

# Everybody Needs a Safe Place: An Interview with Damon Percy

CLAUDE CHASTAGNER

*About Damon Percy.* This interview with Damon “Magic” Percy was conducted online on April 21, 2023. Cultural historian, poet, and activist Damon “Magic” Percy is a member of LGBT Detroit and the founder of the Club Heaven Sound System project, an organization partnering with the Detroit Sound Conservancy to restore the club’s sound system. Club Heaven was a legendary Black LGBT after-hours club in Detroit active from 1984 through 1994.

CHASTAGNER. Damon, can you tell us about your involvement in Detroit’s music scene, and in the Detroit Sound Conservancy project? You are a journalist, a writer, and a poet, so what is the connection between writing and preserving the history of Detroit’s music?

PERCY. I went to Wayne State University here in Detroit, Michigan and got my B.A. in journalism. I was an entertainment journalist for a number of years. Then I started working for the legendary gospel group the Clark Sisters and with a buddy, we created the first gospel website and fan club back in 2000. We traveled with them for a decade, I think I stopped in 2012. At the time we were with them, people didn’t understand their impact, but every single group since mimics their runs and patterns. But there is resurgence, it is starting to happen.

I’ve always worked in the community. I was a member of the first House here, the House of Charles, before ballrooms started. Our first balls were in

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1997. It was kind of a fashion house, based on a New York aesthetic, Malcom McLaren woolen knitwear 1992-93 type of presentations. I was around 20, and I always had in mind that people needed to see us and not just go by what stereotypes were presented.

During that time, we didn't have any true safe spaces, centers, or organizations that helped people get along in the black queer community. We were always in survival mode. Consequently, people were not really thinking about preservation, it was just, "OK, something has opened, let's go there." It would get popular, then the owners, who were usually white men, would double the rent. I worked for club 1X in the early 2000s, we were the biggest hip-hop/house club in the Midwest. We would have around 1,000 people every Saturday. But the owners only saw money, they weren't concerned about us. Then, clubs closed, and people didn't open more spaces, and the scene moved into something else... A lot of it has to do with the music. My generation was old-school hip-hop, but we went to dance to house music. As they started playing more hip-hop, nobody came to mentor the younger generation and tell them to create house music spaces so when they get to a certain age, they have somewhere to go. Right now, we only have a couple of places. Our bar, the Woodward, burned down last year. It was the oldest [gay] bar in the State of Michigan. We had been going there for the last two decades, it was a staple of the community. People panicked of course, but the owner was able to purchase another bar, it opened a few weeks ago. But the communal aspect, the place where everybody goes, is gone... When I started going out back in the 1990s, there were places to go every night. The lesbians had their own bars, with their own DJs. Club Heaven was an after-hours place, and I was only 18, so I couldn't go there. They would check your ID, and I was still trying to be a good kid. When I turned 21, I could really go everywhere. We had clubs like Time Square, the Continental, the Famous Door, Club Zipper's on Broadway East, Club Splash... There was somewhere to go every night, that's how everybody stayed in shape! I would be on the dance floor for maybe two or three hours.

CHASTAGNER. What kind of music did they play?

PERCY. It was house music, and a lot of gospel house, with vocals, and then the remixes came out, in the early 1990s, when house music became more mainstream, and on the charts, with Crystal Waters, and CeCe Peniston, and Ten City. House and techno. Mostly house. The rave parties used to have more techno music. Our clubs had more of the black house, the gospel artists, the

tribal beats. Techno had more of a thin sound; house was more “boom boom,” and somebody wailing over the track.

The artists would come to Club Heaven, and play the music there first, the DJ would play a new song by so and so, and the record company would be there, trying to see the response. They would always start a lot of this music here first. Chicago had their own stuff, with Frankie Knuckles, who created the way things sounded in the club. Just imagine, you’re in a room, and in each corner, the speakers are pointing towards you, like a kind of surrounding sound, your eyelashes would be vibrating, your whole body would be pulsing. The sound was loud, but it wouldn’t hurt your ears, it was rather like a huge wall of sound because of all those speakers. Everybody wanted to dance and be in the spotlight. That sound brought people. Madonna used to come here, and Dennis Robin. One weekend, Madonna was on tour, but then she went missing. She was at the club, it was on the news! I told my parents I saw her and a couple of dancers, they were just there, dancing...

CHASTAGNER. Would you say it was easier to dance on house than on techno?

PERCY. Yes, because it’s a different feeling, I can dance to techno as well, but sometimes techno gets very repetitive, it starts to sound like one giant track, and after a while... Whereas with house music, you are always on the 1, on the 3, and all these different layers. You get a drum layer, then you might have some strings, some extra background vocals, and the DJ is mixing something else. With house, you can have a whole *a cappella*, an instrumental track, and mix them. With techno, you can’t really do that, it’s just one thing. But with house, you can take an *a cappella* song and put your own heavy beat on it and make a track. So yes, it is easier.

CHASTAGNER. How did you reconcile your love for house music, gospel, and techno, with hip-hop? Did you get into hip-hop at all?

PERCY. Oh yes, I was always into it. They started playing it in the clubs, more than house music. The generation under me wanted to present an image, this toughness, this whole masculine thing. It shifted around 1996, I remember that because I went to one of the first black Prides, in Washington DC, with my House. We dressed really avant-garde, and at that time, the men had started wearing the hip-hop wear, Timberland boots, baggy clothes and all the

stuff. So, they're looking at us, almost like "oh you're letting people know that we are gay..." and I'm like, "honey, we're two thousand people."

CHASTAGNER. What kind of relationship did you have with the hip-hop community?

PERCY. It was not antagonistic, but in the 90s, it was illegal to be gay, so if you decided to be authentic in those spaces, you were presenting something that others couldn't be or were afraid to be. You're angry because you can't do that, or you haven't gotten to the space where you can do it... I was in my early 20s, in college, I was like "forget it, I'm not gonna be unhappy." But some guys wouldn't deal with you if you didn't look like them or dress like them, if you looked obvious to people, because they thought they would be found out. And in the clubs a lot of them weren't dancing. The hip-hop videos were all on dance, but people would just sit around, and pose.

Today, the equivalent artists are very visible, they are really in-your-face, and I love it! I have a friend who passed away two years ago. He was a tall, slim guy, six feet tall, very androgynous, and did music with some of the soul singers, doing their clothes. The first time I met him, he was wearing boots and a cat suit...! Because he was so himself, you didn't think about it, you just saw him, and it was "oh, that's Mitchy." When people who are not themselves try to do that, you can tell that they're not comfortable. You have to be very comfortable, and very secure, to be in-your-face the way these artists are now.

CHASTAGNER. But at the time you're talking about, were there many black gay people who dared be themselves and in-your-face in that way?

PERCY. No, and it was part of the thing with our House. They brought me out of my shell. Because I was raised in a middle-class home, I went to church and I was a bookworm, so I never thought to wear a crop top, for example. But at the House, they were just saying, "try this on and see how you feel, here's a satin shirt, here are some boots, some shorts." Every Tuesday, it was show night at the Grand Quarters with female impersonators, dancers, and I got to dance behind my gay mother wearing these clothes! But people who see me now, an older professional, they can't put that in their heads! People who knew me at the time, they know I used to be naked a lot!

Had my friend worked on his career more, he would definitely be one of the artists that we see, because he made all his clothes, and he was a singer, and he was like that at the time, he helped me be myself. But don't try to be

us, if you're not there yet. We're here to support you when you're ready to be a little freer, to wear a little sheer shirt or something. This is what creates the division in our community. Some black people, when they see others who are in-your-face, and living out loud like that, want the world to see black people as masculine but when they find out someone who, like them, is gay, then it's a whole issue: "you can't be gay, you don't act gay!", but what is that?

CHASTAGNER. This is precisely what is being debated right now -- Can you be masculine and gay? -- don't you think?

PERCY. Yes, these questions are being debated, and they're being asked because people are starting to see the entire spectrum of the community. You know, for the longest time, we were presented in the media and sometimes even in literature, as either the comic relief, or the hideous and violent transsexuals, the loud gay boys. But if you see someone who looks like Michael B. Jordan, and you find out that he likes men, then you are threatened, because that is someone that you desire. You see, as long as you don't desire me, you don't care what I do. As long as I'm not threatening your sensibility, or what you want, it doesn't matter. And it's not that everybody has to go out and say I'm this, I'm that... Nothing anybody does is anybody's business, how they live, how they exist. There is an entire spectrum, more than just gays, or lesbians... Now, you have polyamorous relationships, you have the leather community, you have all these types of things, TV shows like *Sister Wives* [about a polygamist family], but it's OK if you are straight.

CHASTAGNER. When did things start to change, when did we start seeing different types of TV shows, and artists coming out?

PERCY. The turning point was the early 2000s when a lot of Black filmmakers created great movies, and there was *Paris is Burning*, that really exploded and showed that whole scene. That was the first things I saw. I was 18 or 19, and I went "oh, this is us!" In the 1990s, it was all about acting normal on TV. But in the early 2000s, people started wondering if certain black and hip-hop artists were gay... But as a journalist, for instance, I could not let them know that I was gay...

CHASTAGNER. Why not, what would have happened?

PERCY. I could not have interviewed people, they would have cut me out, because there was the possibility I would run and tell what I saw. When I was at college, I would go to do interviews, I would go to big events, music conferences, and I thought “oh this is it, they are themselves there!” With everybody now recording you every 10 seconds, you can’t pretend anymore. Before, you could. The Internet was just growing so it wasn’t as bad, but now, if they are seeing you with somebody who they might think is... that’s a whole story for a week! Even if you are affectionate with a family member, or somebody who works with you! It is exhausting!

CHASTAGNER. How did you cope with the homophobic lyrics in hip-hop music at the time?

PERCY. You know, when I would hear them, I would just go “oh wow.” I was used to black men talking like that, that’s what it was in the neighborhood. My brother’s friends, that’s how they were, that’s how they spoke. I didn’t take it personally at that time. Now it’s more aggressive, they talk about their personal beliefs, they write songs about how they feel, what they think. But at that time, it was about how the community at large felt. They were not attacking me, they were just saying what other people said. They were not threatening death to me, just saying “I don’t want you sissies around me” or whatever. If you’re threatening death or harm on me, that’s different. It was still wrong, but I did not take that personally. Besides, it wasn’t as often as people make it out to be. I never ever heard LL Cool J or Slick Rick, Big Daddy Kane, De La Soul say a thing... And when N.W.A., or Ice Cube started to allude to it, at that point, it was all about fags, and bitches, and hoes, so it was like everybody was saying it. Now the artists see the power of our community taking them down. Lil Baby, after what he said on stage, hasn’t been able to get any good press. They have to be careful, it is a business.

CHASTAGNER. And what about the Church? Did they give you any support?

PERCY. No... I grew up in the Baptist Church, that’s a staple of the black community, I was never approached, or touched, or groomed by anybody there. I went to Church with my family, was singing in the choir, did all the stuff... It wasn’t until I was actually an adult that I saw that culture. The whole rhetoric, the damnation, always. I’ve been in churches where the entire sermon was about homosexuality, and I thought “why are we spending the hour talking about this?” I’ve had issues with my mother because she’s rooted in

that. She's better now because we've had long talks. My relationship is with the Lord.

CHASTAGNER. Did you ever feel you wanted to reject the Church, and leave it behind you?

PERCY. Oh, I stopped going. I was going regularly and then once I started working for the Clark Sisters, I got burned out, with all the traveling. I didn't feel that I needed to go, and I still really don't. I don't get up on Sundays to listen to these men, you know, because the people who speak aloud are doing the most. You point your finger at me, but I can guarantee you somebody in this community has been approached by you or involved with you a certain way. That was always my fear, that if I did something with someone in the Church, then they would get in the pulpit and blame me... I've seen that happen, I've seen them get up and blame people.

CHASTAGNER. Did they actually tell names?

PERCY. Yeah, sometimes they do that because it takes it off from them. They say, "the devil got a hold on me and put this spirit on me and brought this person to our church to make me do blah blah blah, and he is sitting right there..." and you don't know if somebody is going to kill themselves after that. They think that homosexuality is the only sin, I just don't understand that. You look at the Scriptures, and if you look closely, there are 40 or 50 other things listed that should not be done. And I believe that the black Church, and not just the Catholic Church, is covering up their sins quicker than anybody, and better than anybody. Because it is always about sexuality. When a pastor gets a congregant pregnant, they blame her, "she seduced him," "she is fast," you know... The black Church will pimp you out for your musical ability, your talents, all of that stuff, and toss you away. You see so many musicians who passed on, who have created sounds for the Church, and they don't honor they legacies.

CHASTAGNER. Did you have different sets of friends, some from Church, and others to go out with, to clubs, etc., or was it overlapping to some extent?

PERCY. It started to overlap when I was 24. I had a friend who was a musician, and I introduced him to all of this music, because I love all types of music. And he was just finding himself. I would take him out, and we are still

like family, after 28 years now... And the others were aware of who we were, but there wasn't ever a conversation, because it did not have to be. It was like "OK, this is Damon," and I think this is what people miss, when they find out about your sexuality, they make it all about sex. You know what I mean? My best friend and I, we used to go to church together and then we stopped. I didn't tell my mother, she's like "you go to church?" and I go "hm hm..."

CHASTAGNER. What about the other communities in Detroit? Is there, for instance, a large Latinx community? Did they play a role in the development of house music?

PERCY. Yes, Southwest Detroit is the Latinx community, one of the biggest in the nation.

CHASTAGNER. Do you mix with them?

PERCY. Yes, I go to their part of town, and one of the white gay bars would have a Latin night, for them to come. We have the largest Caribbean population in the United States, and Dearborn, Michigan has the largest Muslim population... when the 9/11 towers were blown up, two of the gentlemen came here to hide with their families. We also have a large Polish population, in Hamtramck, Michigan, which is connected to the city. It is actually where the new gay bar is. We have everybody, in different parts, but the way Detroit is, you can get to any part of the city in less in 30 minutes. In Detroit, everybody works together.

CHASTAGNER. What kind of music is being played today in these clubs. Is it still house and techno?

PERCY. Detroit being one of the leaders, we have clubs that play house music all week, every night if you want to go dancing. We have so many DJs here, like Stacey Hale. All these legendary people are getting these spots ... There are places where they have days when they play house music only, for my age group, the house music we played in the 1990s up to 2000. The younger generation, they hate it! They like house now because of *Renaissance* [Beyoncé's 2022 album]; before, they would say "uncle (they call me uncle), how can you dance on that?," but as soon as that album came out... and that's why I say that album is a love letter to the black gay community. When I first heard the beat, I thought "this shows me love." What she said [about her gay



uncle and the queer community at the 2023 Grammy Award ceremony] is very impactful, she said it on the biggest stage in the known world, in the whole world, not just during an interview that we share. And I went “wow!” because in terms of visibility, the black artists, and black queer people, always are forgotten. And it’s up to the people who are left to keep their legacies alive. [Many] artists who are still around ... got stolen. Kevin Aviance, a legend in the community, says that he’s back touring because of her, they got contacted, and given this check...

CHASTAGNER. How does it work? Beyoncé makes a statement, she acknowledges and thanks the queer community, but then, concretely, how are all these people impacted?

PERCY. It brings awareness to the community that she’s speaking of. When people write about the artists that she’s worked with, they go research them, they go listen to the music that she used, and generally it takes you down a rabbit hole... If you go to listen to two or three songs, if you go to YouTube, Spotify, or Pandora, you get a list of 20 or 30 songs ... She’s the biggest star on the planet, practically, so anything she says... If she takes the time to honor her uncle whom she watched fight, during my generation, and if kids see that, it sets examples. She’s always had those elements in her videos and music. The “Get Me Bodied” video shows two trans girls dancing with her dancers, and it’s little things like that that the community sees, and they think “wait a minute, that’s one of the girls! They’re doing the voguing like you!” So much stuff is secret in the community, that when it’s out, you wonder “OK, is it being stolen, or appropriated, or is it being respected and honored?” She’s honoring these people by paying them. Ts Madison said she would never work again with Beyoncé if she did not want to, but she got that check, and she thought “wait a minute... this is Beyoncé’s check,” you know what I mean?

It impacts the people because they have to acknowledge that what she is saying is true. It opens doors, because people say, “if these people were doing this back then, let’s see what these people are doing now.”

Somebody like Lil Nas X, when he switched and came out, people went “wow!” because he just did it, he just put a post out... At first, I just thought “oh, good for him” then I thought “damn, he didn’t care.” And his tour was just like a big gay party. He opened here in Detroit first, and it was spectacular because I never thought that I would see in my lifetime somebody on that level, that successful. I’ve seen this ceiling that we can’t get past because of the phobias, and societal norms, and the industry saying you have to be this

way or that to be successful. The best example of that is Billy Porter. I heard his first album in 1997, that's how I was introduced to him. And I followed his career, and the series *Pose* [in which Billy Porter plays] really shifted everything. I tell everybody, if you ever want to know how I grew up in this community, watch *Pose*. Damon – it was me. I cried every week, because like I said, I grew up in a House and Blanca, my gay mother, is a Florida diva. She's one of the top impersonators in this country, and she works for the M.A.C. Cosmetics complex, they moved her from here to there to do that. We've had a relationship for 31 years, since I was 20 or 19. Even the part that hurts in *Pose*, like when Pray Tell's family turns on him, is the kind of things that happened all the time, and that's why it was so real. And that opened up how people saw us. It's authentic. If you don't want to like it, you don't have to like it, but you need to respect it.

And then a white artist may be trying to create the same moment, but you can't because it's not authentic. You can create the same beat, the same costume, the same type of video, but it doesn't work, because it doesn't come from the same place. You are just trying to capitalize on something. You may take the language, you may take all the dancers and all the moves, but you don't honor them. You may have a stage full of gay dancers, but if they don't matter to you...

CHASTAGNER. I was wondering, if you are in touch with younger people, what do they tell you? Are they more confident, more secure, less frightened than 30 years ago?

PERCY. Absolutely, absolutely. I work here with an agency, LGBT Detroit, and I've been with them since the beginning. It used to be a magazine, and I was the youngest then, they were 9 or 10 years older than me, so these people are my mentors. My gay dad helped me along, but now, I'm the elder. I tell people who are in their 20s and early 30s – these artists, the stuff that you are seeing, it just wasn't possible before. Now you can go to any format in the world and see someone who looks like you... None of that existed 30 years ago, nothing! They are fighting for our rights.

During the Trump era, we had to fight more. I was frightened when he got into office, because I didn't know what was going to happen. I didn't know if it was going to be like a race war, or if they were going to come out and just try to kill us because he told them to. They tried to kidnap my governor and kill her because she's been the biggest supporters for our rights here, she signed so many bills for us to be safe. For instance, I can't be fired at work

anymore if they found out that I'm gay. In fact, I'm out here. But the Trump people don't believe in that. Some younger people understand that they have to keep fighting in the trenches, because now people are back where if you don't fit a masculine standard, then you are gay. I am affectionate with my heterosexual male friends, all the time. Most of us have been friends since we were 13, we went to high school together. They don't care!

CHASTAGNER. Do you think we still need safe places?

PERCY. Yes, we always need safe places. People carry around so much trauma, and they project that on the people who are living authentically, living out. They are angry, they call out all the gay boys, to make us react to them. So, everybody needs safe spaces, because if I'm going to a space, I do not want to think about what could happen. With the Internet, death threats, the most heinous, horrible things... so much of that can actually affect you. It is dangerous. So, you want to go to where you have your own people, you want to go where you are affirmed, and celebrated, not tolerated. You want a space where you can go and be uplifted for who you are.

People are finding themselves younger. I was not out at 14, but these kids, they are out at 13 or 14. When I was their age, I was wondering, "am I really gay, what's going on?" I had my first boyfriend at 15, and we are still friends and we still talk about that. How did we even find each other? My first love. When we went to college, we agreed to pretend. But it did not work for me, it did not last long, I could not. He's a professor now. We met again a couple of years ago, we had not seen each other since high school. We talked about how people all need a safe space, somewhere to go and be with the people that understand them, and recognize them, and see them, and love them. The kids who are coming out now need to see themselves. I was listening to this French artist you mentioned, Kiddy Smile. He is in the House of Mizrahi in Europe. The story is the same all over the world, be seen! To stand authentically, be yourself, is what is going to inspire other people to do it. That's why I do it, that's why I am out, that's why I make sure that the young people who follow me, or are with me as family, see that they don't have to be anybody but themselves.

People need a haven, they need an escape from the world, which is right now a horrible place to be. Here in the States, every day, there is a threat against trans rights, or grooming children. Our biggest fear now is that President Biden is too old to run again. Republicans want to overturn so much stuff... Someone like De Santis, saying "don't come to Florida." They say,

“we are not going to kill you, we won’t harm you,” but if I’m not welcome somewhere, you’re threatening me, you’re telling me not to come. So safe places are needed.

Going back to how I became involved with Detroit Sound Conservancy: Carleton Gholz [the founder of Detroit Sound Conservancy] contacted LGBT Detroit, and the executive director at the time, Curtis Lipscomb, said “you need to contact Magic [Damon Percy].” They needed a face, so basically, I am the face of it, because all the people on the board are straight! And everybody is either much older or younger, so they did not have a reason to be in Club Heaven, they don’t know anything about it. And so, I started speaking about my experiences there: Club Heaven was a safe place. It was a place of liberation, you went there, and you let everything go, the whole week or the whole world go. Throughout the day, when you went to work, you had to pretend, because if you did not present in a certain way, you could be fired, and you also had to deal with the Church, if you went to Church. We have done panels at different house music events, spoken about our experiences, what Heaven meant to us, the DJs, the music. I have been involved with the project for 7 years now.

CHASTAGNER. It must have been a very exciting period, reconnecting with all these people...

PERCY. Indeed, it is, because I never thought that people would want to hear what I had to say, that my story would be that important. I believe that many people want the history of the black gay community to be erased. They want to say that we never existed, that we were never viable, or important, or productive. They want to wipe us out, wipe out our history. People come up to me, and they reconnect, like with the video I made about the project. It is on [YouTube](#), people are sharing it, the younger people, too. And they say to me “oh my God, uncle, this was you back then? You are an icon!” And I say, OK, I guess so... I lived through it, and it is important...