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Synth-Aesthesis: I Dream of Wires

By Red Bull Music Academy

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Jason Amm didn't want to get involved with modular synths. The electronic music producer known as [Solvent](#) knew that he'd become immediately obsessed. But when the opportunity to become a part of the team behind [I Dream of Wires](#), an upcoming documentary about modulares, he took it as a sign that it was time to dive headfirst into the topic. Fast forward a few years later and Amm is most definitely obsessed. And most definitely happy about it as well. In putting together the film Amm had the chance to speak to a huge range of musicians that use the patchable synths, including personal heroes like [Vince Clarke](#), [Daniel Miller](#) and [cEvin Key](#). Below you can see a gallery of some of the artists involved pictured with their set-ups.







In advance of the release of the four hour [“Hardcore Edition”](#) DVD in June, we caught up with Amm via email to talk about the film and its impact on his own work as Solvent.

Why do you think that modulators have become so popular in the past few years?

There are so many different reasons for the recent resurgence in modular synths’ popularity, so I’m going to limit myself to two!

First of all, there has been an explosion of new companies that have adapted the small and affordable [Eurorack](#) format, which we’ve been calling “the peoples’ modular synth”! Although this format’s been around for many years, up until a few years ago the market was mainly dominated by the German brand [Doepfer](#), which was difficult to buy outside of Germany, and arguably not always the most sonically or visually interesting brand. Now there are well over 100 companies making modules in this format from all over the world. It’s like an explosion of ideas. Now there are shops popping up all over the world that are specializing in Eurorack modular gear, and there’s a tangible feeling of excitement around the scene. Some people have likened the movement to the early days of post-punk or techno. It’s got the same sense of DIY grassroots innovation going on.

Modular synthesizers offer a path to sounds that are totally unique.

Secondly, I think this resurgence is a reaction to the widespread popularity of electronic music. If you’re someone who craves unheard sounds or wants to produce electronic music that sounds different, it’s difficult to hear something that sounds unique nowadays, because we’re so inundated with electronic sounds and music. Modular synthesizers really do offer a path to sounds that are totally unique, and it’s not going to get played out in the same way as a new plug-in will; a lot of results you achieve with modulators simply cannot be duplicated, even with the same set of modules. Every sound you create with a modular is custom, and there’s a lot of new/hybrid synthesis options going on in the world of modulators that you won’t find anywhere else.

How do you feel like your own music-making will change as a result of the work on this?

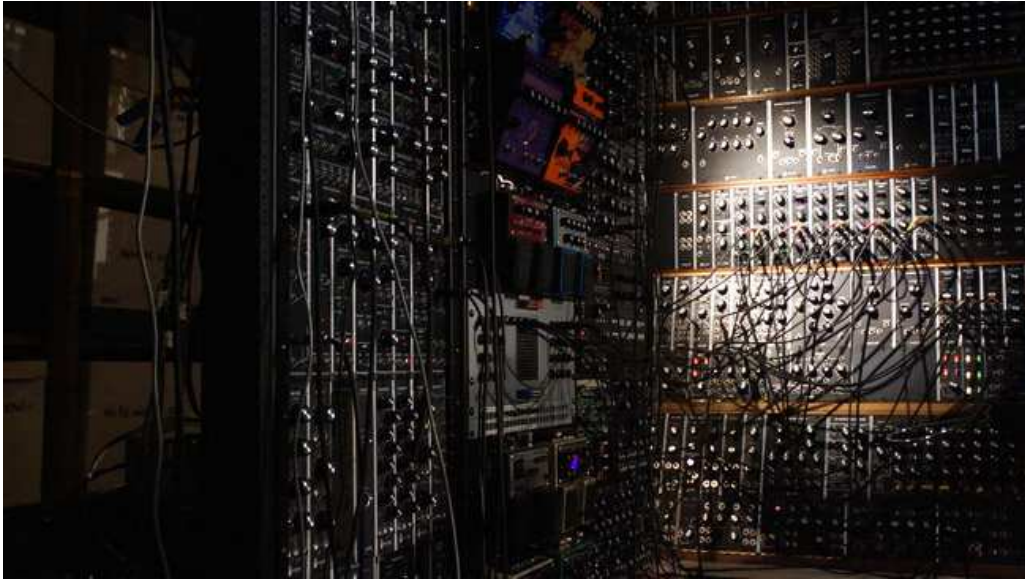
Getting involved with the film is what really got me into buying my own modular setup, and this has definitely had a huge effect on the way I am producing music, and the kinds of sounds I'm getting now. I created the soundtrack to the film exclusively on modulators, in fact. I actually intentionally avoided getting into modulators before *I Dream of Wires*, because I am very obsessive about electronic music and synthesizers, and I was worried that modular synthesizers could really overwhelm my obsessive nature, to the point where it might interfere with my ability to make music.

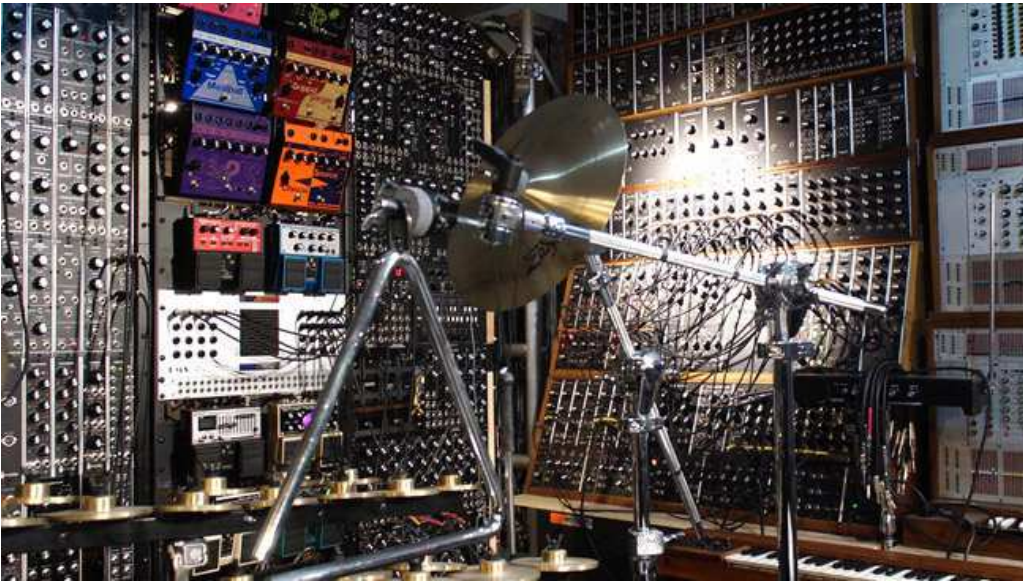
I knew that by getting into this stuff I would become totally obsessed. The film gave me an excuse to do it, and of course it's something I've wanted to get into for a long time. I came up with the title of the film, actually, and although it comes from the title of a [Gary Numan song](#), it absolutely applies to me and my relationship with modulators. Same would be true of most of the people we interviewed for the film, I'm sure.

One of the things that people seem to say about modulars is that they like the unpredictability of it. I wonder if you feel like it's ever possible to really control one?

I'm happy that you asked this question because I think this is a misconception that a lot of people have about modular synths on account of the proliferation of modular videos on YouTube showcasing the weird noises / bleeps and bloops end of the spectrum. Unpredictability is something you can choose to incorporate into your modular system by choosing modules that introduce random elements into the sound or voltage flow. But this is just one approach.

You can make the modular be whatever you want it to be – some want 100% random/chaos, some people prefer straight-ahead, classic subtractive synthesis with maximum control. You can now control modular synths through DAW plug-ins and hardware that turn computer audio into control voltages, offering the same amount of precision control as with soft synths. Most modular users want some of both, control and unpredictability; it's the best of both worlds, and this describes my approach.





David Kronemeyer's studio

Who had the craziest collection of synths that you interviewed?

That would've definitely been [David Kronemeyer](#), and from what I understand, we only saw a small part of it. He is a Los Angeles-based clinical psychologist, and formerly a film and record producer. He had a sizable collection of some of the most sought-after vintage modular systems like Moog and Buchla, but more interestingly, he had a piece of practically every boutique modular modular system from the past 20 years. Im sure that there were some pieces there that must be limited to just one or two units in the world.

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