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Miami Vices

NYC DJs invade the beaches, yachts, and Radio Shacks of South Beach's famed Winter Music Conference

by **Makkada B. Selah**

April 3rd, 2007 12:21 PM

"You must be out of your mind," DJ Reborn says flatly, as the emcee of her showcase at the Marlin Hotel in South Beach—part of this year's Winter Music Conference, the largest electronic and dance-music event in the world—tries to convince her to play only two or three songs because another DJ that's going on after her has "somewhere else to be."

The lobby of the hotel is so full and overflowing that the police are outside attempting to "keep the sidewalk clear," they say. It's hard to hear anything the emcee's saying anyway; there are so many people dancing their asses off, doing handstands and shouting.

"First of all, you didn't ask another DJ to only play two songs," Reborn recalls telling the befuddled guy, one hand on her hip, the other clutching her record bag. "Secondly, if you had been on your job, we would have been on hours ago, and this would be a non-issue. So what I'm gonna do is, I'm gonna play my set." She gets on the decks, kicking things off with "Say It Loud (I'm Black and I'm Proud)." This is, after all, a James Brown tribute at WMC, a weeklong collection of parties and showcases held every March. Reborn, who's from Brooklyn, is part of an all-female DJ crew called Ubiquita NYC along with DJ Selly and DJ Moni, and has spun on BET's *Rap City* four times; Moni remixed this year's *Suite 903* soul compilation put out by *The Fader* magazine.

"DJ'ing can be such a boys' club sometimes," Reborn says a week later. "I don't think they were really giving us our props on the mic. They wanted to talk about all the other DJs coming up, but not us."

Earlier that night, her partner, DJ Moni, had the whole place jumping with a slew of Latin remixes of James Brown stuff like "Funky Drummer" and "Give It Up or Turn It Loose." White labels. Unauthorized. Looking back, she's a little more diplomatic about how things went down. "I told the emcee Reborn's name in case he didn't know, so he could shout her out," Moni says. "We look out for each other."

Moni's got a really long set coming up in the Philippines, where she's spinning a total Latin-house Afro-percussive set during a big Easter



Ladies of Ubiquita

Photograph by Howard Huang; styling by Curtis Davis for Ken Barboza Associates; hair by Hair Q Hardy for Illusions; makeup by JoJo using MAC cosmetics. On DJ Moni (left): camouflage jumper by Younique; D&G bikini top courtesy Albrights; shoes by BCBG; jewelry by Satellite; suede cuff by Eenamaria. On DJ Selly (middle): top by Younique; bikini top by Red Carver available at figleaves.com; track pants by Old Navy; leg warmers by H&M; boots by Cassadei; jewelry by Satellite; sunglasses by D&G courtesy Albrights. On DJ Reborn (right): swimsuit by Lablanca available at figleaves.com; shorts and belt by Nanette Lapore; bangles by Alexis Bittar and sunglasses by Dyce both courtesy Albrights.

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holiday party festival. She's looking to get her hands on a particular record while she's here at the conference, just for that show. "Louie Vega has this new track out now, which is fire," she says. "It's called 'Mi Gente.' It's a remix of one of his uncle's [Héctor Lavoe's] songs. I love it. I e-mailed him, and he told me to come to Miami to the party he's throwing."

Across the turquoise waters of Biscayne Bay, downtown Miami's Y Ultra Lounge is a \$28 million club in the middle of the 'hood—the kind of neighborhood where you pay a street bum a dollar so he'll watch your car just to make sure "nothing happens," but by the time you come back out of the club at 4 or 5 a.m., he won't be around anymore. (Putting a posh nightclub in the middle of a neighborhood with roaming crackheads is what the city of Miami calls "revitalization.") Tonight the Latin press are out in droves to catch Nuyorican Don Dada Louie Vega—the famed Bronx-bred DJ, bandleader, and producer—as he rolls into the place, 50-deep, wearing an alligator-leather fedora and a full-length leather coat. Cameras flash like lightning.

Vega, the nephew of "King of Salsa" Héctor Lavoe and the son of saxophonist Louie Vega Sr., became a fixture at classic New York clubs like the Palladium, 10-18, and the Tunnel in the late '80s. He and Kenny "Dope" Gonzales, his production partner in Masters at Work, have created a sound that combines hip-hop, jazz, Latin, and African, along with underground house. More recently, Vega won a Grammy in 2005 for *Mayfield: Remixed—The Curtis Mayfield Collection*, and just this year was invited by Cirque du Soleil to write a new track, "One Dream," for the Super Bowl pre-game show. "And we played it live with them on television in front of 73 million viewers," he recalls later, spooning sugar into his cappuccino. "So that was amazing."

People have been talking about this Masters at Work party for days. DJ Jazzy Jeff and New York's Terry Hunter open. There's this tall, lanky, druid

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Illustration by McCaul

vibe.

Don't just stand there. Move yr. ass. Eventually, one of Jazzy Jeff's handlers yells at the guy and tells him to stop taking pictures. This guy's got enough for a whole damn photo album.

But when Louie and Kenny get on the decks, camera-brandishing people climb the DJ booth like spiders. A private party is going on in the booth itself, which is big enough to fit maybe 100 people. Louie's taking pictures with his wife, Anané, and enjoying champagne toasts with his friends. The smoke machine is cool. The man in a suit walking through the club and shining a pin-light into people's faces is not. At around 4 a.m., it starts to rain. But in order to get a gift bag with the "Mi Gente" 12-inch, you have to stay until the very end, like Alim, a 33-year-old die-hard MAW fan.

"I was ready for this night to go down in history," he says. "But this was really soft compared to what I'm used to with them. I gotta say that Louie is one of my heroes, but what Louie played didn't really catch tonight. A lot of my friends went to the Shelter NYC party, and I feel like I should've went. Everybody has to have a bad show every once in a while, I guess. Well, we'll see what happens tomorrow at the beach party."

The parties in lounges, clubs, gardens, poolsides, rooftops, hotel lobbies, bars, private residences, yachts, and beaches go around the clock during WMC; additionally, the streets of South Beach themselves are a party. Every trendy clothing store, hookah bar, tattoo parlor, espresso shop, Internet café, and mirrored-doorway pizzeria has two turntables, a mixer, and a DJ. Even the hair salons have someone spinning while you get your hair done. Then you can bust a move as soon as you're through.

Even if a store doesn't have a DJ, it'll be playing house music over the sound system; Walgreens, CVS, even Radio Shack all play house music. But by Thursday, the only shop on Washington not playing house music is a lone falafel place cranking Fall Out Boy, where two Atlanta DJs, Kai Alce and Ra Soul, are having a late lunch and talking about the Masters at Work show the previous night.

"I didn't like it," says DJ Kai Alce.

"I didn't like it either," says DJ Ra Soul.

"It just got real monotonous after awhile."

"He played very big-roomish. There's two Louies. You've got big-room Louie. And then you've got the Louie who plays at [NYC house haven] Cielo on Wednesdays, and that's a whole 'nother Louie. He plays more rootsy at Cielo. Last night was big-room Louie."

"Nah, man, he was just on some Louie Vega shit last night, man. You can't play your own shit all night. Eighty percent of what he played was his own records. And his new stuff is totally different. Can you believe he's got a song called 'Shake That Booty'? Like he's appealing to a commercial crowd. He's at a weird place right now. Louie Vega is no longer the soulful guy he used to be. It is what it is."

"I think that Grammy might have Did you see him at the Super Bowl? Well, the same flamboyance and production they had at the Super Bowl, he had last night. That wasn't the roots sound."

"Roots is today, out at the beach."

"I'm interested to see what he does today on the beach. See if he changes it up."

"I don't think he will."

"I think he's trying to make music to stay in the realm that he's in, with guys like Tiesto and Sasha and Digweed, so he can still get booked for a 25,000-person club in Europe and still not piss off the deep-house Wednesday night Cielo crowd."

"It is what it is."

"Yo man, let's go; I wanna check out this beach party."

Over at the Beach Plaza Hotel on 14th and Collins, there's an all-day party on the roof, and in a garden of coconut trees and gargantuan bamboos. It's Miami's rainy season, which makes putting on a full week of outdoor events inconvenient.

"See, we left and went back to our room for just a minute, and it started to rain," says Begonia Gwertzman, a/k/a DJ Boo, sitting next to her husband Mike, a/k/a DJ Sleepy, on one of the leather ottomans in the lobby of the Beach Plaza hotel.

Earlier, when the two were out back in the garden DJ'ing, Boo looked cool in her Chanel shades, even if it did take a minute for her to get into the groove.

Sleepy's been DJ'ing longer than Boo. He has a good feel for matching beats and can keep people dancing. But DJs change hourly, and now someone else is on, playing the theme from that Lincoln car commercial a few years back, a song by Mr. Gruff called "Trouser Jazz."

To be a bartender at the Beach Plaza, you've got to be buff. Today the blond buff bartender is working the Basic NYC party in the garden, and the brunette buff bartender is up on the roof. Both of the waitresses here are young and look like they just got in from Tahiti. But there's also this weird set of people here who just cut limes. They don't have to look as good.

Here's the deal with the guest list. Of course, just like every other guest list at WMC, being on the list is no guarantee of entry. All the Basic NYC parties are free, but to be on the list, you had to RSVP. The problem is every DJ has a list, too, and there are more than 60 DJs playing this thing. And once the garden hits capacity at 300 and the roof at 140, no one else can get in. So there's a constant crowd on the sidewalk outside, because once people are let in, they don't leave. Some people stay all day. Those who booked a room here just for these parties and got the "Basic NYC" package have an advantage, 'cause they can come to the party anytime.

Looking at the diverse crowd here— including people from Japan, England, and Saudi Arabia—it's like you've died and gone to hipster heaven, or flipped through a United Colors of Benetton catalog. There are two types of people, those on the dance floor, and those who have formed a circle and are watching the dance floor. People on the dance floor are divided into two categories: those who are dancing, and those who are standing in front of the DJ with their camera phones taking pictures of the DJ. Common is the sound of people screaming as if they're on a roller coaster. Yeah! Woo!



Louie Vega
Meg Pukel/megpukel.com

The best thing about WMC is that people dance. Everywhere. In their chairs. At the bar. Near the dance floor. On the dance floor. Everyone dances. But not in couples; you're dancing in circles, with yourself and with everyone in the whole party at the same time. Additionally, you're dancing with the DJ.

Anyone can be a good dancer. The key is the ability to completely let go. Don't think. Just move. Once you start to think, you are doomed. Don't be smart; be obedient to the beat. It's very important to have no qualms about letting the beat kind of hang out in you. Of course, it helps if you've had some training, but never underestimate the power of the beat in providing the right movement at the right time. Some of the best dancers in these ciphers at WMC are those who've had no training at all.

The dancers on the roof seem to be much more serious about taking it higher and going deeper, so to speak, than those in the garden. Earlier on the roof, New York DJ Ian Friday threw on some Ghanaian high-life, and people went nuts. Brooklyn's DJ Spinna rolled through to hear his set.

Later, as the garden party winds down that night, the beautiful Tahitian-looking waitress and the buff blond bartender are making out at the bar while Sam, the hotel's general manager, snaps pictures of them with his camera phone. As people descend from the rooftop party, they're so thrilled and/or drunk that many can't help but compliment the security guard as they leave.

"Good vibe. Really good vibe."

"Really great party."

"Now that is a party up there. Great party, guys!"

"Uh, somebody vomited in the stairwell," adds a petite redhead. She walks away with her friends.

"It was probably her," retorts the guard, a big, bearded, bald guy who resembles Isaac Hayes. "They've been drinking all day. I don't see how they do it. The music never slows down.

"Everybody wants to be a DJ," he adds, snarkily.

Interestingly, all the naysayers let down by the MAW party still follow Louie Vega to his Roots party at Lummus Park Beach the following afternoon. Nothing like dancing in the sand. This morning it was pouring down rain and a lot of early parties were cancelled, but this one just started later. Telemundo is here; the bar has espresso as well as alcohol. Vega kicks off his set with the Super Bowl song, "One Dream," with its distinctive Latin-jazz flavor. Nothing like salsa dancing in the sand. Soon, he brings up timbales and a conga player.

Vega's uncle, Héctor Lavoe, is getting a lot of attention this year because *El Cantante*, the biopic starring Marc Anthony and Jennifer Lopez, will be released in August. Lavoe's entire catalog will also be released this summer, and Vega is compiling a remix album and writing the liner notes. "As a kid, I remember he and [fellow Bronx salsa icon] Willie Colón used to come over with their test pressings and play them for my mother," Vega recalls. "I kind of feel like I'm carrying on his spirit. And I'm really excited about the way my remix of 'Mi Gente' came out. I took him to the clubs, but still kept the integrity of his feel and his soul and his and Willie Colón's sound."

On the beach, Vega uses the party to showcase the artists on his label, Vega Records: a spoken-word artist named Oveous Maximus, a Bronx rapper named Mr. V, and Louie's own wife, Anané, a Cape Verdean and Portuguese singer of statuesque beauty. When she takes the stage, the sun has set and more than 800 people have arrived. She pulls people onstage until it's filled to capacity with people dancing, including Vega's mother, sister, and son. With the stage overflowing, Vega does a live version of "One Dream," complete with banners reading "One Love" and "One Dream" held in the air by kids. By the time he gets to "Mi Gente," hardcore breakdancers have taken over the stage and people are furiously salsa dancing in VIP.

The next afternoon, everything is pandemonium at the Miami Beach Marina. Even with an RSVP'd invitation, there's a 50-to-1 shot of making it on board for the Masters at Work sunset yacht soiree, one of the most exclusive parties at WMC. Being on the list has nothing to do with it; it's more a matter of convincing the right people that you belong here, dancing on a yacht with an open bar and free food and a few of the best DJs in the country.

When it starts to rain a little and some people move to get out of the rain, those that don't mind getting a little wet take their seats. Five minutes later, the sun's back out again.

A lot of New Yorkers are on board. Will, who lives in Manhattan and moved to New York from Ireland nine years ago, says he's at WMC because he's opening a bar on the Lower East Side with Irish investors. "I'm here to see what parties are being thrown and how they're being thrown," he says. "You learn a lot here."

"They don't really have a dance-music scene in New York," adds Marc Turick, a Harlemiter by way of Paris. "The only real place is Cielo with François K. I used to live on the Lower East Side where it was mostly rock. I used to go to Twilo, but Spirit is awful and Avalon is horrible. The crowd there is bad. Bad atmosphere. A lot of bridge-and-tunnel people. At Avalon—lots of guys with no shirt on squeezing on girls with big boobs. Completely unsophisticated."

Down below decks, Masters at Work finally get on the decks and rock the boat—the last song Vega plays before we dock is a Blaze remix of "Family" from the *Dreamgirls* soundtrack, probably one of the most popular songs played during WMC. Everyone's singing together and drunk as hell: "We are a family/Like a giant tree/Growing stronger/Growing wiser/Growing free . . . "

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