

# City of Detroit

## CITY COUNCIL

### **HISTORIC DESIGNATION ADVISORY BOARD**

218 Coleman A. Young Municipal Center, Detroit, Michigan 48226

Phone: (313) 224-3487 Fax: (313) 224-4336

e-mail: [cc-historic@ci.detroit.mi.us](mailto:cc-historic@ci.detroit.mi.us)



### **Proposed United Sound System Recording Studios Historic District Final Report**

By a resolution dated March 25, 2014, the Detroit City Council charged the Historic Designation Advisory Board, a study committee, with the official study of the proposed United Sound Systems Recording Studios (USSRS) Historic District in accordance with Chapter 25 of the 1984 Detroit City Code and the Michigan Local Historic Districts Act.

The proposed United Sound Systems Recording Studios Historic District consists of three lots; a single property at 5840 Second Avenue and two adjoining lots which are presently used for parking. The proposed district is located on the north east corner of Second Avenue and Antoinette Street, north of the Interstate-94 westbound Service Drive, and one block north of New Amsterdam Historic District. The proposed district is situated

within Detroit's Midtown (Cass Corridor) area. The proposed district is located approximately five miles from downtown Detroit.

**Boundaries:** The boundaries of the proposed district are as shown on the attached map and are as follows:

On the west, the centerline of Second Avenue; and

On the north, the centerline of Antoinette Street; and

On the east, centerline of the alley running north-south Lots 7, 8, 9, 10 of Mandlebaums Subdivision, Liber 2, Page 8, Wayne County Records; and

On the south, the east-west line of the North 10 feet of Lot 7 of the Mandlebaums Subdivision, Liber 2, Page 8 Wayne County Records.

#### **Boundary Justification**

The west, north and east boundaries are defined by the public streets or alleys. The south boundary is defined by an adjacent building that is not historically associated with the United Sound Systems Recording Studios.

#### **History**

The United Sound Systems Recording Studios is significant for the musical contributions made there by some of the country's most prominent artists of many genres in American music, primarily by the influential, African American artists of the jazz and "Rhythm and Blues" eras. The United Sound Systems Recording Studios was Detroit's first major recording studio and is known for its innovation in the sound production in the recording industry.

The United Sound Systems Recording Studios (USSRS) have been a place where musical innovation and technological experimentation have blended together to create some of the music industry's major technical and engineering advances. From blues and jazz, to country and rock, to soul and funk and now techno; the United Sound Studios continues to be "the cradle of Detroit musical sound." The United Sound Studios have been recording almost continually since 1933 and is considered one of the oldest independent studios in the country.

The United Sound Studios was founded in the early 1930s by James (known as Jimmy) Siracuse. Originally located in Detroit's historic Cass Corridor, there is some debate about its exact location. Although, Detroit music historians continue to debate this issue, they all agree that United Sound Studios first studio was in the Cass Corridor. According to early city directories the United Sound Studios was initially located at 5051 Cass Avenue which was also the home of James Siracuse and his wife Shyla's (Esther). Polk Detroit City Directories between the years 1920 – 1930 list the United Sound Studios occupying the first floor of the residential building. The United Sound Studios remained at 5051 Cass Avenue until 1939 when Jim Siracuse moved the studios to its present

location at 5840 Second Avenue. James and his wife leased the building on Second Avenue for ten years. In 1949 Siracuse purchased 5840 Second Avenue from William C. Hollands (single) and Clarke D. and Violet Hollands (husband and wife), who owned it as an investment/income property. The building at the Cass Avenue location was demolished in the late 1940s when the area was redeveloped by Wayne State University and is presently the site of the Science Hall.

James Siracuse came from a musical family. His father Joseph was a concert and opera singer (baritone); his bother Tony (Anthony), worked many years for Gunn Music House, dealers in “automatic” musical instruments and juke boxes. During the 1920s Jim rented space at Gunn Music for his business, Siracuse Music House specializing in “musical merchandise.” In 1946 Tony left the Gunn Music Company to start Circle Music, a juke box and vending machine firm. Ten years later in 1956 Tony Siracuse sold Circle Music and came to work with his brother James at United Sound Studios. Later James Siracuse’s, son Joseph, Jr. joined the company as sound engineer, and when United Sound Studios incorporated in 1962 he became corporate vice president.

James Siracuse was a pioneer in adapting residential spaces to accommodate the technical and engineering aspects of the music industry. He and his bother Tony, a sound engineer, utilized his knowledge of building and designing jukeboxes to develop and produce a unique sound that incorporated the building itself as a musical instrument. This manipulation of sound became known by artists worldwide as the “Temple of Sound.” The Siracuse brothers’ ability to transform spaces designed for residential use to produce unique musical sounds became synonymous with United Sound Studios. The United Sound Studios soon became known as the place where innovation and technological experimentation was instrumental in creating the modern sound that would redefine music globally. Musicians from all genres found their way to Detroit and the United Sound Studios to record.

For the first couple of decades the United Sound Studios was best known for producing advertising jingles for radio and later television. During this period the studio was primarily used by local businesses to produce jingles for commercials that were aired on local radio and television shows. Jingles used in commercials for local shows such as Bill Kennedy, Soupy Sales, Milton the Clown and the Rita Bell Show was recorded at the United Sound Studios. The Michigan-based Kellogg Company produced and recorded all of their advertising jingles at the United Sound Studio for ten years.

A number of well-known artists recorded their early hits at the United Sound Studios, beginning in 1942 with the song “Bomb Tokyo” co-written by James Siracuse. In 1947, as part of the Jazz Discography Project; Miles Davis, Charlie Parker, Duke Jordan, Tommy Potter and Max Roach recorded Klaustance for Savoy Records. In 1948, John Lee Hooker recorded “Boogie Chillen” at the United Sound Studios for Sensation Records.

Sensation Records was an outgrowth of Pan-American Distributing Company, a Detroit-based company owned by John Kaplan and Bernie Besman. In July 1947, the partners formed Sensation Records. Kaplan, an accountant, handled the money and Besman, a

pianist and former band leader who performed under the name Dean Dennis, handled the artistic talent. (Before Motown, Lars Bjorn) With the success of Lee Hooker's initial recording, other Detroit-based musicians signed with Sensation Records, including T.J. Fowler, vibraphonist Milt Jackson, and country blues singer Sylvester Cotton; all of whose early recording sessions took place at United Sound Studios.

The success of the United Sound Studios continued into the 1950s and 1960s with recording artists such as Jack Scott and Del Shannon. Detroit-based country singer and songwriter Jimmy Work recorded two of his most successful hits at United Sound Studios, "Making Believe" and "That's What Makes the Jukebox Play." In 1966, the Rationals recorded their classic 'blue-eyed soul' version of Otis Redding's "Respect" at United Sound. In 1969, the funky edge sound produced in 'Studio A' can be heard in the recordings of Bob Seger's "Ramblin' Gamblin' Man" and Isaac Hayes' "Hot Butter Soul."

In 1950s, Dave Usher, former jazz and A& R man – "artists and repertoire" (high profile point man/producer for a record label) partnered with jazz great Dizzy Gillespie to form Dee Gee Records a Detroit-based record company. The company mostly released jazz records but would release pop and R&B ("Rhythm & Blues") records under the label. Usher recorded R&B legend Little Willie John's first record "Mommy, What Happened to Our Christmas Tree" at United Sound Studios at the age of 14. In 1952, Usher produced Jackie Wilson's first record, "Danny Boy" and "Rainy Day Blues" at United Sound Studios as a favor to jazz musician Billy Mitchell.

Berry Gordy Jr., founder of Motown Records, spent his early years at the United Sound Studios. An auto worker at Ford Motors Company and aspiring songwriter Gordy had aspirations of recording his songs under his own record label. Never employed at United Sound Studios, Gordy spent a great deal of time at the 'Studio A' observing the technicians as they experimented with producing new rhythm and sounds inspired by the eclectic group of session musicians who recorded regularly at United Sound Studios. According to Joe Siracuse Jr., Gordy learned the basics of the music business from time spent at the United Sound Studios. He learned how to mix and produce tracks as he sat in on sessions in the studios. Gordy would use his own primitive recording equipment and bring his tapes in to have the levels corrected at United Sound Studios. Gordy recorded his first session "Come to Me" with singer Mav Johnson, in 1958 at United Sound Studios. The Miracles cut their first singles at the United Sound Studios under Gordy's 'Tamla #101 Records.' A year later in 1959, with a loan from his family, Gordy purchased the former Gene LeVett photography studio, a former residential building located at 2648 West Grand Boulevard, and started Motown Records. He became the first African American to own a recording studio in Detroit. Berry Gordy named his new headquarters "Hitsville USA".

### **Don Davis Era**

Don Davis had an unconventional career that took him from the world of music to the 'button-down' halls of finance. A Detroit native, Davis was a three time Grammy-winning producer whose love for music began at an early age. Known for having a keen

ear for sound Davis taught himself to play the trumpet and saxophone while in grade school. In 1955 Davis graduated from Detroit Central High School and formed his own jazz group, the Don Davis Trio. By the 1960s Davis had become a fixture on the Detroit music scene. He soon gained a reputation as an excellent guitar player, and was in high demand as a session musician working with many of the Detroit's independent record labels including Northern, Thelma, Golden World, Ric-Tic, Revilot. In 1960 Barrett Strong's hit "Money" (That's the What I Want) and Mary Wells' "Bye Bye Baby" both featured Davis's guitar work.

By the mid-1960s Davis had moved behind the controls in the studio and was writing and producing. Davis was the lead producer at Motown Records during the 'Golden Era' of the sixties. In 1967 he became the Detroit-based producer for Memphis' Stax Records. His first major success came a year later, in 1968 with the Johnnie Taylor's legendary hit "Who's Making Love", on which he plays guitar. The song reached no. 1 on the Billboard Hot R&B Singles chart and no. 5 on the Billboard Hot 100. Dave Marsh, a national music critic described the song as "a mostly perfect blend of Southern and Northern soul." Davis would collaborate with Taylor on many of his hits in the 1970s, they included; "Jody's Got Your Girl and Gone" 1971 R&B, no. 1 hit, which Davis co-wrote. In 1976, Davis co-wrote and produced Taylor's mega-hit "Disco Lady." The song spent four weeks at no. 1 on the Billboard Hot 100 and six weeks on the R&B Billboard chart, and was the first record ever to be certified "platinum" by Billboard. Taylor recorded both songs at the United Sound Studios. Davis worked for Stax Records for several more years before leaving to establish his own label, Grooveville Music.

In 1971, Davis purchased the historic United Sound Studios, Detroit's oldest and largest recording studio. With his music credentials firmly established, Davis began the process of repositioning the United Sound Studios on the music scene. Davis modernized the recording studios and updated much of the recording equipment including the purchase of a new console designed by Daniel Flickenger. He established 'The Company' a house rhythm section that played for everyone who recorded at the studio. Under Davis leadership United Sound Studios regained its reputation as one of the world premier recording studios. Notable artists such as Burt Bacharach, Aretha Franklin, The Staple Singers, Marilyn McCoo & Billy Davis Jr., The Dells, The Dramatics, Carla Thomas and David Ruffin are among the many artists who recorded at the United Sound Studios. In 1970, George Clinton rented studio space and recorded the Funkadelic's "Free Your Ass, And Your Mind Will Follow." The United Sound Studios became the home studio to George Clinton's Parliament-Funkadelic. In the following years George Clinton returned to the studio to record the following "Cosmic Slop" (1973), "Chocolate City" (1974) and Parliament's "Mothership Connection" (1975). In 1985, Aretha Franklin recorded "Who's Zoomin' Who", at the United Sound Studios.

Don Davis established himself as a banker having founded First Independence Bank in 1971. It was the only African American-owned and operated commercial bank in the state of Michigan when it opened. Davis found the banking business taking up more of his time. He eventually grew First Independence to over \$200 million in assets to become the 12<sup>th</sup> largest African American owned bank in the United States. Despite his long

career in the music industry, Davis closed the doors at United Sound Studios in the 1990s.

In 2004 Roger Hood and his wife Aretha purchased the United Sound Studios and reopened the studio on a limited basis until 2008. Hood was a business law instructor at Wayne State Community College. In 2009 Danielle Scott purchased the United Sound Studios. Scott continues to work to restore and promote the historic legacy of the United Sound Studios.

### **Architectural Description**

Originally constructed in 1916 as a private residence, the United Sound Systems building is a large, two-story, brick home that has been expanded and significantly altered to accommodate a recording studio.

Located at 5840 Second Avenue, the building was once typical of a neighborhood in which many houses have since been replaced by larger institutional and commercial buildings. It faces west onto the street, and is situated atop a slight rise from grade level which necessitates several steps on its approaching concrete walkway.

The building is faced with common-bond brick and topped by a hip roof covered in asphalt shingles. Eclectic decorative features include a double, arched dormer with simplified wood pilasters, decorative brackets at the corners of open eaves, stepped chimneys, limestone string courses, and a rectangular brick spandrel between first and second-story windows on the west facade. Rectangular bay windows, clad in wood, project from the north and south face of the building. Three wall chimneys also add texture to the side (north and south) elevations.

Window and door openings have been altered in a manner reflecting the change in use from a residence to a studio. Windows have been replaced with glass block or vinyl windows, or covered with wooden boards. The front door has been replaced with a commercial hollow metal door. A window opening on the west facade of the first floor appears to have been enlarged to accommodate a large, aluminum display window. An original, glazed wood door, flanked by wood sash windows, remains on the second story, but the porch served by this entrance has since been removed. Remaining wooden areas on the west facade are painted blue, while the bay windows are painted grey.

The building was expanded significantly in 1956 when a large addition was constructed. This windowless, concrete block section has a flat roof, the height of its coping matching the eave line of the original building. The walls of this addition are blank except for two roll-up steel doors on the rear (east) elevation. The concrete walls are presently painted a light grey. Prior to the construction of this addition, building permits indicate brick garages constructed in 1917 and 1947.

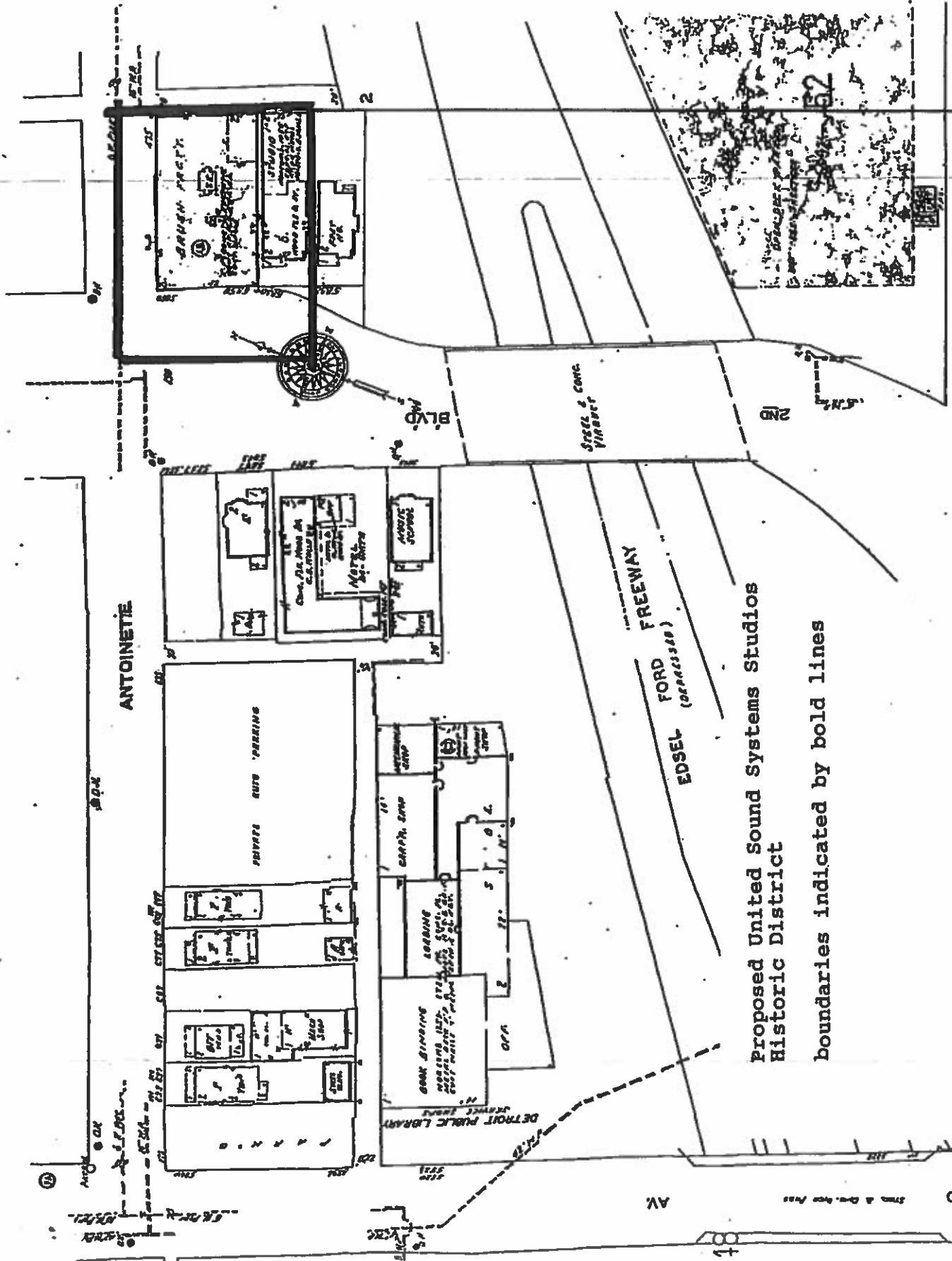
The building occupies most of its site and there is no landscaping. A concrete slab walkway with aluminum railing, sitting on a sixteen-inch concrete block foundation, runs along the northern edge of the building.

## **Criteria**

The proposed historic District appears to meet the first and second criteria contained in Section 25-2-2: (1) Sites, buildings, structures or archeological sites where cultural, social, spiritual, economic, political or architectural history of the community, city, state or nation is particularly reflected or exemplified; (2) Site buildings, structures or archeological site which are identified with historic personages or with important events in community, city, state or national history.

## **Composition of the Historic Designation Advisory Board**

The Historic Designation Advisory Board has nine appointed members and three ex-officio member, all residents of Detroit. The appointed members are: Kwaku Atara, Melanie A. Bazil, Keith A. Dye, Zene' Frances Fogel-Gibson, Edward Francis, Calvin Jackson, Harriet Johnson, Victoria Byrd-Olivier, and Kari Smith. The ex-officio members, who may be represented by members of their staff, are the Director of the Historical Department, the Director of the City Planning Commission, and the Director of the Planning and Development Department. Ad hoc members for this study are Danielle Scott and Joel Batterman.



Proposed United Sound Systems Studios  
 Historic District  
 boundaries indicated by bold lines