

Oct. 5, 2016

Cook County Board of Commissioners Finance Committee (Committee of the Whole)

County Board Room, Cook County Building, West Loop, Chicago

Madam Chair and Honorable Cook County Commissioners:

Reared by two teachers, among which my father taught history in the Chicago Public Schools for nearly 40 years, I learned that history is something to be lived as well as read and lectured about.

Never in my most adventurous imagination did I ever fathom that I would live long enough to witness government taxing the black music of my time because in part it was considered less than fine art by lawmakers virtually lacking discerning minds, eyes and ears for the modern urban fine arts and the economics facing DJs who perform in Cook County's small venues.

My educated guess is that the current 19-year-old Cook County amusement tax ordinance covering DJ'ed events at venues with capacities of 750 persons and less was enacted during a dark age for Chicago hip-hop, when the status quo of classical jazz and rock generations couldn't quite get their heads around the fine art in a youth culture that created music with two record-playing turntables and a microphone, where danced was characterized by individualized whirling dervishes and robotic or slithery moves of precision and where visual art was methodically spray painted on public and private property indiscriminately with apparent anti-social abandon.

The beautiful reality is that before the county amusement tax, a Loyola University student and WLWU-FM on-air personality by the name of **Brother L (Lional Freeman)** pioneered an electronically symphonic hip-hop sound in small venues that was not too dramatically different from the symphonic, sacred and tone poem works created by a Duke Ellington. A **Heather Robinson** began creating a jazzy DJ sound in small venues that now thrills audiences everywhere from Wrigleyville's Smart Bar/Metro to Paris' nightclubs. In small venues, **Rob Madrid (Robert Perry)** created a similar sound that that's regularly heard as far away as Rio de Janeiro. By combining a DJ'ed sound with live instrumentation and MC'ing, or rap, in such small venues as Elbo Room, **Jesse de la Pena** launched a Chicago acid jazz scene that evolved into the likes of world renowned **Liquid Soul**, the legacy of that work being Liquid Soul MC **Dirty MF** pursuing higher education at age 40 and learning the skills to DJ at small venues in his own right.

Small venues have also been the workshop for newer Chicago hip-hop sounds: the afrohouse of pioneering female DJ **Lady D (Darlene Jackson)**, global bass of **Newlife (Tyson Sanchez)** at Subterranean with his world music parties, cumbia of **Rebel Betty (Amara Betty Martin)** and **David Itzi Nallah (David Marques)** at Double Door, along with the world music DJ'ing and VJ'ing, or video clip mixing, of **Calixta (Isabel Calixta Buchanan-Arellano)** and an "acid latin" sound that **Sound Culture (David Chavez)** and Havana-originating **Afroqban (Harold Gonzalez Medina)** have launched via **Future Rootz**, which combines DJ'ed latin and afropop grooves with primarily African-originating percussion licks, and the Balkan/gypsy funk of **Romasoul (Maja Bijedic)**.

Small venues is also where Chicago's reggae sound was pulled from the abyss, redeveloped and refined. For gyrrrl example, **Kinky P (Patricia Reyes)** has distinguished herself as a premier Chicago selectress, or reggae DJ, at small venues from Chicago to her native Tijuana, Mexico with her repertoire of classic, contemporary and evolving reggae.

MC Zulu (Dominique Rowland), after experimenting in small Chicago venues settled on his electro-reggae sound combing reggae and up-tempo dance grooves informed by his childhood in Central America and South Florida and a musical legacy of foreparents who immigrated from Jamaican to Panama to work on the Panama Canal. Zulu's sound has been appreciated in tours on nearly all continents, including in Switzerland, where he received glowing commendations from Grace Jones on brilliantly opening for her, to most recently the Nyege Nyege International Music Festival in Uganda, where he was proclaimed a legend. As a Bollywood award-nominated movie soundtrack producer, Zulu carries the torch of another Chicago-based electro-reggae legend and small venue selector veteran, Grammy-winning electro-reggae pioneer **Max-A-Million**.

Small venue DJs known for playing the most rarefied groove—the Communicator (Jerry Reyes), **Ponderers** (latina DJ duo of **Angelfuk**, **Sandra Trevino**, and **Fanita Banana**, **Stephanie Manriquez**), **Rae Chardonnay** and **Soul Summit DJs**—have thoroughly pleased older audiences and introduced younger ones to the types of classic black music that got Commissioner Jerry "Iceman" Butler inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

Other small venue DJ veterans have made the transition to popular radio and television—**Tim Nickless (Tim Nice)**, **Jeekos (Bartek Karas)** and **Search1ite (Ryan Keesling)** on WNUR-FM's weekly "Party Time Society" show, **Nonstop (Mario Nieves)** and the late **Pinkhouse (Isadore Pink)**, who began DJ'ing block parties in the Robert Taylor Homes housing projects) at WGCI-FM, Billboard Award-winning **First Lady (Khris Raye)** at V103 FM and **P-Lee Fresh (Parker Lee Williams)**, son of celebrated drummer Leroy Williams, who advanced from pioneering Chicago

hip-hop music programming on WNUR-FM to serving as Emmy-nominated music director for the "Oprah Winfrey Show." De la Pena is a lead on-air personality and curator for WBEZ-FM's sister/partner station Vocalo.

Because of that glorious history and the contrastingly cold realities of what happens when Cook County local governments have sought revenues from the fine arts without thoroughly working out the consequences, our urban fine arts community clamors for the Cook County Board's approval of Commissioner John H. Fritchey's proposed amendment that would exempt DJ'ed events at small venues from the county amusement tax. Small venue DJs are also small business folk who can barely afford paying an existing gauntlet of special district, municipal, county, state and federal taxes required for pursuing their art, along with the ever increasing cost of living, without their already rationed slice of the piece being reduced to a sliver because taxes on tickets and other forms of admission at clubs have become disincentives for healthy-sized audiences to attend their performances.

Just as such major non-Illinois cities as Toronto and Seattle became visual substitutes for Chicago when Mayor Richard M. Daley and his Chicago City Council sought to tax motion picture production in the city to death, unduly taxed small venue DJs are not above taking their shows to tax-free venues in the Collar Counties, Northwest Indiana and Southeast Wisconsin. The wages of that musical hip-hop flight is the undermining of a "trickle-up" effect that would prove as difficult to recover from as the dramatic loss of revenue Cook County experienced after the County Board cut the county sales tax balancing the county budget under former County Board President Todd Stroger (only to be restored under his successor Toni Preckwinkle as a cure for a renewed deficit). Should small venue DJs choose to operate in Cook County under government- regulating radar, we assure you that Cook County will never boast enough revenue in its already waning budget to hire and maintain enough staff to catch up with the vast majority of scofflaw DJ'ed events on the lamb.

That additional scofflaw option underscores yet another label for small venue DJ'ing that has eluded the Cook County Board's most fastidious minds—the humanities. And if our great American charters of liberty are to be taken seriously, what could be more human than the pursuit of happiness in making a living wage from fine art one enjoys creating and that brings pleasure and joy to so many, whether that so many be at Sub-T Lounge or Soldier Field?

We thank you for your time and for hearing our Truth, and I am **Mark Fitzgerald Armstrong of Chicago Progress.**