

Weapons of Mass Distraction

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Countdown

8 p.m. EST, Monday, March 17

In the lobby of the Radisson Deauville, on the eve of the Winter Music Conference, the music stops when President Buzzkill addresses the world. The face of George Bush replaces the Dirty Vegas video on the big-screen TVs in the center of the lobby and in the piano bar overlooking the pool. The bright chatter among DJs, promoters, record label execs and their entourages dies away as Bush's voice resounds in the suddenly silent hall. "Events in Iraq have reached the days of final decision," Bush says. "Saddam Hussein and his sons must leave Iraq within 48 hours."

A severe thunderstorm warning slowly scrolls across the screens. While Bush speaks of "evil men who plot chemical, biological and nuclear terror," invading bolts of lightning and thunderclaps split the sky. Bush signs off with "May God continue to bless America." A hard rain begins to fall.

The DJs spin on. Tens of thousands of people from around the world arrive in Miami Beach for WMC 2003 as President Bush delivers his ultimatum. For the 48-hour countdown and the first 100 hours of fighting, the conferees are embedded in the Command Division of Party People. Columns of Hummers throttle up and down Collins Avenue. The sidewalks are littered with thousands of eye-candy party flyers, dispersed like psych-ops pamphlets commanding the populace to surrender to the beat. On the dance floor, sirens wail over the droning beat of machines. Searchlights slice through billowing smoke. Behind the DJs, eerie night-vision footage of cruise missile explosions shares screen time with animated attack helicopters shooting laser beams. Military technology is enlisted in the service of hedonism. War doesn't stop the party — it is the party.

Weapons of Mass Distraction

1:30 a.m. EST, Tuesday, March 18

MSNBC ticker quotes U.S. Marine officer: "My troops are ready to execute, mentally and physically."

At the WMC launch party, Back Door Bamby, 1,000 bodies writhe on the massive dance floor of the Washington Avenue club Crobar. Every muscle absorbs the shock waves sent out by deep house DJ David Morales. Atop the main bar, a female dancer with the ensemble Circ X is dressed as a Headless Nightclub Monster in a suit stitched from the newspapers of the world. Beneath the sweeping red, yellow and green lights, a male dancer sits in the middle of the bar reading the headlines on her body that scream "War!" in French, Italian, German, Arabic, Japanese. Curious clubbers surround the artists.

The man puts on headgear designed by artist and company director Diana Lozano. The glittery sphere with a menacing tube for a mouth is part gas mask, part disco ball. The soldier/disco dancer pulls a U.S. flag out of his pocket. He swallows the flag. He vomits the flag. He is for the moment the dance music community, hyped up on the theatrics of war, outraged and exhilarated, and dancing, always dancing.

War Rations

6 p.m. EST, Tuesday, March 18

A 24,000-member Force Service Support group delivers food to marines in Kuwait.

Of all the yummy women poolside at the Winter Music Conference's official kick-off party at the Raleigh Hotel, the bumper sticker across Michelle Pagan's naked breasts proclaims her "The Yummiest."

Pagan, 31 and a model from Fort Lauderdale, is wearing only the sticker, for the graphic design company she's promoting, a black thong, high heels to match and gold hoop earrings. Costume devil's horns stick up from her spiraling blond coif. When a handler asks her what she wants from the snack bar, Pagan orders "french fries, lots of french fries." An instant later, she stomps her foot in exasperation. "I should have said, 'freedom fries.' The French suck."

Pagan is prowar. "I think it's totally necessary. War's been going on for fucking ever, man. You can't stop it. I have these friends from Poland and they say it's all lies and media hype that Iraq is a threat to us or that Iraq had anything to do with 9/11. They could be right, and I realize that the American government is just picking on somebody they know they can beat down while the whole world watches. But fuck it. I take kung fu and sometimes it just feels really good to just beat somebody's ass, you know."

Psychological Warfare

1 p.m. EST, Wednesday, March 19

U.S. Army vehicles move toward the Iraqi border; airspace over Walt Disney World and Disneyland is restricted.

Octavius Prince, 23, isn't the only aspiring artist to prowl the pool parties, laptop and headphones in hand, dying to play his latest bedroom creation for anyone who'll listen. But there's something a little different about the hard trance composition DJ Octavius plans to launch during his 4 a.m. to 5 a.m. set at Club Pump. "Final Justice" is a prowar anthem. It begins with a snare drum roll that sounds like automatic weapons fire, then thumps at 147 beats per minute over a sample of the president's last State of the Union address declaring, in booming reverb, "We are winning the war on terror."

"I don't particularly like Bush, but I don't particularly dislike him either, and I'm pretty patriotic. I like what he's saying, which is 'Don't fuck with us,' basically."

Forecasting the mood-altering effects of the impending war on the WMC, Prince says, "I think either people will be like, 'Oh, man, we shouldn't be hitting all these parties while there are all these people dying in the desert.' Or they'll be like, 'There's a war, so I'm going to go get fucked up and dance, 'cause I'm in America and I can, so I should.' "

Bombs over Baghdad

8:30 p.m. EST, Wednesday, March 19

Acting on "fresh intelligence," Central Command launches 36 Tomahawk cruise missiles at a bunker where it is believed that Saddam Hussein may be hiding.

Along a red carpet at Eighth Street and Ocean Drive, reporters await presenters and nominees at the American Dance Music Awards. The Goodyear blimp floats overhead, projecting an American flag on one side. A ticker tape on the other advertises "tires for luxury SUVs."

Although the eyes of the world are fixed on Fox News and CNN, DanceStar host Roger Sanchez predicts on camera that "a billion people around the world will be watching this show." Certainly the British television and radio crews in the media tent are less interested in the war than in the debut on the awards show of platinum-selling rapper and hip-hop entrepreneur P. Diddy's first dance single. "We're really just here for Puffy," says a kid from the BBC's music station, Radio One.

But Puffy does not appear in the media tent pitched in the sand. Only less-hyped DJs and performers file past the press, fielding questions about the awards and the war. Miami-based DJ Tracy Young wears an American flag T-shirt. "Apart from the war, I wanted to represent American music," she says with a smile, her wide blue eyes sparkling. "Music always makes us happy."

Passionate beneath his dark shades and electro-shock streaked hair, progressive house music producer BT opposes the war. "It's disgraceful to be an American," he says. "That we can say that this war is not 100 percent about oil and money is a disgrace."

Felix da Housecat is down with that. "One, two, three, four, what the fuck are we fighting for?" he mutters. "How does that look? [Bush]'s just going into somebody's country. And then he's gonna get on TV and say, 'Don't burn the oil rigs.' I hope they burn all of them."

Veteran dance music chanteuse Ultra Naté doesn't know what she can do about the war but sing. "You feel very powerless to change things," she admits. "You've gotta figure out for yourself, 'What am I going to do that will have some positive impact on the universe?'"

The California kooks of Crystal Method already know the answer. "If we could just get George Bush and Saddam Hussein to come when we're spinning some funky breaks...", says Ken Jordan.

Suddenly fresh intelligence flashes through the media tent. P. Diddy will grant brief interviews. Select camera crews pack up gear and move out single file through the dark, scurrying behind the stage. Half an hour later, the crews are still waiting. P. Diddy stands with his feet planted onstage in a cloud of smoke. He flails his arms, repeating frantically: "Let's get ill / Your dreams have been fulfilled."

Clusters of fireworks explode. Everyone ducks.

"Was that a bomb?" a woman backstage yells. "Are we at war?"

Decapitation Attack

2 p.m. EST, Thursday, March 20

CNN reports massive antiwar protests in London, New York, San Francisco, Seoul, Rome, Paris, Cairo and Jakarta.

East German lord of the trance Paul van Dyk doesn't want to talk about his new album. Van Dyk will speak on one topic alone: his opposition to the war. "When the bombing began last night, I was asking myself, 'How can I possibly go ahead and play and enjoy myself while I know there's a totally

unnecessary war killing innocent people?' The only other option would be to just stay in my hotel room and say nothing. It's my responsibility to take a stand. It's very clear: The war is wrong."

Van Dyk sports the same sky-blue "Stop the War" shirt he's worn to all public appearances this year. A few days after his early March show at the Roxy in New York City he received "a disturbing e-mail from a rather misinformed person." A fan berated him for wearing the shirt in New York after 9/11. "How could someone who's a fan of mine have such an opinion? To really understand electronic music you have to be cosmopolitan and open-minded. Cosmopolitan and open-minded people are definitely not in favor of this war."

WMC may prove him wrong. "To be honest, last night 90 percent of the people out in the clubs didn't even know the war had started," van Dyk points out. "It's not good, but that's the way it is in America. Otherwise the Bush administration wouldn't be able to do what they do all the time."

Two hours later, van Dyk is the guest of honor at a listening party aboard a yacht meandering across Biscayne Bay. While servers brandish trays of bruschetta and chicken satay with peanut sauce, the DJ introduces an unreleased track he says was inspired by his encounter with poverty in India. "Be aware of the world / Be true to your conscience," the guests hear through wireless headphones distributed by van Dyk's publicists. The yacht drifts in a sea of tranquillity, a world away from the Persian Gulf.

Patriot Missiles

2 a.m. EST, Friday, March 21

Armored columns roll across southern Iraq at 15 miles per hour in a globally televised off-road rally that soldiers dub the "Baghdad 500."

The U.S. Army pushed its product in the days before the start of the war with a street team of hot enlisted chicks in camouflage who distributed mock dog tags to spring breakers outside the Raleigh Hotel. They're missing in action now that the bloodshed has begun. Their mobile recruiting unit has been replaced by a sunshine-yellow H2 with two lions painted in black on its doors promoting Firdosi, purveyors of women's lingerie.

Just what is it about combat chic that helps sell negligees?

"It's big, strong and powerful," says the manly sun god behind the wheel.

The pretty young thing nestled in the passenger seat agrees: "This is a safe car."

Shock and Awe

1:30 p.m. EST, Friday, March 21

The U.S. and Royal air forces drop more than 1,500 missiles and bombs on Iraqi targets.

Six swimsuit models sashay down a runway jutting over the pool at the Playboy party at the Raleigh Hotel. Dressed in hot pants, each girl wears a Playboy Bunny insignia with an American flag in the middle stitched on her ass.

Mass Surrender

10 p.m. EST, Friday, March 21

Message sent to Iraqi generals: "Surrender now and live; the outcome is not in doubt."

After a long day of interviews, the Iranian-born DJ duo Deep Dish is hosting a party for its own record label, Yoshitoshi. Anything is better than sitting in the hotel room, watching CNN and getting depressed, says Ali Shirazinia. "There's nothing anyone here in Miami can do. The real reason for what's going on is only known by a few. Obviously I hate what's happened to my country." Still the DJ is hopeful. "Maybe inadvertently from what's going on [in Iraq] something will happen [to change Iraq] from within. Change should come from within."

Give Peace a Dance

11 p.m. EST, Saturday, March 22

U.S. Marines report "fewer than ten" casualties in a firefight outside Nasiriyah.

Outside the main entrance to Bayfront Park, a single demonstrator carries a placard that says, "Shocked and Aweful." It's unclear if he's commenting on the war, or the sensory bombing campaign beyond the gates where more than 25,000 vibe troopers march between five staging areas. Bodies lie scattered on grassy knolls, casualties of pharmaceutical friendly fire, fallen into cuddle puddles.

Ten hours into this 14-hour megafest, the faithful await the Miami debut of British live techno duo Underworld. Sitting in the garden of the Royal Palm hotel at sunset the day before, front man Karl Hyde said he hoped to offer the crowd deliverance.

"I feel uncomfortable and powerless," said Hyde about the war. "But you know, I came to dance, and that's my job today. It's not [to] preach. Dance is creating positive situations where tens of thousands of people have got happy for hours and hours on end. It's like ripples in a pond, isn't it?"

Hyde says his father was worried about him boarding a flight for a gig in the United States. "Can't they postpone it?" his father asked, reaching his son at the airport where just a few days earlier two men had been stopped carrying homemade bombs. Hyde knew what his father meant, but he egged him on. "Postpone what? The war?"

As a Brit, the heir of an already fallen empire, Hyde has lived with terror his whole life. He remembers seeing a bartender blown up when he was a young man in the IRA Birmingham pub bombings of 1974. "Do you think the world is any less safe now than at any other time?" he asked his father. "Postpone what?" he repeated to himself in the garden at the Royal Palm.

"Postpone life?"

Going on after dark, Underworld transforms the amphitheater into an orgy of the perpetual beat. Waving hands in the air, the crowds dance ecstatically in the aisles, on the benches, against the barricades, and spin in circles beneath green lasers skittering like tracer fire. They have been liberated.