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## An Interview With Keith Emerson

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Keith Emerson was the driving force behind the 70's mega group Emerson Lake And Palmer. To say that Keith is a colourful character is a gross understatement. His stage antics are the stuff of legend. If you are a Hammond organ Keith is your sworn enemy, over the years he has burned them, blown them up, attacked

the keyboard with sharp knives, and generally abused them. I recently reviewed a DVD [MoogFest 2006](#), which featured Keith Emerson playing the wonderful full size Moog Synthesizer. This electronic marvel of the early 70's has to rate as one of the most expensive musical instruments of all time. My interest was roused, and I set out to discover more.

I had the opportunity to chat with Keith about his long, illustrious, and on occasions wild career.

**Keith you have had a long and industrious career, I think I read somewhere that you were performing from age 14, and that you have owned quite a few organs over the years.**

I bought my first organ when I was 20, of course I didn't have any money so it was on Hire Purchase (rent to own), it took me 4 years to pay that off. Yes I have owned quite a few, Hammond is my

favourite. I really like the L-100 and C2, it was the L-100's that got most of the abuse on stage. The C2 I was a little gentler on.

*Note— an eBay search shows that the L-100 is about \$120, the C2 is \$5,000!*

**I interviewed Dave Cousins earlier this week, and he was telling me how the Strawbs got involved with moog synths, AIR studios had one and they were there making From the Witchwood. How did you get involved with the moog?**

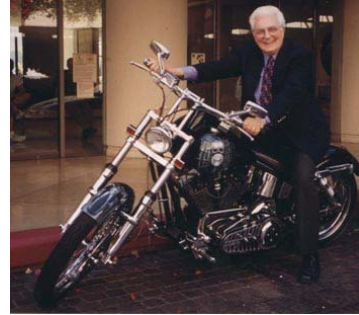
I was in a Soho record shop in 1969, I knew the guy behind the counter and he showed me an album cover that had a picture of the Moog on it. It looked great. My manager at that time was Tony Stratton Smith, and I told him to find me one. Tony tracked one down, Mike Vickers had one and he let me play with it. Of course I tried to play it like a piano, but Moog's don't play that way, they are one note at a time, now it can be a very complex note, but it is one at a time. Mike was kind enough to loan it to me and we played the Royal Festival Hall in London, and together with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra performed The Five Bridges Suite.

The next year, 1970 I formed Emerson Lake and Palmer, everyone needed new equipment, but we had a pretty limited budget. The price tag on the moog was something like \$50,000, well that was a little steep. I decided to try a different approach, I wrote a letter to Walter Sear of Moog, I said something like 'Hi, you don't know me but I'd like to do an endorsement deal with you'. A couple of weeks later I got a reply... Thanks for your interest, but the Rolling Stones and the Beatles bought theirs, so you can buy yours!

I did buy it, and one day a pile of big boxes arrived , well I was living in a pretty small flat at the time, and 'The Beast' didn't leave much living space. I fooled around with it for a while, all I wanted to do was play it, but I didn't even know how to F'ing plug it in! I think I got a couple of lights to blink once, but that was about it.

Mike Vickers came to my rescue, and after about a week of fiddling it was working.

Over the years I got to know Bob Moog, unfortunately he died two years ago, actually almost to the day, he was such a nice gentle guy.



**I have read that you were the first musician to actually tour with a moog. I'll bet that was a challenge and a half. I would imagine from a complexity standpoint it was akin to touring with a cathedral pipe organ!**

Don't laugh, we nearly did tour with a pipe organ, but you are right it was a challenge touring with 'The Beast', the sheer movement of it was a headache. When I first got it Bob Moog had sent a letter along saying that it was designed for studio use only. Well I wanted to tour with it, and we took it to the Isle of Wight festival, and then on to the rest of the tour. Yes, it was a challenge, the Moog has three oscillators in it and they were acting up really badly, scaling was a nightmare, Eventually we cracked the problem, the power supply wasn't big enough, once we had it replaced it was a lot better. We also figured out a way to have the oscillators tuned differently. You can say this was on the job training.

**I was saddened recently when I came across a web site dedicated to obsolete electronic musical instruments and the name Moog was prominent. Do you still have a Moog, and do you ever still use it?**

Of Course! My Moog is still going strong. Right now it is set up at the Marc Bonilla Studios in Woodland Hills. I am using it on a new album that will be out next January. It is great to go to a performance and see the expressions on the audience's faces when they see it. It is not an easy or cheap task to move 'The Beast' around though. Greg (Lake) and Carl (Palmer) used to grumble a lot about the cost of transporting and supporting it.

**Being an astute reviewer (grin) I notice that you are in southern California. When did you leave England?**

Which time? I guess the big break was in 1993, I moved to Southern California.

**Ah, so you lived through the brutal late 70's in England. The advent of the Punk movement seemed to stall a lot of musical careers, Dave Cousins "overnight we were dinosaurs", Al Stewart (who I interviewed recently) bolted to Southern California in 76, right as it was starting. His view is that it wasn't so much punk, but radio that stalled him. Power pop was in, singer songwriter was out. Rick Wakeman on the other hand has a more prosaic view, "every 10 years the music changes, and what was most popular becomes the leper"! What are your views of this turbulent time?**

I thought Punk was a refreshing change, the music scene needed a shake up. What frightened me was the radio, the 3 minute song was in. And most of ours were a lot longer. Punk really had no effect on us, but you have to realize that at the time were living as tax exiles in the Bahamas. In fact it was during the Punk era that we had our only (unofficial) #1 hit single 'Fanfare for the common man'.

### **Unofficial?**



Well it was during the Silver Jubilee, the official #1 was The Sex Pistols with God Save The Queen, but of course the BBC was not going to play that. We were #2, but because of the BBC we were given #1. So Punk was good for us. Actually Johnny Rotten (John Lydon) ex of the Sex Pistols lives about a mile from me, and we have chatted several times. In fact I wouldn't mind doing something with him one of these days.

**A question for fun, I asked Rick the same question, who is the better player of the moog?**

I admire Rick, and I have a great deal of respect for him. The guy is ambidextrous, and I'll love to have his left hand. We play differently; I don't think it is possible to answer that question. There are many great Moog players, a lot of people went with the Mini Moog, it is better designed for touring, and I have to admire Chick Corea, he does it best.

**Footnote:** Keith was a delight to talk with, most people just want to answer the question and get on to the next project. Keith likes to chat, we talked about kids, wives, and just about everything else. We also have a lunch date the next time my wife and I are in Los Angeles. I will be keeping my eye out for his new album, and so should you.

Simon Barrett

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