

**ADDRESS: 210-12 N 12TH ST**

Name of Resource: Sigma Sound Studios

Proposed Action: Designation

Property Owner: 210 N 12<sup>th</sup> St Investment, 212 N 12<sup>th</sup> St Investment

Nominator: Benjamin Leech, Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia

Staff Contact: Kim Chantry, kim.chantry@phila.gov

**OVERVIEW:** This nomination proposes to designate the property at 210-12 N. 12<sup>th</sup> Street as historic and list it on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places. The nomination contends that the former Sigma Sound Studios satisfies Criteria for Designation A and J. Under Criterion A, the nomination contends that the property has significant character, interest, and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of the City, Commonwealth, and Nation, as the home to Sigma Sound Studios, one of the most influential recording studios in America in the late twentieth century, and the birthplace of “The Sound of Philadelphia” or “Philly Soul,” a popular musical genre that fused soul, gospel, rhythm and blues, jazz, funk, and classical music. Additionally under Criterion A, the property is significant for its association with persons significant in the past, including both local and international music producers and recording artists. Under Criterion J, the nomination argues that the property exemplifies the cultural, economic, social and historical heritage of the community, standing as a remnant of the neighborhood’s once-abundant stock of film exchanges, record labels, and other entertainment industry service buildings.

**STAFF RECOMMENDATION:** The staff recommends that the nomination demonstrates that the property at 210-12 N. 12<sup>th</sup> Street satisfies Criteria for Designation A and J.



Committee on Historic Designation  
Meeting Minutes, 19 August 2020

**REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE ON HISTORIC DESIGNATION  
PHILADELPHIA HISTORICAL COMMISSION**

**19 AUGUST 2020, 9:30 A.M.  
REMOTE MEETING ON ZOOM  
EMILY COOPERMAN, CHAIR**

**CALL TO ORDER**

**START TIME IN ZOOM RECORDING:** 00:00:00

The Chair called the meeting to order at 9:33 a.m. The following Committee members joined her:

<b>Committee Member</b>	<b>Present</b>	<b>Absent</b>	<b>Comment</b>
Emily Cooperman, Ph.D., chair	X		
Suzanna Barucco	X		
Jeff Cohen, Ph.D.	X		
Bruce Lavery	X		
Elizabeth Milroy, Ph.D.	X		
Douglas Mooney	X		

\* Owing to public health concerns surrounding the COVID-19 virus, all Committee members, staff, and public attendees participated in the meeting remotely via Zoom video and audio-conferencing software.

The following staff members were present:

- Jonathan Farnham, Executive Director
- Kim Chantry, Historic Preservation Planner II
- Laura DiPasquale, Historic Preservation Planner II
- Shannon Garrison, Historic Preservation Planner I
- Meredith Keller, Historic Preservation Planner II
- Allyson Mehley, Historic Preservation Planner II
- Leonard Reuter, Esq., Law Department
- Megan Schmitt, Historic Preservation Planner II

The following persons attended the online meeting:

- Kevin Block
- Aaron Ruxbin
- Oscar Beisert
- Patrick Grossi
- Pat Wisniewski
- Marla Kay
- Dana Fedeli
- Michael Fichman
- Aaron Cohen
- Nicholas Royston
- Dexter Gresh
- Max Ochester
- Peter Humphreys

David Ivory  
Ash Kernan  
Dan Fisher  
Nino Tinari, Esq.  
George Poulin  
Ximena Conde  
Aaron Levinson  
Nancy Pontone  
David O'Neil  
Matthew Smith  
Steven Peitzman  
Mark Brack  
Arthur Stoppe  
Hunter Ye  
Kelly Wiles  
Susan Wetherill  
John Pettit  
Kim Vernick  
Gary Vernick  
Eugene Naydovich  
Starr Herr-Cardillo  
German Yakubov  
Gideon Fink Shapiro  
Harrison Haas  
Jim Duffin  
Howard Haas  
Sara Schwartz  
Michael Mattioni  
Mike Tarsia  
Eugene Desyatnik  
Kathy Dowdell  
Debra McCarthy  
John Vettese  
L'Oreal McCollum  
Paul Steinke  
Ben Leech  
Sarah Adamo  
Rush Ramone  
R Wilhelm  
Alex Balloon  
Josh Sevin  
Barbara Ochester  
Jack McCarthy  
Keith Cramer  
William Ochester

**ADDRESS: 210-12 N 12<sup>TH</sup> ST**

Name of Resource: Sigma Sound Studios

Proposed Action: Designation

Property Owner: 210 N 12th St Investment, 212 N 12th St Investment

Nominator: Benjamin Leech, Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia

Staff Contact: Kim Chantry, kim.chantry@phila.gov

**OVERVIEW:** This nomination proposes to designate the property at 210-12 N. 12th Street as historic and list it on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places. The nomination contends that the former Sigma Sound Studios satisfies Criteria for Designation A and J. Under Criterion A, the nomination contends that the property has significant character, interest, and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of the City, Commonwealth, and Nation, as the home to Sigma Sound Studios, one of the most influential recording studios in America in the late twentieth century, and the birthplace of “The Sound of Philadelphia” or “Philly Soul,” a popular musical genre that fused soul, gospel, rhythm and blues, jazz, funk, and classical music. Additionally under Criterion A, the property is significant for its association with persons significant in the past, including both local and international music producers and recording artists. Under Criterion J, the nomination argues that the property exemplifies the cultural, economic, social and historical heritage of the community, standing as a remnant of the neighborhood’s once-abundant stock of film exchanges, record labels, and other entertainment industry service buildings.

**STAFF RECOMMENDATION:** The staff recommends that the nomination demonstrates that the property at 210-12 N. 12th Street satisfies Criteria for Designation A and J.

**START TIME IN ZOOM RECORDING:** 01:44:55

**PRESENTERS:**

- Ms. Chantry presented the nomination to the Committee on Historic Designation.
- Attorney Nino Tinari represented the property owner.
- Patrick Grossi and Ben Leech represented the nomination.

**DISCUSSION:**

- Ms. Cooperman asked if the property owner or a representative of the property owner is in attendance.
  - Mr. Farnham responded that the staff has not had contact with the property owner, other than mailing the notice letters.
- Mr. Grossi summarized the significance of Sigma Sound Studios, and thanked those who had supported and assisted with research of the nomination.
- Mr. Leech summarized his experience researching the nomination, and the significance of Sigma Sound Studios.
- During the public comment period, Mr. Tinari announced that he was in attendance to represent the property owner. He stated that he had mailed a letter on 10 August 2020 to Mr. Farnham, informing Mr. Farnham of his client’s opposition to the nomination. He stated that, in addition to the letter, preparation for today’s hearing would require Mr. Tinari and his client to have additional time. He stated that he was attempting to communicate a request that the matter be continued until he has an opportunity to put together a defense regarding the proposal to designate the property as historic. He commented that the property was zoned for a condominium structure in 2019, and the historic marker is across the street. He summarized that

he needs time to present a valid and proper response, and that he is requesting a continuance to a future meeting so that he may present testimony on behalf of the property owner.

- Ms. Cooperman responded that the Committee had already begun its review of the nomination and therefore could not consider a continuance request. He noted that the Committee is an advisory body, and provides a recommendation to the Historical Commission. She stated that Mr. Tinari can request a continuance at the Commission meeting, to allow time to prepare materials and present those to the Commission at a later date. She stated that continuances are routinely granted by the Commission. She suggested that Mr. Tinari contact the staff for more information.
- Mr. Reuter asked Mr. Tinari if he had previously stated that he had made a request to continue the matter and had sent that request to the Commission.
- Mr. Tinari responded that he mailed a letter to Mr. Farnham at the Historical Commission office located at 1515 Arch Street, 13<sup>th</sup> Floor.
- Mr. Reuter asked Mr. Tinari if he understood that City offices have been closed since 18 March 2020.
- Mr. Tinari responded that his understanding is that mail is still being received.
- Mr. Reuter asked Mr. Tinari if he has a copy of the request that he could either share on Zoom or by email. He stated that he is concerned if a continuance request was made, but was not received by the Commission owing to City offices being closed. He stated that this matter may likely get remanded back to the Committee, should Mr. Tinari produce additional materials and make a continuance request to the Commission. He stated that while it may be the practice of the Committee to not grant continuances once the review of a matter has started, he is personally unaware of any rule or regulation which would prohibit the Committee from deciding to continue its review of the matter, to allow the property owner to produce a response.
- Mr. Farnham apologized to Mr. Tinari for not receiving his mail. He explained that the staff is occasionally visiting the office and checking mail, but not since the 10 August 2020 date that Mr. Tinari mailed the letter. He noted that the notice letter did suggest that property owners communicate with the Commission staff via email. He concurred with Mr. Reuter that there is nothing that prohibits the Committee from taking additional public comment and then making a recommendation that the Commission continue and remand the review of the nomination; however, the Committee and its Chair decide how to run the meetings.
- Ms. Barucco suggested recommending in support of the continuance to give Mr. Tinari an opportunity to present his defense of his position. She stated that it would be the fair thing to do, given the unusual circumstances of the time and the confusion surrounding mail pickup.
  - The Committee members agreed.
- Mr. Grossi opposed the continuance request. He commented that he has not heard anything from Mr. Tinari thus far that is material to the nomination or the historic significance of Sigma Sound Studios. He commented that concerns related to past development proposals are better handled by the Commission, as those issues are beyond the purview of this Committee. He suggested that unless there is some substantive challenge to the historic significance of Sigma Sound Studios and the claims made in the nomination, there is no reason why the Committee needs to continue the review of the nomination. He noted that a continuance would likely be granted by the Commission and that he would have no objection to it at that time.

- Ms. Cooperman asked Mr. Tinari if he anticipates preparing testimony and information that addresses the Criteria for Designation, which is the purview of the Committee, or whether he anticipates providing information on other subjects. She reiterated that issues related to zoning, financial matters, and other related matters are not within the purview of the Committee.
  - Mr. Tinari responded that he will address the nomination and will not go beyond that or include zoning matters or other matters that are not within the purview of the Committee.
- Ms. Cooperman stated that the Committee must allow Mr. Tinari the opportunity to present a counterargument.
- Ms. Barucco asked that Mr. Tinari be provided a deadline to submit additional materials.
  - Mr. Reuter observed that the Rules and Regulations provide guidance regarding submission deadlines.
- Mr. Reuter commented that the continuance itself is a recommendation to the Commission, and that the property remains under the jurisdiction of the Commission during the continuance period. He stated that the Commission will consider the continuance request at its 11 September 2020 meeting, where these concerns can be raised again. He noted that there is a zoning permit for this property but zoning permits do not affect potential designations.

**PUBLIC COMMENT:**

- Aaron Levinson supported the nomination and discussed the significance of Sigma Sound Studios.
- Jack McCarthy supported the nomination and discussed the significance of Sigma Sound Studios.
- Max Ochester supported the nomination and discussed the historic context of Sigma Sound Studios.
- Oscar Beisert supported the nomination and thanked the nominators and contributors.
- Aaron Levinson opposed the request for a continuance, and commented that he sees no reasonable counterargument that can be made against the historic significance of this building.

**COMMITTEE ON HISTORIC DESIGNATION FINDINGS & CONCLUSIONS:**

The Committee on Historic Designation found that:

- It typically supports continuance requests proffered by property owners.
- The property would remain under the Historical Commission's jurisdiction during the continuance period.
- Its scheduled September 2020 meeting may be canceled, and therefore the next meeting of the Committee on Historic Designation may be the scheduled October 2020 meeting.

**COMMITTEE ON HISTORIC DESIGNATION RECOMMENDATION:** The Committee on Historic Designation voted to recommend that the Historical Commission continue the review of the nomination of 210-12 N 12<sup>th</sup> Street and remand it to the next meeting of the Committee on Historic Designation.

<b>ITEM: 210-12 N 12<sup>th</sup> St.</b>					
<b>MOTION: Continue and remand to next CHD meeting</b>					
<b>MOVED BY: Lavery</b>					
<b>SECONDED BY: Barucco</b>					
VOTE					
Committee Member	Yes	No	Abstain	Recuse	Absent
Emily Cooperman, chair	X				
Suzanna Barucco	X				
Jeff Cohen	X				
Bruce Lavery	X				
Elizabeth Milroy	X				
Douglas Mooney	X				
Total	6				

**ADJOURNMENT**

The Committee on Historic Designation adjourned at 11:53 a.m.

**PLEASE NOTE:**

- Minutes of the Committee on Historic Designation are presented in action format. Additional information is available in the video recording for this meeting. The start time for each agenda item in the recording is noted.

**CRITERIA FOR DESIGNATION**

§14-1004. Designation.

(1) Criteria for Designation.

A building, complex of buildings, structure, site, object, or district may be designated for preservation if it:

- (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;
- (b) Is associated with an event of importance to the history of the City, Commonwealth or Nation;
- (c) Reflects the environment in an era characterized by a distinctive architectural style;
- (d) Embodies distinguishing characteristics of an architectural style or engineering specimen;
- (e) Is the work of a designer, architect, landscape architect or designer, or professional engineer whose work has significantly influenced the historical, architectural, economic, social, or cultural development of the City, Commonwealth, or nation;
- (f) Contains elements of design, detail, materials, or craftsmanship that represent a significant innovation;
- (g) Is part of or related to a square, park, or other distinctive area that should be preserved according to a historic, cultural, or architectural motif;
- (h) Owing to its unique location or singular physical characteristic, represents an established and familiar visual feature of the neighborhood, community, or City;
- (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.

# Nomination

**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. 12<sup>th</sup> 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

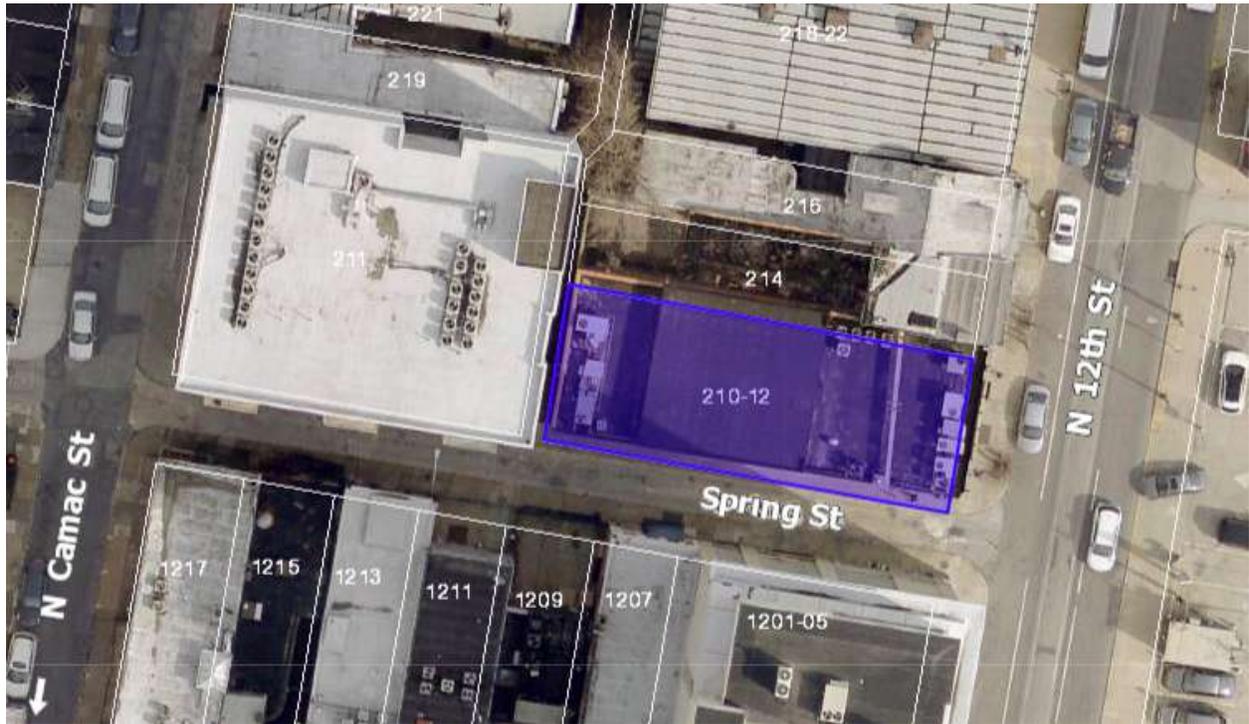
Date(s) Reviewed by the Committee on Historic Designation: \_\_\_\_\_

Date(s) Reviewed by the Historical Commission: \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Final Action: \_\_\_\_\_

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 (12<sup>th</sup> Street) elevation of 210-212 N. 12<sup>th</sup> 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].

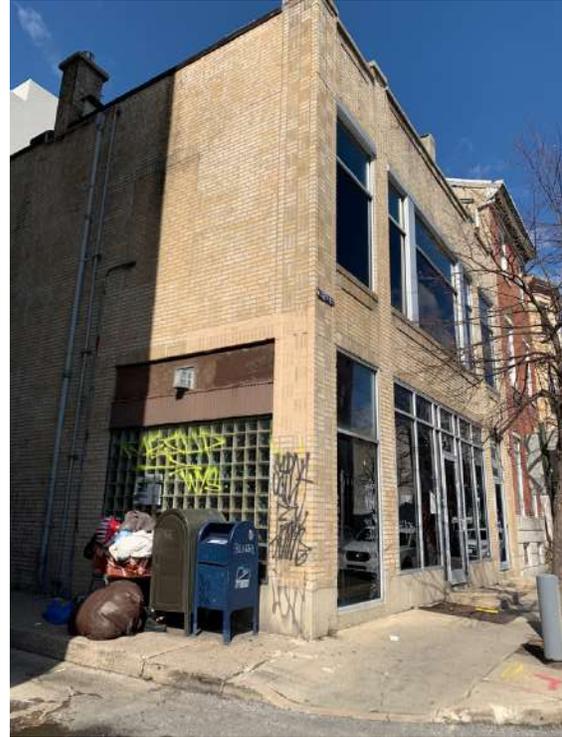


Figure 2: Corner detail of east (12<sup>th</sup> Street) and south (Spring Street) elevations



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.<sup>1</sup> 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].<sup>2</sup> 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.

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

<sup>2</sup> 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”).<sup>3</sup>

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.”<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> The company tapped young session musician and classically-trained composer Thom Bell to head a

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<sup>3</sup> Cogan and Clark, pp. 153-4.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 152.

<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> 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-

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<sup>6</sup> 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*).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> "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.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup>

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

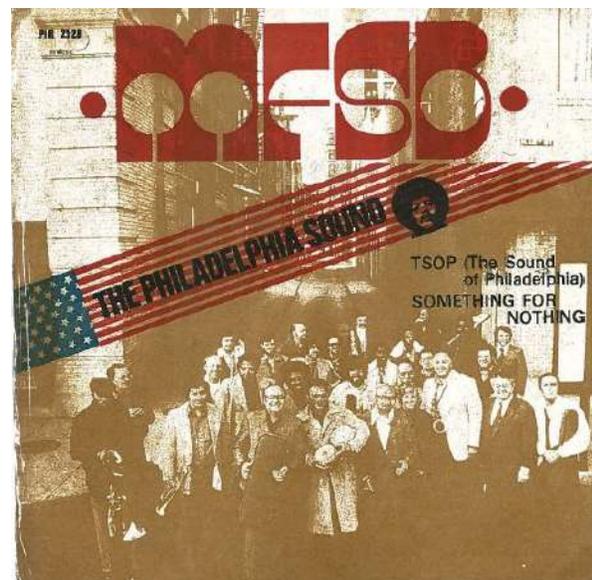


Figure 14: MFSB record cover for TSOP (The Sound of Philadelphia), the theme song to Soul Train.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> 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://why.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.<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup>

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.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> 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.

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

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

<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup> 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

<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> 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.

<sup>15</sup> 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.

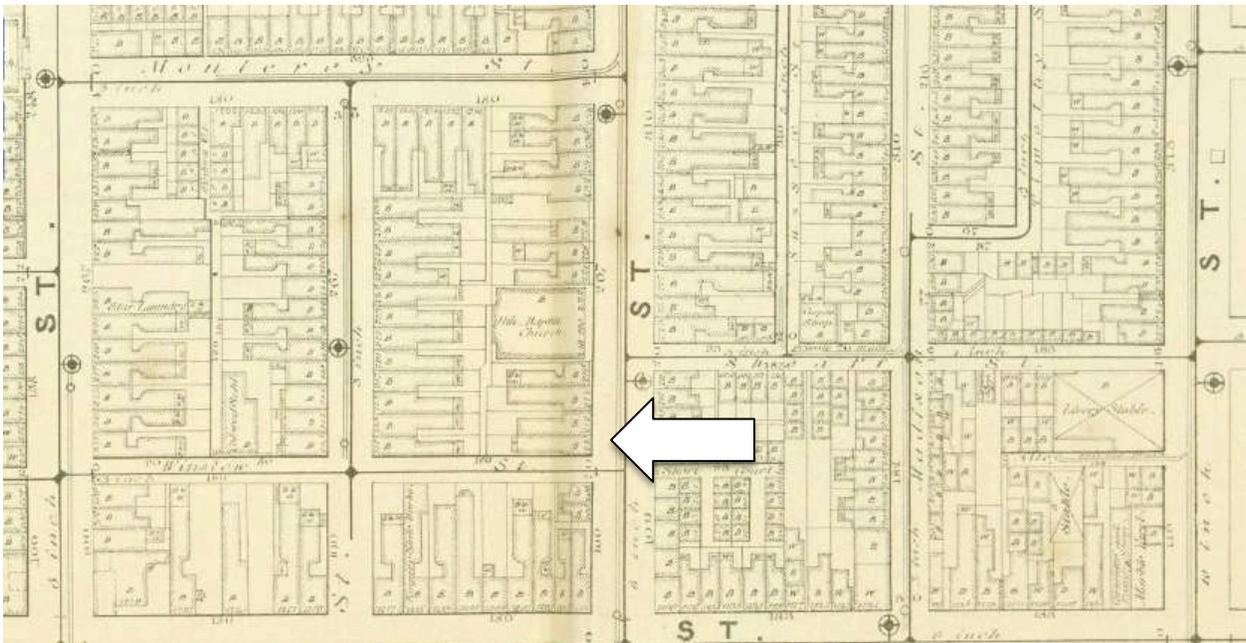


Figure 22: Atlas of Philadelphia, Vol. 3. G.H. Jones & Co., 1875, Plate 11 (detail).



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.

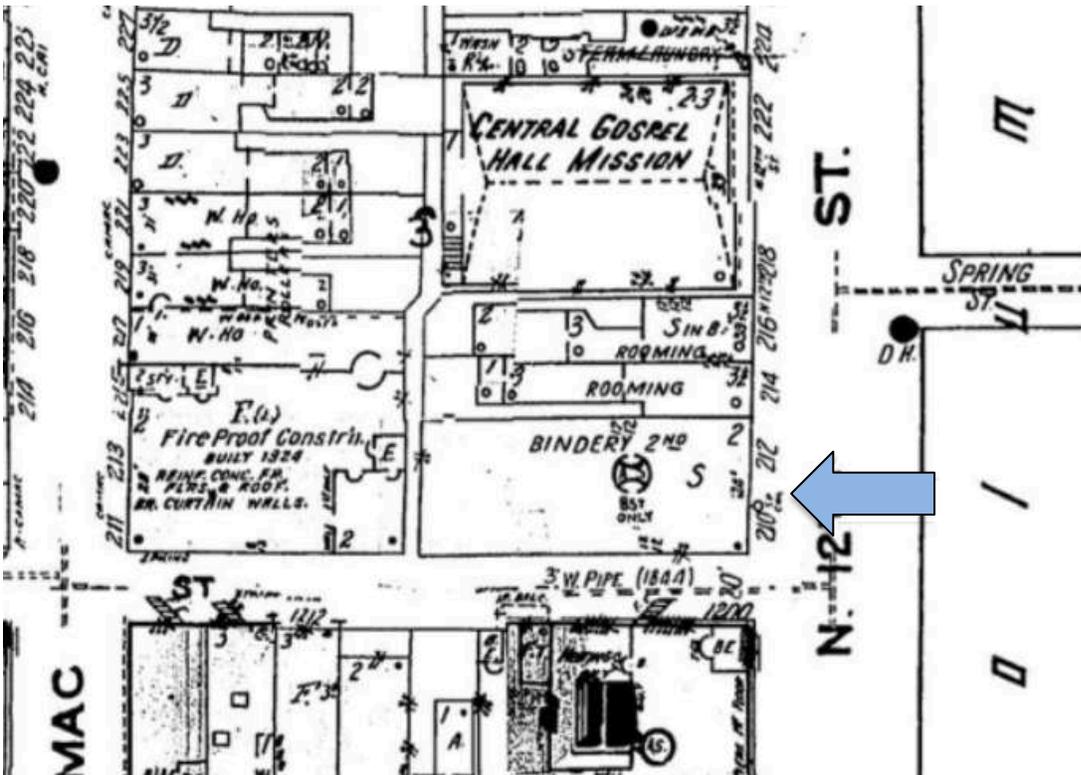


Figure 24: Sanborn Fire Insurance Atlas, Volume 2, 1950, Sheet 111 (detail)

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. 13<sup>th</sup> 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.”<sup>16</sup> Oelschager was a prolific designer responsible for a number of factory buildings, automobile showrooms, movie theaters, and film exchanges across the city.<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup> In 1950, a bindery occupied the second floor.<sup>21</sup> 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. 13<sup>th</sup> Street (PHMC photo)



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



Figure 27: Warner Bros Film Exchange, 230 N. 13<sup>th</sup> Street.

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

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

<sup>18</sup> 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*.

<sup>19</sup> Deed Abstracts, Parcel 002-N10-203 and Parcel 002-N10-280, Philadelphia City Archives

<sup>20</sup> *Philadelphia Inquirer*, March 12, 1938.

<sup>21</sup> *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.<sup>22</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup> 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

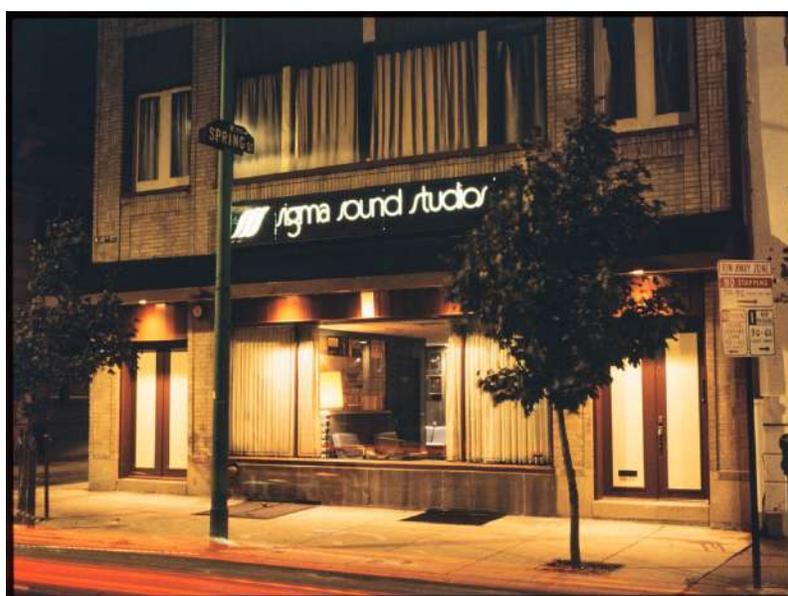
<sup>22</sup> Building Permit 52, Jan. 2, 1956; "City Demands RCA Collect Pay Tax in N.J.," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, June 20, 1959, p. 13.

<sup>23</sup> 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.<sup>24</sup> 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.

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

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<https://www.arpjournal.com/asarpwp/capturing-that-philadelphia-sound-a-technical-exploration-of-sigma-sound-studios/>

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Public comment received by the  
Historical Commission regarding the  
nomination of 210-12 N 12th Street

**save sigma**

mike tarsia &lt;sigmasoundz@gmail.com&gt;

Thu 8/20/2020 2:08 PM

To: Jon Farnham &lt;Jon.Farnham@phila.gov&gt;

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Hello,

I'm Michael Tarsia, son of Joseph the founder of Sigma Sound Studios. I'd like to address the people involved in the determination of the fate of the edifice on 212-214 N 12th street as well as the true meaning of it and the music community it served.

Joe Tarsia started his career at AMS, a small studio in south Philadelphia, and later moved to the historic Cameo Parkway label and studios [which went under the wrecking ball recently]. Many seminal hits were recorded at Cameo... The Twist, Meet Me on South Street [the hippest street in town] Mashed Potato Time, The Butterfly etc ...etc.

Well before my father starting a recording business at the 212-214 location, a visionary recording engineer, Emil Corsin owned a studio called Rec-O-Art studios on the top floor of the building. The music history of this location goes back a decade before Sigma was founded in 1968.

Joe Tarsia, whose background was in electronics, envisioned a studio that combined cutting edge technology with client services on an unprecedented level. From the day it opened in 1968, the studio created a buzz locally and nationally.

When a new generation of tape recorder came out, Sigma purchased it, when the technology wasn't available, Sigma personnel designed it. Earliest [if not first] automation in a recording console?...Multiple tape machines locking in a quick intuitive format?...Sigma Sound employees created it or installed it .

The hit records and artists who walked thru those doors are well know to all. But more importantly, during a time of racial strife throughout big cities in our country, Sigma Sound and the clients and musicians who worked there broke racial and cultural bias to create a rainbow "family " of music.

Musicians hailed from every neighborhood in Philadelphia. Blacks, Whites, Latinos, American Indians and Asians worked together. Gay, straight and even early transsexuals found a welcoming place behind its doors. Sigma was not just a legendary recording studio, but a place of inclusion during troubling times.

The Delaware Valley has been woeful in preserving its great musical history. Many iconic places no longer exist. Myself and my family believe a great home for the legacy of all music and music recording in our area as well as the history of music in the 20th century would be well served by saving Sigma Sound and making an interactive museum at the 212-214 location. Other cities have saved their historical musical legacy, let's see Philadelphia follow the tradition.

Thank you for your consideration,

Michael Tarsia and the Tarsia family

(No subject)

FunnyMomo Ye <holyboyke@gmail.com>

Thu 8/20/2020 7:12 PM

To: Jon Farnham <Jon.Farnham@phila.gov>

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Hi Kim,

I want to express my thought on why we should not approve Sigma Sound Studio nomination.

- 1) is nothing but a brick house in Chinatown community with no architectural uniqueness. There has been a blue sign across the street for remembering the building. I live around that area and don't see anyone "So call" Sigma Studio Supporters" came out to celebrate regarding Sigma Studio or ever walk by. 12<sup>th</sup> Street is full of car traffic and hardly people walk by that street
- 2) Historic preservation should be preserving something that currently has artistic value where 210-212 North 12<sup>th</sup> doesn't show any of that.
- 3) History and culture of Sigma Sound Studio shouldn't be limited to a location or physical building, it should be within one' self
- 4) Suspicious illegal/unethical motives behind the nomination. The plan behind the nomination possibly making the building into a museum. Base on people who called this #SaveSigma Movement. It is ridiculous someone can trying to "legally" force changes to someone else's property.
- 5) Possible conflict of interest behind existing owner and former building owner and may result in legal action
- 6) The nomination is unfair to the existing owner who unknowingly brought the building. The former building owner is possibly behind the nomination
- 7) Nomination supporters are using BIG # tactic trying to use Celebrity influences to persuade more innocent people to send email to each historic preservation planner as to put pressure on the committees. Where vise versa, the owner is a minority with English limitation

Finally, I hope you and rest of historic preservation planners and commissioners can denial this nomination.

Thank you,

## Sigmas Sound Studios - The Sound of Philadelphia

Carl Dixon <carl.dixon@melkman.com>

Fri 8/21/2020 4:59 AM

To: Kim Chantry <Kim.Chantry@Phila.gov>; laura.dispasquale@phila.gov <laura.dispasquale@phila.gov>; Jon Farnham <Jon.Farnham@phila.gov>; Shannon Garrison <Shannon.Garrison@Phila.gov>; Meredith Keller <Meredith.Keller@Phila.gov>; Allyson Mehley <Allyson.Mehley@Phila.gov>; Megan Schmitt <Megan.Schmitt@Phila.gov>

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Good morning everybody from London! Yes, the city that cast your lovely Liberty Bell, originally without a crack :- ) (The Whitechapel Bell Foundry)

I am writing to you as a long term Philly music fan of fifty years or so. Growing up in Hull, East Yorkshire, I ventured to the disco's in 1973 and heard recordings from all the big US cities that filled the dance floor. But similarly to Motown in the 60s, something was happening with your city's musical output at that time. Without a doubt the creativity from the song writer, artist, producer, musicians, backing vocalists, engineers, technical staff etc, affected the musical world as we know it. The songs and melodies will live for ever. It will not be long before theatrical productions capture what happened for another generation to enjoy and I even think one day, a film will be made showcasing the development through the 60s/70s of TSOP. I love the music so much, I became a song writer because of it!

The sad demise of the original Sigma Sound studio building gives a tear in my eye. That building alone, if opened as an historical place of interest in the city, would attract music fans globally. The development of sweet soul, disco and the house drum beat emanated in part from those who worked within that building. The list of local artists who recorded there alone is outstanding. Add to that list, artists from other cities and countries, you have a melting pot of one of the greatest institutions in the musical world. Whether Harold Melvin and the Blue Notes, The Three Degrees, Billy Paul, David Bowie and Dusty Springfield, they have all recorded at Sigma. I also think The Jacksons recorded there!

I therefore ask you to somehow make Sigma Sound Studios an historical place for those interested in Philly soul/music. It will enhance the tourism experience for visitors and be the respectable thing to do acknowledging all those who contributed to the phenomena. If a movie is made, the last thing I would want to see are shots of a derelict or demolished part of the city's musical history. Please don't let this slip through your fingers. Listen to ten songs from that era recorded there and if you get chance, speak to some of the musicians or artists who recorded in the studios and you will realise this is the time to make sure that Philadelphia really does care about its musical history. I visited the studio twice (1994/1999) as we also had family in Germantown. And if Reading Market is still there, what could be better, Sigma Studios with one of Bassett's famous ice creams!

Thank you

Carl Dixon

<https://gcc02.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.bandtraxs.com%2F&data=02%7C01%7Ckim.chantry%40phila.gov%7C8e7952e56534566da2208d845b08e0b%7C2046864f68ea497daf34a6629a6cd700%7C0%7C1%7C6373359>

[71889636524&amp;sdata=xkP88U3HHqcV%2FaefNjv%2BhApboXifk7Hc6WK5HrV9BOc%3D&amp;reserved=0](https://outlook.office365.com/mail/inbox/id/AAQkAGNIZDMxYTUyLWJkNmMtNGY0My05ZjRhLTM1M2IxODQ2ODFhNwAQAGqanQKGcqVLg9VWRe...)

**Fw: Saving Sigma Sound Studio building**

preservation &lt;preservation@Phila.gov&gt;

Sun 8/23/2020 1:02 PM

**To:** Kim Chantry <Kim.Chantry@Phila.gov>

---

**From:** joescor1@aol.com <joescor1@aol.com>**Sent:** Friday, August 21, 2020 4:50 PM**To:** preservation <preservation@Phila.gov>**Subject:** Saving Sigma Sound Studio building

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I am a local musician who grew up with the music created by the people of Sigma Sound Studio, it being the soundtrack for my life growing up. I feel that the building housing the former studio should be converted to a philadelphia-centric interactive museum to preserve the legacy of it's contributions to the musical arts. I consider Sigma Sound to be as historic as the buildings in Detroit and Memphis that housed Motown Records and Sun Records respectively. Don't let pure commercialism and commerce silence a huge part of Philadelphia musical history.

## SAVE SIGMA SOUND 212-214 N. 12TH STREET

tazsellers@silversound.com <tazsellers@silversound.com>

Fri 8/21/2020 10:48 AM

To: Jon Farnham <Jon.Farnham@phila.gov>

Cc: Kim Chantry <Kim.Chantry@Phila.gov>; Shannon Garrison <Shannon.Garrison@Phila.gov>; Laura Dipasquale <Laura.Dipasquale@Phila.gov>; MERIDETH.KELLER@PHILA.GOV <MERIDETH.KELLER@PHILA.GOV>; Allyson Mehley <Allyson.Mehley@Phila.gov>; Megan Schmitt <Megan.Schmitt@Phila.gov>

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Hello,

I am Taz Sellers audio engineer/producer/musician/DJ and a Philly native. I am writing to address you in the matter of the determination of the fate of the edifice and building at 212-214 N 12<sup>th</sup> Street.

That building and address hold unprecedented historical value to not only this city but to the long-standing musical community

In the city and beyond.

The city should be proud to preserve a building that put Philadelphia on the map internationally as a major player in the music industry that rivaled NYC, LA, and Nashville, I can guarantee you that in your lifetime you have listened to a song or album that

Was recorded, produced, mixed or edited at SIGMA Sound within the hallowed historical halls of the building from David Bowie, Michael Jackson, Billy Joel, Aretha Franklin and too many more to list them all

From the day it opened in 1968, the studio created a buzz locally and nationally.

When a new generation of tape recorder came out, Sigma purchased it, when the technology wasn't available, Sigma personnel designed it. Earliest [if not first] automation in a recording console?...Multiple tape machines locking in a quick intuitive format?...Sigma Sound employees created it or installed it .

The hit records and artists who walked thru those doors are well know to all. But more importantly, during a time of racial strife throughout big cities in our country, Sigma Sound and the clients and musicians who worked there broke racial and cultural bias to create a rainbow "family " of music.

Musicians hailed from every neighborhood in Philadelphia. Blacks, Whites, Latinos, American Indians and Asians worked together. Gay, straight and even early transsexuals found a welcoming place behind its doors. Sigma was not just a legendary recording studio, but a place of inclusion during troubling times.

And well before it became SIGMA Sound founded by Joe Tarsia in 1968 the musical history of the building goes back a decade a visionary recording engineer, Emil Corsin owned a studio called Rec-O-Art studios on the top floor of the building.

The Delaware Valley has been woeful in preserving its great musical history. Many iconic places no longer exist. I believe a great home for the legacy of all music and music recording in our area as well as the history of music in the 20th century would be well served by saving Sigma Sound and making an interactive museum at the 212-214 location. Other cities have saved their historical musical legacy, let's see Philadelphia follow the tradition.

Respectfully

Taz Sellers

August 21, 2020

Mr. Leonard Reuter,  
Law Department, City of Philadelphia  
One Parkway  
1515 Arch Street, 17<sup>th</sup> Floor  
Philadelphia, PA 19102

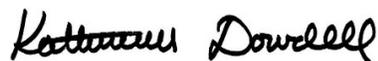
Dear Mr. Reuter;

Wednesday's Designation Committee review of the Sigma Sound Studio building ended in a puzzling and disappointing fashion. As the city's attorney for the Historical Commission, I was frustrated that you did not push harder in asking the building owner's representative, Mr. Tinari, to produce the letter he said he sent via US mail to the Historical Commission. Unless this was a letter hand scribed onto parchment, there's no reason I can think of that would not have allowed him to produce a copy of this letter fairly easily. It also frankly strains credulity that an attorney, someone who regularly does business with the city, would not understand that many offices are closed, and that mailing a letter to a closed office might not be the best way to communicate important information, as Dr. Farnham pointed out. Mr. Tinari was let off the hook far too easily.

While I will not question that you were correct in allowing the continuance request even after the review of this nomination had started, this is atypical in my experience. At other public meetings run by the city, continuance requests must be made in advance, or at the very start of the meeting, not after consideration of the relevant issue has begun. Additionally, it was frustrating to see the committee give up so quickly. To frequent followers of nominations and designations, it seems highly unlikely that Mr. Tinari or the building owner would be able to present a convincing argument that Sigma Sound is not significant in contemporary musical history. It is far more likely, as Patrick Grossi pointed out, that the owner's objections are not related to the significance of the site, but to other issues that fall under the purview of the full Commission. Therefore, unless Mr. Tinari had been able to produce compelling – or any – evidence, the Designation Committee should have been encouraged to stay on track, review the nomination for historical significance, and then let the full Commission make the decisions regarding continuing the case, remanding the case back to the Designation Committee, or hearing and voting on it.

Mr. Tinari and the building owner may have legitimate questions and concerns regarding this nomination. There is obviously no objection to those. However, the public also has a legitimate interest here – in fact, that interest is the basis of our preservation ordinance. When an owner is so easily allowed to alter the process with a simple request, for which they have provided weak reasoning and no supporting evidence, it feels unfair, as if there are two sets of rules – one for well-connected and well-lawyered, and one for the rest of us.

Very truly yours,



Katherine Dowdell, AIA

Cc: Jonathan Farnham, PhD, Executive Director  
All members of the Designation Committee  
Patrick Grossi, Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia

## Sigma Sound Studios

rwfarnkopf <rwfarnkopf@verizon.net>

Fri 8/21/2020 8:26 AM

To: Kim Chantry <Kim.Chantry@Phila.gov>

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This recording studio was the biggest thing for years in music. There Joe Tarsia recorded just about every band that was important to this city. He also built, in Sigma the very first automated recording board. This changed the entire recording industry.

From the early days recording the song South Street to the famous David Bowie, they all came to Joe Tarsia and trusted him with hard earned money.

This building still holds the history of the entire recording industry within its walls.

Don't let it be wiped away. Please save this place so people here in Philadelphia can go there and see where all this took place.

Thanks  
Rick Farnkopf

Sent from my Verizon, Samsung Galaxy smartphone

Sent from my Verizon, Samsung Galaxy smartphone

August 22, 2020

Jonathan E. Farnham, Ph.D.  
Executive Director  
Philadelphia Historical Commission  
Jon.Farnham@phila.gov

Dear Mr. Farnham,

My name is Bruce Bluestein and I am writing to you today to urge you to preserve the building located at 212 N 12th St, Philadelphia, PA. That building housed Sigma Sound Studios for over three decades and is an important part of Philadelphia history.

Opened in 1968 by Joseph Tarsia, it quickly became the premiere recording studio in the Philadelphia area. Joe was not only an enormously talented engineer but also an innovator when it came to the technical aspects of recording. Most well known is that Sigma was the first to offer 24 Track recording and to successfully use console automation to mix, but there was so much more to Sigma than the technical advances.

Over the years, Sigma Sound evolved into a community of people making music together as a family. Together with legendary producers, Kenny Gamble, Leon Huff and Thom Bell, the team of engineers and technical staff at Sigma went on to record thousands of hits from amazing artists including Teddy Pendergrass, The O'Jays, Lou Rawls, The Stylistics, The Trammps (Disco Inferno), MFSB (Mother Father Sister Brother), Jerry Butler, Harold Melvin & the Blue Notes, McFadden & Whitehead (Ain't No Stoppin' Us Now) and of course, David Bowie. So many records cut at Sigma achieved gold or platinum in sales and The Sound of Philadelphia (TSOP) was heard around the world.

I worked at Sigma Sound during the 1970s and I can honestly say it was the best time of my life. The feeling of family and the amount of sheer talent that surrounded me every day was simply amazing. Best of all, I had the opportunity to work directly with Joe Tarsia for a while. He was not only an incredibly talented recording engineer, he was an amazing and kind person who genuinely cared about people. He loved what he did and he loved his studio. He would come into the control room, sit down at the console and literally make magic. The sound that came out of the studio monitors was a mixture of the pure talent in the studio and the amazing ears and finesse possessed by Joe. It was perfect! I not only learned about recording, I learned important lessons about life from Joe and I tell him to this day how much he taught me when I was just in my 20s. Being the person he is, he is always gracious and never gives himself the credit he so richly deserves.

I can tell you with certainty that everyone who walked through the doors of Sigma Sound retain a close, special connection in their heart with that building and what it stood for.

The walls are filled with not only the music of thousands of history making sessions but with the warm feelings shared by the artists, the musicians and the entire staff that made up the Sigma family.

This building is a landmark that embodies the very spirit of Philadelphia, the music of an era that can be heard right now by just turning on a radio when you're driving around Philly in your car. The songs are timeless and the good feelings and good times shared by everyone who listened or danced to the music are priceless.

I want you to know that from those studios located in that corner building at 212 N 12th Street came a piece of Philadelphia history that is of significant importance to the people of this great city. It's the music that, at its most basic, is still the heartbeat of this city. This building deserves to be preserved and to remain a symbol of the diversity and the soul of Philadelphia. Other cities have proudly preserved their iconic recording studios and Philadelphia should be no different. As for me, I would be so grateful if I could once again see this building that I used to walk into everyday and where I was part of something so much bigger than I could ever imagine, be restored and preserved for future generations.

To give that gift to the artists, staff and the beneficiaries of the songs that were created there and which energized generations, would be cause for celebration. Sigma Sound changed lives, a lot of lives and something so positive and uplifting should be cared for and preserved for all to see and experience. The Sigma story is one of diverse people coming together to create music and realize their dreams. I hope each of you will listen to the voices of the past as well as the future as you make your decision whether to save this iconic building for not only Philadelphians but for all who will come to witness this place where music history was made.

Warmest Regards,  
Bruce Bluestein



CC:

Kim Chantry	Historic Preservation Planner II	<a href="mailto:kim.chantry@phila.gov">kim.chantry@phila.gov</a>
Laura DiPasquale	Historic Preservation Planner II	<a href="mailto:laura.dipasquale@phila.gov">laura.dipasquale@phila.gov</a>
Shannon Garrison	Historic Preservation Planner I	<a href="mailto:shannon.garrison@phila.gov">shannon.garrison@phila.gov</a>
Meredith Keller	Historic Preservation Planner II	<a href="mailto:meredith.keller@phila.gov">meredith.keller@phila.gov</a>
Allyson Mehley	Historic Preservation Planner II	<a href="mailto:allyson.mehley@phila.gov">allyson.mehley@phila.gov</a>
Megan Cross Schmitt	Historic Preservation Planner II	<a href="mailto:megan.schmitt@phila.gov">megan.schmitt@phila.gov</a>

## Sigma Sound Studios Building Historic Designation

Randall Grass <rfgrass@comcast.net>

Sat 8/22/2020 12:19 PM

To: Kim Chantry <Kim.Chantry@Phila.gov>

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Dear Ms. Chantry:

I understand that the building on N. 12th St. that housed Sigma Sound is being considered for designation as a historic building. I am writing to strongly urge that it be given this status.

I am speaking as General Manage of the independent record company Shanachie Entertainment, as a long-time Philadelphia area musician, as a former music journalist and former on-air host at WXPB-FM in Philadelphia, as well as long-time Philadelphia resident. I have utilized the studio for various music projects so I am intimately familiar with it and its place in the music industry in general and the Philadelphia music scene in particular.

The historical importance of Sigma Sound cannot be overstated. It is synonymous with the rise of "The Sound of Philadelphia", which in the 70's rivaled Motown as the per-eminent force in African-American popular music. What many Americans don't realize is that internationally, in the 70's, The Sound of Philadelphia arguably surpassed Motown. Millions of people around the world were moved by the music created in Philadelphia. There are many people who would make a pilgrimage to come to Philadelphia to visit Sigma Sound if there was a museum to come to. Sigma, aside from being one of the finest and most important American recording studios from the 1960's through the 1990's, was one of the epicenters of Philadelphia music history.

Philadelphia has, at different times, been the leading city for jazz, gospel, R & B, rock 'n' roll and neo-soul. Yet the City of Philadelphia has done a terrible job of preserving, promoting and celebrating that legacy. The site of Sigma Sound is the only major recording studio site left to be preserved in Philadelphia; the old Cameo-Parkway studios and Philadelphia International studios are gone. The Earle Theater is gone. The sites of major influential jazz clubs--The Showboat, Pep's, The Emerson Lounge , places where John Coltrane, Dizzy Gillespie and other giants played--are either gone or renovated out of recognition. The Uptown Theater--Philadelphia's equivalent of the famed Apollo Theater--has laid dormant and decaying on North Broad St. for decades. Designating Sigma Sound as a historic landmark, and hopefully developing it as destination cultural site, is one of the last opportunities we have to preserve and celebrate a major part of Philadelphia's cultural history and legacy.

I urge you to take the necessary action to make this happen. If I can supply any more information, please do let me know. I would be happy to make an in-person presentation if that would be helpful.

Sincerely,

Randall Grass  
539 Pelham Rd.  
Philadelphia, PA 19119  
609-560-8512  
rfgrass@comcast.net

Dear Ms. Chantry,

I am writing this letter in support of the preservation of the building that once housed the famed Sigma Sound Studios.

Sigma Sound Studios – the place where the soundtrack of my youth and young adult life was recorded. The gods were smiling down on Joe Tarsia when he joined forces with Kenny Gamble, Leon Huff, and Thom Bell to form a relationship, and as a result, created a sound that would shake up the music world. The success of Gamble, Huff and Bell translated into the success of Sigma Sound. The whole world heard the unique and magically pristine sound emanating from 212 N. 12th St. and wanted in on it. David Bowie, Billy Joel, Stevie Wonder, and Aretha Franklin are just a few of the A listers that have recorded there.

The success of Gamble, Huff & Bell's stable of stars, such as Teddy Pendergrass, The O'Jay's, Billy Paul, The Spinners, and The Stylistics enabled Sigma to attract the best of the best in the world of music. Philadelphia was the hottest destination in the music world during 1970's and early 1980's.

It's a shame that a city, once the epicenter of the music world in the 1970's and early 1980's, doesn't have a museum to commemorate its rich musical history. Detroit has Hitsville, USA; Memphis has the Stax Museum of American Soul Music; Nashville has the Musicians Hall of Fame; and let us not forget – the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland. The former location of Sigma Sound would be the perfect location for such a museum in Philadelphia, which not only would present the rich musical history of the studio itself, but also its number one client: Philadelphia International

Records.

Philadelphia, like countless other cities in America, are foresaking their national treasures in favor of profits from faceless condominiums and office buildings. One building could reinstate the heart and soul of the city by designating this building – a National Historical site; and with the addition of a museum dedicated to this city's rich contribution to the music industry, this location will undoubtedly become a major tourist attraction and will add a new revenue stream the city's never seen before!

Sincerely,

Russell C. Martin