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Dance culture caught on film

L.A.-based director Jason Rem's documentary is a thorough history

By **YURI WUENSCH**, EDMONTON SUN

Every spring, Miami's Winter Music Conference welcomes the world's best DJs and producers, labels, gear manufacturers and legions of electronic-music fans for a week of revelry at clubs along South Beach and events like the 50,000-person-strong Ultrafest dance-music festival.

The "conference" in Winter Music Conference, however, can be a bit of a misnomer.

While there is an actual conference - complete with seminars ranging from music production to promotion - most of the dance industry's true movers and shakers don't attend unless they're booked as speakers.

Otherwise, as one big-time booking agency head told me, the conference itself is mostly for chumps: karaoke and wedding DJs.

The conference aside, there's also a myth that having so many key industry players in the same place at the same time facilitates business being done, deals being brokered and partnerships forged. But when I was "working" in Miami in 2002, I never saw any evidence of it, unless partying counts as some kind of enterprise.

The WMC is a lot of fun, though, and, for L.A.-based director Jason Rem, inspirational, too.

Rem also hit the conference for the first time in 2002 and was captivated, particularly by the passion of the DJs and producers he spoke with.

So struck, he decided to return a year later to film *Put the Needle on the Record*, a documentary about dance culture.

It wasn't a new idea; films about "the scene" have been done before with varying degrees of success.

Another documentary, 2004's *Peace, Love & Beats* also used the Miami conference as a backdrop, but its filmmakers were more consumed with getting the red-carpet treatment than anything approaching journalism. Most of the situations in the film are both concocted and contrived.

Hollywood took a saccharine stab at it with *Groove* in 2000, roughly the same point in time when "electronica" went into a major slump. Centred in Ibiza, *It's All Gone Pete Tong*, directed by Calgary's Michael Dowse (Fubar), was far more accurate, scathing and even depressing.

While other electronic-music documentaries like *Modulations* and *Better Living Through Circuitry* are competent, *Put the Needle on the Record* is a more thorough history of dance culture. It's corroborating for those who know their stuff and enlightening for those who don't.

From the origins of Kraftwerk techno and Chicago house to the rise of rave culture in the U.K. and the latest DJ technology, Rem covers all the bases. Not knowing any better, actually worked in the film's favour.

"I didn't really know anything about the dance scene until I went to Miami and made this movie," he explains.

"My father was a history teacher and I think that background along with being someone who didn't know as much helped. In the beginning, the things that interested me were the basics, which is what really hit home."

He also didn't presume to write the film's narrative himself, instead letting the DJs (from old-school NYC disco heads like Francois Kevorkian through to superstars like Paul Oakenfold) tell the story through a series of interviews.

"That was important," Rem says. "I felt like if I didn't know that much about this, who am I to put pen to paper? Because everybody spoke so uniquely about the same subject, it enabled us to assemble an entertaining film."

While it took Rem a couple years to shop the film around, he says the overwhelming response thus far has made up for it, winning a variety of awards at smaller film festivals and enabling him to screen it in places as far away as Morocco.

The strength of the documentary, he says, is that it deciphers certain aspects of the dance scene without losing the intangible qualities that have made it a global phenomenon.

"You can't really put your finger on it and when you do, it moves in another direction. But that's the great thing - it hasn't been spoiled."

Put the Needle on the Record is out now on DVD.