

University of East London Institutional Repository: <http://roar.uel.ac.uk>

This paper is made available online in accordance with publisher policies. Please scroll down to view the document itself. Please refer to the repository record for this item and our policy information available from the repository home page for further information.

To see the final version of this paper please visit the publisher's website. Access to the published version may require a subscription.

**Author(s):** Lawrence, Tim.

**Article title:** Disco Madness: Walter Gibbons and the Legacy of Turntablism and Remixology

**Year of publication:** 2008

**Citation:** Lawrence, T. (2008) 'Disco Madness: Walter Gibbons and the Legacy of Turntablism and Remixology' *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, 20 (3) 276 - 329

**Link to published version:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1533-1598.2008.00162.x>

**DOI:** 10.1111/j.1533-1598.2008.00162.x

## "Disco Madness: Walter Gibbons and the Legacy of Turntablism and Remixology"

Tim Lawrence

*Journal of Popular Music Studies*, 20, 3, 2008, 276-329

This story begins with a skinny white DJ mixing between the breaks of obscure Motown records with the ambidextrous intensity of an octopus on speed. It closes with the same man, debilitated and virtually blind, fumbling for gospel records as he spins up eternal hope in a fading dusk. In between Walter Gibbons worked as a cutting-edge discotheque DJ and remixer who, thanks to his pioneering reel-to-reel edits and contribution to the development of the twelve-inch single, revealed the immanent synergy that ran between the dance floor, the DJ booth and the recording studio. Gibbons started to mix between the breaks of disco and funk records around the same time DJ Kool Herc began to test the technique in the Bronx, and the disco spinner was as technically precise as Grandmaster Flash, even if the spinners directed their deft handiwork to differing ends. It would make sense, then, for Gibbons to be considered alongside these and other towering figures in the pantheon of turntablism, but he died in virtual anonymity in 1994, and his groundbreaking contribution to the intersecting arts of DJing and remixology has yet to register beyond disco aficionados.<sup>1</sup>

There is nothing mysterious about Gibbons's low profile. First, he operated in a culture that has been ridiculed and reviled since the "disco sucks" backlash peaked with the symbolic detonation of 40,000 disco records in the summer of 1979. Second, he occupied a liminal position within that culture, where he attempted to express the aesthetically progressive priorities of downtown New York's private party scene in a series of public discotheques that were always vulnerable to conservative cooption. And third, just as he was approaching the pinnacle of his remixing career, he became a born-again Christian, which set him in opposition to a movement that was already about to become marginal. Gibbons continued to produce remixes that were lucid and daring, yet he did so from the outside, and his isolation increased when he became sick with AIDS and joined a community that was widely deemed to be untouchable. During the first half of the 1990s, when the epidemic peaked in New York's gay male community, it was difficult to even give away disco records — as the executors of Gibbons's collection of vinyl and reel-to-reel tapes discovered.

Gibbons did not contribute to the most flagrantly commercial aspects of disco, but has suffered from implicit association. Elitist and hierarchical, Studio 54 dismantled the core ethos of early disco culture — that the dance floor should function as a space of communal dance — while *Saturday Night*

*Fever* whitened and straightened a culture that had been forged by African American, Italian American and Latino gay men. As the majors flooded the market with a glut of second-rate disco recordings just as the economy entered a deep recession, disco was critiqued for being superficial, materialistic and irretrievably commercial, and this caricature endured as the commonsense interpretation of disco because the postdisco dance movements of house and techno failed to establish the kind of following that would have supported the writing of an alternative history.<sup>2</sup> Like disco, hip hop also struggled to gain recognition early on, but the culture received its first serious historical treatment when David Toop published *Rap Attack* in 1984, and the simultaneous emergence of Def Jam marked the beginning of a period of rapid growth that has supported the publication of a plethora of historical accounts that cite DJ Kool Herc, Grandmaster Flash, and Afrika Bambaataa as key figures. In contrast to hip hop's relatively continuous history — a history that has escaped the schism of a national backlash — the disrupted story of disco and post-disco dance forms has give rise to a fragmented knowledge in which contemporary participants are unlikely to have heard of a pioneering figure such as Gibbons.

However the analogy between Gibbons and hip hop spinners such as Herc, Flash and Bambaataa is conjured not to illustrate the relative bad luck of the disco DJ, but instead to open up a conversation about the relationship between disco and hip hop that to date has been explored in only the most tentative ways. Timing and territory have contributed to the dialogue being foreclosed. Hip hop barely registered beyond New York's boroughs during the 1970s, the decade in which disco surged to international prominence, and the cultures continued to move in inverse relationship to one another when the collapse of the disco market coincided with the breakthrough success of "Rapper's Delight" in the summer of 1979, since when disco has surfaced only intermittently, and largely as cliché, while hip hop has become one of the best-selling alternatives to rock. In addition, the contrasting claims to territory as espoused within disco/dance and hip hop/rap have given rise to a sense of cultural disjuncture, with the former operating according to a range of interiors (the darkened club, the feel of the music, the psychic journey of the trip), and the latter a series of exteriors (the urban ghetto, the conflict with the state, the possession of material objects). Yet if these temporalities and outlooks suggest only contrasts, a consideration of Gibbons opens up a space in which a range of shared practices can begin to be teased out.

Overly simplistic assumptions about the sexuality of purportedly "gay" disco/dance and "straight" hip hop/rap have conflated the reigning sense of immutable difference, and hip hop has contributed more words to the exchange thanks to its sustained success as well as its emphasis on rapped vocals, a number of which have been provocative. As Peter Shapiro notes, the lyrics of "Rapper's Delight", hip hop's breakthrough single, contained homophobic elements that have been repeated as if they are part of hip hop's

accepted social reality, and it has become commonplace (although not mandatory) for disco to be dismissed for being insufficiently masculine.<sup>3</sup> Noting that clubs DJs were often gay, Houston A. Baker, Jr. (1991) commented that disco "was not *dope* in the eyes, ears, and agile bodies of black Bronx teenagers," before he concluded: "Hey, some resentment of disco culture and a reassertion of black manhood rights (rites) — no matter who populated discotheques — was a natural thing."<sup>4</sup> The disdain for house, disco's most obvious generic descendent, was illustrated when Chuck D of Public Enemy described the genre as "sophisticated, anti-black, anti-feel, the most ARTIFICIAL shit I ever heard. It represents the gay scene, it's separating blacks from their past and their culture, it's upwardly mobile."<sup>5</sup> More recently, 50 Cent's derogatory references to "homie" culture and the positioning of female pornography as routine in "Disco Inferno" suggested not so much an engagement with disco as a proposition that the roots of this queer and female dominated culture should be quashed. "For a generation of gays and lesbians raised on disco, hip-hop is foreign territory distinguished mostly by the homophobic trash talk of its superstars," wrote Derrick Mathis in *The Advocate* in 2003.

The jousting conceals a nuanced and variegated history in which disco/dance and hip hop/rap DJs drew on the same pool of funk, soul, uptempo R&B and imported records, developed intersecting turntablist practices, set up inclusive record pools, nurtured dance styles (breakdancing and voguing) that blended athleticism and angularity, and produced a set of recordings that were mixed back-to-back in clubs during the first half of the 1980s. Hip hop chroniclers Jeff Chang, Murray Forman, Nelson George and Tricia Rose have captured shards of this history: that Kool DJ D, Disco King Mario and other Bronx River DJs like DJ Tex played uptempo disco music; that Flash saw Pete "DJ" Jones extend disco records by mixing two copies of the same record; that Bronx discotheques such as Mel Quinns's on 42nd Street and Club 371 in the Bronx were incubators for early rap; that instrumental disco tracks underpinned some early rap recordings; and that "Rapper's Delight" received club play.<sup>6</sup> The citations might have been more extensive if the history of disco had been charted more thoroughly when these and other hip hop historians went about their work; as it is, or was, disco's ahistorical status also made it vulnerable to parody.<sup>7</sup> However, recent research has established a platform upon which it possible points of intersection can be traced more easily, and thanks to his aesthetic outlook, the figure of Gibbons encourages an exploration of the intersecting practices and priorities of disco and hip hop.<sup>8</sup>

Gibbons immersed himself in disco culture, yet his excavation of the break across the 1970s and 1980s makes him an articulate advocate of the links that ran between dance and hip hop. Paralleling Herc, Gibbons started to mix between breaks when he DJed at Galaxy 21, where he developed a quick-fire technique that was comparable to Flash. Ahead of disco and hip hop spinners

alike, Gibbons started to construct reel-to-reel mixes of his edits in his home that he would play live and also pass to friends, and popularising this turntablist practice, Gibbons drew on his DJing sensibility when mixed the first commercial twelve-inch single for Salsoul in 1976. A short while later, and as the first DJ to be granted access to the multitrack tapes of a recording, he began to explore the way in which sound could be manipulated further in order to accentuate the energy of the dance floor. During the 1980s he continued to explore the aesthetic potential of the looped break when he recorded the haunting, heavily syncopated "Set It Off", and he continued to pursue his interest in off-kilter, skittish beats with the musician and producer Arthur Russell. For these and other reasons, Gibbons compels us to remember disco and to ponder its relationship to hip hop.

### The Break

Walter Gibbons stood at five foot five, sported a wispy moustache, and parted his brown hair right to left. He was also shy and softly spoken. Yet when he stood behind the turntables, he became hurricane articulate, as though he kept his daytime thoughts to himself because he could express them so much more forcefully at night. Aware the process of splitting the nucleus of a song into smaller nuclei could produce a significant release of energy, Gibbons approached his work in the DJ booth with the mindset of a nuclear physicist, and once he deduced that drums lay at the atomic heart of dance music, he began to hunt down songs that included a long drum intro or, alternatively, a break — the technique transplanted from jazz and gospel into soul, funk and early disco whereby the vocalists and musicians would stop playing, often simultaneously, in order to let the drummer play solo. Purchasing two copies of any record that contained one or more of these percussive gems, Gibbons specialized in stretching them beyond the horizon of New York's tribal imaginary by mixing between two copies of a record.

Born in Brooklyn on 2 April 1954, Gibbons started to forge his sensibility at a young age. At the Walt Whitman Junior High in Brooklyn, recalls one friend, "he was the lone white boy hangin' out with the sistahs... a fairly tough group of black girls" who probably "helped cultivate his musical taste," and by June 1972, when he met Rich Flores on a Gay Pride event, he had accumulated a collection of 1,500 seven-inch singles.<sup>9</sup> Soon after Flores visited Gibbons, who was still living with his mother, and witnessed him play records on an amp and two Gerrard turntables. "He had one turntable plugged into the left channel and the other turntable plugged into the right channel, and he also used low spindles and paper sleeves to help the records slip," recalls Flores. "He had two copies of Bobby Byrd 'Hot Pants', and he extended the opening of the record by using headphones and the fader, which he also used to hear how to cue the incoming record. He could keep it going for as long as he wanted. It was easy for him."<sup>10</sup>

Gibbons had already DJed for a month or two at a club called Sanctum Sanctorum, where an African American spinner called Alfie Davison was resident, but he was more focused on playing at private house parties, where he would set up his home stereo system and sometimes make a little money. "He was this mamma's kid," remarks Flores, who moved into an apartment with Gibbons in the autumn of 1972. "He was green. He knew nobody in the industry and he had no connections." That began to change when Gibbons started to work at Melody Song Shops (informally known as Melody Records) in the spring of 1973, and toward the end of the year he started to DJ at the Outside Inn, a gay venue situated in Jackson Heights, Queens, after Flores took it upon himself to call around the clubs that were listed in *Michael's Thing*, a gay magazine. When MFSB released "Love Is the Message" (Philadelphia International, 1973) around the same time, Gibbons took to extending its instrumental section, after which he began to blend it with spoken extracts from the *Wizard of Oz*, yet it was his ability to extend the break that became his trademark skill. "I was amazed at the way he would mix," remembers Mark Zimmer, who went to listen to Gibbons after meeting him in Melody Records towards the beginning of 1974. "He was working with these short little records, which were just two or three minutes long, with maybe a two-measure introduction, and he had the mixing down pat. He would extend the break until he got exhausted, or until the people on the dance floor became fatigued. It was just magnificent to see him do it."

Gibbons went on to DJ at Galaxy 21, an after-hours venue on Twenty-third Street, around late 1974, or possibly early 1975, and it was there that he began to play records such as Rare Earth "Happy Song" (drawn from the 1975 album *Back to Earth*), Jermaine Jackson "Erucu" (released by Motown on the *Mahogany* soundtrack in 1975) and the *Cooley High* soundtrack number "2 Pigs and A Hog" (also released in 1975), all of which contained prominent breaks. "Walter was so innovative," notes Kenny Carpenter, who witnessed Gibbons forge his craft in Galaxy 21, where he worked the lights (and briefly dated the DJ). "He would buy two copies of a record like 'Happy Song' and he would loop the thirty-second conga section." Hired to play drums alongside Gibbons, much to the irritation of the DJ, François Kevorkian recalls how listeners "would never hear the actual song" when Gibbons worked two copies of "Happy Song". "You just heard the drums," he adds. "It seemed like he kept them going forever, although I imagine it was actually about ten minutes." (Lawrence 2003: 216)

It was in the late-night setting of Galaxy 21 that Gibbons was able to fully develop his craft. "You could get away with things at an after hours venue that you couldn't get away with at a regular club night," notes Tony Smith, the DJ at Barefoot Boy, who met Gibbons in mid 1975. "After five hours [of dancing in another venue] people would have heard most of the things they wanted to hear and they would be ready for something new. You could go to

Galaxy 21 at seven-a.m." — most other discotheques closed at four-a.m. and Galaxy 21 opened at four-forty-a.m. — "and the club would still be packed." Looping breaks in order to generate tension before switching to a euphoria-inducing vocal crescendo, Gibbons acquired a reputation for being for being a highly skilled original. "Walter was making a lot of flawless mixes," says Danny Krivit, who started DJing at the Ninth Circle in 1971. "He would go back and forth, very quickly, which made it sound like a live edit. It was very impressive." Disco historian Peter Shapiro (34) notes that people started to refer to the spinner's style as "jungle music".

Gibbons was operating at the fulcrum of converging historical forces. The age-old practice of dancing to drum-generated rhythms echoed beneath his beat-mixing aesthetic, while the potential to repeat that experience with pre-recorded music in an industrialised western setting had been established when jazz musicians began to lay down drum breaks on their records. The likelihood of these breaks being looped in consecutive succession increased when David Mancuso and Francis Grasso started to select records for the predominantly gay crowds that congregated at the Loft (a private party situated in NoHo) and the Sanctuary (a public discotheque situated in Hell's Kitchen) at the beginning of 1970. Previously dancers had been required to move within the physically restrictive matrix of the heterosexual couple, while DJs were charged with the task of "working the bar" (in order to maximize venue profits) and accordingly interrupted the rhythmic flow in order to encourage dancers to drink. But the predominantly gay crowds who congregated at the Loft and the Sanctuary weren't used to dancing with partners of the same sex — indeed New York law continued to forbid such activity until December 1971 — and the post-Stonewall celebratory fervour that swept through these venues contributed to the emergence of a new antiphonic dynamic. From this point onwards, dancers moved in freeform patterns that were connected to the broader fluctuations of the assembled crowd, while DJs selected records according to the mood of the floor and programmed them to flow across the course of an entire night.<sup>11</sup>

Picking out tracks that would have cleared the dance floor in another setting, Grasso substituted Santana's guitar-led "Jingo" (Columbia, 1969) with Olatunji's original version, "Jin-Go-Lo-Ba (Drums of Passion)" (Columbia, 1959), while Mancuso began to spin the heavily-percussive "Exuma, the Obeah Man" by Exuma (Mercury, 1969) and "City, Country, City" by War (United Artists, 1972) around the same time. "Sing, Sing, Sing" by Benny Goodman (Victor, 1937), "Revelation" by Love (Da Capo, 1967), "Girl, You Need A Change of Mind" by Eddie Kendricks (Motown, 1972) and "Sultana" by Titanic (RCA, 1971) also became popular, in part because dancers loved the rhythmic dynamism of their breaks as well as the way in which these percussive interludes contrasted with other instrumental and vocal parts, and accordingly generated tension and release. Within the space of a few short

months, the break had assumed a central position within New York's nascent dance network.

New York DJs set about deploying the technologies of the turntable and the mixer to intensify the experience of the dance floor. Leading the way, Grasso pioneered the art of extended beat mixing, while Mancuso stuck to rudimentary segueing in order to stay focused on developing themes around lyrical meanings and instrumental moods. After that, New York spinners such as Jim Burgess, Michael Cappello, Steve D'Acquisto, Armando Galvez, Bobby "DJ" Guttadaro, Richie Kaczor, Frankie Knuckles, Robbie Leslie, Larry Levan, Howard Merritt, Richie Rivera, David Rodriguez, Tom Savarese, Tee Scott, Nicky Siano, Jimmy Stuard and Ray Yeates began to beat-match, interrupt records in mid-flow, manipulate the equalizer, and even mix with three turntables. Plying their trade in Boston and Philadelphia, John Luongo and David Todd mixed between the breaks of records, while Siano might have been the first DJ to virtually insist he would only play a record if it contained a break. Gibbons appreciated the work of his peers: in his opinion, Todd could beat-mix for longer than any other spinner, while Kaczor (he told Zimmer) was "one of the first DJs to do this type of mixing." Amidst the turntablist frenzy, Gibbons acquired a reputation for championing the break. "[*"2 Pigs and a Hog"*] is only 1:46, but the DJs play it two or three times in a row, making it longer," reported Tom Moulton in *Billboard* in October 1975. "The LP has been around for several months and Walter [Gibbons] believed in the record enough to try and convince others."

DJ Kool Herc began to lay down a similar breakbeat aesthetic about a year after Gibbons started to DJ in public. Having arrived in New York from Jamaica, Herc had played reggae at his first party, which he staged in the rec room of the apartment building where he lived on Sedgwick Avenue in August 1973, but as Jeff Chang points out in a narrative that has acquired folklore status, the crowd "wanted the breaks", so he "dropped some soul and funk bombs" (Chang: 70). In the summer of 1974 Herc started to put on free outdoor parties, and at some point he started to work a technique that became known as the "Merry-Go-Round," which involved him using two copies of a record in order to extend the break. Toop (6) notes that Herc "switched to Latin-tinged funk, just playing the fragments that were popular with the dancers and ignoring the rest of the track", and adds that the "most popular part was usually the percussion break." Electro pioneer Afrika Bambaataa recalls Herc began to turn to "certain disco records that had funky percussion breaks... and he just kept that beat *going*" (Toop 2000: 6).

The question remains: if dancer desire for the break was so explicit, why hadn't other DJs started to extend these sections at an earlier moment? Offering an explanation, Garnette Cadogan (2007) suggests Herc was not simply responding to his Bronx-based dancers, but also channelled their will through a set of priorities and techniques he had absorbed in Jamaica, where

sound system DJs would head from the party to the studio in order to edit records according to the responses they had just witnessed on the dance floor. Because Herc lacked that kind of studio set-up in New York, he worked out how to reproduce the looped process on the spot, and so a modified Jamaican outlook was brought to bear on a set of non-Jamaican records. "We can think of Kool Herc as a one-man sound system-cum-studio, or, if you prefer, a selector-cum-sound system-cum-studio who fused economic expediency with imaginative remixing and improvisation," Cadogan adds in conversation. "Like the dub musicians who reused existing rhythms to useful and even exhaustive effect, Herc developed a technique that made perfect economic and creative sense, and supplied an aesthetic in which the pleasure of dancers (and a quick, ready responsiveness to them) reigned paramount. Perhaps more than anything else, this is how Jamaican popular music influenced hip hop." Acknowledging the attention to the dance floor was not specific to Jamaica, but was also an established practice within the tradition of African American jazz dance and related forms, Cadogan concludes: "Although Kool Herc's techniques marked a departure, I see the departure as less a break than an apotheosis, or a confluence of earlier practices."

Along with Luongo and Todd, Gibbons developed a comparable practice, perhaps because the darkened space of the discotheque, in which time and space could be collapsed and extended in unconventional ways, encouraged him to adopt an aesthetic that sounded both primeval and futuristic. Yet whereas Herc talked over records in a style reminiscent of Jamaican MCing, Gibbons abandoned the radio tradition of talking between and sometimes over records, and while the Bronx DJ faded from one record to the next without lining up the beats — much to the frustration of listeners such as Flash — Gibbons combined precision and spontaneity in his mixing. "The break in 'Happy Song' is only thirty seconds long and he [Gibbons] knew exactly how to make it click because to me it sounded like one record," recalls Kevorkian. "I was playing along with the drums and it was always the same pattern, always the same number of bars. He had this uncanny sense of mixing that was so accurate it was *unbelievable*." The Galaxy DJ's technical perfection disguised the difficulty of the mix. "When you listened to the record it was like, 'Wait a minute, where do I cue up to know exactly where I am?' It's not easy. The record doesn't just start. It fades up. You really have to have a very keen ear to pick it out through the headphones."

The contrasting approaches of Gibbons and Herc were grounded in the culture of their respective dance crowds. At Herc's street parties, athletic young dancers — break boys, or b-boys, as Herc dubbed them — would compete with each other, and as their skills became more developed and the competition intensified, other partygoers began to circle around them in order to watch the unfolding spectacle. "Each person's turn in the ring was very brief — ten to thirty seconds — but packed with action and meaning," Nelson George (Rose 1994: 47) has noted of the nascent form. "It began with an

entry, a hesitating walk that allowed him to get in step with the music for several beats and take his place 'on stage.' Next the dancer 'got down' to the floor to do the footwork, a rapid, slashing, circular scan of the floor by sneakered feet, in which the hands support the body's weight while the head and torso revolve at a slower speed, a kind of syncopated sunken pirouette, also known as the helicopter. Acrobatic transitions such as head spins, hand spins, shoulder spins, flips and the swipe — a flip of the weight from hands to feet that also involves a twist in the body's direction — served as bridges between the footwork and the freeze."

The athletic style of the b-boys did not require Herc to mix smoothly between records such as "Bra" by Cymande (Janus, 1972), "Funky Music Is the Thing" by the Dynamic Corvettes (Abet, 1975), "Apache" by the Incredible Bongo Band (MGM, 1973), "Get Into Something" by the Isley Brothers (T-Neck, 1970), or "It's Just Begun" by the Jimmy Castor Bunch (RCA, 1972). According to Rose (47), breakdancers executed "moves that imitated the rupture in rhythmic continuity as it was highlighted in the musical break," and it follows that Herc's abrupt transitions might have been welcomed as an additional challenge.<sup>12</sup> Shapiro (237) adds that the hip hop break functioned in a different way to the disco break, for while the latter created a moment for dancers to "relax", the former was "just the opposite." Shapiro oversimplifies in order to make his point, because so-called hip hop records such as "The Mexican" by Babe Ruth (Harvest, 1973), the live version of James Brown's "Give It Up or Turnit A Loose" (King, 1970), and "Think (About It)" by Lynn Collins (People, 1972) were played regularly in disco settings, while protagonists from the private party and public discotheque network attest to the way the disco break was experienced as a moment of intense excitement and energy. If there was a difference in the private party or public discotheque setting, it lay in the way dancers sought to merge into the crowd rather than stand out as spectacular individuals. DJs such as Gibbons contributed to the dynamic by developing a mixing technique that created a mesmerising flow and encouraged dancers to abandon themselves to the rhythm of the music.

As Flash, Bambaataa and other spinners came to the fore, innovative techniques such as scratching and the quick-fire mixing of multiple records consolidated the impression that hip hop and disco spinners were assuming distinctive styles as they pursued contrasting goals. Yet these differences should not be allowed to override the common turntablist ethos that linked both sets of DJs from the outset as well as the way Gibbons bridged the ostensibly disconnected worlds of Manhattan and the Bronx. The son of Puerto Rican immigrants, John "Jellybean" Benitez grew up on Davidson Avenue in the South Bronx and witnessed DJs such as Bambaataa scratch and quick-cut before he went on to hear Gibbons spin at Galaxy 21. "He [Gibbons] would cut up records creatively, he would play two together, he did double beats, he worked the sound system, and he made pressings of his

own edits," says Jellybean (Lawrence 2003: 217). "Walter played a lot of beats and breaks, and I had never heard a disco DJ playing those kinds of records before. His style appealed to my Bronx sensibilities. He just blew me away."

Fig 1: Walter Gibbons. Courtesy of Kenny Carpenter.

Disco spinners were also left open-mouthed. "Walter was doing things other DJs *wished* they could try in their clubs, including me," remembers Smith, who became close with Gibbons during this period. "I heard every DJ, straight and gay, because I wanted to know what was going on in the music world. Walter was the most advanced." Having heard the future, Smith started to go to Galaxy 21 on a regular basis once he had wrapped up for the night at Barefoot Boy. "Everyone was going to hear Walter," adds Smith. "Most DJs finished at four so we could hear Walter from five until ten. DJs couldn't go and listen to too many people because we had played all night and didn't want to hear the same thing all over again. But we knew Walter would turn us on. Everyone showed up." Smith remembers how the collective fascination with Gibbons emerged in a very short space of time. "It happened close to overnight. DJs were saying, 'Oh, did you hear Walter?' because no one else was doing it. There were lots of good DJs around, but nobody was spinning like Walter."

Once Gibbons had finished his set, he and Smith would go for breakfast and, weather permitting, a trip to the beach, where they would talk about music. "Walter loved progressive music," recalls Smith. "That's why I bought him 'New York City' by Miroslav Vitous. He was the first person to play 'Love Is the Message' with Funkadelic in the background. That was the kind of music he was into." Whereas spinners such as Mancuso and Siano were able to develop a similarly broad-ranging musical agenda because the private status of their parties enabled them to stay open late and attract a predominantly gay crowd that was in search of intimacy and innovation, Gibbons lacked that kind of set-up yet still managed to forge a daring aesthetic. As Smith notes, "The amazing thing was that Walter did what he did for a predominantly straight crowd when it was thought they weren't as musically progressive as the gay crowds."

### Tape and Acetate

The task of mixing between the breaks that appeared in disco and funk records was doubly difficult. The subtly shifting time signatures of their live drums meant the DJ could never hope to lock into an unchanging tempo, while the truncated length of the percussive solos added to the challenge. If a break lasted for thirty seconds, that was long, so Walter Gibbons had to be dextrous and sharp-eared if he was to mix between the breaks more than once

— a feat that required him to play the break in record A and then return to the beginning of that break before the equivalent break in record B ran its course. "These quick-fire mixes were *work*," says Tony Smith. "There were so many short songs where he had to do this mixing technique that after a while he started to put his beat mixes on reel-to-reel at home. Walter became really adept at reel-to-reel." Kenny Carpenter notes that Gibbons would still perform live mixes, but adds that "if there was a mix that went over well Walter would perfect it on reel-to-reel." For the most part these tape edits were not pressed to acetate — or the cheap and ephemeral "dub plate" disc format that was used to test original recordings before they were pressed up onto a "master disc" and reproduced for retail. "Galaxy 21 had a reel-to-reel player/recorder for him to play his edits. He worked in this way to protect the exclusivity of his mixes since, in those days, you couldn't make a copy of a reel-to-reel."

A range of dub producers, experimental composers and recording artists — among them the Beatles, Miles Davis, Alvin Lucier, Lee "Scratch" Perry, Steve Reich, Pierre Schaeffer and King Tubby — had started to explore the sonic possibilities of splicing and looping tape before Gibbons, while Tom Moulton had recorded a non-stop cassette mix for the nascent discotheque scene after he visited Fire Island in the early 1970s. Yet Gibbons appears to have pioneered the practice of developing homemade reel-to-reel edits and pressing them up onto acetate when he produced a custom-made mix of the Temptations "Law of the Land" in 1973 (the year of the song's release on Motown). "'Law of the Land' starts with clapping and he used to extend that section in real time," comments Rich Flores. "But there were a few fuck-ups, so I said, 'Why don't we record the song over and over again, just the beginning of it, and then splice the magnetic tape together?' I didn't have a proper splicing block, so it was ninety-five percent good. Then we pressed it to acetate."

Situated on Forty-seventh Street and Broadway, Angel Sound appears to have been the first company to start pressing up dance records onto acetate for club play. "I had done the big stuff for so long I decided I wanted a smaller place, so I set myself up to do something the larger studios didn't care to do — small recordings and the cutting of discs," says Sandy Sandoval, who opened Angel Sound in 1966. "I was a lot more successful than I ever imagined." Having spent most of his time working in rock 'n' roll and rock, and even engineering Hendrix, Sandoval was surprised when club-based spinners began to pour into his studio in 1972, and by the mid 1970s he says the approximate figure had risen from ten to forty or fifty, which accounted for something like twenty percent of his total business. Sandoval adds that a number of Jamaican reggae DJs also passed through his studio to press up acetate recordings, but maintains there were "no hip hop guys". Then again, how could Sandoval or anyone else have distinguished between a hip hop guy and a disco guy during the first half of the 1970s?

According to Sandoval, the DJs would enter the studio with reel-to-reels and cassettes that contained looped breaks and other reworked instrumental sections, and they also used the studio to grab nonrhythmic parts (such as speech extracts) and overlay those parts onto other tracks. "We'd make transfers and adjustments to the timing, and sometimes we'd carry out the edits they wanted, as well," he notes. "They would get these tapes together, but the tapes couldn't be used for DJing [because most clubs were only equipped with turntables], so they came to us to have the music put onto disc. They would exchange recordings and make compilations of these things. They were all striving to have something that was a little bit different." The names of the DJs who pressed up these cuts, as well as the dates they went about their work, have been lost to the vagaries of this indelibly transient, anonymous, black-market economy, yet Sandoval recalls their enthusiasm with fondness. "The DJs were really into it," he comments. "They played in rough clubs, but they were basically just people who liked music. They probably didn't have the talent to play an instrument, but disco gave them a chance to work in music."

Initially DJs went to Angel Sound with the sole intention of pressing up acetates of rare records, but when Gibbons played Flores two Angel Sound bootlegs — Max B's "Bananaticoco" and "Nessa", which had been released originally on Wah Wah in 1972, and Eric and the Vikings "Get Off the Street Y'All", which came out on Soulhawk, a Detroit-based record company — Flores became inquisitive.<sup>13</sup> "Walter came over to my mother's house before we moved in together, took these ten-inch acetates out of a green sleeve, and played them," recalls Flores. "The Bananaticoco had a lot of heavy bongos, and it was very jungle-like. The Eric and the Vikings was a very obscure instrumental track. I was impressed." When Flores discovered Sandoval charged seven or eight dollars per acetate, he decided to purchase his own record-cutting lathe in order to combine his technical know-how with his boyfriend's impressive record collection. "I knew we were going to have strangers come up to the apartment so I said, 'Let's put the machine in the foyer so people don't have to come into our living room or bedroom,'" recalls Flores. "We had a favourite record by Boris Gardner that was called 'Melting Pot' — it was a Jamaican record that the DJs used to play in the clubs — so that's what we called our company."

Twenty two-sided seven-inch acetates were pressed up on Melting Pot, and when sales turned out to be slow, Flores and Gibbons arranged for them to be listed at Downstairs Records, where DJ customers were invited to place orders. The selection of artists and tracks pressed up on Melting Pot — MP-01 Kongas "Jungle" / Tony Morgan "Black Skin Blue Eyed Boys", MP-02 Max B "Nessa" / Elephant's Memory, MP-03 Eric and the Vikings "Get Off the Streets Y'All" / United 8 "Getting Uptown to Get Down", MP-04 Titanic "Santa Fe" / Edwin Starr "Time", MP-05 Andwella "Hold On to Your Mind" /

Apatchi Band "Issmak", MP-06 Julio Gutierrez "Revival" / Edwin Starr "Runnin' Back and Forth", and so on — reveals the common aesthetic that was surging within the nascent disco and hip hop scenes.<sup>14</sup> Running to MP-20, the series also included edits of "People Get On Up and Drive Your Funky Soul" by James Brown, "Exuma, The Obeah Man" by Exuma, and... "It's Just Begun" by The Jimmy Castor Bunch. "None of these records were edits," notes Flores. "They were all direct copies. The only edits we did were 'Law of the Land' and then 'Love Is the Message'."

Taken together, these sounds, formats and practices repudiate the idea that discotheque turntablism amounted to a conservative practice. "Disco was brand new then and there were a few jocks that had monstrous sound systems but they wouldn't dare play this kind of music," Grandmaster Flash told David Toop (2004b: 233-45) in one such critique. "They would never play a record where only two minutes of the song was all it was worth. They wouldn't buy those type of records. The type of mixing that was out then was blending from one record to the next or waiting for the record to go off and wait for the jock to put the needle back on." Yet discotheque DJs such as the exemplary Gibbons were mixing between two copies of the same record, as well as pioneering a range of other techniques that led them to manipulate pre-recorded music in order to keep their dance floors moving.<sup>15</sup> Just as hip hop DJs would begin to introduce innovative mixing techniques during the second half of 1974, so discotheque DJs searched tirelessly for new ways to massage sound in order to keep their dance floors moving, and across 1972 and 1973 this outlook gave rise to a reel-to-reel and acetate economy that came to isolate and extend the fragment of the break. Indeed their commitment to reworking records where "only two minutes of the song was all it was worth" was so forceful it would give rise to a new format — and Gibbons was once again positioned at the centre of the sonic storm.

### Ten Percent

Walter Gibbons was tenacious in his pursuit of music and, according to Mark Zimmer, he "knew how to be a little aggressive" in order to have his name added to the door list of a club or get promotional records. On one occasion Gibbons showed Zimmer a Top Twenty list that had been published and asked him if he noticed anything peculiar about it. "I took a good look and I said, 'Oh, *every song is from a different record company!*'" recalls Zimmer. "Walter knew how to use these lists to his advantage, because that meant he could call the companies and say, 'Look, I have your record in my list!' If it was a Top Forty list he would have listed records from forty different companies." The outlook served Gibbons well when he approached Salsoul, a newly formed independent label, and offered to promote their records for free — as long as he did not have to pay for them. "Walter was very aggressive when it came to searching out new records," says Ken Cayre, the co-owner of

the company. "He became friendly with Denise Chatman, our promotions girl, and we went to hear him play. I was very impressed with his skills."

With only a limited background in music, Cayre had put Salsoul on the map by persuading the Philadelphia International musicians Vince Montana (vibes), Ronnie Baker (bass), Norman Harris (guitar) and Earl Young (drums) to play on "Salsoul Hustle" (Salsoul, 1975), which referenced Van McCoy's smash hit "The Hustle" (Avoc, 1975), and he attempted to build on this success when he commissioned the Philadelphia band Double Exposure to record the album *Ten Percent* (Salsoul, 1976). In order to promote the album's title single, Cayre released a non-commercial promotional twelve-inch test pressing of the six-minute-fifty-second album version, which consisted of the standard single plus an extended jam, and when inquisitiveness led him to go and hear Gibbons play at Galaxy 21, the DJ worked two copies of the promo in his trademark fashion. "He did this fantastic edit and the reaction in the club was phenomenal," recalls Cayre, who went to the club with Chatman. "I said, 'Can you do that in the studio?' He said he could." Having been impressed by the seriousness and diligence displayed by Gibbons in his dealings with Salsoul, Cayre concluded that the DJ was atypical of his peers and could be entrusted with the remix. According to Smith, Gibbons was interested in remixing "Ten Percent" because the record was "more progressive than the label's attempt to compete with Van McCoy."

By this point the collective desire for extended mixes was tangible. Ever since they started to play extended sets, New York's insomniac spinners had sought out long, experimental album cuts that would enable their dancers to lose themselves in the music, and because these cuts were scarce, they had also adopted the habit of buying two copies of a seven-inch single in order to extend an original recording beyond its three- to four-minute limit. Scepter's Mel Cheren was the first record company executive to respond to the demand, and having commissioned Tom Moulton to remix of "Do It ('Til You're Satisfied)" by B.T. Express (Scepter, 1974) and "Dream World" by Don Downing (Scepter, 1974), which were squeezed onto seven-inch singles, he released another remix — Bobby Moore's "Call Me Your Anything Man" — as a promo-only twelve-inch dance single in June 1975.<sup>16</sup> Although there is some dispute as to whether the Moore remix amounted to the first twelve-inch dance release, the fact that remixes of "I'll Be Holding On" by Al Downing, "So Much for Love" by Moment of Truth, "(Baby) Save Me" by Secrets, and "Train Called Freedom" by South Shore Commission can also lay claim to that honour highlights the way club-based DJs and disco-friendly labels were set on establishing an extended dance format.<sup>17</sup>

Cayre's contribution turned out to be twofold. He was the first label head to grasp that the twelve-inch single would appeal to dancers as well as DJs, and accordingly released "Ten Percent" as the first commercially available

twelve-inch single. And he also understood that, despite their lowly position within the music industry, discotheque DJs were more adept than producers when it came to grasping the way the dynamic of the dance floor might be transposed onto vinyl, and so he commissioned Gibbons to team up with the engineer Bob Blank and produce a remix of "Ten Percent". They were given three hours to complete the job — in effect, one hour to put up the mix and channel the sound, one hour to break down the recording, and one hour to cut up tape with a razor blade. "Walter was prepared but he couldn't prepare everything," says Blank, who would go on to become the most revered engineer in the dance scene. "He had to be ready to do 'brain work' on the spur of the moment. The session was very intuitive. Walter was a real genius."<sup>18</sup>

Fig 2: Walter Gibbons at Blank Tapes Studios, New York. Courtesy of François Kevorkian.

By the end of the session, the diminutive DJ had transformed the album version of "Ten Percent" into a nine-minute-forty-five-second roller coaster that stretched out the rhythm section, the strings and T.G. Conway's keyboards.<sup>19</sup> Gibbons was paid \$185 for his efforts — \$85 to cover a night's work at Galaxy, plus \$100 for the mix — and he started to spin an acetate of the remix (which was effectively a readymade version of the lightning-quick collages he had already been creating at Galaxy) in late February/early March 1976. Released in May, the remix captured the way in which disco's novel aesthetic was beginning to influence wider music culture. "I heard it on an acetate in the Gallery," recalls *Mixmaster* editor and downtown connoisseur Michael Gomes (Lawrence 2003: 218). "It sounded so new, going backwards and forwards. It built and built like it would never stop. The dance floor just exploded." To the frustration of Rich Flores, Gibbons took the tapes to be mastered at Sunshine Sound, which would go on to become a significant rival to Angel Sound. "Walter could have easily said to me, 'Would you like to master the 'Ten Percent' twelve-inch?'" claims Flores. "He could have said, 'Hey, Rich, are you eating good?' That's my one resentment with Walter." Flores would have probably landed the job if he and Gibbons had not broken up towards the beginning of 1975, having released something like 250-350 acetates on Melting Pot.

Sales of the "Ten Percent" twelve-inch single quickly outstripped the regular seven-inch by two to one (McGee 1976; Garcia 1976), but the record's original architects were disappointed with the result. "The mixer cut up the lyrics and changed the music," comments Allan Felder, who co-wrote the song with Conway (Lawrence 2003: 218). "It was as if the writers and producers were nothing." Felder's outlook was widely shared in the 1970s — DJs were widely regarded as musical parasites, and the idea that someone like Gibbons should be given carte blanche to remix an "original work of art" was doggedly opposed — but Cayre understood their potential importance.

"Walter was the first DJ to show the record companies that they should be open to different versions of a song," he notes. "They were in the club night after night so they knew what worked and what didn't work. Walter was pivotal. He convinced producers and other record companies to give the DJs an opportunity to remix records for the clubs. And he showed us that these records could be commercially successful. People didn't believe that was possible before 'Ten Percent'. Walter was a pioneer."

Gibbons remixed "Sun... Sun... Sun..." by Jakki around the same time he worked on "Ten Percent".<sup>20</sup> Produced by Johnny Melfi and released on Pyramid as a twelve-inch in 1976, the record sleeve information contained no reference to Gibbons, but Chatman, who was nicknamed "Sunshine" because of her cheerful personality, remembers Gibbons phoning her up to tell her he was remixing the record. "Walter called me and said, 'Sunshine, sunshine, sunshine!'" she remembers. "Then he told me the name of the record." The remix consisted of three parts: the regular song (which was released as a seven-inch single), a looped break (snatched from the beginning of the second side of the original seven-inch), and a mix of the A- and B-sides of the seven-inch. The break — which was highly percussive, and included trippy vocal clips that faded in and out — was typical of the drums-for-days reel-to-reel edits Gibbons had been developing at Galaxy 21, and it was this section of the record that set it apart from "Ten Percent". "It was a really bad song and Walter turned it into a nine-minute mix," says Smith, who remembers the release being slow to attract attention, in part because Pyramid was a small company, in part because the remix was so off-the-wall. "We would just play the break and after a while we grew to like the rest of the song. The record got no play until it was mixed by Walter."

But it was Salsoul rather than Pyramid that went on to develop a pivotal affiliation with Gibbons when Cayre invited the DJ to remix "Nice 'N' Naasty" and "Salsoul 2001" by the Salsoul Orchestra. Gibbons included a trademark thirty-second percussive break in his A-side remix of "Nice", yet it was the B-side version of "Salsoul 2001", which was re-titled "Salsoul 3001", that revealed Gibbons's willingness to record increasingly abstract and strange remixes. "Salsoul 3001" opened with jet engines, animal whoops, congas and timbales before the record soared into a powerful combination of orchestral refrains and synthesised sound effects that were played out against a backdrop of relentless Latin rhythms. "This has got to be one of the year's most extraordinary products and although it may be too overwhelming and bizarre for some clubs, others, like New York's Loft, turn to pandemonium when the record comes on," reported Vince Aletti (1976) in his highly regarded "Disco File" column in *Record World*. "Experiment with it if you haven't already." Moulton was taken aback. "Walter did this weird, off-the-wall stuff with '3001'," says the remix pioneer, who also started to work for Salsoul in 1976. "I said, 'Walter, what was going through that brain of yours for '3001'? It was nothing like '2001'." A non-DJ who did not like to go out

dancing, in part because he disapproved of the night scene's association with drug consumption, Moulton concedes he "couldn't understand" the aberrant angles of the remix. "It was like Walter wanted to come out with an album that was tripping. Walter was the first radical one."

### Hit and Run

Walter Gibbons developed an even more militant aesthetic on his remix of Loleatta Holloway's "Hit and Run". Released in December 1976 on the album *Loleatta*, which appeared on Gold Mind, a Salsoul subsidiary, the song appealed to Gibbons, who asked Ken Cayre if he could rework the record. In an unprecedented gesture that demonstrated his faith in the DJ, the Salsoul boss handed Gibbons the multitrack tapes in order to maximise his creative scope. Previously limited to carrying out cut-and-paste reedits on half-inch master copies, the remixer was now able to select between each individual track, and he ended up dissecting and reconstructing the six-minute album version in a sweeping manner. Jettisoning large swathes of the original production, Gibbons removed the entire string section and almost all of the horns in order to place greater emphasis on Ronnie Baker, Norman Harris and Earl Young's rhythm section, and in an even more audacious move the remixer revised the entire focus of the record by cutting the first two minutes of Holloway's vocal as well as all of her verses, perhaps because the "old-fashioned country girl" content of the song was deemed to be inappropriate for the urban dance floor, and also because Holloway's vocal performance was at its most conservative in those sections. Gibbons preferred the second, improvised half of Holloway's effort, in which the vocalist supplied an extended, improvised vamp that consisted of a series of lung-busting repetitions, screams, tremors and sighs that ran for three minutes on the original release. To his delight, Gibbons discovered the multitracks contained even more of the same, so he extended the vamp to a long five minutes, and also ran it higher (i.e. louder) in the mix. Lasting an epic eleven minutes seven seconds, the final cut was almost twice the length of the five-minute-fifty-two original.

Cayre wondered if he had made a terrible mistake when Gibbons handed him the revised tape. After all, there was no precedent for a remixer to slice out such a high percentage of the instrumentation, not to mention significant elements of the vocal, and the record label boss began to wonder how he would deal with a wrathful Norman Harris (who had produced the record) as well as an incandescent vocalist (who was well-versed in the art of standing up to men). Gibbons reassured Cayre he simply needed to get used to the new version, and sure enough, when he went to hear it played live he realized Gibbons had improved the record from the perspective of the dance floor. Resolute in his opposition, Harris attempted to have the remix shelved — unsuccessfully, as it turned out — while Moulton was equivocal in his

support. "Many of the breaks on this record are unpredictable, and convey the impression that the mixing deejay was working with a full floor of dancers and was going out of his way to 'do a number' on the audience," he wrote in *Billboard* at the beginning of May 1977. "This version is really so different from the original that it must be classified as a new record."

"Hit and Run" (Gold Mind, 1977) marked out the aesthetic potential of the twelve-inch remix. Embedded in the dynamic call-and-response relationship that ran between the DJ and the dancing crowd, the record captured important elements of Jacques Attali's demand (Attali 1989: 132-48) for music to become democratic, improvised and non-reproducible in order for it to forge a sonic alternative to the hierarchical and commodity-driven music industry. Rather than having the music determined "on high" by recognised specialists such as Harris and Holloway, Gibbons integrated the communicated priorities of his dancers in the twelve-inch reinterpretation of "Hit and Run", which highlighted the rhythmic groove above orchestral complexity, as well as the affective intensity of Holloway's delivery above her semiotic presence. "I remember every DJ just loving it," says Smith. "I heard it everywhere I went and the crowds just went crazy. Everyone was used to the uniform Tom Moulton mix of the intro, the vocal, a little instrumental part and then a fade-out on the vocal. But Walter changed the whole sequence of the song. He did it a bit with 'Ten Percent' and he did it even more with 'Hit And Run'."

Hostile towards drug consumption and suspicious that Gibbons made his records with that culture in mind, Moulton says he could not understand his peer's work. Yet although Gibbons would occasionally take blotter acid and smoke pot when he worked or went to hear other spinners, Smith, who would partner him, maintains the drugs were always secondary. "It was all about enhancing and expanding our creative juices," notes Smith. "We wouldn't do anything that was overpowering because that would stop us focusing on the music. The drug wasn't the high. The music was the high." Moulton also developed intoxicating music, but whereas his remixes were grounded in melody and structure, Gibbons was drawn to discord and unpredictability, and this approach appealed to dancers and DJs who wanted to be transported into the unfamiliar. "Tom was first and he was consistent all the way through, but Walter's mixes were outrageous and quickly got a lot of attention," says Danny Krivit. "Tom was by no means out of the picture, but Walter was much more irreverent and very much the remixer of the moment."

Featuring "We're Getting Stronger" on the B-side, the twelve-inch of "Hit and Run" sold approximately 300,000 copies, outstripping the "Ten Percent" twelve-inch and the "Hit and Run" seven-inch along the way. The commercial success of the release helped placate Harris, and also illustrated the way in which disco music could bypass the imperative of the Hot 100 while remaining economically viable. In addition, a milestone had been passed in the history of recorded music three times over inasmuch as a DJ had

revised a leading producer's work beyond recognition, the remix had outsold the original single, and the producer accepted the logic of the exercise — even if he continued to object to the aesthetic sensibility developed by Gibbons. The balance of power was shifting within the music industry, and Gibbons lay at the centre of a transition that would go on to define the DJ-led principles of dance music and hip hop productions in the 1980s and 1990s.

"Hit and Run" fortified Salsoul's pre-eminent status among New York's DJs, and during the first half of 1977 Walter Gibbons consolidated his position as the label's most compelling remixer. He included a trademark break in his reworking of True Example's tender "Love Is Finally Coming My Way" (backed with "As Long As You Love Me"), which was considered by many to be one of his strongest mixes to date, and he restructured Love Committee's "Cheaters Never Win"/"Where Will It End," a sweet-sounding falsetto recording, in a similar vein. Gibbons also remixed Anthony White's "I Can't Turn You Loose", an Otis Redding cover, and appeared to nod toward the emergent culture of hip hop when he created an unusual B-side edit and renamed it "Block Party". During the same period Gibbons also stretched out the Salsoul Orchestra's discordant strings around layers of shifting percussion on his reworking of "Magic Bird of Fire". In all likelihood these remixes were completed before Gibbons was employed to blend a selection of Salsoul records on *Disco Boogie: Super Hits For Non-Stop Dancing* (Salsoul) in the summer of 1977. Including only the briefest of segues between each track, the album would have disappointed any dancer who hoped to purchase a simulacrum of Gibbons's Galaxy aesthetic.

Gibbons's DJing career was comparatively troubled, however, the spinner having left Galaxy 21 towards the end of 1976 when he realised his sets were being recorded secretly. George Freeman must have delivered a fine speech because the DJ agreed to return to the after hours venue, but he quit again when he discovered his reel-to-reel edits — possibly including his sough-after versions of "'Girl You Need A Change of Mind" by Eddie Kendricks and "Where Is the Love" by Betty Wright (Alston, 1975) — were being lifted from his booth and taken to Sunshine Sound, where they were being pressed up and sold on the black market. Following his split with Rich Flores, Gibbons had started to channel the acetate end of his work — including a pressing of "It's Better Than Good Time" by Gladys Knight (originally released as "It's Better Than Good Time" on Buddah in 1978) — through Sunshine Sound.<sup>21</sup> "Sunshine Sound was my competitor and at the time I didn't know Walter knew these people," comments Flores, who kept the lathe and set up a smaller (and less prolific) acetate-cutting outfit called Spectrum Sound. "Later on I found out that Walter was working with them, bringing them all the business." Flores would bump into Gibbons occasionally and remembers his ex-partner telling him that Sunshine Sound was engaging in shady bootlegging practices. "Even though I wasn't with Walter, I spoke with him, and he said Sunshine Sound was secretly recording the DJ mixes while

they were cutting their records." It's likely that Gibbons would have subsequently stopped taking his reel-to-reels to Sunshine for fear of illegal copy, and he therefore might have been doubly dismayed to learn at this later point that he could not even play his homemade tapes at Galaxy without fear of being pirated.

Galaxy 21 ended up closing around the beginning of 1977 — the venue was never going to survive without its renowned spinner — and Gibbons spent the next six months bouncing around venues such as Crisco Disco, Fantasia and Pep McGuires. Gibbons's quick-fire sequence of post-Galaxy 21 residences suggested his challenging playing style and awkward personality made it difficult for him to settle into a regular discotheque — indeed he had already failed to hold down alternate positions at Limelight, Better Days and Barefoot Boy, where he played on his nights off from Galaxy 21 — and in the summer of 1977 Gibbons travelled to Seattle, where Freeman had opened a predominantly gay discotheque called the Monastery. Gibbons returned to New York during the first half of 1978, but struggled to hold down a steady spot. "Walter was too experimental and too creative," reasons Smith, who had handed Gibbons the Monday and Tuesday-night spots at Barefoot Boy. "Most DJs trained their crowd to know them, but Walter was known for being Walter and he didn't want to change." Smith remembers telling his friend that he needed to modify his playing at Barefoot Boy, which wasn't an after hours club, but his advice went unheeded. "Walter was not good at compromising. He was steadfast in what he wanted to do. He could be so stubborn."

A year or so earlier DJ Kool Herc had come to appreciate just how easy it was for a DJ to go out of fashion — as DJ AJ told Jeff Chang, "Kool Herc couldn't draw a crowd after people saw Flash," and that happened around 1976-77 — and Gibbons discovered the same thing on his return from Seattle.<sup>22</sup> It is possible Gibbons's playing style would have worked in private party venues such as the Loft and the Paradise Garage, but they were not looking for anyone to take over behind the turntables. Elsewhere the white gay private party scene was on the lookout for spinners who were grounded in the steady pulse of Eurodisco; brash midtown spots such as Studio 54, New York, New York and Xenon required DJs who were focused on maintaining a steady flow; and the owners of the burgeoning suburban discotheque scene wanted spinners to rotate chart-oriented disco. Although the dance market had expanded, it had also closed down. "The business had changed and it wasn't Walter's era anymore," says Kenny Carpenter.

### I Got My Mind Made Up

The increasingly commercial discotheque market of 1977 and 1978 was not experienced as being conservative. Laser technology, synthesizer effects, flashing floors, descending spacecrafts, mirror-and-chrome interiors and the

suchlike were all the rage, and at the time they resembled the future. Although the commodification of disco culture became increasingly crass, and although the come-as-you-are inclusiveness of the early 1970s gave way to a range of door policies and dress codes that fostered division and exclusion, the conservative cooption of the movement was never complete. Studio 54 provides one interesting example. The owners of the club attempted to institute a hierarchical door policy, but thank to its public status, there was no straightforward way for the venue's door team to differentiate between "elite" and "non-elite" dancers, and so the entrance policy ended up mutating into a rather vague attack on the perceived conservatism of suburban culture. Once inside, dancers enjoyed listening to a Richard Long sound system, the queer performances of Grace Jones and, for the first six months of the venue's existence, the cutting-edge selections of Nicky Siano (who hailed from the forbidden borough of Brooklyn). Fragments of progressiveness could also be found in New York, New York, the main midtown rival to Studio 54, where François Kevorkian was employed as the resident DJ. Whenever he could, the spinner played the acetate edits he had started to press up at Sunshine Sound during 1977. The first of these edits, "Happy Song", which he modelled on the way Walter Gibbons used mix the record at Galaxy 21, acquired legendary status, as did his edit of "Erucu".

Although his DJing career had dipped, Gibbons was by no means history, and his remixing exploits illustrate the way disco remained a variegated culture, even in 1978, the year in which independent and major record companies attempted to capitalise on the "craze" that followed the opening of Studio 54 and the release of *Saturday Night Fever*. During that year Gibbons picked up plenty of remix commissions, especially from Salsoul, and his reconstructions of Love Committee "Law And Order" (Salsoul, 1978) and "Just As Long As I Got You" (Salsoul, 1978) illustrated disco's ongoing potential for aesthetic progressiveness. On "Law and Order", Gibbons grabbed a series of instrumental phrases and vocal hooks from the cluttered-up original and wove them around an elevated, insistent bongo-driven percussion track; stripped down and driving, the result was nothing less than a blueprint for the decentralised, rhizomatic future of electronic dance. The remix of "Just As Long" caused even more of a stir thanks to the three minutes of dissonant drama Gibbons added to the end of Tom Moulton's original remix. "I said, 'Walter, what you've done with the keyboards is *spectacular*,'" remembers Moulton, the first remixer to be remixed by another remixer. "The keyboard was there, but I didn't pick up on it. I said, 'Walter, you did a fantastic job on that!'"

Gibbons's irreverence continued to flourish on two relatively obscure twelve-inch singles: Cellophane's "Super Queen", which was backed with "Dance With Me (Let's Believe)", and "Moon Maiden" by the Luv You Madly Orchestra, a Duke Ellington song that appeared on the B-side of the more conventional "Rocket Rock". The original releases appear to have been part

of Salsoul's ill-judged decision to release as many disco acts as possible in 1978 (in the belief that everything it released had the potential to be transformed into disco gold). The vocals on both tracks resembled what Abba might have sounded like if they had modified their middle European accents with a cocktail of amphetamines, acid and helium, but instead of smoothing out the strangeness, Gibbons accentuated the effect, intertwining the contorted voices with a series of modulating synthesizers and stabbing strings, which he laid over an insistent and shifting bongo-driven beat track. Although neither record received much attention, Gibbons was probably having too much fun to worry about that.

During the same period Gibbons mixed Loleatta Holloway's "Catch Me On the Rebound" (Gold Mind, 1978), two versions of TC James and the Fist O Funk Orchestra "Get Up On Your Feet (Keep On Dancin')" (Fist O Funk, 1978), Sandi Mercer's "Play with Me", which was backed with "You Are My Love" (H&L, 1978), and Bettye LaVette's "Doin' the Best That I Can" (West End, 1978). A professional mix of a strong song, the Holloway twelve-inch was notable for its extended break, during which Holloway vamped over thumping drums and bouncing bongos. Appearing on an obscure five-track EP, the longer mix of "Get Up On Your Feet" ran for eleven minutes and included a long percussion-and-synth solo. Co-mixed by the late Steve D'Acquisto, the Mercer release was noteworthy for its B-side, which became a favourite of Ron Hardy (who would go on to pioneer house music in Chicago) and Larry Levan (the DJ at the legendary Paradise Garage). Meanwhile the epic eleven-minute remix of "Doin' the Best" shuttled between instrumental and vocal sections before it set off on a disorienting, dub-inflected rollercoaster ride of bongos, handclaps, tambourines and instrumental interludes. As David Toop commented later, the remix "redefined the logical hierarchy of instrumentation" (Toop 1995, 119).

As his twelve-inch work unfolded, Gibbons also blended the Salsoul Orchestra's *Greatest Disco Hits: Music for Non-Stop Dancing* (Salsoul, 1978), and was co-credited (along with Tom Moulton and Jim Burgess) for compiling Salsoul's *Saturday Night Disco Party* (Salsoul, 1978) — a significant level of album work within a market that had yet to come up with the CD-friendly idea of having DJs record album-length mixes of their own selections. But at the end of the year Gibbons began to distance himself explicitly from the disco scene when, having come close to completing a remix of Instant Funk "I Got My Mind Made Up" for Ken Cayre, he decided he did not want to be associated with the song's flagrantly sexual lyrics and asked the Salsoul head for the song to be rewritten. When Cayre refused the request, Gibbons agreed that Levan (who had remixed just one record, the unremarkable Cookie Monster & the Girls "C Is For Cookie") should finish off the job as well as receive credit for the entire mix.

"I worked for weeks on the record," remembers Bob Blank, who engineered the sessions. "Walter started on the mix but then refused to carry on because he became very religious. I remember him saying very specifically, 'I really don't think I'm going to be working on this record anymore.'" With Gibbons out of the studio, Blank continued to develop the remix with the assistance of Levan. "Larry was brought in after we had worked on this record forever," notes the engineer. "Larry basically had very little input on 'I Got My Mind Made Up'. All the groundwork had been done and he only came in for a few hours. But it was Larry who made the nine-minute version. It was never nine minutes before he came in." Denise Chatman confirms Gibbons had a change of heart during the recording process. "Walter's whole being was taken over by something else during the remix of 'I Got My Mind Made Up' and that made Kenny very, very nervous," she says. "Walter became very judgemental of everybody around him — he was against any kind of cursing — and he became very uncomfortable with the material." Having stretched the boundaries of remix culture to breaking point, Gibbons went a step too far. "Walter asked Kenny to change the lyrics and there was *no way* that was going to happen," adds Chatman. "I told Walter he was being totally unrealistic. Kenny then went with Larry."

One significant player contests Blank and Chatman's account. "Walter never went into the studio with 'I Got My Mind Made Up'", maintains Cayre, and the appearance of Levan's name on the sleeve makes this hard to dispute. "Larry was playing the record at the Paradise Garage and loved it," adds the Salsoul boss. "We went to see the edits he was doing and we asked him if he wanted to do a remix. We asked Larry because he was getting the best reaction of all the DJs." But whereas it is hard to imagine why Blank and Chatham should invent a story about the involvement of Gibbons, Cayre could be honouring a commitment he might have given to Gibbons and Levan — perhaps that he promised to keep secret the sequence events that resulted in Levan receiving an exclusive credit. When Cayre claims "Walter" did not go into the studio with the record, perhaps he is referring to the "old Walter" — the Walter he knew before the remixer began to complain about the lewd content of "I Got My Mind Made Up". Ultimately, it is only possible to speculate.

Released on Salsoul at the end of 1978, the Instant Funk twelve-inch single sounded like a Galaxy 21 reel-to-reel tape edit transposed onto vinyl (and bore no obvious relation to Levan's "C Is for Cookie", or anything else the Garage DJ would remix in the immediate aftermath of the release). Opening with a lush twenty-three second intro, the remix switched to a crackling percussive break that incorporated elements of rhythm guitar and the song's upfront chorus, and then moved to an extended keyboard jam. At around two minutes, and anticipating the approach that was about to come her way, the female protagonist asked incredulously, "Saaay whaaat?" after which the lascivious male vocal declared, "I got my mind made up, come on, you can

get it, get it girl, anytime, tonight is fine" — the lyric that appears to have persuaded Gibbons to abandon the remix. After moving to an instrumental and vocal section that built to a forceful crescendo, the track returned to another break, during which the bass and rhythm guitars grooved over an undulating percussive backdrop, and a final reprise of the song concluded the remix. Widely considered to be one of the most spellbinding twelve-inch singles of the 1970s, the recording helped propel the single to the top of the R&B charts, and also launched Levan onto the remixing map. From there the Garage DJ became one of the most prolific remixers of the late 1970s and 1980s, and, for many, the most accomplished remixer of his generation.

Although Gibbons might have experienced some kind of revelatory turn during the Instant Funk commission, it is plausible he became more and more uncomfortable with the provocative if not entirely outrageous lyrics of "I Got My Mind Made Up" over a period of time. "Walter was starting to get into the Bible and Jesus back in 1974 or 1975, although he was never committed one hundred percent," notes Mark Zimmer. "He was always interested in spirituality, and that led him to programme only music that contained positive lyrics, but he also led a gay lifestyle. He thought, 'God is on my side with me when I play this style of music.'" According to Zimmer, Gibbons attended a church that was tolerant of homosexuality, yet as his religious outlook hardened, he became increasingly intolerant of dance culture's liberal relationship with sexual licentiousness and drug consumption, and instead of consolidating his cutting-edge reputation career, Gibbons began to distance himself from the club scene. The zealotry he had channelled through his fiery DJing, editing and remixing came to be expressed through sermonising and intolerance. "When Walter went religious he alienated all of his friends," says Kenny Carpenter. "He was really fanatical about the whole thing."

### Disco Madness

According to Bob Blank, Walter Gibbons was a consummate professional in the recording studio. While most remixers entered unprepared and barked out instructions, notes the engineer, Gibbons always did his homework and sat with his hands on the mixing board. Yet the thing that most impressed Blank was the remixer's intuitive style. "It was quite easy to chop up a record and extend certain sections," says the engineer. "The difficult thing was to take a multitrack and create a flow. The skill lies in feeling the music and that's what Walter could do. He would sit at the board with the mute buttons, and he would cut and edit in real time." Gibbons took the art of remixing into the realm of emotion and affect. "He would come in and say, 'I want this song to be the love mix.' He would listen to the bass part and say, 'That part is really about love.' That's totally different to someone who comes in and says, 'I've got to get this mix out in a day and we've got to have three breaks!'"

Those qualities persuaded Cayre to entrust Gibbons with the task of recording an album of custom-designed twelve-inch mixes, and with no contentious lyrics to disturb the production process, which would have overlapped with the remix of "I Got My Mind Made Up", Salsoul released *Disco Madness* in March 1979. "It was the first time a label released an album of mixes by a single remixer," says Ken Cayre. "Every DJ was inspired by Walter." Issued as both a regular album and a DJ-friendly double-pack, *Disco Madness* included six mixes, and marked a hardening and deepening of Gibbons's aesthetic. "I don't consider *Disco Madness* to be a mix of the original music," says Tom Moulton. "It wasn't called *Disco Madness* for nothing. Most people felt the same way. I always said, 'If you want to know anything about that album, ask Walter.'"

On the first part of the album, Gibbons revisited "Magic Bird of Fire" and, remixing his own remix, elevated the beats and lowered the instrumentation. Faced with the challenge of reworking "Ten Percent", another earlier remix, he zoomed in on bongos and low-end keyboards, while on "Let No Man Put Asunder" — a rarely-played album cut by First Choice — he produced a dub-like mix that included stripped down beats, sunken synthesizers and echoed vocals. On the second twelve-inch, Gibbons laid down a driving, skipping beat for "It's Good For the Soul" and interspersed the chorus with his own infectious chants of "alright", "woo-ooo", "it's good for the soul" and "alright-alright-alright-alright-alright-alright-alright-alright". (It was as if, unable to contain himself in the control booth, he kept on darting into the studio to have a quick dance.) The penultimate track, "My Love Is Free", originally a Moulton twelve-inch release, resembled a fragile and tender conversation. To round things off, "Catch Me On the Rebound", another remix of an earlier remix, was whittled down to the beats and Holloway's vamp.

*Disco Madness* helped forge a set of sonic principles that would run through the future of post-disco dance music. Aside from the Disco Dub Band's 1976 cover of "For the Love of Money" and Gibbons's mix of "Doin' the Best That I Can", the release was the closest disco had come to establishing an aesthetic alliance with dub, and that connection would be consolidated with the release of tracks such as "Love Money" by the Funk Masters (Siamese Records, 1981), the Peech Boys "Don't Make Me Wait" (West End, 1982), and François Kevorkian's twelve-inch remixes of "Keep On" by D Train (Prelude, 1982) and "Go Bang #5" by Dinosaur L (Sleeping Bag, 1982) in the early 1980s. The album also contributed to the emergence of house when Frankie Knuckles, who was spinning at the Warehouse in Chicago, turned the "Let No Man" remix into one of his signature records. A year or so later, Warehouse dancers started to describe the music they were hearing as "house music", and cited "Let No Man" as the record that was most typical of the sound. Although the Gibbons remix was less electronic than the dance tracks that would be laid down by the likes of Adonis, Chip E, Larry Heard, Marshall Jefferson, Frankie Knuckles, Jamie Principle and Jessie Saunders during 1984

and 1985, its stripped-down aesthetic, three-dimensional use of space and quotation-oriented schizophrenia place Gibbons as a visionary antecedent to the formal sound of house.

Gibbons completed four more mixes for Salsoul in 1979: "Ice Cold Love" and "I Wish That I Could Make Love to You" by Double Exposure appeared on the Double Exposure album *Locker Room* — Gibbons was also credited with adding tambourine and cowbell on the mixes — plus "Stand By Your Man" and "Your Cheatin' Heart" by the Robin Hooker Band. The releases displayed a southern-soul-veering-into-gospel vibe that might have worked well in a church barn dance; catchy, hypnotic and stomping, yet occasionally cheesy, they sounded like the work of a man who had a gifted feel for dance music, but had fallen out of synch with the culture in which it was played. The deepening disjuncture came to be reflected at Salsoul, where the big remixes started to go other figures (most notably Larry Levan) while Gibbons was offered scraps. Elsewhere, the ex-Galaxy 21 DJ's remix of Colleen Heather's "One Night Love Affair" (West End, 1979) skipped along in a fairly predictable manner before breaking into a series of wild beats and handclaps, which were interspersed with bass, horns and vocals. Released in Canada in 1979, Gibbons's version of "It's Better Than Good Time" by Gladys Knight & the Pips for Buddah ran at half the length of his earlier acetate bootleg and was a comparatively conventional, gospel-oriented effort, while the flipside, "Saved By the Grace of Your Love" featured southern-style yee-haas, handclaps and hallelujahs, all recorded at a sky high beats-per-minute tempo that would have flummoxed most dancers.<sup>23</sup> If a hardening religious outlook had led Gibbons to attempt to scrap the supposedly immoral vocals of "I Got My Mind Made Up" at the end of 1978, by 1979 he was introducing self-consciously religious elements into his mixes — with somewhat uneven results (at least from the perspective of the secular dance floor).

Gibbons DJed at the Buttermilk Bottom and Xenon during this period, but his sets became increasingly improbable and his residencies ever more ephemeral. "I got Walter his job at Xenon and the owners complained because he only played gospel and Salsoul," says Tony Smith, who had been working at the midtown location seven nights a week and needed to employ an alternate. "I said, 'Walter, you can't do that!' There was so much great music out there at the time. Larry was coming out with all this new stuff. But Walter wouldn't change and after three weeks they told me to fire him." Smith was shocked at the transformation that had taken place in his friend. "When I met Walter he was so wide-ranging. You didn't know what he was going to turn you onto. He could make a rock record sound like disco." Now, however, Gibbons was using a marker pen to blot out any unsavoury words that appeared on his records, as well as highlight any song titles that contained the word "love" with a heart. "His musical horizon shrank. All of a sudden the music had to have all these big messages and he wouldn't play any negative songs."

Gibbons continued to push his religious theme when Steven Harvey interviewed him for a wide-ranging and influential survey published in *Collusion* in September 1983. Having met at Barry's, a record store on Twenty-third Street, where Gibbons recommended danceable gospel tracks, Harvey invited Gibbons back to his apartment and listened to him play a series of homemade acetate recordings of Philly-style tracks that included his own vocals. "Walter was not a singer," Harvey remarked in his piece, "but they definitely had the spirit." Gibbons went on to explain how he had started to play records at his own house parties — he was now living in Queens — and noted that he took requests, even for records he considered unchristian, because that could help him get into the mindset of his dancers and help reshape their outlook. When one dancer asked him to play "Nasty Girls", Gibbons recounted, he put it on and then segued into "Try God" by the New York Community Choir. "For me, I have to let God play the records," he explained. "I'm just an instrument."<sup>24</sup> Gibbons also discussed a recent encounter with the Better Days DJ Tee Scott, whom he gave a mix that blended two disco classics with a spoken version of the Ten Commandments. "He played it and the crowd roared like I've never heard in my life," said Gibbons. "Especially after the part where he's saying 'thou shalt not commit adultery, though shall not steal, though shall not kill' — there was such a roar." Gibbons said he was taken aback. "It was very interesting."<sup>25</sup> The DJ's proselytizing outlook had become more entrenched than ever.

### Set It Off

Between 1979 and 1982, hip hop tracks tended to consist of a rapped vocal being laid on top of a grooving rhythm section, with party whistles, canned chatter and dancer cries added to the mix. In other words, they sounded a lot like disco as well as the increasingly raw and electronic sound of mutant disco (which came to define the sound of dance in the post-disco period of the early 1980s). Released in 1982, "The Message" by Grandmaster Flash slowed down the tempo, but this hardly marked a finite break with dance given that Larry Levan had made the same move with a significantly slower mix of Taana Gardner's "Heartbeat" (West End, 1981) a year earlier. Tracks such as "Planet Rock" by Afrika Bambaataa & the Soulsonic Force (Tommy Boy, 1982) demonstrated how hip hop and early electro were linked to the postdisco sound that was being spun in New York's clubs in the early 1980s. Playing at the Funhouse, a cutting-edge club for a young Latin crowd where Tony Smith was employed as his alternate, Jellybean switched willingly from hip hop to electro to dance — as well as UK synth pop, Latin Freestyle and anything else that had a danceable beat.

Although the flow that existed between hip hop and dance could not be halted by any single record, the release of "It's Like That" / "Sucker MCs" by Run

DMC (Profile Records, 1983) marked a significant turning point.<sup>26</sup> Delivering shouted raps over a heavily syncopated, big-sounding beat, Run DMC marked a move towards simplicity and noise; as Jeff Chang (209) comments, the group "hollowed out the music and killed the old school," and over the next couple of years their sound would inspire hip hop outfits such as the Beastie Boys, Doug E Fresh and the Get Fresh Crew, Heavy D & the Boyz and Schooly-D. Across the same period, hip hop DJs became far less prominent and breakdancing all but disappeared, while rappers came to the fore as the element of hip hop that could be most easily commodified. The sonic composition of these rap releases was sufficiently far removed from the aesthetic of the nightclub for it to be possible, some ten years after the disparate elements of hip hop synchronised in the Bronx in 1974, to talk about a clear-cut split between hip hop and dance.<sup>27</sup>

Along with a number of other DJs, producers and remixers, Walter Gibbons ignored the market-driven logic that required dance and rap to develop distinctive sounds in order to sell to segmented audiences when he recorded "Set It Off" by Strafe in 1984. The debut release on Jus Born Records, which was co-owned by Gibbons and explicitly referenced his religious affiliation, "Set It Off" was performed by Steve "Strafe" Standart, a childhood friend of Kenny Carpenter's, whose vocals combined sung, spoken and whispered elements, and were delivered in a mode that emphasised an affect of longing, desperation and desire. "Set It Off" was also structured like a dance track. Running at nine-minutes-twenty-seconds, the record introduced and subtracted a range of instrumental parts across a steady pulse as it sought to create a trance-inducing state (a goal that had been all but discarded within hip hop culture). Yet whereas the record's reliance on electronic instrumentation established a sonic link to house — a sound that had not yet filtered into New York — the Chicago genre revolved around an insistent four-on-the-floor bass beat that was reminiscent of disco, while "Set It Off" had more in common with funk, Latin and dub music as it hit developed unexpected rhythms and introduced intense clusters of handclaps. Sparse, atmospheric and heavily syncopated, "Set It Off" maintained the link between the hip hop offshoot of electro and the postdisco continuum of early eighties dance.

In all likelihood "Set It Off" was played for the first time in 1984 when Gibbons approached Tony Smith at the Funhouse and handed him a test pressing of the record. "Walter had brought the track to other DJs before me but no-one would play it," recalls Smith. "Even Strafe didn't like it, or should I say 'understand' it. Ultimately, I had to play it. I played both sides. It cleared the floor." Smith notes that the Funhouse crowd had become habituated to the sound of Arthur Baker's electro, which was more direct and pop-oriented than "Set It Off", but adds that "everyone in the booth was stunned by the record — it was so incredible and different." That didn't prevent Gibbons from heading off with the test pressing, much to the dismay of Smith. "Walter left

under a real cloud. He was really disgusted. I said, 'Walter, there's no one here over *eighteen!*'"

Smith managed to lay his hands on a copy of "Set it Off" when he discovered the Funhouse light man Ricky Cardona had made a reel-to-reel tape of his set, and he proceeded to play the record once a night until, after a month of careful programming, his dancers began to ask after the track. By the time Gibbons returned to the club, "Set It Off" had become a dance floor favourite. "Everyone screamed when I put it on," remembers Smith. "Walter was totally shocked." The principal DJ at the Funhouse, Jellybean, also went heavily on the record and helped build it up into a Funhouse classic. "It was very, very different to everything that was out there," says the spinner, who had risen to celebrity fame as the boyfriend and producer of Madonna. "It had soul, it had electro, it had Latin. It had a whistle in it, and a lot of the kids on the dance floor would bring whistles. It was a long record that took you on a journey. It captured so many different things — and it had just the right energy."

Fig 3: Walter Gibbons at the Funhouse with light controller Randy Murray (left) and Tony Smith (right). Courtesy of Tony Smith.

Carrying the inscription "Mixed with Love by Walter Gibbons", "Set It Off" was reviewed by *Billboard* as being a "low-budget production making some substantial neighbourhood noise here in New York, in the same way unusual cuts by Peech Boys and Loose Joints have."<sup>28</sup> Yet while Larry Levan broke Peech Boys and Loose Joints at the Garage, "Set It Off" was too electro-oriented to become a favourite at the King Street venue and ended up following a different trajectory. "Strafe got played at the Garage quite a bit, but it was getting more play in a lot of other places," says Danny Krivit, who was spinning in venues such as the Roxy, Down Under, Laces, Area and occasionally Danceteria. "It was unbelievably big. I could play the record all night, wherever I was DJing. I could play it on the worst sound system and it still sounded good. It was just this huge thing for me." The reverberations were felt throughout the city. "In my honest opinion, 'Set It Off' was the great record of that whole era," says Ned Sublette, the future author of *Cuba and Its Music* and *The World That Made New Orleans*, who would gravitate from the downtown experimental scene to the Salsa scene in 1985.

For his second release on Jus Born, "I've Been Searching" by Arts & Craft, an undated mix of a seven-inch single that appears to have been released in the mid-1970s, Gibbons developed live percussion, strings, and soulful vocals within a minimalist structure that evoked a spiritual sensibility.<sup>29</sup> Introduced over a hypnotic beat that featured prominent bongos, soulful male and female vocals interacted with keyboard effects until the song developed into an uplifting jam and continued in that vein until it returned to the atmospheric beats-and-vocals aesthetic. Creating space through its emphasis on low and high-end frequencies, the ten-minute recording would become a reference-

point for the followers of so-called deep house, a loosely defined sound that created its effects as much through absence as presence. Yet there was no record industry rush to sign the mix and, left with no choice but to plough his own groove, Gibbons teamed up with Barbara Tucker, then an unknown gospel vocalist, to produce his next release, a remix of "Set It Off", which he released in 1985 under the moniker Harlequin Four's.<sup>30</sup> The record was the third (and probably last) issue to be released on Jus Born Records. "After 'Set It Off' I thought [Walter] would get back into the music business," says Smith. "The record went to number one [on the dance chart]. But nobody gave him any offers."

Gibbons recorded two of his final releases with Arthur Russell, the experimental-composer-turned-disco-auteur, who had co-produced "Kiss Me Again" with the Gallery DJ Nicky Siano for Sire in 1978. Russell became interested in Gibbons after hearing his mix of Sandi Mercer's "Play With Me", and the two of them ended up meeting each other for the first time in the offices of West End (the label having signed Russell's Loose Joints project). Nothing came out of that encounter, and Russell ended up developing his interest in dance with Steve D'Acquisto (who co-produced the Loose Joints sessions), Larry Levan (who remixed "Is It All Over My Face?" and "Tell You (Today)" by Loose Joints, and "Cornbelt" by Dinosaur L, another of Russell's studio outfits), and François Kevorkian (who remixed "Go Bang! #5" by Dinosaur L). But then Russell heard "Set If Off" and resolved to work with Gibbons. "Strafe changed our lives," reminisces Steven Hall, a musician and close friend of Russell. "It would play in the black gay clubs on the waterfront and people would abandon themselves in a kind of Bacchanalian trance. The record gave Arthur a new idea about how to use trance-like states in dance music." Visiting Rock & Soul, where Gibbons had started to work, Russell learned about the ex-Galaxy 21 DJ's readiness to dish out sermons when he handed him a copy of "That Hat", an uptempo record he had worked on with the experimental musician and producer Peter Gordon. Gibbons was fine until he saw the B-side of the record was titled "The Day the Devil Comes to Getcha".

The outburst did not dissuade Russell from inviting Gibbons to develop a mix of "Let's Go Swimming", an off-kilter dance track he was working on for Logarhythm, a subsidiary of Upside Records, and Gibbons is likely to have been pleased to work with a potentially like-minded soul, Russell having made an substantial impact on the dance scene in spite of his distinctly off-beat outlook. Not that their compatibility made for a peaceable studio session. "There were incredible scenes of screaming and fights," recalls the guitarist and co-owner of Upside Records Gary Lucas of the ensuing all-night edit. "Arthur was shrieking and tearing his hair out, raging around the studio like a psychotic bat, while Walter was calmly snipping and pasting the tape as if it was macramé. Arthur would say, 'You're ruining my fucking vision! This isn't what I had in mind! What are you doing? This is my big shot!' And Walter

would reply, 'Arthur, Arthur, calm down!'" Lucas sat back and watched the drama unfold, while the engineer Eric Liljestrang, who had been stationed in the studio in order to make sure that nothing was broken, did his best to keep out of the control room because Gibbons worked deafening loud. "It seemed argumentative, but Arthur would often defer to Walter, and I don't remember him deferring to anybody else," remembers the engineer.

Released in the summer of 1986, Gibbons's "Coastal Dub" mix ran for just under eight minutes and included an opening instrumental section that built to a crescendo before it broke back down, as well as an extended outro that rose out of a gurgling sound effect before locking into a conga-and-cello groove. "Walter created a visionary, psychedelic soundscape for the song," says Lucas. "He sort of out-avant-garded Arthur and took the song out to the stratosphere. There was a kind of one-upmanship as to who could be more far out — like Zappa and Beefheart." Despite the studio drama, Arthur was pleased with the contribution of Gibbons. "[I]f you try and do something different in dance music, you just get branded as an eccentric," he told David Toop in 1995. "A lot of DJs take the tapes I make and try to make them into something more ordinary. 'Let's Go Swimming' was supposed to be a futuristic summer record. Some DJs said that nobody would ever, ever play that. I think eventually that kind of thing will be commonplace." Toop (2004a) would later state that "Let's Go Swimming" sounded "like nothing in the history of disco." Contemporary reviewers were just as enthusiastic about the record. "This is an *impossible* dance music, jumbling your urges, making you want to move in ways not yet invented, confounding your body as it provokes it," wrote Simon Reynolds (1986) in *Melody Maker*. "In its tipsy mix, I seem to hear Can, Peech Boys, Thomas Leer, Weather Report, hip hop, but really this is unique, original, a work of genius."

Russell also asked Gibbons to bring his leftfield sensibility to bear on "School Bell/Treehouse", which replaced the oscillating flows of "Let's Go Swimming" with a recognisable groove that revolved around jagged congas and skipping hi-hats. Scratchy cello motifs, discordant synth patterns and spacey trombone passages were wrapped around the recording's awkwardly aggressive groove, while Russell's echo-laden voice evoked a child-like world of innocence and strangeness. As the percussion accelerated across the last couple of minutes of the record, "School Bell/Treehouse" began to sound like a proto-house track, although its rhythm was too organic and peculiar to suggest anything more than a passing proximity to the Roland-generated rhythms of Chicago house. Instead the recording was closer to the hypnotic groove that might have been generated if Ali Akbar Khan, James Brown, Fela Kuti and Neil Young had got together to busk in Grand Central Station. Featuring the longer ten-minute mix on the B-side, the twelve-inch was met with critical enthusiasm when it was released on Sleeping Bag in 1986. "Possibly a bit too esoteric for current dance tastes, this will undoubtedly be a

collector's item in about three years time," wrote Jay Strongman in the *NME*.<sup>31</sup>

In Gibbons, Russell had found not only an ideal companion with whom he could make quirky, leftfield dance music, but also a friend who, like himself, was intensely creative, softly spoken, unremittingly intense, and gay while not appearing to be gay. Will Socolov, who co-founded Sleeping Bag Records with Russell, remembers Gibbons being obsessed with the nuances of musical texture — the ex-Galaxy 21 DJ would lure him into discussions about sound that he could barely follow and never had time for — and notes that Russell was the only other person who liked to analyse sound in such microscopic detail. Their collaborations were not always successful, so when Gibbons remixed "Go Bang! #5" during scrambled-together hours at Blank Tapes, the taut, stretched out result lacked the dramatic dynamism of Kevorkian's original remix effort (and wasn't released until a bootleg version appeared in Japan some twenty years later). Other records, such as the sparse and funky "C-Thru", remained unfinished. Yet the more or less simultaneous release of "Let's Go Swimming" and "School Bell/Treehouse" confirmed that Russell and Gibbons were set on forging a new form of jittery, wonky dance music. Hall confirms Russell respected Gibbons more than anyone. "Everyone knew that Walter Gibbons was the real thing," he comments. "He was not just a mixer but a musician and an alchemist. He could turn a good groove into gold or mercury. Arthur and Walter were totally soul mates."

Gibbons worked on three other records (and maybe more) in what would turn out to be his twilight period. In 1985 he mixed Arts & Craft Wait A Minute "Before You Leave Me" (Panic), but the record appears to have failed to make it beyond the promo stage.<sup>32</sup> A year later Gibbons heard "4 Ever My Beat" by the Brooklyn-based hip hop outfit Stetsasonic (Tommy Boy, 1986) and went on to produce a ten-minute mix on which he stripped away everything save for the vocal and replaced the group's drums with live percussion — but in this case Tommy Boy decided to edit the mix in half for the final promo-only release, which was released in 1987. Steering an uneasy path between synthesizer pop, jagged beats and run-of-the-mill gospel, Gibbons's mix of "Time Out" by the Clark Sisters (A&M, 1986) combined feel-good vocals with a leftfield sensibility. Developing an almost unfathomable syncopated rhythm, the electronic, twitchy "Calling All Kids" ended up appearing on the posthumous Arthur Russell compilation *Calling Out of Context* (Audika, 2004).

"Calling All Kids" seemed to capture something about the whereabouts of Gibbons; working with an innovative and misunderstood songwriter/producer on music that drew on dance and hip hop, his work continued to bring together Bronx and downtown sensibilities, but was now going unheard. The fate of the Stetsasonic mix, subtitled the "Beat Bongo Mix", was also revealing. "Walter was crazy for the track and begged to remix it," remembers

Steve Knutson, who was working for Tommy Boy at the time. "After weeks of nagging we gave in and paid him one thousand dollars to remix it. What we got back was an unusable track, even though I personally loved it. The group hated it and so did the promotion people." At the request of Tom Silverman, the head of Tommy Boy, Knutson carried out the edit with Rodd [sic.] Houston — to the satisfaction of everyone except for Gibbons. "Walter never forgave me and was in tears," adds Knutson. "He was very, very angry and for a period of a month or so he would call up and yell at me. He even begged us to give the remix back to him so he could release it himself." Knutson notes that the twelve-inch promo disappeared unnoticed. "Walter was crushed as he thought it was a masterpiece."

During this period Gibbons also amassed a collection of approximately five thousand gospel records, a number of them signed copies purchased directly from church congregations in New York. "He thought gospel was the pure message of God and that something was wrong with you if you didn't get it," says Krivit, an occasional customer. "Every time he opened his mouth he would preach at you. It seemed to a lot of people he was just history, especially as there was less of a nostalgia thing going on at the time." Yet Gibbons was still able to connect to the dance scene, and appears to have played a key role in bringing one of the most unusual and popular dance records of the early 1980s to the attention of other DJs. An uplifting, funk-tinged gospel record, "Stand On the Word" by the Celestial Choir was recorded in 1982 at the First Baptist Church of Crown Heights in Brooklyn, where it was sold as an independent production. "Walter was a member and consistent visitor and lived down the block while I was Minister of Music at the Church," says Phyliss Joubert, the leader of the Celestial Choir. "He happened to be in the audience listening, and without my knowledge or consent, purchased one of the original records from the church and began his own illegal path of doing whatever he chose to do."

It is impossible to confirm if a devotion to the rousing sound and message of "Stand On the Word" persuaded Gibbons to return to the practice of bootlegging in the belief that the end would justify the means, but it seems likely. How else could the record have found its way into one of the weekly listening sessions the promoter Bobby Shaw held with DJs in his office at Warners every Friday? Present when the record was played to this select group of spinners, Steven Harvey was so enchanted with its innocent vocals (which were sung by children) and stirring instrumentation (led by a gospel piano) he paid a visit to the church, purchased a whole box of the vinyl, and distributed copies to his DJ friends as a "free promo". Within a short space of time, "Stand On the Word" became a favourite at venues such as the Loft and the Paradise Garage, while Harvey remembers hearing Gibbons play two copies of the record at a gay bar where he was spinning on Christopher Street. "Walter started to take the end part, where the record is more uptempo, and he kept that section going by mixing between the two copies." Harvey adds: "I

had a fantasy that Walter would be the ultimate guy to remix the record." Instead Joubert created the Joubert Singers to remix the record for the club scene, and it became a popular release. But it is the Celestial Choir version that continues to receive play today.

### Threshold Territory

Walter Gibbons contracted the AIDS virus sometime in the second half of the 1980s. For a while nobody could tell he was sick because he had always looked undernourished, but as the disease progressed, there could be no mistaking his condition. "I saw him at Rock & Soul about a year before he passed away," recalls Bob Blank. "He was in terrible shape. He was very thin and had lost a lot of his hair. He looked around and said, 'I just love being in contact with music. This is what I love.'"

In September 1992 Gibbons went on a mini-tour of Japan, where interest in the disco era had been gaining momentum. Mixing classics, house and hip hop with his custom-made mixes, Gibbons received an enthusiastic reception from local DJs and music aficionados, and in between appearances at the Wall (Sapporo) and Yellow (Tokyo) he went to listen to Larry Levan and François Kevorkian play at Gold as part of their Harmony tour. When Gibbons returned to Japan a year later he was skeletal but radiantly happy — so happy that he refused to stop playing when police raided Yellow and ordered it to close. In the end the party was reconvened as a private event, and at the end of the night Gibbons asked to be taken to Hakone, situated in the district of Ashigarashimo. When he saw Mount Fuji he kept uttering, "It's beautiful. It's beautiful!" After that he was whisked to a hot spring to revitalise his tired body.

Fig 4: François Kevorkian (left) and Larry Levan (centre) with Walter Gibbons at Gold, Japan, in 1992. Courtesy of François Kevorkian.

Fig 5: Walter Gibbons in Japan, 1993. Courtesy of Yuko Ichikawa/Club Yellow.

Gibbons played his final set in New York at Renegayde, a monthly night organised by Joey Llanos and Richard Vasquez. Drawing on Motown, Philly Soul, disco, early eighties dance and contemporary house, the ex-Galaxy spinner took his dancers on a message-oriented journey of devotion and love in which he sequenced his selections according to ambience rather than chronology or genre. Judging sincerity to be more important than dexterity, Gibbons made no attempt to repeat the quick-fire mixes that had become his signature skill during the 1970s. DJ Cosmo, who was in the crowd that night, remembers being struck by the way in which Gibbons's "pure and beautiful musical aura" provided a striking contrast with the freakish mood that had

come to dominate the New York club during the late 1980s. "I was really struck by Walter's honesty to himself, to his faith and to his audience," she says. The late Adam Goldstone, a significant DJ and remixer on the New York club scene until his sudden and untimely death in 2006, admired the way Gibbons created an "uplifting, spiritual and positive atmosphere" without slipping "into religious proselytising or the kind of lazy, saccharine clichés that seem to pass for soulful dance music these days."

Frail, isolated and all but blind, Gibbons started to go out to eat with François Kevorkian and Tom Moulton at Beefsteak Charlie's every Tuesday night. "A lot of people abandoned Walter, but he wasn't the most outgoing person either, and he didn't attract a lot of friends," notes Moulton. "We would help him down the stairs. Beefsteak Charlie's had a salad bar and shrimp, all you could eat, and watching Walter shovel down that shrimp, I don't know where he put it. He kept saying, 'Boy, this shrimp is so good!'" According to Moulton, Gibbons was still playing records — he developed a special "notch system" in order to recognise his records by touch — and when he found out Moulton had just finished re-mastering a series of Salsoul twelve-inch singles he asked him for an advance copy. No tests were ready, so Ken Cayre pressed up a special set, which Moulton took to his old sparring partner. "Walter played one and said, 'Oh, it sounds great!'" remembers Moulton. "Then he cued up another record and mixed it in perfectly."

Having spent his final weeks living in a YMCA, Gibbons died of complications resulting from AIDS on 23 September 1994, aged thirty-eight years old. One of his final acts was to donate his record collection to an AIDS charity based in San Francisco (only for the collection to be returned at a later date because the charity's organisers deemed the records to have no market value). A small number of people attended his funeral, and his memorial service, a dignified affair held on 11 October at the Church of St. John the Baptist on Thirty-first Street, was also quiet (and certainly much quieter than the service that had been held for Larry Levan in 1992). *Billboard* marked the moment with a brief obituary at the bottom of its weekly dance music column. "The club community lost one of its earliest studio wizards Sept. 23, when veteran mixer Walter Gibbons died of complications resulting from AIDS," ran the somewhat matter-of-fact tribute (Flick, 1994). "He was 38. The bulk of Gibbons' work was for Salsoul Records during the disco era. Among his records were 'Ten Percent' by Double Exposure and 'Just As I Have You' by Love Committee. He will be missed."

Gibbons has subsequently received partial recognition for his work within dance, although that recognition might have been more pronounced had he been an easier person to spend time with from the late 1970s onwards. (Instead he became intolerant, and friends agreed that his preaching and castigating were unbearable.) Gibbons might have also enjoyed a higher profile if he had been less unbending in his commitment to aesthetic

progressiveness — an outlook that he only relaxed on some of his gospel recordings. "Walter was an innovator, but he also had an abstract *I don't give a shit* approach," notes Kevorkian. "Walter didn't care if anyone danced, whereas Larry [Levan] would make it for the party. He was a little more conscious of what people liked. Whereas Walter was conceptually the most advanced, he was also a lonely genius. Walter was an innovator, but Larry made it work. He turned records into hits."

Nevertheless it was Gibbons (along with Moulton) who established the basic principles of remix culture, and in a fairly short space of time his innovations were judged to be so important they became routine. "By the time Larry came by I had done a thousand dance records," comments Bob Blank. "I knew what was supposed to happen. I didn't say, 'Oh my God, there's the bass drum!'" Along with Moulton, and leaning in a more experimental direction, Gibbons established the basic principles of remix culture. "Nobody had heard the strings all by themselves or the rhythm chopped into these syncopated moments, but once he did it people began to understand there was a formula. When the next person came in after Walter, I would bring up all of his good ideas. That was my job — to remember all the cool things." The cool things are now ubiquitous within dance. "On disco classics like Loleatta Holloway's 'Hit and Run' and Love Committee's 'Law and Order', Walter took heavily orchestrated Philly soul-style songs, stripped out most of the sonic frills, and turned them into dark, trippy, heavily percussive marathons," Goldstone told me in 2004. "Nowadays, that sort of stark, dubbed-out aesthetic is standard-issue in hip-hop, house, drum 'n' bass, and so on, but in the mid-seventies it must have sounded like something from another planet entirely."

Gibbons would have developed a higher profile if he had worked in just about any sound other than disco and dance. The paucity of serious music criticism on these genres remains striking and extends well beyond the sidelining of disco in the published histories of hip hop. More general histories of US popular music overlook disco as a matter of routine, while the innovative, cross-fertilising presence of disco has also failed to register in the recent flurry of books on downtown New York during the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>33</sup> Of course when the disco of Studio 54, *Saturday Night Fever*, the Bee Gees and the hustle does get a mention, Gibbons cannot be squeezed into the cliché of commercialism and extravagance. Nevertheless one of the reasons why Gibbons remains interesting is not because he was exceptional in this regard, but precisely because so many disco DJs, venues and records did not match the cliché.

Hovering between disco/dance and hip hop/rap, Gibbons occupied a threshold territory that could not be assimilated easily into genre, and although the commodification of disco and hip hop encouraged them to develop into mutually antagonistic generic formations, the example of Gibbons encourages an analysis that acknowledges the way in which these and other music scenes

and cultures are porous and interactive. Although that might be a lot to load onto the shoulders of a skinny DJ, Gibbons's practice suggests that an analysis of the relationship between disco/dance and hip hop/rap should begin not with the assumption of difference and opposition, as has been the case so far, but instead with the recognition of their shared roots and perspectives. While it is important to acknowledge divergences, the cultures of disco and hip hop also drew on an overlapping pool of records, developed innovative uses around turntable technologies, explored various ways of isolating and extending the break, and produced a set of records that, at least during the first half of the 1980s, were played back-to-back in a number of venues. The cultural history of New York can become richer through such a conversation, and so, too, perhaps, can the future.

### Discography

The following discography includes a comprehensive list of Walter Gibbons's official releases. Acetates, reel-to-reel recordings and unreleased recordings are not included.<sup>34</sup>

Arts & Craft. "I've Been Searchin." Jus Born (undated).  
Arts & Craft. Wait A Minute "Before You Leave Me." Panic (1985).  
Cellophane. "Super Queen" b/w "Dance With Me (Let's Believe)." Salsoul (1978).  
Clark Sisters. "Time Out." A&M (1986).  
Double Exposure. "Ice Cold Love." On *Locker Room*. Salsoul (1979).  
Double Exposure. "I Wish That I Could Make Love To You." On *Locker Room*. Salsoul (1979).  
Double Exposure. "My Love Is Free." On *Disco Madness*. Salsoul (1979).  
Double Exposure. "Ten Percent." Salsoul (1976).  
Double Exposure. "Ten Percent." On *Disco Madness*. Salsoul (1979).  
First Choice. "Let No Man Put Asunder." On *Disco Madness*. Salsoul (1979).  
Gladys Knight & the Pips. "It's Better Than Good Time." Buddah (1979).  
Heather, Colleen. "One Night Love Affair." West End (1979).  
Holloway, Loleatta. "Catch Me On the Rebound." Gold Mind (1978).  
Holloway, Loleatta. "Catch Me On the Rebound." On *Disco Madness*. Salsoul (1979).  
Holloway, Loleatta. "Hit and Run" b/w "We're Getting Stronger." Gold Mind (1977).  
Indian Ocean. "School bell / Treehouse." Sleeping Bag (1986).  
Instant Funk. "I Got My Mind Made Up." Salsoul (1978).  
Jakki. "Sun... Sun... Sun..." Pyramid (1976).  
James, TC, & the Fist O Funk Orchestra. "Get Up On Your Feet (Keep On Dancin')." Fist O Funk (1978).  
LaVette, Bettye. "Doin' the Best That I Can." West End (1978).

Love Committee. "Cheaters Never Win" b/w "Where Will It End." Salsoul (1977).

Love Committee. "Just As Long As I Got You." Salsoul (1978).

Love Committee. "Law and Order." Salsoul (1978).

Luv You Madly Orchestra. "Rocket Rock" b/w "Moon Maiden." Salsoul (1978).

Robin Hooker Band. "Stand By Your Man" b/w "Your Cheatin' Heart." Salsoul (1979).

Russell, Arthur. "Let's Go Swimming." Logarhythm (1986).

Russell, Arthur. "Calling All Kids." Audika (2004).

Mercer, Sandi. "Play With Me" b/w "You Are My Love." H&L (1978).

Salsoul Orchestra. *Greatest Disco Hits: Music for Non-Stop Dancing*. Salsoul (1978). (Blended by Walter Gibbons.)

Salsoul Orchestra. "It's Good for the Soul." On *Disco Madness*. Salsoul (1979).

Salsoul Orchestra. "Magic Bird of Fire." Salsoul (1976).

Salsoul Orchestra. "Magic Bird of Fire." On *Disco Madness*. Salsoul (1979).

Salsoul Orchestra. "Nice 'n' Naasty." Salsoul (1976).

Salsoul Orchestra. "Salsoul 3001." Salsoul (1976).

Stetsasonic. "4 Ever My Beat: Beat Bongo Mix." Tommy Boy, 1986).

Strafe. "Set It Off." Jus Born Records (1984).

True Example. "Love Is Finally Coming My Way" b/w "As Long As You Love Me." Salsoul, 1977.

Various. *Disco Boogie: Super Hits for Non-Stop Dancing*. Salsoul (1977). (Blended by Walter Gibbons.)

Various. *Disco Madness*. Salsoul (1979). (Remixes by Walter Gibbons.)

Various. *Saturday Night Disco Party*. Salsoul (1978). (Compiled by Jim Burgess, Walter Gibbons and Tom Moulton.)

White, Anthony. "I Can't Turn You Loose" b/w "Block Party." Salsoul (1977).

### Works Cited

Aletti, Vince. "Disco File", *Record World*, 4 September 1976.

Baker, Jr., Houston A. "Hybridity, the Rap Race, and Pedagogy for the 1990s". In Constance Penley and Andrew Ross (eds.), *Technoculture: Cultural Politics, Volume 3*. Minneapolis and Oxford: University of Minnesota Press, 1991, 197-209.

*Billboard*, 9 June 1984.

Brewster, Bill and Frank Broughton. *Last Night A DJ Saved My Life: The History of the Disc Jockey*. London: Headline, 2006.

Cadogan, Garnette. "Begin at the Beginning: Jamaican Popular Music In Jamaica", unpublished paper presented at the EMP Pop Music Conference, 21 April 2007.

- Chang, Jeff. *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*. London: Ebury Press, 2005.
- Crawford, Richard. *America's Musical Life*. London: WW Norton & Company, 2001.
- Flick, Larry. "Eclectic Ideas Sprout From Moby's Techno Roots", *Billboard*, 8 October 1994.
- Forman, Murray. *The 'Hood Comes First: Race, Space, and Place in Rap and Hip-Hop*. Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2002.
- Garcia, Rudy. "12-Inch 45 Disco Disk Sales Brisk", *Billboard*, 19 June 1976.
- George, Nelson. *The Death of Rhythm & Blues*. New York: Plume, 1988.
- Haden-Guest, Anthony. *The Last Party. Studio 54, Disco, and the Culture of the Night*. New York: William Morrow and Company, 1997.
- Harvey, Steven. "Behind the Groove", *Collusion*, September 1983, reprinted in *DJ Magazine*, 11 March 1993.
- Lawrence, Tim. *Love Saves the Day: A History of American Dance Music Culture (1970-79)*. North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2003.
- , "Beyond the Hustle: Seventies Social Dancing, Discotheque Culture and the Emergence of the Contemporary Club Dancer", in Julie Malnig (ed.), *Social and Popular Dance Reader* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 199-214.
- Lejeune, Patrick. *The Bootleg Guide to Disco Acetates, Funk, Rap and Disco Medleys*. Published by Patrick Lejeune and Patrick Vogt, Netherlands, 2007.
- Mathis, Derrick. "Gay Hip-Hop Comes Out". *The Advocate*, 13 May 2003
- McGee, David. "Salsoul 12" Disco Mix a Retail Smash", *Record World*, 19 June 1976.
- Moulton, Tom. "Disco Action", *Billboard*, 25 October 1975.
- , "Disco Mix", *Billboard*, 7 May 1977.
- Reynolds, Simon. "Arthur Russell Let's Go Swimming", *Melody Maker*, 11 October 1986.
- , *Energy Flash: A Journey Through Rave Music and Dance Culture*. London: Picador, 1998.
- Rivera, Raquel. *New York Ricans from the Hip Hop Zone*. New York, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003.
- Rose, Tricia. *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. Hanover, New Hampshire: Wesleyan University Press, 1994.
- Shapiro, Peter. *Turn the Beat Around: The Secret History of Disco*. London: Faber and Faber, 2005.
- Strongman, Jay. "Bomb Culture", *New Musical Express*, 27 September 1986.
- Taylor, Marvin J. (ed.). *The Downtown Book: The New York Art Scene 1974-1984*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006.
- Toop, David. *Ocean of Sound: Aether Talk, Ambient Sound and Imaginary Worlds*. London: Serpent's Tail, 1995.
- , "Past Futurist", *Wire*, April 1995.
- , *Rap Attack 3: African Rap to Global Hip Hop*. London: Serpent's Tail, 2000.

----- "The Flying Heart", *Wire*, January 2004.

----- "Uptown Throwdown". In Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal (eds), *That's the Joint! The Hip-Hop Studies Reader* (NY/London Routledge, 2004), 233-245.

---

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Bob Blank, Garnette Cadogan, Kenny Carpenter, Ken Cayre, Denise Chatman, DJ Nori, Allan Felder, Rich Flores, Colin Gate, Adam Goldstone, Steven Hall, Yuko Ichikawa, Jellybean, Phyliss Joubert, François Kevorkian, Steve Knutson, Danny Krivit, Tom Lee, Patrick Lejeune, Eric Liljestrand, Jeremy Newall, Gary Lucas, Tom Moulton, Colleen "DJ Cosmo" Murphy, Joey Negro (aka Dave Lee), Alex Rosner, Sandy Sandoval, Tony Smith, Will Socolov, Ned Sublette and Mark Zimmer, who agreed to be interviewed for this article. Thanks also to Ian Dewhirst and Chris Barnett at Suss'd for being receptive to my proposal to release a compilation of Walter Gibbons's Salsoul remixes, which resulted in *Mixed With Love: The Walter Gibbons Salsoul Anthology* (Suss'd, 2004) and gave me the opportunity to develop my initial research into Gibbons. I would also like to acknowledge the following DJs and record collectors for contributing to the discography that appears at the end of this piece: Zafar Chowdry, Colin Gate, Matthew Higgs, Dr Bob Jones, Cedric Lassonde, Ian Levine, Niki Mir, Jeremy Newall, Alex Pe Win, Steve Reed and Tony Smith. I'm also grateful to Bernard Lopez at [www.discomusic.com](http://www.discomusic.com) for helping me contact Mark Zimmer, and to WHUT 91.9 for putting me in touch with the elusive Rich Flores. This article is dedicated to my friend Adam Goldstone, an inventive and often daring DJ, who passed away in sudden and unexpected circumstances at the Burning Spear festival in 2006.

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed analysis of the backlash against disco, see Tim Lawrence (2003), *Love Saves the Day*, 373-83, 385-88, 391-95. Peter Shapiro (2005) also analyses the backlash in *Turn the Beat Around*, 226-32.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around*, 238-39.

<sup>4</sup> Houston A. Baker, Jr., "Hybridity, the Rap Race, and Pedagogy for the 1990s". In *Technoculture: Cultural Politics*. Ed. Constance Penley and Andrew Ross (1991), 198.

<sup>5</sup> Chuck D made this comment to Simon Reynolds, *Energy Flash*, 15.

<sup>6</sup> Chang (2005), 97, 112-13; Forman (2002), 113; George (1988), 189; Rose (1994), fn13, 211.

<sup>7</sup> In a cavalier attack, Nelson George (153) argued that disco was "de-funked" and became "a sound of mindless repetition and lyrical idiocy" between 1976-80. Raquel Rivera (2003: 56) also commented that "[b]reak-beat music provided an antidote to the perceived rhythmic blandness of disco, where the percussive break either was just one more element in the song or was masked or even altogether eliminated. On the contrary, break-beat music foregrounded the rhythm." Entrenching a binary outlook that was anything but clear-cut in the 1970s, Rivera added: "Most disc jockeys at the time weaved one disco song into the next. But the Bronx DJs at the forefront of the early development of hip hop sounds — among them Kool DJ Herc, Grandmaster Flash and Afrika Bambaataa — relied more on hard funk records and emphasized the breaks of the songs, meaning the point in a song when the rhythmic patterns created by the instruments are emphasized over the melodic and harmonic components." These and other condensed references have contributed to the popular ridiculing of disco.

---

<sup>8</sup> Following the backlash against disco, 1970s dance culture was overlooked by historians until Anthony Haden-Guest published the risible *The Last Party*. (Haden-Guest's obsession with celebrity culture led to him to write a book that resembled, but was not intended as, a satire of the most excessive and commercial aspects of disco.) Bill Brewster and Frank Broughton (2006) devoted two chapters to disco in *Last Night A DJ Saved My Life*, which was published for the first time in 1999. Lawrence and Shapiro published their book-length studies at the beginning of 2004 and in the summer of 2005 respectively. (*Love Saves the Day* carries a publishing date of 2003, but was not available until the following February.)

<sup>9</sup> The friend in question is called Steve and posted this information on the website [www.discomusic.com](http://www.discomusic.com). The information was retrieved from [http://www.discomusic.com/people-more/1582\\_0\\_11\\_0\\_](http://www.discomusic.com/people-more/1582_0_11_0_) on 11 May 2008.

<sup>10</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all interviews are conducted by the author.

<sup>11</sup> The early history of disco and the groundbreaking contribution of the Loft and the Sanctuary are discussed in detail in *Love Saves the Day*. The reasons for the emergence of a new dance dynamic at this historical juncture are elaborated in Tim Lawrence (2008) "Beyond the Hustle", 199-214.

<sup>12</sup> Paralleling the rise of breakdancing, black gay drag queens developed a similarly athletic and angular style that came to be known as voguing, and it made sense that the culture should flourish in the setting of the drag ball, where display was all, and not in the club, where it struggled to establish a presence. Voguers ended up favouring choppy, dislocating beats and DJing techniques that encouraged them to accentuate their moves.

<sup>13</sup> The early focus on reproducing rare records on acetate is born out by the specialist collection of Patrick Lejeune, which is charted in *The Bootleg Guide to Disco Acetates, Funk, Rap and Disco Medleys*. The first edits occur on acetate-based edits of records that were released originally in 1976.

<sup>14</sup> "Issmak" by the intriguingly titled Apatchi Band, which looks like a misspelling of "Apache", a hip hop favourite, can be found on the Terry Cavendish Orchestra *All In an Afternoon's Work* (Vocalion, 2006). This rare track is composed almost entirely of driving percussion, and it is likely the re-edit placed an even greater emphasis on the percussive component. A full list of Melting Pot releases is listed in Patrick Lejeune (2007), 30-31 and 39. A Walter Gibbons chart produced for Melody Records, dated 23 August 1973, and reproduced in Lejeune (26-27), reveals the extent of the crossover still further.

<sup>15</sup> Details of these innovations are included in *Love Saves the Day*.

<sup>16</sup> Tom Moulton recalls completing the B.T. Express mix before he began work on the Don Downing, but the Downing was released first.

<sup>17</sup> Moulton pressed up a remix of Al Downing's "I'll Be Holding On" on a twelve-inch blank because he had run out of seven-inch blanks, and says he was stunned at the resulting improvement in the sound quality, which was due to the spreading out of the grooves. However, the remix was eventually released by Chess on the seven-inch format at the end of 1974, while the precise timing of the release of the Moment of Truth remix is open to question. Moulton also remixed of Moment of Truth "So Much for Love" for Roulette — Peter Shapiro (33) says the remix was completed in early 1975 — and handed promotional copies of the record to DJs such as Richie Kaczor and David

---

Rodriguez. However, the timing of the release is difficult to verify: Kaczor and Rodriguez passed away before being interviewed, while publications such as *Mixmaster* and *Record World*, which carried regular accounts of promotional and commercial releases, as well as Top Ten lists of the records DJs were playing, carry no mention of the remix. Scepter released twelve-inch promos of Secrets "(Baby) Save Me" and South Shore Commission "Train Called Freedom" that contained catalogue numbers that appeared to be lower (i.e. released earlier) than "Call Me Your Anything Man". However, the varying prefixes attached to the records mean that no straightforward chronology can be assumed — Secret "(Baby) Save Me" was released as SDJ 11288 and South Shore Commission "Train Called Freedom" was given the catalogue number WDT 11294. Bobby Moore "Call Me Your Anything Man" ran as SDT 12417, and Cheren himself maintains that the Moore came first. A small number of twelve-inch singles preceded all of these dance releases. According to record collector John Hall, Colgems and UA released a three-song twelve-inch sampler in the late 1960s; Leon Russell released a promotional twelve-inch in 1971; and Bachman-Turner Overdrive released a promotional twelve-inch in 1974. Therefore the twelve-inch single format was in use before it was taken up by disco, even if its disco progenitors are unlikely to have known about these earlier releases.

<sup>18</sup> Tony Smith confirms Walter Gibbons went into the studio prepared. "Walter did more of 'Ten Percent' at home than in the studio," he says. "I remember him calling me up and asking if he should loop a certain part. He was doing it at his house. I would listen through the phone. I know he did homework because that was where he felt comfortable — at home on that reel-to-reel."

<sup>19</sup> Peter Shapiro (34) maintains Walter Gibbons was working with the three-minute single, but Cayre had no reason to limit the DJ-remixer in this way. In addition, Cayre did not provide Gibbons with the multitrack tapes, so the Galaxy 21 DJ's ability to reinvent the sound was limited to the kind of cut-and-paste techniques he had developed on reel-to-reel.

<sup>20</sup> "Sun... Sun... Sun..." entered the *Record World* disco charts in July, a good two months after "Ten Percent", which suggests that Gibbons remixed "Ten Percent" first. Then again, the omission of Gibbons's name on "Sun..." suggest otherwise: the "Ten Percent" twelve-inch caused such an overnight sensation, no label head would have dreamed of omitting the remixer's name from the release. The roughness of the "Sun" mix adds further weight to the likelihood it was recorded before the much smoother "Ten Percent".

<sup>21</sup> The original Gladys Knight release was titled "It's Better Than Good Time".

<sup>22</sup> Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop*, 144.

<sup>23</sup> The original twelve-inch release of "It's Better Than Good Time" included only the album version.

<sup>24</sup> Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop*, 144.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> The tracks featured on the compilation *Big Apple Rappin'* (Soul Jazz, 2006) illustrate the way hip hop recordings were intertwined with disco and dance during the 1979-82 period.

---

<sup>27</sup> In an interview with Mark Derry, Chuck D of Public Enemy commented: "[W]hen the record companies came around in 1979, their whole thing was coming up with a band that would emulate some of that New York era where guys were rhyming on top of disco beats, so you never really heard the actual beat up front. I remember when Run-D.M.C. first came out — we were some of the first people to play it, on our radio show — and I remember saying, 'This is the shit we was looking for.' The beats was *large*. Before that, rap music had the beat and the bass line way in the back." Quoted in *That's the Joint*, 412-13.

<sup>28</sup> *Billboard*, 9 June 1984.

<sup>29</sup> The information on the original "I've Been Searchin" release appears in the sleeve notes to *The Kings of Disco*, compiled by Dimitri from Paris and Joey Negro (BBE, 2004). In a separate interview, Joey Negro notes he heard about the original seven-inch for the first time when he attempted to license "I've Been Searchin" in the late 1980s, but he has not been able to track down a copy of the recording. The original seven-inch features the vocalist Willie Daniel.

<sup>30</sup> Barbara Tucker would go on to host the celebrated Underground Network night at the Sound Factory Bar in the 1990s, and she also recorded a number of vocal house anthems with the producer/remix outfit Masters at Work.

<sup>31</sup> Jay Strongman (1986), "Bomb Culture", *New Musical Express*, 27 September 1986.

<sup>32</sup> "Wait A Minute" is not written in inverted commas, unlike "Before You Leave Me", although Arts & Craft appears as the artist name at the top of the record.

<sup>33</sup> Richard Crawford's (2001) impressive, nine-hundred-page volume *America's Musical Life* does not contain a reference to disco. For an incisive yet disco-less analysis of downtown New York, see Marvin J. Taylor's (2006) otherwise excellent edited collection, *The Downtown Book*.

<sup>34</sup> In addition to the reel-to-reel, acetate and promo-only releases listed in the article, the London-based record collector and co-compiler of the *Mixed With Love: The Walter Gibbons Salsoul Anthology* Jeremy Newall spotted a reel-to-reel of "Making Love Will Keep You Fit" / "Freakin' Freak" by Brenda Harris for Dream Records (a subsidiary of Salsoul) that was marked "Mixed by Walter Gibbons" in Tom Moulton's office in New York. In his article for *Collusion*, Steven Harvey noted that Gibbons mixed and produced a record called "Faith" with Steve D'Acquisto. Newall also owns a copy of a remix Gibbons completed for Joey Negro, "Best Part of Me" by Cynthia Cookie, which was never released (because it is a "poor mix", according to Newall). Having purchased the key elements of Gibbons's record collection when it was returned to Rock & Soul, Colin Gate is holding a number of Gibbons's unreleased acetates, mixes and songs. "Walter's acetates are much more intense than his Salsoul remixes," comments Gate. "You can hear slices of his DJing style on remixes like 'Just As Long', where there's that looped section with a kick drum and hi-hat pattern with a clap. Some of his acetates extend that house sound for ten minutes, not just a few bars."