

For 18 years, Ultra grew up on Miami's waterfront. Then came neighbors — and conflict

BY JOEY FLECHAS

jflechas@miamiherald.com

For the first time in 18 years, Ultra Music Festival doesn't have a home in downtown Miami.

The internationally renowned three-day electronic dance music festival, attended by hundreds of thousands from around the world and viewed by millions online, might have to turn to a plan B to keep the bass bumping in Miami after the city moved to abandon an institution that annually takes center stage against the backdrop of Magic City's burgeoning skyline.

Thursday's stunning, [unanimous vote to reject a contract for Ultra to remain at Bayfront Park](#) was framed by political infighting among commissioners and opposition from residents who live in neighboring condominium towers, an increasingly vocal group of citizens who finally saw their longstanding protests heeded on Thursday. The bad blood in City Hall combined with a persistent resident outcry poisoned Ultra's chances of securing four of five votes for a multi-year contract — even after Commissioner Joe Carollo, who negotiated the contract, extracted a minimum of \$2 million from the festival. Then he confoundingly opposed the proposed agreement when it came time to vote.

Once the noise died down from Thursday's rocky meeting, the magnitude of the decision came into focus. Ultra's potential exit from downtown would mark a turning point in the evolution of downtown Miami, an urban core that in the past decade has transformed into a neighborhood with a swelling population. According to a recent demographic analysis from the Downtown Development Authority, [downtown's residential population has hit an all-time high of 92,235](#) — a 65 percent jump between 2000 and 2010.

But before the rise of downtown residential towers, Ultra gradually evolved into a large-scale festival that became part of the downtown's fabric and an economic boon for hotels and local businesses. The event grew from humble beginnings as a beachside offshoot of the once-mighty Winter Music Conference to a mammoth gathering that every year draws sellout crowds that eclipse 100,000. Ultra fills hotel rooms, employs locals and brings people from across the world to Miami.

"I believe if we take away Ultra, it will strip away culture," said Nora Francis, a downtown resident who wants to see the festival stay in her neighborhood. "That's free advertising. That's free tourism."

Still, taxpaying residents say it doesn't matter who came first. Even as Ultra moved away from a past blemished by widespread drug use, arrests and the trampling of a security guard by a rowdy crowd toppling a fence to get in without tickets, residents kept complaining about the noise, the traffic, the lack of access to Bayfront Park for the weeks before and after the festival weekend and the nuisance of festival goers wandering around downtown streets.

"People just trash the streets ... cigarettes and water bottles. They have no respect," said Brooke Berns, who lives across from Bayfront Park.

Ultra organizers have not revealed any alternative arrangements, but they insist that even though they have a contingency plan, they want to get back to the bargaining table to hammer out a contract the city and neighbors will accept.

"The outcome of today's meeting with the Miami City Commission does not mark the end of Ultra in Miami and we look forward to staging the 21st edition of the Ultra Music Festival as planned, March 29-31st, 2019," said a message to Ultra's Twitter following — and those who have already purchased tickets for next year's festival. The festival would only offer a statement that it is still working with the city to find a resolution.

Failure to reach a deal to keep Ultra in Bayfront Park would likely force the relocation of a concert that emerged as a genuinely homegrown Miami product — from a party on the beach to the juggernaut of the electronic dance music world.

Worldwide audience

It started with a rave.

Eleven hours. Fifty performers. Thirty bucks.

On March 13, 1999, 7,000 people gathered in Miami Beach's Collins Park to hear headliners Rabbit in the Moon and Union Jack. Ultra was born. Co-founders Russell Faibisch, a Beach native, and Alex Omes, an Argentine who moved to the Beach during childhood, created Ultra in the shadow of the bigger and well-attended Winter Music Conference, an annual electronic music gathering that began in 1985.

Over the next decade, with bigger crowds and bigger acts, Ultra grew to usurp Winter Music Conference's position in the electronic dance music industry. Both events coexisted peacefully for a time, with Ultra closing out the week-long conference every March. Then Ultra catapulted itself in the musical stratosphere, spinning off more than 20 other festivals in 20 countries that, according to organizers, make up the bulk of Ultra's business.

That doesn't mean there weren't battles along the way. In 2003, then-mayor Manny Diaz tried to kill the party by accusing the festival of fostering rampant drug use. Organizers prevailed and doubled the police presence. The following year, police reported 117 drug arrests and the seizure of \$25,000 worth of drugs. In 2010, Faibisch and Omes had a falling out, and Omes was ousted from the organization. After a 12-year collaboration with Winter Music Conference, Ultra split from the older event and continued its journey toward dominating the electronic dance scene.

[See the Miami Herald's timeline of Ultra Music Festival's history here.](#)

Dark moments peppered Ultra's ascent. In 2013, a 20-year-old man died from an apparent overdose at the festival. While locked in a years-long legal battle with his former business partner, [Omes died in his sleep](#) the day before his lawsuit against the festival was set to go to trial. Miami New Times later reported he had [drugs in his system](#), though the autopsy was not conclusive. In 2014, an unruly crowd crashed the festival's gates and [trampled security guard Erica Mack](#), who suffered a fractured skull and a broken leg.

The trampling prompted another attempt to kick Ultra out, this time led by Marc Sarnoff, a Miami commissioner at the time. He lobbied his fellow commissioners, showing the infamous 2012 video of a young woman making out with a tree at the festival and photos showing debauchery.

Sarnoff was alone in his effort. Ultra stayed after a 4-1 vote in the festival's favor. By 2015, the festival banned minors, hardened its fencing and upped security. Since then, the party has raged without any major incidents. It looked like Ultra [might have hit a sweet spot](#) in recent years, attracting big acts and audiences even as electronic dance music boomed into the mainstream and later [settled into a comfortable pocket of a globally lucrative industry](#). (In 2016, electronic dance music grossed \$7.1 billion around the world, according to an industry report.)

Each year, fixtures in the electronic dance music scene such as Steve Aoki, David Guetta, and Tiësto joined headliners who ranged from the biggest names in the genre to more mainstream acts, such as The Chainsmokers, MGMT and Ice Cube.

Even though the brand ballooned into a global empire, Miami remains Ultra's main squeeze. The local festival now caps "Miami Music Week," which like the satellite events that surround Art Basel Miami Beach, supplant the festivities at Bayfront Park with gatherings throughout Miami. The activity outside Ultra's gates looked to expand with this year's [acquisition of Winter Music Conference](#), which had [parted ways with the festival in 2011](#) and faded into the background of Ultra's presence. In March, Ultra essentially swallowed its parents and pledged to reboot the event. It's unclear if the rejected Bayfront Park contract will impact these plans.



Ray Martinez, head of security for Ultra in Miami and a spokesman for the show, said revelers at Ultra's festivals abroad have told him they see Miami as Ultra's Mecca.

"The Miami show is like the dream," he said.

The show by Biscayne Bay is the flagship event for the brand, beamed out to 30 million viewers online this year. Twice during March's three-day event, Ultra was the top trending topic on Twitter.

Then, a few months after the 20th iteration of Ultra this year, it was [time to negotiate a new contract](#). Enter the neighbors.

Growing pains

Ultra has grown up on Miami's waterfront, an older sibling to the residential towers that have shot up and attracted a range of residents to downtown. But before Ultra reaches drinking age, it looks like frustrated neighbors have succeeded in pushing out the party that preceded them.

Much like Ultra surpassed Winter Music Conference, a group of downtown dwellers who want to define their neighborhood on their own terms are now playing David to the festival's Goliath.

"The downtown of today is definitely not the downtown of 20 years ago, when there were no residents," said Alyce Robertson, executive director of the Downtown Development Authority.

Some residents complain of sleepless nights during the three-day festival, if they choose to stay in the towers across the street from Bayfront Park. They say the loud rumble emanating from the stages sends vibrations up their walls, rattling their dinnerware and peace of mind — a grievance painted as a health hazard in a sound study commissioned by neighbors. They complain that they are trapped with the music, unable to navigate through the traffic that piles up due to traffic patterns that are rejiggered during the festival.

But perhaps the gripe that resonated most strongly with Miami commissioners was the lack of access to Bayfront Park.

The park access question either struck a nerve with commissioners or lit a fuse in the commission's political powder keg. Carollo, the commissioner who chairs the agency that manages Bayfront Park, and Ken Russell, the commissioner who represents most of Miami's waterfront, have feuded over how the government should handle the park's business. That squabble continued Thursday, with Carollo backing Russell into the corner as the deciding vote. By the end of the debate, all commissioners opposed the contract.

Gamesmanship aside, the park access problem is not exclusively caused by Ultra. The Bayfront Park Management Trust, the group Carollo leads, allows events throughout the year, causing a drastic jump in the number of days the park has been completely or partially closed off from public access in recent years.

Being the big game in downtown each year, Ultra has taken the brunt of the criticism.

“No to any, any type of mega event in our green spaces,” said Amal Sohl Kabbani, president of the Downtown Neighbors Alliance. “We need access to our green spaces at all times.”

These residents’ complaints underscored the political debate over the Ultra contract at multiple commission meetings through the summer. On Thursday, though, pro-Ultra voices emerged from residents who like Ultra’s cultural value, the festival’s workforce and downtown business owners.

They echoed Ultra’s refrain: The festival put Miami’s downtown on the music world’s map and fueled business growth that continues today.

“You’ll be deterring other people from opening businesses in that district,” said Nathaniel Sandler, one of the partners behind recently-opened bar Mama Tried, which is down the street from Bayfront Park, and nearby nonprofit Bookleggers, which gives away free books to the public. Sandler said Ultra was a determining factor in his and his partners’ decision to do business downtown.



A 2012 Ultra-funded study found that the event has a \$79 million economic impact on Miami-Dade County. It brings almost 1,000 jobs, fills hotel rooms across the county and provides patrons to bars and restaurants.

At the same time, said Robertson of the Downtown Development Authority, the growing residential population naturally spurs its own commercial development, from groceries to preschools to dry cleaners.

The expiration of Ultra's last contract this year might have pushed Miami's urban core to an unexpected fork in the road. Should the city keep Ultra and the economic and cultural benefits that come with it? Or do downtown taxpayers feel their urban center has outgrown Ultra? Or after all the drama, is there a middle path?

"I'd like to see them compromise. It'd be nice to have Ultra stay because of the economic impact," Robertson said. "But it would have to be that they make some concessions to the residents."

Ultra could come back with new offers on some major sticking points, including shortened hours on each of the three festival days, an accelerated set-up and tear-down schedule that would leave the park open on more days, and even lower decibel levels.

Neighbors were satisfied with Thursday's vote, signaling they might not be interested in a compromise to accommodate a music festival they worked to kick out.

At this point, an olive branch might be the festival's only shot at coming back.

"We have to look for a middle ground, so we're not as intrusive as we have been," Martinez said.