

Retro Family Tree

CD TRACK 7

Here are five examples of various Arp sounds:

1. Axe Bass
2. Bass
3. FX
4. Miscellaneous
5. Pad

FAMOUS USERS

Early ARP adoptee Pete Townshend put his ARP 2500 to good use on *The Who's Who's Next* (1971). A customised ARP 2500 made its big screen debut in Spielberg's 1977 *Close Encounters Of The Third Kind* communicating with visiting aliens. Vince Clarke acquired a 2500 in later years.

ARP 2600 users are ten a penny: Depeche Mode, Jarre, Orbital, Klaus Schulze, Underworld and Stevie Wonder, to name but a few; ditto the Odyssey (Abba, Chick Corea, John Foxx, Herbie Hancock, Tangerine Dream, Numan, Ultravox and 808 State). Other ARPs were not so widely used, though the cumbersome Quadra fleetingly found favour with prog rockers Genesis, ELO and Pink Floyd.

808 State



⚡ After Moog, ARP was next in line to realise the American synth dream, but sadly, they were first to bite the dust. Jonathan Miller rides the 'synthwaves' of success and failure. . .

MOST OF US have heard of Moog, but a lot less have heard ARP. It's strange that of these two long defunct arch rivals in a bygone era of sonic history, Moog's legacy remains stronger. Yet between 1969 and 1981 ARP arguably produced some of the most musically expressive (analogue) synths ever built. Indeed, by the mid 70s ARP enjoyed an amazing 40% share of the \$25 million synth marketplace, surpassing even Moog!

Why this disappearance into relative obscurity, then? Good question. With the benefit of hindsight we can see lady luck did not always shine down on ARP, with catastrophic results.

Lost in space

Throughout the 60s RA Moog Inc. (later Moog Music Inc.) effectively ruled the early synthwaves. Of course, this was mainly down to lack of competition, but come 1969 there was a new kid on the block: ARP Instruments of Newton Highlands, Massachusetts, USA (named after founder Alan R Pearlman, an engineering genius who had spent several years designing amplifiers for NASA's Apollo and Gemini space programs).

Like many, Pearlman was awakened to possibilities being thrown up by Moog's newfangled electronic instruments when the press reported that Walter (later Wendy) Carlos had painstakingly recreated a series of Bach pieces to form 1968's groundbreaking *Switched On Bach* album using only a Moog modular system. Unlike most, however, Pearlman (who had studied classical piano) had the technical know-how and financial clout to rain on Moog's parade, sinking \$100,000 of his own money into the new company he formed with a small group of investors.

Back in 1948, Pearlman had written a university paper predicting the future importance of dedicated electronic music instruments; in 1970, he finally acted on those prophetic words with his first instrument, the ARP 2500. Like Carlos's beloved Moog, the 2500 is an unfeasibly large modular synth, requiring users to physically patch together individual sound modules – multiple VCOs, VCFs and the like – using a switchable matrix system (unlike Moog's preferred patch cords). Naturally, an understanding

of subtractive (analogue) synthesis – and probably a spell working on NASA's space program – is required to get any sound from the beast. In fact, the 2500 looked like it was developed for NASA!

ARP's debut synth was popular with upmarket university labs and a handful of patient musicians. It featured a more stable oscillator design than its Moog modular counterparts (later acknowledged by Bob Moog himself). But a cheaper, easier to operate alternative was needed if ARP were to live long and prosper.

Music for the masses

1971's semi-modular, three-VCO ARP 2600 monosynth – replete with detachable 49-note keyboard and built-in spring

reverb and amp – still involved a degree of user-patching, but Pearlman admirably succeeded in achieving his design goals, with a respectable \$2,600 (£1,350) price tag to boot. Here was a synth that someone without a Masters in Quantum Physics could get to grips with!

⚡ “Pearlman sought to address a lack of working capital by floating ARP in 1973, but sales did not increase” ⚡

Some 3,000 units were sold in its 10-year production run, during which the instrument was revised on several occasions, becoming duophonic in 1975 thanks to an implemented modification by one Tom Oberheim, who later went on to find fame and fortune with his own successful series of namesake analogue synthesizers. ARP dropped its original 'Moog-esque' filters that same year, having been sued by Bob's boys.

Likewise, in 1971, the infamous Mini-Moog monosynth shaped the synthesizer, both in terms of appearance and features: no patch cords required for this compact baby! ARP responded in kind with 1972's \$1,550 (£1,250) Odyssey, in effect a simplified, two-VCO 2600.

Like its immediate predecessor, the Odyssey was also revised on a number of occasions during its lengthy production lifespan, though consensus among collectors and ARP personnel is the original, 'white-faced' models sound best. Still, ARP clearly had an uphill battle on their hands if they were to match the

Falling down

keyboardless expander, intended as an Axse add-on but equally capable of beefing up any other suitably-endowed CV/Gate pre-MIDI synth.

Pearlman sought to address a lack of working capital by floating the company in 1973. While ARP's public profile increased via endorsements from leading names like Stevie Wonder and Joe Zawinul, sales did not increase accordingly, despite peaking at \$7 million in 1977.

Still, ARP fought valiantly against an incoming tide of cheaper Japanese synths with 1975's Axse, literally a single-oscillator Odyssey. In a cunning marketing stroke they simultaneously launched the Little Brother, a single-VCO

However, marketing – or rather a gross marketing misjudgement – would be ARP's downfall. As their range of lead synths had undeniably proved popular with pro keyboard players, ARP figured that richer pickings were to be had among their more abundant guitar-playing counterparts. 1977's 'guitar synth', the Avatar, cost an unbelievable \$4 million to develop, only to prove hopelessly unreliable in practice. Predicting this disastrous outcome from the outset, Pearlman had attempted to kill the ill-fated project, only to be overruled by the ARP board. Moreover, with only \$1 million worth of Avatars being sold in its two-year production run, ARP was doomed.

ARP ceased trading in 1981, the first of the American synth giants to bite the dust. Moog were not far behind and SCI of Prophet 5 fame also followed suit. That ARP was sold lock, stock and barrel to corporate bigwigs CBS Musical Instruments for the paltry sum of \$350,000 (that included the manufacturing rights for the Chroma, a polysynth that should have been ARP's saving grace) is a poignant reflection of just how far the once mighty synth giant had fallen. **FM**

No. 11: ARP synths



ARP 2500

Up to \$8,500 new, depending on configuration, only 100 ARP 2500s were manufactured from 1970 onwards. A 10-VCO example is currently posted for sale on the Old Tech Vintage Synthesizer Site (www.oldtech.com/synth/) for \$21,000!



ARP 2600

The ARP 2600 settled into its commonplace vinyl-covered, luggage-style casing with a dark grey panel from 1972 onwards. A final technical revamp and change of colour scheme (white and orange panel graphics on a darker grey panel) occurred in 1978. Typical second-hand pricing is around £1,500.



ARP ODYSSEY

From the first white-faced monophonics to the last duophonic examples, five different Odyssey models were launched between 1972 and 1978, starting at \$1,550/£1,250. Today's pricing varies according to model: two (white) Odyssey 'MkIs' were recently spotted online for £800 and £799, respectively.



ARP LITTLE BROTHER

Sound sculpting facilities are rather scant (four basic voices and four octave settings) on the keyboardless Little Brother 'synthesizer expander'. Not many were sold between 1975 and 1977; the Old Tech Vintage Synthesizer Site is currently selling one for \$390.



ARP AXXE

The diminutive, three-octave Axxe was occasionally revamped throughout its six-year production (1975-1981) lifespan, starting life in a fetching black with gold legends colour scheme at \$780/£400. Today a good condition Axxe would probably set you back around £200.



ARP QUADRA

Essentially the guts of an Omni string machine, a bass synth, a simple preset polysynth section and a two-voice, touch-sensitive lead. Launched in 1978 for \$3,700/£2,500, the Quadra was doomed for failure when pitted against SCI's groundbreaking Prophet 5 programmable polysynth that same year.



ARP LEARNING MODULES

ARP's low-cost range of 'Learning Modules' looks like an Airfix model of a modular system! Actually, that's not far from the truth: each tiny (\$40-\$70) module was battery-powered for maximum classroom flexibility. Not many were manufactured, so today's pricing is anyone's guess.

ARP AVATAR



Effectively a keyboardless Odyssey, most two-VCO Avatars ended up as just that: keyboardless expanders.

Only around 300 met their original 1977 retail price of \$3,000/£1,500; rare but not sought after, www.oldtech.com is currently offering one for \$790.

ARP SOLUS



A \$790/£400 'Odyssey remake' of sorts, built into a flightcase. In 1980 the world really didn't need another two-VCO monosynth so it's unlikely the instrument sold well, nor will it fetch as much as an Odyssey would today.