

TECHNOLOGY | SYNTHESIZERS.COM

# SOUND OF MUSIC



SARAH A. MILLER/STAFF

**TYLER RESIDENT** Roger Arrick (above), of Synthesizers.com, stands with a newly finished modular synthesizer at his business on Dec. 16. Arrick became a self-taught synthesizer designer in 1998. "It was something I was always interested in," he said. Top right, Roger Arrick starting designing modular synthesizers, such as this one pictured at his business, in 1998. Middle right, Adam Risley, an employee for Synthesizers.com, tests out modules at the Tyler business. Bottom right, Roger Arrick of Synthesizer.com walks past a wall of modules at his business Dec. 16.



## Tyler business making analog synthesizers

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Technologies come and go. The evolution of listening to recorded music from vinyl records, eight-track tapes, cassettes, CDs and the iPod are an indication. The same goes for instruments that have created sound over the centuries.

Sometimes a technology reemerges because of its nostalgic value or because its successors can't recreate its uniqueness.

Synthesizers.com owner and operator Roger Arrick, 52, of Tyler, has carved out a market in the world of sound by recreating a modern-day version of a machine that changed the way musical sound is produced — the analog synthesizer.

Synthesizer pioneer Robert Moog created the first commercially viable modular analog synthesizer system in the early 1960s.

Hundreds of bands — from the Beatles (for "Abbey Road," one of the first times a Moog was used in studio recording) and Pink Floyd to Nine Inch Nails — used Moog units to create signature sounds over the past five decades.

Digital technology and synthesizers lessened demand for analog units in the 1980s because they were more portable, produced a cleaner, more consistent sound and were much less expensive than their predecessors.

But there has been a reemergence in the demand for analog units' distinct sound and creative capabilities, and Synthesizers.com has emerged as a top producer of analog units globally.

Moog synthesizers, like early computers, were bulky and costly. They cost as much as a car in their heyday. Today, an original Moog unit can cost more than \$100,000.

Analog synthesizers work like early



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**THE SYNTHESIZER.COM TEAM** includes: Jacob Reich, Justin Wall, Jeff Wright, Derek Crow, Roger Arrick, James Allen, Adam Risley and David Gober. Roger Arrick starting designing modular synthesizers in 1998. Bands use the analog devices to create musical sounds and sound effects.

phone switchboards, where operators made each connection manually.

Hardware starts with phone jacks and patch panels, which make the connections between various effects similar to pedals used to change electric guitar sounds, such as modulation, which combines multiple audio signals to create unusual tonal sounds.

By combining numerous effects and patching from one module to another, the operator can manipulate the sound to their preference.

"Everyone knows what a synthesizer is. To most people, the analog synthesizer looks like a wall of knobs and cables," Arrick said. "But it gets to be like a dashboard in a car after getting used to it."

Unlike digital synthesizers, analog units can be temperamental, Arrick said. Moog synthesizers were notorious for getting out of tune when they became too hot, he said.

But Synthesizers.com uses new electronic

designs and modern components along with the Moog's physical form to improve performance, Arrick said.

Arrick said analog synthesizers are a niche market supported by professional and amateur sound aficionados. His units have been shipped all over the globe. His customers range from platinum-selling artists, including electronic music group M83, to sound effects designers for films and amateur musicians who enjoy playing with sound.

"I don't even know who buys a lot of our synthesizers. Most of the time we get orders and don't know where they are going," he said. "There are some big names — Dream Theater, LCD Sound System and M83 — but most are serious amateur musicians."

About half of Synthesizers.com's customers order complete units, while the other half orders individual modules.

Arrick began his immersion into technology by taking apart and rebuilding

radios as a child. He started his first business in the 1970s during the early emergence of computers and moved to robotics in the 1980s. Synthesizers have since emerged as the most profitable portion of his businesses.

Standard and custom Synthesizers.com units are built by hand in Arrick's 2,500-square-foot shop. He tests each synthesizer personally. Depending on orders, Arrick and his 10 employees produce anywhere from one unit a week to one a day, he said.

Longtime Tyler producer and owner of Robin Hood Studios, Robin Hood Brians, was surprised and elated to hear analog synthesizers were being made in Tyler. He said Moog pioneered the way sound was used in music and that instrument companies continue to try and recreate its sound with digital synthesizers.

Its ability to allow the operator to "bend" and "manipulate" sound frequencies and combine sounds ushered in a new era of musical production and continues to allow musicians to create imaginative sounds.

"It was a way to go in and become God of sound," he said. "The Moog synthesizer was an instrument that the people who fell in love with it were crazy about it."

Musicians tested and continue to test the bounds of sound by experimenting with analog synthesizers, Brians said.

Arrick called experimentation that might reap an appealing sound as "happy accidents," but students of the instrument know how to use his units to generate what they hear in their minds. He's more partial to classic rock sound, he said, and is a drummer at heart, but Arrick appreciates being part of the resurgence in an old-school way to create new music.