THINGS

Michael Shore

Bleep. Blurr. Whoosh. Whizz. Remember them? The sounds you loved to hate? The sounds of synthesizers, those coldly gleaming hanks of incomprehensible circuitry—pioneered by obscure avant-gardists like Cage, Babbitt, Feldman and Stockhausen; introduced into “rock music” by English art-rockers like Yes and ELF. No wonder synthesizers got a bad rep.

Now it’s a different story because of today’s Brave New Pop Wave: Giorgio Moroder’s compo-disco; Kraftwerk’s melancholy android hit; and the young electronic idols like Gary Numan, Human Leaguer, The Normal, DEVO, The Residents and many more. All based firmly in a positive and expansive use of electronic devices. Synthesizers are cool, au courant for New Age sardonic/sonic pop musk. The sounds you hate to adore, you can’t help liking. And there’s no denying the surprising commercial success of Numan in England and M.P. Music overseas.

But the avant-gardists continue to struggle, and the symphonic rockers still prosper, though both are well out of favor with critics. The ultimate critical smear by enemored of electropop, Bob Ostertag is currently New York’s leading exponent of free-form synthesizer. Larry Fast is corporate rock’s ace session man, having worked with Nektar, Peter Gabriel, Hall & Oates, Boz Scaggs, Ian Lloyd, Canadian techno-black FM and a host of others he can’t even remember.

Ostertag, who plays most often with an improvising trio called Full Mountain, gained some notoriety recently when Robert Fripp was quoted in these pages to the effect that Ostertag was his favorite knob-tweider. Both he and Fast are in their late ’20s, look even younger, are pleasant and soft-spoken, with unfashionably long hair reflecting their un-fashionable musical involvements. Yet neither has the appearance of a cloistered, bespectacled Popular Science news of years, reasonably expect.

Both came naturally to performing on synthesizers, sharing twin fascinations with electronics and music. Fast says he’s “a real experimenter, if I saw the TV on, or my mom on the phone, I’d always wonder how that worked. I got into music because I liked the sounds, like everyone else, bought my $12 electric guitar at Korvettes and so on. As I grew, I got into all sorts of music, classical as well as rock. I read electronics journals.” The music I play now reflects that. It’s not message-oriented, political pop music. It’s more synthesizer concert-hall type stuff.” Larry just released his fourth solo synthesizer album under the “Synergy” banner, Games (Passport). polished, accomplished, middle-of-the-road classic-pop for those who always liked Yes, Genesis and the rest.

Larry Fast: “Synthesizers and electronics are not irrelevant to our world, they’re integral, and anyone who doesn’t think so has his head in the sand.”

Bob Ostertag: “You have white noise on one end of the spectrum, and pure electronic effects more than the instrument. From there he went to Oberlin College in Ohio to study electronic music, just after being selected to tour as one of the first gigs, were physically removed from two and asked to leave the third. He began performing on guitar, then a particular interest in his electronic effects more than the instrument. From there he went to Oberlin College in Ohio to study electronic music, just after being selected to tour as one of the first gigs, were physically removed from two and asked to leave the third. He began performing on guitar, then a particular interest in his electronic effects more than the instrument. From there he went to Oberlin College in Ohio to study electronic music, just after being selected to tour as one of the first gigs, were physically removed from two and asked to leave the third. 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The NIGHT

Larry Fast: “What crap! Synthesizers and electronics are not irrelevant to our world, they’re integral, and anyone who doesn’t think so has his head in the sand.”

Ostertag has his father’s radicalism, and being an “exciting underground artist” has built up a sharp awareness and mistrust of capitalist commodity-think: “Take studios.” The technology is great, but it’s so bureaucratic that you need a manager or a company to shell out capital for you. Then it’s not music, it’s business. I wouldn’t do that to my music. Or, if I had to, I’d make a different kind of music. And grants. I don’t want a grant. Where’s the money come from? Rocker or someone? Where’d he get it? I don’t want his money. He didn’t get it from experimental musicians, he shouldn’t make a big deal of anything, just get some garbage men to clean up these streets—”he gestures outside his Mott Street storefront—”instead of giving it to people nobody’s ever gonna hear anyway.”

Ostertag doesn’t seem to mind that he himself is an experimental musician nobody’s ever gonna hear anyway, and that he damns himself in that bargain: “That’s true, but I like it better that way. It’s honest. The music I make, with Full Mountain, Fred Frith, Eugene Chadbourne, John Zorn, is honest music. It’s a rare social, political, economic, sonic statement of who we are and where we’re going: It’s all right here.” He also told me that after that Fripp quote appeared, 30 Fripp freaks showed up at a Full Mountain gig wondering where their idol was.

Fast doesn’t consider the socio-political implications of his music too, he says, “I’m not a writer, I’m more synthesizer concert-hall type stuff.” Larry just released his fourth solo synthesizer album under the “Synergy” banner, Games (Passport). polished, accomplished, middle-of-the-road classic-pop for those who always liked Yes, Genesis and the rest.