

Retro Family Tree

✧ If God were to bless America then he might as well bless Tom Oberheim too!
Jonathan Miller pays tribute to the OB's awesome force. . .

TO THINK OF America is to think big. Hollywood has always promoted the American dream and our cousins across the waves have taken this work hard, play hard ethic to heart; such is their apparent fondness for big cities, big houses and big cars. Step back in time to the 1970s and early eighties and big, fat sounding analogue synthesizers were all the rage with Uncle Sam's keyboard-playing pros (as were even bigger, gas-guzzling cars).

Two manufacturers most commonly associated with this bygone era in American sonic history are Moog and ARP. It's fitting that Bob Moog is to be awarded this year's Polar Music Prize by His Majesty King Carl XVI Gustaf of Sweden, for designing the infamous MiniMoog.

But another equally eminent American designer has also lent his name to a number of equally groundbreaking synthesizers. Electronic trailblazer (and Tangerine Dream's founder and mentor) Edgar Froese said: "The voltage-controlled principle invented by Bob Moog, and brought to a variety of high-class hardware equipment by Tom Oberheim, in the late 1970s and early eighties, simply can't be reconstructed. Both are great minds. They should be credited on all today's pop and rock records." Our Oberheim odyssey leads us to California...

Massive Attack

"Help me Obi-Wan..." Sound familiar? You can't help but wonder if Oberheim Electronics named its OB-1 Monosynth of 1977 in reverence to that year's *Star Wars* blockbuster; itself of Californian heritage. Though this was the LA-based company's first synth to bear the OB moniker, Oberheim started out in 1970 producing add-ons rather than complete instruments, including the world's first digital sequencer in 1973. The two-VCO (Voltage Controlled Oscillator) OB-1 has the distinction of being the first programmable monosynth.

Having cracked programmability, Oberheim set its sights on producing a genuinely programmable polysynth. Pipped at the post by garage rivals Sequential Circuits' infamous Prophet 5 (1978), Oberheim's pricey (\$5,595) OB-X followed a year later, replete with 32 patch memories, polyphonic portamento

and polyphonic sample and hold. Available in four-, six- and eight-voice versions, it sounded awesome but couldn't match the cheaper (\$4,495) five-voice Prophet 5's sales lead.

The drawing board beckoned and 1981's OB-X 'remake' – the six- or eight-voice OB-Xa – was the result. Same price, same two VCOs per voice architecture, same 32 patch memories (later boosted to 120), similar weighty (45lbs) casing (albeit with soon-to-be familiar black and thin blue stripes colour scheme).

So what's the difference? Well, a subtly different sound, for starters. More important is its ability to split the 61-note, non-velocity sensitive keyboard or layer two different sounds per voice (due to separate voice cards).

The Oberheim System

As all good students of synth history know, MIDI was but a mere hop skip and a jump down the university of life's fickle corridor. Yet in autumn 1982, Oberheim launched a brave pre-emptive strike with its so-called Oberheim System (comprising DMX digital drum machine, DSX sequencer, OB-Xpander – a keyboardless OB-Xa, not to be confused with Oberheim's later Xpander – and revised OB-Xa). Briefly in with the in crowd, MIDI

voice cards and more reliance on underlying software. Page Two allows additional features and functions to be accessed from the front panel controls. It still sounds awesome; put simply, today's virtual analogue wannabes pale in comparison.

End of the road?

Having embraced MIDI, some argue that the sought-after Oberheim sound ended with the OB-8's 1985 discontinuation. The OB name didn't stop there, but it nearly wasn't so. In 1983 Yamaha's FM (Frequency Modulation) synthesis wonder, the 16-voice DX7, finally felled the analogue synth market. ARP, Moog and SCI (Sequential Circuits, Inc.) bit the dust. Oberheim would have, but for a rescue package. More innovative products such as the mighty Matrix 12 followed under EEC Oberheim before the founder's 1987 departure (today heading up SeaSound).

Several years would pass before the appearance of a new 'Obie' in the shape of 1994's OB-Mx rackmount (by which time Oberheim was a division of guitar giants Gibson). Here Gibson was clearly tugging at the heart (and purse) strings of Oberheim aficionados and almost succeeded. Originally dubbed the OberM006, to look like OberMoog on

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soon put a stop to such proprietary interfacing shenanigans.

Next came another eight-voice analogue affair in 1983's OB-8, superficially similar to its predecessor in appearance, but quite different under the bonnet. Indeed Tom Oberheim is on record as saying: "I think the early designs – the SEM, the OB-1, the OB-X and the OB-Xa – have a somewhat better sound than the OB-8." The SEM, or Synthesizer Expander Module, is a 1974-vintage keyboardless monosynth; initially designed to fatten up a MiniMoog or ARP Odyssey, it was later incorporated into Oberheim's fledgling polysynth range.

This is perhaps because the OB-8 is a more thorough design with no separate

account of its switchable Moog- and Oberheim-like filters, at £1,500 for the basic two-voice version (with additional two-voice upgrade cards costing £500) it was never going to sell in large quantities. Its SEM-like creamy white paint job and robust design screamed vintage Oberheim with a sound (almost) to suit.

And so with last year's OB-12 we arrive at Oberheim's latest and (sadly not) greatest synth to bear the OB prefix. Today, Oberheim belongs to Italian organ maker Viscount. Despite its retro appearance, this 12-voice virtual analogue beast is Oberheim in name only. That's not to say it's a bad synth, far from it. But true Oberheim will forever be analogue. Just ask Edgar Froese, or Tom Oberheim. **FM**

FAMOUS USERS

Tangerine Dream have long been ardent admirers of Oberheim, even using the cumbersome eight-voice on stage before graduating to OB-X status. Japan's Richard Barbieri followed suit. For many, its successor defines the classic Oberheim sound of yesteryear; the opening synth riff to Van Halen's *Jump* is pure OB-Xa all the way. Like we said, big. You can also hear those unfeasibly fat analogue tones all over *Signals* (1982) by Canadian prog rockers Rush. Closer to home, Gary Numan gushed: "In my opinion, the Oberheim OB-Xa was the best analogue synth of them all." The OB-8 had its fair share of fans too; Prince used one on 1999. As for the OB-Mx, again it's back to America and Trent Reznor's *Nine Inch Nails*.



COMBS

No. 7: Oberheim OB- synths

OB-1

Sales figures for this groundbreaking 1977 programmable monosynth are unavailable; it's unlikely they match the Mini-Moog's 13,000 units. The OB-1's eight patch memories constituted a world first, making for a more advanced design than

its monophonic Moog competitor. Originally selling Stateside for \$1,895, quite what it would cost today in the UK is pure guess work. The similarly spec'd, though more radical, Moog Source unbelievably fetches around £500.



OB-X

In 1979, this programmable polyphonic analogue monster's main competition was SCI's Prophet 5. Though less common than the Prophet, today the originally more expensive OB-X can be picked up for much less – as little as £350 (depend-

ing on voice configuration) – making for a bargain vintage buy. (A preset OB-X derivative, the OB-SX, was released in 1979 for \$2,295, but isn't really worth considering today.)

OB-Xa

Perhaps the most desirable of the OB range for those seeking that exclusive Oberheim sound. Remember: think big (think Van Halen's *Jump*). Considering similarly spec'd vintage rivals like SCI's Prophet 5, Roland's Jupiter 8 and Moog's

monster MemoryMoog are currently swanning around £1,000 and beyond, the OB-Xa still represents remarkably good second-hand value at between £550-750 (again depending on voice configuration, eight being preferable).



OB-8

Latter (Rev B5) OB-8s sports MIDI, fresh out of the box; assuming you can still find a boxed example. As such, it commands a healthy second-hand asking price of around £900 – pre-MIDI versions can occasionally be picked up for under £600.

That's not bad considering the baffling foreign exchange mechanism set its original 1983 UK pricing at £4,418, roughly double that paid by Americans. Kenton Electronics can MIDI retrofit earlier OB-8s (and OB-Xs and OB-Xas) for £388.

OB-Mx

Despite its 1994 arrival in a digital age, this hefty 6U rackmount features an analogue signal path and boasted no fewer than 37 knobs and 47 buttons to ease the 'sound sculpting' process. Though Tom Oberheim had long left the com-

pany, Don Bucha (one of the founding fathers of analogue synthesis) ironically headed its design team. And what a fabulous design it is. An unexpanded two-voice version was recently spotted online for only £449.



OB-12

It's the only non-analogue contender in our Obie round-up. It's got 12 voices, hence the name. And it's good to see at least one of the original American synth manufacturers still soldiering on, even if in this case the maker is techni-

cally now Italian! Taken in context, as a thoroughly modern virtual analogue synth, the OB-12 represents remarkably good value at £799. (Like the OB-Mx, no MIDI problems here.)