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HOT FEATURED

'Sandstorm' producer Darude talks EDM

L. KENT WOLGAMOTT Lincoln Journal Star Jan 31, 2017 Updated Feb 1, 2017



Courtesy photo

Last week, Ville Virtanen, aka Darude, was at Vega, playing to about 400 people, bringing with him his ubiquitous hit, "Sandstorm," and delivering a high-energy set.

On New Year's Eve, Darude kicked off the celebration of Finland's 100th anniversary as nation, dropping "Sandstorm" at midnight beneath a cascade of fireworks, seen by 100,000 people in person and many more on television.

Last week, Ville Virtanen, aka Darude, was at Vega, playing to about 400 people, bringing with him his ubiquitous hit and delivering a high-energy set of his progressive and uplifting trance fused with elements of tech, breaks and house.

Before he took the stage, Darude, one of the most influential electronic dance musicians of the last two decades, talked with the Journal Star in Vega's green room. Here's that conversation:

GZ: Three weeks ago, you were playing to 100,000 people. Now you're here doing a club.

D: Why not?

GZ: That's a giant contrast.

D: Of course it is. That wasn't really my gig. I was just part of our centennial celebration starting. It was amazing. I say the same thing to everybody. I was on stage when the fireworks started and knew how it was going to go and everything. The stage had a roof, so I actually didn't see the fireworks. So when I went back to the hotel later, the national broadcast company had recorded it and put it up and I could actually then watch it from my phone, teary eyed. It was so amazing to see it.

GZ: That's got to be an honor, don't you think?

D: Yeah, absolutely, it was crazy. Normally, those kind of national celebrations they have Sibelius, classical pieces and stuff. They chose my track for it. It was a big honor.

GZ: Did you have any idea what was going to happen with 'Sandstorm'?

D: I did not. I actually now crack the joke that '97 I planned that in 2017 I'm going to be performing it at the year change. I was a hobbyist. I didn't even dare to call myself a producer or a musician. I was just tinkering with my computer. I didn't even have a studio, just a little kitchenette in my apartment where I was making music. It was just a hobby, had fun with it. I had given demos to some djs and a couple of record company people, but didn't think of selling anything. I just wanted feedback. But it somehow went on from there."

GZ: Any idea why?

D: It is because of the music, of course. I gave my track to a guy I looked up to as a producer and a dj, but I didn't know he was starting a record company. When I gave my demo to him, I just wanted feedback and he got in touch with me and asked if I wanted to be his first artist. Well, yeah. It was just sort of happenstance.

GZ: Now, you're 20 years into it. It seems to me that in the last five, six years, at least around here, electronic dance music has come from the underground into the mainstream.

Absolutely. I think, in that way, America has finally caught up in a commercial, mainstream way. Corporate America has jumped on the electronic dance music bandwagon as well. From that you know that it's big here as well. I think you're right, five, six years ago, the EDM explosion started. Now it's an insurance commercial or car commercial, baby food commercial. It's pretty big.

GZ: It's big and you have all these niches, house, dubstep, this kind, that kind, but I don't think most people can tell the difference.

If you ask me, I don't think anybody should need to. Obviously, musical taste is a very personal thing. I don't judge anybody based on that. This kind of beat (playing in Vega) doesn't sound like what is exactly my favorite, but if it gets the crowd going and somebody else does it, I can respect it. They know that crowd and how the vibe will work and that's that. If I hear a pop thing on the radio, I might not necessarily like it, but I can learn from it. I can dissect and try and figure out what's good about it. To me, that's more important about music than how you classify it.

GZ: How do you do your remixes?

Mainly I do official remixes, something that somebody commissioned me to do or it's my friend and I make a remix for him and he makes a remix for me. But I think it's a really good practice for a producer to take something they're not too familiar with. Say for me, creating a remix of an R&B track. The tempo may be very different, singing style, the instrumentation might be very different. Taking that and trying to make it dance music, that takes skill and sort of an ear to find the right parts. The main thing is there's a lot you can learn from that.

GZ: How does all of that work, your stuff, your remixes, live?

D: Remixes these days are one of the things that differentiate you from the next dj. Earlier it used to be you were the only guy in town with that vinyl, whatever the big hit was, and because of that you were the top dog. These days, anybody and everybody can have access to whatever pieces of music there are out there.

Unless it's something I haven't given away. For that reason, sometimes I do remixes and mashups and then I can play them in my set. Or I can have a version of my track nobody else has. I'll play the vocal with another track or make a whole new version of the background and the vocal stays about the same. Something like that.

GZ: It seems to me that everybody has access to it and a lot of people try to do it, but it's a lot more difficult to do it. You hear attempts and they fall short.

D: The thing is what is easy today is putting a song together technically. You can find template mixes, where the kick drum is how it is supposed to be, the high hat is how it's supposed to be and you don't necessarily need to even touch those. You create a melody with a certain synth and the template even tells you about how loud it should be.

So technically it's not that difficult and also financially. Today, you have medium laptop with free software or software that costs 100 bucks, that is way more than you had with 100 grand 20 years ago. So that technical ability is there, but I think the cream still rises to the top. You have to have content to the music as well for it to be remembered after it is heard.

GZ: Where does that content come from?

D: That comes from a person's skills, their imagination, their ear. I think the ratio of skilled people and not skilled people in music hasn't changed from 20 years ago to today. It's gotten so much easier and cheaper to try it. So probably a little more of those skilled people have been able to realize their musical journey. But at the same time, the signal to noise ratio in the good stuff and the bad stuff, that's really bad.

GZ: In dance music, it seems like in order to be at the top level, you have to have something unique. I'm not sure that's the exact word, but it's got to grab people some way. You know what I mean?

D: One of the things that has changed -- even 10 years ago, when you sent a demo to a record company, they might have come back to you like "hey your song is amazing, sound is not great, how 'bout I hook you up with a mixer or a producer?" Today that doesn't really happen. They expect you to send them ready and mastered stuff pretty much ready to go.

Record companies, in dance music, they're not that much of a developer anymore. They're more like a filter, cherry picking what's good. In some cases it's not all bad. There are some labels who aren't promising to do that. They're just promising to get the music out. Also deals, percentages could be a lot better these days. But sometimes that doesn't make any difference because music doesn't sell."

GZ: 50 percent of 0 is still 0. One last question, any idea where dance music is going?

D: I have no idea. I don't even want to try and guess. It's going to do the same it's always done. You'll have trance in 2000 and 2002 and then it saturates. Then you'll have dubstep and it saturates. Then you'll have deep house be the cool thing and it saturates and turns to pop. But it spawns something new.

When something cool becomes too mainstream and commercial, the guys who were the starters say 'screw this I want to do something else.' then they might find a new dubstep. Then that's going to be bastardized in a couple of year cycle. The thing is trance is always going to be there, house is always going to be there, dubstep is always going to be around as well. But I wouldn't want to even guess what is next.

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