

Wolfgang Gartner: The Interview

I'm standing outside the dressing room, near the artist trailers on the EDC grounds, and still can't believe it. In a few minutes I'm going to interview one of the most gifted musicians in the world: a skilled producer, a classically-trained pianist, a label owner, and a transcendent force in the EDM scene. He's the main reason I got into house music in the first place.

Six years ago his soulful grooves and high-powered energy spoke to my soul at a time when I didn't even know what a sawtooth wave was. I've followed along with his music for a long time, and now I'm going to get the chance to pick his brain. His tour manager, a bearded man who looks to be in his 30s and goes by the name "E," lets me know that I'll be waiting just a few more minutes. I pace back and forth, going through the questions I'll be asking in my head. Finally I hear, "*You ready?*" The door to the dressing room opens, a few people walk out, and I can make out the skinny figure of a man sitting inside. "Yep," I answer. "I'm ready." It's time to talk with **Wolfgang Gartner**.

I walk up the steps to the tiny room and there he is, reclining on the couch inside. Whatever preconceptions I have about Wolfgang maybe being uptight or unfriendly go out the window—he greets me with a handshake and a smile, and seems incredibly laid-back. I make the introductions and give him my compliments, telling him how much I appreciate the chance to talk with him. "*My pleasure,*" he says. There's about an hour to go until he goes on for his live set, so we're quick to get started. We have a lot to talk about, after all.

Apparently, he only just got into Vegas the night before. I ask him what he's been up to the past few weeks: "*I went on my first vacation in 10 years,*" he says. "*I needed it more than anything, I was about to go insane...I went to Maui for a week and turned off my phone and internet, and that was actually*

*pretty healing. Then I came to Vegas, we just got in last night. I played part of my residency at **Tryst at The Wynn**, and then we just got here only 15 minutes ago.”* He’s excited to play at **EDC**. *“I haven’t been here in two years, so it’ll be interesting.”* He’ll be playing a bunch of unreleased tracks off of **Kindergarten Recordings** for his upcoming set, which I’m sure the crowd will absolutely go crazy for (not that they won’t be going crazy for Wolfgang already).

“My management put the leash on me and took me off Twitter before I ruined my career,” he jokes. I tell him we’re actually fans of his tweets at the site, and he laughs. *“Thank you! A lot of people aren’t because I’m kind of a dick sometimes,”* he says only half-jokingly. I tell him we also appreciate honesty, and he laughs. *“It’s honesty is what it is! I just don’t have a filter.”* It’s this honesty that we appreciate from Wolfgang—honesty of a man who has spent over a decade in the scene, making music, spinning at live sets, and becoming known as one of the most artistically-minded producers in the world. He takes pride in his work, and he feels the need to respond to some of the naysayers—a topic we will dive into deeply later in the interview.

The topic then shifts to his own label, **Kindergarten Recordings**, and its recent rise through the house music scene as one of the most authentic upstart labels around. This is actually the second iteration of Kindergarten, as **Wolfgang Gartner** himself used his label way back in 2008/2009 to launch a series of his own self-released singles, including **“Hook Shot,” “Clap,”** and the **“Candy EP.”** Now in its second version, Kindergarten Recordings is a hotbed for young, up-and-coming talent like **Charlie Darker, Popeska,** and **DallasK**. I ask him what he looks for when he signs a track or artist, and his response is an honest one. *“For me, it’s all about good music. As long as it falls under the umbrella of house music, whatever sub-genre that might be—complextro, electro, progressive,*

tech house, disco house—as long as it’s really amazing music, we’ll sign it. Because I love all of that stuff.”

He continues describing this process, which sounds like a surprisingly organic one: *“My A&R works full-time to go out and find all this music. He discovered Charlie Darker, he discovered Popeska. He brings this stuff to me, and we go over it together to hear who sounds the most promising. And then as a result, my manager has ended up signing Charlie and signing Popeska to management contracts as well. In the end, we’re looking for artists who are unknown, undiscovered, who have incredible talent and potential, and who are just waiting to be found.”* If the first couple years of its existence has been any indication, then **Kindergarten Recordings** is well on its way to being a hotbed of young talent ready to invade the house music scene in full force.

I ask him how he conceives of electro house today. Is there any room for innovation or originality in an age where much of it is dominated by that dubstep-influenced, complextro sound? His answer is rather hopeful. *“I think there is [room for originality]. This topic has so many different branches, but it’s all become homogenized. I could go on a tangent on the homogenization of dance music and how all the genres are blending together...but that also means that you can make a style of dance music that people can’t really pigeonhole into progressive or electro or whatever. And that can be very good.”* I tell him that’s what he does, that a lot of his own tracks vary from progressive, to electro, to old school disco-influenced house. *“Yeah,”* he says, *“I go all over the board. Usually you can figure out what style to categorize a track in, but I go from style, to style, to style all the time.”* Indeed he does, with tracks like **“Redline,” “Latin Fever,” “Anaconda,”** and even his remix of **Tiesto’s** legendary track **“I Will Be Here”** switching through different styles with relative ease. That’s perhaps the best element of Wolfgang’s music, that he can juggle all these different

styles and techniques with such ease. No two releases ever sound the same.

Since he is so outspoken, I'm curious to know something in particular. I ask what he would change in the EDM/house scene if he was emperor of it all.

We all laugh, Wolfgang says *"Oh, God..."* and I joke that it's like opening up a bombshell with him. He steadies himself, notes that he'll *"choose [his] words wisely,"* and begins. What he says almost blows me away. *"Well, if I could change anything about dance music, I think I would completely obliterate social media. I'd make it so that Twitter and Facebook don't exist. I mean, I know people discover music through it, and Facebook has the personal aspect too. But as a whole, they create unhealthy relationships between fans/music enthusiasts and artists. Let's say you post a new track on your Facebook: 50 people will come on and like it, and 30 people will come on and say 'You suck, you haven't made anything good in four years. I disown you!' And as an artist, if you're sensitive or actually have feelings, you realize that 'I just can't ignore all this shit.' I mean, I've been doing this for ten years and there's always been some form of social media, whether it was Myspace, Facebook, whatever. So through all that, I grew 'elephant skin.' But eventually, it got to a point where I could not just ignore all of this."*

I tell him that's understandable, because he takes pride in his work. *"I can't ignore haters,"* he says. *"If somebody comes and talks shit to me, I'm not just gonna back down and walk away. I'm gonna fight back! So I had to go off Facebook and now, when I post stuff, I'll just give it to my management to post it because, there's so many negative people on there that I can't read all of that. It's not healthy for me. I don't want to read the negativity, I want*

to read the positive responses. But I can't filter it into the 'good' and 'bad,' so I just stay away now."

It's interesting, and frankly eye-opening, to hear that such a notable and respected musician (with ten years in the scene and a slew of number one releases to his name) feels so hurt by the negativity he receives online. Most artists or public figures would fire back with an equal amount of hostility, or simply ignore them and say "screw the haters." But Wolfgang is different.

You always hear him putting every fiber of his being into every track he creates. He takes the process of music making so seriously, that at the end of the day, all he wants is to simply be appreciated. He loves making people dance—he always has. But in an era where the internet now dominates everyday life, and has subsequently created a particularly nasty and offending type of social media user, even the best tracks and most talented artists will have some harsh critics. That's an unfortunate part of the scene now, and certainly makes the proliferation of EDM through social media out to be a double-edged sword. For all the good it has done for the scene (with free downloads and social media dispersion thrusting talented artists like **Skrillex** and **Porter Robinson** into the forefront), it has also made the fan-to-artist relationship a harmful and uncomfortable one at times. And Wolfgang Gartner makes no apologies for distancing himself from it.

Another pet peeve of **Wolfgang Gartner's** is the repetitive nature in the way the top DJs select their tracks. *"The way that all the DJs are playing the same tracks at festivals,"* he says, *"is something I bitch about all the time.*

You know that. So, okay: you know that if a track is in the Top 10 on Beatport, everybody's playing it because it got there, because everybody's buying and playing it. Whether that be DJs at clubs, DJs at festivals, wherever—if you play that track in that set, you're doing that knowing that everybody else is already hearing that track. And doing that, to me, is just lazy and ignorant."

I ask Wolfgang if he'd rather see artists try to be more original with the track selection in their sets, and he responds adamantly. "Yes!" he says. *"Play something! There are so many tracks out there that are just as good as the Top 20 that are so good, and just haven't been discovered yet just because they're on some unknown label or from some unknown artist. I mean, you can even find a track from two years ago that was maybe in the Top 10 and people haven't heard it in two years—bust it out again! Or you can do a mashup, or play your own shit. But you don't even have to be a producer to overcome this. Just dig, and be a DJ. That's what it used to be about. There was so much vinyl out there—you'd go to a record store and just dig. I mean, all my friends had all these different records, and none of us had the same stuff. None of us had the same styles, so we'd dig in different stores, and different circles, and get our own collection up. And that's what people need to do instead of going to Beatport and downloading just what's on the Top 10."*

Like mixing out of one track and into another, Wolfgang launches seamlessly into his next item of interest: the way that the world's top DJs now share tracks between each other, which often leads to many different well-known DJs incorporating the same exact songs into each of their sets.

"Everyone in the top-tier DJ world is friends with each other now," he says, *"and we all send each other songs. And I know if 'so-and-so' who's in the Top 50 DJs in the world sends me a song, he's probably sent it to the other Top 49 DJs in the world, and they're probably all playing it tonight!"*

He laughs, as if he knows just how truthful his statement is (**Martin Garrix's** "anthemic" track **Animals** has been played by nearly every house DJ so far this weekend). *"But,"* he continues, *"I'm just not gonna [play those types of songs] in my sets, no matter how good they are."*

We get onto the topic of his musical influences, specifically the way he incorporates soulful funk- and disco-influenced elements into his work. In

addition to that, he also has been mixing a lot of hip-hop in with his sets lately. I ask him why he enjoys the “funk” sound so much, and what about the sound he thinks resonates with so many people. His answer is unexpected: *“To be honest, I don’t know if it does resonate with a lot of people. And I’m trying to make it resonate with people, because I think my demographic is getting younger. The people who come to these type of [festivals] are getting younger, which is a beautiful thing and I love it. But, they haven’t really been exposed to the funk...”*

“Like, when I was growing up there was disco house, and the hip-hop had a lot of disco samples in it, and that was the real funk. Then it turned to all very electronic and lacking ‘soul’—sometimes that’s okay, and sometimes a song that lacks that ‘soul’ element is still good. But I think people that are growing up on this music right now haven’t been exposed to this element of real, 70s-era soul that I was exposed to. And they need to be, because they just haven’t heard it. So I try and work it in in a way where I’m showing it to them, and mixing it in with what they’re familiar with to make it easier for them, but hope that they’ll still get turned on to it somehow.” I note that even though he’ll make a track like **“Redline,”** which is definitely progressive house, that he’ll still try to keep that funk-influenced element of his sound alive in most of his tracks. He agrees. *“Exactly, and I do it to try and expose [the fans]. But I really think it throws them off some of the time. I just do it as sort of a public service.”* We appreciate his service, I tell him with a smile, and he laughs.

Then something happens which I do not expect at all: I actually stump Wolfgang with a question. This is not intentional at all, and I ask him what I feel is a pretty tame query. Who, I ask, are some up-and-coming artists that are on his radar—other than the guys on **Kindergarten Recordings**. At first he draws a blank. *“Um...’other than the guys on Kindergarten’ huh...I’m looking at my playlist and record catalog in my head right now, and all the new stuff that’s undiscovered, well...I’m playing off Kindergarten!”* We both laugh, and I tell him it’s not as if the guys on Kindergarten aren’t good.

Quite the opposite: **Charlie Darker**, **DallasK**, and **Popeska** have all been tearing it up with their respective careers so far. I just want to hear who else is on his radar. I won't let him cop out, and I still want an answer. *"Who do I like?"* Wolfgang asks himself. *"Um...oh...I can't really think of anyone right now to be honest!"*

My colleague and fellow editor, who has been sitting in on the interview the whole time, glances over at me and says "You stumped Wolfgang Gartner!" I laugh nervously and exclaim, "No, I didn't mean to stump Wolfgang Gartner!" All the while, Wolfgang himself is laughing, finding the humor in both the question and his lack of response. *"Haha, that's the thing! That question always stumps me, because everyone who's 'hot' right now has already been discovered. Like, all these guys who are out here right now—they're hot, they're doing good stuff, and their music is good so I appreciate it. But there are very few 'up-and-comers' that I can think of right now. If there are guys coming up who are really hot right now, I'd probably be signing them and trying to get music from them. So if I knew those names, I'd be on them myself."* Touché, Wolfgang.

By now our interview is winding down, so I ask Wolfgang what we can expect from him for the rest of the year, and into 2014. *"Part of it is that I just don't know,"* he says. *"Basically, I'm writing a shitload of new music right now. And I'm not necessarily exposing it yet. I'm waiting for the right time. I used to just write a song and then come out and play it in my set the next night, but I'm not doing that anymore. I'm holding it back. I don't know what we're gonna do, but I wanna unleash it in a way that...I put out an album and nobody has even heard a snippet of any track."* I note that every DJ is all about the "previews" and the "teasers" lately. *"That's the thing, I just want it to be 'Boom!' Here's twelve f**king tracks that I've spent time making, and you haven't heard any of them. So that's what I'm working on right now. I feel like I'm working on an album, but I'm not*

signed to any album deal or anything.”

He explains how his deal with noted label **Ultra Records** recently came to an end. *“I just got off Ultra Records, my deal with them has ended. And I feel that, part of the reason I’m in such a good place creatively is partly due to that.”* My colleague notes how that’s pretty much what happened with **deadmau5** after his Ultra deal ended, and he agrees. *“Just like deadmau5. We were both talking about that. Basically, I’m just in a really good creative headspace and making a lot of music. It’s just all very secretive right now.”*

We’re almost out of time, so for my last question, I ask Wolfgang what’s one message he’d like to communicate to these younger fans who are entering the EDM scene. Just something for them to keep in mind as they go on to (hopefully) embrace this music for years to come. *“Don’t believe the hype,”* he says. *“Don’t believe the marketing, the advertisements. Do your research. Just listen to the music! Don’t go for all the other shit—the partying, the bright lights—I mean, that’s great too. But avoid the gimmicks. Listen to the music. Because that’s what it’s about.”* The response is typical Wolfgang—straight, to the point, and most importantly, valuing artistic skill above all else.

My interview with **Wolfgang Gartner** is eye-opening in more ways than one. In the beginning, I’m surprised to see that Wolfgang is just a mild-mannered, down-to-earth guy who is incredibly easy to talk to. There are

absolutely no signs of elitism or snobbery with the man—two insults that the aforementioned Facebook/Twitter “keyboard warriors” like to hurl at Wolfgang, as if they somehow know him. I’m surprised to hear Wolfgang tell me how much he is affected by the words of naysayers and haters through social media. He takes the music he makes as seriously as a painter would a painting, or an architect would a house. His pipe dream for social media to be “eradicated” seems to stem not only from his unfortunate experiences with Facebook- and Twitter-users, but also from his own wish for the dance music scene to return to being the more inspiring, supportive community it once was.

The artistry, the digging for unheard-of records, the fan support of musicians. These are all things Wolfgang would bring back if he could snap his fingers together and make it so. But he can’t. Instead—with his songs and his words—he fights for the true music fan, the one who isn’t swept up in the aforementioned “hype,” who goes to clubs and festivals not just to get drunk or high, but to experience the music itself and to spread that love with fellow enthusiasts. And he will fight for this dream, tooth and nail.

Because **Wolfgang Gartner** is not just a producer or a DJ. He is a musical warrior, waging a battle against the forces of stagnation and immaturity that pervade many areas of the modern-day EDM scene. And while this campaign is nowhere near over, Wolfgang will continue to fight. He’ll continue to sound off and be outspoken, never censoring himself for anyone. But most importantly, he’ll continue to make music his way.

That’s what warriors do: stick true to their sense of honor and never waver in their mission. The worldwide house music scene is lucky to still have artists like Wolfgang, someone who is not afraid to speak their mind, or to trumpet artistic skill over bottle service DJs and gimmicky music. Because he doesn’t just fight for himself—he fights for us too. And that’s the true definition of a warrior.