

The Warehouse

206 S. Jefferson Street, Chicago



The Warehouse - Birthplace of House Music, 1906 & 1917, 206 S. Jefferson Street, Vernon W. Behel. Photo Credit: Serhii Chucky

OVERVIEW

In 1975, nightlife organizer Robert Williams purchased a 1910s-era warehouse building at 206 S. Jefferson Street with hopes to transform it into a nightclub comparable to the best dance floors in New York City where Williams was raised. After a two-year renovation and with one of best sound system available, the Warehouse opened as a three-level nightclub. At first a membership-only club frequented mostly by gay Black men, the Warehouse soon became a place of dance floor freedom for not just the LGBTQ+ community, but a diverse crowd of Chicagoans brought together by their love of music.

The Warehouse - Birthplace of House Music

Address: **206 S. Jefferson Street, Chicago**

Architect: **Vernon W. Behel**

Date: **1906 & 1917**

Style: **Chicago Commercial/Industrial**

Neighborhood: **West Loop**



Frankie Knuckles at The Warehouse, 206 S. Jefferson Street, Chicago, Illinois, Photo Credit: Frankie Knuckles Foundation

Prior to the opening of the Warehouse, Williams recruited his friend and fellow New York City nightlife figure, Frankie Knuckles, to be the club's resident DJ. Knuckles spent the next five years honing a new style: a revolutionary dance sound that blended disco, electronic, soul, and gospel music. The Warehouse earned a reputation in Chicago as the only place to hear this developing sound which later took its name from the nightclub itself, and ultimately became known as "house music."

From the Warehouse at 206 S. Jefferson Street, house music quickly spread across the globe. It emerged as one of the biggest and most successful genres in music for decades to come and became the basis for countless pop hits, revolutionizing how music sounded forever. Knuckles became a world-renowned producer due to the fame earned from his time developing house music at the Warehouse. His groundbreaking impact on the world of music was deep and lasting. Outside of the Warehouse's important place in music history, it is also a notable site of Black and LGBTQ+ history, a significant heritage whose commemoration is often overlooked within the built environment.

The Warehouse is located in the West Loop where teardowns of historic industrial structures have been occurring at a rapid pace. When the structure recently sold in December 2022, the listing noted both the building's history and the opportunity to clear the site for new development. The new ownership has been unresponsive to persistent outreach by Preservation Chicago.

Despite its extraordinary significant place in Chicago's musical and cultural history, the Warehouse has no protections against alteration or demolition. Preservation Chicago urges the City of Chicago to take steps to initiate Chicago Landmark Designation which would fully recognize and protect this highly significant site of Chicago music history. The Warehouse should be protected as a symbol of the rich history of Chicago's gay and Black communities, the incredible story of house music, and the groundbreaking impact that Frankie Knuckles had on the sound of modern music.

Chicago 7: The Warehouse – Birthplace of House Music

HISTORY

In 1906, a 2-story brick factory building was erected at 206 S. Jefferson Street for owner J.J. Gallery. It was designed by architect Vernon W. (or V.W.) Behel, a mostly industrial architect of the era. While many of his designs have been demolished, a handful remain, including a large warehouse structure at 409 W. Huron Street. Although the building's initial permit and construction announcement list the building as a 2-story structure, real estate advertisements in 1917 describe the property as having 3 stories and a basement. It is unclear if the additional floors and glazed brick facade were added later or were part of the building's original design.

Over the following decades, 206 S. Jefferson Street served as the home of various manufacturers such as the Celmo Company, Inc., George Felsenthal & Co., and Golitko Lithography. The building remained in industrial use up until 1975 when it was purchased by Robert Williams, a native New Yorker who had relocated to Chicago at the advice of his aunt. Williams, soon after arriving, realized that the nightlife scene in Chicago paled in comparison to the one he left behind. The Warehouse was Williams's attempt at offering Chicago's clubgoers something different.

When designing the Warehouse, Williams hired Richard Long & Associates (RLA) who were known at the time for installing the best sound systems in the world's most prominent nightclubs. Among the most notable RLA-designed spaces during this era were Ministry of Sound in London and Studio 54 in New York City. These sound systems were custom made for the club's layout and atmosphere, allowing DJs to control the sound quality and acoustics of the night's music. In doing so, RLA famously made an art out of sound design, creating auditory experiences that couldn't be found anywhere else. Today, only one intact RLA sound system still remains and can be found in a New York City bumper car arcade.

A world class sound system required a DJ that understood its potential. Williams initially reached out to his friend Larry Levan to be the Warehouse's resident DJ, an offer that Levan declined. Instead, Levan recommended his nightlife partner, Francis Nicholls, Jr., also known as Frankie Knuckles who, at the time, was DJing at New York City's famed Continental Baths, alongside Levan. Knuckles, an openly gay man, accepted the offer and relocated to Chicago in 1977, the same year that the Warehouse opened for business.



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Dancing at The Warehouse in Chicago in the late 1970s. Photo Credit: Frankie Knuckles Foundation

In its earliest years, the Warehouse was a members-only gay club, frequented mostly by Black men. Disco was wildly popular in the United States at the time, especially within both the gay and Black communities. Growing resentment against both groups in the 1970s manifested in a public disdain towards disco music in the latter half of the decade. This resentment eventually fueled the infamous Disco Demolition Night on July 12, 1979 at Comiskey Park in which thousands of disco records were dramatically destroyed by a mostly Caucasian crowd. These pervasive attitudes forced these communities into underground spaces like the Warehouse which were defined by community safety and a celebration of music.

With Knuckles behind the turntables, word began to spread that the Warehouse was the only place in Chicago to hear a new type of music, one that forged a harmony between soul, R&B, disco, electronic, and gospel. Knuckles famously toyed with song structures, elongating songs past their normal runtime, crafting hypnotic grooves out of song fragments, and bringing a song's best elements to the forefront. Knuckles's songs would be set to rhythmic, four-on-the-floor beats, even incorporating disorienting sound effects, like that of a freight train barreling through the dancefloor. Eventually, Knuckles's remixes moved outside of the Warehouse to Chicagoans' homes by way of cassette recordings, disseminating this new style of music to an even wider swath of fans. Thanks to this sound's association with the Warehouse, it soon became commonly referred to as "house music." Knuckles would later refer to house music as "disco's revenge."

As the Warehouse's popularity grew, the club's membership eventually moved away from a largely gay and Black clientele and came to include Chicagoans of all backgrounds. By 1982, just five years after the Warehouse opened, safety concerns from the City of Chicago led to the nightclub's permanent closing. Still, Frankie Knuckles and Robert Williams continued to shape Chicago's nightlife culture for years to come. The same year that the Warehouse shuttered, Knuckles opened up the Power Plant nightclub at 1015 N. Halsted Street where he continued to play house music for the masses. Meanwhile, Williams opened the Music Box (alternatively spelled Muzic Box) nightclub at 326 North Michigan Avenue—quite literally an underground space as it was only accessible from Lower Wacker Drive—with Ron Hardy, a gay Black man, was the club's resident DJ. Hardy would become known for an intense, hard-hitting sound that further defined the boundaries of house music.

Chicago 7: The Warehouse – Birthplace of House Music

In 1986, Frankie Knuckles produced and released the song “Your Love” with Chicago singer Jamie Principle providing vocals. The release and popularity of “Your Love”, a spellbinding dance track known for its arpeggiated synth line, is often pointed to as a watershed moment in the history of house music. It, along with Jesse Saunders’s “On & On” (1984) which was the first house record pressed on vinyl, helped to further define the spirit and sound of house, as well as popularize it with a larger audience. In particular, “Your Love” is credited with bringing house music to the United Kingdom where the track became a dance hit. Knuckles and Principle went on to release other house tracks together that drew on racial politics, sexuality, and dancefloor liberation. Unsurprisingly, house music became one of the defining soundtracks of LGBTQ+ nightlife during the 1980s and beyond.

By the 1990s, house music had exploded into a mainstream worldwide phenomenon. Countless pop hits during the decade incorporated and expanded upon the sound that Knuckles had developed at the Warehouse. Songs like “Pump Up The Jam” (1989) by Technotronic, “Vogue” (1990) by Madonna, “Finally” (1991) by CeCe Peniston, and “Show Me Love” (1992) by Robin S. were all massive radio successes in the early part of the decade. House music maintained an international appeal in the 1990s, as well, morphing into subgenres like jungle music in the United Kingdom and French house in France. Still, Chicago remained a center of house music during this time, producing classic house tracks like “Jack Your Body” (1987) by Steve “Silk” Hurley, “The Whistle Song” (1991) by Frankie Knuckles, and “Coffee Pot (It’s Time for the Percolator)” (1992) by Cajmere. Eventually, house music was no longer an underground sensation, but a global phenomenon. Even today, house music continues to inspire and define popular dance music, most recently exemplified by Beyoncé’s critically acclaimed album *RENAISSANCE* (2022) which brought the early sounds of house music to mainstream cultural prominence once more.

Knuckles was a musical force throughout the 1990s and into the 21st century, producing house remixes for some of the biggest names in music, including Patti LaBelle, Chaka Khan, Janet Jackson, Whitney Houston, Toni Braxton, and Michael Jackson. In 1996, Knuckles was inducted into the Chicago Gay and Lesbian Hall of Fame and, in 1997, Knuckles won the first ever Grammy Award for Remixer of the Year, Non-Classical, further cementing his legacy within the music industry. Knuckles’s incredible influence was also recognized in August 2004 when Jefferson Street between Monroe and Van Buren was named Honorary “The Godfather of House Music” Frankie Knuckles Way, thanks to efforts from community members and then-Senator Barack Obama.



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Frankie Knuckles and friends in the 1970s. Photo Credit: Frankie Knuckles Foundation

Knuckles passed away in 2014 at the age of 59. To commemorate his life, former President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama released a statement honoring Knuckles's accomplishments: "Frankie's work helped open minds and bring people together, blending genres to capture our attention and ignite our imaginations. He was a trailblazer in his field, and his legacy lives on in the City of Chicago and on dance floors across the globe."

THREAT

In July 2022, 206 S. Jefferson Street was listed for sale and in December, sale of the property to a new owner was completed. While the listing did acknowledge the building's significance as the "birthplace of house music," it also noted that "the asset is unencumbered by any long-term leases allowing for an excellent owner-user or redevelopment opportunity. The property has in place DX-7 zoning, which allows for potential expansion and a variety of uses." The larger West Loop area has seen a wave of industrial architecture demolished in recent years as new development continues to erase the neighborhood's manufacturing heritage. The Warehouse's valuable placement within the busy West Loop area and near Union Station and the Ogilvie Transportation Center makes it particularly vulnerable to being permanently lost through redevelopment.

Furthermore, the Warehouse is not a listed property in the Chicago Historic Resources Survey (CHRS). Without any type of designation within this survey, any application for a demolition permit would not be subject to a 90-Day Demolition Delay meaning the Warehouse could be razed overnight with no recourse available to halt the loss of the property. Even if the current owner does not plan to demolish and redevelop 206 S. Jefferson, there is no safeguard in place to protect the building's historic façade. Destructive alterations would be easy to carry out by this or any future owner unless protective measures are enacted.



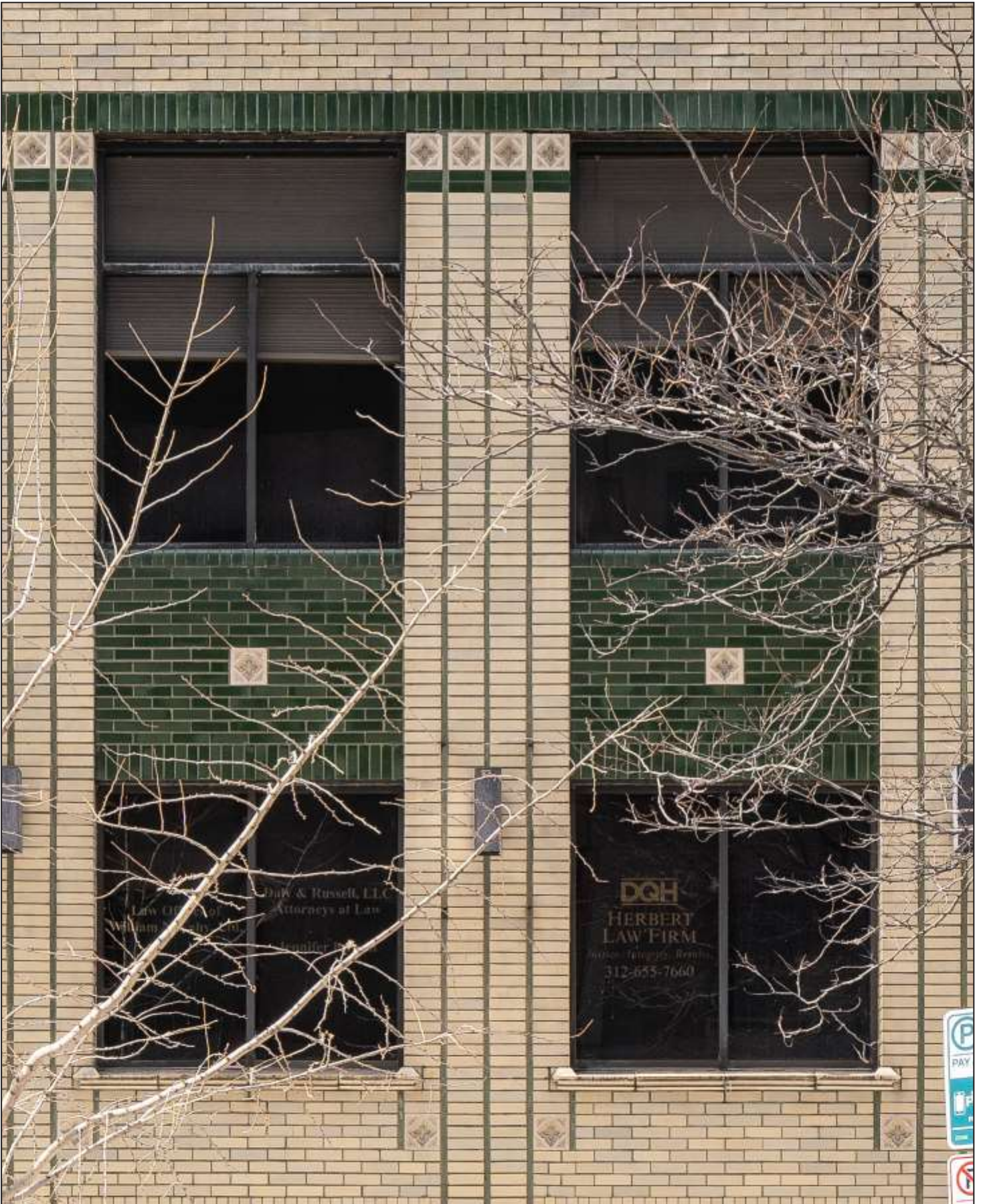
Frankie Knuckles. Photo Credit: Frankie Knuckles Foundation

The new owner appears to be associated with group of Chicago attorneys. They have been unresponsive to persistent outreach by Preservation Chicago regarding their plans for the future of the Warehouse. Preservation Chicago is concerned that if a redevelopment is planned, it could alter or demolish this significant site of Chicago music history.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Preservation Chicago endorses the designation of the Warehouse as an official Chicago Landmark. As the structure presently has no protection from the Chicago Historic Resources Survey (CHRS), the only way to save the Warehouse from alteration or wholesale demolition is to grant the building Landmark status. This could be accomplished as either an individual designation or as part of a larger Chicago Music historic district. Chicago Landmarks such as the Chess Records Office & Studio or the recently Landmarked Muddy Waters House demonstrate that Chicago has a built environment marked by stories of music innovation that are worthy of official Landmark protection. Although would likely meet multiple criteria for Landmark status, its association with a globally popular style of music, and a world-famous DJ, the site could also be folded into a larger district that honors other nightclubs and underground music venues from the same era.

Chicago still has much progress to make with regards to protecting and honoring crucial sites of music history throughout the city. Landmarking the Warehouse would signal to music communities, both nationally and internationally, that Chicago is a vital center of music in the United States and one of the great music cities of our nation. The Warehouse must be protected as a symbol of the rich history of Chicago's gay and Black communities, the incredible story of house music, and the groundbreaking impact that Frankie Knuckles had on the sound of modern music today.



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