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Inside The Womb

An Internet radio station takes the sounds of South Beach global.

by Joanie Cox

Important: This article was last updated on January 26, 2005. Please call ahead to confirm hours, prices, dates and other information.

A DJ positions himself between two turntables, his body jerking back and forth in time to the breakbeats rumbling from the speakers set up in one corner of the room. The music is so loud that the floor is shaking, but this doesn't deter a petite young woman with butterfly wings attached to her back from running into the room and reaching for a Red Bull.

"Can you believe the energy in this place?" Vanessa Picart, 33, asks as she puts her drink on the ground to adjust her wings and bust into an impromptu dance. "I've got these on because I'm ready to fly tonight."

Picart, better known as DJ VButterfly, is one of 57 DJs who make their way to the third floor of this Lincoln Road studio in Miami Beach every week to spin on the Internet radio station The Womb. Launched in 1997, the station is the brainchild of business partners Duncan Ross, Rick Garrido and Mark Graziadei, whose bedroom initially served as The Womb's broadcast center. Graziadei, now 36, had produced an electronica CD titled *The Voyage* and decided the only way its tracks would get on the radio would be if he started his own station.

So at a time when Hanson's "MMMBop" was blaring from radios nationwide seemingly nonstop, Graziadei and his partners tossed their money together to buy a 100-watt transmitter and antenna to start up an illegal, underground dance-music station. The FCC caught up with them, however, twice shutting down the pirate radio station. Ironically, this was the best thing that could have happened to it.

They relaunched The Womb four years ago on the Web site www.thewomb.com and primarily broadcast electronica. The station has since acquired 1.7 million listeners from 120 different countries, according to BellSouth, which monitors traffic to the site. Because Internet broadcasting, like satellite radio, is not

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PHOTO



(photo: Josh Prezant)

Log on, tune in

The Internet is overrun with online radio stations. Here are five worth checking out.

www.lovetheweekend.com

A dance-music station spinning everything from trance and drum 'n' bass to house music

www.clubfmradio.com

Features eight different channels playing breakbeats, '80s music and trance while DJs broadcast from Las Vegas, Chicago and Tampa

www.live365.com A huge directory of Internet radio stations broadcasting rock, electronica, reggae, pop, hip-hop and more

www.spankradio.com

A station focused on underground indie-rock, emo, electro-clash and space rock

www.shoutcast.com Plays everyone from Avril Lavigne to Eminem and provides links to hundreds of other Internet stations

Tell us what you think!

Question, comment or complaint? E-mail Joanie Cox now.

regulated by the FCC, The Womb's DJs can do something most of their peers in commercial radio can't: play whatever they want.

The fully interactive Web site features a virtual nightclub in which visitors can enter The Womb Room, Main Club Room or VIP Room to check out music by different DJs who are spinning live. The site also offers chat rooms for clubbers and instant messaging options. With the exception of some MP3 downloads, the entire service is free.

"This has really taken off. Our typical listener is 14 to 40," The Womb's CEO and executive director, John Westley, says. "But the goal of all this is to make a worldwide media outlet to show there's a way to reach people without having to go through the same three companies."

Westley, age 40, joined the group in 1998, following the FCC's second bust of the station. After working as a DJ on Minnesota State University's campus radio station and earning a degree in construction management, Westley started his own construction business. Soon, though, he had befriended The Womb's founders, sold his business and used the proceeds to help them set up the site.

"There was a huge need for a radio station that let new artists be heard," he recalls. "Also, it gives the artists and independent labels a chance to take their music directly to the people by playing their tracks and selling them to the audiences as MP3 downloads."

Every week, DJs at The Womb spin tracks that would likely never get heard on commercial radio stations. "I like The Womb because they've never once made a comment about what I should play," says Felipe Aspillaga, a.k.a. DJ FX, who spins electronica and breakbeats during his show, Storytellers Featuring DJ FX. "I have free rein to play what I want to."

Aspillaga, 28, also appreciates the chance to interact with South Florida listeners as well as people halfway across the globe. "Almost every week, I post on the message boards, and I use the chat feature as much as I can," he says. "I meet people on the street all the time who've logged onto The Womb, and they all say how much they like it."

Marina Raq a.k.a. VJ Psyberpixie joined The Womb in October and has become its official resident VJ. "A place where you can view visuals and listen to music all day long that's commercial-free and doesn't cost you a dime is a very cool thing". She scratches and mixes like a DJ, but adds video clips to accompany the beats, bringing a video element to the station.

"With the whole MTV generation, lighting just isn't enough anymore. We need to give them a visual and audio experience," she explains. "I like to custom-make my clips. I'll go to a club with my video camera and film footage there and then broadcast it during a show on The Womb."

DJ Danny Bled, 37, joined the station four years ago and hosts the drum 'n' bass show The 4:20 Sessions. "The Womb is spearheading a movement," he says. "They're not the only Internet radio station. [See sidebar.] There are tons more, but they're going to be a big force in Internet radio."

The station has already had an impact on some South Floridians. Miami Beach resident Christina Rodriguez, 21, logs on to The

Name:

City, State, Zip:

E-mail:

Comments:

Womb almost daily to see what's going on. "I'm really sick of hearing the same songs over and over," she says of commercial radio. "I don't have a lot of money to spend on CDs or going to clubs, and this is a way for me and my friends to listen to new music."

Nancy Grunwald, a.k.a. DJ Roxxia, moved to Miami from New York last month and landed a spot on The Womb spinning progressive trance every Thursday. "I've been getting e-mails that there's not enough trance music down here," the 33-year-old says. "I've been DJ'ing for seven years, and I've been on Internet radio stations before, but The Womb is different because it's so interactive. It's really an amazing outlet for people to expose their talents."

Word about The Womb has spread so far throughout the DJ world that many DJs have signed a waiting list of six months to a year to land a full-time on-air slot. DJ Jenna G, whose real name is Jenna Gilmore, started DJ'ing on The Womb six months ago, after a friend told her about it. "I like The Womb because you can see the DJ spinning from all different angles," she says. The Broward Community College student and amateur cartoonist, who plays tribal and progressive house, also enjoys the frequent e-mails from her fans. "They tell me I'm hot," the 27-year-old says, blushing. "It's always nice to hear."

DJ Hana, a.k.a. Hana Besedova, loves spinning house music at The Womb because she gets something there she wouldn't normally get in a club. "It's great spinning on Lincoln Road. I look out at the palm trees through the studio's windows, and I'm talking to my listeners in Alaska, Australia, Sweden or South Africa," she says.

Known to many of her fans as "Sexy Mama," Besedova, who refuses to reveal her age, also communicates with her listeners via e-mail. "Sometimes, it's funny getting e-mail during my show online," she continues. "They'll ask which song I'm spinning at that moment, what I'm wearing and what I'm doing tonight."

She is particularly amused with the e-mails she gets from some of her listeners' employers. "Bosses are writing me, 'Please, stop the music because the staff is dancing around the computers,' " she says. "And my listeners are sending me e-mails asking when I'll be spinning in their countries, like Portugal, Spain, France, Brazil, Argentina and Australia."

Last summer, Westley, who was having so much success with The Womb, felt it was time to give the hip-hop community in Miami an alternative media outlet. So in August, he launched Krib TV at www.krib.tv. As a hip-hop-oriented Internet television station, Krib TV broadcasts 10 shows a week and highlights new and independent hip-hop artists. In five months, the station has snagged half a million viewers, according to BellSouth. "We just had too much talent walking through our door," Westley explains. "We got tired of turning them away, so we decided to start the TV station."

Jennifer Burbank, who hosts the show Worldwide with DJ Al Valient, joined Krib TV last May and has since interviewed Dirtbag, Elephant Man, Beenie Man, Ivy Queen and Pitbull on her show. "Five of our shows are taped live, but we'll replay some of them so we have constant broadcasting," she says. "It has to be that way because of all the time differences around the world."

Burbank, 28, often takes her camera crew to clubs to film South Beach nightlife as it's happening. "We're trying to film more club events and take the show around town," Burbank says. "But we're really about breaking underground talent. If you're good and you want to get heard, we'll give you the exposure."

With Krib TV and The Womb, Westley hopes to continue giving local DJs and independent artists global exposure. "So many people around the world are curious about what it's like to party in South Beach," Westley states. "Now, they can see and feel how it would be to be a part of that."

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