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Owners and founders of Wax Trax! Dannie Flesher and Jim Nash were life partners.

JULIA NASH/WAX TRAX! CHICAGO PHOTOS

CHILDREN OF A REVOLUTION

‘Industrial Accident’ doc explores Wax Trax! Records as an LGBTQI+ pioneer

By JESSI ROTI
Chicago Tribune

In a 1990 interview, Wax Trax! Records co-founder Jim Nash said he just wanted to get the music he liked into the spaces he frequented — they just happened to predominantly be gay clubs.

During a “hush hush” era of American sexual and identity politics, Nash and his partner (in life and in business for 27 years) Dannie Flesher opened Wax Trax! Records — first in Denver, Colo., then in Chicago’s Lincoln Park, where it became the preeminent store and label for discovering music from the most exciting acts in punk, rockabilly, disco, new wave and glam rock, as well as the burgeoning “industrial” genre led by Ministry, Front 242, KMFDM, Revolting Cocks, My Life with the Thrill Kill Kult and more.

From 1978 to 1992, the store and label (officially established in ’81) thrived as guided by the pair — providing a place for everyone: nonbinary folks, drag queens, weirdos, punks, goths and rave kids; bands (both homegrown and international), locals and tourists to coexist; never compromising their vision of what pop music could sound like or who was allowed to make it.

Its legacy, as a local institution and popular music cultural touchstone, is far from forgotten. While Nash and Flesher have both passed away due to complications from AIDS, in 1995 and 2010 respectively, the mark they left on Chicago has since been celebrated with a three-day “Retrospectacle” (benefiting Center on Halsted, the largest LGBTQI+ resource nonprofit in the Midwest) at Metro in 2011. Meanwhile,



The original Chicago home of Wax Trax! Records on Lincoln Avenue. The store and label thrived from 1978 to 1992.

The Wax Trax Way

Greg Kot talks about the label's legacy of trusting the artists. **PAGE 7**

the influence of the bands that built the label's roster can be heard across genres and movements from queercore to EDM. Nash's daughter Julia even revived the label's imprint in 2014, 13 years after Wax Trax! officially closed its doors.

Last year, “Industrial Accident: The Story of Wax Trax! Records,” the self-produced documentary film written and directed by Julia Nash and illustrator/partner Mark Skillicorn, aimed to tell the whole history of her father's

oft-chaotic independent music experiment. To tell the most complete story, the first daughter of the city's industrial dance scene pointed the lens at the relationship at the heart of everything.

In just over 94 minutes, the film simultaneously establishes and explodes Wax Trax's and the industrial genre's queer history — while making the case for why it should be further explored and celebrated along the way.

“Wax Trax was a community of people, all kinds of people, who didn't feel

like they belonged or were appreciated, or acknowledged or accepted in other places,” Nash says. “That was what I was hoping would resonate with people throughout the movie; the vibe of family — my dad, that store, that label, it welcomed everybody. The gay community, I think it was just along the same lines of they were outcasts. Any of these little subsets were outcasts, and they all found a comfortable place and a home at Wax Trax! It just so happens these two guys were gay. A lot of people found that out in the movie.”

Built on a love of early nonconformist acts like David Bowie, T. Rex and Roxy Music and transgressive cult films like those by writer/director John Waters, Jim Nash and Flesher created much more than what Metro owner Joe Shanahan once called “the marketplace for the disenfranchised.”

For LGBTQI+ music fans and culture consumers, Nash and Flesher's Wax Trax! was an alternative world within the much harsher confines of the Midwest — free from stereotypes and predefined expectations or expressions of sexuality and gender.

During Wax Trax's prominence, what was thought of as “mainstream” gay culture was dominated by inoffensive, commercial pop from groups like Culture Club and Wham! Disco was on its way out (at least with the straight, white men controlling the music industry), and the most subversive tunes — made by queer black and brown artists and those abroad — were further relegated to the underground. Freedoms, and therefore consequences that came with being “out” seemed reserved for

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Fab Four's northern songs hit the North Side



YOUNGRAE KIM/FOR THE CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Becky Menzie plays the piano during a performance of “Re-Imagine the Beatles” with Tom Michael at Davenport's Piano Bar in Wicker Park.



RICK KOGAN
Sidewalks

The first time I saw the Beatles, on a September night in 1964 at the International Ampitheater, I could not hear the Beatles.

Even though we — my 12-year-old self, younger brother, our father and our 13-year-old friend/neighbor Mary Bauler — were three rows from the stage, the screaming and frenzy and vocal hysteria of those in the audience was all that we could hear.

Still, it was fun and obviously

memorable. But sadly, I never saw the Beatles together in person again. I finally did hear them of course, again and again and again, so frequently that, like many with whom I share a generation, they are a major part of the soundtrack of my life.

The last time I heard the Beatles was a couple of weeks ago when pianist/vocalist Beckie Menzie and singer Tom Michael played for me a couple of samples of what they would be performing in their ambitious new show, “Re-Imagine The Beatles,” Saturdays during April at Davenport's Cabaret, 1383 N. Milwaukee Ave. (davenportspianobar.com).

This pair has been collaborating for 20 years, creating themed

shows tackling all manner of music, composers and performers. One of my favorites was 2017's “The Highs and Lows of Musical Duos,” exploring the relationships of such musical pairs as Simon & Garfunkel, Steve Lawrence and Eydie Gorme, The Carpenters, Fred and Adele Astaire.

But they are far from some by-the-numbers cover band. They dig deep to interpret songs and pepper their performances with stories. Their work is innovative and fresh.

Says Menzie: “I do like risk. I don't like performers who phone it in. I really have a disdain for that, though I see how easy it can

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Wax Trax legacy: Trust the artists



GREG KOT
Tribune music critic

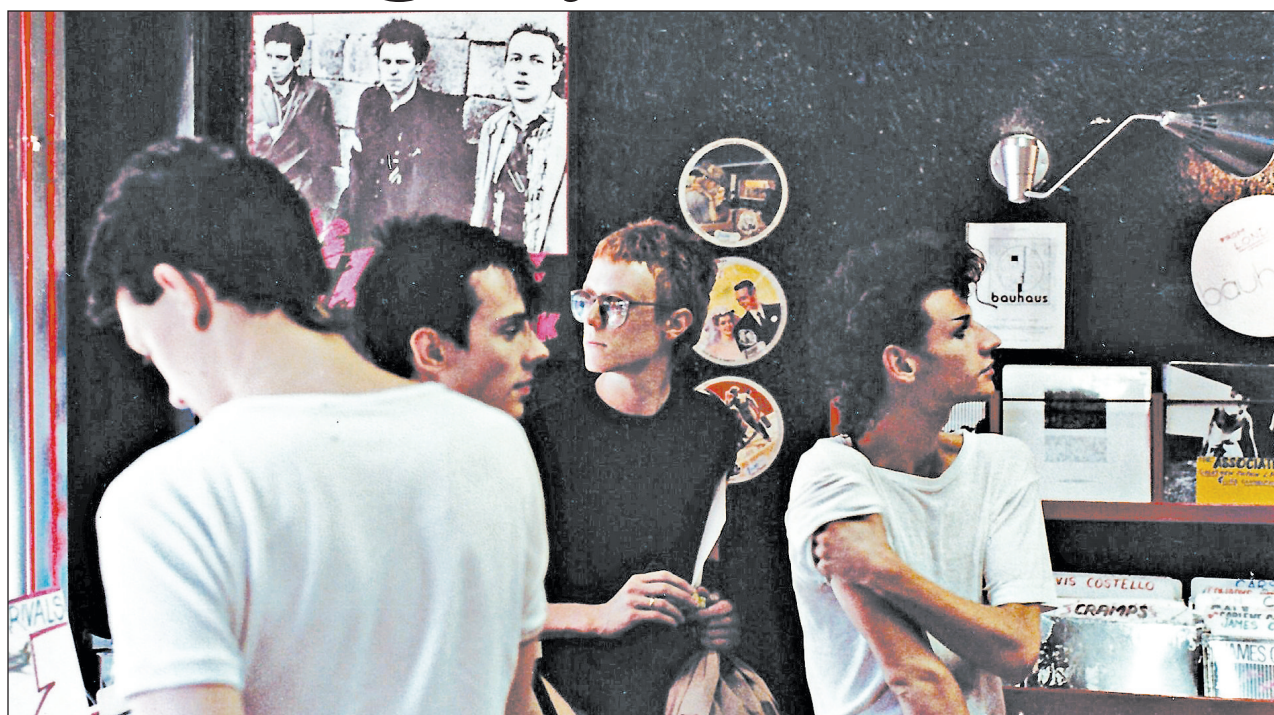
Jim Nash was one of those people who always seemed to be up to something, a wicked smile or a wry joke always in his pocket. He was a music fan who became a music enabler, a “yes” man to countless bands. He was a businessman who hated business. For more than a decade he ran the Wax Trax record store and label with the same free-form, rule-breaking creativity he admired in his artists.

Nash and his partner, Dannie Flesher, a loyal and levelheaded confidante, are key players in the era documented by “Industrial Accident: The Story of Wax Trax! Records,” directed and produced by Nash’s daughter, Julia Nash. They share screen time with the artists, employees and scene regulars that were part of the community they helped build in Chicago during the late ’70s and ’80s.

But an even deeper story lies in the margins of the movie, one that has nothing to do with economic imperatives such as products, risk-reward oversight and bottom-line management. It is above all a story of trust — the trust that Nash and Flesher put in their artists to create something out of nothing.

Beyond music that bred or influenced more commercially successful acts, from the transgressive industrial thump of Nine Inch Nails and Marilyn Manson to the brawling big-beat rave music of the Prodigy and the Chemical Brothers, the Wax Trax founders shaped a radical business model — not that they ever thought of the label as anything as conventional as a business.

Instead, they suggested that label owners needed to be as creative as their artists, as open to new ideas for marketing and distribution as their bands were to reinventing sound and rhythm. Though there was nothing to suggest that Ministry or Front 242 would build an international audience when Wax Trax began releasing their recordings, Nash and Flesher put their



JULIA NASH/WAX TRAX! CHICAGO

English goth group Bauhaus at Wax Trax! Records. They were well-known in Chicago before they even arrived for their first show because Jim Nash imported the band’s early singles.

artists first. They took financial risks because they not only trusted the music, but their own artistic instincts.

They were often denigrated as “bad businessmen,” but in reality they just had a different conception of business than many of their peers. Just as they gravitated toward artists who didn’t cater to mainstream convention, Nash and Flesher didn’t believe that the business of music required them to carry a briefcase, sit behind a desk with an accounting ledger and play by traditional corporate rules. It was not a formula designed to ensure them lasting wealth or comfort, but what would’ve been the fun in that?

In contrast to the collegial and often chaotic approach to life and art that guided Nash and Flesher, “Industrial Accident” is a relatively straightforward documentary of a vital chapter in music history, one that turned a creative haven for Chicago misfits into a subculture that resonated worldwide. The documentary does not turn away from uncomfortable truths: Nash’s breakup with his wife and family to make a new life with Flesher, his eventual self-inflicted bankruptcy, the struggle with AIDS that eventually killed him, at age 47, in 1995 (Flesher died at age 57 in 2010). But this is less a eulogy than a celebration of the music and the aesthetic

Nash and Flesher nurtured.

The Wax Trax bands took a punk-rock approach to largely machine-driven sounds that combined elements of underground dance and electronic music, rock and the avant-garde. Some dubbed it “industrial disco,” an umbrella term that included Ministry, Front 242, Underworld, KMFDM, and My Life With the Thrill Kill Kult, underground acts who didn’t sound anything alike but went on to sell millions of records, in part because they carried the Wax Trax seal of approval. Though much of the music sounded ominous, dark, it also contained raging humor — sometimes playfully camp, sometimes politically charged.

Yet as gleefully innovative as some of Wax Trax’s music could be, the legacy of the Nash-Flesher partnership speaks to something even more profound amid the greed-is-good ’80s. As skeptical — and sometimes downright cynical — as Nash in particular could be, his love of music and the people who made it was genuine. He gravitated toward the misfits because he himself felt like one. And, above all, he was always a fan, which is why before there was a label, there was a record store.

Like a cherished few Chicago whims that became institutions, the Wax Trax store on Lincoln Ave-

nue was an island for misfit toys, a sanctuary in a city that at the time was largely inhospitable to the weird and the marginalized.

When out-of-towners looking for something left-of-center visited Chicago in the late ’70s or early ’80s, they inevitably were directed to the store and its wall to wall array of posters, records, band fliers and TV sets playing the latest videos by Cabaret Voltaire or Throbbing Gristle. It was like “we had entered this camp, gay enclave in the middle of this tough city,” says David J of British goth-rockers Bauhaus, one of the interview subjects in “Industrial Accident.”

Bauhaus arrived in Chicago at Nash’s behest, and would play its first Chicago show at Tut’s in 1980. Even though it hadn’t yet released its first album, Bauhaus was already well-known to Wax Trax clientele because Nash had imported its early singles. The store became the Midwest’s primary conduit for all things cutting edge, and in turn turned its customers into a community. At a time when European imports trickled into America from labels such as 4AD and Factory, Nash made his store the one place you could not only hear the music on a rolling soundtrack that blared from the speakers and TV monitors situated amid or above the stacks of merchandise, but buy it.

The stock included Joy Division’s “Love Will Tear us Apart” single or Public Image Ltd.’s “metal box” album, housed in a movie film canister, as well as “oldies” that spoke just as eloquently to Nash’s taste in the unconventional: a rare single by rockabilly wild man Hasil Adkins, a New York Dolls bootleg, colored vinyl from German art-rockers Can.

Nash didn’t think of himself as tastemaker so much as a ringleader, the guy who made things happen, and then stood back and enjoyed the party he had created out of nothing. He could be found vacuuming the store in the morning, and bantering with customers about the merits of the latest Slits EP behind the counter in the afternoon. Flesher was the guy who kept things running while Nash was plotting his next anti-social outrage, whether it was signing drag-queen Divine or giving Al Jourgensen an unlimited studio budget to create a multitude of side projects and spin offs from his main gig as Ministry’s marauding wild man.

It was not a logical way to run a business, and ended with Nash’s rags-to-riches artists leaving the label for even more riches when the major labels dangled big-money contracts and wider distribution. It’s telling that most of the bands interviewed in the movie who recorded for

the label later bailed on Nash for the majors and often took their back catalogs with them.

But Nash believed in complete creative freedom for his artists, including the right to leave at any time. Trust was a concept in short supply at the time, especially for an industry that had built a multi-billion-dollar business by exploiting artists. Any \$300-an-hour lawyer would’ve told Nash and Flesher they were nuts. Instead, they treated the Wax Trax artists and bands as friends, co-conspirators, fellow mischief makers, rather than employees.

Nash and Flesher were trusting, but they were not naive. They didn’t see Wax Trax as their ticket to a mansion on the hill. Instead, they lived in apartments filled with records and offbeat artifacts, much like the record store they ran. “The plan was there wasn’t any plan,” Nash once said in a Tribune interview. “We weren’t going after the Bananaramas of the day. The music we liked, it’s not exactly pleasing.”

That it ended up appealing to as many people as it did was a surprise. A year before he died, Nash wasn’t lamenting the label’s bankruptcy. He was still processing the notion that it had lasted as long as it did.

“I’m kind of proud and embarrassed at the same time,” he said. “One part of me says anybody could do this. If I could do it, anybody could. Dannie and I have been so close to it, it never seemed like any big deal.”

But it was. The Nash-Flesher legacy was more than the music. It was about the attitude that made the music possible.

As Chris Connelly, a key musical contributor on countless Wax Trax releases, once said of them, “Their willingness to take chances, nurture acts, and not worry about the business aspect was crucial. Yes, you could call it bad business for a label to be run this way if you view music as a product. But that’s not how they thought of it. And that’s why it lasted as long as it did and produced the music it did.”

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Wax Trax

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those in New York and L.A. At the same time media and government hysteria over the impending AIDS crisis and faux moral outrage surrounding what was considered a “deviant lifestyle choice” were enough to keep everyone else closeted.

“It’s just honesty, you know? The whole thing is honest,” Nash continues, discussing “Industrial Accident’s” direct framing of part of her family’s history. “And, to be completely transparent on the whole gay culture/AIDS — again, to really embrace that and discuss that in the movie, there are so many levels and different stories throughout this film, you couldn’t — we simply could not, we had to stay focused on this particular flow that we had. You could go right into the early ’80s and the ’90s with the AIDS epidemic, and I wanted to, and originally we had different footage — but eventually it was like ‘Look, we all know what happened. Why do we need to re-educate? This is the facts.’ ”

Instead, she let those who were there do the talking.

In the film, former employee Steve Knutson says, “Being an out, gay couple at that time where they lived in Kansas and Denver was a big deal. And they didn’t apologize for it, they didn’t hide from it ... They didn’t care what anybody thought.”

Nash’s ex-wife, Jeanne Payne — with whom he remained close until his death, also appears

throughout.

“I really thought he was having an affair with this girl who was hanging around all the time,” Payne says in the documentary. “Turns out he was having an affair, it just went a little differently.

“He was acknowledging something in himself that he had a difficult time accepting, and didn’t want to change his life because of the life we had. We were happy,” she continues. “But the two of them fell in love, and you can’t choose who you fall in love with.”

“At times during making this, and during the editing process, I’d like sometimes ‘Would my dad be upset if I said this, or showed this, or played this?’ ” Julia Nash recounts. “No, maybe, I don’t know? But this is part of the story, this is what it’s about, you know? I wanted to hear the good, the bad, the ugly. This isn’t all rainbows and roses. There was some heavy s--- going on, talk about it.”

From its first pressing, a 7” release of John Waters’ muse, drag icon Divine’s debut “Born to Be Cheap,” to distributing what’s widely considered the first AIDS benefit single state-side — British experimental duo Coil’s 1985 drastically-rearranged cover of Ed Cobb’s “Tainted Love” — the label always had a focus toward visceral anti-assimilationism, whether intentional or not.

As noted in Yetta Howard’s “The Queerness of Industrial Music,” many of the bands that made up the Wax Trax roster furthered that point-of-view through splicing instrumentation (sometimes made *without* actual instruments) with rudimentary, disruptive

“Wax Trax was a community of people, all kinds of people, who didn’t feel like they belonged or were appreciated, or acknowledged or accepted in other places.”

— Jim Nash, co-founder

technology — deepening its musical ambiguity and incongruity. Embracing their very real social status as “outcasts” and unapologetically creating from the “sexual minoritarian experience,” as further cited, at the heart of the subculture they identified with — a new electronic expression was formed.

Taboos and stigmas around sex, fetish, religion and lack thereof, love and pain? Not here.

“Trash! Culture!” laughs My Life With the Thrill Kill Kult’s Franke Nardiello aka Groovie Mann on the elements driving the band’s production at the time. “This was all pre-internet, computers and iPhones! You’d move to the city to search out others like you or go out. Dannie and Jim, they were like brothers or parents to me — not gay icons. But when you get the gay sensibilities, when you come out, it can become a shared thing with others, like a language. It’s part of creativity for some, but not the basis. That freedom, in anyway, is inspiring.”

Nardiello met Nash and Flesher when he was 21 after moving to the city from Rockford; attending Columbia College and playing in the band Special Affect with Al Jourgensen (before his days in Ministry). While still underage,

he frequented Dugan’s Bistro — a gay dance club in River North famous for a drag queen known as the Bearded Lady — only to be thrown out by the police.

But those experiences, which he’s described as “whole rooms flashing,” opened up his world. By the time he teamed up with Buzz McCoy (Marston Daley) in the late ’80s to establish TKK, the pair had honed their brand of avant-garde, industrialized disco that shook the status quo — marrying satirical Satanic obsession, psychosexual lyrical exploration and overt BDSM, leather daddy iconography with beats and riffs that interpolated the likes of Chic and lauded “camp” films like “Mommie Dearest.”

“Queer?” Nardiello questions. “There wasn’t so much clarity then with sexuality, no one cared really. (Jim and Dannie) were just cool guys and whatever they did was their biz.

“I mean I sorta model my years that way, in terms of finding a partner to work with,” he continues. “It was cool that there was a collective of people who shared similar music and interests in turning others onto new finds, too. (Wax Trax and the music) played equal parts in sort of helping close the gap between

people that were hung up.”

Also an employee of the store, he reiterates the sense of community Nash and Flesher fostered — especially as an alternative to the Boystown scene.

“Boystown had its own problems,” he sighs. “No one hung out in that scene, though — they accepted clones and jocky types, didn’t like freaks or hippie weirdos. Now it’s better, but I live in West Hollywood,” he laughs.

“I honor (Dannie and Jim) for many reasons, and believing in me,” Nardiello continues. “They both always backed me in expressing my ideas at the store in the beginning, pre-label. They launched me; helped me find who I am today, *naturally*. I think their belief in the things we all loved, music, proved that it generated a unity.”

After a few bad business deals, major labels signing Wax Trax artists to real contracts instead of handshake-agreements, and a sonic (arguably followed by an aligning social) trend toward hetero-masculinist, more explicitly violent industrial rock and nu-metal led by Nine Inch Nails, Tool, Marilyn Manson — even Korn, the lingering, early subversion of the pioneering generation’s more dance-minded tracks was once again out of fashion.

Today, in an *almost* full-circle way, storied gay nightclub Berlin — which used to partner with the label to host release parties and special events — is the only local spot in the city that offers a recurring party exclusively dedicated to the Wax Trax! catalog and artists inspired by it. Resident DJ Greg Haus started

the party with fellow resident Jena Max over a decade ago, and wrote about what Wax Trax! meant to him as he came into his own sexuality for National Coming Out Day in 2017.

“I truly believe that Wax Trax! being owned by a gay couple (Jim Nash and Dannie Flesher), and all of the out, queer, and gender nonconforming artists like TKK, Coil, etc. populating the label I loved made me feel comfortable with my sexuality in a way that mainstream LGBT culture simply couldn’t at the time,” Haus writes.

“If it wasn’t for that, I might not have had the strength to be honest about myself with my parents until years later. Jim and Dannie were out, but their ‘gayness’ didn’t define them. It was just a fact of life, which is the way it should be,” he continues. “It’s part of the reason the music and the store have such profound, personal meaning for me. Even now I work in a creative environment and still gravitate towards modern music and art that can inspire the next generation of queer weirdos to feel like they have a community when the mainstream might not speak to them.”

Haus thanked Wax Trax for being his “icon of hope,” adding, “even if you never wanted to be.”

The soundtrack to “Industrial Accident: The Story of Wax Trax! Records” was included as a Special Record Store Day release and will be available in limited quantities at local record shops beginning Saturday.

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