

# SYNTH SECRETS

## BUYING YOUR FIRST VINTAGE SYNTHESIZER



by **Phil Roberts**

For the first time buyer there are many pitfalls for the unwary. Despite popular belief, electronic instruments are not unbreakable, and do wear out over time (or get abused). I do not pretend to be 'expert' in any way but hope that sharing my own experience will be a good guide for potential purchasers, particularly the first-time vintage synth buyer.

Firstly, remember the following; in its day, your chosen instrument was probably the property of a professional and has endured the rigours of numerous gigs on the road.

Second, it has had 20 years or so of high ampere current coursing through discrete components that will degrade over time. If there are special circuits or unique chips in it replacements may not be available. Third, corrosion will inevitably be present, and not everything

may work. Fourth, it may be sold-as-seen and your success or failure will be at the mercy of the fates.

On that gloomy note let me part the clouds and let in a ray of sunshine. There is a way to be very confident in your purchase!

Number one - get the current synth 'bible', a book called 'Vintage Synthesizers' by Mark Vail ISBN 0-87930-603-3. If you are serious about owning vintage synths, you cannot be without it. It is probably the best intro to the subject you could have and covers much fascinating history of the birth of electronic music, with great articles by amongst others, Bob Moog. It also has a helpful guide to residual values of most instruments although these are in US dollars - unfortunately the figures are similar in pounds sterling currently! Another invaluable resource is the website [www.vintagesynth.org](http://www.vintagesynth.org). This magnificent database holds more info than you can shake a stick at, and has useful MP3 and Realplayer downloads so you can 'audition' individual synths for their sound.

Number two - there is no substitute for actually seeing the instrument you are to purchase. NEVER buy unseen from a private vendor. The risk factor of buying a 'dog' is high and your definition of good condition may differ to theirs! I am not saying that you should never buy privately, but there are a couple of things you should bear in mind. If the vendor says it is fully working, will you realistically have the time to check out every function and every routing? You really should because once you have paid the vendor there is no comeback...and on a complex synth a full checkout could take hours! Then be aware that

even in the hands of the very best couriers, vintage gear does not travel well! Collect it yourself, in person if possible. Too many good synths have been wrecked by over enthusiastic couriers and inadequate packaging.

So where do you buy if you are to buy with confidence? A visit in person to an experienced professional dealer is without doubt the best solution. The dealer will usually be an enthusiast himself and knowledgeable about his subject. The instruments offered for sale (at a reputable dealer) will have been fully serviced and restored and offered with a limited warranty. You will also have a range to choose from! If you have to buy from the dealer by mail order he/she should pack it professionally and will only use delivery services that he or she knows have experience of transporting musical instruments safely.

Of course this all comes at a price. Like car buying, the dealer is the most expensive option. But the peace of mind, quality of service, product support and standard of the product make it worth it in my book. Above all, a dealer should offer you the facility to play it first if you can! Every instrument

is subtly different, and your preferences will become clear as you get 'hands on'.

So what if you can buy a slightly modified and run down Minimoog in the small ads for £1100? A false economy. The hidden cost of repairs and restoration are unknowns and you may never get a fully working instrument. It could cost you over £2000 by the time you have repaired and restored the electronics, and refurbished the casing at a professional service agent. From a dealer £2000 will get you a Minimoog that not only looks like new, it is fully restored to the standard it left the factory 25 years ago, has

typically 2-4 weeks warranty, and a full servicing and repair backup service ongoing throughout your ownership of the instrument.

Be clear about your budget. £500 is unlikely to buy you a good vintage polyphonic, but you could do very well with a good 2 oscillator monophonic (Moog Prodigy, Sequential Pro-One etc.). Be prepared to pay upwards of £1500-2000 for the top classics and even larger sums for modular systems.

A dealer will be your point of reference for all future tuning and service. vintage analogues require regular TLC (at least once a year) and a knowledgeable dealer with a professional synth service agent behind him will be able to supply this service at reasonable cost.

I bought my first synth (Moog Prodigy) from Richard Lawson of RL Music. I never regretted the decision. I got a top class instrument and Richard's friendly and enthusiastic support. We have done business together since and have established a good rapport with each other. There is no doubt in my mind that for the first time buyer, this is the route to success. Long

experience may teach you the tricks for buying on your own in the future, but to establish yourself as a first time synth collector I know of no better way to start.

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