

PRELIMINARY SUMMARY OF INFORMATION

SUBMITTED TO THE COMMISSION ON CHICAGO LANDMARKS IN AUGUST 2024



WAX TRAX! 2449 NORTH LINCOLN AVENUE



CITY OF CHICAGO
Brandon Johnson, Mayor

Department of Planning and Development
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Cover photo by Patrick Pyszka

The Commission on Chicago Landmarks, whose nine members are appointed by the Mayor and City Council, was established in 1968 by city ordinance. The Commission is responsible for recommending to the City Council which individual buildings, sites, objects, or districts should be designated as Chicago Landmarks, which protects them by law.

The landmark designation process begins with a staff study and a preliminary summary of information related to the potential designation criteria. The next step is a preliminary vote by the landmarks commission as to whether the proposed landmark is worthy of consideration. This vote not only initiates the formal designation process, but it places the review of city permits for the property under the jurisdiction of the Commission until a final landmark recommendation is acted on by the City Council.

This Landmark Designation Report is subject to possible revision and amendment during the designation process. Only language contained within a designation ordinance adopted by the City Council should be regarded as final.

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WAX TRAX!

2449 NORTH LINCOLN AVENUE

CONSTRUCTED: CIRCA 1880S; REFRONTED CIRCA 1900

ARCHITECT: NOT KNOWN

Introduction

Life and business partners Jim Nash and Dannie Flesher opened the WAX TRAX! records store at 2449 North Lincoln Avenue in Chicago in 1978. Their shared passion for music inspired the retail venture and their personal tastes, creative generosity, and willingness to take risks shaped the store into an international source of eclectic and ground-breaking music.

They chose to locate in a two-story, circa 1880s building in the then economically transitioning Lincoln Park neighborhood on the north side of Chicago. After purchasing the building in 1983, Nash and Flesher began to remove the drab green paint that had blanketed the façade to reveal the building's white-and-dark-green-glazed brick frontage. Though the glazed brick was likely an early twentieth-century upgrade, the building maintained its extraordinary, original, Renaissance Revival cornice, its projecting limestone window hoods and sills, and its first-floor cornice with *mascarons* (human faces) and shields.

The WAX TRAX! store opened at a time in America when society's pendulum was swinging away from earlier decades' idealism and freedom-focused liberation toward the New Right and nostalgic conservatism of the Reagan years. To those who felt targeted or out-of-step with the new status quo, or those who felt like outsiders or outcasts, the WAX TRAX! records store provided a rare refuge. Jammed with material promoting the punk, new wave, glam, rockabilly, eclectic, dance, and industrial music being sold, and offering clothing and accessories alongside fanzines and other cultural ephemera, the store became a mecca and a meeting place for those most comfortable outside the mainstream.

With bootlegs, imports, and hard-to-find records, cassettes, CDs, and videos, WAX TRAX! became a worldwide retail destination. Using the store as their home base, Nash and Flesher also helped to bring the world to Chicago by producing and promoting shows for cutting-edge bands, bringing many of them to the city for the first time. When they launched the WAX TRAX! record label from the store at 2449 North Lincoln Avenue, the music which was created put Chicago on the world stage as the U.S. city which birthed the new genre of industrial-dance music that would influence the direction of future music across the globe.



Above: Map of the WAX TRAX! records store, located northwest of the intersection of Fullerton Avenue and Halsted Street in the Lincoln Park Community Area on Chicago's North Side.

Below: Looking southeast at the WAX TRAX! records store. At far right is the marquee of the





Above left: The red structure at 396 is the 2449 North Lincoln Avenue in this 1887 *Rascher's Atlas*.



Above right: This 1923 Sanborn Map shows 2449 was then now being used as an “undertaker” business.

Below: The front façade is topped with a pressed metal cornice of unusual size and ornamentation for this building type. The cornice is topped with four acroterion and an obelisk. All of these motifs are derived from Renaissance Revival architecture which itself took inspiration from Classical Greece and Rome. (Photo by Patrick Pyszka)



Building History

While the building is significant for its association with WAX TRAX!, it is also significant as a late nineteenth-century example of a neighborhood commercial building with Renaissance Revival ornament. Research has not uncovered the original or even early construction permit records for the building to pinpoint its date of construction, architects, or original owner. However, fire insurance maps strongly suggest that this building existed as early as 1887.

The earliest map of the area is an 1887 *Rascher's Atlas* from when this portion of Lincoln Avenue was in the Township of Lake View. The map shows a two-story masonry building at the same location and with the same dimensions as the existing structure prior to later frame additions at the rear. The address at this time was 396 North Lincoln Avenue and directories from this time show it being occupied by George J. Stadler and J. Schoeben, a wallpaper and painting firm.

While it is clear the building existed by 1887, the design of the façade, especially its use of white-glazed brick, is likely from circa 1900 when it was acquired by a new owner. On January 24 of that year, Frederick Strauss, owner of the Fred Strauss Dye Works, acquired the building as well as two neighboring buildings to the north, no longer extant. White-glazed brick had become more fashionable after Chicago held the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition, nicknamed the "White City" for its City Beautiful-inspired white-colored architecture. This trend in architecture was adopted along the city's most vital commercial corridor, State Street, as a preferred cladding up until World War I. The dye works at 2449 North Lincoln catered to clients in the garment and fashion industry, so re-fronting the property with the white brick would have been a way to advertise their ability to keep up with what was stylish. Chicago was also home to the Tiffany Enamelled Brick Company, one of the nation's largest manufacturers of glazed brick.

The Strauss Dye Works remained on Lincoln Avenue until 1910 before building a new larger plant at the southeast corner of Schubert and Sheffield Avenues nearby. The obvious financial success of the Strauss enterprise indicates that it had the means to re-front the building on Lincoln in 1900. And the nature of the dye works business was to cater to clients in the garment and fashion industry which is another indication that Strauss was responsible for the smartly designed façade.

After Strauss relocated to the new plant, the building was acquired in 1911 by Harry P. Klassen who operated an undertaking establishment. Historic Sanborn maps and obituaries indicate that the building housed a series of undertaking businesses until 1972. From 1972 to 1978 the building hosted Casa Bonnifeather, a restaurant.

Architectural Description and Style

Architecturally, WAX TRAX! is a neighborhood store and flat building with an unusually high degree of ornamentation which also stands out as a rare and early example of the use of glazed-brick cladding applied to a building of this small scale.

The building stands mid-block on a densely built commercial section of North Lincoln Avenue in the Lincoln Park Community Area. The load-bearing masonry building is two stories tall with an overall height of 24 feet and a flat roof. The front façade spans 20 feet on Lincoln Avenue with the historic masonry portion of WAX TRAX! occupying the front 60 feet of its



Above: A mascarón with white- and green-glazed tile in the background. (Source: Julia Nash)

Below: Bedford limestone trim includes shields and *mascarón* between belt courses above the first floor and window hoods and sills at the second floor. The pressed-metal cornice projects significantly from the top of the façade. (Photo by Patrick Pyszka)





Left: The WAX TRAX! records store sometime between 1978 and 1983, before Nash and Flesher began removing green paint from the façade. They used the existing awning of the building as an early sign in addition to the projecting sign at the second floor.

(Source: Julia Nash)



Below: WAX TRAX! after green paint has been removed from both floors.

(Source: Julia Nash)

lot. The neighboring building to the northwest is built directly adjacent to the side elevation of WAX TRAX!; to the southeast, a small gangway separates WAX TRAX! from its neighbor, revealing a common brick side elevation. The densely built environment leaves only the front façade of WAX TRAX! visible from the public way and this is the only portion of the exterior afforded finished architectural treatment.

Research has not identified original permits or construction records for the building, however historic maps indicate that it was extant by the time of the earliest map for the area, a *Rascher's Atlas* of 1887. In that map, the building is identified as a 20-foot-wide, two-story, masonry building on Lincoln Avenue with a depth of 60 feet from the front façade, leaving the rear 60 feet of its lot vacant in 1887. Subsequent maps show gradual development of secondary buildings at the rear of the lot, including a frame stable in 1891, a frame dye works in 1894, a frame garage in 1923, and a brick garage in 1950. Through these changes, the maps consistently show the same two-story masonry building standing at the front of the lot. Currently, the rear of the lot is occupied by a two-story addition to the historic building constructed of split-face concrete block and topped with a shallow, pitched roof which is not visible from the public way.

The architectural interest of WAX TRAX! is confined to the front façade which combines white- and green-glazed brick set in a running bond, carved Bedford limestone trim, and an elaborate pressed metal cornice. The overall design is symmetrical. The first floor is occupied by a large storefront window flanked on either side by glazed entrance doors with large transoms. Originally designed as a store and flat building, the pair of entrances served the buildings two functions separately. The storefront window and entrance openings are in their original locations, though the windows and doors are recent aluminum storefront systems. Brick piers between the large, glazed areas at the first floor are topped with limestone capitals.

Between the first and second floors, the façade features two limestone belt courses with Classical molding that frame a horizontal band of white-glazed brick with green accents. Within this band are three carved *mascarons* depicting individual variations of smiling female faces and two cartouches rendered in carved limestone. Figurative ornaments like these *mascarons* are rarely found on a store and flat building.

On the second floor there are three equally sized punched window openings with prominent limestone lintels and sills carved with Classical moldings. The original wood window sash have been replaced with aluminum. The field of white-glazed brick is relieved by accents of green-glazed brick.

The front façade is topped with a pressed metal cornice of unusual size and ornamentation for this building type. It includes two horizontal elements, a frieze and cornice, tied together with large, curved brackets, or modillions. Festive swags are set between the modillions. At the center of the cornice is a panel which identified the historic name of the building (now blank) topped with a broken pediment. The cornice is topped with four acroterion and an obelisk. All of these motifs are derived from Renaissance Revival architecture which itself took inspiration from Classical Greece and Rome.

Alterations

As previously noted, the building likely was originally masonry and later re-fronted, sometime around 1900, with glazed brick, but the elaborate cornice and decorative limestone elements which remain are likely original to the structure.



Above: Dannie Flesher building out the rear addition.

(Source: Julia Nash)

Below: Customer in finished rear addition.

(Source: Julia Nash)



After leasing 2449 North Lincoln Avenue, Nash and Flesher purchased the building in 1983 and began to remove green paint that covered the front façade to reveal the historic glazed brick cladding that lay underneath. In 1986, permits were issued for alterations and new construction. Jim Nash's daughter, Julia Nash, recalls that her father and Dannie Flesher built a rear addition which connected the front building to the existing garage at the rear, expanding the square footage.

Since that time, a new, split-faced concrete masonry, two-and-one-half-story rear addition with a front gable roof has been built with a two-story attached garage topped with an open porch.

WAX TRAX!

Owners Jim Nash and Dannie Flesher

The WAX TRAX! records store at 2449 North Lincoln Avenue was not the first record store Jim Nash and Dannie Flesher owned. The two men had met in Nash's hometown of Topeka, Kansas, in 1971. Flesher was from Hope, Arkansas. They shared an extraordinary passion for music that had them hanging out at record stores for entertainment.

Despite thinking of themselves as anything but businessmen, Nash and Flesher found ways to hatch a business out of almost nothing. They opened their first record store in Denver in 1975 by putting their own record collections on the shelves and joining as many twelve-for-a-penny-intro-offer record clubs as they could to get additional stock. Their first store did well enough that they moved to a bigger Denver location by 1978. They reveled in their newfound connection to the music industry and could be found dancing at the shows of bands they booked to play for after-hour "punk nights" and parties at their store.

Though Denver was bigger than the cities each of them had come from, it still wasn't big enough to be a regular stop on the tours of bands they wanted to hear. So instead of continuing to travel for concerts, and wanting to sell records to an even bigger market, they sold their Denver store to friends in 1978 and moved to Chicago that fall. They wasted no time in setting up a new record store, and opened it on October 1, 1978.

The Chicago Music Store Landscape in 1978

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, records were sold by a few large national chains (e.g. Camelot Music, Sam Goody, etc.), department stores, grocery stores, five-and-dime stores, mail order record clubs, and the occasional independent retailer. WAX TRAX! employee Larry Crandus summed it up this way:

In the 1970s, you were pretty much limited to two types of stores when you wanted to buy records in Chicago: the overly fluorescent-lit, sterile supermarkets like Rose Records/Sounds Good, or (god-forbid) Sears/Montgomery Ward/E.J. Korvette. On the other end of the spectrum, there were the patchouli-soaked, black-light-poster-filled record store/head shops – great, if you hadn't gotten over *Yellow Submarine*.

With a few exceptions, the music sold at WAX TRAX! was not the type of music that could be purchased at these retail outlets whose bottom line demanded that they stock the music most likely to sell, namely what was heard on the radio or seen on TV. Nash and Flesher focused on



Photo booth image of Dannie Flesher (left) and Jim Nash (right)

(Source: *Billboard Magazine*, October 21, 1995)



The first print ad for the new WAX TRAX! store announcing the grand opening.

(Source: Julia Nash)

specialty genres, offering a breadth and depth of these types of music that other retail outlets, with rare exception, did not. Music writer Harry Young put WAX TRAX! in perspective:

To understand the overwhelming importance of WAX TRAX! in Chicago record store history, recall the depressing retail landscape of 1978. Current singles were really only available at the Ashland Avenue Sounds Good. Rose Records (later Tower) on Wabash arranged its albums by label, not artist. The Downtown Records chain had a few sealed Danny Williams cut-outs, but not much else. New wave promo LPs by Talking Heads, Richard Hell and the Dead Boys littered the Second Hand Tunes, Wax Stax and Ha Ha stores. But full-line imports, oldies and obscurities were absolutely not available anywhere. So vinyl-starved Chicagoans welcomed WAX TRAX! with open wallets...

The Music at WAX TRAX!

Nash and Flesher had gotten into the record business to have a more direct connection with the music they loved and wanted others to hear. The store at 2449 North Lincoln Avenue initially featured punk, post-punk, rockabilly, glam, English R&B, power pop, psychedelic/psychpop, mod, European synth-pop, new wave, and other eclectic selections. Independent labels (those not on major labels) featured prominently.

Part of the breadth of their offerings came from the fact that WAX TRAX! offered both used and new records and cassette tapes, later videos and CDs, including rare and out-of-print issues. Nash and Flesher had a passion for imports, especially collectible pressings (colored vinyl, picture discs, deluxe versions). Obsessed with UK culture, initially they relied on record dealer, friend, and UK native Mike Smyth (who would later start his own specialty record store, Phonoluxe Records, in Nashville) to fly to London to bring back records. They wanted the most recent releases, sometimes getting them before the releases debuted in their home country. Many remained rare, never to be released in the United States.

Nash and Flesher also produced and sold bootlegs (illicitly recorded performances). Their initial foray into bootleg releases had been in Denver when they paid to have a performance of the New York Dolls pressed into vinyl. These types of offerings were rare enough to excite buzz among hard-core fans and even, in this first instance, the artists themselves as they discovered when New York Dolls lead singer David Johansen stopped at their store to buy his own copy. With experiments like this, Nash and Flesher were learning how to move beyond their role as retailers to become producers of music. Once they were known for this type of trade, collectors who specialized in obtaining these recordings worked with them to expand the store's illicit bootleg offerings. In 1979, after their Chicago store was set up, one of the first bootlegs they had made was a 7" vinyl of the A-sides of two Brian Eno proto-punk singles.

The Store

The store at 2449 North Lincoln Avenue proclaimed its purpose and energy from the moment you set foot inside the store. Music was playing loudly at all times. The walls were covered with promotional posters and materials, memorabilia, band and concert photos, picture discs, and neon signage. Rows of record bins had hand-lettered and -decorated dividers with band names or sections like "New Arrivals" to help guide buyers' curiosity.

VHS and Betamax video tapes were also on sale at the store. In the larger record industry, video became a regular vehicle to promote music starting in the 1980s, marked most notably by the

POP
Rolling Stones

CARS
IGGY POP
JOE JACKSON
DAVID BOWIE
PAUL SMITH
GROUP
-DEVO-
ULTRAVOX

CLASH

BRUCE

We pay
top dollar
for • 45s
• LPs

POLICE
WHO
THE JAM

666

B52s
BEATLES
ROXY MUSIC
COSTELLO
LONDON
cheap trick

BLONDIE

Ramones
BUZZCOCKS
Talking Heads
ENO
Avant Garde

50's Rock 'N' Roll

Graham Parker

Dealers in quality used
and selected new records

WAX TRAX
RECORDS

We specialize in:
U.S. & Imported
Rock 'N' Roll
New Wave
Rockabilly
R & B
Blues & Reggae

Collectible Records
Old Hits (& Misses)
Memorabilia &
Magazines
Selected Imported
LPs & 45s

Unusual Overseas
& U.S. Releases
All Varieties of
Quality Second-
Hand Albums in
Top Condition

312-929-0221

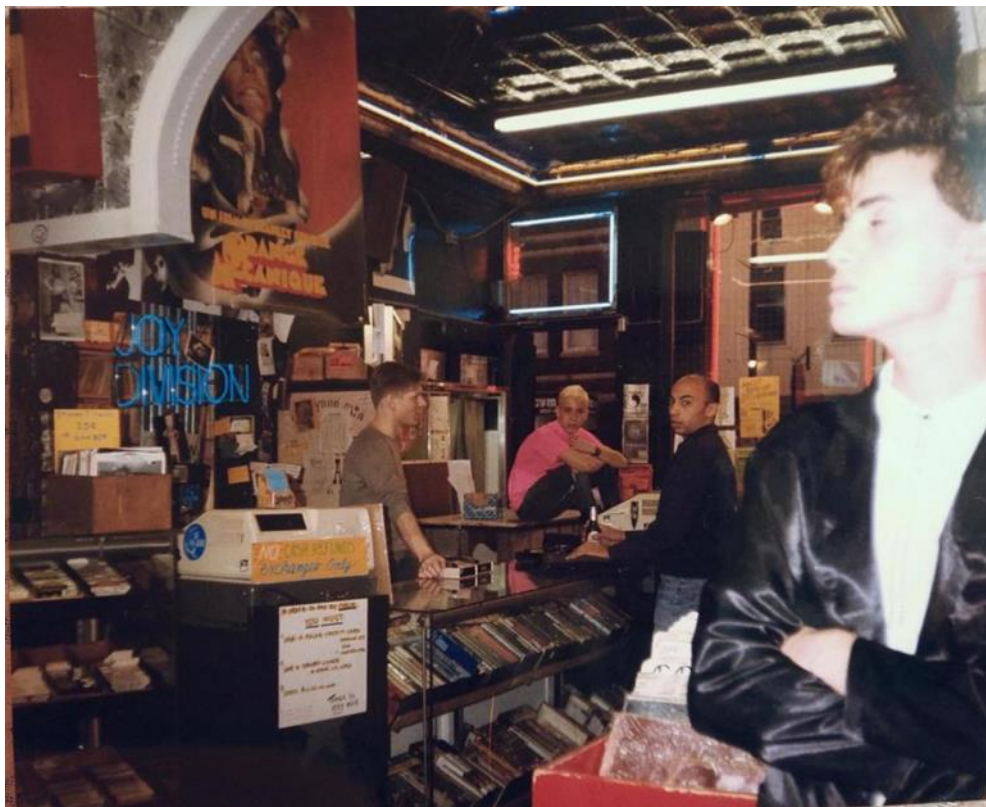
~~2249~~ N. Lincoln Chicago Illinois 60614

Above: This WAX TRAX! ad emphasizes the special inventory carried by the store. Instead of sharp, highly detailed promo photos, images used in this ad are low-quality photocopies which appear to have been cut out from another magazine or newspaper. They are set against a geometric pattern or plain background. Fonts vary in size and type, and the blocks with names of groups appear collaged together. The “we pay top dollar” typeset has a home-made look and “The “50s Rock ‘N’ Roll” label is written by hand. This was typical of the store’s DIY aesthetic . (The incorrect address appears to be a mistake, later marked out.) (Source: Julia Nash)



Above: People browsing and hanging out on the WAX TRAX! sales floor. (Source: Julia Nash)

Below: Looking toward the front of the store. (Source: WAX TRAX! Facebook page; Posted by Elizabeth Moreland)



launch of cable's MTV (Music Television) in 1981. In the store, TVs mounted on the walls showed a different menu of images than what was broadcast on MTV, however--a mélange of oddball movie footage (e.g. clips from John Waters movies, random propaganda and industrial movie clips such as plane crash test footage) and the novel, often outlandish video creations of bands like Cabaret Voltaire and The Cramps.

Employees were a self-chosen group of music devotees whose input helped determine what music was on offer. They shared their expertise and opinions with customers to steer them toward new discoveries.

Initially, the Lincoln Avenue store had an area at the back where limited clothing and music-related merchandise was on offer. When Jim and Dannie vacated the apartment on the second floor in the late 1980s, they remodeled it, closed off the street-front entry to the building's stairs, and provided interior access to the second floor. The upstairs became a boutique for clothing, accessories, and publications.

Of course, music was the reason people came to the WAX TRAX! store, but for some, the clothing and accessories sold there were just as important. The clothing boutique had brands which were part of the London music scene, and it was the first to carry brands in Chicago that have become staples of music-related fashion: Doc Martens, Free People, Boy London, Tripp NYC, and Vivienne Westwood.

Publications were also moved upstairs. The store offered a variety of magazines from international to ultra-local. This included music industry magazines which often provided coverage on the newest bands and releases, but also fanzines which were typically low-budget, DIY (e.g. photocopied, folded, and stapled together), fan-based journalism that was popular from the late 1970s through the early 1990s and which focused primarily on non-mainstream music genres and bands.

The store also became a ticket outlet, sometimes the exclusive outlet, for local shows. Having put together performances by bands at their Denver store, it was natural that Nash and Flesher would start sponsoring shows in Chicago where there was a bigger potential audience. A bigger audience would likely need more space than they had available at the Lincoln Avenue store, however, so they worked with local venues to produce shows.

Tickets for the shows were initially made by hand, stamped with the store's name and address on the back, but by 1980 Nash and Flesher were paying to fly in cutting-edge bands like Bauhaus, The Cramps, New Order, and The Jam to Chicago for their first-ever shows in the city. Because they ran a small operation, and, perhaps more importantly, because they were huge fans of the groups they brought to Chicago, Nash and Flesher would personally pick up the bands from the airport and bring them back to the store and up to their apartment to welcome them.

The WAX TRAX! Aesthetic

When you saw an ad for the WAX TRAX! store, the art spoke as much as the text. Typical ads were black and white, often using cut-out, Xerox copy-quality images set against bold, geometric graphics. This stark, sometimes handmade look aligned with the unpolished, ransom-note graphics look and "anyone can do it" ethos of punk music and fanzines, a DIY world in



Above: Jim Nash and Dannie Flesher moved out of their second-floor apartment at 2449 North Lincoln Avenue and transformed the space into a boutique for clothing and accessories. (Source: *Chicago Sun Times*, 3/28/17; Photo "Courtesy of Wax Trax")

Below: At right, the fanzines display on the second floor. (Source: Julia Nash)



the age before wide-spread use of computers and home color printers when graphic design and architecture were still being done by hand with the aid of paper clip art or dry transfer Letraset. For the WAX TRAX! Records label (discussed below), when their businesses were flush with cash, Nash and Flesher splurged on elaborate packaging designs, thinking more about what they'd like to see than what would earn them the biggest profit. The look of the store and the label had always been important to them, and they understood the power of visuals to convey succinctly and powerfully what WAX TRAX! was about.

The WAX TRAX! Record Label

The Store Set the Stage for the Label

Having pressed bootlegs, organized concerts, and procured difficult-to-find music from all manner of sources, it was not that much of a stretch for Nash and Flesher to establish their own legitimate record label. The nature of the work needed to run the store meant they had already established relationships with record labels, distributors, manufacturers, venues, and musicians. But these larger networks may not have been on their mind when they began. Their first official label release in 1981 was done in response to being asked to record and make a pressing for a local punk group called Strike Under. The plan was to sell the "Immediate Action" EP out of the store, so they only had a small number of records made.

Now that the WAX TRAX! label had been established, Nash took the initiative for the next project. He had been a fan of John Waters films and, having recently met Waters's film star Divine, he wondered if the female impersonator would be willing to work with them. In a 1995 interview with *The Advocate*, he recalled:

"I had always been a fan of Divine," Nash says, "so I asked him if he'd ever made a record—because it seemed like a logical thing for him to do. He had, of course, and it was just *awful*. So we immediately volunteered to put it out."

So, the label's second official release was Divine's first release, the twelve-inch single "Born to Be Cheap."

Witnessing these new developments was employee Franke Nardiello, who was in the local band Special Affect with Al Jourgensen. Nardiello gave his bosses a demo tape from his friend Jourgensen who had just put together the band Ministry. When the WAX TRAX! label released a twelve-inch single in 1982 by Ministry called "Cold Life," it became a hit in the dance clubs of Europe and made *Billboard's* Dance/Disco Top 80 chart.

Having kept their pulse on bands coming out of Europe, Nash and Flesher next set their sights on a Belgian band called Front 242 whose records they had been importing to sell at the store. They engineered a licensing agreement through the band's label to make and distribute their music in the United States. In 1983, the first record made under these terms was the EP "Endless Riddance" which also found success as a dance club hit. This was one of many licensing deals that Nash and Flesher put together.

To promote their new artists, Nash and Flesher turned to people like David Shelton. Shelton was a party promoter who had thrown his first Chicago party in 1979 at The Warehouse club (a designated Chicago Landmark) with DJ Frankie Knuckles, one of the progenitors of the

Chicago-born genre of “house music.” By 1983, Shelton had created his own dance club called Medusa’s at 3257 North Sheffield Avenue in the Lake View neighborhood, not far from the WAX TRAX! store. Nash and Flesher partnered with Shelton to put on some of the earliest shows for WAX TRAX! label bands. Medusa’s became “the de facto showplace for the emerging Wax Trax! sound” according to music writer Michaelangelo Matos.

Nash and Flesher were also happy to provide new WAX TRAX! issues to the DJs at Medusa’s. By playing them in the club, these titles would be given positive marks in the reports the DJs provided to national music publications such as *Billboard*, helping to give the songs national attention. And, of course, the diverse crowd which went to Medusa’s was also exposed to the music which helped sales.

In 1986, when a local alderman sought to pass an ordinance which would require Medusa’s and other juice bars to close earlier, Jim Nash testified in opposition. He cited all the positive economic benefits that Medusa’s brought to the politician’s ward. The ordinance passed anyway, but Medusa’s remained in business until 1992, one of several points in the constellation of Chicago clubs and bars where industrial music was played.

The WAX TRAX! Label Approach

The WAX TRAX! label used the back office at 2449 North Lincoln to oversee projects from inception to the final packaging and shipping of the product. When packages left the store, they always included a catalog of WAX TRAX! releases and label ads encouraged people to write in for the catalog. This became an integral part of the business and allowed it to expand beyond just the cities where there were record stores that carried WAX TRAX! label releases. It also opened up a natural way for fans to communicate with the label. Nash and Flesher received letters from people asking for the catalog on a regular basis and they often expressed the vital role that the records played in people’s lives. It was not uncommon for them to hear that WAX TRAX! releases were a lifeline to people who felt or were made to feel entirely alone in communities without a safe zone like the WAX TRAX! records store. The sense of identity and belonging that WAX TRAX! records provided went far beyond simple listening pleasure.

Nash and Flesher continued their fearless pursuit of bringing new sounds to people. Bands who worked with them were given exceptional artistic freedom and support. WAX TRAX! paid for all the studio time they wanted.

This allowed for the luxury of experimentation. Both Ministry and Front 242 were bands interested in the use of technology in music. Digital synthesizers were barely beyond the prototype stage in the early 1980s, but Jourgensen had procured a Fairlight mega-synthesizer as a signing bonus from major label Sire Records. This early Fairlight was one of the first digital machines to make sampling (capturing a sound recording snippet and manipulating multiple aspects of it for use in a song) possible. Literally teaching themselves from the ground up (it didn’t come with a typical user’s manual), artists crafted songs using the Fairlight and the new electronic sound made its way into the WAX TRAX! sound.

Giving people the support to be creative and be themselves was part of Nash and Flesher’s overall approach. WAX TRAX! label employee Andy Wombwell characterized it like this:

Jim and Dannie were everybody’s cool gay dads. For employees, this meant paychecks could be cashed out at the record store downstairs and “hangover” was sometimes a

valid excuse for coming in late or to make mistakes. For the artists, it meant complete enablement and no budgets and definitely no contracts. There was never even a mention of contracts except when bashing major labels for having such terrible ones. Jim and Dannie didn't run numbers. They made decisions based on intuition, often impulse. They made deals on trust and handshakes. That was their way.

Such treatment was rare in the music business, and it generated a great deal of goodwill on the part of the artists. Employees and musicians frequently cite the sense of community they had with the store and label, how working there felt more like being part of a family than a firm. Even when Ministry signed on to a larger label, its founder Al Jourgensen continued to work on side projects for the WAX TRAX! label that became quite successful. That the side projects often involved different members of other WAX TRAX! bands further reflected the communal spirit of the label.

The WAX TRAX! label was the first U.S. company to release music by British band KLF, the originally Chicago-based TKK, KMFDM from Germany, Belgian group A Split Second, British groups including Coil, and The Young Gods out of Switzerland. Though no two bands were alike, much of the success of WAX TRAX! music was due to its popularity in dance clubs because much of the music relied on a prominent beat track underlying the other instrumentation. Another through-line was experimentation with electronics as the primary instruments for both melody and mood, often pushing sound to the limit of harshness as a reflection of the nihilism and absurdity at the philosophical core of the music. The result was a very machine-made, or industrial, sound. It was dubbed "industrial dance" by music journalists who eventually shortened the term to "industrial" music. And WAX TRAX! Records was seen as the primary label behind the development of this genre in the United States.

Wombwell characterized the label's trajectory:

Word spread via club DJs, savvy record store buyers, MTV's *120 Minutes*, and the occasional college radio station open-minded enough to play something not guitar-based or sent to them by a major label rep with an expensive account. Fans told friends. The bands began touring more extensively, often to enthusiastic, sold-out crowds.

Rolling Stone mused on the result in 1995: "WAX TRAX! defined a subculture and created a following as strong as any of its individual artists. People would buy any record with the WAX TRAX! imprint music unheard, and the label often received fan mail of its own."

Financial Problems

The WAX TRAX! label had begun in the office of the WAX TRAX! store on Lincoln Avenue. By 1985, the label's sales had become big enough that new staff were needed, and the office was moved to a building next door. The label prospered through the end of the decade, but financial problems began stacking up. Not all artists made money for the company, yet the label kept royalty rates high and absorbed the costs associated with making the music rather than limiting expenses or charging them back to the groups. The artists that did make the company money didn't always stay. Nash and Flesher had never set up contracts with the bands, so when major labels offered them deals which promised greater rewards, many took advantage of the lack of contractual agreements to leave, sometimes even taking their back catalog with them.

Cash flow became a problem when distributors failed to pay them. Without available funds, the label was not able to provide the music product needed to satisfy demand. Trying to solve the problem, WAX TRAX! Records entered into an agreement with the European label Play It Again Sam Records to manufacture, promote, and distribute all of their artists in the U.S. Ultimately it turned out to be a liability when WAX TRAX! Records had to push music that competed with their own stable of talent.

In 1992, Nash and Flesher filed for bankruptcy in a bid to save the company. The unconventional business practices WAX TRAX! had used made the company a hard sell when looking for an investor to bail the label out. They ultimately convinced TeeVee Toons to enter into an agreement for ownership of the label in exchange for handling the production, manufacturing, sales, and marketing aspects of the business, leaving Nash and Flesher to focus on finding and recruiting new artists. Staff were let go and more traditional business practices were enforced, about which Flesher lamented “They changed the way we operate—for the best for us, but not for the artists.” Just as the merger was happening, Jim Nash discovered that he had AIDS.

The Changing Music Business and Transitions

The WAX TRAX! store on Lincoln Avenue had always been financially linked to the label, with Nash and Flesher letting funds flow between them as needed to keep both businesses going. At the very time when the owners most needed the store’s profits to bolster up the label, the music recording and retail landscape was transforming. Major labels had seen the changing winds of the 1980s and now specifically sought out underground artists, Nirvana being one of the best-known examples. Such “alternative” artists now had major label money and distribution behind them which meant that they were in the pipeline that fed large retail chains, no longer constrained to specialty retailers like WAX TRAX!.

Meanwhile, new music stores came to Chicago that offered greater variety than stores of the past, creating a new level of competition for WAX TRAX! customers that previously had not existed, e.g. Reckless Records in 1988 and Tower Records in 1991. At the same time, chains like Circuit City, Best Buy, Target and Wal-Mart competed for consumers by using their large-scale buying power to offer CDs at lower prices.

With these pressures, it no longer made financial sense for the store to stay in the now decidedly high-end Lincoln Park. The label offices had been moved to the relatively affordable Wicker Park in 1989. In 1993, Nash and Flesher sold the store on Lincoln Avenue and re-opened it on Damen Avenue with the help of Nash’s daughter Julia at the Wicker Park location.

Jim Nash continued working on the WAX TRAX! label from his apartment above the Damen store. Under TVT ownership, the WAX TRAX! label had the business mechanisms and widespread distribution needed to turn its largest profit ever, but it was no longer the label Nash and Flesher had created. The store on Damen Avenue was also a pale shadow of the energy-filled Lincoln Avenue location. Stock was merely leftovers from the old store and the space was stark in comparison to the riot of its predecessor.

Jim Nash succumbed to complications from AIDS in 1995 and his daughter closed the WAX TRAX! store the following year. Without his partner-in-crime of nearly 25 years, Flesher soon found he had no drive to continue the business. Eventually he returned to Arkansas and a quieter life. He passed away in 2010 from pneumonia.



Above: Members of the band Bauhaus at WAX TRAX! in 1980. (Source: Alternative Press website)

Below: A 1980 clipping showing Squeeze band members at WAX TRAX! (Source: Harry Young)



A&M's Squeeze defines "Argybargy" (the title of their new album) as a gleeful crowd-
ing together of people. Seen here argybargy-ing with the staff of Wax Trax Records
are (left to right): John Bentley, Squeeze; Gilson Lovis, Squeeze; Glen Tilbrook, Squeeze;
Jools Holland, Squeeze; Chris Eifford, Squeeze; Carol Blank, Wax Trax; Jim Nash,
manager, Wax Trax; and Rich Girod, A&M Records.

The Impact of the WAX TRAX!

The World's View of Chicago's Music Scene

The arrival of the WAX TRAX! store in Chicago was monumental in terms of shaping Chicago's music scene and in shaping the world's perceptions of Chicago music from that point forward. In 1995, *Chicago Tribune* music critic Greg Kot put it this way: "When Nash and Flesher arrived on Lincoln Avenue to open the WAX TRAX! records store in 1978, Chicago's music scene became hip again. Today, Chicago bands are celebrated worldwide for their cutting-edge cool, a renaissance that began when Nash and Flesher blew in from Denver 17 years ago."

The list of bands whose members made a point of stopping in at the store is a who's who of rock music from the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. Sometimes Nash and Flesher would be able to pose for a photograph, but signed album covers or posters were also favorites for the fans-turned-owners. To the Ramones album signed at the Denver store, after which the band declared the store to be the best record store they had ever seen at their concert later that night, their collection included Lou Reed, Ian Dury, The Talking Heads, The Cramps, Ultravox, New Order, Social Distortion, Madness, Duran Duran, The B-52s, The Jam, The Pretenders, and The Psychedelic Furs.

Former store employee Sean Joyce summed up what he witnessed for the *Chicago Sun-Times* in 2017: "People visited from around the world to shop and it was a total meetup spot to find other creatives who were just into the same music as yourself. I remember a couple of visits from director John Hughes, who used to get records from the store to help him build what would be the soundtracks to films."

WAX TRAX! Store as Catalyst

Journalist and music critic Jim DeRogatis recalled the 1999 of John Hughes on radio show *Sound Opinions*:

Throughout his time living in the Chicago area and well into his prime years as a filmmaker, he loved nothing more than haunting the racks of vinyl at the old Wax Trax record store on Lincoln Avenue in the heady days after the punk explosion yielded to New Wave and the electronic dance sounds that followed. It was there that he first connected with many of the bands that would become staples of his soundtracks. And it was those soundtracks that opened many young listeners' ears to music that couldn't be heard on many radio stations at the time.

According to Jim Nash's daughter Julia and her husband Mark Skillicorn, John Hughes originally had wanted to shoot part of the 1986 *Pretty In Pink* movie at the WAX TRAX! store, but her father and Dannie Flesher could not afford to shut down the store for the amount of time it would have taken. Instead, they supplied Hughes with promotional materials to help re-create the store as a set in Hollywood. Some of those materials were also used in the main character's bedroom. From very personal experiences like Hughes's, the WAX TRAX! store, its vibe and take on life as manifested in the music it sold, sent ripples out into the world.

The store was also a magnet and a green light for people who saw themselves following in the footsteps of Nash and Flesher by creating their own spaces for the music they loved. Joe Shanahan, who later opened the concert venue Metro and the Smart Bar club (both at 3730 North Clark Street) in Chicago, was so anxious to have the WAX TRAX! store in Chicago that, after hearing about it, he went to the not-yet-opened Lincoln Avenue store to help them get it ready. He painted walls and record bins. He reflected on the store's impact in a 2017 article in the *Chicago Sun-Times*:

“To really understand the '80s and the massive impact of ‘new wave’ and ‘punk rock’ and the birth of industrial music, you have to look no further than WAX TRAX! There would have been no Smartbar and no Metro without Jim and Dannie and all the creative energy WAX TRAX! brought to Chicago. I bought all the original club’s records there and WAX TRAX! was Metro’s first off-site box office. The feeling of excitement between the store, the label and the club was undeniable as bands and DJs felt the chemistry.”

The relationship became symbiotic. Shanahan would visit WAX TRAX! to ask clerks to DJ at the clubs. When he organized a show, he judged its worth by looking to see if the WAX TRAX! clerks had deemed it worthy of display space in the front window.

A Gathering Spot and Haven

The store became a natural gathering place for musicians and music lovers. There was no better place to meet people who were musically and therefore more apt to be culturally like-minded than this uncommon place. The store's relaxed atmosphere fostered this natural occurrence, and it was not frowned upon to hang out at the store for an afternoon or an evening to see friends and meet new ones. More than one person active in Chicago's music scene at the time has said that bands were formed in the store.

Not everyone who walked into the store looked the same, of course. Nor did they come from the same background. But they were united with a love for the unconventional music sold at the store. People open to those types of music also tended to be open to unorthodox looks and lifestyles, perhaps because their musical heroes, images of whom were plastered all over the store, led the way in breaking conventions. In 1994, *Chicago Tribune* music critic Greg Kot described the scene:

Their storefront on Lincoln Avenue quickly became a gathering spot for the city's more colorful night marauders, a place where people in nose rings and combat boots, or bombardier jackets and fish-net stockings, felt right at home. To record junkies, it was also a shrine, full of imported exotica, where the latest New Order single or Buzzcocks bootleg blasted from the speakers.

Though not overtly made for the LGBTQ+ community, much of the music sold in the store and the artists who made it were “free from the stereotypes and predefined expectations or expressions of sexuality and gender,” as noted in a 2019 *Chicago Tribune* article. At a time in America when being labeled homosexual was generally considered, at best, an insult or a joke, if not justification for physical abuse or worse, this made the store a sort of safe zone for the LGBTQ+ community.

The need for a haven felt particularly acute during this time when a larger societal shift was taking place. The “me-decade” of the 1970s which focused on personal liberation and standing up to authority gave way to the New Right and nostalgic conservatism of the Reagan/Bush years. Kot’s article included an interview with Ministry’s Al Jourgensen who connected the dots:

“When you have a real right-wing shift in society, you have a much more entrenched underground,” he says. “The more right-wing things get, the more people get [angry]. When you get [angry], who ya gonna call? WAX TRAX Records.”

When they called, the WAX TRAX! store welcomed them with open arms.

Influence of the WAX TRAX! Record Label

Though the label was a separate venture from the store, they were unquestionably intertwined. When Nash and Flesher began experimenting with making records, they did so to sell the product at their store and, in many ways, the WAX TRAX! store served as the perfect platform for the label. The store’s offices and backrooms became the label’s offices and backrooms. Several of the store’s employees became employees of the label or even members of the bands it would record. Profits from the store made the label venture possible and when the store needed cash, money flowed back in from the label’s profits. All the groundwork the owners did to find the music they wanted to sell in the store directly informed their search for artists for the label.

However, with a record label, Nash and Flesher were not just selling what others produced. Making new music was the purpose of the WAX TRAX! label and the music it put out impacted the evolution of other types of music as well as the music industry.

Richard Girdi of the *Chicago Sun-Times* compares WAX TRAX! Records to another of Chicago’s musical institutions: “As important as Chess Records was to blues and soul music, Chicago’s WAX TRAX! imprint was just as significant to the punk rock, new wave and industrial genres. What began as a record shop on Lincoln Avenue that specialized in underground music more than 30 years ago morphed into an influential label and seeped into the city’s culture.”

In 2010, Greg Kot of the *Chicago Tribune* summarized the WAX TRAX! music and artists who made that happen: “In the ‘80s, the store expanded into a label that became the world headquarters for boundary-pushing artists who bridged disco, electronic music, rock and the avant-garde. Some dubbed the sound ‘industrial disco,’ an umbrella term that included Ministry, Front 242, Underworld, KMFDM, and [TKK], underground acts that went on to sell millions of records.”

Although there was more than one label that specialized in this type of music, *Billboard* credits WAX TRAX! as “the U.S. label that put industrial dance music on the map in the ‘80s.” Using a comparison to another of the United States’ legendary labels which came to signify a genre, David J. Prince of *Rolling Stone* described WAX TRAX! Records as “a virtual Motown of molten electronic dance music, which set the tone, aesthetic and soundtrack for the 1980s industrial revolution and laid the groundwork for the success of artists like Nine Inch Nails.” Other artists can trace a clear line of debt to the music of WAX TRAX! including Marilyn

Manson, Rob Zombie, and Rammstein, but Reznor's link may be most direct as he joined Al Jourgensen's WAX TRAX! side project bands briefly in 1990 while his band, Nine Inch Nails, was just starting. In 1992, he gave an interview to *Spin* magazine:

“I was a Wax Trax record buyer when I was making *Pretty Hate Machine* [Nine Inch Nail's first album, 1989]. I always liked stuff that was computer-based, where you can tie in the technology with music. It was a fresh, new thing that couldn't have happened before. And I still like it even though now it's become mainstream, and you can buy a drum machine for a hundred bucks, and everybody in the world has a computer and sequencer.”

Reznor's lament reflects the predicament of many types of ground-breaking styles of music. When it was being made, it was a new contribution to music, sounds that had not been heard. However, the more familiar people become with it, and as other artists incorporate it into their new creations, what once was revolutionary now seems like it was always there. But for those who look at the history, the story of how the WAX TRAX! label became synonymous with industrial music in United States is clear.

CRITERIA FOR DESIGNATION

According to the Municipal Code of Chicago (Section 2-120-620 and –630), the Commission on Chicago Landmarks has the authority to make a preliminary recommendation of landmark designation for an area, district, place, building, structure, work of art, or other object within the City of Chicago if the Commission determines it meets two or more of the stated “criteria for designation” and that it possesses a sufficient degree of historic integrity to convey its significance. The following should be considered by the Commission on Chicago Landmarks in determining whether to recommend that the WAX TRAX! be designated as a Chicago Landmark:

Criterion 1: Value as an Example of City, State, or National Heritage

Its value as an example of the architectural, cultural, economic, historic, social, or other aspect of the heritage of the City of Chicago, the State of Illinois, or the United States.

- WAX TRAX!, located at 2449 North Lincoln Avenue from 1978 to 1993, invigorated Chicago’s music scene. With bootlegs, imports, and hard-to-find records, cassettes, CDs, and videos, WAX TRAX! became an international retail destination. It carried music not readily available elsewhere including punk, post-punk, rockabilly, glam, English R&B, power pop, psychedelic/psychpop, mod, European synth-pop, new wave, avant-garde, and other eclectic selections. The stock included rare, out-of-print, imported, bootleg, and collectible records as well as independent label releases.
- WAX TRAX! helped to shape the world’s perceptions of Chicago music. As the home base of the WAX TRAX! record label, the store at 2449 North Lincoln helped to launch industrial-dance music, what became to be known as industrial music, in the United States. This early electronic-based dance music which employed tape loops, sound effects, and drum patterns to create a machine-made sound was a new genre that would influence the direction of future music across the globe.
- Using WAX TRAX! as their home base, owners Jim Nash and Dannie Flesher helped to bring the world to Chicago by producing and promoting shows for cutting-edge bands like Bauhaus, The Cramps, New Order, and the Jam bringing many of them to the city for the first time.
- WAX TRAX! opened at a time when society’s pendulum was swinging away from earlier decades’ idealism and freedom-focused liberation toward the New Right and nostalgic conservatism of the Reagan years. The store provided a rare refuge to outsiders and outcasts as a mecca and a meeting place for those most comfortable outside the mainstream.
- The arrival of WAX TRAX! in Chicago was monumental in terms of shaping Chicago’s music scene. Owners Jim Nash and Dannie Flesher’s musical tastes, creative generosity, and willingness to take risks provided the collaborative space, support, and inspiration for musicians to experiment with new technology to create a new style of music and led the way for other music-lovers to open their own venues and start their own labels.
- WAX TRAX! was a favorite of director John Hughes in whose films music played a key role. He featured the bands he discovered at the store in soundtracks for some of the most successful films of the 1980s including *Sixteen Candles*, *The Breakfast Club*, *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, and *Pretty in Pink* which featured a re-created WAX TRAX! store.

Criterion 4: Exemplary Architecture

Its exemplification of an architectural type or style distinguished by innovation, rarity, uniqueness, or overall quality of design, detail, materials, or craftsmanship.

- WAX TRAX! is a neighborhood store and flat building with an unusually high degree of ornamentation. It is a rare, early example of the use of glazed-brick cladding applied to a small-scale building.
- The building maintains an original Renaissance Revival cornice with a “broken pediment,” swags between curved brackets, a highly detailed central panel, and four acroterion and an obelisk projecting above the cornice’s horizontal elements.
- Carved Bedford limestone elements on the building’s façade include prominent window hoods and sills, and a first-floor cornice with *mascarons* (human faces) which are rarely found on a store and flat building.
- The structure was built circa 1880s and re-fronted circa 1900 in white- and green-glazed brick. In the decades leading up to World War I, white-glazed brick and terra cotta took precedence over darker tones as the preferred cladding for dozens of skyscrapers built in the Chicago Loop. This striking shift was first seen on Burnham & Root’s Reliance Building at Washington and State Streets, completed in 1895, just two years after the opening of the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago. The popularity of the fair’s gleaming white Neoclassical structures, combined with advances in the manufacturing and availability of terra cotta and enameled brick, led to its utilization in commercial structures throughout the city.

INTEGRITY CRITERION

The integrity of the proposed landmark must be preserved in light of its location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, and ability to express its historic community, architecture, or aesthetic interest or value.

WAX TRAX! possesses sufficient integrity to convey its historic architectural and cultural significance. The building remains in its original location within a low-scale but dense commercial setting. Additions to the structure have been at the rear and are not visible so have not negatively impacted the structure’s integrity. The original storefront and windows have been replaced, but this is typical for commercial structures of this age and can be reversed. The building largely retains its character-defining features, materials, and overall design and therefore sufficiently conveys its historic significance.

SIGNIFICANT HISTORICAL AND ARCHITECTURAL FEATURES

Whenever an area, district, place, building, structure, work of art, or other object is under consideration for landmark designation, the Commission on Chicago Landmarks is required to identify the “significant historical and architectural features” of the property. This is done to enable the owners and the public to understand which elements are considered most important to preserve the historical and architectural character of the proposed landmark.

Based upon its evaluation of WAX TRAX!, the Commission recommends that the significant features be identified as:

- All exterior elevations, including rooflines, of the building.

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