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Digger talks with Richard Lawson at [RL Music](#) - Europe's largest Vintage Analogue Synthesizer dealer



Digger: Can you tell us why you have a passion for analogue synthesizers?

Richard: It started when I was in my mid to late teens and at school in the mid-70s. My best friend and I were listening to a lot of people at that time like; Wendy Carlos, Tomita, JMJ and all the prog-rock bands and other super groups, like Pink Floyd, the Who and The Beatles. We could hear these people were using electronic instruments, some in a really big way. It kind of blew us away really because of how these things sounded. But, being at school, we'd no money and no possibility of owning any of this stuff so we'd just spend hours listening to records and reading about synths and visiting shops playing the demo units. At that time my friend and I (who are now business partners), just played pianos and electronic organs at home and just dreamed about owning some of this gear and that went through from the 70s to today although our collection of instruments has improved slightly these days. That's where the passion all started I think and a lot of people who are into electronic music would tell you much the same thing. It was the bands and what they were using and the images we saw of what they were playing on Top Of The Pops.

Digger: Were you classically trained?

Richard: No, not at all. Even today I've never had any formal training, but I think with electronic music you can get away with that. I'm not saying the equipment plays itself, but unlike a classical piano or orchestral instruments you don't need to be formally trained in order to get some sounds out of them. So maybe that's a lazy man's way of getting into music without being a maestro.

Digger: Or do what I did and play the drums.

Richard: (Laughs) You don't have to play a note then.

Digger: I think technically speaking they are notes, but there's that old joke about "What do you call a guy who hangs around with musicians?" And the answer, of course, is a drummer.

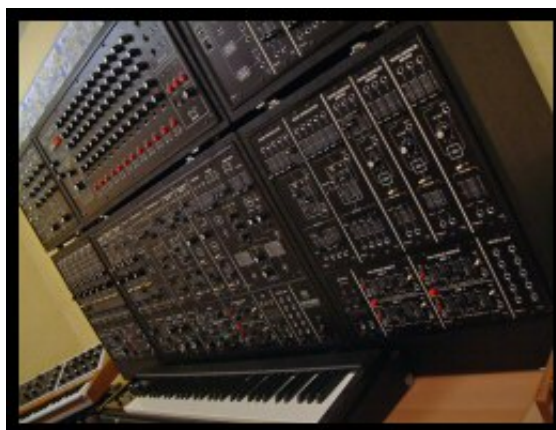
Richard: I don't know whether it's a difficult job or not.

Digger: If it's done well it's incredibly difficult and just as

technical as any other instrument, but not the way I play it that's for sure!

Richard: The skill is making it look easy. So with synthesizers I think that all this mix of technology at the time and the unusual nature of the instruments, it hit something in my psyche.

Digger: And you liked the lights and the buttons?!





Richard: Yes, and making sounds that annoyed the neighbours which was great. Most of my customers today are a similar age as well, so the influences must have been pretty heavy in those days.

Digger: Did you have the choice of headphones?

Richard: No, because the synths we could afford were all mono back then, so unless you put them through your mum and dad's speakers in the family radiogram then you wouldn't be able to hear them that well. We did get through a lot of speakers in those days as well when we got our first synths. We'd destroy them - rip the paper cones apart..he he.

Digger: Are you a fan of Spinal Tap?

Richard: Not hugely. It's all great stuff but if you're a prog rock fan then you'll be listening to people like Rick Wakeman playing a mini-Moog and you'll want that big keyboard rack on stage, which is great. Other people like the modular studio-based stuff like Wendy Carlos used. It depends entirely on your budget.

Digger: What's the difference between analogue and digital when it comes to synths?

Richard: That's okay for me to answer because I'm not technical so I can probably explain it easier. The main technology difference is that analogue instruments are using technology that was developed up to the 1970s,

which use discreet components like resistors and capacitors.

Digger: Things that move or have two states?

Richard: Yes, they're basically switches which are governed and controlled by voltages. In music terms, it means that they weren't mass-produced, but for the most part hand-built in small numbers, often in people's sheds or garages up until the late 70s. Apart from the big Japanese manufacturers, that is. Even the circuit boards were hand drawn, so when you see them they have wiggly lines and are nothing like the modern technology. So what does that do to the music? It means that all the tolerances and all the components that fit within that are all done with such a wide scope of variation that you get a certain amount of imperfection in the design. So, I think an analogy would be comparing a car that was built in the 1950s to one that was built this year. You'll see something that rattles and wanders along the road but people will say "Yeah, but it's got character." How do you define that? It's very subjective, but it is a bit like art and how do you define something that's beautiful? I think in musician's terms, for an audiophile or for someone who just appreciates listening to music you will tell the difference between something which is hand-built as opposed to a modern device. Digital, of course, is the extreme end – it started in the late 70s and early 80s, in fact, but in terms of today's music everything today is mass-produced and to fabulous tolerances and is mainly software-driven using computer components.

Digger: Zeroes and ones.

Richard: Yes, zeroes and ones and it's pretty much perfect, but to the human ear, as organic beings, we actually look for and listen for imperfections in things which sound better to us. I'm sure this subject has been written about in many a scientific journal.

Digger: An irony is that when you listen to a digitally-remastered version of an original analogue recording then you hear more of the imperfections than you ever would on the

original 'pressing'.

Richard: It's bizarre. It's also connected with this renaissance of people playing vinyl records again. A lot of recording studios have now gone back to using analogue tape recording systems again and have gone away from digital. Some studios may record some aspects of the final recording onto a tape and then master it again back onto digital – 'bouncing it back', which will add something not perfect to the recording. So digital is clean, it's perfect, it's fantastic and I'm not anti-digital at all. At my own studio my own keyboards, and what we do, uses a very high percentage of modern equipment. But, analogue or digital in itself - no, it has to be a marriage of the two which makes it work.

Digger: When they used the drum synthesizers in the 80s they were clinical and often overused. It sounded unnatural.

Richard: Funnily enough, you can now get everything that was ever produced in terms of drum machines onto just one CD! They play it with a sequencer on a computer now, but people still want to buy the old drum machines because they'll tell you it's more creative standing there pressing buttons than doing it on a mouse. Work that one out, because it's a fraction of the price to do it on a computer but there's something about the tactile experience of using an original piece of equipment. Which is why people are into analogue, I guess.



Richard with Robert Moog

Digger: You met Robert Moog. When was that and can you describe the encounter?

Richard: Phew, yeah! That was amazing. I hero-worship the man and Robert was considered the grandfather of synthesis – some people may contend that as there were other great engineers around in his early days. But he's had the most influence on electronic music since it began in the late 60s early 70s. And me being a child of the 60s and growing up in the 70s with the instruments it was Moog. It's always been Moog. We always wanted the mini-Moog or a Moog modular and everything we listened to we thought was made or built or designed around a Moog. Of course that wasn't necessarily true, but for me meeting him was very important and I was a little bit nervous that day. It was almost too important. We were talking in the interview I did with him about his comfort zone which is about design engineering, instruments and musicians and he was brilliant. He used to listen to musicians and his products were designed with them in mind. The day was about that and the interview with him, although the whole day was a visit to London at Turnkey where he was promoting The Voyager. The whole day was hosted by Turnkey and in the evening there was a concert in one of the local pubs using Theremin and Voyagers and the guy heading up the band was the ex-keyboard player of The Buggles. It was just great. Then Bob did a speech and everyone was bringing their Moogs in from their cars and getting him to sign them. Amazing. I got a great picture of me and Bob and it's something I never will forget and I'm glad I did it. What an experience.

Digger: Fantastic. You mentioned the Theremin there. Have you seen Bill Bailey's orchestra DVD because he plays it on that?

Richard: I have and it's a damned hard instrument to play and maybe as difficult as a violin. It's all about hand positions and I did meet a few people who've had lessons with a French professional and she was teaching people

but it would take ten years for you to be able to stand and perform music on it without it sounding like something from The Forbidden Planet! When we saw the concert it was really good because it had something quite haunting.

Digger: You mentioned The Buggles. Have you bumped into Trevor Horne?

Richard: No, I wish I had. He was a huge influence and when they came out it was very much electronic music. Him and most of the people of that era. People like Howard Jones.



Digger: They claimed that Chicory Tip had the first UK hit using a synth.

Richard: A lot of those guys were using sampling back then as well.

Digger: I was listening to some contemporary music at the weekend and three of the songs were sampling older songs

from the 60s and 70s.

Richard: Big artists and film score writers are integrating all of this technology into their new music because a lot of the use of classical music is alongside the raw powerful sound of analogue because it gives a contrast. Most of my customers now are professional people and using this equipment in current projects.

Digger: Who have been and who are the biggest exponents of analogue synths?

Richard: There's a book there! Without going into too much detail, depending on how far back you go and what sort of genre of music it is you listen to, designers would have been the big American designers back in the late 70s – users would have been Wendy Carlos and Jean-Michel Jarre and people like Tangerine Dream They were major adopters of that technology and made massively successful careers out of instrumental music. I remember back in the 70s and 80s instrumental music was seen as elevator music. Nobody would buy it, but these guys changed everyone's opinions of it. Exponents like Howard Jones and Vince Clark and Gary Newman – all of them synth gurus and they changed people's perceptions and that synths could sound really cool. And a lot of people locked into that and kept the whole dream alive. Things changed and this stuff was expensive and maybe difficult to tour with and when the digital stuff came along from the Japanese houses like Korg, Yamaha, Roland and so on, so then music changed. The way people used it changed. But today's users of analogue synths are the big supergroups again, but not so obviously. You won't have a modern supergroup on stage banging away at a 1970s modular anymore, but you will have people like The Chemical Brothers or Aphex Twin using big modular systems on stage and touring with them. Hybrids and pure analogues, which is amazing because it's not the easiest to use on tour.

Digger: How difficult is it to get parts for servicing?

Richard: Very hard. One of the values of the business that

I operate is the network of people around the world that can help us do it. It's taken many years to build a network of suppliers and specialist parts manufacturers, but most of these parts are now 30 years out of production. So if you're looking to get spares for something that was made in 1982 then nobody makes them anymore you either have to go to a bad condition unit and break it up for spares, which still costs a fortune because they're still valuable, or you have to find creative ways to either re-manufacture them or find work-arounds. Every single repair and restoration takes a lot of resources and a lot of money to get them right.

Digger: And one less box to be available for the future as well.

Richard: Yes, most of the vintage of stuff we're seeing from the private market is the dregs. They couldn't sell it the first time around, stuck it under the bed and brought it out and dusted it off and are now asking lots of money for stuff that is broken. That's the best you're going to get and it is a diminishing market in that respect. But there is a lot of good equipment out there, not least because my business and many other companies like us around the world, have done the restoration on them and people who now understand the value of them. There is a definition of what vintage is – analogue synths are still made today – vintage synths which were made 30 or so years ago are not made now but the spirit of their design can be incorporated into modern products. Vintage is the best of its day, so, for example, a vintage Fender guitar sounds better and is worth a lot more than one that was made yesterday. Why would you buy a vintage one for £60,000 when you could buy a new one for a few hundred? There's something intrinsic in the original article that makes it valuable.

Digger: What advice would you give to new bands who want to get into analogue synths?

Richard: The biggest problem with the vintage stuff is the price and most new bands starting up are not going to have the financial resources to go out and spend thousands on a synth when they can probably kit out the

whole band for that. There are a number of options. If you want the purity of the analogue sound and the rawness and flexibility that analogue can give you then there are literally dozens of companies around the world making analogue instruments in various shapes, sizes and capacities. If anybody's interested in finding out who they are then there are various resources on the Internet or they're welcome to contact me for pointers. Some of these are modest entry-level prices, the same as you'd pay for a digital keyboard. And that's good news. There's an analogue music tech renaissance going on. They're made of discreet components and have gone back to that old-school philosophy of design and that's how they get the old-school sound. There's some companies using modern techniques but still making their systems from pseudo-analogue but using modern production techniques. These are relatively cheap and you can buy analogue synths within a few hundred pounds. It does the job. If you wanted the great names of the 60s, 70s and 80s you're probably going to have to buy an original keyboard from that time which is going to be lots of money because of the demand and lack of supply.

Digger: What's lots of money?

Richard: Depends what it is. If it's Moog modulators you can be talking between £20-£50,000. If it's something like a Sequential Pro One or a Moog Prodigy, you're talking around £600 to £1000 mark. They're very worthwhile machines so it's a question of budget. The people who spend money on the big systems tend to be the big professional users. They can probably justify that spend because they'll be using it on lots of projects. To buy it as an objet d'art to stick in your room and look at occasionally is probably not the way to go although if you can afford it then go for it as it's also a good investment.

Digger: I suppose there are a few mega-rich collectors around?

Richard: Exactly. There are some of those people out there as well but they certainly don't represent the majority at all.



Digger: Where's the business heading?

Richard: The business that we're in is in ever decreasing circles as I mentioned earlier because there's a limited supply of the technology. What we do is keep investing more into perfecting the restorations so we can restore to the highest level. Our reputation around the world is based on delivery of the best quality and we want to keep that focus. Where does it go from there? I don't really know. Every year people say to us that analogue's dying and there's nothing left but we seem to keep finding all sorts of opportunities which counter that opinion. But we'd like to keep the high quality rather than box-shifting low-end stuff because most of our customers are discerning people who want the best possible quality, accepting that this gear is old and can be difficult to maintain. Business as usual, and it's getting harder, but we enjoy what we do because we're passionate about it. If we did it just for the money we wouldn't do it. We've made

various additions to the business where we've brought in partners who can sell their products because we feel it fits our business philosophy. Macbeth Studio Systems, for example, produce very specialised hand-built modular systems and modules which are just extraordinary, based all around the early analogue designs and about as vintage-sounding as you can get. They're unique, high-quality and very affordable products and we like to involve ourselves in those sorts of partnerships. That adds to the flavour of the business. But the vintage is where it all started and where we'd really like to keep it.

Digger: It sounds as though you're another one of these people who has turned their passion into a going concern and a very strong one?

Richard: It's better than a real job! Over the next few years we're going to use the technology to do writing and producing of our own music as well. That's another thrust of the business, using the technology with modern digital stuff as well to produce sounds and new tracks and something slightly different.

Digger: The youthful imperative to write and create music is just as strong as it ever was.

Richard: If anything it's got stronger, because what you can buy now for the money compared to what it was costing 20 or 30 years ago, you can get an awful lot more. You can buy an analogue synth these days and plug it into your laptop and it's 1,000 times more powerful than anything available in those days. The ability for a young person sitting in their bedroom trying to write a track. You can write a hit-making piece of music now without even venturing outside your house. You don't even need to be a rich person. The marriage of analogue and digital has never been better.

Digger: God bless the Internet.

Richard: Isn't it good? The market I have is truly global and most of the customers I have through RL Music are not in the UK at all.

Digger: Imagine trying to do this with 60s technology, running an international company?

Richard: I don't think it would be possible. I remember back in the 70s and early 80s we'd go to the back-street music shops in London to fiddle around with the keyboards on display. But that kind of business model is unworkable now, to run a shop with all the overheads with specialised equipment, you'd be out of business in three months.

Digger: I've seen that with movie memorabilia. I'd often spend a day in London at the memorabilia shops whiling away many a happy hour. All of those shops have gone now, because of The Internet.

Richard: Turnkey was probably the last big music retailer in London and they went bust about two years ago. Digital Village, and Dawson's are still high-street retailers, but they're kind of mainstream music shops. I often get emails from Americans coming over to visit the UK and they want to come to our store and visit all the vintage synth shops. I have to disappoint them - we don't have a physical outlet and there aren't any vintage synth shops out there.

Digger: There's not even one in Denmark Street.

Richard: No, I think Argent's are still there, selling sheet music and that really seems to be the way to go. There's been a massive interest in guitars in the past couple of years and there's a whole retro thing going on. There's always a global passion with old, be it jukeboxes, valve based tech etc.

Digger: There's a company selling brick mobile phones again now. It's a good thing to be seen with again!

Richard: Is there? I had one when I was a salesman in the 80s. Here we are in 2010 and the technology has just got so big. I was talking to my wife about this. We both have Mac books, iPhones, LCD TV, Apple TV, Blue ray and Play

station and the Wii and a B&O stereo system and that's just my lounge! This is just an average household!

Digger: Richard, it's been great taking to you and long may your business flourish.

Richard: Thank you Digger and all the best to you as well.



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Website **[RL Music](http://www.rlmusic.co.uk)**

Details

We are a specialist business based in Reading, Berkshire in the south of England, offering a personal one-to-one service for people looking to buy rare and beautiful vintage analogue music machines.

We are passionate about Vintage Analogue Synthesizers and work hard to ensure you are satisfied with your

purchase. We also want you to buy from us again and recommend us to your friends if you are pleased with our service and products.

We specialise in the rare and hard to find synthesizers that are highly collectable and usable in today's home & professional studios.

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