

Chicago's Best Record Stores for Dance and Experimental Music Aficionados (Dedicated to Mark Fisher)

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Chicago's record store scene is a treasure trove for fans of dance beats and avant-garde sounds. From legendary house music hubs to niche experimental boutiques, each shop has its own vibe and specialty. Below we review five standout Chicago record stores – **Signal Records**, **Gramophone Records**, **Reckless Records**, **Shuga Records**, and **Dusty Groove** – focusing on what makes them essential stops for electronic dance music aficionados and lovers of experimental noise.

1 **Signal Records – The New Experimental Out- post**

Signal Records is one of Chicago's newer record stores, opened in 2022 by Blake Karlson (of the Chicago Research label) in Logan Square. The shop quickly made a name with its *confrontationally aloof* aura – a friend who played shows with owner Blake jokingly

described the staff's vibe as such. Specializing in used and hard-to-find vinyl, Signal puts a spotlight on post-punk, industrial, global and experimental music. In fact, Karlson packed the store with around 20,000 LPs from his own collection, aiming to ensure "*anyone who walks in can walk out with a cool record*" across genres.

Despite branding itself as an experimental/noise haven, some hardcore noise fans might find Signal's selection a bit *safe*. The store carries underground dance releases and industrial artists, but one might not find the most extreme noise acts (for example, Japanese noise legend **Masonna** or power electronics pioneers like **Whitehouse**). Instead, the experimental bins lean toward slightly more accessible industrial fare – e.g. *Cut Hands* (a project of Whitehouse's William Bennett) or early industrial group **SPK** – rather than the full spectrum of noise. During one visit, an employee (notably the producer **Jason Letkiewicz** in his Steve Summers persona) wasn't even aware they stocked a certain record or that Detroit techno icon Carl Craig once used the alias **BFC** – a surprising gap in knowledge for a purported experimental shop. That said, Signal excels in its core domains: post-punk, EBM, and global obscurities. With a second location now open in Wicker Park (after acquiring the inventory of the defunct Dave's Records), Signal is expanding its reach. Techno and electro heads will find some gems here, but for a deeper dance selection, many turn to Chicago's more established stores below.

2 Gramophone Records – Chicago’s House Music Mecca

Gramophone Records is one of Chicago’s most legendary record shops, with a pedigree stretching back to 1969. Originally a folk and blues store, it transformed in the 1980s into the city’s **house music headquarters**, becoming the first local shop devoted to DJ-ready dance vinyl. Walking into Gramophone today is like stepping into a DJ’s paradise – *“the bottomless record bag of a cool Berlin DJ,”* as one review aptly put it. Indeed, the crates are packed with bleeding-edge 12 singles from micro-labels around the globe, spanning disco, deep house, techno and whatever new subgenre producers dream up in their studios. Gramophone’s focus remains squarely on electronic music: house, techno, hip-hop, and it has been instrumental in promoting the Chicago house sound worldwide.

Beyond its unrivaled selection, Gramophone exudes an all-heart-and-soul atmosphere. Longtime owner **Michael Serafini** (a veteran Chicago DJ) and his staff are famously knowledgeable yet unpretentious. In fact, the staff’s welcoming attitude is frequently praised – a refreshing contrast to the elitism sometimes found in dance music circles. On a recent visit, when asked if he knew of 90s NYC house producer **Pal Joey**, a Gramophone staffer smiled and said, *“Of course!”* before enthusiastically digging up one of Joey’s records from their back stock. This kind of passion and approachability defines the Gramophone experience. It truly feels like a community hub: you might bump into local

DJs flipping through the new imports, or catch an impromptu conversation about Chicago’s club history. **Stickers** and other goodies often find their way into customers’ hands as tokens of appreciation. In short, Gramophone is *the mecca of dance music in Chicago* – if it’s a house or techno record worth having, chances are high it’s in these racks. From rare classic Chicago house cuts to the latest European techno white labels, Gramophone delivers, all with a smile.

3 Reckless Records – The Subculture Institution

Reckless Records is a Chicago institution for *all things subculture*. Founded in London and planted in Chicago in 1989, Reckless now operates three city locations (Loop, Lakeview, and Wicker Park) and has the widest reach of any local record retailer. In fact, its Wicker Park store was so iconic in the ’90s that it inspired the record shop in the film *High Fidelity*. Stepping into Reckless, you’ll find a bit of everything: the latest indie rock releases on vinyl and CD, classic punk 7s, metal and jazz staples, and plenty of used gems cycling through daily. Their selection is both wide and deep, with *stacks of pre-owned rock, jazz, metal and experimental LPs* for crate-diggers to flip through. The knowledgeable staff (many are musicians themselves) and the store’s long-running cred in the scene give it a timeless “college town record shop” vibe – unpolished, eclectic, and endlessly rewarding.

For fans of experimental music, Reckless offers an **excellent**

experimental section that arguably outshines Signal's. Local noise, drone, avant-jazz, and obscure DIY electronics are well-represented – indeed, I even found records of my own music on small labels (Index Clean and Regional Bears) stocked here, reflecting Reckless's support for local experimental artists. This commitment to underground sounds is part of what makes Reckless beloved by Chicago's subcultural communities. However, when it comes to the dance genres (techno, house, electro), Reckless's selection is solid but limited compared to the dance-focused shops. You'll find some techno/house 12s, often leaning toward classic reissues or Clone releases, but the bins aren't as overflowing with the newest import 12s as at Gramophone. One secret weapon is an employee named Dave, who periodically beefs up Reckless's dance section with direct imports from Dutch distributor Clone – meaning you might luck into a fresh haul of European techno/electro once a month thanks to his efforts. Overall, Reckless is the “*standard*” alternative record store: if your tastes span multiple genres (from post-punk to experimental noise to classic Chicago indie), this is a must-visit. For pure dance music hunters, Reckless is a good supplementary stop, but you'll likely find the motherlode at Gramophone or Shuga.

4 Shuga Records – The All-Encompassing Vinyl Warehouse

Shuga Records has quickly earned a reputation as the **largest** and one of the most comprehensive record stores in Chicago. Located in Wicker Park (with a second outpost in Logan Square),

Shuga opened in the mid-2010s after founder Adam “DJ Shuga Rose” Rosen spent years searching for the perfect space. The result was worth the wait: the Wicker Park shop now boasts **close to 20,000 records on-site** – all exclusive to the store – plus thousands more available through their online catalog. The inventory is impressively diverse and well-organized, so much so that *if you’re hunting for an obscure album, chances are you’ll find it here amid the neatly arranged racks.*

For dance music aficionados, Shuga offers a breadth that rivals Gramophone’s. The store dedicates ample space to genres like **Chicago house, acid house, tech-house, techno, and electro**, alongside rock, hip-hop, and beyond. Customers have noted that Shuga’s Wicker Park location in particular carries a deeper selection of techno and electro than many competitors – a claim even the staff will affirm if you call ahead. In practice, Shuga’s dance section is extensive: you might see bins labeled for *Acid*, *Chicago Classics*, *Detroit Techno*, *UK Garage*, etc., reflecting a curatorial love for all facets of club music. Meanwhile, Shuga’s overall scale means they also stock what other stores might miss – from vintage soul 45s to indie rock cassettes – making it a paradise for eclectic collectors. Despite its vast inventory, the store maintains a friendly vibe; staff are helpful and often fellow music enthusiasts ready to chat about the latest reissue or recommend a hidden gem. If Gramophone is the spiritual hub of house music, Shuga is the sprawling marketplace where **quantity meets quality**. Many locals rank Gramophone as the city’s top dance music spot (for its historical gravitas), but they’ll tell you Shuga is not far behind – and for sheer volume of vinyl, Shuga stands

unmatched in Chicago.

5 Dusty Groove – Crate-Digging for the Truly Obscure

Dusty Groove is an **art curator’s dream** – a store devoted to the obscure, the global, and the truly adventurous. Located in Wicker Park and operating since the 1990s (with roots as an on-line seller), Dusty Groove defies the stereotypical “dusty” record shop image by being *bright, clean, and inviting*. Its name hints at its specialty: those rare global grooves and eclectic sounds that DJs and collectors obsess over. Walk in, and you’ll find smartly curated sections for **Tropicalia, Afrobeat, reggae, vintage soul, French pop, blues, and jazz**, among others. It’s the kind of place where one minute you’re thumbing through Brazilian funk LPs, and the next you’re examining a Nigerian Afro-rock album or a 60s Thai pop compilation – in other words, *exactly* the kind of selection you’d need to soundtrack a Quentin Tarantino film. The bins are labeled with care, and new arrivals (often from far-flung genres) appear constantly, making every visit an exploration.

Beyond its well-known strengths in soul, funk, and world music, Dusty Groove holds a special status for avant-garde collectors. As I put it, if you’re interested in “**REAL music, i.e. *Kunstmusik***” – the experimental art music tradition – Dusty Groove is essentially the **only store in Chicago** that consistently carries it. Indeed, alongside funk 45s and jazz rarities, you might spot LPs by Austrian avant-garde artists like **Gerhard Rühm**

or **Christian Attersee**, free-improv records by **Sven-Åke Johansson**, or other esoteric releases (for instance, anything on the German *Freie Musik Presse* label). These are the kinds of titles so niche that even dedicated experimental shops might not bother, yet Dusty Groove curates them for the discerning few. This commitment to “out there” music truly sets Dusty Groove apart – it treats a rare piece of European sound art with the same respect as a classic Blue Note jazz LP. In short, Dusty Groove is *the* destination for **collectors of obscure and global music**. Whether you define “real music” as Fela Kuti deep cuts, vintage Sun Ra albums, or an ultra-limited avant-garde sound art pressing, this shop likely has you covered. And all of it is served up in a welcoming, well-lit space that feels part record store, part cultural archive.

Conclusion

Chicago’s record stores each cater to different corners of the music universe. **Signal Records** offers a fresh haven for post-punk and industrial enthusiasts, though it’s still finding its footing in the deepest experimental niches. **Gramophone Records** remains the beating heart of the city’s dance music scene – historically rich and passionately staffed. **Reckless Records** is the all-around subculture shop, balancing breadth with a great experimental selection, even if it cedes the dance crown to the specialists. **Shuga Records** brings a huge inventory and wide tent approach, ensuring that DJs and collectors of all stripes can uncover treasures. And **Dusty Groove** stands alone for glo-

betrotting crate-diggers and avant-garde aficionados seeking the *realest* of “real music.” Together, these stores make Chicago a vinyl lover’s paradise, each contributing its own flavor to a city that thrives on musical diversity and discovery.