

**NOMINATION OF HISTORIC BUILDING, STRUCTURE, SITE, OR OBJECT
PHILADELPHIA REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
PHILADELPHIA HISTORICAL COMMISSION**

SUBMIT ALL ATTACHED MATERIALS ON PAPER AND IN ELECTRONIC FORM (CD, EMAIL, FLASH DRIVE)
ELECTRONIC FILES MUST BE WORD OR WORD COMPATIBLE

1. ADDRESS OF HISTORIC RESOURCE (must comply with an Office of Property Assessment address)

Street address: 210-12 N. 12th Street

Postal code: 19107 Councilmanic District: 1st

2. NAME OF HISTORIC RESOURCE

Historic Name: Sigma Sound Studios

Current/Common Name: _____

3. TYPE OF HISTORIC RESOURCE

Building Structure Site Object

4. PROPERTY INFORMATION

Condition: excellent good fair poor ruins

Occupancy: occupied vacant under construction unknown

Current use: Vacant

5. BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

Please attach

6. DESCRIPTION

Please attach

7. SIGNIFICANCE

Please attach the Statement of Significance.

Period of Significance (from year to year): from c.1935 to 2013

Date(s) of construction and/or alteration: c.1935

Architect, engineer, and/or designer: Charles E. Oelschlager

Builder, contractor, and/or artisan: _____

Original owner: Benjamin Alexander

Other significant persons: Joe Tarsia

CRITERIA FOR DESIGNATION:

The historic resource satisfies the following criteria for designation (check all that apply):

- (a) Has significant character, interest or value as part of the development, heritage or cultural characteristics of the City, Commonwealth or Nation or is associated with the life of a person significant in the past; or,
- (b) Is associated with an event of importance to the history of the City, Commonwealth or Nation; or,
- (c) Reflects the environment in an era characterized by a distinctive architectural style; or,
- (d) Embodies distinguishing characteristics of an architectural style or engineering specimen; or,
- (e) Is the work of a designer, architect, landscape architect or designer, or engineer whose work has significantly influenced the historical, architectural, economic, social, or cultural development of the City, Commonwealth or Nation; or,
- (f) Contains elements of design, detail, materials or craftsmanship which represent a significant innovation; or,
- (g) Is part of or related to a square, park or other distinctive area which should be preserved according to an historic, cultural or architectural motif; or,
- (h) Owing to its unique location or singular physical characteristic, represents an established and familiar visual feature of the neighborhood, community or City; or,
- (i) Has yielded, or may be likely to yield, information important in pre-history or history; or
- (j) Exemplifies the cultural, political, economic, social or historical heritage of the community.

8. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

Please attach

9. NOMINATOR

Organization Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia Date June 9, 2020

bentleech@gmail.com;

Name with Title Benjamin Leech, consultant Email patrick@preservationalliance.com

Street Address 1608 Walnut Street, Suite 1702 Telephone 215-546-1146

City, State, and Postal Code Philadelphia, PA 19103

Nominator is is not the property owner.

PHC USE ONLY

Date of Receipt: June 9, 2020

Correct-Complete Incorrect-Incomplete Date: July 7, 2020

Date of Notice Issuance: July 20, 2020

Property Owner at Time of Notice

Name: 210 N 12th St Investment, 212 N 12th St Investment

Address: 4401 N 5th Street

City: Philadelphia State: PA Postal Code: 19140

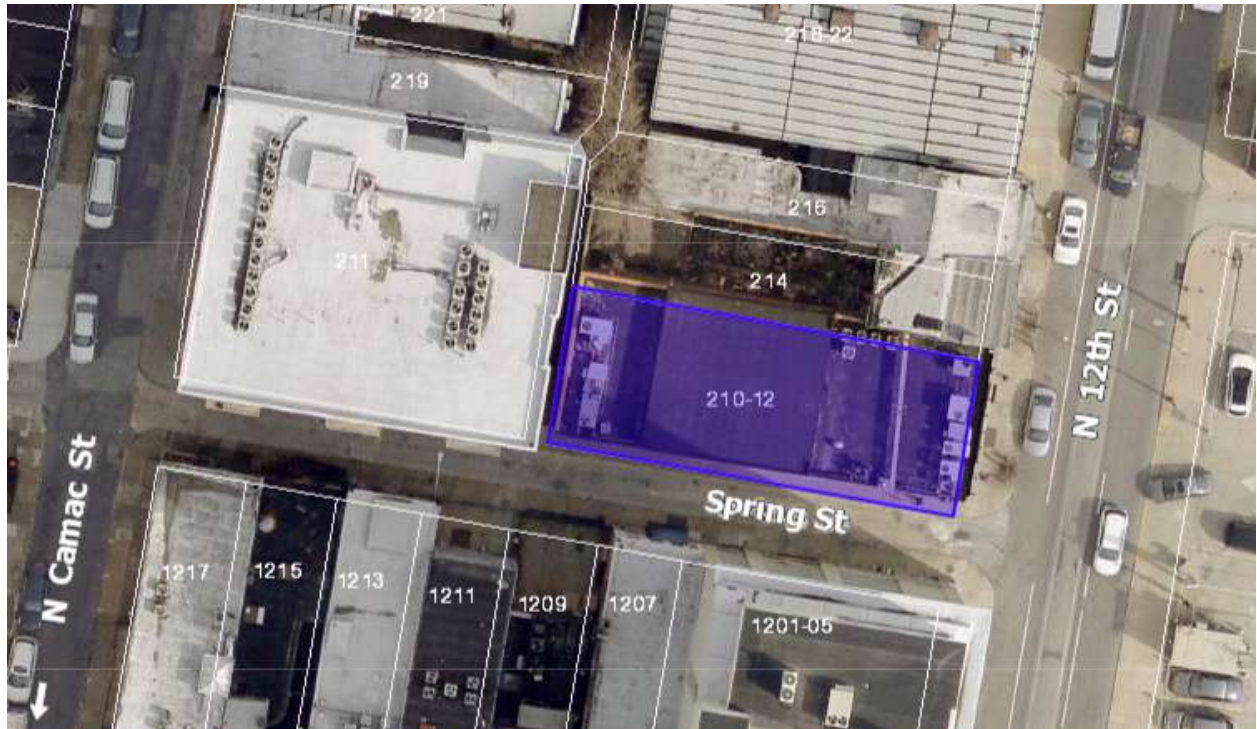
Date(s) Reviewed by the Committee on Historic Designation: October 21, 2020

Date(s) Reviewed by the Historical Commission: November 13, 2020

Date of Final Action: November 13, 2020

Designated Rejected

5. Boundary Description



Situate on the Northwest corner of Twelfth Street and Spring Street, containing on the said Twelfth Street in front or breadth Thirty-six feet and extending of that width in length or depth Westwardly along Spring Street Ninety-five feet to a five feet wide alley.

6. Description



Figure 1: East (12th Street) elevation of 210-212 N. 12th Street.

The former Sigma Sound Studios building is a two-story, flat-roofed, brick-clad, steel-framed commercial loft building occupying the full width and depth of a 36’x95’ plot of land at the northwest corner of North 12th and Spring Streets in Center City Philadelphia. The building’s primary east elevation faces 12th Street, its south elevation faces Spring Street, and its rear east elevation faces a narrow pedestrian alleyway. It shares a northern party wall with an adjacent three-story structure to the north. The building was designed in a modern commercial style in 1930 by architect Charles E. Oelschager as a “store and storage” building for prominent real

estate developer Benjamin Alexander, though its construction was delayed a number of years and was most likely completed c.1935.

The building's primary east elevation [Figs. 1-2] is clad in tan brick and features a symmetrical, tripartite grid of fixed windows separated by narrow brick piers and flat brick spandrel panels. The two outer piers are laid in a checkerboard bond pattern, while the inner piers and spandrel panels are laid in a common bond. The spandrels are framed by projecting soldier-course brick bands with limestone corner blocks. The roofline is trimmed in limestone coping, and a low limestone water table marks the building's base.

All windows are currently tinted, fixed panes with aluminum mullions; these are not original to the building but match the basic dimensions of the original fenestration. At the ground-floor level, entrances originally occupied each of the narrower outer bays flanking a wide central storefront window bay. Currently, an entrance is located in the center of the middle bay, and the original southern entrance has been infilled with a full-height fixed window. Over time, the building has also featured various iterations of a full-width pent eave or storefront awning [Figs. 4-6], though none exists currently. The building does retain a historic "N. 12th St." street marker mounted to its southeast corner pier [Fig. 2].



Figure 2: Corner detail of east (12th Street) and south (Spring Street) elevations



Figure 3: South (Spring Street) elevation from rear

The south elevation facing Spring Street [Figs. 2-3] is clad in common-bond tan brick but is otherwise unadorned and utilitarian in character. It originally featured an informal arrangement of punched windows, but these have since been infilled with glass block on the ground floor and brick on the second floor. A large glass block infill panel is located at the building's front corner, and two auxiliary doorways, one functional and one infilled, are located at the building's rear. Minimally visible from the public right-of-way and facing a private pedestrian alley, the building's western (rear) elevation is clad in common red brick [Fig. 3].



Figure 4: Sigma Sound Studios, n.d. Temple University Libraries, Special Collections Resource Center.



Figure 5: Sigma Sound Studios, early 1970s. Photo Dave Moysiades, courtesy of Arthur Stoppe.



Figure 6: Sigma Sound Studios, c.1980s. Temple University Libraries, Special Collections Resource Center.

7. Significance

Widely acclaimed as one of the most innovative and influential recording studios in America in the late 20th century, Sigma Sound Studios was the birthplace of a musical genre variously defined as “Philly Soul” or “The Sound of Philadelphia,” a fusion of soul, gospel, rhythm and blues, jazz, funk, and classical music that dominated popular music in the late 1960s and 1970s. Founded in 1968 by sound engineer Joseph Tarsia, the studio was instrumental in launching songwriter-producers Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff’s Philadelphia International Records, whose seminal Sigma-recorded hits included “If You Don’t Know Me By Now” (Harold Melvin and the Blue Notes, 1972), “Love Train” (The O’Jays, 1972), “Me and Mrs. Jones” (Billy Paul, 1972), “TSOP (The Sound of Philadelphia)” (MFSB featuring the Three Degrees, 1973), and “You’ll Never Find Another Love Like Mine” (Lou Rawls, 1976), among many others. Songwriter-producer Thom Bell also rose to national prominence with a string of Sigma-recorded classics, including “Didn’t I (Blow Your Mind This Time)” (The Delfonics, 1969), “Betcha By Golly, Wow” (The Stylistics, 1971), and “I’ll Be Around” (The Spinners, 1972). Characterised by Tarsia as “soul music in a tuxedo,” Sigma’s signature sound featured lush orchestral arrangements played by house band MFSB (an acronym for “Mother Father Sister Brother”), a thirty-piece ensemble that included members of the Philadelphia Orchestra, and a driving rhythm section anchored by bassist Ron Baker, guitarist Norman Harris, and drummer Earl Young. In addition to fostering an explosion of homegrown talent, the studio also played host to some of the era’s most popular national and international recording artists, including the Jacksons, David Bowie, Wilson Pickett, Stevie Wonder, Robert Palmer, B.B. King, and Dusty Springfield, among others.

Occupying a modest Depression-era industrial loft at 210-212 N. 12th Street from its founding in 1968 to its eventual closure in 2013, Sigma Sound Studios represents a definitive chapter in both the cultural history of Philadelphia and the evolution of popular music in America. Though currently vacant, the former Sigma Sound Studios building remains an iconic landmark for music fans around the world, and in 2015 was honored by the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission with an official state historic marker. The property likewise merits listing on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places, clearly satisfying the following criteria for historic designation as set forth in the Philadelphia Historic Preservation Ordinance §14-1004 (1):

A: Has significant character, interest or value as part of the development, heritage or cultural characteristics of the City, Commonwealth or Nation or is associated with the life of a person significant in the past;

and

J: Exemplifies the cultural, political, economic, social or historical heritage of the community.

From Doo-Wop to Disco: Sigma Sound Studios and the evolution of Philadelphia Soul

From a thriving sheet-music industry in the mid-19th century to the rise of gramophone recordings in the late 19th century and radio broadcasting in the early 20th century, Philadelphia has long played a leading role in the evolution of popular American music as a mode of cultural expression, technological innovation, and economic enterprise. As one of the most successful and longest-operating recording studios in Philadelphia's history, Joe Tarsia's Sigma Sound Studios represents a major chapter of this history. But its meteoric rise was foreshadowed by a long tradition of Philadelphia music production that laid the technical and creative groundwork for "The Sound of Philadelphia" that emerged from Sigma in the 1970s.

Tarsia, a former television repairman and Philco lab technician, first discovered an affinity for sound recording in 1958 after being hired to repair a tape recorder for Tony Mammarella, the producer of *American Bandstand* and owner of South Philadelphia's Swan Records.¹ After four years moonlighting at Swan and other small recording studios across Philadelphia, he joined Cameo-Parkway in 1962 as chief sound engineer [Fig. 7].² Founded in 1956, Cameo Records (and its later subsidiary Parkway Records) was one of the city's most successful independent record companies of the late 1950s and early



Figure 7: Joe Tarsia at Cameo-Parkway, n.d. Temple University Libraries, Special Collections Resource Center.

¹ Cogan, Jim and Clark, William. *Temples of Sound: Inside the Great Recording Studios*. San Francisco: Chronicle Book, 2003, p. 153.

² Purple, David, "Joe Tarsia: An Interview," *Euphony*, Vol. 2, no. 1, Spring 1981, p. 14.

1960s, launching the careers of Chubby Checker, Bobby Rydell, Charlie Gracie, the Orlons, Dee Dee Sharpe, and other legends of early rock and roll, rhythm and blues, and doo wop. While at Cameo-Parkway, Tarsia recorded hits for the Orlons (“South Street”), Dee Dee Sharp (“Do the Bird”), Chubby Checker (“Limbo Rock”), and Bobby Rydell (“Wildwood Days”).³

Like many Philadelphia record labels, Cameo-Parkway enjoyed a close relationship with Dick Clark and *American Bandstand*, the first nationally-broadcast rock and roll television show and the undisputed tastemaker for American teenagers. In a 2003 interview, Tarsia credited Clark as “the only reason I’m in the business. Because when he had a major show emanating from Philadelphia, it was like a window of opportunity. And a lot of people, including the people I worked for, were stimulated by that possibility. Because he was a reachable guy, and if you went up to him and said, ‘I have a record,’ and he played it, it was worth a thousand promotion guys, because it was heard all over the country.”⁴ But in February 1964, Philadelphia’s close-knit music scene was rocked by two epochal (and virtually simultaneous) events. On February 8, Clark moved production of *American Bandstand* to Los Angeles, depriving local artists and record labels of their main path to national exposure. The following day, The Beatles made their American debut on the *Ed Sullivan Show*, instantaneously launching the British Invasion. Cameo-Parkway struggled to adjust to this new musical landscape and entered a period of slow demise, eventually shuttering three years later.

Yet even during Cameo-Parkway’s decline, the company laid the groundwork for a Philadelphia renaissance that reached its zenith at Sigma in the following decade. Beginning in 1964 Cameo-Parkway turned increasingly to soul music, which had not previously been a major part of their repertoire, in an effort to emulate the recent success of Motown Records in Detroit.⁵ The company tapped young session musician and classically-trained composer Thom Bell to head a

³ Cogan and Clark, pp. 153-4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

⁵ McCarthy, Jack, “Soul Music,” *Encyclopedia of Greater Philadelphia*, Rutgers University, 2013. <https://philadelphiaencyclopedia.org/archive/soul-music/>



Figure 8: (L to R) Leon Huff, Thom Bell, Kenny Gamble. <https://www.soul-source.co.uk/articles/soul-articles/gamble-huff-thom-bell-and-the-philly-groove-r193/>

new soul unit, which in turn attracted two aspiring songwriters and musicians, Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff. The three had previously worked together as members of the local doo wop group Kenny and the Romeos, and soon were collaborating on a string of minor soul hits recorded by Tarsia at Cameo-Parkway's studios.⁶ When Cameo-Parkway folded in 1967, Tarsia recognized the potential of the blossoming Gamble-Huff-Bell triumvirate and decided to open his own independent recording studio to capture their emerging Philadelphia Soul sound.

In late 1967, Tarsia leased a defunct recording studio at 212 N. 12th Street, a cramped second-floor rear unit located above an RCA Motion Picture service center. Formerly the home of Reco-

⁶ Cummings, Tony. *The Sound of Philadelphia*. London: Methuen, 1975, pp. 83-85.



Figure 9: (L to R) Kenny Gamble, Joe Tarsia, Leon Huff at Sigma Sound Studios. Temple University Libraries, Special Collections Resource Center.

Arts, a studio founded by pioneering sound engineer Emil Curson, the space hosted many of Cameo-Parkway's early recording sessions but faded into relative obscurity after Curson's retirement in 1964. Tarsia rebuilt the studio with a new custom-designed recording console and reopened as Sigma Sound Studios on August 5, 1968. Just as Tarsia hoped, Sigma became the preferred recording facility for Gamble, Huff, and Bell, who were soon collaborating as songwriters and producers for an impressive roster of local and national soul acts. In its first three years of operation alone, Sigma and Tarsia recorded hit albums by former Impressions singer Jerry Butler (*The Iceman Cometh* and *Ice on Ice*), British chanteuse Dusty Springfield (*Brand New Me*), Ohio trio The O'Jays (*The O'Jays in Philadelphia*), Texas group Archie Bell & the Drells (*There's Gonna Be a Showdown*), soul legend Wilson Pickett (*Wilson Pickett in Philadelphia*), and local legends-to-be The Delphonics (*The Delphonics*) and The Stylistics (*The Stylistics*).⁷

⁷ "Sigma Sound Studios: Recording Hit Records Since 1968," *Billboard*, Sept. 16, 1978, pp. ss11-13.



Figure 10: O'Jays recording at Sigma Sound Studios, late 1970s. *Temples of Sound*, Jim Cogan and William Clark, p. 158.



Figure 11: Harold Melvin and the Blue Notes. *Getty Images*.



Figure 12: MFSB promotional photograph in front of Sigma Sound Studios. Getty Images.

Successful as they were, Sigma’s early years proved only a prelude to what would follow: a run of genre-defining hits in the early 1970’s that dominated the nation’s airwaves and made “The Sound of Philadelphia” a staple of the pop culture lexicon. In 1971 Gamble and Huff founded Philadelphia International Records and immediately signed the O’Jays, Harold Melvin and the Blue Notes, and Billy Paul, while Thom Bell (still collaborating part time with Gamble and Huff) continued independent production duties with The Spinners and The Stylistics. With Tarsia as chief engineer and a house band that came to be known as MSFB, hits recorded at Sigma in 1971-72 alone included “Backstabbers” and “Love Train” by the O’Jays, “If You Don’t Know Me By Now” by Harold Melvin and the Blue Notes, “Could It Be I’m Falling In Love” and “I’ll Be Around” by the Spinners, “People Make the World Go Round” and “Betcha By Golly Wow” by the Stylistics, “Drowning in the Sea of Love” by Joe Simon, and “Me and Mrs.

Jones” and by Billy Paul.⁸ Just as soul music in the 1960s was synonymous with Motown Records in Detroit, Stax Records in Memphis, and the Muscle Shoals sound of Fame Studios, Philadelphia in the 1970s became the undisputed center of the soul music pantheon, with Sigma Studios its primary center of production.⁹

Two milestones in the mid-1970s perhaps best exemplify Sigma’s cultural prominence during this era. In 1973, at the request of host Don Cornelius, Sigma house band MFSB recorded the opening theme song to *Soul Train*, which had recently supplanted *American Bandstand* as the most popular dance show on national television. Though the show was based in New York, the theme was named “T.S.O.P. (The Sound of Philadelphia),” became a #1 hit, and is now credited as one of the harbingers of the disco era. Then in 1974, British superstar David Bowie chose Philadelphia and Sigma Studios to record his *Young Americans* album, which was heavily influenced by American soul music and the “Philly Sound.” While something of an outlier in the roster of Sigma



Figure 13: Billy Paul. Getty Images

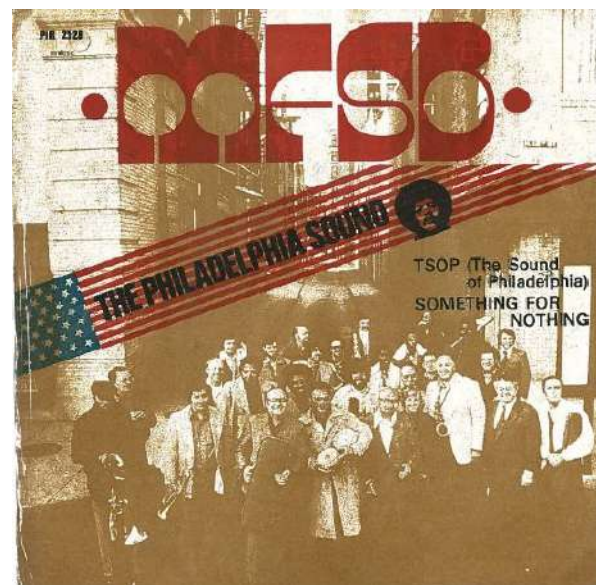


Figure 14: MFSB record cover for TSOP (The Sound of Philadelphia), the theme song to Soul Train.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Seay, Toby. “Capturing That Philadelphia Sound: A Technical Exploration of Sigma Sound Studios,” *Journal on the Art of Record Production*, Issue 6, June 2012, <https://www.arjournal.com/asarpwp/capturing-that-philadelphia-sound-a-technical-exploration-of-sigma-sound-studios/>

productions (for unknown reasons, Bowie did not use Sigma's house roster of engineers or musicians), the 12-day visit was widely covered by the local press and drew a cadre of teen fans, still remembered today as the "Sigma Kids," who kept all-night vigils outside the studio during the sessions [Fig. 15].

By this time, Sigma's popularity and a near-24-hour recording schedule propelled Tarsia and studio general manager Harry Chipetz (another veteran of Cameo-Parkway records) into an ambitious series of expansions and upgrades. In 1973 Sigma expanded to fill the entire building at 210-212 N 12th Street, adding a state-of-the-art "Studio B" on the ground floor. Sigma also added a satellite studio in 1974 at 309 S. Broad Street, the former Cameo-Parkway headquarters then occupied by Gamble and Huff's Philadelphia International Records. Tarsia even expanded to New York City in 1976, opening Sigma Sound



Figure 15: "Sigma Kids" outside David Bowie sessions at Sigma, 1974. <https://whyy.org/segments/philly-loves-bowie-second-time-around/>



Figure 16: Tarsia (L) and Harry Chipetz (R) review Sigma expansion plans. *Billboard*, Sept. 16, 1978.

Studios of New York in the Ed Sullivan Theater Building on Broadway.¹⁰ Between 1980 and 1983, Tarsia remodeled both floors of 210-212 N. 12th and expanded into the adjacent rowhouse at 214 N. 12th St., and even had plans for a fourth studio at 230 N. 13th Street, the former Warner Brothers Film Exchange, though these were never realized.¹¹ Throughout these expansions and upgrades, Sigma cemented its reputation as one of the most technologically advanced studios in the nation, employing three dozen engineers and technicians at its peak and introducing numerous recording innovations that were later adopted across the industry.¹²

While most closely associated with Philadelphia soul music, Sigma clients spanned a wide range of recording artists and producers, from rock groups to stand-up comedians to television and radio voice-overs. Local



Figure 17: Bonnie Raitt recording a live WMMR session at Sigma in 1972. *Billboard*, Sept. 16, 1978.

radio station WMMR broadcast a series of live in-studio Sigma sessions featuring (among others) Todd Rundgren, Bonnie Raitt, America, Robin Trower, The Flying Burrito Brothers, and Billy Joel, whose 1972 concert as a virtually unknown singer-songwriter is credited with helping launch his career.¹³

¹⁰ Sigma's New York studios operated until 1988, recording albums by the Village People, Talking Heads, Madonna, and Paul Simon, among others. Tarsia, Joe. "Sigma Sound: Recording Hits Since '68." Unpublished typescript, Sigma Sound Studio Records, 1960-2011, Temple University Special Collections Research Center.

¹¹ DeLeon, Clark. "What's New: Sigma Catches NFL Films Punt," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, March 24, 1980, p. 2B.

¹² "What Keeps Sigma Spinning?" *Billboard*, Sept. 16, 1978, p. ss5; Seay, Toby. "Capturing That Philadelphia Sound"; Tarsia, Joe. "Sigma Sound: Recording Hits Since '68."

¹³ Frick, David. "Billy Joel's Radio Days: Live on the Air in Philadelphia, 1972," *Rolling Stone*, Dec. 2, 2011, "Radio Concert Tapes On Hand," Sigma Sound Services, Inc., Aug. 26, 1996, Sigma Sound Studio Records, 1960-2011, Temple University Special Collections Research Center; <https://wmmr.com/tag/sigma-sound/>

As the 1970s progressed, Sigma’s increasingly sophisticated production techniques and its talented staple of house musicians were also central in propelling disco music into the cultural mainstream. Just as soul music was rooted in the African American musical traditions of doo wop, gospel, and rhythm and blues, disco evolved naturally from soul music, with a particular emphasis on the large orchestral arrangements and multitrack layering characteristic of the “Philadelphia Sound.” Producer Tom Moulton, whose extended dance remixes were instrumental in disco’s development, was a regular Sigma client.¹⁴ Among the first disco groups were the Trammps, whose members included MFSB mainstays Earl Young, Ronnie Baker, and Norman Harris and whose Sigma-recorded 1976 hit “Disco Inferno” became a staple of the genre. Other Sigma-produced disco classics include “Ain’t No Stopping Us Now” by McFadden & Whitehead and “Love is the Message” by MFSB.



Figure 18: The Trammps



Figure 19: McFadden & Whitehead. Getty Images

¹⁴ Mason, Andrew. “Beat Doctor,” *Wax Poetics*, Issue 45, 2011, <https://www.waxpoetics.com/blog/features/articles/tom-moulton-disco-remix/>

By the early 1980s, Philadelphia International Records had compiled an impressive discography of homegrown and national artists, including the Jacksons (formerly the Jackson 5), Patti LaBelle, Lou Rawls, and Teddy Pendergrass. Yet “The Sound of Philadelphia” was beginning to lose its national audience to rock, pop, and the continued evolution of soul music into funk, disco, R&B, and early hip hop. PIR’s slow decline was tragically hastened when Pendergrass, then the label’s top-selling artist and a bona fide soul superstar, was paralyzed following a car crash on Lincoln Drive in 1982, temporarily but decisively sidelining his career. Along with PIR’s decline, Sigma’s place in the national spotlight also began to fade, though it would remain in business at 210-212 N. 12th Street for another two decades. Boyz II Men, The Roots, Jill Scott, and Erykah Badu all recorded work at Sigma in its later years.¹⁵ Tarsia eventually sold the studio in 2003, and it shuttered permanently in 2013.

Neighborhood Significance

While 210-212 N. 12th Street is primarily significant for the role that Sigma Sound



Figure 20: The Jackson 5’s first post-Motown album, *The Jacksons*, released on Philadelphia International Records in 1976



Figure 21: Teddy Pendergrass. Getty Images.

¹⁵ Young, Clive. “Sigma Sound Studios Sold to Developers,” *Prosound News*, March 3, 2015; Morrison, John. Six Incredible Songs Recorded at Sigma Sound Studios,” *The Key*, April 9, 2020.

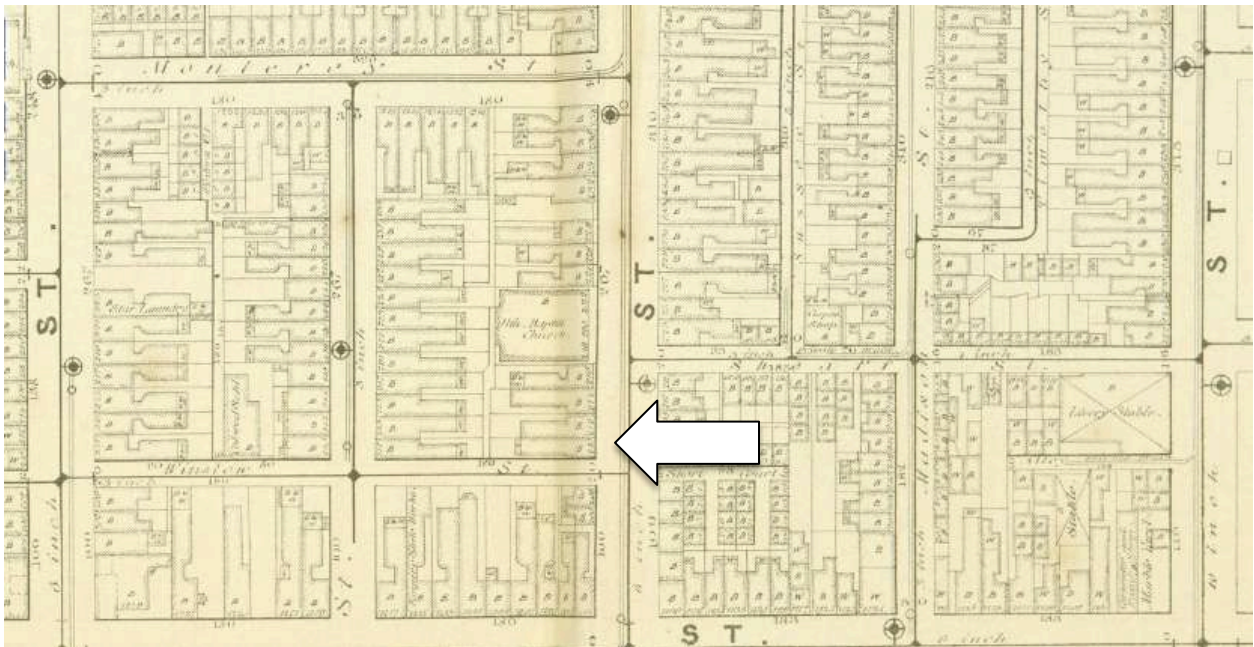


Figure 22: Atlas of Philadelphia, Vol. 3. G.H. Jones & Co., 1875, Plate 11 (detail).

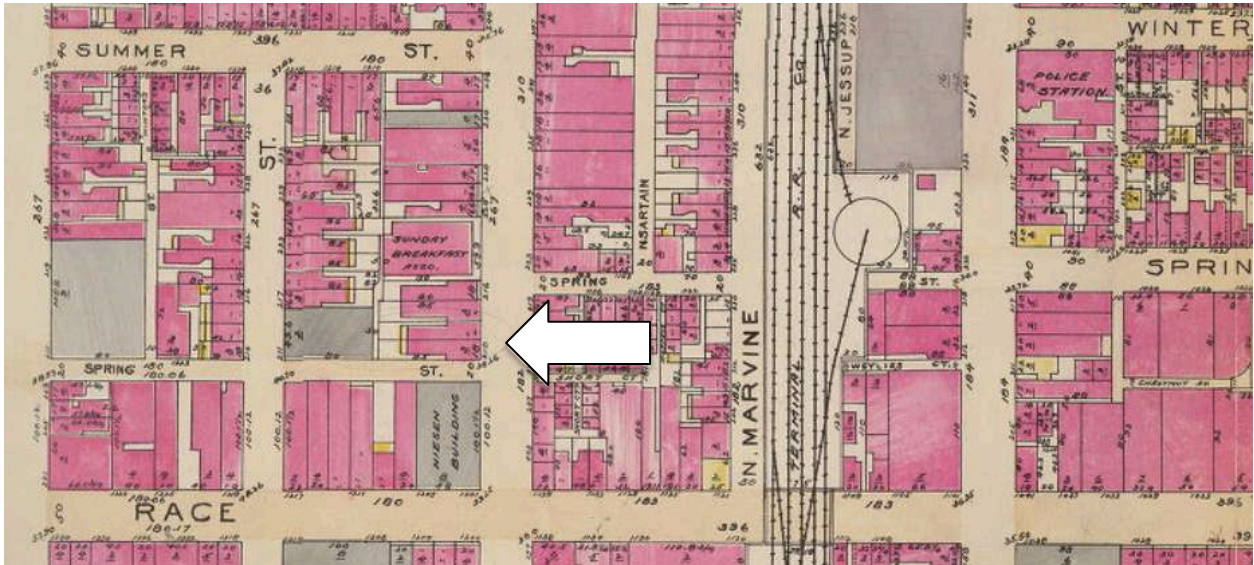


Figure 23: Atlas of the 5th to 10th Wards of the City of Philadelphia, Elvino V. Smith, 1927, revised 1931, Plate 12 (detail).

Studios played in history of popular music, the building itself is also significant in the context of its surrounding neighborhood, which evolved from a dense 19th-century residential enclave into a mixed-use industrial and commercial district in the early to middle 20th century [Figs. 22-23]. Of modest architectural significance, the building’s light industrial character and vernacular modern design nevertheless exemplify this economic and social evolution and reflect the history of the surrounding community.

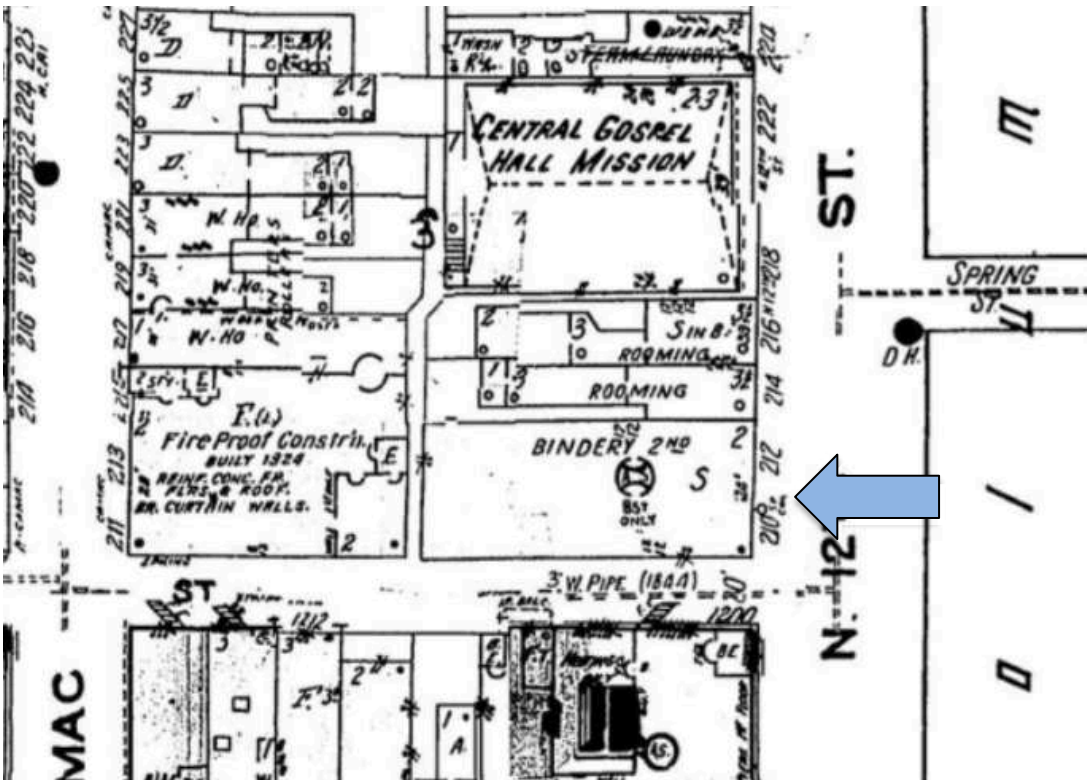


Figure 24: Sanborn Fire Insurance Atlas, Volume 2, 1950, Sheet 111 (detail)

Like most of the surrounding neighborhood south of Vine Street between Broad Street and the Reading Viaduct, 210-212 N. 12th Street was originally occupied by a pair of 3-story brick rowhouses constructed in the mid-19th century [Fig. 22]. While scattered examples of these rowhouses still survive throughout the neighborhood, many began to be replaced in the early 20th century with small factories, warehouses, and commercial buildings following the construction of the nearby Reading Terminal. Particularly by midcentury, many of these light industrial structures were associated with the entertainment industry, including the Philadelphia Register-listed Warner Brothers Film Exchange at 230 N. 13th Street, the United Artists Corp/Chancellor Records Building at 1322 Vine Street (demolished), and the RKO Film Exchange at 250 N. 13th Street (demolished) [Figs. 25-27].

In 1930, prominent real estate developer Benjamin Alexander commissioned architect Charles E. Oelschager to design a two-story “store and storage building” to replace the existing rowhouses

at 210-212 N. 12th Street, both of which were then described as “rooming houses.”¹⁶ Oelschager was a prolific designer responsible for a number of factory buildings, automobile showrooms, movie theaters, and film exchanges across the city.¹⁷ Though a demolition permit for the site was issued in 1930, it appears that the existing buildings remained standing for a number of years thereafter, perhaps as a result of the Great Depression.¹⁸ Following Alexander’s death in 1933, the property was sold to the Girard Trust Company, at which time it was still described as two dwellings.¹⁹ Because no other demolition or construction permits survive, and because the existing 210-212 N. 12th Street structure corresponds closely to the 1930 building permit description, it is likely that the building was constructed following Alexander’s and Oelschager’s specifications sometime in the mid-1930s. By 1938, its first known occupant was the U.S. Slicing Machine Company, a deli equipment distributor.²⁰ In 1950, a bindery occupied the second floor.²¹ In 1956, RCA leased the property for use as an office and service center for its marine division and motion



Figure 25: RKO Film Exchange (demolished), 250 N. 13th Street (PHMC photo)



Figure 26: Chancellor Records/United Artists Building (demolished), 1322 Vine Street (PhillyHistory.org)



Figure 27: Warner Bros Film Exchange, 230 N. 13th Street.

¹⁶ Building Permit 1620, March 31, 1930; Building Permit 1906, April 2, 1930, Philadelphia City Archives.

¹⁷ Tatman, Sandra L. “Oelschager, Charles E. (fl.1891-1935/36),” *Philadelphia Architects and Buildings*, https://www.philadelphiabuildings.org/pab/app/ar_display.cfm/19007

¹⁸ A building permit (#2958, 6/22/1931) was issued for a new fire escape for the rooming house at 210 N. 12th in 1931, the same year that both existing rowhouses still appear in E.V. Smith’s *Atlas of the 5th to 10th Wards*.

¹⁹ Deed Abstracts, Parcel 002-N10-203 and Parcel 002-N10-280, Philadelphia City Archives

²⁰ *Philadelphia Inquirer*, March 12, 1938.

²¹ *Sanborn Fire Insurance Atlas*, Volume 2, 1950, Sheet 111.



Figure 28: Sigma Sound Studios and Frankford/Wayne Recording Labs, c. 1968. Photo Dave Moysiades, courtesy of Arthur Stoppe

picture equipment department.²² Two years later, sound engineer Emil Corson leased a portion of the second floor for his Reco-Art Sound Recording Company, relocating from 1305 Market Street in 1958. After Corson's retirement in 1964, Reco-Art briefly operated as Sound Plus Studios before Tarsia took over the lease in 1967.²³ Tarsia initially shared the second floor with the Frankford/Wayne Mastering Labs, a sound production studio, before expanding to fill the entire building in 1973 [Fig. 28]. Tarsia purchased the property outright in 1977 and maintained ownership until 2003.

Sigma Sound Studios' nearly half-century run at 210-212 N. 12th Street witnessed dramatic changes to the surrounding neighborhood, having predated both the construction of the

²² Building Permit 52, Jan. 2, 1956; "City Demands RCA Collect Pay Tax in N.J.," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, June 20, 1959, p. 13.

²³ Jackson, John A. *A House on Fire; The Rise and Fall of Philadelphia Soul*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 74;

Philadelphia Convention Center and the completion of the Vine Street Expressway.²⁴ Only a few remnants of the neighborhood’s once-abundant stock of film exchanges, record labels, and other entertainment industry service buildings still stand. Likewise, few historic recording studios remain standing anywhere in Philadelphia, and certainly none with the national and international significance of Sigma. Virtue Recording Studios, another legendary facility at 1618 N. Broad Street, was demolished in 2001. Cameo-Parkway’s former offices at 309 S. Broad Street, later home to Philadelphia International Records, was demolished in 2014.

Conclusion

“The Sound of Philadelphia” that emerged from Sigma Sound Studios in the 1970s was the result of a synergistic collaboration between a number of highly skilled musicians, singers, songwriters, composers, recording engineers, producers, and promoters representing a broad cross-section of the city’s vibrant



Figure 29: Sigma in 1979. Photo Arthur Stoppe.

musical traditions. While Philadelphia can claim numerous achievements in the history of popular American music, Sigma’s contributions were uniquely central to both the city’s self-identity and its international reputation in the 1970s and beyond. Home to Sigma for its entire five-decade tenure, the property at 210-212 N. 12th Street has significant character, interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of the City, Commonwealth, and Nation (Criterion A) and exemplifies the cultural, economic, social and historical heritage of the community (Criterion J). It therefore merits listing on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places.

²⁴ Kasper, Vince, “Vine St. Xway Plan is Unsound,” *Philadelphia Daily News*, Jan. 16, 1985, p. 16.

8. Bibliography

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