



_PHOTOS: COURTESY OF COURTNEY JAMES
Courtney James (centre) directs a shoot for his documentary, *Global Groove Network*.
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The Night Shift: Get into the Groove

A local filmmaker is using Kickstarter to raise funds for the final cut of *Global Groove Network*, a documentary chronicling the ever-evolving fandom and religious experience around the DJ culture—with big love for Toronto's own scene.

BY: PAUL AGUIRRE-LIVINGSTON

Courtney James loves music. And dancing. A lot. So much so that he made a documentary about it, aptly titled *Global Groove Network*. For the past six years, James has been travelling and immersing himself in the intoxicating mythology surrounding DJs and their culture. The project took him on a journey to find the industry's silent stars, those who help others worship through music and create the soundtracks of our lives. He's gone to Burning Man, the annual pop-up festival of "radical self expression and self-reliance" in the Black Rock Desert of Nevada. He's explored the shores of Ibiza. He's partied in Miami. He's intensely serious about the profound impact dance music can have on people, despite the frivolity often associated with "hard partying" and "this lifestyle."

But for all its international ambitions, *Global Groove Network* is rooted firmly here in the 416. James has a typically Toronto story in that he's, well, not from here. The Peterborough-area native arrived after a year of feeling "lost" while attending McMaster University. In 1997, he came to the Big Smoke in hopes of pursuing a career in television and film; he ended up working at East Side Mario's on Front Street. "This moment in time was the moment that inspired the film," he remembers. "I made the greatest connection with my co-workers in all facets of our life." James recounts that moment in the late '90s when the electronic-music scene was "blowing up" in Toronto with huge parties, events, and clubs like Industry, his favourite haunt back in the day. This scene helped shape the city's future, and a filmmaker with a passion project was born. (James also found love on dancefloor with his wife of six years.)

It hasn't always been easy listening, though, as *Global Groove Network* has remained largely self-financed through odd jobs until this point. "When I decided to do this film, I knew it was going to be a self-financed feature because it's tough as the new guy to get funding through grants for a topic like this," James says. Now that the majority of the documentary has been completed, James has mounted a Kickstarter campaign to help fund the post-production and deliver the final cut to a distributor. Until Feb. 20, James hopes to reach his goal of \$15,000 in pledges. (At press time, the running tally is about \$3,400.) There are some incentives: Donors receive a copy of the film and, if the goal is not reached, all money raised is refunded.

James' current cut of the film, though, is worth your time. I was able to watch it last weekend, and found its charm lays largely in the fact that it's an insightful personal memoir from a lover of music exploring his own culture almost as an outsider to all these scenes. He's also interviewed some big names, from locals Manzone & Strong to U.K. legend Pete Tong and beyond. He even shows some love for places like Footwork, interviewing its owners on the

intricacies of basing their business on other people's pleasure. (Plus, *Global Groove Network* is definitely better than that David Guetta doc.)

In hopes of helping someone start the year off right with a goal accomplished, I chatted with James about the film and what he's learned from being entrenched in DJ culture. It leaves me with one thought: Does a culture even have a nightlife without the proverbial DJ figurehead? "Dance music is all about a communal experience," says James. I'd say we still owe a helluva lot to the people working behind the decks and scenes.

Describe the *Global Groove Network* and its premise: 60 seconds—go!

This is a film about the power of music. It's a look at the soundtracks we create to those moments *you* make. Everyone has a DJ in their own life. Welcome to the journey where music shapes your identity. Welcome to the *Global Groove Network*.

You've been working on the project for six years. What do you hope to accomplish with the film?

I hope people put themselves in my shoes for 90 minutes and reflect on the music, the friends, the family, and the experiences from their past. I base all my creative decisions on that premise, and try to look at the aspects I want to cover with the DJs and the locales from there. When I started the film, it was very free-form because you have to get the DJ and "music historian" perspective first. Not everyone is great on camera, even though they are a great talent in what they do, so I'm trying to be respectful with the people I've used and not used. I have over 300 hours of footage, and it's amazing what can be said on camera. It's really meaningful to me, and it's my love letter to the Toronto dance-music community and the global scene.

You travelled a lot for the project. What was your favourite place to visit, music and nightlife-wise?

My favourite place is Burning Man, by far. This is the ultimate tribal gathering. I can't really describe it, but it's a great chapter in the film visually, and with the people that shared their stories with me.

You describe wanting to see "DJ culture" from the inside. What do you find so captivating? In your opinion, what do you think it takes to be a professional DJ?

During the era I grew up in, the idea of the DJ was more about performance. The reality today is that the DJ is looked at as a producer. I think this evolution is great because options are what give EDM some history, making it something worth talking about. It's all about cycles when it comes to dance music that began in the disco days. This music was built on positive energy and a place where you can just communicate with people through music. DJ culture is captivating because of this unspoken communication through dance beats. People who have gone to a festival or a killer club know the vibe. When those dance beats from the DJ are just "working"—and you watch everyone just connect emotionally by smiling or grinding—it really is something to

experience.



Global Groove Network features a lot of talent, from Swedish House Mafia to Pete Tong to Manzone & Strong. What did you learn through your interviews?

One thing I can take away from all of them is that they really love what they do. "Passion" is the best way to describe what these people are all about when it comes to the music.

You connected with one of your early-adulthood idols, DJ Dan, and went to the Winter Music Conference in Miami.

This was a once-in-a-lifetime moments for someone. You send an email, you pour your heart out, and he responds. We had an amazing time together. I will always appreciate him making that extra time for me by making this appearance and sharing his life on camera. He told me what a great film it turned out to be. I can't tell you, after all the financial struggles and insecurities... I was a happy camper!

I found your exploration of the record shop to be a highly insightful addition to the film and the culture. Elaborate for potential viewers.

Think of iTunes, but actually talking to people about the music you love. This was like the coffee-shop sessions of the past for people in the scene. The DJs came in every Thursday picking up the new records and socializing like a family. It's funny how we are more connected than ever with society today, but we all live our lives a little more disconnected face to face.

We're also able to see you return to your own heyday for a minute in the film. Do you still go out?

I definitely don't go out as much but, when I do, I'm all about Footwork and Moskito right now. I'm going out this weekend to interview and check out Sydney Blu at Footwork Jan. 11. This is going to be a killer night of beats!

Courtney James' Kickstarter campaign runs until Feb. 20.

TAGS Courtney James, EDM, Global Groove Network, Kickstarter, Manzone & Strong, Pete Tong, Swedish House Mafia, The Night Shift

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