

music

this week's essential reading

{ Ian Rankin: 50 songs I love', *Sabotage Times*

The crime novelist's main character Rebus is a massive music fan, but what does the author love? Van Morrison, Joy Division, Black Sabbath, Throbbing Gristle ... }

House rules

Taking its name from an inner-city dance club in Chicago, this may be the most innovative style of music and dance that you've never heard of, writes Andy Battaglia



The spirit of disco: House music fans dance along to a laser light show. Getty Images

You can't help but wonder about a man who names himself Johnny Fiasco. What is his life like? What makes him tick? Has he managed to make his friends call him that? (If so, did it require a lot of a little convincing?)

The questions only compound when Johnny Fiasco also happens to be responsible for the creation of *Taurus*, a dance-music track for the ages. It skitters, floats, soars, swells; every sublime part of it seems conceived and crafted in mind of motion. It's an anthem for ecstatic acts, and it counts as a classic, of a sort.

But then, it remains even more so unknown, just one of hundreds and even thousands of effectively anonymous electronic dance tracks that do their duty to get people dancing and then spin back into expectant silence, waiting to be played again. That, in essence, is the story of Chicago house music, a sound seeded decades ago but still awaiting its proper due.

Part of that due comes by way of *Only 4 U: The Sound of Cajmere & Cajual Records*, a new 2-CD set that

surveys a particular corner of Chicago house in all its kinetic glory. Johnny Fiasco figures into it, as does an eclectic cast of performers and producers who took their cues from new ways to make people freak out in the Windy City.

Chief among that cast is Cajmere himself, who works as well under the alias Green Velvet – recognisable in his formative years for his fluorescent mohawk hair. He is one of many legends of Chicago house, most of them African-American, who dreamt up a sound to follow in the spirit of disco. There's a new strain of disco, though, for a new age of electronic machines. It was weird, wired, wild, unhinged, always at least a little bit beyond the bounds of control.

Only 4 U surveys a fertile period for it, beginning in the early 1990s, a few years after house music in Chicago found its form. Like the similarly mechanistic sound of techno that developed in Detroit around the same time, house made much of a prevailing sense of mystery and menace; unlike moody, brooding

techno, however, house prioritised levity and euphoric signs of life. You can hear them at work together in the *Only 4 U* track *Le Fusion* by Gemini, who mixes some seemingly nonsensical vocal chattering (it sounds like wandering though a spirited cocktail party in a country you've never visited) over a slight but commanding beat that intercuts a walking bass-line with bursts of sinister laughs.

It's there too, in Cajmere's classic 1992 single *Percolator*, an archetypal rendering of the Chicago house form and a strong candidate for the best song in any genre about a means for brewing coffee. Very little happens in *Percolator*, but its merging of a disembodied voice (devoted to intoning variations on "it's time for the percolator!" no fewer than 59 times) and meticulous, almost-martial drum sounds makes for a mesmerising kind of minimalism.

Chicago house is seductive and sly in ways that Cajmere likes to play with. In *Chit Chat*, he sends up the culture of dance-floor flirtation with spoken-word parts that parrot the worst kind of pick-up lines ("Do you like the colour blue or red? Oh really now"). In *Feelin' Kinda High*, over a stomping upright beat, he introduces elements of musical wooziness that threaten to make a listener want to tumble to the ground and roll around with a slinky sense of wasted wonder.

Not all of it is pointed or provocative in any one particular way. In *Lalalalala (Inside My Head)*, Cajmere simply sets out a tight, tidy beat with bouncy arpeggios from a synthesizer and then steps back to listen and let the voice of someone else enter in. "I don't know, today is just a day I want to flow," sings the voice – which happens to belong to Jamie Principle, a soulful

signifier who helped establish the spirit of Chicago house in its early stages in the early 1980s.

That elemental spirit can be heard on *122 BPM: The Birth of House Music*, a recent 3-CD set compiled and mixed by Jerome Derradji. A student of the style who calls Chicago home, Derradji digs deep into history to present house as a simultaneously sparkling and ramshackle project that developed over time. From the start, pride of place goes to tracks that survey what it means to "jack" – a method of dancing that involves bucking one's body (or at least attempting to) in the fitful, collapsing, fold-up mode of a jackknife.

The set begins with musical agitations delivered by way of *Jackmaster*, a track dating back to 1987 and credited to Mr Lee & Kompany, who knew more than most how to make machines seethe. As matters have progressed only a few minutes later,

a voice wielded by Mitchbal & The Housemaster coos "when I hear the music, that house music, I go crazy, shot – I get hot, I start jackin' my body and I just can't stop".

Indeed, there's a sense of unbridled, uncontrollable energy in Chicago house that owes its genesis to after-hours parties in inner-city dance clubs (including The Warehouse, the source of the genre's name). Such were the settings integral to establishing the strangely alien and yet somehow also accommodating sense of atmosphere that play in tracks like *The Jackin' Zone*, which functions like an internal monologue transmitted from the head of someone either out of his mind or in uncommon touch with his innermost thoughts – or both. "You have just entered a dimension of sound, a dimension of body movement," goes the spoken intro. "There's no going back, only forward."



The DJ known as Johnny Fiasco, a progenitor of Chicago house music.

Tales of inventive nights when such wisdom reigned remain, even if mostly in the romantic amber glow of history. But the spirit of Chicago house thrives. Elements of the music have been revived in contemporary sounds that catalyse dance clubs around the world, from London to Berlin to anywhere, really, where a liking for sensuousity and space has introduced itself into the formula for dance music that can be as suggestive as it is straightforward.

The spirit lives on in Chicago too, though in different forms. One of them, the newest and most notable, goes by the name of "footwork", in reference to the mode of dancing it engenders. (Imagine a futuristic octopus in a cartoon dangling its legs and floating a few inches above the ground, and you begin to get a sense of what footwork dancing is like. Really, look it up on YouTube.)

The music for footworking has travelled beyond Chicago mainly on curious compilations until the past few months, when the notion of the full and proper footwork "album" has gained some currency. The first of the recent wave was Traxman's *Da Mind of Traxman*, which begins with a prototypical track called *Footworkin' on Air*: beneath the twinned sounds of an African thumb piano and a slow-rolling synth that levitate up top, a dance beat scatters and abstracts down below, in complicated patterns that somehow cohere into something groovy and forthright.

It's all intriguingly spacious and strange, with a habit for vocal samples that fix on a stutter or a single snippet of an utterance and then repeat it until otherwise standard speech starts to sound otherworldly. It happens in high supply on another hallmark album, DJ Rashad's *Teklife Vol. 1: Welcome to the Chi*, which highlights footwork's links to the swagger and strut of hip-hop.

It also works its way, less so but with a more lasting sense of subtlety, into the best of the new Chicago footwork albums, *The Space Zone* by Young Smoke. He's young – just 18 when the album came out and all of 19 now – but Young Smoke presents a widescreen vision that enlists footwork as a sort of soundtrack for an imagined sci-fi fantasia. The whole album sticks to a unified musical theme that draws on vintage sensations of "space music" and burns extra thrusters toward a new version to take its place.

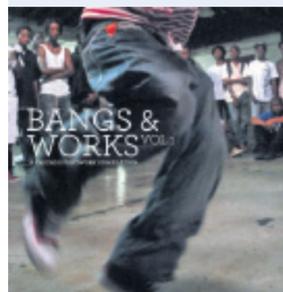
It's spelt out in the song titles – *Traps in Space*, *Destroy Him My Robots*, *Alien Pad*, *Lazer Hornz*. But it's even more clearly communicated in a sparse, spare, radically strange but also studious sound that seems to appreciate its roots in the origins of Chicago house without mirroring itself in the past. It shows respect, and a worthwhile lack-of-respect, where all respect is due.

Andy Battaglia is a New York-based writer whose work appears in *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Wire* and *Spin*.

playlist

Dance music known as Chicago house, named for a nightclub in the Windy City

Bangs & Works Vol. 1 & 2 (Planet Mu)



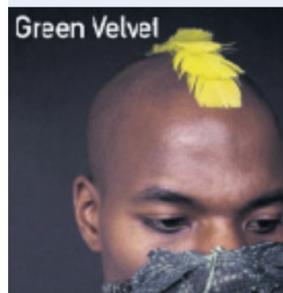
Various artists
The two separate volumes of Bangs & Works ushered footwork into the ears (and addled brains) of listeners the world over, many of them now under the sway of a sound still very much in its development phase.

This Ain't Chicago: The Underground Sound of UK House & Acid 1987-1991 (Strut)

Various artists
This recent two-CD set tells the story of house as it travelled beyond the bounds of Chicago, seeding the ground for rave scenes and other such illicit enterprises on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean.



Green Velvet (F-111)



Green Velvet
This compilation of seminal Green Velvet hits hard, in meticulous and minimal ways, with Flash, The Stalker and Answering Machine, which chronicles a string of insane phone messages in song. Plus the cover offers a great view of his crazy yellow mohawk.

Trax Records: The 20th Anniversary Collection (Trax)

Various artists
Surveying the inventory of Trax, the most storied label in Chicago house, this 3-CD set gathers a slew of classics – *No Way Back* by Adonis, *Can You Feel It?* by Mr Fingers, *Acid Trax* by Phuture – and spins them out like alien calls from the wild.

