Tom Oberheim

ANALOG AVATAR

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.