

Entertainment

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Bob Moog

THIS MAN ROCKS

The machine that changed music -- How Bob Moog's synthesizer helped invent modern pop by Nancy Miller

One of the world's greatest music legends is in a New York club tonight. Hundreds of worshippers, wearing T-shirts emblazoned with his name, wildly undulate to the wacky, spaced-out sounds he unleashed on the world some 40 years ago. Others crowd near the entrance, waiting anxiously for the briefest glimpse of their beloved cult hero. No, it's not the dude with the black shirt and feathered hair performing on stage -- that's just Keith Emerson, the lightning-fingered keyboardist for Emerson, Lake & Palmer, pounding out his prog-rock opus "Lucky Man." No, the 70-year-old object of all this adoration is currently perched in a specially reserved booth, taking a nap.

Meet Bob Moog (rhymes with rogue), one of the most influential innovators in the history of rock & roll and the guy who invented the monster Moog synthesizer Emerson is now plugged into. Even if you don't know the names of the dozens of contraptions he's created over the years -- the Minimoog, the Minimoog Voyager, the Moog Modular -- you've undoubtedly heard them: Their eerie, pulsating rhythms and juicy, fat squelches have been used -- for good and sometimes evil -- by just about every musician in rock, jazz, hip-hop, and pop, from the Beatles to the Beastie Boys, from P-Funk to P. Diddy, from ELP to N.E.R.D. Until recently, Moog was all but unknown outside music-geek circles. His machines altered the course of pop music, but the man himself spent the last few decades laboring in obscurity, flirting with bankruptcy, and enduring a long legal battle over the rights to use his own name.

Not anymore. Thanks to a full-fledged Moog renaissance, he's finally feeling the love. All year, in fact, thousands of Moog fans have been packing houses at a series of "Moogfest" concerts -- everywhere from Scotland to Japan -- featuring both hipster favorites (Money Mark and DJ Logic) and '70s dinosaurs (Rick Wakeman and, uh, Eumir Deodato). Moog, a new documentary by filmmaker Hans Fjellestad (2002's *Frontier Life*), is due in theaters on Sept. 24. And after a 15-year hiatus, the company he founded, Moog Music Inc., is back in business, and sales have never been so brisk. "I love the whole Moog package," says loyal customer Roger O'Donnell, keyboardist for the Cure, who uses a Minimoog for several tracks on the band's latest album (and composed his own tune for the Moog soundtrack). "It's the instrument, the sound, but it's just as much about Bob. Not only is he a genius, but he has that genius hair and that genius name."

And the burgeoning cult isn't limited to just musicians and pony tailed analog purists. One 22-year-old engineering student at tonight's NYC Moogfest drove seven hours to attend. He gushes to Moog (now awake): "I wanted to tell you, sir, you are my inspiration. I want to be the next Bob Moog." Another twentysomething is simply awed that Moog exists. "I didn't even realize he was an actual person. It's so cool."

The actual person -- that genius hair a wild white halo, his glasses a trifle grease-smeared -- is baffled by all the attention. "A lot of people want to be in the electronic instrument business because they think it's glamorous," says Moog. "They think you'll hang around musicians all the time. But it's not glamorous at all, really."

No disrespect or anything, but we kind of suspected as much (the pocket protector was a dead giveaway), and a trip to Moog's home base, near Asheville, N.C., confirms our suspicions. Just off Interstate 40, right next to a hardware supply store, you'll find the ever-so-humble headquarters of Moog Music Inc. The first thing you notice as you wander through the cramped, 18-person operation is an urgent, lusty whooping sound -- like a car alarm in heat -- coming from a tiny, single-windowed room way in the back of the building. Inside, on this late-June afternoon, Moog is stooped over his latest creation, a wooden box the size of a dorm-room fridge. He flicks a few switches and turns a dial. Beeweer. Then

another twist. Mwaaaaaaa. "Yep," he says in his sharp, Christopher Walken-like clip. "There's a lot of cool s--- happening in there."

Moog's been on a quest for strange sounds pretty much his entire life, starting in Queens in 1949, where he spent his youth building theremins, a hauntingly high-pitched electronic instrument best known for making that weird noise in the Beach Boys' "Good Vibrations." He's still the biggest theremin manufacturer in North America and its biggest fan (a bumper sticker clinging to his ancient Toyota reads Theremin Players Do It With High Frequency!). But it wasn't until he introduced the Moog synthesizer, in 1964, that Moog was made.

That electronic wildebeest looked like a 1940s operator switchboard, sounded like a spaceship with hiccups, and cost as much as a Cadillac. "People didn't know what to make of it or what they were going to do with it," Moog recalls, "but they knew they wanted to have one." Some of its first customers were in the TV industry, where the gizmo's chirps and whistles were used for cartoon noises and other peculiar sounds (although experimental composer John Cage was also an early adapter). It didn't take long for others to find better uses for it. In 1968, Wendy Carlos fiddled with its knobs and buttons to make *Switched-On Bach*, an interpretation of Johann Sebastian as if conducted by Ms. Pac-Man. The record moved over a million copies and, astonishingly, is still one of the best-selling "classical" albums of all time.

By the late '60s, Moog synths were like three-ways and quaaludes – every rock star had to try them (sometimes with less-than-desirable results). "It was a constant surprise to find out who was using it," says Moog. "If anything, I remember feeling flattered that musicians would be interested in something I helped create." (Moog credits Herbert Deutsch, a composer, with helping him develop the technology.)

But it was prog-rock bands like Yes and ELP who gave the sound its onstage mojo. "Up until Bob came along, keyboardists were back-room boys," recalls former Yes keyboardist Rick Wakeman. "When it came solo time, you were either drowned out completely or the band had to embarrassingly drop their volume in order for you to be heard. Guitarists would inevitably smirk to the bass player, as if to say, 'I don't know why we even have these people on stage.' Then

the Moog hit the scene, and here was an instrument with a sound that would cut concrete. Guitarists fell to their knees in fear."

It was a heady time for Moog, the height of his success, and he chose the moment to cash out: In 1973, he sold half his Moog trademark to a larger music company, Norlin, taking a job as president of Moog Music. Four years later, fed up with the company's "testosterone-laden corporate atmosphere," he quit and moved from a suburb in Buffalo to North Carolina, where he spent the next few years building a house with his first wife, Shirleigh (they divorced in 1995; Moog has since remarried), and their four children. The synthesizer slid into the disco era like Brooke Shields into a pair of Calvins, but in the mid-'80s Norlin went under and sold off the Moog trade name. It took 15 years of legal wrangling before Moog would be allowed to sell instruments with his name on them (that lag has only made vintage Moogs all the more valuable; collectors pay upwards of \$5,000 these days).

Not that there was a huge demand for the Moog brand name at the time. Most keyboard-based acts, like Depeche Mode and Thomas Dolby, were going polyphonic digital, and by the '90s synths were as dated as bell-bottoms. "We bought up all the Moogs nobody wanted," says Brian Kehew, cofounder of Moog Cookbook, a kitschy cover band that helped jump-start the Moog revival in the late '90s with creations like an electronic version of Nirvana's "Smells Like Teen Spirit." "People wanted a band, guitars. Keyboards were seen as dorky."

But even dorky gets its day. At the cluttered desk in his Asheville office, Moog snatches a sheet of paper listing current clients: Nick Rhodes from Duran Duran, Chad Hugo from the Neptunes, Snoop Dogg (or as Moog wrote it, Snoopy Dogg), and Printz Board of the Black Eyed Peas. ("I use the Moog now to thicken my beats, like a special sauce," says Board.) "Wanna see something wild?" Moog asks, plucking up a picture sent in by an overeager fan. It shows a half-naked woman with the word "MOOG" tattooed on her back. "I just can't. . . it's baffling to me," he stammers, shuffling the photo under some other papers. And it's really not even a close second to his biggest turn-on. "Forty years later," he says, fiddling again with the Anniversary Edition of the Minimoog Voyager, the room filling with wet electro-kerplunks, "I still get little goose bumps when I make these sounds."

CIRCUITS SIDESHOW

THE 5 BEST AND 5 WORST MOOG TUNES OF ALL TIME

THUMBS UP

1. **ABBEY ROAD** The Beatles: Their last recorded album was their first to use the Moog, which enhanced tunes like "Because" and "Here Comes the Sun." Unfortunately, it also encouraged the recording of the cartoony "Maxwell's Silver Hammer."
2. **"I FEEL LOVE"** Donna Summer: Due to the Moog's pulsing bass line, we still feel love for Summer's 1978 disco hit.
3. **"BLOW YOUR HEAD"** Fred Wesley and the JB's: The squelchy, gritty, soaring sounds of the Moog (played by James Brown himself) on the all-instrumental track on the 1974 *Damn Right I Am Somebody* will, as the title suggests, blow your mind. Public Enemy later sampled it for "Public Enemy No. 1."
4. **A CLOCKWORK ORANGE SOUNDTRACK** Wendy Carlos: Her futuristic twist on Beethoven added an unsettling beauty to Stanley Kubrick's ultraviolent classic.
5. **"FLASH LIGHT"** Parliament: Thanks to keyboardist Bernie Worrell's squealing and dealing, the 1978 tune is still a dance-party anthem.

THUMBS DOWN

1. **"POPCORN"** Hot Butter: It's just never a good idea to base a melody on the sound of a concessions snack. Still, this tune was a hit--the "Axel F" of '72.
2. **COSMIC SOUNDS** The Zodiac: The tracks on this 1967 psychedelic relic are listed astrologically. 'Nuff said.
3. **"ONE NOTE SAMBA/SPANISH FLEA"** Jean Jacques Perrey: In 1967, he hijacked Antonio Carlos Jobim's bossa nova melody and turned it into an alien life-form.

4. "THE LOOK OF LOVE" Richard Hayman: The combination of Burt Bacharach and the Moog in this 1969 tune created a near-combustible level of cheese.

5. NASHVILLE GOLD Switched on Moog: An entire album of country hits like "Tennessee Waltz," Moog-style. So bad, it's--no, it's just bad.

[QUOTE:]

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