

Techno-pop music is making small comeback at Fort Myers radio station

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Hip-hop stars and their record companies long ago figured something out that techno music artists and their labels are just now starting to get a handle on.

In the mid-80s, rappers realized they would have to put a face to their music in order for the genre to make it big. So they sold their sound to corporations. They endorsed clothing lines and soft drinks. They pushed their songs to producers on the silver screen and to program directors at urban and pop radio stations.

And now hip-hop is incredibly hot. Dance music, on the other hand, "is where hip-hop used to be — underground," explained Paul Michaels Trueba, program director for Miami's pure dance station Party 93.1 WPYM-FM.

Party 93.1 FM is just one of a handful of stations across the country that play a pure dance format. It's ranked No. 4 in its market among 18-to-34-year-olds and No. 1 among Hispanics of the same age group, according to Arbitron's fall 2003 ratings book.

The success of Party 93.1 is aided by

clubs such as Mansion in South Beach and Space in downtown Miami that play electronic music to packed houses nightly.

The station and the clubs feed off each other, with the station promoting the clubs over the airwaves and the clubbers, in turn, tuning in to the station to cure their mid-week jones for the blood-pumping beats and rhythms.

In the achy-breaky heart of Southwest Florida — where techno music takes a back seat to country, hip-hop and classic rock — one station is doing its part to bring the sound that's big in big cities to Southwest Florida, if only for a few hours once a week.

WINK 96.9-FM's Saturday Night Retro Dance Party begins at 7 p.m. As the hours roll by, DJ hosts Justin Credible and Art Rooney spin sounds that evolve from '70s-era disco to the mesmerizing sounds of trance, house and other forms of electronica. The show wraps up at 2 a.m., when WINK goes back to its normal Hot Adult Contemporary format.

Inside the studio at Meridian Broadcasting's Palm Beach Boulevard headquarters, the phones ring nonstop

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CLINT KRAUSE, THE NEWS-1

■ Saturday Night Retro Dance Party host Justin Credible and disc jockey Art Rooney entertain listeners from the WINK 96.9 studio.

DANCE RADIO

■ The Saturday Night Retro Dance Party on WINK 96.9-FM begins at 7 p.m. The first hour features music from the 1970s, '80s tunes follow at 8 p.m. and '90s numbers at 9 p.m. New techno, trance, house and break beat music airs from 10 p.m. to 2 a.m.

■ Miami-based Dance Party 93.1-FM can be heard in part of Collier County and also via streaming audio on-line at www.party931.com.

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DANCE

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during the Retro Dance Party. Listeners call in to request songs, to participate in contests and to ask for "shout-outs," messages to friends who might be listening elsewhere.

"When we do the retro stuff, we get a lot of calls from people telling us that they haven't heard that song in years," Rooney said. "We get a great response from listeners."

WINK'S Retro Dance Party has been on the air for 2½ years. "You can gauge how a show is going by the number of phone calls you get or by the word on the street," Credible said.

In the Arbitron book for fall 2003, WINK's dance party ranked No. 2 among men 12 to 24 and No. 2 among women 18 to 34.

In spite of those ratings, Bob Grissinger, Meridian Broadcasting's director of programming, doesn't foresee an expanded offering of dance music in the near future.

"The belief is that it's too narrow in its appeal," he said. "For shows like this one, we look for a specialized time slot when regular listening is at a low."

Justin Kleinfeld, a dance music columnist for The College Music Journal, believes the problem is that dance music lacks a face.

Trueba agrees.

"We have to learn from the way hip-hop was marketed. We need to put more faces on the music than just Madonna, Kylie Minogue and Deborah Cox," he said.

In the dark ages of the early-to-mid-1980s dance music was where hip-hop is today: It was all music fans could talk about, Kleinfeld said. But by the mid-1990s

the genre was headed underground.

Dance songs were no longer three-minute splashes of high-octane beats. The music's epic meditative beats became more suited for all-night dancing than head-bobbing at a traffic light. These changes made it hard for radio stations to support a format that often times featured no vocals for lengthy periods of time, Kleinfeld said.

Seldom heard on the radio, access to dance music became largely via clubs and spur-of-the-moment raves.

Miami's Party 93.1-FM switched from classical music to the dance party format Dec. 31, 2001.

"South Florida is known for its clubs and nightlife, and this type of station went along with that," Trueba said. "There's been a tremendous response to our station."

Grissinger doesn't see how an

all-dance music station could survive in Southwest Florida.

The idea for WINK's Retro Dance Party, he said, is to get listeners to tune in who might not normally listen to the station.

Still, Credible and Rooney remain faithful to the music they love and hope that Southwest Florida continues its urban growth.

In the past couple of years, new restaurants and nightclubs such as Blu Sushi in south Fort Myers, Varian's downtown and Aja Lounge in Bonita Springs have started pumping techno from their sound systems.

If anyone can make a go of electronic music in Southwest Florida, Credible and Rooney can, Trueba said.

"I talk to them all the time, and they're very into what they're doing," he said. "They're both passionate about the music, and you can tell that just by listening to them."