

HOUSE

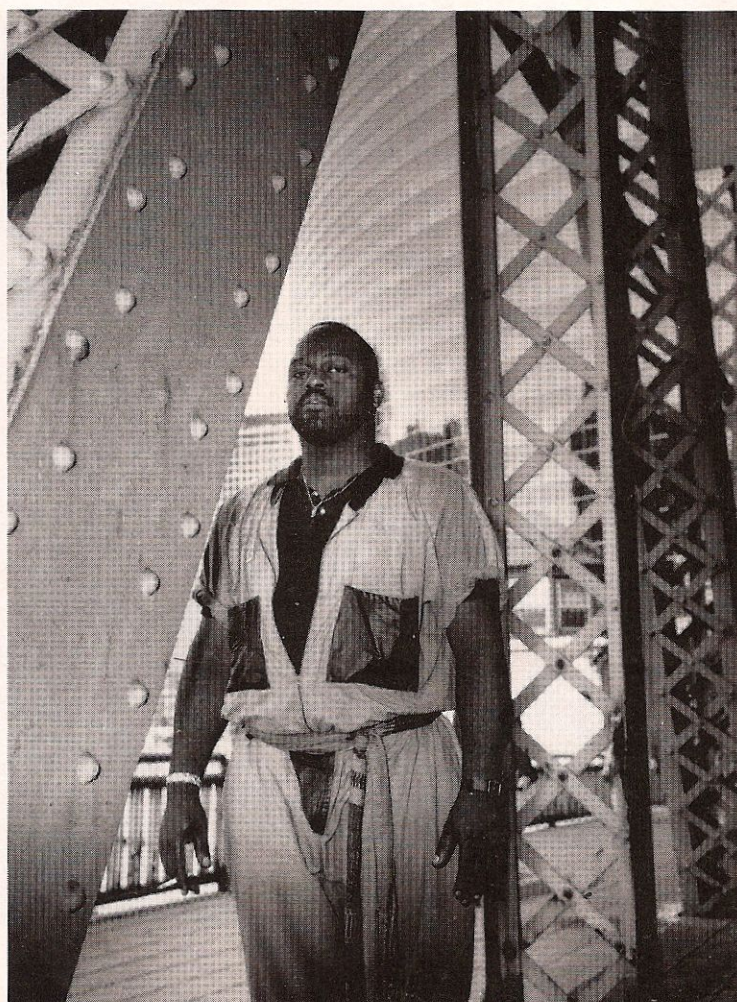
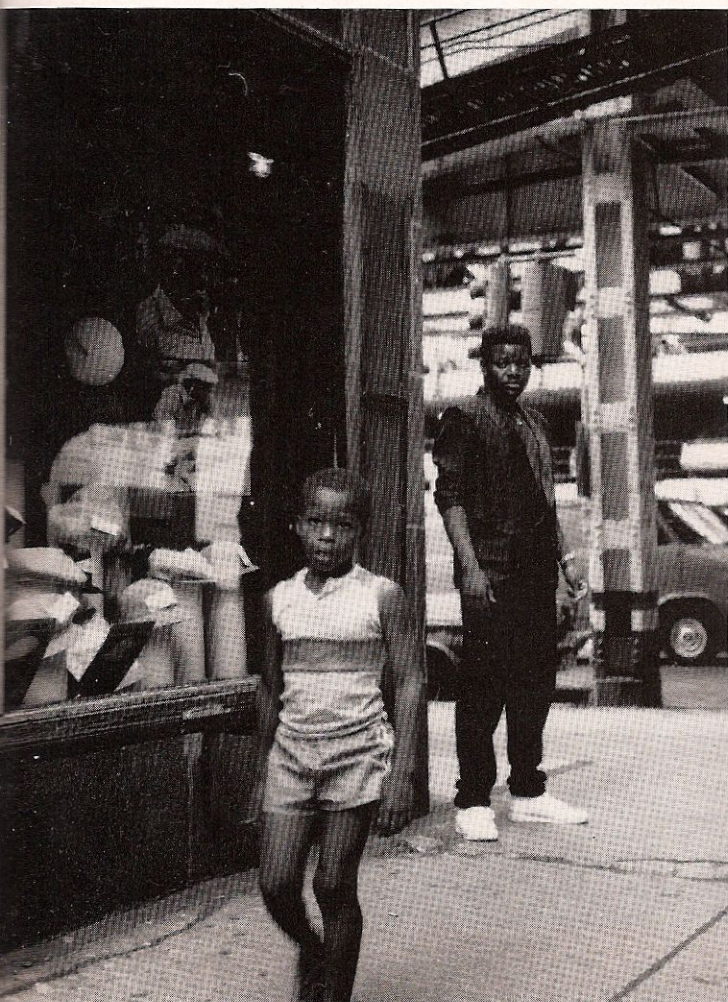
CHICAGO

SAMPLE AND HOLD: THE BARE BONES OF DISCO
HAVE BEEN IN DEEP FREEZE IN CHICAGO. OUT OF
EAR-SHOT OF THE MEDIA, EAGER DJs HAVE BUILT
A STYLE CALLED HOUSE.

"Sue the bastards!"

WE'VE BEEN IN CHICAGO for two hours now, and for reasons too ridiculous to explain we are sitting in an Armenian restaurant talking to Jay B. Ross, attorney at law for DJ International. Ross, a respectable if portly-looking citizen, suddenly reveals that he too has a deal with the label and launches into a performance as The Rapping Lawyer. Events have taken a distinctly surreal turn. Only in America could an attorney sell himself via 'Sue The Bastards' T-shirts with his name and number on the back; only in Chicago would a label sign its own lawyer to

G A R A G E



work on a song with Farley Funk, Arthur Baker and two 15-year-old hip hop hardliners. Even more confusingly, the label has also signed William 'Refrigerator' Perry of the Chicago Bears, Indiana soul lady Loleatta Holloway, a Greek pop group, several hip hop crews, NY punkette Screaming Rachel and other oddities too bewildering to mention. Which makes the question we're here to answer seem all the more difficult: what is this 'House' music they're hyping so heavily back home?

A day later and I'm in Paragon Studios to hear a re-recording of Marshall Jefferson's song "The House Music Anthem" for London Records' upcoming House compilation. Chicago studios, I've found, are unlike any other; when one person cuts a House track, everyone else comes down to watch. There's

a party going on in the control room: Harri, vocalist on the classic House track "Donnie" by The It, is dancing with a dog's choke chain and lead around his neck '76 style, and Marshall is doubled up on the sofa in a fit of anguish, envy and admiration. "Aw God, I wish I could look weird like that!" he wails, fishing out a nappy pigtail from behind his standard Afro for my inspection. "My girlfriend made me grow this so I'd look more like a recording artist, but I wish I could deal with people staring at me like that."

Backing singers Rudie Forbes, Prof. T.C. Roper and Curtis McClay are here, while Lewis Pitzele, DJ International's Vice President in charge of Promotion is — as always — on the phone. Chip E, the label's 20-year-old Vice President in charge of A&R (living proof that in Chicago, every boy can

grow up to be vice president) sits quietly in the corner; DJ Ron Hardy revolves on a chair and Frankie Knuckles is busy working on the mix. John Stoddart is taking photos, Marshall is videoing his first ever interview with a British journalist, and in the background the vocals float through the monitors: "This is House Music." It seems as good a time as any to pop the question, so I do. What is House music? Suddenly, all hell breaks loose.

"House music? I couldn't even *begin* to tell you what House is. You have to go to the

ROCK THE HOUSE:

Frankie Knuckles (above) came from New York to DJ at The Warehouse. From his mix of disco and drum machines, Farley Funk (left) created House anthems like "Jack Your Body"

HOUSE

CHICAGO



IN THE HOUSE TONIGHT. Above: At a session to record "The House Music Anthem", Louis Pitzele, ex balloon salesman, now VP in charge of Promotion, is on the phone. Right: Chip E steps out in midtown Chicago.



clubs and see how people react when they hear it. It's more like a feeling that runs through, like old time religion in the way that people jus' get happy and screamin'. It's happening! It's . . . House!"

"Let me see if I can put it better. It's more like Eighties disco songs in Eighties style."

"It's Chicago's own sound."

"'Cept it come from New York, and they don't know it."

"It's rock 'till you drop, that's what it is!"

"It's a status symbol to party all night at the Muzic Box. Everybody goes there — all the hippest kids in the city!"

"You'll leave there a changed person. You might go and seek religion afterwards! You'll love it. It's gonna be hot, it's gonna be sweaty, and it's gonna be great. What you'll experience is honest-to-goodness, get down, low down, *grutsy*, grabbin' type music. Boom boom boom!"

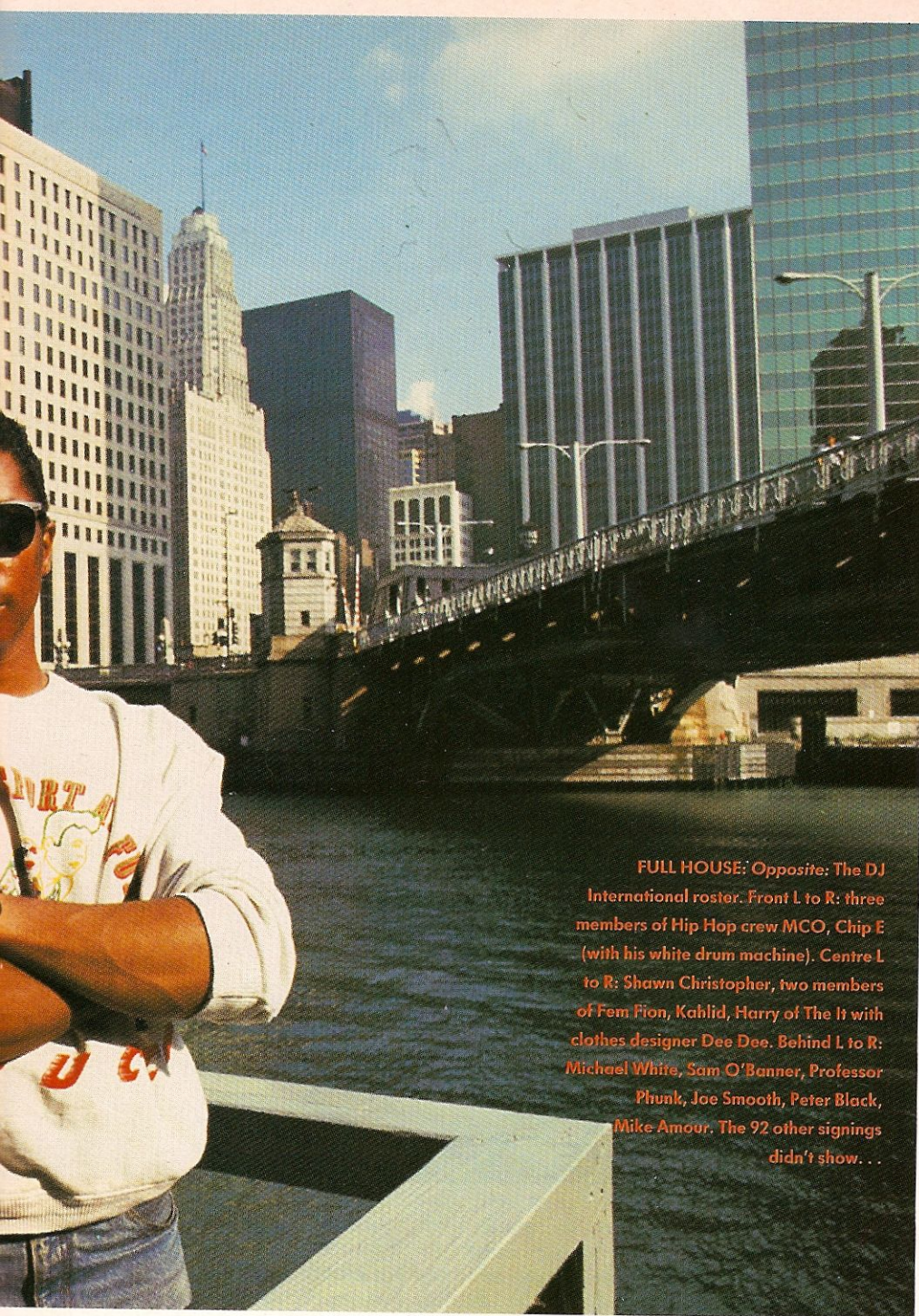
Long a centre for gospel, jazz, blues and

advertising jingles (really), the Windy City is revelling in its new-found status as a dance music centre. There's a new (and beautiful) city for the UK hacks to fly to *en masse*, and the man from the *Chicago Sun Times* is calling my room to ask how seriously THE FACE is taking all this. "It hasn't crossed over to the Yuppie crowd here," he tells me with satisfaction, citing a commission to write about Chicago rock bands for *Creem* as one of the best of the best things to emerge from the affair.

Local radio, meanwhile, only started introducing House records to their regular playlist after DJ International took their crew to the New Music Seminar in July, held a party in NY's Better Days Club, and began attracting media interest. Larry Levan had been playing the music at the Paradise Garage for some time along with a few other NY clubs. Arthur Baker has recorded his own homage, "Chicago", but Lewis is adamant

that "it took the English media to make the radio play its own local talent". Yet Farley 'Jackmaster' Funk claims a crowd of 2,000 at La Mirage on Friday and Saturday nights, while Ron Hardy at The Muzic Box on Thursday and Saturday and Frankie Knuckles at COD's on Friday both attract capacity crowds. Maybe it's because the faces are mainly black that they don't count.

BUT LET'S BEGIN AT the beginning. In 1977, New York DJ Frankie Knuckles was asked to come to Chicago to establish a new gay club called The Warehouse. At the time, he recalls, DJs were a rarity in the city, and all except two bars — Le Pub and The Bistro — used jukeboxes instead. Things didn't look promising, but the club had the advantage of being the only after-hours venue, opening at midnight and closing when the last dancers left on Sunday afternoon. A small three-storey building with a seating area



FULL HOUSE: *Opposite: The DJ International roster. Front L to R: three members of Hip Hop crew MCO, Chip E (with his white drum machine). Centre L to R: Shawn Christopher, two members of Fem Fion, Kahlid, Harry of The It with clothes designer Dee Dee. Behind L to R: Michael White, Sam O'Banner, Professor Phunk, Joe Smooth, Peter Black, Mike Amour. The 92 other signings didn't show. . .*

upstairs, free juice, water and munchies in the basement and a dimly-lit dancefloor in between, Frankie told the owners to give him five years to create an impact. It took him two.

"It was absolutely the only club in the city to go to," he recalls with little visible self-congratulation. "It wasn't a polished atmosphere — the lighting was real simplistic, but the sound system was *intense* and it was about what you heard as opposed to what you saw. Comfortably, the place held about 600, but coming and going all night I'd say we did about 2,000-2,500 people. The crowds came in shifts — those who were always outside at 11.45, they'd 'jack' until about 3-4am when the bar people would arrive. Then there'd be a whole different crowd that would come about 9am which is how the parties carried on until the afternoon.

"Most of the music I played was inspir-

ational — all the dance things that were popular in '77/'78, but the voice had to have a nice sound and a message that was more than just *'I met this chick'*. Most of the time it was either really heavy instrumentals or vocals talking about doing something for oneself. Like D-Train's 'Keep On': *"I can't let nobody keep me from reaching the top"*. That type of stuff."

Frankie's seamless mixing and his combination of obscure US oldies with Euro imports meant that while hip hop swept across America, disco never died in the windy city. It wasn't long before the straight kids too were crowding through the club's door, and when they began walking into record stores demanding Frankie Knuckles music or "that sound they play down the house", House Music was born.

SOME STILL MAINTAIN the name comes from the house parties held in the mainly black

South Side of the city or in the Bronx-like projects called Cabrini Green, but most of those with sass say the term came from The Warehouse. Such was the infatuation with the club that younger artists such as Chip E and producer Jessie Saunders' brother Dr Derelict clearly remember a time in the early Eighties when all the youths were dressing gay, acting gay, trying their hardest to *be* gay. The scene is still a remarkably amiable mix of sexual tastes largely free of macho and misogyny, though mention should be made here of Farley Funk's mildly amusing nasty (as in rude) romp "SMMFD" (Suck My Mother Fucking Dick). It appears on the flip of "Jack The Bass" under the alias Jackmaster Dick, and comes complete with Dickappella mix, fetish fans. Besides, when the radio stepped into the scene, most gave up the idea of being gay and decided to be a DJ instead.

The mix shows started on WGCI, but things really took off when rival R&B station WBMX responded by gathering together a group of street DJs under the title the Hot Mix Five. Led by Kenny Jason, the team also included a young DJ popular on the South Side: Farley Keith Williams, aka Farley Jackmaster Funk.

The Hot Mix Five have since defected to WGCI, leaving Frankie Knuckles to head the WBMX side, and the mixes are now an integral part of Chicago city life. Thirty minute mixes are aired at regular intervals throughout the day — around 18 records per session, mixed together as one continuous medley without repeats. The serious event, though, is on Saturday night when the stations air five-hour shows with each DJ offering an hour-long mix. From 250,000 to a million of the city's inhabitants tune in at some point — about a fifth of the population.

"In my neighbourhood there seem like a million kids all on the streets with radios blasting," laughs Shawn Christopher, backing singer for Chaka Khan and the voice on the DJ International single "People Of All Nations".

FARLEY IS REPUTEDLY the wealthiest and definitely the best-known of the House DJ/producers, and although he owes much of his success to the radio, he is as dismissive of it as the rest. The stations' alleged refusal to acknowledge their records outside of the mixes and to play anything more energetic than 117bpm has earned them almost universal contempt among the House fraternity, although Farley admits it was the Hot Mixes that spread the scene.

"Chicago is a DJ city," he insists. "If there's a hot record out, in Chicago they'll all buy two copies so they can mix it. We have a talent for mixing. When we first started on the radio there weren't many, but then every kid wanted two turntables and a mixer for Christmas. We've been on air for six years now, so a kid who was 11 then is 17 and a DJ or at least a fan of the mixes. And if a DJ can't mix, they'll boo him in a minute because half of them probably know how to do it themselves."

The frequent exposure also meant that they soon ran out of what Farley calls "Bootsy Collins/SOS Band-type tracks" to mix, and so they turned to Paul Weisburg of

KEEP A CLEAN HOUSE: Jay B Ross is The Rapping Lawyer at DJ International. Below: Kahlid, aged 14, sang along to tapes of Whitney Houston to impress a music business convention.



"IF THERE'S A HOT RECORD OUT, IN CHICAGO THEY BUY TWO COPIES SO THEY CAN MIX IT. EVERY KID WANTS TWO TURNTABLES AND A MIXER FOR CHRISTMAS. AND IF A DJ CAN'T MIX, THEY'LL BOO HIM BECAUSE THEY CAN DO IT THEMSELVES."

Imports Etc for ideas. Now selling an odd mix of hot House tracks and dusty \$13 LPs by the likes of Wire, even the mighty Farley bows in homage to the shop and to its owner's inventiveness. "He was the only person in the city selling those imports. Italian records like Trilogy's 'Not Love', 'I Need Love' by Capricorn, 'Brainwashed' by Telex. There was one called 'Don't Forget To Buy This Record' – a tripped out name for a record! That was really big here, but we couldn't get no more imports so somebody bootlegged it – that happens a lot."

Another variation was digging out old Philly songs and adding a faster, boosted rhythm track. Farley started taking his drum machine to play along with records at his club The Playhouse, and there was a booming trade in records consisting solely of a bassline and drum patterns, often recorded by local DJ.

From this to complete records was a short step, and Farley finally made his debut with "Aw Shucks" on his own House label. Showcasing the distinctive thumping bass drum – "Farley's foot" – it was overlaid with computer samples of a dog barking, James

Brown grunting and lots of silly voices. Like all House records, it comes in a choice of mixes, was made cheaply and somehow sounds even cheaper.

But that, everyone tells me, is part of the appeal. It's the reason why Frankie Knuckles hasn't yet indulged his fantasy of lush, layered productions à la Trevor Horn ("Frankie Goes To Hollywood Were 5000 big here!") and as Farley explains, "Our sound is so different because we can make just a bassline and a rhythm track and we can sell 10,000 copies of that just in the city. All you need is a feel for music. There are people who've been to college to study music and they can't make a simple rhythm track let alone a hit record. It's weird. And it seems like a waste of time to learn all that because now a little kid can pick up a computer, get lucky with it and write a hit. It's no use working with ancient sounds."

For aspiring artists, then, this is the House that Jackmaster built:

"Basically, it's a good vocalist with a nice bass drum pattern that really thumps. I love the foot, because that's what gets people moving. The foot establishes the beat, the

snare sustains it and from there the hi-hat picks it up and gives it energy. There's a lot of funk in House, which people don't realise - they say it's hi-NRG but it's not because it has a lot of soul in it, it's real funky."

Now making his own records (14 at last count), producing other House artists, re-mixing outsiders such as the Dazz Band and branching out into rap, Farley finds less time for the clubs but still says they are central to his work. "I love playing for the crowd - it's unbelievable when 2,000 people really get going. I can make a record on my four-track recorder at home, take it into the club and play it on the reel-to-reel. If they like it I'll copyright it then play it in the Hot Mix about two weeks later, then I'll call round the record stores. If you play a record in the mix, kids will go into stores with the tape and ask for it, and if there's a demand, night away I'll try to get it out.

"I was looking for a deal with a major label but it's kinda hard because I'm the type of person who would put out five records in two months and they'd make me wait."

VINCE LAWRENCE of The Bang Orchestra has just released his debut LP and a single, "Sample This", on megabucks label Geffen and Jessie Saunders of Jes Say Records is in the process of signing to the major too, but on the whole House still works on the level of ducking and diving. Chip Edhardt became DJ Chip E while still at High School, but in spite of guest spots at Muzic Box, The Playground and The Candy Store, he didn't get big enough quick enough. A spell behind the counter at Imports Etc convinced him he could make records as good as some of the DJ product he was selling, so he sold his turntables and spent the money in the studio laying down some rhythm tracks. There was enough cash left to make a single test pressing: "I already knew the Hot Mix Five so I gave it to Kenny Jason and he played it immediately. Then Farley took it and it got passed around and gained a lot of popularity from that. So by the time I had my first 1,000 pressed - I borrowed my mother's income tax cheque - we sold 500 in the first day out of one store, and the rest within a week. I ordered another 3,000 and we sold them in about a week. that was the 'Jacktracks' EP."

Meanwhile, Rocky Jones of the record pool AudioTalent had decided to help one of his DJs, Steve 'Silk' Hurley, release a track called "Music Is The Key" by J. M. Silk. When the first pressing sold out, he swapped his hot-rod Corvette in exchange for 10,000 more copies: DJ International was born. Chip was amongst the early signings, producing the stuttering, stripped-down dance track "Like This" and the upcoming "Godfather Of House" under his own name, working with Harri and friends on "Donnie" as The It, and producing/mixing other artists for the label and its subsidiaries.

For Chip, the formula is much the same as for Farley: "A lot of bottom, real heavy kick drum, snappy snare, bright hi-hat and a real driving bassline to keep the groove. Not a lot of lyrics - just a sample of some sort, a melody to remind you of the name of the record so you go out and buy it."

How long can you keep doing this, I ask, before people get bored? Chip looks

thoughtful for a while, then turns back to face me with a grin.

"I'd say about the next 20 years."

AND SO FAR, THE outlook seems good for DJ International. Having just signed a distribution deal for release via London Records in the UK, the bigger names are busy packing their cases and checking out addresses for the best London warehouse parties. Songs are being recorded in Spanish for the city's large Hispanic community, and the version of "Love Can't Turn Around" sung by Darryl Pandy and recorded by Farley and Jessie Saunders has been played in uptown clubs like The Limelight as well as the house parties and dance dives.

"I'm glad to see our creation's out now, after all this time," states Farley with satisfaction, but others aren't so sure. Everyone is keen to stress that Chicago is brimming with talent, that there is an endless stream of hungry young DJs and gospel-trained voices to keep the House burning, but DJ International has signed over 100 artists now, and you can't help but feel that many will have their hopes disappointed. Lewis Pitzele hands me a sheaf of press shots telling me he can't remember the artists' names, but at least I can see what they look like.

Then there's Kahlid, a pretty, dreadlocked 14-year-old with a silver sequined jacket who's being hyped as the next Michael Jackson. At the New Music Seminar, Lewis had him in a hotel room at the Marriott singing along to tapes of "Ben" and Whitney Houston's "Saving All My Love For You" to any and every journalist who came in the door. Kahlid was discovered while busking to earn extra money; Lewis happened to be in the same street selling balloons and decided he'd found a star. Kahlid smiles when I say he must learn to say no - he says he knows what he's getting in to and he's learnt the word already.

Then there's MCO, a rap duo plus DJ who have been told to write a tune celebrating House but are really resentful that hip hop hasn't made it big here: "Even Alabama made a rap record! Everyone thinks Chicago is a soft sucker city. We don't understand House music - we only know how to write bad about it 'cos they're always putting hip hop down." They suggest putting their feelings onto vinyl then getting another group to rap a pro-House reply, setting up a Roxanne-style battle. They could have a point.

But then so could Professor T.C. Roper, self-styled king of Ropeology, which he claims is rhyme with reason, a Chicago style of advanced rap designed especially for roping in the girls. Or the boys, if you prefer. Like much I've seen, I get the feeling he's making it up as he goes along, but he claims to know nine other ropers in the city and to be teaching advanced classes to a crop more. Who knows, it could sell . . .

"Whatever you do, you can't sway away from why people were interested in your music in the first place," says Chip calmly amidst all this. "We have to keep that House music feel to it. Otherwise it would be suicide." Chip is thinking of recording a tune called "I Can't Live Without My Beatbox" to emphasise the point: hardly an

original title, but then originality isn't that high on the House list of priorities.

Stealing, as several people explain, is when someone hears your idea and gets it out on disc locally before you do. It's nothing to do with borrowing or adapting riffs from old records. These are DJs, after all. And so, Chip quite openly admits that "Like This" was inspired by ESG's "Moody". Anyone you ask will tell you how "Love Can't Turn Around" is in part a reworking of the Isaac Hayes tune "I Can't Turn Around", and there's a thousand more if you care to look. Me, I prefer to dance.

WHICH BRINGS US back to the question we started with: what is House? The answer finally came after a late-night studio session with Frankie, Chip and Joe Smooth. Joe Smooth is the House Doctor. He irons out the problems at DJ International's frantic office, plays a role in most of the label's productions, and is known as a perfectionist. Chip has been sampling my voice all night for use on future records, and it's Joe who complains that I breathe too much and asks me to say parts again. He asks me to intone "Life Is Strange" through the sampler and DX7 and when I ask why he smiles inscrutably behind dark shades. "Trust me," he says. I feel I may regret it.

By 4am, Frankie has finally come up with a mix that satisfies Joe's requirements, and at 5am we are outside the Muzic Box, a run-down warehouse-type building under the railway tracks in Lower Michigan Ave.

"Hey Frankie!" yells a voice from a parked car. "I heard you on the radio last night. You sounded good!"

Everyone knows Frankie, and it seems like it takes us 30 minutes to edge from the entrance to Ron Hardy's DJ booth because they all want to say hello and shake his hand. Frankie has a theory that dancing is the poor man's luxury, but the rich like it too so they have to go where the poor people hang out because that's where it's happening. But just as white Washington has never gone to the Go Go, no Yuppie will ever enter the dingy, dimly-lit dive.

People stumble out of the main room dripping with sweat to drink the water provided in a tea urn, the only liquid available in the venue. Open the door and it's like stepping into a furnace: 5am on a Thursday morning, and the place is still full of bodies jacking up and down, hands in the air, and all at a pace that makes the pogo seem like a slow waltz. "House fever!" declares a flyer on the wall. "It's for real - let's see the animal in U!" Others remind people of special Sunday night holiday events: "No school on Monday!"

Ron mixes "Go Bang" by Dinosaur L into a treated tape of Aretha singing "Respect", then Willie Colon and Denise Lasalle *acapella* leads - unbelievably - into Sade singing "Maureen" without the advanced aerobics on the dancefloor ever slackening. Just over an hour after it was finished, Frankie's mix of "You Can't Hide (From Yourself)" is on the reel-to-reel making its club debut, and the crowd like it well enough. The excitement in the air is as palpable as the heat.

Frankie smiles. "So now you know about House." ●