

WHAT'S THAT SOUND? KEYBOARD

DEPECHE MODE

Depeche Mode have brought us numerous albums over the last thirty-plus years, ever developing and changing with their musical tastes as time goes on. Listening to their sound in the late 90's you hear something much darker and more guitar driven than the bouncy, poppy synth-lead lines of their work in the 80's. With the group hinting on social media this month that a new album is in the works and with them going back to their roots with synth driven sounds for their last album, *Sound of the Universe*, there are all number of synth and keyboard based sounds they have encompassed over the years, few that have been untouched. But what is the single most unlikely keyboard sound they used in all that time? What really stands out in my mind is the good old melodica.

EVERYTHING COUNTS

In 1983 Depeche Mode released their third studio album, *Construction Time Again*, which featured a number of singles including 'Everything Counts'. This track was an industrial style synth number that used all sorts of samples combining to create an aural picture as a base for the song, but it was the most unlikely of keyboard instruments that gave this track its catchy hook – the melodica.

WINDY KEYS

For those of you who are unaware of what a melodica is or how it works, it is really quite simple. A mouthpiece allows the player to blow into the instrument's chamber where the simple valve system is opened and closed with a set of piano style keys running across the top of the body. They are usually found in either 32 or 37 key varieties and come in a range of horrible pastel colours that leave them looking like something out of a toy shop. In fact, you may well find one in a toy shop. But the sound that comes out of this instrument is what it is really all about.

In two words – bloody awful. It is somewhere in between the sound of a child's toy and fingernails being dragged down a blackboard, but with the ability to be done in tune. Obviously this must sound very inviting to anyone who hasn't heard one, I am sure, and you are all wondering how such an instrument could make it onto one of Depeche Mode's greatest singles of the '80s. Well, it was the '80s, and apparently everything counts, no matter how bad it sounds.



A TIMELESS TONE

With all I have just said, it is hard to wonder how it could marry into the mix of any song, but Depeche Mode got the melodica to sit so well, it almost feels like the instrument was made just for them. Martin Gore is often seen playing the melodica live on stage when they tour to great

applause from the crowd and with a tone that is, if anything, absolutely timeless. It doesn't matter how, when or where the melodica is used, it still sounds the same. It just takes great talent like that of Depeche Mode to make it work within a song.

By Rob Gee



CLASSIC KEYS

ENSONIQ MIRAGE

In today's modern computer driven world of music production, there are so many options when it comes to electronic instruments. What makes this so appealing is that most of these options are available in software format, offering cheaper, space saving alternatives to getting the great sounds of yester day. But, unfortunately the sound of many hardware synths can never truly be emulated by a piece of software and, when all is said and done, there is nothing like getting your hands on the real thing. So, let's take a look at some of the classic keyboards and synths that some of us still own and many only dream about. This month, let's take a wander back to 1984 and have a look at the Mirage, produced by Ensoniq.

Many of the newer musicians these days may not even know the name Ensoniq, they seem to have almost dropped off the face of the earth, with just a handful of products still around. But, anyone making electronic music in the late '80s or anytime in the '90s would definitely have come across a

few Ensoniq keyboards in their time. Possibly an EPS or an ASR model, but the keyboard that really stood out for me from Ensoniq was the Mirage, a sampling synth that was well ahead of its time.

By today's standards, the Mirage was a technological joke, but in its time it gave users an incredible flexibility within the means of the technology that was available. It offered sample rates up to 32 kHz and 8-bit sampling, leaving it with a somewhat dated and lo-fi sound, but this was part of its charm. Best of all, it gave its users the ability to make the most of an amazing 128 Kb of storage space. Yes, 128Kb of storage,

not 128MB or even 128 GB as may be expected in today's comparative units. So, one had to be creative with how you made use of this space and multi-sampling sounds was a near impossibility.

What made the Mirage stand out ahead of many other basic sampling keyboards of the era was that it wasn't just a modern digital replicator, but it featured analogue filters on board that could be used over the samples. There were envelopes for the VCA and VCF, an LFO and a nice low pass VCF that enabled you to take the somewhat grainy samples and give them some real character and a little extra life. Sure, this keyboard was

almost outdated before it was even released and probably fared better on the second hand market than it did when new, but it is one of those timeless pieces of junk that so many producers have owned at some stage and has left its mark on so many recordings, it is hard to give it a totally bad rap. The Mirage may now be nothing but a heavy keyboard that ofers current owners very little, but it had its place in the bastions of music history and will never be forgotten, especially by anyone who had to lug one around, or deal with the temperamental nature of the disk drive.

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