

A. Paul

Character Before Perfection

Hardgroove before the revival, the architecture behind multiple labels, a catalogue spanning thousands of tracks, and why power does not have to mean density.

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VOICES

EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

A.Paul has been around long enough to watch techno styles disappear, return and acquire new names. His interest is less in the cycle itself than in what survives it: groove, authorial identity, label purpose and the difference between power and density.

In this SIGNAL conversation, he traces the label architecture behind Squeeze, Onh.Cet, Naked Lunch and the projects that followed; explains why rough edges can matter more than polish; and reflects on a catalogue he says has grown beyond 2,500 tracks. The result is not a career retrospective. It is a conversation about judgment: what to preserve, what to reject, and what still makes a record feel like somebody's own.

01

The groove is older than the revival.

Across your early records, hard, funky and deep bass-driven techno existed before today's market separated it into categories such as hardgroove, raw/deep/hypnotic and hard techno. When you listen to the current hardgroove revival, which rhythmic details tell you that a producer genuinely understands the form, and which details expose it as a fashionable reconstruction?

Styles come and go—that's something you inevitably witness after spending enough time in this scene. Trends get reshaped, sound design evolves because the tools improve, but the essence of a style usually stays the same.

Hardgroove was originally developed by Ben Sims, who built incredible records from recycled beats and loops, inspiring an entire generation of producers. It quickly became one of the most exciting directions in techno and won over DJs and dancefloors everywhere. I was deeply into it as well, and for several years it was probably the main sound I was producing and playing.

As always with techno, though, things evolve. I naturally moved into other territories that I also love. So it makes perfect sense that a new generation is now rediscovering hardgroove and finding it exciting again. I'm hearing a lot of quality releases, and I think many producers genuinely understand what made the style work in the first place.

To me, hardgroove today sounds remarkably close to how it did when it first emerged. The producers who really get it aren't just copying the surface elements—they understand that it's about creating relentless groove through layered rhythms, often built from recycled house percussion, with subtle movement, tension and creative breakdowns. It's a style that relies on rhythm more than gimmicks.

Of course, there are different shades of hardgroove. Some tracks lean darker and more hypnotic, while others are more energetic and playful, incorporating recognizable vocal snippets or samples from different musical genres. That's always been part of its DNA. What matters isn't whether it sounds old or new, but whether the groove feels natural, drives the

dancefloor, and has the personality that made hardgroove so special in the first place.

“It's a style that relies on rhythm more than gimmicks.”

02

Every label needed its own room.

Before Naked Lunch, you worked through Squeeze and Onh.Cet, later building Parallel 125, The Light, Dirty Ego, LK and several other imprints. Were these labels truly separate artistic propositions, or different compartments of one evolving A.Paul language? Which unfinished idea from one of those labels would still be relevant if revived today?

Yes, each label had its own identity and purpose, although together they reflect different stages of my evolution as an artist and label owner.

The first one was Squeeze Records, which I founded alongside two other Portuguese artists, Ricardo Ferro and Paulo Wogz. It became the first Portuguese techno label, created mainly as a platform for national talent. We released several records and CD compilations, and even today many people remember it as a landmark in the history of Portuguese electronic music.

After a few years, I felt I needed a space dedicated to my own productions, which led me to create Onh.Cet. Unfortunately, around 2001, our distributor closed down and I had to put both projects on hold.

Everything changed in 2005. Beatport had just opened, digital distribution was transforming the industry, and after years of experience I had built a solid network of contacts. It was the right moment to start again. Naked Lunch was born, followed by Parallel 125 for my more minimal and experimental side, Dirty Ego for a tech-house approach, and LK Music, dedicated exclusively to my productions under the L.K. alias.

Later, vinyl made sense again, especially after I co-founded MPC Distribution with Cisco Ferreira (Kombination Research) and Michaelangelo (Labrynth Records). Through MPC, many of these labels found a new life on vinyl while continuing to exist digitally.

So, rather than being different versions of the same label, each project had a clear artistic direction and a specific role. Some of them are still active today and continue to receive great feedback.

As for unfinished ideas, I don't really see them that way. If I feel inspired by a concept from the past, I have no problem bringing it into the present. Good ideas don't have an expiration date—they just need the right moment and the right context. My latest project, Theorum, which I run with my good friend Lisa Oakes from the UK, is another example of that mindset: always looking forward while carrying the experience of everything that came before.

03

Character survives the rough edges.

After decades of listening to demos and curating releases, what is the smallest detail that tells you an unknown producer has an authorial fingerprint rather than a technically polished imitation? Is there a production flaw you would deliberately preserve because correcting it would also remove the artist's identity?

After listening to demos for so many years, you develop an instinct for it. I can usually tell within a short time whether someone is simply reproducing a sound that's already out there or whether they have their own artistic identity.

For me, techno needs to bring something fresh to the table, or, if it's working within an established style, it has to be exceptionally well crafted. Technical quality is important, but it isn't what makes a record memorable. What really stands out is when a producer has their own way of building tension, programming drums, arranging a track or creating a groove. Those are the details that reveal an authorial fingerprint, even before the production is perfect.

I'm also willing to overlook certain imperfections if I can hear genuine potential. Every artist goes through a learning process, and I don't expect new producers to be at their peak from the beginning. Sometimes a track has rough edges, but there's a unique energy or personality that would be lost if everything were polished to perfection. I'd much rather hear something with character than something technically flawless but anonymous.

One of the things I've always tried to do through my labels is give opportunities to new talent. If I believe an artist has something original to say, I'm happy to be part of that journey and help provide the platform for them to grow.

"I'd much rather hear something with character than something technically flawless but anonymous."

04

Power is not density.

Recent releases such as Holographic and Context operate around 140 to 142 BPM and sit within the raw/deep/hypnotic spectrum, yet their force comes from control rather than maximal density. At this stage of your career, do you create intensity primarily through addition, subtraction or duration, and what element do younger producers most often exaggerate when trying to sound powerful?

I try not to overthink or intellectualize my creative process too much. My love for techno is immense, and one of the things I enjoy most is being able to explore its different shades. Every new project starts with a feeling rather than a formula. It depends on the mood I'm in that day and where the music naturally wants to go.

I don't consciously think in terms of adding or subtracting elements to create intensity. Sometimes power comes from layering sounds, sometimes from stripping everything back, and

sometimes simply from letting a groove evolve over time. The track itself tells you what it needs. Experience teaches you to listen to that instead of forcing an idea.

I think one thing many younger producers tend to exaggerate is the need to make everything bigger, louder and more intense all the time. They often confuse power with density. But in my experience, the strongest moments usually come from contrast, tension and restraint. If everything is at maximum energy from beginning to end, there's nowhere left for the music to go.

More than anything, I believe it's important to stay true to yourself rather than making music with the sole purpose of pleasing other people or following the latest trend. Otherwise, you're not really creating art—you're just reproducing a formula. The records that stand the test of time are usually the ones that reflect the artist's own vision, not what they think the market wants to hear.

“They often confuse power with density.”

05

A catalogue can become its own question.

You have major-festival history, longstanding peer support, national awards and an extensive catalogue, yet contemporary techno media increasingly mythologises careers through branding and narrative rather than sustained contribution. Which part of A.Paul's reputation is accurate, which part remains incomplete, and what has the scene consistently misunderstood about your work?

When I look back at my career, I feel I got many things right, although there are certainly aspects I would approach differently today. The music industry has changed enormously. The way you build an artist's career now is very different, with the influence of social media and the sheer scale that electronic music has reached over the last two decades.

One thing that has always defined me is my productivity. I've released more than 2,500 tracks and over 100 vinyl records, and I'm proud of that body of work. At the same time, I sometimes wonder whether being more selective with my releases might have created a different perception of my catalogue. That's a fair question to ask myself.

Another important lesson is that no one builds a lasting career alone. I've been fortunate to work with some incredible people who helped me reach a higher level, but I've also experienced partnerships that weren't the right fit and probably limited what I could have achieved. That's simply part of any long career.

As for my reputation, I think the part people get right is my consistency. I've dedicated my life to techno, not just as a producer and DJ, but also as someone committed to developing labels, supporting new artists and helping the scene grow. What I think is sometimes overlooked is the breadth of my work. Because I've explored so many different shades of techno over the years, some people associate me with only one period or one sound, when in reality I've always enjoyed evolving and challenging myself rather than staying in a comfortable formula.

In today's world, branding and storytelling often receive as much attention as the music itself. I understand that's part of the industry now, but I've always believed that the work should speak first. If there's one thing I'd like people to remember about A.Paul, it's not a narrative or an image—it's a catalogue built with passion, consistency and an honest love for techno. And despite everything I've done so far, I still feel I have a lot to give.

06

Identity should not become a prison.

You once described Naked Lunch as a home for raw material left “undressed”, releasing known and unknown producers without preconceptions. Twenty years later, platforms reward immediate genre recognition, constant visibility and measurable traction. What commercially irrational decision would you still make to protect the label’s identity?

For me, techno has never had boundaries, and that's something I've always tried to reflect through Naked Lunch. From the very beginning, the label was never about chasing trends or fitting into a specific category. It was about releasing music I genuinely believed in, whether it came from an established artist or someone nobody had heard of.

That philosophy hasn't changed. Even though today's industry is different as you state, I would still make the same “irrational” decision of signing a great track simply because I believe in it, regardless of whether it fits the current trend or has obvious commercial potential.

A label should have an identity, but that identity shouldn't become a prison. For me, Naked Lunch's identity has always been its openness—its willingness to embrace different shades of techno as long as the music is honest, well made and has something to say.

At the end of the day, trends come and go, but good music lasts. I'd rather take risks and release records that I truly believe in than compromise the label's vision just to satisfy algorithms or short-term market expectations.

“A label should have an identity, but that identity shouldn't become a prison.”

SIDE SIGNAL

When the interviewer enters the frame.

This may be an unusual question to ask in an interview, but I have to take the opportunity. You, MarAxe, D.A.V.E. The Drummer and Ogi have been major reference points throughout my own journey in techno. If DKTech’s work has crossed your radar, I would genuinely value your honest critique, because real progress comes from understanding both what works and what still needs to improve. What do you hear in the project, where does it already have a strong identity, and where should it evolve next?

First of all, thank you for the kind words. It's always rewarding to know that something I've done has inspired another artist's journey.

As for DKTech, from what I've heard, I think the talent is definitely there. You already have a solid understanding of groove, structure and the energy that makes techno work on a dancefloor. More importantly, I can hear commitment, and that's something you can't fake.

My advice would be to keep developing your own voice. Inspiration is healthy—we all start by being influenced by artists we admire—but the goal is always to arrive at something that is unmistakably yours. That's what gives an artist longevity.

Keep working hard, keep refining your sound, and be patient with the process. Try to release on good labels that truly fit your music. The right label can help shape your career far more than chasing trends or quick exposure.

Most importantly, never stop being curious. Keep experimenting, keep learning, and don't be afraid to take risks. That's how artists evolve. If you stay consistent and true to your own vision, the recognition will eventually come.

LAST WORD

Croatia, Portugal and one penalty.

Since I'm Croatian and you're Portuguese, we can't finish without settling this: that penalty against Croatia... come on, was it really a penalty?

The truth is, it's one of those moments that football fans could debate forever. More broadly, I think football has had its share of controversial decisions over the years, and I don't think anyone would deny that the sport hasn't always been free from politics, commercial interests or inconsistencies in refereeing.

As for that particular penalty, I can understand both sides of the argument. Players are constantly grabbing and holding each other inside the box during set pieces, and most of the time referees let it go. In this case, there was contact, but it's difficult to judge the intensity and, more importantly, whether it genuinely affected the player's ability to challenge for the ball.

So, if the referee had decided not to give it, I don't think many people would have been shocked. It's one of those incidents where reasonable people can reach different conclusions—and that's probably why we're still talking about it.

CLOSING NOTE

The work still has to speak first.

Across different eras, labels and production approaches, A.Paul keeps returning to the same test: character before formula. Groove matters when it feels natural. Imperfection can survive when it carries identity. A label can move without losing its purpose. Even an enormous catalogue becomes meaningful only when the records still sound like decisions rather than output.

For someone who has spent decades inside techno, the interesting position is not resistance to change. It is resistance to becoming predictable.

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