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POP MUSIC REVIEW

Dance tunes have the global floor at spring-fueled fest

Ultra Music Festival in Miami brings out revelers as well as electronica's elite as DJs share limelight.

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REPORTING FROM MIAMI

"The DJ is the most important thing in music right now," will.i.am of the Black Eyed Peas said in Miami on Saturday as the throb of the Ultra Music Festival vibrated the press tent around him. "In Europe, Australia, Brazil, Los Angeles and New York, electronic dance music really has this new inspirational energy. It reminds me of what hip-hop was in the 1980s."

The Peas chose Ultra, the massive, two-day flagship finale of the annual Winter Music Conference, to play "Boom Boom Pow," their new beat-driven single, being released digitally today.

In terms of A-list talent in Miami, they weren't alone; Although DJs and dance-music mavens have been flocking to the WMC for decades now, this year hip-hop was in the house.

Producer Timbaland DJ'ed on Ultra's main stage Saturday. Diddy — who has been threatening to make a trance album for at least seven years now — had a spin-off against Felix da Housecat at the Miami Beach nightclub Cameo on Friday night.

The Miami locale draws an impressively international crowd to WMC week, as indicated by the united nations of flags waved by Ultra revelers. "The people that come to this conference are clued-up from four corners of the world," said Roni Size, the drum-and-bass pioneer who played with his live band Reprazent on Friday night, their first U.S. show in seven years, a stellar Ultra highlight.

One of the festival's founders and promoters, Russell Faibisch, said 50,000 people at-

tended Friday night, 60,000 on Saturday.

Unfortunately, not every veteran on the bill was as creatively dynamic as Size. Such headlining DJs as Armin Van Buuren, Tiësto and Paul Van Dyk trotted out the same tired techno and trance beats. Van Dyk did introduce a new single, "Home," that, true to its title, had an unusually warm house-music feel and operatic pop vocal.

Anything was better than Prodigy, the once hugely successful rock-electronic crossover band, which resorted to a string of epithets to try to spark a muddy, wan performance.

Other acts fused rock and dance more successfully. Pendulum looked like the Clash but built its rhythms on drum and bass and break-beats. The Ting Tings — one male drummer and one female singer-guitarist — played effervescent indie pop.

With a hard-partying set that mixed samples of house and hip-hop, MSTRKRFT stepped happily into the vaulted tradition of DJ tag teams, even paying homage to that legacy with a mix of Justice's '07 anthem "D.A.N.C.E."

On a small side stage, the Bassbin Twins also mixed pleasure with innovation, dance music's killer combo.

The 11-year-old UMF is timed to coincide with spring break and draws a largely teen and college-age crowd.

For many, if not most, it provides a chance to celebrate excessively. The vibe is techno Mardi Gras, with lots of such classic infantilized, psychedelic rave accessories as glowsticks, multicolored hair extensions, pacifiers, fuzzy leg warmers, vinyl micro-skirts and gas masks.

Oddest sight: a circle of Day-Glo-garbed youths blowing Vicks inhaler into each other's eyes because "it feels good."

Ultra is where judgment comes to die.

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