

City of Detroit

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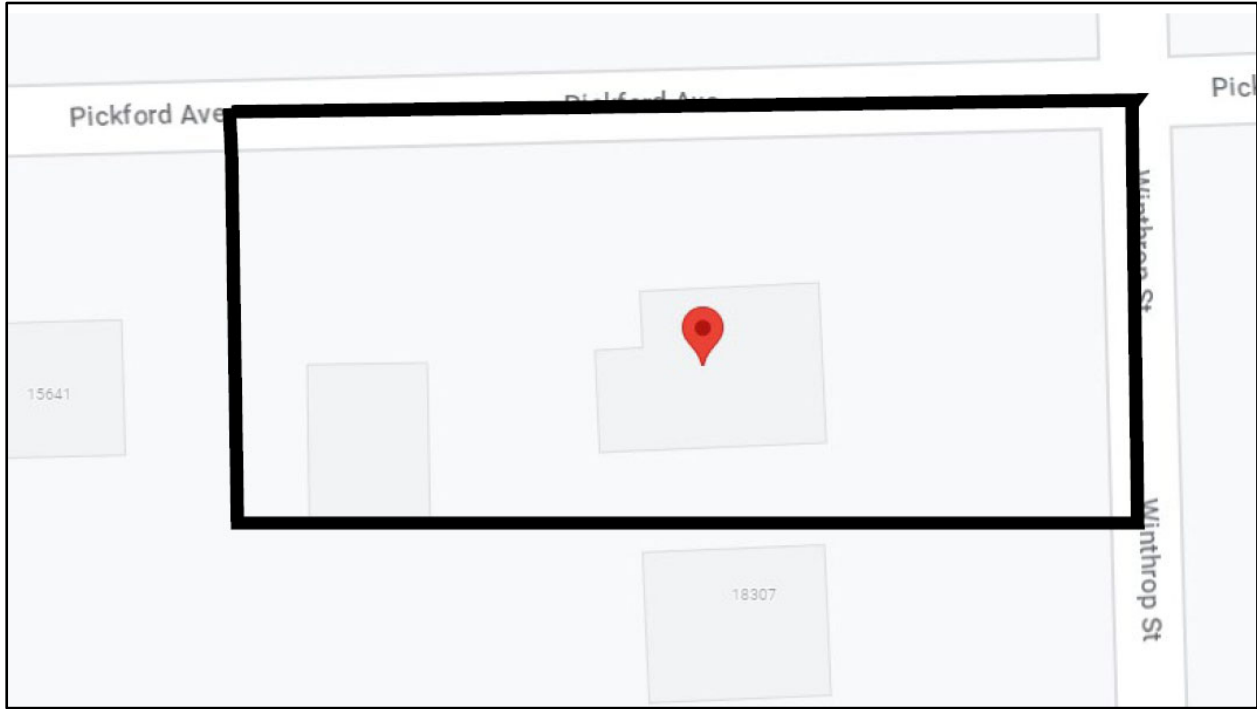
Def Sound Studio House Historic District Final Report




By a resolution dated October 3, 2023, the Detroit City Council charged the Historic Designation Advisory Board, a study committee, with the official study of the proposed Def Sound Studio House Historic District in accordance with Chapter 21 of the 2019 Detroit City Code and the Michigan Local Historic Districts Act.

The proposed Def Sound Studio House Historic District is located approximately twelve-and-a-half (12.5) miles northwest of downtown Detroit and consists of 0.156 acres, and one (1) contributing resource. The boundaries are; on the north, the centerline of Pickford Street; on the west, the centerline of the vacated alley lying between Forrer and Winthrop Streets; on the south,

the south property line of Lot 150 extended eastward of the Laurelhurst Subdivision, Liber 47, Page 16, Plats, Wayne County Records; on the east; the centerline of Winthrop Street. The building is presently owned by Jerry Flynn Dale.




Def Sound Studio House Historic District
Historic District boundary map
18315 Winthrop Avenue
Detroit, Wayne County

[Legal description: On the north, the centerline of Pickford Street; On the east, the centerline of Winthrop Street; on the south; the south property line, extended east and west, of Lot 150 of the Laurelhurst Subdivision, Liber 47, Page 16, Plats, Wayne County Records; and on the west, the centerline of the vacated alley running north and south between Forrer Street and Winthrop Street. The property is commonly known as 18315 Winthrop Street.]

BOUNDARIES

The boundaries of the proposed Def Sound Studio House Historic District, outlined with black on the map above, are as follows:

Beginning at a point, that point being:

On the north, the centerline of Pickford Street;

On the east, the centerline of Winthrop Street;

On the south; the south property line, extended east and west, of lot 150 of the Laurelhurst Subdivision; Liber 47, Page 16, Plats, Wayne County Records;

and

On the west, the centerline of the vacated alley lying between Forrer and Winthrop Streets to the point of beginning.

Boundary Justification

The boundaries described above delineate the parcel presently and historically occupied by the Def Sound Studio House and contains the entire footprint of the Def Sound Studio house.

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The proposed Def Sound Studio House Historic District is significant under Historic Designation Advisory Board **Criteria Number One**: “sites, buildings, structures, or archaeological sites where cultural, social, spiritual, economic, political, or architectural history of the community, city, state, or nation is particularly reflected or exemplified.” The proposed district is also significant under National Register **Criteria A** at the local level, for its role in Ethnic Heritage: Black, as well as Performing Arts: Music.

The Def Sound Studio House Historic District is also significant under National Register **Criterion Consideration G**: “properties that are eligible for having achieved significance within the past fifty years and have exceptional importance.”

Period of Significance

The period of significance of the Def Sound Studio House Historic District is defined as 1983, beginning when rap music recording at 18315 Winthrop began when Def Sound Studio was founded, to 2004 when recording paused. This period reflects many of the changes that have taken place reflecting significant social, cultural, musical, and African American history in Detroit.

Significance

Early History of the Site

Evidence of the earliest human activity in the vicinity of Detroit dates to the Late Woodland period (500-1000 CE). This native culture of hunters and gatherers lived in small villages near the Detroit River. The proposed district, five miles from the Detroit River, did not have an immediate aquatic resource and is less likely to have archaeological evidence of Native Americans. The land near 18315 Winthrop Street is part of the traditional territory of the *Confederacy of Three Fires*, comprised of the Ojibwe (Chippewa), Odawa (Ottawa), and Bodewadmi (Potawatomi) Nations and referred to as *Waawiyatanong*, or “where the water goes around,” in the Anishinaabemowin language of the Anishinaabe indigenous community. The region’s original inhabitants, including Anishinaabe as well as Wyandot, Iroquois, Fox, Miami, and Sauk tribes are known to have traveled throughout the area near 18315 Winthrop Street by using multiple trail systems including the Shiawassee Trail that now roughly corresponds to today’s Grand River Avenue, just two miles to the south.¹

Detroit was incorporated as a town in 1802, and the Michigan Territory was organized that same year with Detroit as its territorial capital. Judge Augustus B. Woodward designed a new plan for Detroit in 1805, and the city sprawled outward from the Detroit River as the population grew in the 19th century. One of the major streets or “spokes” of Woodward’s plan for Detroit was Grand River Avenue. Grand River was a major transportation route, and residential subdivisions developed along Grand River as early as 1887 at the Joy Road intersection.

Between 1916 and 1926, the City of Detroit annexed ninety square miles of land from the surrounding rural townships as people left the older Detroit residential areas and crossed West Grand Boulevard to live in one of the many fashionable new suburban neighborhoods still within the city limits. The development of the College Park neighborhood grew from the north to south as development spread from downtown. The explosive physical growth of the city of Detroit, particularly its growth northwesterly from the city center to the College Park neighborhood occurred approximately twelve-and-a-half-miles from downtown Detroit. This large area of annexation is the northwest corner of today’s Detroit and was annexed by the City of Detroit in 1926. New homeowners in the area knew that once the city of Detroit annexed an area, they would receive Detroit services such as fire and police protection, Detroit public high school privileges, sewers, and water connections. Developers were quick to advertise their lots once they knew that annexation was imminent. Early residential suburbs such as these fostered an emerging American aspiration for life in a semi-rural environment, apart from the noise, pollution, and activity of a crowded city, but close enough to the city for daily commuting to work.² Throughout the twentieth

¹ Reinhardt, Jennifer, City of Detroit Historic Designation Advisory Board, Final Report, *The Blue Bird Inn*, October, 2020.

² Ames, David L. and L. F. McClelland, *National Register Bulletin: Historic Residential Suburbs, Guidelines for Evaluation and Documentation for the National Register of Historic Places*. United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Washington, D.C., 2002, p. 65.

century, development in northwest Detroit grew at a rapid pace, and by 1928 the area at Grand River and Joy Road was “probably the fastest-growing shopping center in the city of Detroit,”³

The area now known as the College Park neighborhood was once a rural part of Redford Township, north of Grand River Avenue. The development of the area in the northwest corner of Detroit began even before the establishment of Redford Township in 1827. Originally organized as Bucklin Township, it was renamed Pekin Township in 1829, and then Pekin Township was renamed Redford Township in 1833. An early 1876 map of Redford Township shows that the location of the home at 18315 Winthrop was once the farm of W. Allen.⁴ Requirements for plating property in Redford Township were regulated by a 1925 law established by the State of Michigan, Act No. 360, Public Acts of 1925.⁵ These requirements established the north-south grid pattern of the streets in Redford Township.

By the mid-1920s, a large portion of Redford Township was still undeveloped farmland lacking proper sewer systems and other amenities of modern life. Redford Township’s tax base was insufficient to keep pace with the rapidly growing population, and the township was in debt with the construction of large schools and public buildings. In 1923, Detroit made its first attempt to annex part of Redford Township, promising residents “paved streets, sewers, and inside toilets.”⁶ In 1925, Redford voters passed the measure overwhelmingly and the annexation went into effect in 1926, reducing the total size of Redford Township from thirty-six square miles to just over eleven. Sometime around 1923, the Laurelhurst development company had purchased the farm property of W. Allen, and the company began planning a new subdivision for the area. The Laurelhurst subdivision is at the eastern edge of Redford Township, just half a block from Greenfield Road, the eastern boundary road of the township. The Def Sound Studio house at 18315 Winthrop is lot number 150 in the center of the Laurelhurst subdivision and it was built in 1943.

According to long-time residents, the area at Greenfield and West Seven Mile Road became known as College Park sometime in the 1990s. Current-day maps show that the College Park neighborhood is bounded by West McNichols Road on the south, Greenfield Road on the east, West Seven Mile Road on the north, and the Southfield Freeway (M-39) on the west. The southwest area of College Park was once home to Mercy College, Benedictine High School, its gymnasium, St. Scholastica church, a convent, and other related buildings, thus the area’s name College Park. In the late 1930s through 40s, the residential growth of the northwestern-most section of Detroit coincided with tremendous commercial growth. The destination commercial districts of the neighborhood were on Southfield Road, West Seven Mile Road, West McNichols Road, and Greenfield Road (north of Clarita Street). The library in the neighborhood was the Jessie Chase branch at 17731 West Seven Mile Road, although it is closed at the time of writing. The

³“Joy Road Zone Spreads Fast.” *Detroit Free Press*. October 19, 1928.

⁴ Belden, H. & Co., *Illustrated historical atlas of the county of Wayne, Michigan*, 18.

⁵ Board of County Auditors, Wayne County, Michigan, *Regulations and Requirements for Laying out, platting, and subdividing of land in the County of Wayne State of Michigan*, effective August 26, 1925. <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.35128001149465&seq=3>

⁶ DesAutels, Fred W., *Redford Township: Its Heritage and Its History*, 1975.

College Park Fire Engine Company #59's structure (1930, Charles Kotting, arch.) is at 17800 Curtis Street.⁷

In the 1940s, neighborhoods in Redford Township were generally occupied by an educated, solidly middle and upper-middle class. However, race restrictions were included in all or most deeds issued by the developers and intended to exclude African Americans until the practice was struck down by the United States Supreme Court in 1948. In 1953, the occupations of the residents of the College Park neighborhood were a mixture of working-class people and professionals; they included Robert M. Waters, a chemical engineer, Edward J. Noftz, a maintenance man at Vickers-Hydraulics Inc., Oscar J. Okerlund, a serviceman, Thomas V. York, a civil engineer, and Betty M. Ness who worked at Grande's Trucking.

Laurencelle Properties Inc. – subdivision developer

Charles Laurencelle, founder of Laurencelle Homes, Inc., the developer of the Laurelhurst subdivision where the Def Sound Studio is located, began his real estate career in the 1930's by selling homes in Detroit for the Rose Building Company. An attorney by trade, Laurencelle established the Laurencelle Building Company at 14900 Linwood in Detroit, and later moved the office to Woodward Avenue in Royal Oak. Charles Laurencelle built and sold hundreds of homes in the metro Detroit area throughout the 1940's and 1950's. Permit records and historic maps indicate that Laurencelle was the developer of the subdivision at Greenfield Road between Seven Mile Road and McNichols Road. In 1956, Michael A. Laurencelle, the eldest of Charles' six sons, began working with his father and eventually opened his own company specializing in the sale of residential homes. The business expanded to the communities of Berkley, Birmingham, Clawson, Madison Heights, Oak Park, Royal Oak, and Southfield. In the early 1980's, the business transitioned from a single-family brokerage to a commercial brokerage developing various commercial properties including apartment buildings and retail shopping centers. Realizing the potential of commercial real estate, the residential real estate business was sold and Laurencelle & Associates, Inc. was established. In 1992, Charles J. Laurencelle, Michael's son, joined the business and today runs the company's operations and continues as the third-generation owner. In 2002, the company was renamed Laurencelle Properties, Inc. to more closely reflect its focus on the commercial real estate industry.⁸

House at 18315 Winthrop

The lot at 18315 Winthrop Street is fifty (50) feet wide by 135.65 feet deep, which is the typical lot size for the Laurelhurst subdivision's properties on Winthrop Street. The 1923 plat map of the area (Wayne County Plat #19496) depicts the subdivision as running from Greenfield Road west to the alley west of Cambridge Street (now Prevost Street). The northern boundary of the subdivision was Margareta Street, and the southern boundary was Oakdale Street (now Curtis

⁷ In the early 1920s, the neighborhoods near the University of Detroit, and the College of the Immaculate Heart (now known as Marygrove College) promoted themselves as the "College Park" district. An article in *The Detroit Free Press* in 1924 stated that the College Park district was over 3,000 acres in size. In 1931, an advertisement for a new housing model at Cooledge and McNichols called its location College Park.

⁸ Laurencelle Properties Inc. webpage: <https://laurencelleproperties.com/about-us> accessed September 26, 2023.

Street). Winthrop Street was initially named Tucker Avenue, and Pickford Avenue was initially named Alfred Avenue according to the 1923 plat map. The Laurelhurst subdivision was platted with two-hundred and fifty lots, although the plots on Greenfield Avenue and Oakdale Avenue (Curtis Street) are narrower at twenty or twenty-five feet in width.

The Def Sound Studio house is in the College Park neighborhood. The College Park neighborhood is square in shape; the border streets of the neighborhood are Greenfield Road, West Seven Mile Road, Southfield Freeway (Michigan Highway M-39), and West McNichols Road. Greenfield Road is the eastern border street of the neighborhood; West Seven Mile Road is the northern street, West McNichols Road is the southern border street, and the Southfield Freeway (M-39) is the western border street. In the College Park neighborhood, Greenfield Road is a residential street, four lanes wide, although north of Clarita Avenue, Greenfield Road is lined with commercial buildings, and it widens to accommodate a center turn lane. The Greenfield neighborhood is located to the north of the College Park neighborhood. To the south of the College Park neighborhood is the Crary/St. Mary's neighborhood and adjacent to the east is the Hubbard-Puritan neighborhood. West of the College Park neighborhood is the Holcomb Community. These neighborhoods are mainly comprised of residential properties. A large athletic park known as the Peterson Playfield is east of Greenfield Road, adjacent to the College Park neighborhood, near the Def Sound Studio house. A smaller greenspace known as the Bale Playground is north of the Def Sound Studio house, at Winthrop and Margareta Avenues. The Def Sound Studio house sits at the east side of the College Park neighborhood, near the Greenfield Road border.

The permit for the house at 18315 Winthrop Street was issued to the development company Laurencelle Homes Inc. of Detroit, according to City of Detroit Building Department (permit #25910) on April 28, 1943. The Certificate of Occupancy for the home (#38152) was issued on August 12, 1944, and it is likely that the year-and-a-half delay in occupancy was due to the shortage of construction materials during World War II. On November 17, 1945, City of Detroit Permit #13969 was issued for the construction of a one-story wood-frame side addition measuring fifteen by nine feet for a dinette; this addition at the Pickford Street side of the home remains today. On August 5, 1960, permit #1415 was issued for the construction of a wood frame garage. The garage remains today and is accessed from the Pickford Street side of the property, although it is non-contributing to the historic district. In 1966 City of Detroit building permit #87000 was issued to "construct a 9' x 6' front patio cover" which remains on the rear (west) façade of the home.

At the time of the house's construction in 1943, the *R. L. Polk Co. Detroit City Directory* was not published due to World War II staffing and material constraints. The 1953 *Detroit City Directory* lists the residents at 18315 Winthrop Street as John C. and Helen V. Wilhelmsen of the Wilson & Wilhelmsen Company, painters. John and Helen Wilhelmsen were still listed in the *City Directory* as occupying the home in 1965. Other owners occupied the house through the ensuing years, and in 1981 the family of Jerry Flynn Dale purchased the house, and renovations were made in later years including vinyl siding and a new front door. The house is owned by Jerry Flynn Dale today.

Detroit's African American Neighborhoods

The contents of this section of the report are largely taken from the Twentieth Century Civil Rights Sites In the City of Detroit - Survey Report by Quinn Evans Architects prepared for the

Michigan State Historic Preservation Office and the City of Detroit Historic Designation Advisory Board.

In 1820, the African American population in Detroit was recorded at just 67 residents. Detroit's Black population remained relatively small until the turn of the twentieth century. Its upper and middle class African American residents were integrated into the city overall, while working class Blacks clustered on the East side along with White working-class immigrants. It was the explosion of Detroit's automobile industry after 1907 and Henry Ford's introduction of the assembly line and factory jobs in 1914 that brought the first large population of African Americans to Detroit.

The new immigration created a change in African American housing patterns within the city. In the decade between 1910 and 1920 Detroit's Black population increased over 14%; between 1920 and 1930 it rose to over 49.6%. As African Americans moved in large numbers into the city, White residents interpreted this as a threat, and reacted to establish and maintain racial homogeneity. Blacks who attempted to move into White neighborhoods in the 1910s and 1920s faced increasing resistance, from White property owners refusing to sell or rent to Blacks, to the establishment of racial covenants, to actual violence against African Americans who attempted to break the color line. While segregation was not the city's official policy at the time, the White police force and city officials either passively supported or actively enforced *de facto* segregation. As a result, most of Detroit's African American residents were involuntarily segregated into a few small areas of the city on the city's East side known as Black Bottom and Paradise Valley. As more and more people were packed into relatively small areas, houses and apartments were subdivided in an attempt to expand living space well beyond its capacity. Extremely overcrowded conditions and lack of maintenance by landlords reduced the housing in these areas to what were termed slums, though the neighborhoods themselves retained a vibrant sense of community.

The mostly residential district of Black Bottom was located south of Gratiot Avenue between Brush Street and the Grand Trunk Railroad Tracks, eventually extending all the way to the Detroit River on the south. The commercial counterpart to Black Bottom was Paradise Valley, extending a few blocks to either side of the main commercial corridors of Hastings and St. Antoine Streets from Gratiot to Mack, and eventually expanding north toward Forest Avenue. Although historically Black Bottom was considered a residential area and Paradise Valley a commercial one, in practice there were businesses located throughout Black Bottom and Blacks lived in homes, boarding houses, and apartments on the side streets of Paradise Valley. Most of the historically Black churches, businesses, and social and political organizations founded in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were located in Black Bottom and Paradise Valley.

By the 1920s there were several small middle-class enclaves developing outside of the lower east side. Like their White counterparts, Black Detroiters aspired to home ownership, but due to restrictive racial covenants and racial prejudice, there were few areas open to them. Black residents looking to purchase homes had to search for areas well away from established White neighborhoods. The largest of these was the "Black West Side," a community bounded by Tireman Avenue, Epworth Street, Warren Avenue, and Grand River Avenue. The "Black West Side" boundaries became obsolete once the Black population moved north of Tireman Avenue after the Supreme Court decision of 1948 ruling restrictive covenants as unconstitutional. In the 1970s, the

racial makeup of the College Park neighborhood began changing as the black population of Detroit moved northward, and the neighborhood became more integrated.

Hip Hop Music History

Much has been written describing and documenting the origin of hip hop music in the United States; from academic papers, to biographies, to online music histories and books. According to authors Derrick P. Alridge and James B. Stewart, hip hop has developed as a cultural and artistic phenomenon influencing youth culture around the world. For many, hip hop reflects the social, economic, political, and cultural realities and conditions of their lives, speaking to them in a language and manner they understand. As a result of both its longevity and its cogent message for many worldwide, hip hop cannot be dismissed as merely a passing fad or as a youth movement that will run its course. Instead, hip hop has been now taken seriously as a cultural, political, economic, and intellectual phenomenon deserving of scholarly study, similar to previous African American artistic and cultural movements such as the Blues, Jazz, the New Negro Renaissance, and the Civil Rights, Black Power, and Black Arts Movements. According to other hip hop authors, the hip hop culture consists of at least four fundamental elements: disc jockeying (DJing), break dancing, graffiti art, and rapping. Hip hop encompasses not just a music genre, but also a style of dress, dialect and language, way of looking at the world, and an aesthetic that reflects the sensibilities of a large population of youth. This broad characterization of hip hop may seem imprecise to some, but it reflects the hip hop community's refusal to be singularly defined or categorized and demonstrates the dynamic nature of hip hop as a world-wide phenomenon.⁹

The origin of hip hop is generally acknowledged as beginning at 1520 Sedgwick Avenue in the Morris Heights neighborhood of the Bronx. The origin story was summarized by author Michael Griffie in the *Detroit Free Press*.

On Aug. 11, 1973, an 18-year-old aspiring DJ named Clive Campbell - better known as DJ Kool Herc - hosted a party in his hometown of Bronx, NY. Kool Herc wanted to raise a little extra cash so his sister could get new clothes before school started. But instead of playing a song followed by another song, he mixed the instrumental break of each song (known as the "break beat") into a continuous loop. By all accounts, using the break beat to create a song all its own gave birth to a new musical and cultural art form: hip-hop.

Emcees would soon rhyme over these break beats, and would be called *rappers*. "Break Boys" (also called B-Boys) and "Break Girls" (also called B-Girls) would dance to those songs. Graffiti artists, fashion designers and film producers would later add to the fabric of this cultural movement. More than a musical genre, hip-hop would become a cultural bastion that has impacted American life at large as much as it did the African Americans communities that created it.¹⁰

⁹ Alderidge, Derrick P., and James B. Stewart, *Introduction: Hip Hop in History: Past, Present, and Future*, The Journal of African American History, Volume 90, Number 3, <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/pdf/10.1086/JAAHv90n3p190>

¹⁰ Griffie, Michael, "Opinion: From Coleman Young to Big Gretch: Exploring Detroit hip hop's political evolution," *The Detroit Free Press*, August 11, 2023, p. 23A.

By the mid-1990s, the commercial success of hip hop music was established, and mainstream radio began playing artists such as Run-D.M.C. (15 million albums sold), Tupac (36 million albums sold), NWA (10 million albums sold), and The Notorious B.I.G (over 21 million albums sold).¹¹

Detroit Hip Hop History

Music historian Dan Charnas described Detroit's African American musical history that preceded hip hop in his book *Dilla Time*.

The restaurants, lounges, and hotels of Paradise Valley became a vital venue for the development of syncopated and swung music in the city...jazz and blues, then the blues' brazen, uptempo child, rhythm and blues. An archipelago of Black churches spawned generations of musicians and singers. The Detroit Public Schools, segregated as they were, provided comprehensive music education. And Detroit, imperfect as it was fostered Black prosperity, which enabled not only the purchase of musical instruments, but also a worldview that allowed for the pursuit of fulfillment after generations of struggle for survival.

Berry Gordy III applied for a family loan to start a record company in 1959, and after much debate, he was given \$800 from his family members. Operating from a modest two-story house in West Grand Boulevard, Motown became one of the most successful independent record labels in the country and, eventually, the largest Black-owned business in America...In the late 1960s and into the 1970s, James Brown solidified and codified funk through a series of songs that built out the aesthetic...but funk was a set of ideas that could be heard across all music genres. The hard rock band Led Zeppelin's lead footed John Bonham was highly influence by James Brown...and almost no corner of global pop went untouched by this particularly American rhythmic idea: reggae, Afro best, even country music...by the end of the decade, funk informed a new genre, hip hop.

Aside from James Brown, no person was more influential in the growth of funk than George Clinton...Clinton and his group, the Parliaments, were initially a barbershop quartet that had a ten-day residency at the Phelps Lounge on Oakland Avenue. But as the days went by, George Clinton and the band became more uninhibited...his magnum opus, *Mothership Connection* coalesced all the elements of future funk. It became a totem of a larger Black American world-view: a cultivated exuberant dream-sense of the future, spirits both ancient and new, bound with the sciences...offering the possibility of flight. In later years, Black scholars would give this aesthetic a name: Afrofuturism.¹²

Music historian and founder of Detroit Sound Conservancy, Carleton Gholz wrote about the influences that created the Detroit hip hop scene in, *Welcome to tha D: Making and Remaking Hip*

¹¹ Website accessed November 20, 2023, <https://www.eightieskids.com/the-top-15-rappers-of-the-1980s/>

¹² Charnas, Dan, *Dilla Time: The Life and Afterlife of J Dilla, the hip hop producer who reinvented rhythm*, Swift Press, Great Britain, 2022, p. 22-31.

Hop Culture in Post-Motown Detroit. Gholz stated that Detroit has had a tremendous influence on the sound of hip hop including the 1960s soul sound of record labels like Motown, the 1970 funk provided by artists like George Clinton and his Parliament-Funkadelic, and the 1980s early techno acts such as Juan Atkins' work in the groups Cybotron and later Model 500. Gholz wrote, "When Detroit hip hop finally did reach a critical mass in the early 1990s, the impact would be felt around the world, with groundbreaking acts like Esham, Boss, Jay Dee, Slum Village, and Eminem proving that Detroit was not just living in its musical past but charting out hip hop's future...a major negative factor working against early Detroit rap music: the lack of a nationally significant record industry presence."¹³ Other music historians wrote that artists from Detroit made indelible contributions to national hip-hop music as much as their Motown predecessors did for pop music in the decades prior. As described by author Michael Griffie, Detroit artists from J Dilla, Eminem, and Big Sean to next-generation artists like Sada Baby, Kash Doll and Tee Grizzley have impacted the hip hop music genre.¹⁴

Detroit's other significant music-related sites that are City of Detroit (locally) designated include the United Sound System Recording Studios (5840 Second Avenue), the Blue Bird Inn (5021 Tireman Avenue), the Underground Resistance Museum – the birthplace of techno music (3000 East Grand Blvd. in the Jam Handy/North End/East Grand Boulevard Historic District), and the Motown Museum – Home of Hitsville U. S. A. (2648 West Grand Blvd in the West Grand Blvd. African American Arts and Business Historic District).

In the early 1980s, it was frustrating to Detroit's new hip hop artists that their music was not played on mainstream radio. "There is a double standard, a hypocrisy," said Faye Worthy, of Detroit. "The radio stations say they won't play gangster rap, but they don't play positive rap either."¹⁵ Later in the 1980s, radio DJ's were significant in breaking the hip hop music industry in Detroit. Electrifying Mojo on WGPR (107.5 FM) and The Wizard on WJLB (97.9 FM) were instrumental in bringing early hip hop records and DJ styles budding in New York to a mass audience in Detroit. Gholz wrote, "From music producer Jay Dee (James Dewitt Yancey/J Dilla) and his progeny's soulful sampling in their underground rap songs, to the local dance-floor friendly ghetto-tech DJs with their emphasis on scratching records speeding by at 150 beats per minute, to Dabrye's (Tadd Mullinix) synthesizer-heavy laptop programming and its emphasis on distortion and off-kilter structures, many contemporary Detroit hip hop artists have drawn energy from the Mojo vs. Mills (the Wizard) battles of the 1980s...but through the circulation of radio mixes and folklore, Mojo and Wizard's nimble skills and encyclopedic knowledge of Motown, rock, funk, electro, and hip hop established the horizon for rhythmic creation in Detroit."¹⁶

Author Michael Griffie wrote an opinion article in the *Detroit Free Press* titled "From Coleman Young to Big Gretch: Exploring Detroit hip hop's political evolution," that described the political history of Detroit's hip hop origins:

¹³ Hess, Mickey, editor: *Hip Hop in America: A Regional Guide*, Volume 2, Carleton S. Gholz:

"Welcome to tha D: Making and Remaking Hip Hop Culture in Post-Motown Detroit." Greenwood Press, Santa Barbara, California, 2010.

¹⁴ Griffie, Michael, "Opinion: From Coleman Young to Big Gretch: Exploring Detroit hip hop's political evolution," *The Detroit Free Press*, August 11, 2023, p. 23A.

¹⁵ Esparza, Santiago, Gangsta rap still dancing to a tune of mixed reviews," *The Detroit News*, April 28, 1994, p. 4.

¹⁶ Hess, Ibid.

“The year was 1988. Near hip-hop's 16th birthday, its “gangsta rap” era began when a collection of young Black men from Los Angeles formed a group called N***** With Attitudes (NWA). [NWA member] O'Shea Jackson, the 19-year-old lyrical impresario better known as “Ice Cube,” penned a song in response to the police brutality he and other members of the group received that year...It was called “F*** Tha Police.”

When the NWA tour hit Detroit on August 6, 1989, they were met with opposition from Mayor Coleman A. Young. The night of the show, police presence around the Joe Louis Arena was ramped up, the Detroit Free Press reported. A Detroit Police Department sergeant was told by Young's gang squad leader, Benny Napoleon, to warn the group not to perform their most controversial song. According to Ice Cube, when the group disobeyed this warning and began to perform the song anyway, police standing backstage threw firecrackers, mimicking the sound of gunshots. Chaos ensued. NWA was whisked away, and would later be ticketed and fined. But Young himself had risen to power on a platform of anti-police brutality. One of his first actions as mayor was to eliminate the violent DPD STRESS unit known for viciously beating and killing unarmed Black Detroiters.¹⁷

NWA's stop in Detroit demonstrated how hip-hop exposed a generational divide within the Black community. Detroit's first Black mayor, an icon to Black households across southeast Michigan, used his power to silence young Black artists exercising their First Amendment rights on the subject of police brutality — an issue that continues to be a flashpoint more than 30 years later.

In the fall of 2001, Detroiters elected 31-year-old Kwame Kilpatrick mayor. After Kilpatrick was elected, Def Jam Records co-founder Russell Simmons decided to hold a “Hip-Hop Summit” in Detroit. Simmons wanted to raise youth awareness about the political process and encourage the younger generation to vote and participate. Kilpatrick, given his age and his charisma, was a great ambassador for this opportunity. The Hip-Hop Summit was a success, attracting thousands of young people to register to vote. But at the event, Simmons made a proclamation that now lives in infamy, dubbing Kwame Kilpatrick America's first “Hip-Hop Mayor.” Kilpatrick, sporting his trademark diamond earring, had been anointed the first hip-hop mayor by the first hip-hop mogul.

In 2018, Michiganders elected Gretchen Whitmer to serve as the state's second female governor. Soon after her first term began, Whitmer was faced with a global pandemic that quickly made Detroit one of the first COVID-19 hotspots in the country. She was decisive, taking action to contain the pandemic, even as others questioned and protested what she did to keep people safe. But Detroiters, who buried far too many loved ones, were grateful for her leadership. Not long after receiving national attention for her public opposition to Donald Trump in her handling of COVID-19, Detroit parody rapper GMac Cash wrote a song about Whitmer, giving her a nickname: “Big Gretch.” A GoFundMe campaign raised

¹⁷ Ibid.

money to gift Whitmer a pair of Cartier buffalo-horn sunglasses, or "Buffs," which retail at \$2,500 and are a staple of Detroit's hip-hop culture. The most powerful political figure in Michigan openly accepted and embraced hip-hop culture. From the outright hostility from Detroit's first Black mayor, Coleman A. Young, to the full embrace from Michigan's sitting governor, Gretchen Whitmer, hip hop is a living testament..."¹⁸

50 years of Hip Hop

Hip hop's acknowledged origins in the Bronx in 1973 were commemorated at events celebrating its 50th anniversary in 2023. As hip hop spread, "it has done a very good job at making culture more accessible. It has broken into spaces that we're traditionally not allowed to break into," says London's *I Am Hip Hop* magazine founder Rishma Dhaliwal. "The impact that it's had on the world, it really can't be quantified," said recording artist Nile Rodgers. "You can find someone in a village that you've never been to, a country that you've never been to, and all of a sudden you hear its own local hip hop. And you don't even know who these people are, but they've adopted it and made it their own."¹⁹ It wasn't long after its origin in 1973 that the style could be heard all over New York City, and then in just a few years, nationally. The fiftieth anniversary of hip hop's founding has been recognized in many media forms and in many concert tributes across the country.

In 2023 Detroit, there were many events, concerts, and programs recognizing the 50th anniversary of hip hop. A concert was held at the Fox Theatre (2211 Woodward Avenue) on July 15, 2023 celebrating Detroit's Hip Hop 50th anniversary that featured Detroit rappers Rakim, Big Daddy Kane, KRS-One, and Doug E. Fresh. On August 11, 2023, the Detroit Institute of Arts (5200 Woodward Avenue) held a 50th anniversary of hip hop event that celebrated women in hip hop. The Charles H. Wright African American Museum (315 East Warren Avenue) held a symposium on the 50 years of hip hop in Detroit that was filmed and recorded in a podcast on June 15, 2023.

Nationally, a United States Congressional resolution passed on July 24, 2023, that designated August 11, 2023, as "Hip Hop Celebration Day," as well as federal designation of August 2023 as "Hip Hop Recognition Month," and November 2023 was designated "Hip Hop History Month" to celebrate the year as the 50th anniversary of hip hop. The federal government designations were a significant recognition and documented the contributions of hip hop to art and culture in the United States as well as encouraging local governments in the United States to building partnerships with local hip hop entities and other members of the creative arts and music communities. The Congressional resolution was sponsored by Congressman Jamaal Bowman, Ed.D. (New York), Congresswoman Maxine Waters (California), and Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (New York) who announced the resolution was unanimously passed.

In 2017 the Universal Hip Hop Museum project staff began planning and fundraising for a \$350 million complex including a museum, affordable housing, and office space for nonprofit

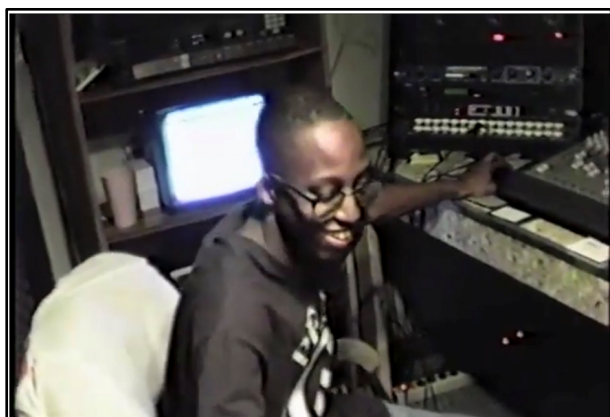
¹⁸ Griffie, Michael, "Opinion: From Coleman Young to Big Gretch: Exploring Detroit hip hop's political evolution," *The Detroit Free Press*, August 11, 2023, p. 23A.

¹⁹ Hajela, Deepti, "At 50, hip-hop not done reinventing itself, the world," *Detroit News*, August 10, 2023, p. 9A.

organizations. The Universal Hip Hop Museum is located at 1520 Sedgwick Avenue, the Bronx, New York, the acknowledged birthplace of hip hop. The museum founders wanted the museum to be located in the Bronx because of its history, and because of the potential to impact the community. The New York African American architect Michael Ford (Brandnu Design) was the designer of the museum and has plans to train students as part of the project's Education Center, among many other programs and community-based initiatives.²⁰ The Universal Hip Hop Museum had its opening celebration on August 11, 2023: the 50th Anniversary of Hip Hop.

Def Sound Studio

Like many of Detroit's music pioneers including Motown and techno; hip hop music recording began in a house in Detroit. Detroit's hip hop recording history begins with Jerry Flynn Dale. Dale was born in Detroit, Michigan in 1969 and placed in foster care at one and one-half-years of age. After a tumultuous early upbringing, Jerry Dale was adopted by loving parents, Celia Pearl and



Jerry Flynn Dale in the Def Sound Studio basement at 18315 Winthrop Street circa 1990, photo by Brian Flowers.

Joseph Dale, and the family moved to the house at 18315 Winthrop in Detroit in 1981. Jerry Dale began his recording career at age fourteen while attending Frank Cody High School. Jerry worked as a studio apprentice at Sound Suite Studio, a professional recording studio (14750 Puritan Street) where he learned from talented artists, producers, and co-owner engineers Mike Grace and John Lewis. Don Was, member of the group Was (Not Was) and other musicians at Sound Suite Recording Studio working with Dale included Sir Harry Bowens, vocalist with Was (Not Was), Norman Brown, a world-renowned jazz musician, David McMurray, an award-winning producer, and countless others. Jerry Dale adeptly mastered electronic instruments replacing studio musicians, and quickly made a name for himself as a music engineer. Consequently, Dale moved up the ranks at Sound Suite Studio to become a top tier musician, engineer, and producer in Detroit rap music.

Future Funk Records was a neighborhood record store on West Seven Mile Road, just a few blocks Dale's home. The owner, Carl Mitchell allowed Dale to set up a makeshift stage and microphone on Saturdays so the neighborhood's aspiring emcees could rap. The set-up was basic, but Dale's youthful vigor and Mitchell's storefront inspired ambitious hip-hop artists from all over the west side of Detroit. "Every weekend, Jerry would put out this makeshift stage on the sidewalk and play instrumentals; we would come up there to rap," said Kalimah Johnson (aka Nikki D). "It was such an amazing time during the early years of rap music," said Dale. "We could do anything at Future,

²⁰ Springer-Norris, Nia, "A Museum to Celebrate the History of Hip Hop is Set to Open in the Bronx," *Next City*, April 1, 2021. https://nextcity.org/urbanist-news/a-museum-to-celebrate-the-history-of-hip-hop-is-set-to-open-in-the-bronx?gclid=CjwKCAjwysipBhBXEiwApJOcu8WrfhsLA570zLzXiLWF_4ZIBXaXS3UVEPbwnrM_aagaCqia7IHBJxoC-toQAvD_BwE, <https://uhhm.org/the-corner/>

I dreamed about the future of making Detroit’s first hip-hop record. I was like 12 or 13 when I first went in Future Funk.”²¹

Using his parents’ adoption stipend, Jerry Dale purchased the initial recording equipment that established **Def Sound Studio** in 1983 while he was still in high school. Dale graduated from Frank Cody High School in Detroit in 1987 and furthered his career in the recording industry while at Sound Suite Studio. Dale saw the unfilled market demand for hip hop recording studio time, and he was determined to initiate Detroit’s hip hop recording industry. Def Sound Studio was Detroit’s first hip hop and rap recording studio, founded in Dale’s mother’s basement. Jerry Dale’s work in new music creation was the life blood of all hip hop coming from Detroit, given the fact that other studios would not record rap music in the mid-1980s. Dale says. “Rappers didn’t have anywhere to record back then. Local studios thought rap was dangerous and wanted nothing to do with it.”²²

Working alongside Dale was his lifetime friend and Detroit firefighter Percy Warmack II. As a pioneer of Detroit’s hip hop recording industry, Dale is also credited with changing the format of musical recording in Detroit from analog to digital. He produced many of Detroit’s first rap records and developed an A-list clientele which included: Don Coleman & Associates, George Clinton Jr., Kid Rock, D-12 (with Eminem), Amp Fiddler, Vickie Winans, Mario Winans, Marvin Winans, as well as the successful gospel quartet from Detroit, Fred Hammond, Brown Mark of The Revolution, Ted Alexander (Teddy) Bishop, the musical group Commissioned, the Detroit Talent Review, and Arnell Carmichael (co-lead singer of the group “Raydio” and the group founded with recording artist Ray Parker Jr.). The guitar work of Ray Parker Jr. influenced the work of future rap recording artists. Dale stated, “When I was younger I wanted to be like Berry Gordy, I wanted to make records, I wanted to continue the great sound of Motown to where we’re at now, and thank God I was able to do it.”²³

In addition to recording hip hop, Dale was the creative force who was the first to inject hip hop into gospel music on a major record label, MCA Records, as well as recording national commercials for AT&T and Western Union. The Def Sound Studio was shaped by Jerry Flynn Dale as well as Tony Grown, Walter “D.J. Rush” Morrow, Michael Grace, Ted Alexander Bishop, Greg C. Brown, Valint Teamer, Enaharo Offord, Joe “Futuristic” Ford, Jeffrey Valentine, Cornell “Popeye” Giavantt, and Donald C. Garner.



Def Sound Studio 1992 release.

In 1983, Jerry Dale, along with Alex Thomas and Julius Kelly co-founded Detroit’s first rap record label, **Hip Hop Records**. In those early years of hip hop, none of the existing recording studios in Detroit would record hip hop artists, it was considered risky and dangerous to do so. There, Dale saw an opportunity. The first Hip Hop Records label track recorded was “the Rappin’ Rascals” where Dale’s nephew Hatari Brooks was featured on the song

²¹ Davison, Kahn Santori, “Remembering notable locales among Detroit’s hip-hop history,” *Metro Times*, March 15, 2018.

²² Davison, Kahn Santori, “An instant lesson in the history of Detroit hip-hop,” *Metro Times*, March 9, 2016.

²³ Davison, Kahn Santori, “How Jerry Flynn Dale’s Def Sound Studio became Michigan’s first designated hip hop landmark,” *Metro Times*, November 21, 2023.

“Drugs no Drugs.” The Def Sound Studio was fully functioning and established in 1985. Detroit area hip hop artists came to Def Sound Studio to record tracks, and portions of tracks in the early 1980s. Detroit Mic Fresh cut one of his successful early album tracks at Def Sound Studio, “The Heart Breaker” in 1989. Def Sound Studio was pioneering the rap recording industry in Detroit. Author and music producer Ironside Hex called Def Sound Studio a “think tank” that cultivated and grew a stable of neophyte rappers. Other innovations occurred at Def Sound Studio, for example, Vickie Winans’ song, “Don’t Throw Your Life Away” was only the second time in music



18315 Winthrop
Detroit, Michigan 48235

history that rap beats were added to gospel music. Gospel artist Fred Hammond recorded portions of his track “I Came to Jesus as I Was” at Def Sound Studio in 1991. Later that year, Dale’s collaborators Ron Henyard and Dr. Anthony (Wojamm) Womack were instrumental in laying the bedrock for Detroit’s first hip hop music sound. Another early group of significance to record at Def Sound Studio in 1999 was D-12, Eminem’s early hip hop group who recorded tracks there prior to being released on Shady records. Early in his career, Dale was trained by Brown Mark (born Mark Brown, b. 1962), a bass guitarist of “The Revolution,” the musician

and artist Prince’s original touring and recording band.²⁴

In 1994, Dale managed the Detroit group, O.C.C. (Out Cold Cops) which made waves with their songs that described police brutality. The policemen members of O.C.C. spoke openly of beating suspects in custody. All six official members of O.C.C. (there were ten unofficially), have rap names related to their line of work: Narco, Smith & Wesson, Deputy Dog, Robocop, Pac Man, etc. Jerry Flynn Dale and the group members described that O.C.C. felt that the City of Detroit could do a lot more to combat crime, but since not enough was being done, they chose to share their viewpoints in recorded music.

In 2004, Jerry Dale supplemented his career in music by working in real estate, although he never stopped recording work. Jerry Dale began his career as a strong civil rights advocate in the metropolitan Detroit community, in 2009 when he and Dr. Tiah McKinney co-founded a nonprofit organization, The McKinney Foundation. The McKinney Foundation was established on three pillars: health, entrepreneurship, and the environment. The core focus is to address educational equity as it relates to ensuring access and opportunity to quality programs for all Detroiters. More recently, Dale was on 910 a.m. radio (WFDF-AM) in Detroit with Pastor Mo (legal name Maurice Hardwick) on Sundays from 11:00 to 1:00 p.m. during the years of 2017 through 2021. Jerry Flynn Dale has been a key leader in the Detroit community as a political activist, community advocate, and a musical pioneer.

Description

The Def Sound Studio house, located approximately twelve and one-half miles northwest of the Detroit River, was constructed in 1943 as part of a defense worker housing subdivision developed in the mid-twentieth century. Situated east of Southfield Road (M-39), west of the John C. Lodge

²⁴ BrownMark, *My Life in the Purple Kingdom*, University of Minnesota Press, Minnesota, 2020.

(M-10) expressway, north of McNichols Road, and south of Seven Mile Road, the house is located in the College Park section of the Belmont district in northwest Detroit. Placed on generally flat terrain, Winthrop Street is twenty to twenty-one feet wide and oriented in a north-south direction. Sidewalks line each side of Winthrop Street and the houses on Winthrop Street are set back from the road by a berm with a few mature trees remaining in the berm in the center of the block.



Single-Family house – 18315 Winthrop Avenue (1943)

Initial residents: John C. and Helen V. Wilhelmsen

Significant resident: Jerry Flynn Dale

This one and one-half story single-family dwelling was built in 1943 according to City of Detroit permit #25910. The developer, Laurencelle Homes Inc., took out the permit for the house on lot number 150 in the Laurelhurst subdivision. The building at 18315 Winthrop is twenty-four feet wide by thirty-two feet and six inches long. The lot measures fifty-feet wide by one-hundred-and-thirty-five feet deep, matching the lot size of the other properties on Winthrop Street.

With its wood frame construction and concrete block foundation, this example of a single-family Minimal Traditional style house is in keeping with the materials and uncomplicated design of the style. Dwellings of this type lacked excessive ornamentation and were characterized by their small scale, simple roofs, windows, and rooflines. Minimal traditional houses were initially designed by staff of the United States Federal Housing Authority (FHA) as a prototype for a “minimum house

that the majority of American wage earners could afford.”²⁵ Designs for the Minimal Traditional style house were standardized and published in pattern books which helped to spread the style throughout the country. The Minimal Traditional style house was a dominant style in domestic architecture until the Ranch-style house emerged in the early 1950s. According to author Virginia McAlester, “these houses were built in great numbers in the years immediately preceding and following World War II, they commonly dominate the large tract-housing developments of the period.”²⁶

The house at 18315 Winthrop Street sits at the southwest corner of Winthrop Street and Pickford Avenues, facing Winthrop Street. The house is a cross-gable one-and-a-half-story design with an addition at the north side of the building that accommodates a dining nook off the kitchen (1945). A front-gabled projecting entry on the front façade is identical to the front gable of other houses on the street. The house is faced with light yellow vinyl siding on the front (west), side (north) and back (west) façades. The south side façade has the lower portion faced with light vinyl siding, but the upper portion of the gable displays the original white wood lap siding.

On the east façade, (the primary façade) facing Winthrop Street, the front entry to the house is approached by two concrete steps and a concrete stoop set onto concrete block. The front entrance door is a newer panel white metal door with a half round window at the top. There is a double-hung vinyl window to the north of the door. There is a double-hung window in the set-back portion to the south of the entry. All of the windows and doors have beige-painted trim surrounds.

The north façade (facing Pickford Avenue) has two double-hung vinyl windows on the original house façade. There is a louvered vent in the gable of the attic level. An addition to the house, attached to the kitchen, is a dinette area, one-story in height with a hipped roof. The addition sits on a concrete block foundation. The three-sided addition has a white double-hung vinyl window at the east façade, a slider vinyl window at the north facade, and two double-hung vinyl windows at the west facade. The vinyl siding and windows were added to the home in the 2010’s.

The south façade has three window openings, each with a white vinyl double-hung window. There is a louvered vent in the center of the gable at the attic level. As described above, the lower portion faced with light vinyl siding, but the upper portion of the gable displays the original white wood clapboard.

At the west façade (the rear façade), the house has a nine-foot by six-foot wood-frame porch that was erected in 1966. The siding has been removed from the porch walls, leaving exposed chipboard on all three sides of the pitched-roof porch. There is a back door at the west façade of the house, which has a black wrought iron security door. There are basement-level windows filled with glass block on the north, south, and west façades.

There is a chimney at the center of the gabled roof, and four roof vents are on the west side of the roof. The roof is shingled with light brown asphalt shingles. A vinyl (polyvinyl chloride – p.v.c.) plumbing vent is at the north side of the roof.

²⁵ Gibbs, Jocelyn, et al., eds. *Outside In: The Architecture of Smith and Williams*, p. 174.

²⁶ McAlester, Virginia and Lee, *A Field Guide to American Houses*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1984, p. 478.

A concrete walk inset with a triangular scoring pattern leads up to the front porch. The front lawn of the property extends to a sidewalk, and a grass berm is adjacent to the street. There is a fire hydrant at the north side of the property's front berm near the street corner. A three-and-a-half-foot tall chain-link fence is at the north side of the property along the Pickford Avenue property line. The chain-link fence attaches to a six-foot high fence at the western side of the property, and along the alley side of the property. The north-south alley between Winthrop Street and Forrer Street has been vacated and is now filled with grass. The western end of the property is adjacent to the vacated alley, there is a chain-link aluminum fence at the rear property line, and along the vacated alley. An aluminum chain-link fence is at the southern property line adjacent to the neighboring property. The southern fence rises from three-and-a-half-feet in height to four-and-a-half-feet in height. There are brick semi-circular planting areas at the north and south corners of the front lawn. A concrete walk and patio are at the west façade, and a driveway leads to the garage at the Pickford Avenue (west) side of the property.

The non-contributing wood frame garage was erected in 1960 and it is sided with white wood lap siding. The garage accommodates two vehicles, and it has a gabled roof with an octagonal vent in the upper center of the gable of the north facade. There are four wood windows in the eastern garage façade, and a pedestrian entry door is at the north side of the east façade also. The roof of the garage is finished with light brown shingles, matching those on the house.



Noncontributing garage structure

Criteria

The proposed Def Sound Studio historic district appears to meet Criteria Number One adopted by the Historic Designation Advisory Board, as well as National Register Criterion Consideration G:

- (1) HDAB Criteria Number One: Sites, building, structures or archeological sites where cultural, social, spiritual, economic, political or architectural history of the community, city, state or nation is particularly reflected or exemplified.
- (2) National Register Criterion Consideration G: properties that are eligible for having achieved significance within the past fifty years and have exceptional importance.

List of Contributing and Noncontributing Resources

The proposed Def Sound Studio historic district consists of one contributing building resource: the house, and one non-contributing resource: the garage.

COMPOSITION OF THE HISTORIC DESIGNATION ADVISORY BOARD

The Historic Designation Advisory Board has nine members, who are residents of Detroit, and two ex-officio members. The appointed members are Melanie A. Bazil, Carolyn C. Carter, Louis Fisher, Theresa Holder-Hagood, Calvin Jackson, Nubia Warford Polk, Osvaldo Rivera, Sharon Sexton, and William Worden. The ex-officio members, who may be represented by members of their staff, are the Director of the City Planning Commission and the Director of the Planning and Development Department. Ad hoc members for this study are Jerry Flynn Dale, property owner, and Kalimah Johnson, rap historian.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Local historic designation report prepared by
Rebecca Savage, Lead Architectural Historian

Jerry Flynn Dale, research, historic photos, garage photo

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