

Reviews

KEY TO DVD RATINGS

★ = Poor ★★ = Fair ★★★ = Good ★★★★ = Excellent

Visuals: refers to picture quality and special visual effects.

Sound: refers to a disc's sonic quality as well as quality of the recording (clarity, dynamic range and mix). Rarely will live recordings rate as highly as studio recordings.

Performance: refers to artistic presentation, including musical composition/songwriting, musicianship (technical ability), plus effort and emotional content.

Content: addresses DVD package "extras," such as bonus features/information/footage above and beyond the primary presentation, plus inclusion of additional materials such as a booklet or audio CD.

Total rating refers to the sum total of stars in the four categories. The maximum possible rating is 16.

● **BLOOD, SWEAT & TEARS: *Spinning Wheel***
2007 (DVD, 58:00); MVD/Cherry Red CRDVD154
Style: Jazz-rock/fusion

Sound: ★★1/2 Visuals: ★★1/2 Content: ★★

Performance: ★★★★★ Total rating: 11

This concert recorded at a British venue in 1980 appears to have been pulled from a television broadcast; hence, the less-than-optimum quality sound and visuals. The performance by this seven-member lineup is top-notch, however. And while most of this set comprises classic standards (the title track, "And When I Die," "You Made Me So Very Happy," "God Bless the Child," etc.), the ensemble absolutely smokes when allowed to cut loose. The opening "Overture" is an impressive chops-fest, while the big-band jazz style of "Spanish Wine"/ "Blood Sweat, and Tears Blues" (replete with solo spots for acoustic guitar, soprano sax, electric guitar, and bass) further highlights a group that was much more than its enduring trademark — the soulfully expressive singing of front man David-Clayton Thomas.

The show closes with what promises to be a spirited rendition of Jimi Hendrix's "Manic Depression," but fades to black just a few seconds after kicking off. Very disappointing that this wasn't included in its entirety. — **John Collinge**

STEVEN M. MARTIN: *Theremin— An Electronic Odyssey*
1993/2001 (DVD, 122:00); MGM Avant-Garde Cinema
Style: Electronic music documentary

Sound: ★★★★★ Visuals: ★★★★★ Content: ★★★

Performance: ★★★★★ Total rating: 15

HANS FJELLSTAD: *Moog*
2005/2007 (DVD, 117:00); Plexifilm 018
Style: Electronic music documentary

Sound: ★★★★★ Visuals: ★★★★★ Content: ★★★★★

Performance: ★★★★★ Total rating: 16

Electronic instruments are such a ubiquitous fixture of contemporary music culture that to recall a time without them one must be downright elderly. These modern accoutrements we seem to take for granted had to come from somewhere, though. With these two DVDs, we regular folks get the inside scoop on

two such instruments, as well as highly personal takes on and from the men who pioneered them.

You might not ever have played (or even seen) a Theremin, but you've likely heard its otherworldly wail. The Beach Boys' "Good Vibrations" (the first prog tune?), live and studio renditions of Led Zeppelin's "Whole Lotta Love," the soundtrack to Alfred Hitchcock's 1945 thriller *Spellbound*, not to mention *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951), *The Haunting* (1963), *The Ninth Gate* (1999), and the television series *Dark Shadows*, are just a few high-profile examples of this unique instrument in action.

Russian inventor Leon Theremin (1896-1993) developed his namesake device at the height of that country's civil war in 1919, and received an American patent nine years later, whereupon he leased all commercial production to RCA/ Victor. The instrument's technical premise is deceptively simple — a series of heterodyning oscillators that produce a sine wave change phase in response to a changing electro-magnetic field. Thus, using a vertical (frequency) and horizontal (amplitude) antenna, one controls the sounds merely by hand movements. It remains the only non-contact musical instrument.

The film's tagline of "the music he created was strange; his life was even stranger" barely scratches the surface of historical and anecdotal detail packed into its superbly allocated two-plus hours. There's strong emphasis on Theremin's 60-year on-again off-again romance with ex-Soviet compatriot Clara Rochmore, the first Theremin virtuoso and to this day the instrument's leading exponent (you'll love the "cliffhanger" conclusion).

Missing (or essentially inaccurate) are certain political chimeras that might still embarrass both American and Russian officialdom. But in producing the world's first commercially available electronic instrument (five years before Adolphe Rickenbacker's electric Hawaiian guitar and a decade before Larry Hammond's magnetic tone-wheel organ), Leon Theremin kicked open the gates for all who followed. Given the material's arcane nature, and the leading characters' desire for it to remain such, this award-winning docu-drama is as close to these mysterious subjects as one is likely to get.

If Leon Theremin introduced the world to electronic music's limitless potentialities, Robert Moog brought it to the masses. Indeed, his name is synonymous with the first (and still best) analog music synthesizers. Hans Fjellstad's documentary provides a thoroughly informative (and decidedly playful) orientation on the artists who use this machinery and of course, Moog himself.

Moog began his career in instrument design at RCA building and repairing — you guessed it — Theremins! While formulating ideas on circuit design for his namesake synthesizer, it should be mentioned that he was not the first (or only) to pursue such an instrument. In 1915, Lee de Forest received a patent for an ungainly vacuum-tube "audion piano" that generated sine waves, as would the more practical Theremin four years later. In the early '50s, fellow RCAer Harry Olsson constructed a tube device only slightly less awkward than de Forest's. And concurrent to Moog's alchemy, Don Buchla was working with newfangled solid-state circuitry along similar lines. But it was