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Batten Down the Hatches: Darude's 'Sandstorm' Just Turned 20

10/30/2019 by [Zel McCarthy](#)



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Darude

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"I don't want to only be known as the 'Sandstorm' guy, but I'm not dumb or oblivious to how the world works," says the Finnish producer.

While a song known for its jackhammer synth stabs isn't prone to subtlety, this past weekend (Oct. 26) quietly marked the 20th anniversary of "Sandstorm," the global hit by Finnish DJ/producer Ville Virtanen, better known as [Darude](#).

A moderate success when first released, the track has sustained its popularity as it's been discovered and embraced by new generations, thanks largely to the force of nature known as internet culture. Speaking to *Billboard Dance* on the phone from his home studio in Finland, Darude laughs when asked if he was aware of the milestone.

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"It's been a huge part of my life for the last 20 years," he admits. "It got my professional career started. I don't want to only be known as the 'Sandstorm' guy, but I'm not dumb or oblivious to how the world works. If you're not into dance music but you actually know my track, that's good enough for me."

Originally released in October of 1999, "Sandstorm" began ascending global charts the following spring, eventually reaching No. 5 on the Dance Club Songs chart in late 2000 and No. 83 on the Billboard Hot 100 the next October. Its early lifespan was buoyed by a series of syncs and artist-sanctioned availability on the nascent music file-sharing site mp3.com. But the track's real heyday came when it found a second life as fodder for viral videos during the halcyon days of web 2.0 in the late 00s.

At the dawn of the Esports streaming era, "Sandstorm" was claimed as an unofficial anthem for gamers -- and by 2013, had achieved peak internet by becoming its own meme, wherein any song would be intentionally misidentified as "Sandstorm" by Darude. (For example, in the comments of any Twitch stream, someone would ask, 'What's that song playing?' and someone else would inevitably reply "'Sandstorm' by Darude," no matter what the song actually is.)

And the storm didn't stay online. College football fans from Michigan to [South Carolina](#) embraced the track as their unofficial anthem, while a cappella groups [covered it](#) and at least one youth orchestra [performed an arrangement](#) of it. To date, it has over 164 million plays on YouTube and over 160 million combined plays on Spotify, and has been certified Gold in the U.S.

Michigan vs Notre Dame - 2011 - Sandstorm



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The appeal of “Sandstorm” is overt, recalling the adrenaline-rewving blasts of Hi-NRG dance, though never conforming to a pop song structure. Its melodic refrain is simple to remember, but its production remains defiantly unsoftened and unrelentingly rhythmic at 136 BPM, leaving no question that “Sandstorm” was, first and foremost, a club track.

Often mislabeled as “techno,” “Sandstorm” is unequivocally a trance record. A genre often maligned or misunderstood in the American music industry, trance originated in Europe, though its lineage as a descendant genre of American house music is often contested. In the late '90s, while electronic music was already somewhat mainstream in the U.K. and Europe, U.S. major labels had forecasted that the next big thing would be “electronica,” an umbrella term that included trip-hop, big beat, and other subgenres but ultimately stood for a specific era of major label dance music.

By the early 00s, artists like Moby and Groove Armada were soundtracking car commercials and touring amphitheatres; Fatboy Slim was an MTV fixture and BT was producing for NSYNC. Despite these signs of electronica’s success, American audiences were thought to be wary of the melodic, pulsating, typically emotive sound of trance, often derided as being too “Euro.”

Darude was hardly alone on his island of trance, however. There had been breakthrough electronic instrumental hit records before him (notably 1996’s “Children,” [by the late Robert Miles](#)), and there would be breakthrough electronic instrumental hit records after him (such as 2014’s “Animals,” by then-teenage EDM star Martin Garrix). That Darude has not been considered to be as influential as Miles or Garrix is perhaps an oversight; their records shifted our understanding of mainstream audiences’ appetite for lyric-less club music just like “Sandstorm,” even if its influence wasn’t as discernable at the time of its release.

This is not to say that Darude has been unfairly miscast -- certainly to no cost, as he maintains a full touring schedule that he happily balances with his life as a husband and father -- it’s just that “Sandstorm” has had outlier-level success without necessarily being a musical outlier. Sonically, his hit fits alongside other international hits of 2000 like Sonique’s “It Feels So Good” and Alice DeeJay’s “Better Off Alone,” both of which enjoyed some crossover dance-to-pop success thanks to radio love for their hook-filled choruses. Despite its relative acclaim, [Paul van Dyk](#) would have loved to have seen some of the song’s widespread popularity with *Out There and Back*, the trance-pop album intended to be his mainstream breakthrough that same year.

Despite the best efforts of an industry that wanted to control which variety of electronic music would dominate, club music kept breaking through. By the time [Daft Punk](#) returned with the unabashedly Euro dance-pop banger “One More Time,” a full year after the original release of



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Success is relative, of course — though dance music snobs have long dismissed trance and its current varietal, progressive house, for being oversentimental or baroque. According to the somewhat ephemeral and often arbitrary coolness hierarchy of dance music, popularity is corrosive to authenticity, especially the further removed the music itself is from the genre's Chicago, Detroit, or New York roots. Effectively, dance artists are expected to balance their ambition to reach wide audiences with a counterintuitive commitment to remain underground, where they are perceived to be more artistically genuine.

For the most part, trance and progressive artists have ignored these rules and brazenly pursued pop charts and stadium gigs with music designed to give an uncomplicated emotional wallop in every synth string flourish. Accordingly, most trance isn't considered very cool.

But Darude isn't most trance artists. While those "Sandstorm" royalties have given him the financial flexibility to control his creative freedom, he hasn't chased the high of that first hit with knock-off attempts at another. Across four albums, a grip of singles, and dozens of remixes (not one of which is a formulaic major-label pop remix, the likes of which can stain even the best trance producer's discography), Darude has proven that he's a progressive house artist with range and longevity. No matter what social media says, he's more than just the "Sandstorm" guy.

Because the Internet's favorite topic is itself, the recurring gusts of "Sandstorm's" popularity have led to a [flurry of analysis](#) charting the track's digital resurgences. At the core of its frequent virality is the same joke: in Internet culture, "Sandstorm" is a proxy for club music, so it's funny when people express sincere appreciation for it because according to internet paradigms of popular music, club music is inherently unserious if not wholly ridiculous.

Darude - Sandstorm



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This doesn't mean people are laughing at "Sandstorm" whenever they hear it, but perhaps they share a knowing wink. Those winks don't even account for the two greatest ironies of the song's fortitude: that a club track found its greatest success outside the club and that music once disparaged as foreign is now embraced by the core of American culture.

None of this, mind you, matters to the record's creator. "When people are talking about me, it's a good thing for my career," Darude says plainly. "I find my people when I get on the road and I communicate face to face or connect with likeminded people online. Not all the people I connect with are hardcore Darude fans, but it's enough for me when they are dance music people. Dance music people pretty much feel the same way about music in general. It gives us escape, it gives us a chance to connect times and moments with audio."

Just as the meaning of a meme can be altered through our interactions with it, so can the meaning of a hit song. While "Sandstorm" holds great personal significance to Darude himself, it has also allowed him to represent Finland on the world stage, including earlier this year at the Eurovision Song Contest. While next door Sweden is known as a veritable pop star factory, Finland has had only a handful of artists achieve success abroad. In the tradition of his country's best-known musical export, 20th century classical composer and political activist Jean Sibelius, Darude shrugged off Eurovision's rules against music with political messages by making a record with a political message ("though the climate is really everyone's politics," he demurs).

Though his song, "Look Away" with Finnish singer Sebastian Rejman, did not qualify for the final round of competition, Darude describes his Eurovision experience as a "ridiculous bubble of love." His appreciation for the opportunity mirrors his appreciation for "Sandstorm," and how the record's endurance -- combined with an average of 70 DJ gigs around the world every year -- has brought him a career he's understandably proud of.

In today's landscape, new music is either meticulously and thoroughly analyzed upon release, or forgotten by next Friday so the opportunity to revisit and reacquaint ourselves with the same record over years, let alone decades, is exceptional. It's hard to imagine how a record released in 2019 could ever have the trajectory of "Sandstorm," in which it can impact and re-enter the popular consciousness multiple times over 20 years, with each entrypoint connoting new meaning and cultural significance of its own.

There's also no reason to assume this story ends at 20 years. Like a meteorological event, even if the winds seem like they've calmed, it's only a matter of time before they pick up again, whooshing "Sandstorm" back around.



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