

JEAN-MICHEL JARRE

PRODUCING *ELECTRONICA*

New album *Electronica* sees Jean-Michel Jarre making connections with a galaxy of other legendary figures from the world of electronic music.

TOM DOYLE

Wandering room by room through his studio on the outskirts of Paris, Jean-Michel Jarre is giving *Sound On Sound* a guided tour of his creative HQ. Passing through a corridor, he invites us to glimpse into a storage cupboard where shelves heave with synthesizers from various eras. In a live-playing area, where Jarre rehearses for his concerts, the lights of an ARP 2500 twinkle in a corner, while the 67-year-old musician proudly leads us towards his Coupigny, the first synthesizer he ever used when studying under the guidance of modernist composer Pierre Schaeffer in 1969. "Very warm frequencies," Jarre nods.



The last time *SOS* visited the studio, in 2008, the facility was still under construction, with only the control room completed at the time. "I suppose a studio like this is always moving," he says. "It's what I like actually. I always approached studio environments like a place where not everything has to be there forever. Just changing things. It's something which is great also when you start a new project, to change your habits."

In the control room today sits a circle of instruments pulled out of storage for Jean-Michel Jarre's latest project, *Electronica*, including a Moog 55, a Memorymoog, a Big Briar Theremin, a Fairlight CMI, an EMS VCS3 and Synthi AKS and an ARP Pro/DGX. "I like to say 'OK, this is going to be my range, my palette of colours,' and then try to limit myself as much as I can on this," he

explains. "I think limitations are the key. The difficulty these days is actually there is no limit. And there is nothing worse than having no limit."

Who's Who

Electronica will be released as two albums, the first in October, with a second instalment due in April 2016. A typically ambitious undertaking, it involves Jarre collaborating with a pantheon of other artists connected to electronic music down the years. The first album, *Electronica 1: The Time Machine*, features tracks created with Tangerine Dream, Pete Townshend (an early adopter of the ARP 2500 >>

Going Live

Aside from the synths selected for *Electronica*, Jean-Michel Jarre took delivery of an SSL AWS 948 for the making of the album. "I wanted to have a desk which could actually provide the best of both sides: the possibility of having lots of synths plugged in and being able to record in the analogue way, but also being able to control DAWs. I'm working these days with Ableton Live and with this SSL, it's quite compact, but you still have 48 inputs. You can have two monos or one stereo output for every track."

Monitor-wise, Jarre still favours Genelec 1031s. "I'm very faithful to Genelecs," he says. "I love the 1031s with two subwoofers because I believe that all that is said about bass being not directional is not true. I like having two subwoofers more or less in the axis of each speaker. Before, I was very keen on big speakers on the wall, but actually you're depending too much on the acoustic of the room. Even in a very sophisticated studio, you can really destroy a mix very easily because the room is affecting too much what you hear. I love the idea of having like a big home studio monitor. So the 1031s are good because they're medium-sized, and with big subwoofers you have actually the sound of the big room, but closer to your ears."

Meanwhile, the creation of *Electronica* found Jarre changing his preferred DAW, moving from Pro Tools to Ableton Live. "I started with Pro Tools," he points out, "and step by step, because I was travelling a lot and working with so many people, I suddenly used Live more and more because I could use it on the road. I really fell in love with this DAW. Even in terms of quality, I found it in some aspects better than Pro Tools."



Photo: Tom Sheehan

To help develop the working approach he had in mind for *Electronica*, Jean-Michel Jarre installed an SSL AWS 948 hybrid console in his Paris studio.

For instance, bouncing a mix from Pro Tools, I heard a difference between the bounce and the result of the session being played. With Ableton Live, it's absolutely transparent — even visually on the spectrogram and when you listen to it. And it's so easy to work with, so friendly. I've found for the first time a DAW where I have as much pleasure as I used to have dealing with an analogue desk."

When travelling to work with others, Jarre ran Ableton Live on his MacBook Pro, using an Apogee Duet interface. Most of the

collaborations were done side by side with the artists, but some file-sharing was involved in the later stages as the tracks were being completed, forcing Jarre to make a decision to work at 48kHz. "So many files were exchanged through Dropbox," he says. "After a while I couldn't even put them on my one terabyte Mac [drive], so I said, 'OK, having made lots of tests between 48 and 96, frankly, there is no problem.' The main thing is the content of the music, and the sound, if you record carefully, the difference between 48 and 96 is not that crucial."

» on 1971's *Who's Next*), John Carpenter, Vince Clarke, Moby, Air, Massive Attack, Fuck Buttons and Little Boots.

"I started this project more than three years ago," says Jarre. "It has been

a massive project in my life. I've wanted to do this for quite a while: collaborating with people, but not at all the kind of 'featuring' album which is so trendy these days, where you're just sending a file

somewhere to somebody, and you've never met. It was absolutely not that. I was really wanting to work with people who have been a source of inspiration to me or are a source of inspiration, directly or indirectly linked to the electronic scene."

Some of the artists travelled here to Paris to work with Jarre, but mostly it involved him going to them, whether they were in London, New York or Los Angeles. "I really wanted to have this almost initiation journey, where I go and visit people," he says, "in days that we think we are connected with the world, but we're not talking to our neighbour any more. I mean electronic musicians, you know, we are quite isolated. Starting a track from scratch with someone is something that is not that usual. I've been really moved by the fact that everybody

Jean-Michel Jarre's idea of a 'limited' setup probably seems like a wild dream to most SOS readers! One instrument much used in the making of *Electronica* was his Moog modular synth.

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The Future Is All Around Us

Forever looking to frontier technology, Jean-Michel Jarre has mixed four bonus tracks on *Electronica 1: The Time Machine* using the Audio-3D process developed by the French company of the same name. "This is not playing on phase and stereo enhancer," he points out. "It's actually a series of algorithms that this company is using. I mixed with them through their system and it's really amazing. The beauty of it is you don't need any kind of equipment, you will be able to download it from the Internet. It's a file that is processed, so you don't need an app, you don't need hardware. Hans Zimmer is quite involved with the DTS process, and making comparisons, this process is quite amazing."

"I'm actually convinced the future is surround audio 3D for headphones. Because you know, stereo is just a fake. I mean, the world is mono. When you talk to me you are in mono. A violin is mono, a clarinet is mono, an electric guitar is mono. And what makes

the space is the space around us, the air, and also the fact that we have two ears and not one. Stereo is the *feeling* of space, and it became the normal way of listening to music, which is actually something which is not natural. The natural thing is actually to recreate the environment around us, behind and above the head and all this. Stereo will be regarded like a gramophone by the end of the 21st century. We have so many things to explore ahead of us in terms of sound."

At 67, it seems, there is no dimming of Jean-Michel Jarre's passion for advances in the sonic world. "I mean, I think it's timeless, you know," he smiles. "It's something that you have or not. And if you're curious about things... It's funny because I went through the vinyl and then the CD... we were all thinking that the CD was the grail and it was worse than the vinyl. And the MP3 came along and it was worse than the CD. So it's time to wake up, guys. Now we should be a bit more ambitious."

» said yes. I thought it was really important to try to connect."

Starting Points

Before connecting with his collaborators on *Electronica*, Jean-Michel Jarre tended to generate the initial idea for each track himself. "What I've done, almost as a dogma, is I've prepared quite advanced demos for every collaborator, thinking about what could it be," he says. "What could it be working with Vince Clarke, or what could it be working with Massive Attack? Then trying to go musically to establish a kind of bridge. Writing something in their direction."

Conversely, as a result, some of the parts which seem to exemplify Jean-Michel Jarre's trademark style were not actually created by him. "In lots of tracks," he grins, "I'm sure that lots of people will think that the other collaborator has done some of the tracks I've done, actually. And the reverse was true in some cases because some people — supposedly respecting me — used some of my sounds. So it's not me, it's them. It's quite funny."

High on Jarre's initial list of potential collaborators was Vince Clarke, who now works out of a studio called The Cabin, in Brooklyn. "He's definitely one of the sounds of the '80s," says Jarre, "being a founder of Depeche Mode and with this kind of pure British electro-pop approach of synths. He kind of has a pointillist approach, with lots of precise sounds and things very rhythmic. I really

love Vince, I think he's a great musician and a great human being."

The results of Jarre's sessions with Clarke produced two tracks on *Electronica*, 'Automatic Part 1' and 'Part 2'. "I went to Brooklyn to his studio, and I had two quite different demos in mind," Jarre says. "We worked on both tracks, and then we decided to have this work with two parts. The first one is more abstract I would say, and the other one has a more dynamic kind of club feel, which is part of Vince's world, and also quite melodic, which is part of my world. We both think that melody and sounds are very important in music, so we were very close. We worked in Brooklyn and then I came back here to finish the tracks. Then we discussed again the tracks another time in Brooklyn. It was really back and forth, like everybody else."

Elsewhere, for the six-and-a-half-minute atmospheric journey that is 'Close Your Eyes', Jarre and Air had a very grand scheme in mind: attempting to tell the story of electronic music, in sound, as the track progresses. "We thought it would be cool to have something that would be in one track going through all the equipment of the story of electronic music," he says. "Starting with the Coupigny and doing a loop with tape and scissors. I did the first beats with this kind of technique by looping with magnetic tape [on a Revox B77]. When you are 120bpm, it's two seconds for

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For his collaboration with Air, 'Close Your Eyes', Jarre attempted to tell the entire story of electronic music — beginning with *musique concrète*, courtesy of loops created on his Revox tape machine.

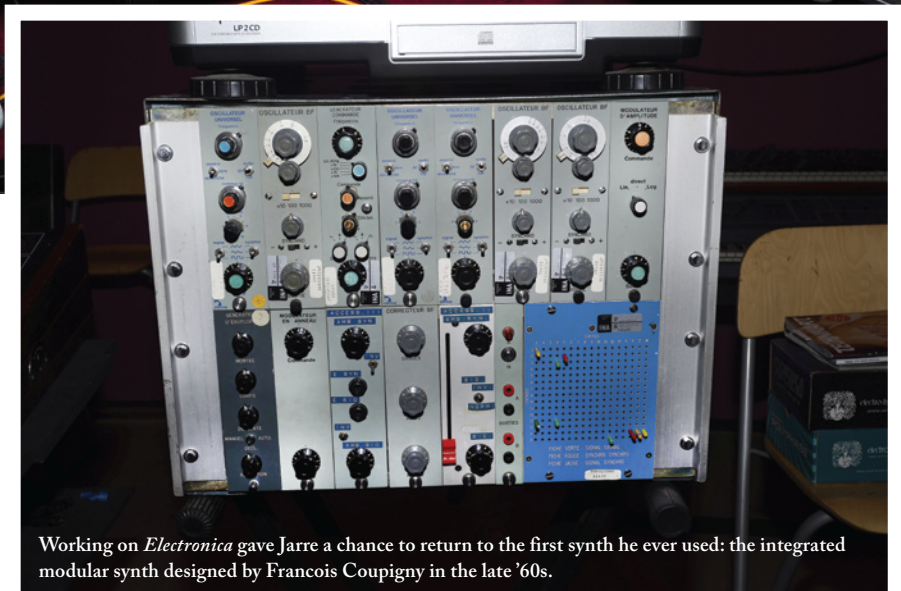
» a bar and then at 15 inches per second, you just calculate what means an eighth note or a quarter note.

"I recorded various sounds on a microphone that I processed, speeding up and down, reversing, all that. And then editing it. When you hear it, you instantly understand what it is. It's sounds that I recorded in the street, some sounds that I recorded in the studio like percussion sounds or whatever. Sounds that I made with strange objects or whatever and then processed. Then by doing this, you create the beat.

"So as a process we are starting the track with this technique. And then I matched it in a sneaky way into the first drum machine which was a Korg MiniPops, and then going through the first modular Moog to the analogue polyphonic Memorymoog. Then the Fairlight and the first sampler, then the digital [Roland] D50 and [Korg] M1 and [Yamaha] DX7 from the '80s, then to plug-ins. And the last sound of the track I did on an iPad, using Animoog."

If I Were A Carpenter

One of the more unusual collaborations on *Electronica* is with film director (*Dark*



Working on *Electronica* gave Jarre a chance to return to the first synth he ever used: the integrated modular synth designed by Francois Coupigny in the late '60s.

Star, The Thing) and electronic composer John Carpenter on the brooding and intense 'A Question Of Blood'. "For me, John Carpenter was a must in this project," says Jarre, "because some people don't know that apart from being a genius as a film-maker, he used to do all his soundtracks with analogue synthesizers. He was really the first one to use analogue synthesizers in Hollywood, in days where it was not the case at all. And also with a very specific, recognisable sound. I mean all the collaborators I wanted to work with, they all have in common something very precise — an instantly recognisable sound. You hear John Carpenter for 50 seconds, you know it's John and nobody else. You hear Moby or Air or Vince Clarke or Massive Attack, you know that it's them and nobody else.

"So I went to see John, and he was quite ill at that moment. He said, 'I'm in, but give me some time to do it.' I played him what I had in mind and he really liked it and then we met again in Los Angeles and went into his studio. Then we went back and forth because of his situation. It was more kind of Skyping and sending the work we had done on each side, and then joining forces in Los Angeles. And then I mixed the final thing here. But I had in mind this epic type of track, starting in the very minimalist-like John Carpenter opening credits, and with a progression to this kind of crazy massive ending."

One of the other tracks which took a long time to complete was 'Watching You' with Robert Del Naja, aka 3D of the famously painstaking and slow-working Massive Attack. "We started working on

» a totally different track," Jarre explains. "We wanted to get some female singer on it, and then we didn't find the right combination. We were going nowhere particularly and then I suddenly changed my mind and said, 'OK, we should go somewhere else.' I did a whole new demo in one night and Robert really loved it."

One of the key features of 'Watching You' is its ultra-processed and warped vocoder topline, created using a Novation MiniNova. "It's not like a classic vocoder, it's a vocoder using bender and sliders," says Jarre. "I love the MiniNova, which I think is even better for vocoder than the bigger Novation. It's a great piece and I must say that for the few vocoders I used in the project, I used mainly the MiniNova and also the Roland VP550. Y'know, not a big success commercially, the VP550, but one of the best sound processors I know on the market. Basically I love commercial failures in synthesizers because most of the time they have something very interesting. Then you find something different which is definitely your own sound."

Final Statement

For Jarre, the most poignant collaboration on *Electronica* was with Edgar Froese and Tangerine Dream on the expansive soundscape of the near-seven-minute 'Zero Gravity'. Froese died in January 2015, shortly after its completion. "I mean obviously Tangerine Dream was also very high on my list for this project, this story of electronic music," says Jarre. "As we know, lots of people in America think that electronic music started with Avicii and it's not exactly the truth [laughs]. Tangerine Dream are part of the foundation of electronic music and actually, funnily enough, we started at the same time and we didn't know each other."

"Electronic music really started in those two countries, France and Germany, with Stockhausen, Pierre Schaeffer, Pierre Henri, and also in Italy, with people like Russolo and the Art Of Noises. So it's really a continental European saga, the beginning of electronic music. And it's probably due to the fact electronic music is coming from the tradition of classical music — long pieces, instrumental — which was not at all in the American way of thinking, with jazz and blues."

Jarre has in the past talked about how he feels that he and the German electronic music pioneers of the 1970s

Soft Machines

Perhaps surprisingly, given the range of vintage synthesizers at his disposal, Jean-Michel Jarre also uses soft synths — unlike many other electronic musicians, who can be sniffy about them. "Oh yes, I use a lot," he enthuses. "I love to use Native Instruments, especially the recent ones like the Kontour and Rounds and FM8. Monark is a very good one. Actually the Monark is closer to the old Minimoog than the Voyager for me. I really love this plug-in. Also, a lot of the Hollow Sun plug-ins, and Omnisphere... I love Eric Persing's work, I think he's brilliant."

"This project is actually quite balanced between very modern digital plug-ins and old analogue synthesizers, going from the Theremin to the Animoog or Omnisphere or whatever. I think Omnisphere is really one of the best synths these days. I'm not making differences now between using Omnisphere or the ARP 2600. It's different instruments depending on what you want. It took a long

time for plug-ins to have the same kind of warmth, but now we are getting there. When you have instruments such as the Monark or the Rounds or Kontour, you have things which you can't do with analogue instruments. The Animoog is the most interesting and creative synth that Moog have done for decades. Because it's something totally different from analogues. It's not a Minimoog, it's something else."

While the revival in the use of vintage analogue synthesizers is of course widespread, Jarre accepts that he's perhaps unusual in still wanting to use the Fairlight CMI in a time when sampling is so much more sophisticated. "This 8-bit [sound] and limitations creates something which these days is very poetic, very unique," he states. "Suddenly you play with a Fairlight or an old [Emu] Emulator II and it has a kind of instant style. It's like using a Clavinet or something that has a unique flavour."



The Fairlight CMI, says Jarre, still has "instant style".

had very different approaches, Tangerine Dream and Kraftwerk being much more about precise repetition, while he was more influenced by Ravel and Debussy and exploring constantly evolving sequences. He wanted 'Zero Gravity' to be a melding of the two different styles.

"I was really interested by the pure electronic sound of Tangerine Dream, not the kind of prog-rock type of things they did later on with guitars and saxophone and drums. I really wanted the pure electronic sounds like *Phaedra* and *Rubycon* and *Ricochet*. I had in my mind the idea that most of the time, Tangerine Dream pieces used to be more or less on the same chord or two chords. I wanted to have something that could be exactly the kind of things we like — hypnotic,

haunting sequences — but with subtle constant changes all along the piece, in terms of modulation but also in terms of moods.

"I really worked a lot before meeting with Edgar. I took the train to Vienna, then I took a car to his place. We spent a whole day in his studio and it was the first time that we really met. He was using a lot of analogue gear and also some polyphonic emulations of analogue synthesizers. They were quite Moog people, but I was more of an ARP guy when I started."

"We worked together and then they worked on their own because the whole band was involved, and then when they sent the final result to me, I didn't change anything. I thought it was really perfect and then I just mixed it and that was it."



Two quirky analogue synths separated by 40 years: Jarre's EMS VCS3 (left) and Dewanatron Swarmatron (right).

It's funny because I called this track 'Zero Gravity' and he sent me something very nice saying that it's a perfect title for this project, because he was feeling actually kind of weightlessness and all that. It was really a few weeks before he passed away. And I must say that for me obviously this track is very symbolic, very important because it's going to be the last track that Tangerine Dream ever did with the soul of it, with Edgar."

Punk Attitude

While the majority of the collaborations involved creating entire tracks, some of the guests, such as Little Boots and Pete Townshend, appear only as singers

— though the latter adds his trademark windmilling power chords to 'Travelator Part 2', where he also provides a very punky vocal. "He listened to the music I'd done," Jarre recalls, "and he said, 'Wow, I really like it, I'm going to sing on it and add guitar riffs.' Pete gave me so much on this project. I mean, the anger, the kind of punk approach he has, is actually intact. When we were in the studio, it was like an 18-year-old kid, giving so much to the vocals. Pete amongst the collaborators is probably the one who's the most aware of analogue vintage gear but also plug-ins. I never saw so many iLoks as I did in his studio. I was really impressed.

"Little Boots is somebody I really love.

I discovered that this young English girl was using the laser harp. I said, 'Wow', and then I discovered that she was a great electronic musician, and that we had a lot in common. We met in London and I had an idea of having this mad rockabilly type of electronic approach. And then she sang on it and I love what she did, but I didn't like what I did. And then I decided to change entirely the structure of the song, and it went into more crazy pure electronic and more downtempo. And I must say I love this track, it's the most electro pop."

Crazy Mastering

Mixing for the first instalment of *Electronica* was done in Paris and at Paramount Recording in Los Angeles.

Even after all these years, Jarre says that mixing is still a tricky part of his creative process. "I was mixing for the past two days and then I realised that it was totally wrong," he laughs. "So, you never know. I was quite confident and it doesn't work."

Jarre actually spent six weeks mastering the album at his studio to gain more control over carving out frequencies. "I think it's crazy actually to do a mastering from a stereo stem these days," he reasons. "If you think there is too much bass, suddenly you are going to change the low frequency on the whole mix, when probably it's just one track that needs that adjustment. I wanted to get the mastering directly from the

session. And then I could change whatever we needed to change on the track, if we were having a problem."

Come April, the second part of *Electronica* will appear, featuring a completely different cast of collaborators including David Lynch, Cyndi Lauper, Gary Numan, Yello, Hans Zimmer, Julia Holter, Jeff Mills, Sebastien Tellier and the Orb. "It's a very exciting project, going through the whole landscape of electronic music," Jarre says. "It's basically covering four generations of artists linked to the electronic scene." ■■■



Jean-Michel Jarre says that he was more of an ARP than a Moog devotee in his early days, and with instruments such as this ARP 2500 modular synth available, who can blame him?

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