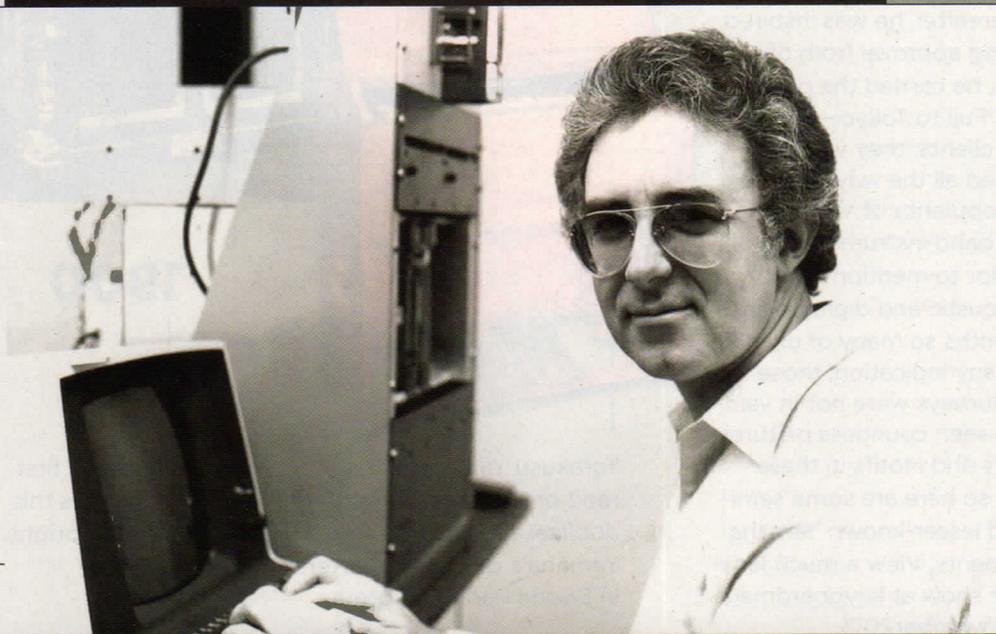


# Tom Oberheim

## ANALOG AVATAR

BY STEPHEN FORTNER



**ORIGINALLY HAILING FROM THE “LITTLE APPLE” OF MANHATTAN, KANSAS,** Tom Oberheim’s name is synonymous with some of the most desirable synths of the ‘80s. Before the OB series was burned into the mainstream cultural retina by Eddie Van Halen’s ersatz synth solo on “Jump,” its monophonic forbear the Synthesizer Expander Module (SEM) was a keystone of the rigs of such pioneering synthesists as Lyle Mays, Josef Zawinul, and Jan Hammer.

**You had an extensive career in computer engineering prior to being known as a synth designer. What first got you into electronics?**

I remember receiving an electric motor kit for Christmas when I was ten years old. This was soon followed by a crystal radio, which I enjoyed playing with for hours on end. That led me to start reading about the technical aspects of radio and I learned, among other things, what a diode was. Much to the chagrin of the local radio shop owner, I then visited the shop every day after school with questions. That led to my eventually building a radio out of a 6J5 vacuum tube and coils wrapped around a toilet paper tube.

**Like many people who’ve found success in the music business, you moved from the Midwest to Los Angeles. . . .**

I think one of the reasons it was so easy for me was that I’d read an ad in *DownBeat* magazine for the Lighthouse Cafe in Hermosa Beach, where

well-known West Coast jazz players Bud Shank and Bob Cooper played. The ad said, “No entrance fee required.” I thought, “Wow, imagine seeing these great jazz players for free!” That was before I knew about the two-drink minimum!

**Any early recollections of bringing your love of technology into the service of musicians?**

In my final days as a student at UCLA, one of my fellow students in a class about modern music was the outstanding trumpet player and bandleader Don Ellis. In 1966 I built Don an amplifier and then later some other equipment. About the same time Don bought a Crown tape recorder and asked to start recording a rehearsal band that played in Hollywood on Monday nights. Don had recently been on tour in Europe and had come back with eight Sennheiser MD421 mics. I bought a couple of small Shure microphone mixers and started recording the band’s gigs. I had no practical way to

do live monitoring, but by trial and error I eventually got some quite good recordings.

**You’ve brought back the SEM to rave reviews. What was the original design idea behind a synth that was a module, not a keyboard—but unlike other modules, a self-contained synthesizer voice?**

At the time, I thought that getting into the synthesizer business, even in 1973 or 1974, was a major undertaking, especially for a company the size of Oberheim Electronics. It was just Jim Cooper [of J. L. Cooper fame] and me doing the engineering. By starting out with the SEM-1, without all the other complications that are part of making a complete keyboard synth, the process was made easier. The idea was that the SEM-1 would be an accessory to be used with a synth by another company like ARP or Moog. To that end, I purposely built the voice around a two-pole multi-mode filter as a complement to other synths’ four-pole filters.

**What’s next for you and for Tom Oberheim instruments?**

Now that new SEMs are back, I’m hoping that the new Two-Voice and Son of Four-Voice will be as successful. I’m very excited about today’s “analog revival,” both from a point of view of keeping the analog dream alive and because of how it’s making my “senior” years very fulfilling! 🎵



The new Two-Voice consists of two of Tom’s new SEMs plus a sequencer, programmer, and three-octave keyboard.

## See It Now!

Read our full review of the return of a classic, Tom’s new SEM.

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