres of electronically produced dance music. One of the most basic results of house was the use of the DJ, the fundamental creator of dance music. The DJ's turntables allow solo creation of a variety

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1 Kai Fikentscher, *"You Better Work!" Underground Dance Music in New York City* (Hanover, New Hampshire: Wesleyan University Press, 2000), 78.

of types of music, from a rhythmic background for vocals to fully orchestrated dance music that stands on its own. The figure of the DJ ties electronically produced genres together: disco to house, house to techno, techno to rap and R&B and/or hip-hop. The DJ is equally important in a club space as on a rapper's album.

Despite similar beginnings, and the presence of a DJ, Fikentscher sees house and hip-hop as opposed in the popular realm, noting that "while underground dance music is largely synonymous with house music, the increased popularity of techno and rave music in Europe and selected areas of the United States has contributed to the further marginalization of house, which, in contrast to disco and hip-hop, has yet to cross over to the mainstream popular culture."[2] He believes furthermore that the relative marginalization of house has occurred partially because of resources being poured into hip-hop, both by the recording industry and audiences.[3] However, I believe that as hip-hop has made its way further into mainstream musical culture, it has increasingly paved the way for DJs, regardless of genre.

The rise of the DJ has changed the entire front of popular music. In 2008, electronically produced songs (songs using electronically generated and sampled sounds rather than acoustic sounds) made up the vast majority of Billboard's year-end chart: artists including T-Pain, Rihanna, and Kanye West recorded electronic music almost exclusively.[4] The popularity of this type of dance music has recently lead to a wider acceptance of DJs as musicians, and will, I believe, continue to affect the world of dance

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2 Fikentscher, *"You Better Work!" Underground Dance Music in New York City*, 113.
3 Ibid.
4 Billboard's year-end chart for 2008, (Accessed 29 June 2009) <http://www.billboard.biz/bbbiz/charts/yearendcharts/chart_display.jsp?f=Top+Artists&g=Year-end+Top+Artists>

music in a positive way, bringing both dance and DJs further into the mainstream.

The emergence of the DJ as an important figure in contemporary dance music was a process begun by house. Therefore, although house as an isolated genre remains mostly underground, its early use of the DJ as the sole musician for a floor full of dancers began the DJ's integration into popular culture.

Gender in Dance Music

Many of the DJs in early electronic dance music were African American and male. However, in the last thirty years of DJ history, the demographic has altered dramatically. Dance music as a whole has broken through racial boundaries, and has made a worldwide cultural impact. Despite this, much of the DJ culture still remains predominantly male; this applies especially in genres where the DJ is the sole musician, specifically house, techno, and the many sub-genres of electronic dance music which have recently come into existence.[5] This fact is evident on websites like The DJ List, an online networking site for DJs around the world, whose top-ten DJ list, featured on the website's front page, contains only men.[6] Rap and hip-hop, other DJ-based genres which emerged alongside electronic dance music in the twentieth century, have become much more diverse with regard to gender, but it is still difficult for women DJs to break into many electronic dance music scenes, especially those that are considered underground.

Women have likewise been largely absent from the scholarly literature on DJ culture. While the body of literature on DJs has grown exponentially in the last decade, it has largely neglected the issue of gender in the field, with a few notable exceptions.

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5 I will discuss the racial issues in more detail in Chapter Two.

6 "The DJ List" (Accessed 12 July 2009) <http://www.thedjlist.com/>

Mark Katz's article "Men, Women, and Turntables: Gender and the DJ Battle," for one, discusses the lack of women present in hip-hop DJ battles, and the "puzzlement and frustration" with which DJs respond to the gender imbalance.[7] Although he does not specifically explore the issue of women DJs in club culture, many of his arguments and conclusions are applicable to the house music scene as well.

Because of the relatively small amount of literature on women DJs in general, and house music specifically, I believe that it is especially important to create an accurate account of how women DJs function in contemporary club culture. It is especially crucial to address questions like how women gain entry into the profession, how women deal with difficulties that they may encounter in the club in comparison to their male colleagues, and whether club culture provides a gendered atmosphere for women DJs. I believe that ethnographic research, involving fieldwork in clubs where DJs work, and interviews with the DJs themselves, can help to fill the void in the existing literature.

When I started the ethnographic research for this thesis, one of the first questions that came to my mind was about audience reception: did the audiences of women DJs expect them to sound different than male DJs? If this expectation existed, did it have implications for when and if women were hired by clubs to perform? I made sure to include this question in my list when I went to Chicago to meet my first consultant, DJ M. Sylvia. Her reply was both amusing and thought-provoking:

> I don't think it comes from everybody, but... I was playing at Sound-bar, and I was playing in a time slot that requires you to play harder and faster, and a guy comes up and he was one of the promoters, and he was really drunk, and he was like,

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7 Mark Katz, "Men, Women, and Turntables: Gender and the DJ Battle," *The Musical Quarterly,* 89(4), (2006), 581.

"listen, for a girl, you can really throw down." And I was like, okay... So I think that a lot of people think that you should sound more delicate, sometimes... they just don't expect you to play like the guys do.[8]

This remark was made by a promoter, a figure who, like the club owner, plays a large part in finding and booking DJs. Assumptions on the part of powerful gatekeepers in the industry can make it more difficult for women to get bookings as DJs. Even assumptions like this on the part of the public can be extremely detrimental to a DJ's career since it could mean fewer audience members, especially if the DJ is young and relatively unestablished in the industry. This could be one factor among many that discourages women from entering the electronic dance music field.

Women DJs face many of the same difficulties as women in other heavily male musical fields, like jazz and rock, and the existing literature has been extremely helpful in drawing parallels. Jacqueline Warwick, in her discussion of girl groups in the 1960s, addresses a scene that is surprisingly similar to contemporary club culture, where women are assumed to be dancers when the enter the club, and men control the majority of the hiring and production of music. Sherrie Tucker's book *Swing Shift* deals, in part, with the dichotomy of visual and audio that women jazz musicians dealt with in the all-women jazz bands of the 1940s; women DJs must also navigate many issues concerning their appearance versus their performance.[9] Lucy O'Brien examines the difficulties of women musicians becoming "one of the guys," a trope that DJs are subject to in a field where the majority of their friends, colleagues, and bosses are male.

Although women trying to gain footing in the DJ booth have this, and more,

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8 Sylvia Dziemian, interview with the author, Chicago, IL, 4 October 2008.
9 I will discuss this issue further in Chapter Four.

shared history with women in other musical genres, DJing is an isolated practice, both for the DJ individually and for electronic music. DJs, like other musicians, spend long hours perfecting their craft. However, unlike other musicians, a band is not required, and a social element that might be taken for granted by a member of a band is lost. DJs also spend a significant amount of time collecting music. Whether they are searching through dusty bins for vinyl records or hunting through beatport.com for new mp3s, DJs must have something new to play for their crowd. Bill Brewster and Frank Broughton, in *Last Night a DJ Saved My Life: The History of the Disc Jockey,* note that "[w]ithout wishing to be sexist, we suspect this unhealthy, obsessive, anal retentive behavior fully explains why there have been so few female DJs."[10] Although this remark makes a casual jab at male DJs who have only "the house – unheated, unlit, so crammed with trash that the door wouldn't open – and three quarters of a million records," it could be seen as making a far deeper stab at women DJs, assuming that they lack the dedication to pursue only their craft, alone.[11]

DJs as a whole must also contend with a genre-wide exclusion from different types of acoustic music-making. Brewster and Broughton take a defensive tone when they remark in the opening chapter of their book that

> Despite his pivotal role, to this day the established forums of music criticism remain almost completely ignorant of who the DJ is, what he does and why he has

10 Bill Brewster and Frank Broughton, *Last Night A DJ Saved My Life: The History of the Disc Jockey* (New York: Grove Press: 2000), 9.

11 Ibid.

become so important. If this book aims to do anything, it is to show the rock historians that the DJ is an absolutely integral part of their story.[12]

DJs can, therefore, experience a double isolation, both of picking and playing records alone as individuals, and cut off from acoustic music as a genre. Women DJs experience a third type of isolation, since they must work in a predominantly male scene. Unlike the girl groups of the 1960s and the all-women jazz bands of the 1940s, female DJs do not have women band members to rely on, and to provide support in an industry dominated by men. The female DJ must find other means with which to make her way into the field, either socially or musically, or preferably both.

While many of the best-known women DJs in the world, like the women of the SuperJane collective, and DJs Psycho Bitch and Terri Bristol, gained a major foothold in the Chicago scene, there are still many fewer women DJs than men. There are even fewer who produce their own music. Women who want to become DJs seem to encounter difficulties every step of the way, from acquiring equipment to maintaining their safety in the DJ booth.[13] However, as DJs become increasingly mainstream, the number of women playing music in the club scene is growing, and there are more and more women breaking into the field in the Chicago area specifically. They are working in the Chicago clubs that can make or break a career, holding residencies, and making appearances and connections. These women are using both conscious and unconscious methods of resistance to enable themselves to carve out spaces in an industry that is still heavily gendered. In this thesis, I will explore how women in house music are entering

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12 Brewster and Broughton, *Last Night A DJ Saved My Life: The History of the Disc Jockey,* 17.

13 I will discuss these difficulties more specifically later in the thesis.

the DJ booth and culture, as well as how they function within the environment of the club.

Chapter 2

The History of House

"In the beginning there was Jack, and Jack had a groove, and from this groove came the groove of all grooves, and while one day viciously throwing down on his box, Jack boldly declared, Let there be house."[14]

Chicago's house music was the beginning of the electronic dance music revolution that heavily influenced dance culture throughout the world. House is still a source of fierce pride for many Chicago natives, who refer to the names of early DJs with reverence.[15] Because house was the first heavily electronic dance music movement to form in the United States, much of its history has become legend for fans and musicians alike. The element of legend is exemplified in the lyrics to "My House," by Rhythm Control, in which Jack "boldly declared, Let there be house." The stylized lyrics to this song, which refer to the writing style found in the book of Genesis, suggest the Biblical importance of the birth of house music to its followers. It is important to understand the historical background of house with regard to the DJ's role, especially because of the legend surrounding early house music and its creators. This chapter will explore the history of house music, beginning with the "disco sucks" movement of the late 1970s, which prepared the Chicago scene for the onset of house. I will then discuss dance music in African American communities during and shortly after this time, and the rise of house

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[14] Brewster and Broughton, Last Night A DJ Saved My Life: The History of the Disc Jockey, 294.

15 Carl Hindemarch, *Pump Up the Volume: The History of House Music,* Flame Television Production, LTD, 2001.

music within the worldwide dance music scene. Throughout the chapter, I will pay special attention to the role of the DJ as this type of performance evolved, especially how the DJ's role grew and changed with house music.

The death of disco in the U.S., and the birth of house

Chicago's house music began as simply a rebirth of disco; it must be noted that the climactic event that "killed" disco was also a Chicago event. Disco, the dance music that later evolved into house, had as many antagonists as it did fans in the late 1970s, and the tension between the two factions came to a visible head on July 12, 1979. During a doubleheader between the Detroit Tigers and the Chicago White Sox, radio DJ Steve Dahl hosted his best attended anti-disco rally. Dahl, who DJed for WLUP-FM, was a controversial figure, and at twenty-four years old, had already made a name for himself with his anti-disco stance. He advertised that anyone who brought a disco record to the stadium would be admitted for ninety-eight cents; the records would then be blown up on the field between games.16 So many members of the public demanded admission with disco records that some regular ticket holders were denied admission to the game.[17]

The records were supposed to have been collected at the gates, but fans brought a number of them into the stadium. During the half-hour break between games, Dahl preached anti-disco rhetoric to a crowd of mostly white teenagers, leading the entire stadium in a chant of "disco sucks, disco sucks"; he then blew up a crate of records on the field. After the records were destroyed, and fifteen minutes before the Tigers' game was

16 Kai Fikentscher, "Disco and House," *African American Music: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 324.

17 Richard Dozer, "Tigers ask for forfeit of 2d game," *Chicago Tribune.* 13 July 1979, section 5, pp. 1.

scheduled to start, fans rioted, throwing records like frisbees, running onto the field and destroying the playing surface. Thirty-nine fans were arrested for disorderly conduct and one fire had to be put out.[18] Despite organizing a promotion centered around destroying music by blowing it up in a stadium, Dahl maintained that they were "trying to downplay the violent aspect," and that "we just wanted people to have fun."[19] Because the riot had severely damaged the field, the second game of the doubleheader was canceled, and the Tigers asked for a forfeit.[20]

Until John Travolta's 1977 "Saturday Night Fever" helped popularize disco among white audiences, the movement had been largely African American. By contrast, the teenagers wielding disco records at the baseball game were rock and roll fans, and mostly white. Brewster and Broughton's description of disco underscores the racial element present on the baseball field, calling disco music "non-blond, queer, hungry."[21] In contrast to the "non-blondness" of disco music, the *Chicago Tribune* noted that "a blond poster-girl known only as Lorelei was the goddess of the fire" in which the disco records were destroyed.[22] This event and others like it helped to dampen the popularity of disco, especially among white audiences, and had consequences for dance music in general among the African American community.

Chicago DJ Vince Lawrence argued that Disco Demolition Night was, in part, a racist backlash against African American music, and not just disco. He commented on the event in the documentary "The History of House Music": "It was more about blowing

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18 Ibid.
19 Ibid.
20 Brewster and Broughton, *Last Night a DJ Saved My Life,* 268-69.
21 Brewster and Broughton, *Last Night a DJ Saved My Life,* 126.
22 Ibid.

up all this nigger music than, you know, destroying disco. Strangely enough, I was an usher working his way toward his first synthesizer at the time. What I noticed at the gates were people were bringing records, and some of the records were disco records, and I thought those records were kinda good. And some of those records were just Black records. They weren't disco."23 Lawrence noted that music by Marvin Gaye, who was not a disco artist, was blown up along with recordings by Donna Summer and Anita Ward, two African American musicians associated with disco.

Although Dahl succeeded in gaining publicity for his cause, he also created a negative image for himself. The *Tribune* noted that "[t]he evening's events may have made it more difficult for Dahl to stage future demonstrations . . . . "When I heard about the success of this Dahl guy and his anti-disco nights, we looked into the possibility of having him come to one of our games, maybe the final home game," said Sting [North American Soccer League's Chicago team] owner Lee Stern. "But after seeing that weirdo on TV tonight, there's no way we'd do it now.""[24] However, Dahl's event succeeded in helping an already-large anti-disco movement to dramatically reduce the sales of disco records, and eventually caused many record companies to close their dance labels.[25]

Dance music in African American communities

With less production of disco and dance music, many DJs struggled to find enough new music to play in their clubs. As disco became less and less popular, DJs had

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23 Carl Hindemarch, *Pump Up the Volume: The History of House Music.*

24 Lynn Emmerman and Joseph Sjostrom, "'These weren't real baseball fans' – Veeck," *Chicago Tribune.* 13 July 1979, section 5, pp. 3.

25 Carl Hindemarch. *Pump Up the Volume: The History of House Music.*

an increasingly limited number of records to play. Club DJs, in order to provide dancers with new music, started to remix old disco records and eventually began producing and remixing their own music, using drum machines, synthesizers, samplers, and other equipment.[26] This creation of new music out of the ashes of disco, or recycling of old records, marked the birth of house music.[27]

As a result of the anti-disco sentiment within the United States that produced this event, African American dance venues, especially those catering to gay clientele, became more and more underground. African American gay spaces were adversely affected by record companies' discontinuation of disco records. The Paradise Garage, a legendary gay club in New York City which opened in January 1978, was one of the spaces that was forced to adapt. DJs began to play parts of the songs over and over in order to elongate songs. They also began to work with duplicate records of the same song, which enabled them to shift easily between the beginning and the end of the track. Paradise Garage's main DJ, Larry Levan, was legendary for his ability to keep dancers on the floor, both by using these techniques, and by using his intuition to determine what the crowd wanted to hear.

One of Larry Levan's friends and fellow DJs would become the founder of house. DJ Frankie Knuckles, a friend of Larry Levan since high school, moved from New York City to Chicago to become the resident DJ at the Warehouse. When Knuckles couldn't find enough new dance records to play in his club, he became one of the first DJs to add drum machines to his mixes. He created remixes in his basement, bringing them to the

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[26] Fikentscher, "Disco and House," 324.

[27] Although I won't focus on hip-hop in this chapter, the history of the evolution of hip-hop is related to that of house. See Tricia Rose's *Black Noise* for a discussion of the role of technology in the emergence of hip hop.

Warehouse; he built a reputation for playing some of the best music in town. His music was characterized by its fast tempo, deep bass, and heavy, layered percussion.

Knuckles's audience was committed to the music he played. Brewster and Broughton's description of the Warehouse highlights the audience's dedication to both the music and the DJ:

> One day a week, from Saturday night to Sunday afternoon, a faithful crowd gathered, waiting on the stairway to enter on the top floor of the building and pay the democratically low $4 admission. The club held around 600, but as many as 2,000 people – mostly gay, nearly all black – would pass through its doors during a good night. They dressed with elegance but in clothes that declared a readiness to sweat. Many would sleep beforehand to maximize their energy. Once in the club, some stayed in the seating area upstairs. Others walked down to the basement for the free juice, water and munchies. Most people, however, headed straight to the dark, sweaty dancefloor in between. For them there was no need for distraction: they came here for Frankie Knuckles's music.[28]

One of the key points that this passage makes clear is that the Warehouse catered to a mostly African American, homosexual audience. Although house quickly made its way into straight clubs, partially due to the efforts of Muzic Box DJ Ron Hardy, the music continued to be strongly associated with gay male culture and environments and with African American culture. The DJ, as a representative of this exclusive group of men, was almost always also male in the early days of house.

Simon Reynolds notes that:

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28 Brewster and Broughton, *Last Night a DJ Saved My Life,* 292-93.

> Chicago house music was born of a double exclusion, then: not just black, but gay and black. Its refusal, its cultural dissidence, took the form of embracing a music that the majority culture deemed dead and buried. House didn't just resurrect disco, it mutated the form, intensifying the very aspects of the music that most offended white rockers and black funkateers: the machinic repetition, the synthetic and electronic textures, the rootlessness, the 'depraved' hypersexuality and 'decadent' druggy hedonism.[29]

The "double exclusion" noted by Reynolds must not be taken lightly; house music's early association with male homosexuality suggests a space where the focus of sexuality is not on women. This can produce a defined role of women as observers within a gay male space, rather than active participants. Joseph Harry describes gay bars, like the bars in which house music evolved, as "a central institution for gays in the larger city," both as a route to social connection, and as a "sexual marketplace."[30]

In addition, Harry found that in 1974, only 86% of cities with a population over one million had a gay (male) bar that catered to an African American clientele, compared to 100% with a lesbian bar.[31] The idea that more lesbian women than homosexual Black men had a place to express themselves could have produced an increased need to protect the space that was designated African American, gay, and male. Since house music evolved within these spaces, and the DJs (especially those living and working in Chicago) are interested in preserving the history and tradition of house, it's possible that

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29 Quoted in Stan Hawkins, "Feel the beat come down: house music as rhetoric," *Analyzing Popular Music* (New York, N.Y.: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 83.

30 Joseph Harry, "Urbanization and the Gay Life," *The Journal of Sex Research* Vol. 10, No. 3 (August 1974), 238 and 240.

31 Harry, "Urbanization and the Gay Life," 243.

its historical association with gay male culture has shaped house DJing as a predominantly male activity.

However, the preservation of dance music as well as gay, male, African American spaces may have also had a mission of inclusion. Mel Cheren of West End Records notes that "[i]f people can dance together, they can live together, and that's why it was so important to bring all kinds of people, black, white, straight, and gay, together, with music."[32] Hindemarch's documentary includes interviews of several of Frankie Knuckles's male devotees, who say that although the club primarily catered to gay men, there was a spirit of inclusion, especially on the dance floor. DJ Screamin' Rachel Cain, who was inspired by Frankie Knuckles's style at the Warehouse, similarly noted that "this place was like this throbbing, hot... mixtures of just body to body. And I mean, you know, yes, I remember it was all Black people, and mostly all Black men. There were a few women, not very many, you know. But it was just a really cool place, and it made me feel at home."[33] Screamin' Rachel outlines an interesting dichotomy: an atmosphere consisting mainly of one gender, but preserving a spirit of inclusion.

"House"

Although the term "house" is disputed, it may to have taken its name from a shortening of the word "Warehouse," and referred to the type of music that Frankie Knuckles played. This term may have been especially popularized by the record shop Imports, etc., which advertised and sold the music played at the Warehouse. Originally

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32 Carl Hindemarch, *Pump Up the Volume: The History of House Music.*
33 Carl Hindemarch, *Pump Up the Volume: The History of House Music.*

this referred to disco records, but as DJs began to mix their music, use double copies of records, and add drum machines and other percussion, the meaning of "house" expanded.

A second interpretation of the term refers to the way in which house music was produced: usually in the DJs' homes, and rarely in recording studios the way disco had been.[34] Vince Lawrence addressed the humble beginnings of house, asserting that "if somebody told me when I was younger that this music that we were making in our basement would be the shot heard 'round the world, I would say 'give me some of what you're smoking, pal.'"[35] Lawrence and other Chicago musicians, like Jamie Principle and Frankie Knuckles himself, were recording house music, mixing tracks, and making tapes in their homes, and the artists interviewed in Hindemarch's documentary were consistently surprised at the mainstream success of house. At the same time, the DJs retained fierce pride in its underground heritage. DJ Pierre believes that "anything that starts off underground is house, to me. I don't care how big it gets; if it started off underground, and it had that that big club feel, then that's house."[36]

House music was an inspiration for Detroit teenagers like Derrik May, Kevin Saunderson, and Juan Atkins, who drove to Chicago on weekends to go to the Warehouse and the Muzic Box, and listened to the Hot Mix 5, a radio show where DJs played house music live.[37] Although in the beginning, this style of music sounded very similar to Chicago house, it soon evolved a more electronic sound of its own. "Detroit techno" became a more electronic-sounding music with a faster beat, associated with Detroit

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34 Fikentscher, "Disco and House," 325.
35 Carl Hindemarch, *Pump Up the Volume: The History of House Music.*
36 Ibid.
37 Beverly May, "Techno," *African American Music: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 335.

rather than Chicago. This evolution helped to move electronic dance music farther away from its disco roots.

House's influence on Europe

The next step for house music was to create a worldwide image, far from the underground clubs in Chicago and Detroit. House was accepted more easily in Europe than it had been in the U.S., and the transition was made easier because disco was still alive and well in many European countries, especially Great Britain. Sarah Thornton quotes *Disco International,* the first disco trade magazine as remarking in 1979 that "It's comforting to predict that as America's disco dinosaur becomes extinct, the social bedrock of the British disco is as firm as ever."[38]

The African American origins of house remained vital in the image that DJs revealed to Europe on their first tour. During the tour, DJ Joe Smooth featured a single called "Promised Land" which had become a massive underground success.[39] The song clearly references the Civil Rights Movement in its lyrics:

Brothers, sisters

One day we will be free

From fighting, violence

People crying in the street

When the angels from above

Fall down and spread their wings like doves

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38 Sarah Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media, and Subcultural Capital* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1999), 47.

39 Carl Hindemarch, *Pump Up the Volume: The History of House Music.*

And we'll walk hand in hand

Sisters, brothers, we'll make it to the Promised Land

"Promised Land" evokes explicitly a spirit of unity among African Americans, and its title and some of the text is drawn directly from Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I've been to the mountaintop" speech. Joe Smooth's production of this song shows how important he felt his African American heritage to be. It can also serve as a musical representation of the importance of the connection between African Americans and house music; the popularity of the song overseas solidified the association to audiences in different countries as well. Furthermore, that Joe Smooth chose this song to serve as a musical ambassador to British club-goers is even more telling about how visible artists wanted their identity to be.

After this tour, house and its close relation, Detroit techno, enjoyed great success throughout Europe. In Great Britain, the way had already been paved by northern soul, dance music that was extremely popular in northern England among the working-class[40] This genre set out to copy the Motown sound of Detroit, and had a large underground following.[41] Northern soul DJs prized obscure records, and either soaked off record labels or covered them with blank labels to disguise their prized picks from other curious DJs.[42] Another central aspect of club culture in Great Britain was lengthy parties; clubbers frequently used drugs to help them maintain energy. This drug culture, which had not been as prevalent in Chicago and Detroit, became a central aspect of rave culture that became prevalent in England and throughout Europe.

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40 Brewster and Broughton, *Last Night a DJ Saved My Life,* 103.
41 Brewster and Broughton, *Last Night a DJ Saved My Life,* 78.
42 Brewster and Broughton, *Last Night a DJ Saved My Life,* 101.

In Chicago twenty years after the founding of house, the music continues to thrive. Chicago DJs and music enthusiasts are still fiercely proud of their lineage and musical heritage, paying homage through their own music. DJ Sista Stroke moved to Chicago to produce her own album and absorb the history of house. Stroke cited a desire to know her history in music as one of the main reasons that she moved from Texas to Chicago.[43] Another reason that young DJs may relocate to Chicago is the openness of the city's music scene. Mona Holmes, the co-creator of shejay.com, cites the Chicago scene as one where up-and-coming DJs can get publicity, adding that "it's like the blues coming from the South, it's just what it's like, to be in Chicago and to go listen to house is really an experience."[44]

Many Chicago house fans have a clear but very personal idea of what pure house is. During my fieldwork at the Sound-bar, the host came over and introduced himself, asking how I knew one of the resident DJs. When I said I was doing research on house music, he instantly replied "then at 1:30, get out of here and go across the street to the Spy-bar. This isn't house. You know the music? You know what I'm talking about." Despite fans' strong ideas about house music, house itself has undergone many changes, and can mean many different things to different people. For example, Jamie Principle's "Your Love," one of the original house songs, had a dominant text; many of M. Sylvia's house tracks, on the other hand, have no lyrics at all. Despite the variations in description, fans like the host at the Sound-bar are proud of their musical heritage, and feel that it is important to promote the popularity of the genre.

Chicago DJs in clubs, especially on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday nights

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43 DJ Sista Stroke, telephone interview with the author, 15 January 2009.
44 Mona Holmes, telephone interview with the author, 26 November 2008.

(known as "industry" nights), spin their own versions of acid, minimalist, or pure house, remaining loyal to their own conception of the house sound. The weekends are reserved for the less musically educated public, most of whom want to hear more mainstream hip-hop or pop tunes.45 Although most DJs use computers or CDs to play their music (as vinyl is frequently dubbed ecologically unfriendly46), they continue to use the strong, heavy beat and heavy, tactile bass that characterized early house.

Most of Chicago's clubs welcome an audience from a variety of different genders and ethnic groups, retaining the spirit of inclusion that characterized early house. Women have also moved into spaces where house music is performed, creating space for themselves in clubs, especially on the dance floor. However, there are still relatively few women performing the music.

Gender and the house DJ

From the beginning, the house DJ was fundamentally different from the radio disc jockey. The house DJ did not play unaltered songs for a radio audience that was invisible and silent. Rather, this type of DJ played for an audience that was present and vocal about what they want to hear and feel. As Brewster and Broughton note: "Once the disc

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45 Sylvia Dziemian, interview with the author, Chicago, IL, 4 October 2008. "Sunday through Wednesday are industry nights, so it's really cool to go out and find some good music. Then Thursday through Saturday are more commercial, and for crowds who don't go out on the weekdays and aren't as "educated" about music."

46 Sylvia Dziemian, interview with the author, Chicago, IL, 4 October 2008. "Yeah, Richie Hawtin, he swears by CDs now. And the DJs who like to use only vinyl and do it the old-school way, they're called "purists," we call them in the industry. And some DJs look up to them because they stick to the old way, but some DJs look down on that because you're... sure, you're all about the music and you want to keep it old-school, but pressing vinyl is kind of harmful to the environment, the whole process. I didn't really study into it, I trust Richie Hawtin."

jockey had come out from the radio and entered the dancing arena, his job had changed radically. Now that the relation between music and audience was interactive, the audience had become part of the event – in some sense, the audience was the event, and the DJ a responsive controller of their pleasure."[47] This passage demonstrates two-way communication between the DJ and the dancers. It is important to note, therefore, that if the dance floor can be controlled by the DJ, the DJ may also be influenced by the dancers.

Although the control exercised by the dance floor over the DJ may come from aural mediums, like shouting or screaming, it may also come from visual cues. Dancers may wave their arms or otherwise visually demonstrate to the DJ that they approve of what she is playing. However, there may be another more subversive way in which the dancers can control the DJ: she may be the subject of a gaze directed at her by everyone outside the booth.

"The gaze" as a theoretical concept, introduced by Laura Mulvey, notes that women often function as the subjects of visual pleasure for men.[48] Mulvey notes that:

> In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness.* Woman displayed as sexual object is the *leitmotif*

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47 Brewster and Broughton, *Last Night a DJ Saved My Life,* 71.

48 Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1989), 19.

of erotic spectacle: from pin-ups to strip-tease, from Ziegfeld to Busby Berkeley, she holds the look, and plays to and signifies male desire.[49]

While Mulvey's essay primarily concerns women in film media, removed from their audience, this passage especially could be equally applicable to women in the DJ booth, since they are both removed from their audience and displayed by the booth itself. This method of control over the DJ could be more subversive than clear audio or visual cues from the dance floor, since the DJ might not realize that it exists.

Women DJs can be very susceptible to being placed on visual display, especially because the DJ performs from the visual center of the dance floor. In the case of some clubs, like the Sound-bar in Chicago, the clear glass booth actually frames the upper body of the DJ, displaying her to the dance floor. DJs have historically preferred this type of placement of the booth because it enables better communication between the DJ and the dancers through body language and eye contact.[50] It also results in the DJ being placed visually where the eyes of the dancers, club patrons, and employees are all focused on her.

Simon Frith notes differences between the gaze depending on the gender of its recipient: "All this female activity, whatever its fun and style and art as a collective occupation, is done, in the end, individually, for the boys' sake. It is the male gaze that gives the girls' beauty work its meaning."[51] Frith makes especially clear the visual element where women DJs are concerned. Although a DJ's primary obligation is to produce music, women may have a difficult time navigating the boundaries between

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49 Ibid.

50 Frankie Knuckles asked that his booth in the Warehouse be moved to be closer to the dance floor, and many subsequent house DJs have followed suit.

51 Simon Frith, *Sound Effects* (New York, N.Y.: Pantheon, 1981), 86.

producing aural and visual entertainment, since the gaze may give them little control over how they are interpreted.

Although Mulvey and Frith limit their discussions to the effect of the gaze on women (and performed by men), the gaze could change depending on gender and sexuality. In a gay male space, the male gaze is not directed at women. This redirection of the gaze implies not only that women in a space like this would be less objectified, but also that they might be designated the role of bystander rather than leader, and therefore dancer rather than DJ. House music was created and evolved within a space like Chicago's Warehouse, which catered mostly to gay men. Since the gaze within a gay male space is directed at men, the focus of the bars as spaces that catered to the needs of gay men could have ensured that various roles within the bar, including those of owner, bartender, and DJ, were held by men.

The role of the DJ in house music is, then, a complicated one. The DJ must be able to control the dance floor, but must also be influenced by the dance floor. The DJ may also have little control over how the dance floor interprets them visually, and this aspect is further complicated when the DJ is the subject of a gaze. In order to navigate the many complexities of their chosen careers, many women DJs practice methods of resistance against the dominant practices. The women DJs who are working in Chicago are continuing to fortify their positions in the industry using these methods, which I will discuss in the following chapter.

Chapter 3

Resisting the Industry

"not bad 4 a girl ;)" -djmatter07[52]

Late in the evening, at the Martini Ranch in Chicago, DJ M. Sylvia and I were talking and she asked what I wanted to drink. I said I wasn't sure; I didn't mention it then, but I was worried because I'd had my wisdom teeth out recently and was still on a fairly steady regimen of painkillers. She said she'd get me something, but she seemed very busy, so I told her not to worry about it. After about twenty minutes, Sylvia came over to our table with a martini in her hand. The music was loud, and Sylvia had to lean in close to tell me that it was called "The Painkiller," and I laughed at her particularly appropriate choice. She had known about my wisdom teeth removal through Facebook, and had remembered. I was struck by how, even in a potentially stressful performance situation, she still took the time to do a very personal thing like this for her guest.

I believe that Sylvia is practicing a method of resistance against the industry through her social interactions. Sylvia views DJing in a very social way; she makes each of her guests feel appreciated, and like they are a necessary part of her experience as a DJ, and necessary to the club environment as well. Her outgoing personality seems to draw music enthusiasts into the space. Her focus on social space addresses issues that women DJs and women in other genres of popular music must deal with, like familial constrictions, lack of equipment and space, and lack of funding. The social method is

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52 This was a comment left on a YouTube video of a woman DJ's mix by an individual with the username djmatter07. Accessed 12 October, 2008, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=33d_mN4ldbM&feature=related>

one of many diverse methods that DJs use to secure work, equipment, and performance space.

Sylvia's assertion of her personality directly confronts the pressures of the club industry. Brewster and Broughton note that "club culture has never been much of a force for sexual equality. Just look at a few flyers or this month's dance mags to see what skills are sought in female clubbers. DJing is not at the top of the list."[53] They further suggest that "[u]ntil recently the music world has always been very much a boys' club, with women restricted to turning out some vocals for the lads."[54] Indeed, many Chicago clubs pepper any tables with postcard-sized fliers featuring pictures of women, and on the flip side, a list of exclusively male DJs. It is this dichotomy that presents fundamental problems for women wishing to enter the music field as club DJs. Despite these persistent obstacles, women like Sylvia are using specific methods to resist stereotypes formed in and about the club environment, and their success is opening the door for more women in the industry.

Women as agents in the club space

Many clubs in Chicago post lists of events on their websites; reading down the posters often reveals few women DJs, and more often only male names and faces are present. The literature also reflects the male domination of DJing: Kai Fikentscher refers to DJs as "hi[m] (rarely her),"[55] and Brewster and Broughton's chapter on house music mentions only male DJs, focusing predominantly on the "fathers" of house, like Ron

53 Brewster and Broughton, *Last Night A DJ Saved My Life*, 377.
54 Ibid.
55 Fikentscher, *"You Better Work!" Underground Dance Music in New York City*, 33.

Hardy and Frankie Knuckles.[56] This is not by accident, they note in a later chapter: "In DJing's 94 years, women have been largely frozen out of the picture, with precious few exceptions."[57] The exceptions are covered in a page-and-a-half section in the last quarter of the book.

In Chicago, there are many fewer women than men in the field of performative DJing.[58] In early house music, the DJ, as a representative of this exclusive group of men, was ideally also male (in fact, electronic music pioneers Larry Levan and Frankie Knuckles were openly gay, while Ron Hardy got his start in gay dance clubs). Although the movement has spread much wider than its roots, the majority of the DJs discussed by scholarly literature and working in the Chicago area are male. Socially constructed ideas that some may consider to be related to masculinity, like power, control, and a competitive atmosphere, are reinforced within the environment of the Sound-bar and other larger Chicago-area clubs.

As more skilled DJs became available, the DJ became a more powerful figure in the club, embodying most or all of the drawing power for the public. The Warehouse in Chicago was famous because of its DJ, Frankie Knuckles. Club owners relied on good DJs, like Frankie Knuckles, to draw crowds; as the owners were able to draw from a larger pool of DJs, they became more selective. Although local scenes vary considerably, some job markets are flooded with DJs, creating hardship with up-and-coming artists regardless of gender.

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56 Brewster and Broughton, *Last Night A DJ Saved My Life*, 292-317.

57 Brewster and Broughton, *Last Night A DJ Saved My Life*, 377.

58 Mark Katz, in his paper "Academies of Scratch," made a distinction between radio DJing and what he called "performative DJing," which involves the creation of live music, usually for dancers. He presented his paper at the national meeting of the American Musicological Society on 9 November, 2008.

However, with an increasing pool of skilled DJs, women in particular have multiple layers of difficulty when they search for jobs. Polish-American DJ M. Sylvia (Sylvia Dziemian) double-majored in philosophy and biochemistry in college, but chose to pursue becoming a DJ because she felt it was the best creative outlet for her. Her perspective on job markets is colored by her academic experiences in two separate fields, each with its own challenges. In an interview, she expressed her frustration at how hard it can be for women DJs to get jobs:

> No, especially in the beginning, getting gigs is actually, in my experience, more difficult than majoring in biochemistry. Because, in biochem, you know that even if it's the most difficult subject, if you sit there, if you study, if you do your work, you will get an A. Not so in the music industry, not so at all. Especially for a girl, especially for me in the beginning, it was very difficult for me to get gigs. You go up to people, and they a) don't take you seriously because you're you and you're a nobody and you're a bottom feeder, b) you're a *girl* and you're nobody and you're a bottom feeder. And you need to prove yourself. So even if you give somebody a demo, they have absolutely no obligation to listen to it, often times they'll use it as a coaster, if you're lucky.[59]

Sylvia recognizes the hardships involved in booking jobs as an up-and-coming DJ, regardless of gender. Finding jobs as a woman, however, can make the job search even more difficult.

The technology involved in DJing can also prevent women from entering the field since, in many cases, access to technology is restricted for women. Mavis Bayton argues

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59 Sylvia Dziemian, interview with the author, Chicago, IL, 4 October 2008.

that women in popular music are constrained by lack of finances, which can translate into lack of equipment. For DJs, the lack of funding to purchase a set of turntables or, more recently, computer software can destroy a career before it starts. Women's lack of access is often misinterpreted as incapability of taking advantage of new advances in technology. Owen quotes DJ Beth Coleman as saying that "[t]here was a preliminary fear among women of dealing with the gadgets and technology."60 Bayton rejects the simple explanation of "fear," however, and quotes "Roberta," a music tutor in the 1980s: "Sound technology is controlled by men and a lot of men want to keep it for themselves. They don't take you seriously as a woman. Some men are fine but the situation is generally that you are liable, as a woman, to be given wrong information, misleading information. They're so possessive about it. Or, they just won't let you near it."[61]

Owen, who includes a list of reasons that women have a difficult time breaking into the DJing field in his *Village Voice* article, assumes that, in American culture, rhythm is considered male and melody female: "Male mixmasters still greatly outnumber their female counterparts. Why? 'Women are not encouraged to be warriors,' offers Mutamassik, by way of explanation. 'In this culture, rhythm is considered a male thing and melody is female.'"[62] Bayton discusses this type of opposition, and quotes Sue Sharpe on the subject of male versus female careers:

> Throughout their [women's] school life, they have experienced many counter positionings of sexes and subjects, they have absorbed the siting of male and

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60 Owen, Frank, "Spin Sisters. Women DJs Turn the Tables in Clubland," *Village Voice.* 2 December 1997, pp. 32.

61 Bayton, Mavis, *Frock Rock: Woman Performing Popular Music* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998), 7.

62 Frank Owen, "Spin Sisters. Women DJs Turn the Tables in Clubland," 32.

female as opposite, and have moved toward the safer 'feminine' areas of interest. They have learned that much of the work men do is associated with so-called 'male' characteristics such as aggression, strength, stamina, competitiveness, ambition, and a technical or analytical mind, which are qualities that conflict with the myth of 'femininity', and probably where they have positioned themselves in relation to this.[63]

The male/female opposition can be seen even in critiques of Western art music, and Susan McClary notes it when Schubert's music is concerned: "His [models of male subjectivity] have been read as "feminine," largely because subsequent generations have learned to reserve the term "masculine" for only the most aggressive formulations."[64] In house music, where the rhythm and the technology are the most important parts of music-making, a societal connection between rhythm and masculinity could make it very difficult for women to assume the role of DJ. Women are forced to prove that this connection does not exist before they can begin to build careers.

Women DJs employ different strategies in order to find (and keep) work, both as freelance artists, and as residents in clubs. Their self perceptions and philosophies around their creations are vital to the construction of the role of women in the club and the role of the DJ as a woman. One example of such a strategy is Sylvia's use of social techniques; another is the ability to be flexible in repertoire. M. Sylvia feels that she must be able to play good sets in multiple styles of music in order to be successful in the scene. Sylvia says that

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63 Bayton, Mavis, *Frock Rock: Woman Performing Popular Music,* 47.

64 Susan McClary, "Constructions of Subjectivity in Schubert's Music," *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology* (New York, N.Y.: Routledge, 2006), 214.

> I don't want to sound cocky, but I think I'm one of the few who can do the minimal underground and who can also do the commercial, so I kind of do see myself as a little bit of a separate... I just know by the places I go to where I get booked, they have certain expectations for what I play, so I feel that I have to prepare every time. Sometimes that means underground, sometimes it's more commercial. So, yeah, I don't really... I think my group is kind of an example. I think there's maybe one or two DJs that I know of that kind of do that.[65]

Sylvia's diverse styles helped her get booked for jobs, especially before club owners were familiar with her name. Other women DJs have diversified in different ways; DJ Colette, of the Chicago SuperJane collective, was one of the first DJs to add her own vocals to the tracks she was spinning.

Many DJs, especially those new to the field or trying to make a name for themselves, must do other jobs in addition to spinning records. Even if a DJ has been booked on a consistent basis (or become resident) at a club, their retention depends on the crowds they attract on a regular basis, since the majority of the income for most clubs comes from alcohol sales. For this reason, the most important secondary job a DJ can have is to create publicity about their events.

Because clubs often do not adequately publicize events, most DJs maintain their own websites. Most DJ websites feature resumes, events, a photo gallery (which further draws attention to the visual element), and samples of the DJ's music. However, in order to increase traffic to their websites, DJs are increasingly taking advantage of relatively new ways to communicate: Myspace and Facebook. Since many people keep a fairly

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65 Sylvia Dziemian, interview with the author, Chicago, IL, 4 October 2008.

constant eye on their accounts at these sites, DJs are able to send out event invitations, mass emails, and wall postings advertising their events. This type of publicity is time-consuming for the DJ, but can increase traffic to the DJ's own personal website, in addition to reminding their friends to attend an event. For many DJs starting to build their careers, Facebook and Myspace are vital to maintaining residencies.

It's also important for up-and-coming DJs to create a welcoming space for friends at an event. During my fieldwork at the Sound-bar, Sylvia circulated constantly, making sure that the people she invited were having a good time. In my fieldnotes, I noted that

> Even though Sylvia wasn't spinning on this particular night, she still had a central role in the club, almost like an executive. She only actually came by three or four times, and always had to run off to find someone. She was very apologetic for this, but I didn't want her to feel like she had to be with us the whole time. The club culture seems to have retained a remnant of the personal connection on which it was founded, and Sylvia hugged almost everyone she saw.[66]

Sylvia seemed to monitor her time very consciously, never spending time with a person or group of people for too long, and never leaving any of her guests alone for too long. She made sure that we had not only drinks, but drink tickets, and bracelets indicating that we were allowed in and out of the VIP area. She also made sure to introduce me to various employees of the club, including the host and the lighting professional, from whom I got information about how the Sound-bar was run.

I attended another one of Sylvia's shows at the Martini Ranch, a smaller Chicago venue where Sylvia is not resident DJ. I went, primarily, because she had personally

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66 Fieldnotes, Sound-bar, Chicago, IL: 10 October, 2008.

invited me, using both Facebook messaging and text messaging; it was the individualized invitation that persuaded me to drive to Chicago to see her perform. I noticed similarities to the Sound-bar event in the way the Sylvia was socializing:

> As Sylvia started to play, there were suddenly many more people in the room. People seemed to gravitate toward the DJ booth. I wondered if it was something about her music, but she also seemed to have a large number of friends with her. I wrote down that it seemed like she really values social networking, and she was very concerned that her friends had full drinks and a good time. [...] As the male DJ took over, the crowd began to drift out of the back room, away from the booth. I wondered whether this was because it was getting late (although not for Chicago on a Friday night), because the crowd wasn't a fan of the music or the volume, or because he simply didn't bring as many friends with him as Sylvia did?[67]

Sylvia easily creates a warm social environment in the club. Her extra-musical tactics help to create an audience of friends who return to see her perform repeatedly. Because she brings a crowd with her, clubs are more likely to hire her. This way of resisting against the industry was especially important for Sylvia as she was beginning her career, and she was able to take advantage of it during a time when building an audience was crucial. Although this is not the only method available to women DJs, it has allowed Sylvia to begin a successful career in Chicago.

Just as women behind the turntables are agents within the club, women dancers can also become agents. Dancing is often a space for women to express themselves freely, unimpeded by social constraints on female sexuality. Frith and McRobbie write

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67 Fieldnotes, Martini Ranch, Chicago, IL: 17 January, 2009.

that "[d]ancing for them [women] is creative and physically satisfying. But more than this, dancing is also a socially sanctioned sexual activity."[68] The dance floor in strategically dark nightclub is one place (and there are very few) where it's socially acceptable for a woman to be as openly sexual as she wants, and, as Frith and McRobbie note, this display is "an aspect of girls' own pleasure," and the presence of men is not necessary for this pleasure to be had.[69]

Within these spaces, Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie argue that the function of the dance is for the expressive purposes of the women themselves. They note that

> One function of dance as entertainment from Salome to Pan's People, has been to arouse men with female display, but this is not a function of most contemporary youth dancing – it remains an aspect of girls' own pleasure, even in the cattle-market context of a provincial dance hall.[70]

Kai Fikentscher similarly says that

> Dancing can be as much about empowerment as fun. For women in particular, Gotfrit has pointed out, dancing can be a disruption and a subversion of dominant practices.[71]

As these authors have pointed out, women dance for themselves; often the dance floor is one of the only places where they can physically express themselves in a space without constraints. Many of the women who dance in clubs do not intend to display themselves for men, but they may become the objects of the gaze of men in the club.

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68 Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie, "Rock and Sexuality," *On Record: Rock, Pop, and the Written Word* (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1990), 388.
69 Ibid.
70 Ibid.
71 Fikentscher, *"You Better Work!" Underground Dance Music in New York City*, 66.

Women dancers in this situation have no control over how or whether they are objectified. As dancers in spaces where house music is performed, women can become part of a larger congregation, moved by the DJ. However, they can also become sexual objects controlled by the DJ.[72]

DJ as translator

Even though the rarely seen club owner is the ultimate authority over the DJ, the DJ, in the elevated shrine of the booth, is the ultimate authority over the dance floor. The role of the DJ, perceived as controller of the dance floor, is usually described showing the DJ using music to *control* the dancers. M. Sylvia painted the scene in different detail, describing playing a song that particularly moved the dancers, and caused two people to kiss.

> One of my favorite things ever was at Sound-bar when I was playing there and I played this one track called "Sedna" by 16 Bit Lolitas, and it's just a beautiful sound, and it made two people kiss, and that was great. (laughs) [...] My favorite times are just spotting those little instances in the crowd when you see someone just really enjoying what they're hearing, and I just remember the track name, and the person's face, and their expression when they heard it, that's usually the best. Like, at Sound-bar [I played this track, and this person had an expression on his face] like this is the best audio cheesecake, and he is just loving it. (laughs) It was just the best. It's just so satisfying at those moments, like when those two people

72 This will be discussed more in the following chapter.

kissed too. It's... that's what you live for, really.[73]

M. Sylvia also uses the term "made," but gives the credit for "[making] two people kiss" to the song, rather than to herself as a DJ. Her description of her interaction with the dancers suggests a back-and-forth flow, while most of the literature on DJs (who are assumed to be male) describes an environment with much less reciprocal interaction.

Some writers, and some DJs themselves, characterize their role as powerful and controlling, and describe the club as a religious experience. Frankie Knuckles, called the Warehouse his church, Brewster and Broughton describe the generic DJ as "the witchdoctor, the shaman, the priest."[74] Brewer and Broughton state that

> They [the dancers] are worshipping life through dance and music. Some worship with the heightened levels of perception that drugs bring; but most are carried away merely by the music and the people around them. The DJ is the key to all this. By playing records in the right way the average DJ has a tremendous power to affect people's states of mind. A truly *great* DJ, just for a moment, can make a whole room fall in love.[75]

By using terms like "power" and "*make* (a whole room fall in love)," the authors imbue the DJ with the "power" to "make" the dance floor do whatever they (the DJs) want; suggesting that a skillful DJ can create a space where dancers are at his or her mercy.

Rather than using music to control the dance floor, Sylvia sees herself as a translator, working for the music to make it understandable to the audience. In this way,

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73 Sylvia Dziemian, interview with the author, Chicago, IL, 4 October 2008.

74 Brewer and Broughton, *Last Night a DJ Saved My Life,* 4. It seems like the majority of adjective descriptions of DJs involve heavily gendered professions, like priest and shaman.

75 Brewster and Broughton, *Last Night a DJ Saved My Life,* 5.

the music is the real authority when she is performing. Sylvia describes her role as DJ as "creative artistic medium," valuing the music and her ability to translate the music to the dancers, rather than an authority that her position might afford her. M. Sylvia's emphasis, therefore, is on the elements that already exist in the music, and making it accessible to the dancers, rather than emphasizing creating (from "scratch") and controlling. Sylvia expands on her role as a DJ:

> But yeah, I see myself as a medium, and I see myself as an artist. I don't see that as a position of power, I just feel that's... people are drawn to that because I think that artists can interpret feelings and can express them, and put them into the physical. And that's how I see myself, as an artist, as a medium, of energy, of feelings from people, from my own life, and translating that into the physical. So that's me.[76]

Sylvia emphasizes her ability to translate a feeling to the dancers. By identifying as an interpreter, she distances herself from the traditional roles of control and power that literature associates with the DJ. This powerful element is showcased by Bill Brewster and Frank Broughton, in *Last Night a DJ Saved My Life*: "[l]ike the witchdoctor, we know he's [the DJ] just a normal guy really – I mean look at him – but when he wipes away our everyday lives with holy drums and sanctified basslines, we are quite prepared to think of him as a god, or at the very least a sacred intermediary, the man who can get the great one to return our calls."[77] Brewer and Broughton, in one sentence, compare the DJ to a witchdoctor, an intervening saint, and a god. When this idea came up in the interview, I expected Sylvia to talk about the power involved in DJing. Instead, she

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76 Sylvia Dziemian, interview with the author, Chicago, IL, 4 October 2008.
77 Brewster and Broughton, *Last Night a DJ Saved My Life,* 5.

described the power flowing *through* her to the dancers, rather than *from* her.

Eye contact between the dance floor and the DJ is especially important in performative DJing, as Brewster and Broughton note: "A good DJ isn't just stringing records together, he's controlling the relationship between some music and hundreds of people. That's why he needs to see them."[78] In this visualization, the relationship should ideally be cyclical: the DJ looks at the audience for feedback, and the audience looks at the DJ to communicate about whether or not they like the music. It is essential, therefore, that the DJ maintain at least some visual contact with the dance floor, and the design of most clubs allows this, but some DJs take advantage of it more than others.

In an interview, Mona Holmes reflected on her club experiences with visual contact: "I do think that female DJs are able to connect with the audience a little bit better than a good percentage of male DJs can. I often find that when I'm watching a male DJ, or a lot of the time, really famous ones, they're hunkered down, they're completely looking into the mixing board or the turntables or whatnot, and barely connected with the audience. And I've noticed that the women look up, they make eye contact, they laugh, they kind of feel the crowd out a little bit more."[79]

Her comment, and her suggestion that I watch the DJs carefully next time I did fieldwork, caused me to pay more attention the next time I was in a club. I was fortunate that the next time I was in a Chicago club, two DJs, one man and one woman, were alternating sets of about forty-five minutes each. I noticed the same phenomenon; the booth was separated from the small dance floor by a bar (and bartender), and perhaps due to this barrier, the male DJ, for the most part, didn't attempt to make eye contact with the

78 Brewster and Broughton, *Last Night a DJ Saved My Life,* 11.
79 Mona Holmes, Telephone interview with the author, 26 November 2008.

crowd. The woman DJ, however, looked up and the crowd and back at her computer constantly, and I noted that she made eye contact with me several times, even though I was to the far left of the DJ booth.

This observation could reflect the emphasis that women DJs place on social interaction and reciprocal communication with the dance floor (or audience). Warwick's *Girl Groups, Girl Culture* emphasizes various reasons for the collective nature of groups of women musicians in the 1960s, including issues of safety and social conditioning.[80] The connection that women make with individuals in the audience and on the dance floor could be a way to create a group from the solitude of the booth. However, this situation could also be specific to the singular event. There certainly are male DJs who use visual contact to gauge their audience's reaction to their music-making, and use the dancers' responses to change and tweak their musical sets.

In these cases, women DJs interpret rather than manipulate, and translate rather than control. The cyclical conversation between the DJ and the dance floor suggests that neither the DJ nor the dance floor are the authority. Rather, both could be seen as engaging in an interactive performance where the goal is the interpretation of the music.

DJ Collectives

One of the difficulties of being a DJ, male or female, is the singular nature of the job. Far from the collective nature of bands that rehearse and perform in ensemble, the DJ is alone in her selection of music, alone in the practice of her music production, and ultimately alone in the booth while playing. This can create a high-pressure situation

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80 Warwick, *Girl Groups, Girl Culture,* 24.

during performances, where the DJ must be responsible for her own music making and promotion, as well as the protection of her music, equipment, and self. The solitude of the DJ in the booth can mean many different things for male and female DJs because of issues of socialization, assumptions inherent in club culture, and personal safety.

For these reasons, there are advantages for both male and female DJs in teaming up with other like-minded DJs to form collectives. DJ collectives usually consist of between two and four individuals who often are able to divide duties among themselves, including publicity, finding and securing jobs, or maintaining a shared residency at a club. The ways a collective functions depends on the level of member participation, which can vary significantly depending on whether the DJs live and work in the same city. Some collectives exist in name only, and others find their members consistently at each other's shows. Collectives can provide mental and physical support for DJs, and often share equipment and even music, alleviating financial stress for DJs who are just getting started in the business. Collectives where individual DJs have their own musical styles can also be more versatile within the job market, since a club can depend on a single collective to supply different styles of music, rather than having to hire separate individual DJs. Many women DJs choose to join or form a collective, and the support from the group can help individuals resist constraints levied by the electronic music industry.

One major restriction for women DJs is that they must work within a leisure industry, of which men usually maintain control. Mavis Bayton has discussed constraints that women in leisure industries must deal with, noting "the extent to which girls and young women in *all* social classes and ethnic groups are restricted in their leisure pursuits

compared to boys/young men."[81] Bayton argues that the home is still considered the domain of the woman, and that men, spending their leisure time outside the home, tend to have control that space. She cites multiple areas in which women are constrained because of lack of funds or difference in the treatment of boys and girls when they are young.

Some women in Chicago have the same types of constraints in areas like transportation to and from jobs, lack of private space in which to practice their skills, and lack of access to equipment. DJ M. Sylvia was initially granted access to equipment through a man with whom she was in a relationship. She noted that "my boyfriend first got turntables. And, I was like, I can do this too, and eventually ended up getting my own equipment. And I started practicing more often, and things like that, but initially, it was because he got turntables."[82] Sylvia is not unique in this aspect. Many other women DJs working in Chicago gain access to equipment, as well as public and private space and transportation, through male friends. Forming a collective with male members can solidify this access.

M. Sylvia is the only female member of the collective NOR (New Order Ravers) DJs, who maintain a shared residency at the Sound-bar in downtown Chicago. Sylvia cites the musical and emotional support of her collective for her success in the industry, noting that "it's really nice [being in a collective], because the industry is very cold, and it's very rough, and sometimes very slimy, and it's nice. It can be very difficult, and had I not been in the group, I'm not sure I would have made it to the point I did; I actually

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81 Mavis Bayton, *Frock Rock: Women Performing Popular Music,* 27.
82 Sylvia Dziemian, interview with the author, Chicago, IL, 4 October 2008.

think I may not have."[83]

Outside of the Sound-bar, each individual DJ has their own schedule and bookings. Sylvia describes the way that her particular collective functions as a group:

> Well, there's four of us, and we split up the work. Other than music, there's more to it. There's promotions, there's taking care of our website, promotions having to do with Myspace, Facebook, trying to bring people into the club. Making deals with various venues and promoters. So, we're all equal, that's how we consider ourselves. We all do music, that's the prerequisite and foundation of it all, but there's a lot more to it, and each one of us has strengths. For example, Tima, he's great with the business part of the whole thing, so he's the one who will talk to Sound-bar and book things. But Ivan and Kibo and I, we talk to promoters. So, we kind of all work together, and we have our strengths and our weak points, and we work off of that. Ivan, you know, might not be good at doing this, so we'll do that. But our main point was to train everyone to the point where you can play a very commercial set at Sound-bar on Saturday at 1:00AM. [...] So there's certain gigs, where if you're a DJ, you need to bring out a crowd, so we always come and support each other. Especially if it's a bigger gig and we're all excited about it, we'll come out and support each other.84

In Sylvia's case, her collective accepted her as a member two years after they started, so she was able to take advantage of the bookings and name recognition that the collective already had. She acknowledges their support, and when we spoke, she was careful to define the personal relationship that she maintains with the other members of

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83 Ibid.
84 Ibid.

her group: "It's not so much a business relationship. I mean, it started out that way, but now we're like a family."85 Sylvia cites her collective as one of the determining factors in her success as a DJ.

Because Sylvia is a member of a collective, the four DJs associated with the group split the extra duties involved with DJing between themselves. One DJ may maintain the website while another put events on Facebook, and so forth. DJs who are not members of collectives may be the only sources of publicity for their events. Even if only for publicity's sake, forming a collective provides DJs with a larger pool from which to draw expertise. A singular DJ may have no experience with creating a webpage, or may not have the time to keep the page up to date, but the duties can be split more easily in a collective; one member can maintain the website, another can keep up the Facebook page, and another can handle the face-to-face networking.

Chicago is the home of several well-known, all-women DJ collectives, among them SuperJane, which consists of DJs Heather, Colette, Dayhota, and Lady D. Mona Holmes of shejay.net mentioned SuperJane because of the careers that each individual member has had:

> You know, the women that I know that are doing okay... they tend to put a collective together so they can support each other. It just seems like that's the way to go. [...] the collective of, like, Heather, Collette, Dayhota, and... you know, I think when they did it, it was, had to be twelve, fifteen years ago? And it's just what they did. They got together, and they threw parties, people got to know them by name... and, you know, next thing you know they've got international

85 Ibid.

careers.[86]

All of the SuperJane women have experienced international success.87 Although each member of SuperJane has an individual career, the strength provided by the collective helped them initially, as they were breaking into the competitive industry of DJing. Another smaller Chicago collective, which is equally well-known, consists of DJs Terri Bristol and Psycho Bitch; their collaboration, which spans over twenty years, has helped them become two of Chicago's best-known DJs.

Collectives of DJs in the Chicago area are especially likely to contain, or to be entirely made up of women; this could point to a preference among women for working collectively, even in the solitary field of DJing. Scholars like Jacqueline Warwick have discussed group identity as it pertains to other genres of popular music, especially the Riot Grrrl movement, and girl groups in the 1960s. In her book *Girl Groups, Girl Culture,* Warwick notes that group identity among women may be a societal phenomenon, in addition to being a musical one:

> [I]n a study of values of personal identity and self-esteem among adolescent girls in two northeastern U.S. high schools in the mid-1990s, researchers confirmed that girls are generally trained to develop their senses of identity in relation to others – at school, at home, at church, in their communities – in contrast to masculinist strategies of self-direction, autonomy, differentiation and self-reliance that are assumed to be cultural norms for men and women. Data indicated that girls who prized cooperation ahead of competition, [...] and thought of themselves

86 Mona Holmes, Telephone interview with the author, 26 November 2008.

87 "Super Jane: Four on the Floor," 12 March 2000 (accessed 3 December 2008) <http://straypoodle.wordpress.com/2000/03/12/superjane-four-on-the-floor/>

> in relation to friends and family rather than as individuals first and foremost identified themselves as having "traditional" values. The study's important conclusion, however, supports McRobbie's analysis in stating that 'rather than a process of active seeking and individuation, the girls' interviews suggest that the losing of oneself and one's boundaries in a group identity... may be [an] alternative [route] to integrating one's personal identity.'88

I believe that, for women DJs, forming a collective could be a way of integrating themselves into the field. The need or desire for a collective might not be because the DJs themselves feel a need to lose their personal boundaries. Rather, a collective could act like a battering ram toward the industry, where combined strength is needed to break through the doors initially, but where individual personalities are allowed to flourish after the initial walls have been deconstructed.

Women in a public space

Dance is one of the most common ways that women participate in a leisure activity outside the home, and women DJs are physically and mentally close to this type of self-expression.

Owen also asserts the viewpoint that solidarity is better suited to men than it is to women, because of the mostly assumed sense of strength that women gain by being in groups. More than being simply a benefit of having a supportive group surrounding an individual, Owen's sense of female collectivity seems to morph into a crutch, necessary for success in the cutthroat world of the DJ.

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88 Warwick, *Girl Groups, Girl Culture*, 186.

> [A]ny sense of female unity is bound to be undercut by the simple fact that DJing is an intensely competitive and solitary profession. DJs spend countless hours alone in their bedrooms fiddling with gizmos, matching and mixing music. It's not like being in a rock group where you interact with other musicians. That's why a feminist faction like alternative rock's riot-grrrl movement wouldn't work with DJ culture. 'There's mild gestures of solidarity made, like when someone organizes an all-women DJ night,' says Mutamassik, who works with the DJ crews Shaolin Fist and True Mystic Soundsystem. 'But in the end, especially in this city, it's every man for himself.'[89]

Owen's assertion seems to assume a more fundamental principle about gender, that to be successful, women in music must be in groups, and must maintain a group identity. The attempts at solidarity seem, according to Mutamassik, to be for the women; however, "in the end, it's every *man* for *him*self," rather than every *woman* for *her*self. The underlying suggestion could be that women are only expected (or allowed) to function in groups, while men are able to succeed alone, and therefore, as DJs in New York City.

Some of the elements of DJing which are assumed masculine by Owen, like solitude, technology, and competition, may be easier for women to use from within the protection of a group. Jacqueline Warwick asserts that "unladylike" behavior is culturally allowed from women within the confines of a "girls' night out"; within a group, female members of a DJ collective could take advantage of this freedom. A girls' night out takes place

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[89] Frank Owen, "Spin Sisters. Women DJs Turn the Tables in Clubland," 32.

"[...] when women of a comparable age and social background band together in groups to invade public spaces such as bars and restaurants. These excursions are understood to provide relief from the responsibilities of domestic containment through nostalgic recreations of girlish insouciance, and stereotypes of the girls' night out involve "girls" making spectacles of themselves and taking delight in being looked at, all the while emphasizing their unavailability to men. The phenomenon of being part of what is obviously a group gives women on a girls' night out license to behave in an unladylike way with carefree abandon."90

Women DJs, therefore, could find it easier to take advantage of the so-called masculine nature of DJing from within a group. This may be especially true because the DJ is an extremely public figure, and the DJ booth is usually the visual center of focus for the club.

Safety in numbers

Within the space of the club, especially after dark, group identity may serve a different purpose than just providing the "traditional values" noted by McRobbie. Safety is one of the main concerns of women in the city, at night, and especially where alcohol consumption is concerned. Bayton notes that fear of violence is lends control of leisure time to men, and this control is especially relevant in the settings where DJs work in Chicago. Bayton further notes that

Sexual violence is an omnipresent possibility that affects all women, regardless of class, age, or ethnic group, because more than actual attacks, fear of violence is a

90 Warwick, *Girl Groups, Girl Culture*, 186.

> crucial constraint on women's freedom, limiting what they can do, where they can go, when, and who with. Research shows that although, in fact, men are more likely to be the victim of (other men's) violence, women *fear* attack far more than men do.[91]

The fear of encountering violence can keep women from even attempting to pursue a career like DJing. Even if women have access to equipment, practice space, and transportation, DJing may require venturing out alone in dangerous areas of the city, after dark and in a crowd of inebriated people. On a personal level, I experienced the same nervousness when I was planning my research, and organized my first trip to Chicago around a male friend's schedule so I wouldn't be by myself in the middle of the city.

One of the easiest ways to maintain a safe atmosphere is to stay in a group; "safety in numbers" is a catch phrase that women and girls are pelted with from the time that they are young. Women in the environment of the club can take advantage of this type of group identity easily if they are on the dance floor, but this group-identified safety is harder to maintain from the DJ booth, where the DJ often works alone.

Providing physical protection for its women DJs then becomes another function of collectives, whether explicitly stated or not. In an interview with shejay.net co-founder and writer Mona Holmes on November 26, 2008, she spoke about this type of difficulty for women in the club environment:

> Club life can be a really fun place. It can also be a really dangerous place. You know, people drinking alcohol, using drugs and whatnot. And, you know, then there's a girl behind the turntables. I remember one girl getting attacked as she

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91 Mavis Bayton, *Frock Rock: Women Performing Popular Music,* 32.

was breaking down her equipment at the end of the night, you know, because there just wasn't a security guy or anyone around, and he [the attacker] just felt like he could take advantage of her because the club had cleared out. You know, it was awful for her because she was in a foreign country and it would have been his word against hers... horrible. I mean there's constant stories about that, but the good news is that she is tough as nails, and so she pretty much kicked him in the balls and that was that.92

San Francisco-based DJ Bella revealed a similar story in an interview:

I would say the "handicaps" I as a woman DJ have dealt with are security. People are more likely to attack or be verbally rude to a woman than a man because they perceive the woman to be weaker. I was physically assaulted once while DJing at Nickie's in San Francisco, when a drunken guy forced his way into my booth and forced his body on me, causing me to almost fall. I punched him and pushed him out of the booth - and I am only about 100 pounds! That scared the shit out of me, and so from now on I always bring security/bodyguards with me.[93]

Collectives can offer a kind of group protection against incidents like this one. Warwick discusses the protection offered by group identity with regard to the Ronettes' premiere, where they ventured, un-escorted, into a night club as teenagers.

I consider, however, that the girls' mothers felt a certain confidence in sending their disguised underage daughters into a notorious nightclub simply because they were a *group*. Dressing them outrageously meant (in this case, at least) also

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92 Mona Holmes, Telephone interview with the author, 26 November 2008.

93 Peta Cooper, "DJ Bella – Definitely Not Your Typical..." (accessed 19 April 2009) <http://www.desiclub.com/desimusic/desimusic_features/printlisting.cfm?id=127>

> dressing them identically, and their uniforms that night, provocative though they seem to have been, also marked them powerfully and instantly as belonging together and may have made it difficult for any adult to prey on them individually. [...] stereotypes of the girls' night out involve "girls" making spectacles of themselves and taking delight in being looked at, all the while emphasizing their unavailability to men.[94]

Even as sixteen-year-olds in a nightclub, the group identity between the members of what would become the Ronettes was so strong that it acted as protection for them. It could be that female members of the public in the modern club environment are able to protect each other in a similar way through the use of group identity. Not only are they allowed to venture into a potentially dangerous environment, but they are allowed to engage in acts that might otherwise be seen as traditionally "unladylike" because they are within a circle of protection provided by their group identity. If acting as the DJ (and the provider of rhythm as well as the singular authority over the club) is an example of "unladylike" behavior, a collective could provide an important protective circle for the DJ, socially as well as physically.

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94 Warwick, *Girl Groups, Girl Culture*, 186.

Chapter 4

Gender Issues In The Club

"I never grew up thinking I'm going to cook and clean, and my husband's going to bring in the money. So I really think that has a lot to do with me feeling confident enough to jump into the industry and say I can do this too, and I don't need implants or a fake tan."[95]

As discussed in the previous chapter, women can be agents both on the dance floor and in the DJ booth. Often the club is one of few spaces in society where it is permissible for women to display sexuality openly through dance, and women dancers are often in control of their own sexualities and the space around them. Sometimes, however, the dance floor becomes a space where women are exploited, either by club owners, promoters, or other members of the public. Women DJs may also be subjects of exploitation, and must choose early in their careers what type of display from the booth best represents their personalities and how they wish to be perceived by the public, both musically and physically.

Male attendance and participation in clubs can often be bolstered by a female display of sexuality, whether or not it is intended for male consumption. The lifeblood of many clubs is in the female members of the public who participate in dancing. The industry counts on these women to draw men into the space, since men statistically purchase much more alcohol than women, and clubs make most of their money in alcohol

95 Sylvia Dziemian, interview with the author, Chicago, IL, 4 October 2008.

sales - fifteen billion dollars in the U.S. in 2007.[96] In this way, club owners bank on the freedom of sexual expression of women in order to sell drinks to men.

Because of this expression, the male "gaze" is a potentially controlling factor within the club, especially within the house music genre.[97] The shift in the house scene from the underground into popular culture created a change in the gaze within the club; where previously the gaze had been directed mostly at men within a gay male space, as house music moved farther into popular culture and as women became more prominent in dance club venues, the gaze slowly shifted toward women. It became important for club owners to cater to women in order to make money. Creating a comfortable environment for women is important in many clubs, since even if women are not charged a cover fee at the door, a group of women will usually draw men who pay cover and buy drinks. In addition, an environment where women are able or even encouraged to express their sexuality can help to draw more men into the space and encourage more alcohol consumption.

Despite women's use of the dance club as a forum for their own sexual expression, some clubs hire female dancers who function on a basic level as sex objects, and whose main purpose is to attract men. Hired dancers are usually scantily-clad, and in very visible positions on the dance floor; I have observed that, in some cases, these dancers make other women on the floor uncomfortable, either because of their dress, visibility, or comportment, or because of a combination of the three. In the case of the

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96 "Our Industry," (accessed 26 April 2009) <http://www.nciaa.com/content.aspx?page_id=22&club_id=160641&module_id=29898>

97 I have dealt with the concept of the male "gaze" earlier in the thesis; the theoretical concept of the "gaze" is about recognizing the ability of men to affect the actions of women through their observation rather than their actions.

Sound-bar in Chicago, the dancers that are hired by the club to cater to the male clientele seemed to have an alienating effect on the other female members of the dance floor. As I wrote in my fieldnotes on October 10, 2008:

> At midnight, the club's hired dancers climbed onto three pedestals surrounding the dance floor. The dancers wore coordinating, but not identical, outfits, which consisted of a bottom (not much more than a thong) and a top covering the bare minimum, and white high-heeled boots. They danced on elevated circular platforms on three corners of the dance floor. One of the dancers was blonde, and the other two were brunettes. The one closest to me was wearing pigtails, and would play with them while dancing up against the glass wall separating her from the DJ booth. The style of dancing was freestyle, but extremely sexualized, and the term that came to my mind was 'striptease.' The floor instantly cleared of almost all the women (minus one or two). The men stopped dancing, and close to midnight, there were between ten and twelve men standing on the floor in front of me, holding drinks and staring at the dancer with pigtails. It occurred to me that having a woman DJ would skew the entire dynamic of the club at that point."[98]

As the club's dancers began their routines, and the women on the dance floor reacted, the mass exodus of women was even more obvious to me because I had been thinking joining the dancers on the floor. After seeing the hired dancers, however, I immediately decided to stay in my seat. As a woman, I experienced a variety of emotions during the first few minutes that the dancers were on the pedestals, from exasperation at

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98 Excerpt from Fieldnotes, Sound-bar: Chicago, IL, 11 October 2008.

the idea of taking part in the overt display of female sexuality to an intense feeling that I was not as attractive as the dancers, and would not be welcome on the dance floor for that reason. I wondered at the time if women DJs at the Sound-bar are exempt from this response, especially since their job requires such close communication with the dance floor, and their booth provides an excellent view of the floor and the dancers' pedestals.

After twenty minutes, I noted that the female members of the public seemed to have become "immune" to the club's dancers, and many of them had returned to the dance floor. It is possible that frequent visits to the Sound-bar or another similar club could produce an "immune" emotional response in women that could be different from my reaction upon seeing the dancers for the first time. In that case, frequent clubbers could be less affected by this type of sexual display. Martha Nussbaum notes that "this baneful experience [of objectification] is, in [Catharine] MacKinnon's view, unavoidable. In a most striking metaphor, she states that 'All women live in sexual objectification the way fish live in water,' - meaning by this, presumably, not only that objectification surrounds women, but also that they have become such that they derive their very nourishment and sustenance from it."[99] The female members of the public may have been able to overcome their reactions to the club's dancers quickly simply because they were used to similar situations in both the Sound-bar and other nightclubs. There were no such displays of male sexuality during this evening at the club; the male employees assumed the roles of host, bartender, and DJ.

Despite the relatively equal presence of men and women in the club, for the most part the women remained on the dance floor. Frith and McRobbie note that "dance is the

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99 Martha C. Nussbaum, "Objectification," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 24, No. 4 (Autumn 1995), 250.

one leisure activity in which girls and young women play a dominant role"; for this statistical reason, many clubgoers generally assume that the place of women is on the dance floor, rather than in the booth.[100] Warwick notes that, in the case of the "girl group" The Ronettes in the early 1960s, the young group of singers actually profited from a club's assumption that they were dancers, using it to gain access to a space that may have otherwise been closed to them. According to Warwick, "Standing in line outside the club [the Peppermint Lounge] in their stuffed bras, mountainous beehive hairstyles, and identical light yellow dancers, they were mistaken for the professional dancers expected that night and herded into the club to take the stage."[101] Rather than correct the club staff, the three women played along, and were hired primarily as dancers for the club. Successful DJ Jackie Christie notes that clubs made the similar assumption that she was a dancer when she relocated from Detroit to New York. She is quoted in Frank Owen's *Village Voice* article: "In Detroit, they weren't shocked by female DJs," she recalls. "Whereas, when I came to New York and applied for work at the Limelight, they were like, "Well, there's a position for a go-go girl up in the cage."[102] While some women use dance as a gateway through which they can enter the music industry, it's still telling that women are assumed to be dancers when they enter the club.

The dichotomy of empowerment versus objectification in club dancing is not limited to the dance floor. Women DJs must deal with the same visual issues from the DJ booth, and must choose how to present themselves to a club space that is often just as (or more) in danger of focusing on how a DJ looks, as opposed to how she sounds. Dancing

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100 Frith and McRobbie, "Rock and Sexuality," 388.
101 Warwick, *Girl Groups, Girl Culture,* 185.
102 Owen, "Spin Sisters. Women DJs Turn the Tables in Clubland," 32.

is, in the end, a physical and visual activity; by contrast, many women DJs in the booth must struggle for their skills to be perceived aurally rather than visually.

Look first, listen second

The importance of the visual aspect of clubs have strong ramifications for women. Although it seems obvious that club spaces revolve around music, the way a club looks is a necessary consideration to preserve and amplify the mood, and can include everything from lights to the dress of the participants. Other parts of the visual aspect in a club can include dancers (both professional and members of the public), lights, and the design of the club itself; it is a necessary element in the club experience. The club can often be a space of heightened sexual expression, and for this reason women in the DJ booth are also subject to visual scrutiny. Mark Katz writes:

> Killa-Jewel [a female DJ working in New York] notes that in clubs, women – whether as DJs or dancers – are often gawked at, encouraged to act lewdly, and "expected to be ... the submissive." Thus, even though many male DJs welcome women, an environment that cultivates or simply tolerates sexism, misogyny, and homophobia is not the most welcoming place for women.[103]

Although male DJs can also feel pressure to present a good physical appearance to the dance floor (M. Sylvia notes that "obviously you're a performer and you have to upkeep a certain image, and that's true of men too."), appearance can be a far more decisive factor in a women DJ's career.[104] Sherrie Tucker, in her book *Swing Shift: "All-*

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103 Mark Katz, "Men, Women, and Turntables: Gender and the DJ Battle," *The Musical Quarterly* 89, no. 4 (2006), 583.

104 Sylvia Dziemian, interview with the author, Chicago, IL, 4 October 2008.

Girl" Bands of the 1940s, noted a similar phenomenon among women jazz musicians:

> Women musicians who took to the road under these conditions were consumed as visual entertainment, primarily as representations of the idealized sweethearts that wartime propaganda and entertainment relentlessly encouraged servicemen to miss or imagine. Bandleader Ada Leonard recalled telling her musicians, "Because you're a girl, people look at you first, then listen to you second.[105]

Women must choose how to portray themselves from the booth, since, for many of them, the visual element in the club is something that cannot be overlooked. As a booking agent as well as a writer who frequently covers electronic music events, Mona Holmes is familiar with the demographic of DJs who are hired by clubs in Los Angeles and other cities, and notes that:

> There are some women who are easier to book because of how they look. And it can be very real about that. You know, it's... and since the club owners and the promoters are my clients, I have to... they'll never say "I want a pretty girl," but they'll look at our roster and say "I want her," and I know it's because she's either a pretty girl, or for whatever reason. And you know, there's even an impact of that, having pretty girls behind the turntables all the time. It doesn't leave much room for women who are not nearly as concerned about their looks.[106]

If women DJs have a longstanding relationship with a promoter or club owner, there may be a chance that they will be hired for the way they play. DJ Sista Stroke noted that "usually when someone's booked me, it's been because they've heard me. . . . Pretty

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105 Sherrie Tucker, *Swing Shift: "All-Girl" Bands of the 1940s* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2000), 49.

106 Mona Holmes, telephone interview with the author, 26 November 2008.

much they already know what they're getting. And that's either because, you know, they were already there when I played, or they heard from a friend that I [passed] the mix. But usually... everyone already knows what they're getting with me."[107] However, like in the case of Mona Holmes's bookings, club owners and promoters who hire the women DJs literally look first and listen second.

The women DJs' dressing style in particular can mean the difference between the audience interpreting a DJ's music or the DJ's appearance as her distinguishing feature. Women DJs are extremely susceptible to visual interpretation by the audience, especially since some DJs prefer not to use lyrics in their music.[108] The strong visual element in Chicago clubs helps to contribute to the multimedia experience of house music, but it can have negative consequences for women in the club. For this reason, it is extremely important for a DJ to choose carefully how she presents herself visually, and her choice can have a strong effect on her career.

Many clubs maintain a visual image by enforcing a dress code, especially when the dress reflects the class standing of the club. These codes are especially important in clubs that cater to a mostly upper-class, heterosexual clientele, and generally are interpreted by club-goers to mean that men should wear button-down shirts, and women should wear dresses or nice tops. Usually, it's an unspoken rule that women should show skin, either in a short dress or a low-cut top. From the perspective of the club owner, the dress of the women can attract more men to the environment, to increase alcohol purchases. Because of the financial benefits, many club owners try to maintain this

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107 DJ Sista Stroke, telephone interview with the author, 15 January 2009.

108 M. Sylvia noted that she found lyrics potentially distracting to dancers. Sylvia Dziemian, interview with the author, Chicago, IL, 4 October 2008.

visual standard with female members of the public as well as any women working in the club.

Despite the fact that music is the most projected product of the club, many clubs are designed to showcase the DJ, leaving her extremely visible to the dance floor. The central focus of the Sound-bar is the DJ booth, encased in class and centered prominently. It is the most noticeable feature upon walking into the room. The glass walls and open front of the booth frame the DJ, who is displayed, framed between two columns, behind the turntables. In this particular club space, the location and presentation of the booth creates an especially strong need for the DJ to create an image for him- or herself. As a woman, the DJ is already restricted in what she can wear because of the dress codes in the club. Because of the especially visible position of the booth, DJs must choose their clothing carefully. While some DJs may make a conscious artistic decision to project an aspect of their sexuality, others feel that it would detract from the attention paid to their music and prefer to dress more conservatively.

Topless DJs

Sometimes a woman DJ's drawing power may come primarily from her physicality, and not her music. Topless DJs, or women DJs who work wearing little or no clothing on the upper half of their bodies, have become an increasingly popular phenomenon, first in Europe and more recently in the United States. Women may choose to portray themselves in this manner for a variety of reasons: they may be encouraged to perform partially clothed by club owners in order to draw a male crowd. They may also feel that they must take off their tops in order to initially secure employment.

Conversely, they may use topless DJing as a legitimate expression of their individuality. The differences in motivation are a concern for women DJs, both topless and otherwise.

The issue with topless DJs that many women in the music industry seem to grapple with is the source of the power being visual rather than audible. In early house music, it wasn't the look of the DJ that made their reputation, but rather the music that they created. Some women feel strongly that this ideal should be preserved.

M. Sylvia comments that:

> We [non-topless women DJs] work so hard to be booked for our sound and our art, and obviously you're a performer and you have to upkeep a certain image, and that's true of men too. But it's just like... why? We work so hard to make it a legitimate profession for us, and it's like you're selling sex, you're not selling your music so much. People don't go there to *hear* you, they go there to *see* you.[109]

The visual emphasis can be especially true in cases where the DJ may have an assistant in the booth. In an interview, Sylvia emphasized the ultimate responsibility of the DJ for every aspect of the music-making, and expressed that having an assistant should be unnecessary for a good DJ:

> Some of them have assistants, and it's kind of weird to see that... a topless DJ, Portia Surreal, she had an assistant. And he's basically getting the records ready, and they had a split in the headphone jack, so she had headphones on, but he had headphones on too. [...] You do *not* have an assistant, it's like it defeats the purpose. You do everything yourself, you look for the record, you put it on, you

109 Sylvia Dziemian, interview with the author, Chicago, IL, 4 October 2008.

queue it up, you mix it in when you want to. It's all you.[110]

DJ Portia Surreal is one of the more established DJs who combine heavily sexualized visual elements with musical production. While she doesn't always perform topless, she has built a reputation based on her attire. Her large MySpace front page describes her as an "Erotic DJ Showgirl"; the title alone emphasizes the heavily visual nature of her presentation. In the largest picture on her page, she is shown in a revealing bikini eating takeout with chopsticks, her feet (encased in enormous heels) propped up on crates of records.[111] Her picture on her Facebook fan page features her in leather pants, holding the jack of a pair of headphones between her teeth, with the headphones themselves pressed against her bare chest.[112]

Likewise, in a video of her performances, she was dressed in a thong and corset, with her chest completely exposed except for two tassels. She routinely performs with a partner, Darius FXXX, and it is possible that this partnership eases her transition between visual and audio display, since his assistance frees her to move around the booth and the stage area more than she would otherwise be able. In one online video, she used the space in front of the turntables, dancing as she turned her back to the audience and bent over; in the same video, while she was behind the turntables, she changed the records slowly, pausing to rub them against her body.[113]

It's possible that Portia Surreal's visual display is an artistic expression of her

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110 Ibid.

111 DJ Portia Surreal's MySpace page (accessed 22 July 2009) <http://www.myspace.com/djportiasurreal>

112 DJ Portia Surreal's Facebook fan page (accessed 23 July 2009) <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Portia-Surreal/60872080609?v=info&viewas=34300582>

113 "DJ Portia Surreal" (accessed 22 July 2009) <http://www.220.ro/taDLhOBB1X/DJ-Portia-Surreal>

identity. Mona Holmes distinguished between women who may practice topless DJing as a legitimate expression of their sexualities, and those who feel forced by the industry to place their bodies on display:

> People love and get off and express themselves in ways that I completely understand and some ways that I don't, but it's... if it really is a true expression of themselves and they're not being exploited, I think it's fine [...] Your musical choices that you choose, to having a pretty face up on the... behind the turntables or even tits behind the turntables that you can see. So it's about how each individual DJ presents themselves, and also how they're represented.[114]

However, she also noted that Shejay's recently launched booking agency does not represent topless DJs. She added that, when the website was asked to review a topless DJ, they gave a poor review based solely on the quality of her music rather than her visual appearance, and the review received some backlash from fans of the DJ.

The main issue that some women may have with DJs who choose to remove clothing is that the emphasis within the club space is fundamentally shifted, from the sound of the music, to the visual and/or sexual elements of the space. However, this element may not be intended to intensify the experience of either the music or the act of dancing like the presence of lights, smoke machines, or a predominant dance floor. This sexual element at the expense of music can be summed up by a forum comment posted concerning Portia Surreal's topless performance: ".....nice rack, mixing wasnt that good, but she played some nice selections. Anybody notice that *no one was dancing*, no

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114 Mona Holmes, telephone interview with the author, 26 November 2008.

clubbers around. 8/10 . Cheap drinks!"[115] (My emphasis.) A reply to the thread suggests a similar stress on visual elements: "didn't get on time to watch her spin, but got on time to c her big precious boobs."[116] In this case, I would like to argue that both music and dancing are far from the minds of much of the audience. The visual nature of a performance like this could be so pronounced that it changes the function of the event completely, from an audience dancing to music to an audience observing a striptease. The DJ herself is also in danger of "play[ing] to and signify[ing] male desire," as Laura Mulvey noted in her discussion of the male gaze.[117]

Some DJs, like M. Sylvia, believe that the aural nature of DJing will eventually win out over the practice of topless DJing:

> I think at the highest echelons of music, the big owners, they prefer the sound, they know the sound, and that's what they want. So I'm not too worried about it, I don't see it as a big wrinkle in women's path to equal treatment in the music industry, but it's just kind of sucks.[118]

Sylvia makes a distinction between visual titillation and top-notch musical production. The main draw of many topless DJs is their physicality rather than their musical skill, and although the two are not necessarily mutually exclusive, they seem to be separate a large part of the time. Topless DJs are mostly suitable for live performance, and do not seek out producers (or become producers themselves) to make recordings and produce their own albums. Because visual display does not translate to sound recordings, it could be

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115 Post by eljumping (accessed 22 July 2009) <http://www.cooljunkie.com/forum/san-juan-junkies/88455-portia-surreal.html>

116 Post by axel (accessed 22 July 2009) <http://www.cooljunkie.com/forum/san-juan-junkies/88455-portia-surreal.html>

117 Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures,* 19.

118 Sylvia Dziemian, interview with the author, Chicago, IL, 4 October 2008.

possible that topless DJing very limited in scope, and topless DJs' individual careers are successful for a limited time only.

One alternative way that women in club environments can deal with issues of physicality is to produce masculinity in order to take advantage of the authority and protection that masculinity gives within the club. The Sound-bar's "dress to impress" dress code generally emphasizes distinctions between genders, and during my fieldwork, I was one of very few women in pants (most wore short dresses). However, Sylvia was dressed in dark jeans, high heels (which accentuated her five-foot eleven-inch height), and a black blazer. Her dress differed from other women in the club, and she both stood out and projected authority because of her clothing. In addition, her purposeful emphasis of her already above-average height created an alliance between her and the masculine element in the club, while at the same time distancing her from the feminine element.

Judith Halberstam, in *Female Masculinity,* argues that "far from being an imitation of maleness, female masculinity actually affords us a glimpse of how masculinity is constructed as masculinity. . . . . what we understand as heroic masculinity has been produced by and across both male and female bodies."[119] In this way, Sylvia and some other women employees of the Sound-bar, are not trying to project "maleness." Rather, the masculinity that they produce gives them access to aspects of club life that might otherwise be restricted for women.

While some DJs use sexual and visual display as a way to gain access to the industry, many other DJs are primarily focused on presenting their music to the audience, and do not want visual perception to get in the way. One concern for these DJs is that the

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119 Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity,* Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998, 1-2.

industry will become more accepting of topless DJs' displays of sexuality, and will, in the process, shut out women DJs who only want to play music.

DJs who use strong displays of sexuality in their performance can make a decision to display themselves in this manner, as a true artistic expression of themselves. When they perform this way, they invite the male gaze to be centered on their bodies, and this by itself may not be harmful, if the performance is a true manifestation of the DJ's identity. However, there are so few women DJs working in house music that the actions of one DJ run the risk of reflecting on many other women behind the turntables. Therefore, the danger is not that a single DJ invites the male gaze upon herself, but rather that, by doing so, she invites the male gaze on many other women DJs struggling to survive in the club industry.

Conclusion

"Best night I ever had, was when I was playing, and it was a packed floor at Sound-bar, and they just started chanting 'go girl.'"[120]

Much of Chicago's house music is still considered to be underground, but the genre is not completely isolated from other genres of dance music worldwide. The sound of house music has affected a wide variety of electronically produced music worldwide, from Detroit techno to Madonna's dance music.[121] The proverbial splash that house music made when it entered the musical scene thirty years ago is still rippling actively, producing genres like trance, and fusions like tech house.

As DJs in these other genres work their way farther into the public consciousness and their music becomes more and more popular, the role of the DJ will continue to evolve. Although the DJ has continued to move to the forefront of societal consciousness, male and female DJs have had very different paths to success. Women DJs have been subject to many of the same difficulties as other women working in the club industry, most notably a gendered environment where the female DJ and other women become objects of the male gaze. Often, women DJs have to deal with the preconceived notions of the public regarding everything from their musical capabilities to their sexuality.

Many women DJs grapple with the issue of appearance in an industry that often allows or promotes the idea that women in the booth are to be seen and not heard. The

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120 Sylvia Dziemian, interview with the author, Chicago, IL, 4 October 2008.
121 Carl Hindemarch, *Pump Up the Volume: The History of House Music.*

club industry often helps to create an environment where female sexual display is encouraged, but for the sake of the men observing women rather than the women themselves. DJ M. Sylvia suggests that the dependence on women DJs' visual presentation is on the rise:

> I think the industry is less accepting now than maybe it used to be when some of the other DJs started, when house music just started. . . . that's kind of what the trend, we feel, is. . . . if I do see a lot of girl DJs booked, it's like playboy models. So I feel now the industry is less accepting of women.[122]

M. Sylvia's career, however, and the careers of other women DJs in Chicago, suggest that rather than being consumed by the industry's biases, they are simply bypassing them. By using methods of resistance like allying themselves with the masculine element in the club space, or creating social networks that fortify their careers, these DJs are showing an alternate route to success in the music industry.

Some of the methods of resistance practiced by women help to address issues for DJs at large, and regardless of gender. Forming collectives is beneficial for DJs in several ways: first, it can decrease the solitude often associated with being a DJ. It also has the potential to enlarge the amount of resources available, such as equipment and music files or records. Members of collectives have access to the experience and knowledge of the entire group, which can be helpful in booking jobs. Finally, it provides a way for clubs to hire multiple DJs at once, ensuring that each DJ's particular style will keep the club's musical style from stagnating. Being a member of a collective can help to stabilize a DJ's career, and in the long run, can help introduce more DJs to the practice.

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122 Ibid.

As the dance music industry becomes larger and more socially and racially diverse, it creates more spaces for DJs to perform. Women DJs are less limited by the constraints of the early house scene. The rise of the DJ has, in the end, resulted in a widening field where dance music is part of societal consciousness, and the expansion has the ability to create space for more women DJs, both in the club and as producers of their own music. Although there are still many issues that face women in Chicago's industry, their ability and methods of resistance are allowing them to gain a foothold. Through it, these women DJs are able to build sustainable careers and thrive in a male-dominated field.

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