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MOOG MANIA

A FESTIVAL FETES THE SYNTH THAT TRANSFORMED ROCK

By LARRY GETLEN

New York, NY – June 18, 2006 – Emerson, Lake & Palmer did nothing small, playing with spinning drum kits, flying pianos and symphony orchestras. So for a band that raised grandiosity to an art form, the Moog synthesizer became the instrumental equivalent of Woodstock in a box.



"Not only was it an innovation," says flash keyboardist Keith Emerson, "but it had a theatrical quality, where the audience could see how sounds were changed."

The Moog, which will be celebrated Thursday night at the third annual Moogfest at B.B. King's, was a bulky contraption: a keyboard attached to a monolithic console bulging with knobs and wires (previous synthesizers were even more awkward – and expensive). But when introduced in the late '60s, it's what progress sounded like.

The Moog (rhymes with vogue) allowed keyboardists to slide notes electronically, and simulated the sounds of other instruments so authentically, England's musician's union feared it would kill orchestras.

"It opened up all the possibilities of soloing," says Emerson, who'll perform Thursday along with Jan Hammer, DJ Logic, the School of Rock and others. "It defined progressive rock music."

The Moog synthesizer was invented in 1965 by its namesake, Robert Moog, a physics grad student who initially sold them to experimental composers and universities. But that switched with Walter Carlos' 1968 album "Switched-On Bach," which featured Moog-performed Bach concertos. "Switched-On Bach" spent 17 weeks in the Top 40, raising the instrument's profile. When ELP recorded the ballad "Lucky Man," Emerson played the solo on a Moog. The song became a hit, further exposing the instrument to the rock world, and catching its inventor by surprise.

"I played "Lucky Man" for him," says Emerson, "and he was blown away. He had never heard the instrument used so musically."

Robert Moog died in August, making this a bittersweet Moogfest – the first since his passing. For Emerson, who described Moog as a "warm, wonderful man," his contribution to music was anything but synthetic.

"I like to think ELP would have gone ahead on its musicianship alone," says Emerson, envisioning a Moog-less career. "I like to think that. But the Moog put the icing on the cake." Or at least something that looked and tasted almost exactly like icing.

Photo: Wire Image