

'I Dream of Wires' and the legacy of the Modular Synthesizer

From next week you will be able to buy what may be one of the most unusual documentaries released all year. *I Dream Of Wires: The Hardcore Edition* is the four-hour director's cut edition of a lovingly assembled documentary dedicated to the history, demise and resurgence of the modular synthesizer.

Although early incarnations of the instrument had been around since the early 20th century, it wasn't until Bob Moog designed and built the first of his modular systems in the mid-1960s that the idea began to take off. There have of course been numerous documentaries on the subject, but what makes *I Dream Of Wires* different is not only the sheer depth of detail on the subject – especially in terms of the diversity of interviewees, including everyone from Nine Inch Nails mastermind Trent Reznor to Depeche Mode / Yazoo's Vince Clarke - but also the way in which the film documents the strange sub-culture that has grown up around the instrument. There is a whole scene dedicated to designing and building modules for these vast synthesizers, some of whom are musicians who actually use them, but others are engineers and hobbyists who just like building them.

The film also charts the rise in popularity of modular synths during the 70s – particularly among progressive rock acts - and their subsequent decline in the 80s as digital synthesis began to take over. They are, however, beginning to make a comeback: there is something appealing about all those knobs and dials, a tactile, hands-on experience that is difficult to replicate with software. As one of the interviewees points out: "There are loads of software synthesizers these days – and some of them sound great – but interfacing with them is a nightmare."

Four hours is a long running time by anyone's standards, but if synthesizers are your thing this documentary provides a huge amount of insight and should appeal in particular to musicians or engineers. For those who don't know the history of the instrument, or just like the sounds that synths like these can produce, we've put together a list of 10 of the best albums that would just not have been possible without them.

Autobahn

Kraftwerk

The band that did more to advance electronic music than any other, Kraftwerk were building their own synthesizers and drum machines since the late 1960s, but their breakthrough 1974 album *Autobahn* cemented the instrument as a rising force in



From Here To Eternity

Giorgio Moroder

Moroder had already produced the first hit made entirely with synthesizers with Donna Summer's 'I Feel Love', but this 1977 album from the man with the moustache took this idea to the next level and proved to be a huge influence on the house music ...



Moog Indigo

Jean-Jacques Perrey

One of the most criminally underrated musicians on this list, Perrey was a pioneer and friend of Bob Moog who helped him develop the instrument and provided some of the best early examples of its possibilities. His seminal 1970 album *Moog Indigo* ...



Oxygène

Jean-Michele Jarre

Recorded in his kitchen using a variety of borrowed synthesizers and other equipment, Jean-Michel Jarre originally had problems finding anyone willing to release *Oxygène* until small French label Disques Motors agreed to press a run of 50,000 copies. The album ...



Zero Time

Tonto's Expanding Head Band

Better known as the session musicians behind Stevie Wonder's extraordinary creative period in the 1970s, British duo Malcolm Cecil and Robert Margouleff can take a lot of credit for Wonder's experimentation with synthesizers, but this 1971 album started it ...

