

Feature

Return of the analogue synth

Next in the amazing adventures of Analogue Andy ... or N. RAMA LOHAN, as he's more fondly known in these parts. This week, he speaks to the foremost vintage synth restorers/suppliers in existence.

REPAIRING vintage synthesisers and keyboards is a dying trade. Technicians who have spent the better part of their lives tuning VCOs and calibrating VCFs back in the 1970s and 1980s have learnt (perhaps painfully) that this trade just doesn't do much more than keep a roof over their heads - yes, it pays quite poorly.

The growing desire to incorporate the sounds of vintage instruments in today's recordings has brought renewed interest in these instruments from the past, though. Technicians have taken particular notice of this phenomenon. Where there is demand, there is supply, so it comes as no surprise to discover a number of commercial organisations dedicated to resurrecting some of these instruments.

Sure, it doesn't pay that well, but nothing beats passion. Ask Richard Lawson of RL Music (the largest supplier of vintage synths in Europe) and Kent Spong of Kent Spong Restorations (both based in Britain), and they'll tell you that it all comes straight from the heart.

In the following weeks, Lawson (RL) and Spong (KS) - associates in this trade - will reveal everything they know about running a business of this nature, restoring vintage keyboards and synths, and how users can extend the shelf-life of their beloved instruments with proper storage and maintenance methods.

Why does RL Music exist?

RL: I started RL Music for two main reasons: firstly, my complete passion for vintage analogue synthesisers and secondly, my belief that there are a great many people in the world who want to own these beautiful instruments that have been fully restored and are ready to play, without the worry of quality or support. As a musician and long-term owner of synthesisers, I have personally found it very frustrating trying to buy vintage keyboards. The general condition, both cosmetically and operationally, of what's offered around the world is pretty poor and in my opinion, dealers in general don't do enough



THE DOCTOR'S IN: Richard Lawson (left) meets the legendary Dr Robert Moog during the latter's recent visit to RL Music.

AAOL

to support the customers' requirements and expectations.

I also wanted to do something different and bring my own experiences into a business that really caters for the exacting requirements of customers rather than just supply what's around because that's all there is.

The website (www.rlmusic.co.uk) is the shop window in effect but the business is quite complex behind the scenes and is essentially supported by very skilled vintage synth restorers who have the technical know-how to bring these extraordinary instruments back to their full glory. I do work with a small number of specialist companies in the UK for this, but by far, the majority of the restoration work is done by a good friend and associate of mine, Kent Spong of KSR (Kent Spong Restorations).

Are there adequate restoration facilities, like RL Music, to serve the vintage synth market?

RL: Although there are quite a few businesses around the world who will offer maintenance and repair services for electronic musical instruments, very few actually have the skills, resources, ingenuity, interest and sheer tenacity to get involved with vintage equipment. This is not an "off-the-shelf" business, so the few people dedicated to offer this service tend to be highly skilled, resourceful and are component level repair engineers. For the most part, they are a very rare breed indeed.

To answer why - you should recognise those involved in vintage



HERE DOGGIE: Pets and synths are all part of the RL Music experience. This is a view of RL Music from the outside.

restoration work are enthusiasts themselves and have a love for the instruments they restore - without this, I don't think anyone would do it considering the work involved.

Do you attend to overseas repairs?

KS: The answer is certainly yes. We will do everything possible to help anyone, anywhere with a problem with his or her keyboard. KSR is particularly recognised for the restoration work we do on the Yamaha CS-80 and have customers who ship them in from all over the world to us. If a customer is willing to accept the costs and risks of shipping to and from the UK, then we will happily support anyone in the world. We also try to help and advise people with problems over the phone or by e-mail where possible.

Where do you source your instruments?

RL: We buy our instruments from all over the world and from a number of sources like private sellers to studios and collectors, etc.

What are the criteria for the selection of a particular piece?

RL: As mentioned earlier, the historically important pieces are the main focus but we are certainly not limited to this. It is sometimes interesting to offer more esoteric pieces as this can open up new areas of interest like the whole modular synth world or vintage digital synth's like the Synclavier, etc.

How does the American market compare, in terms of supply of

RING, RING, TELEPHONE RING: While it's easy to mistake this Moog modular system for a telephone operator's patch bay, it's actually a synthesiser.

vintage keyboards?

RL: The USA is a massive market for all musical instruments and the home of many of the finest vintage keyboards ever made. It stands to reason that there will be a high percentage of equipment available there, but Europe is not far behind. Back in the 1970s and 1980s, a huge number of synthesisers were imported into Europe and there are some very significant collections here, but unfortunately, not that many are for sale. We import from the USA quite regularly but if your readers are considering the same then don't forget all the hidden costs, some of which I have covered within this interview.

Why did you choose to go online?

RL: You yourself contacted me some months ago from Malaysia - I can't imagine having that kind of global coverage from running a small shop in England.

How much of your business comes from online sales?

RL: As RL Music is an internet-based business, it's logical to assume that online sales are key to our business but we advertise in *Sound On Sound* magazine and some other specialist publications, which has proved quite positive. A good percentage of our business now is from existing customers, which is always an excellent indicator that we are doing a good job. Good customer service, pre and post sales, is fundamental, and as mentioned in my opening remarks, it amazes me how some businesses survive when they can't even communicate with customers properly, let alone supply the goods in working order and when promised.

Where do you clients mainly come from?

RL: Our client base is truly global although about 60% are in Europe and are from all walks of life, but principally musicians. We have some very high profile clients in the music industry, with quite a few using many of the vintage instruments we have sold, which is wonderful.

I believe that my customers come to RL Music for these special purchases because of confidence in the condition and quality of our instruments and the attention we provide to their requirements. This is a very specialised business and only by

offering individual service for each and every client can we hope to be successful.

How has eBay influenced the vintage keyboard market?

RL: I think eBay has enabled a true global market, which has to be a good thing, but there are many drawbacks. A growing problem with eBay is the proliferation of criminals operating through them and people now need to be extremely vigilant. I have covered some tips on buying vintage synthesisers later in this interview, which I hope, will be of some value.

I don't think eBay has directly influenced the vintage market though, as the demand for these instruments is there anyway, it just forms another portal for buying and selling them, although many people have an expectation of prices from what sells on eBay. This is unfortunately distorted as the final sale prices on eBay don't take into account so many hidden charges (tax/shipping) and extra costs (repairs/restoration), which for the most part, people don't anticipate. Thank goodness for the Internet though, and long may it live.

Are the prices of these instruments over-inflated today?

RL: People should remember that not only are these instruments beautiful sounding and useable, they're historically important as well. Your readers may be interested to know that vintage guitars like the original Fender Stratocaster can sell for as much as £20,000 (RM140,000), so keyboards have a way to go yet.

I do get asked, occasionally, why fully restored vintage synthesisers are expensive when compared to what they can buy privately, which seem to look okay and apparently all in "mint" condition. It never ceases to amaze me how a 20-to-35-year-old un-restored keyboard can be in "mint" condition. That's absolute rubbish, and I know very well the general condition of what is offered, which is why we have to spend so much time and expense restoring them!

So are these instruments over-inflated - well not everyone has the budget to afford a fully restored example but those who can tend not to sell them, so supply and demand determines the market price and this is a fact of life.

News

Ten-year itch

Ten years could be a long wait, but when it comes to getting a great guitar at a great price, this is probably how long you're going to have to hang on for. But we'll tell you this: **Guitar Collection** (☎ 03-7727 2057 / 7726 3057 / 7492 6057) will make sure you get some fine instruments when you walk out of their doors anytime this month.

Throughout the month of August, this retailer will be having a mind-boggling sale that will see Art & Lutherie, Alvarez, Pyramid,

Elite and Cristina guitars, and Kustom amps going for anywhere between 10%-70% off their normal prices. See, we told you this sale was going to knock your socks off.

But why did you have to wait a decade, you ask? Simple, this is Guitar Collection's 10th anniversary.

Now that you're armed with that information, make sure you pay any of this retailer's numerous outlets a visit to demand your instrument of choice. Punch in the right numbers for the details.