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APRIL 2012  
HOUSE MUSIC

# JOEY NEGRO

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FOUND A HOME

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# where house found a home

CHICAGO AND SOUTH AFRICA'S HOUSE  
MUSIC EXPLOSION.

BY LYNNEE DENISE.  
SPECIAL CONTRIBUTOR TO 5 MAGAZINE.

My dearest Chicago, you are the architect for the house that Jack built, but did you have any idea that your music was fueling the rage and resistance against apartheid? Did you know that this electronic music created in your mama's basement would become a part of the cultural fabric of one of the most historically complex places on earth? That House Music is a part of the Mandelas' (both Winnie and Nelson's) cultural vocabulary?

Many a househead in the U.S. would like

to believe we "discovered" House Music in South Africa, when the truth is house has had a home in South Africa long before we tuned in. Sort of like the pre-existing civilizations that Sertima suggested *Came Before Columbus*. But let's be clear, it wasn't that we didn't care. We can use this moment in electronic music history to admit that not enough of us in the States received a reliable education about the contemporary cultural developments of Africa. And at the risk of sounding like an Intro to Afro-centric Studies course,



we've learned a great deal about Africa through the lens of white supremacists who sought the resources of Africa (both human and natural), to help institutionalize their superiority. But today, I need us to know better.

Now granted, 'heads were busy with our own developments, blending music that Traxx Records, Paradise Garage and Mr. Fingers gave us. Not to mention what The Warehouse, West End Records and Steve "Silk" Hurley offered. We had our hands full and our dance floors powdered. We had no idea that the migration of this electronic cultural product called House was travelling beyond our housing projects, ghettos

**CLIVE BEAN OF SOUL CANDI REMEMBERS HEARING CHICAGO'S FRANKIE KNUCKLES IN 1987 AT A LOCAL STOCKVEL, THE SOUTH AFRICAN EQUIVALENT OF A HARLEM SPEAKEASY. 'WE LISTENED TO THIS SOUND AND THOUGHT, THIS IS HARDCORE MUSIC, DIFFERENT FROM THE BUBBLE-GUM ARTISTS MOST OF US WERE LISTENING TO AT THE TIME.'**

and boroughs and settling in the South African township. How could we know? There was not a single network I can think of that broadcasted music, videos or favorable images of modern Africa. *National Geographic* doesn't count.

House Music in South Africa did not start with the hyper-talented and contemporary Black Coffee, Culoe de Song and Soulistic crew; in fact, House in South Africa has roots almost as long as Hip-Hop's golden era in the Boogie Down Bronx.

DJ Clive Bean of Soul Candi Records remembers hearing Chicago's Frankie Knuckles in 1987 at a local *stockvel*, which is the South Afri-

can equivalent of a Harlem speakeasy. "We listened to this sound that we called international music, and thought, this is hardcore music, different from the bubble gum artists like Brenda Fassie most of us were listening to at the time." Clive shared that House Music went hand in hand with *Pantsula* dancing, a local and traditional dance that came to life in the townships, primarily in the '80s and gained momentum with the dismantling of the apartheid regime.

South African musician/musicologist Thozani Mhlambi talks about House Music in the post democracy context. "House Music is the same age as our democratic dispensation in South Africa [18 years old]. The increase in access to overseas sound material in the early 1990s led to House Music's growth locally."

With the support of a Jerome Foundation Travel and Study grant, I paid a visit to South Africa, determined to understand *The Afro Digital Migration: House Music in Post Apartheid South Africa*. I wanted to explore how House Music took root in South Africa and shaped its national identity. The impetus for this research was my belief that electronic music in the African Diaspora is an under-explored cultural product. As a DJ, I was driven by the clean production and seamless mixes I heard; as a dancer, I wanted to witness the intricate body movement inspired by House; and as a scholar, I wanted to figure out how, in the face of state-sanctioned surveillance and harassment, the music flourished.

Most of the DJs, musicians and producers I connected with in Joburg, Cape Town, Newcastle and Durban mentioned Frankie Knuckles as being their introduction to House Music in the late '80s/early '90s. Clive Bean adds, "We were listening to this music at the height of [apartheid] resistance." House Music was a part

of the soundtrack of social change and was the underground answer to the chains of restriction imposed by the Dutch/British minority who occupied South Africa through the system of apartheid. In fact, the Bronx, the South Side of Chicago and South Africa were all united by the stank of disenfranchisement and the electronic music inspired by the lived reality of people in all three places amplified the inequalities that connected black people around the world.

To understand the context of South African house, Mhlambi places it at the center of a generational response to freedom (real or perceived), and a new access to technology. "House Music grapples with the difficult issues we have been unable to resolve in our material reality. In House Music we see the co-mingling of ambiguities within the post-apartheid scenario... House Music conflates these issues in a dynamic and experiential way, addressing precisely that which we have been unable to speak in words."

South African House is characterized by the bass heavy, churchified synthesized sound of classic Chicago House and some of the Euro-techy sounds heard coming out of Germany and England. It incorporates syncopated, repetitive rhythms, traditional African instruments and sounds and lyrics sung in South African languages, mainly Xhosa and Zulu. Prior to the South African "invasion" that we have come to know through DJs/producers like Kent or Black Motion, pioneers of the sound like DJ Oskido and Arthur Mafokate took this township electro funk, slowed down our beloved 120bpm groove to about 90bpm, added social context and vocals and gave birth to a sub-genre of House unique to South Africa called Kwaito music. While Kwaito never made it into the hands of the global House community (a sign of gross negligence on the part of the industry), it demanded the collective attention of South Africa as nation and provided fertile ground for what was to come.

The feeling that came over me in South Af-

rica spoke to a larger point that I had never really considered: *Deep House is healing*. It makes sense that a place still haunted by the ghosts of apartheid would make House Music the sound of daily living. I heard House Music played everywhere in South Africa – in the clubs, in the taxis, in the elevators, at the airport and in the stores. There was even a religious segment of househeads that played House for Christ. Thanks to Kaya FM (Johannesburg) and Metro FM (national), I heard hours of House on commercial radio during prime time slots. I witnessed Soweto swingers, rambunctious teenagers, grandmothers, former activists, struggling students, teachers, waiters and doctors bouncing to House.

So it didn't surprise me when I came across a little known fact that explains it all; South Africa has been dubbed the world's biggest House Music market per capita. And to be clear, the love and creation of House doesn't stop at South African borders. It can be heard in neighboring countries Mozambique, Botswana, Namibia and Zimbabwe as well.

I will always love Atjazz, MAW and Osunlade, but my ears, my feet and my Afro Digital lens have been permanently changed – I would even say expanded – by the South African House Music experience. There is a dangerous, and at this point, boring focus on Black American music as being THE sound of the African Diaspora. To learn more about Black American music, we must reach into the soul of it. There we'll discover Brazil, Ghana, Jamaica and a host of other global influences. We're a multi-dimensional people and our music reflects the true meaning of Diaspora. Who's to say what ancestor used you as a vessel to create your sound? Let's share the bass that unites us. •••

*therunout:*

You can contact Lynnee Denise at [lynneedenise@gmail.com](mailto:lynneedenise@gmail.com) and hear a mix to accompany this piece at [djlynneedenise.podomatic.com](http://djlynneedenise.podomatic.com).