

Dr. Ulrich Dieter Einbrodt

Hidden Behind His Instruments or Acting as Entertaining Frontman: Where is the Keyboarder?

As drummers are always confined to sit and play behind their toms and cymbals, guitar players are used to carry their instruments around and move like they feel, but singers are the most free of all. They have a small, light device, easy to handle, easy to carry that brings their voices to the world. They can swing it around or put it back to rest on a stand, it's always there. Even rock 'n' roll bass players in the time of the double bass felt free to turn their instrument around, sit and lean on it, one should think of Bill Haley's Band The Comets.

But what about the keyboarder? During rock and pop history, his instrument changed from a big instrument – the grand piano – over the heavy Hammond organ to smaller synthesizers. Weird enough, even these days he can choose what types of keyboard he likes to play or he can play several ones at the same time.

Because of innovations in technology, keyboarders are more dependent on new sounds of their instrument than other musicians, unless they rely on the most used and asked sounds throughout keyboard history – the piano sound and the sound of the Hammond organ.

The different keyboards with their individual sounds stand for a specific musical style – partly combined with the time the instruments were developed. In short, the piano is the instrument of rock 'n' roll, the electronic organ represents the time of beat and the Hammond organ the rock branch, the synthesizers brought new sounds for the pop-oriented styles since the 80's but are now able to produce or imitate whatever instrumental sound is needed.

It should not be forgotten that many electro-mechanical keyboards shaped and coloured the musical world with their distinctive sounds: the Fender Rhodes, the Vox organ, the string ensembles and the Moog synthesizers.

But still, and disregarding the synthesizers, a good grand piano is to a keyboarder what a Gibson Les Paul, built in 1958, is to a guitar player, and the same feeling arises in front of an old Hammond organ.

This is due partly to the effect that the keys of a piano are weighted and therefore give a different feeling, which is preferred by most players. It also offers a kind of a surround or three-dimensional effect as its long strings are spread over the huge sound board and tend to fill a room completely.

How do keyboarders arrange their performance on stage? The piano was designed to be played while sitting in front of it, this applies also to modern keyboards, as playing is more relaxed. For presentation, it is desirable to have the player standing, so that the audience can see him or her. So how did or do

famous keyboarders and piano players decide to perform, which instrument of the big keyboard family fits best for their musical style and/or way of presentation and the main questions are: Where is the keyboarders' place on stage? Can he be seen by the audience or is he encircled by his instruments? Can he move or is he fixed to one spot? Can he see the audience or the rest of the band? The article wants to bring light to these questions with the help of several keyboard artists and their typical way of handling these questions.

Two of these artists started in the mid 50's during the peak of Rock 'n' Roll: Little Richard and Jerry Lee Lewis. Though the Hammond Organ existed, the real Rock 'n' Roll keyboard was the piano. The hammond being too legato and soft, the piano gave rhythm with the percussive playing style of its musicians. Most loved was the big grand piano, standing in front of the stage, giving the players a distinctive area to show their importance.

Such was the case with Little Richard, who played, sang and danced around his instrument. A famous picture from a Rock 'n' Roll movie showing him with one leg standing, the other on top of the grand piano, and still playing, the band meanwhile acting about five meters behind him.¹

Jerry Lee Lewis can be seen in a performance as guest of the Little Richard Show, which is interesting, as Richard was his keyboard and entertaining „rival“. Maybe that was why he dared to give just a bit more. Playing his „Whole lotta shakin goin' on“, he starts rather conventionally, playing and singing, then, throwing his jacket off, he climbed the grand piano and did the rest of the song on top of it, still singing and shaking legs. All the time he and his instrument were surrounded by his fanatic audience, who leaned on the piano, waved hands and dared to touch Lewis. And still meanwhile, the band was playing, hardly to be heard and still less to be seen.²

No doubt, Richard and Lewis were entertaining frontmen with their instrument playing an important role in supporting them during their performance, but both were singers and without this fact they would never have been able to act in front and center of the stage. These two are best described as keyboard and vocal superstars with backing band, their role of keyboard playing and singing frontmen is carried on – in a more pop oriented style – with, for instance, Elton John³ or Tori Amos.⁴

In the 60's, the british beat bands came to fame. The usual line up was four or five musicians, i.e. one or two guitars, singer, bass player, drummer. In many cases the guitar players were the singers, too. The only one fixed to his instrument was the drummer, who nearly almost found his place in the middle of the stage, a little backwards. When keyboarders joined, they had to share the backline with the drummers, so both were spread a bit to the left or right, while guitars and singer kept their front line places.

The Animals, with Alan Price at his Vox Continental in 1964, gave an example of this line up. Price was sitting behind his keyboard in the backline

left, facing the audience, who might see him in case the front musicians leave space enough.⁵ That is why many keyboarders started to play while standing, to get their share of the audience's admiration. As some people like to watch the finger action of their stars, which is easily to be observed by guitar players, some keyboard manufacturers invented the curious possibility to tip the instrument over a bit to the direction of the audience so that they could see the hands of the keyboarder.⁶

This was not the trouble of the keyboarder of the Remo Four at a performance at Beat-Club in the mid 60's.⁷ He was sitting at his electronic organ, which was placed middle stage, fronting the audience and having his fellow musicians left and right of him in the same line. With no second guitar player, the band had space enough to arrange the following front line, from left to right: Drums, keyboards, guitar and bass.

If space was available keyboarders looked for another place on stage. This new place became urgently necessary with the change to the bigger Hammond Organ, which needed more place and the question of how and where to put the instrument was of most importance for a keyboarder's performance.

As the keyboard is in front of the player he has to decide on his line of sight towards the rest of the band or the audience, i.e. in which angle to the stage he has to put up his instrument. Throughout rock keyboard history, several angles and placing positions have developed, the most used are the two where the keyboard is set far left or right on stage, more or less in line with the front musicians.

A typical left-stager was Jon Lord of Deep Purple,⁸ who, in his early days, relied only on his Hammond. Facing the band but his instrument set to a right angle to the stage, just about a quarter of the audience could see his finger action, he started to introduce some kind of effects that all could see, the most famous was to shove his Hammond back and forth so that it nearly tipped over, meanwhile the built in reverb-spring was shattering.

Nowadays Jon Lord moved to the center of the stage, a bit in the background, but raised high on a platform so everyone can see him, no matter if he is standing or not.⁹

A typical right stager was Ken Hensley of Uriah Heep, also with just a Hammond.¹⁰ Interestingly enough, both Lord and Hensley were placed opposing their guitar players on the other side, forming a visual contrast to the musical one.

A comparable problem of angle to the stage and line of sight arose for those players who featured the upright piano. In addition, this instrument is so high you cannot look over it while sitting. Because of its size, the upright piano found its place also at the utmost left or right end of the stage with the piano in right angle to the stage. The piano player of the British beat band

Gerry & The Pacemakers therefore was given the right end of stage in a performance at Beat-Club back in the mid 60's.¹¹ He sat at his instrument and that was the only thing he could normally see, for, awkwardly enough, the rest of the band was behind him. If he looked right, he was able to see a part of the audience; if he managed to look over his instrument, he could see the studio wall. Apart from these facts, he looked rather happy and did a good job playing the rock 'n' roll-oriented „Dizzy Miss Lizzy“. Compared to the rest of the electrified band or the drums, the piano is a relatively soft sounding instrument, so the front of it was taken off to make it louder and to give more input to the microphone; in addition, the action of the hammers could be seen, which, as a visual effect, might have made an impression upon the audience.

Such was the state of affairs when keyboarders used one instrument only. In the pre-midi-area and before the time when hundreds of good sounding preset sounds were installed within a synthesizer, there was only one way of increasing a keyboarder's sound spectrum: Add new instruments. The piano and the organ were therefore combined with electric pianos, string machines, early Moog synthesizers and other devices, many of them offering only a few or even just one sound, in case of the moog changing of sounds was a science of its own.

Slowly but irresistibly, keyboarders found themselves surrounded by their instruments during the 70's. A good start and example is the performance of Pink Floyd's keyboarder Rick Wright in the movie „Pink Floyd live at Pompeii“ of 1972.¹² Although it was a performance with the camera- and soundmen being the only audience, the equipment had been set up as for a live concert, with PA-System left and right, big speaker-backline the whole width behind them and the band spread as far as possible in a historical pompeian amphitheatre. Wright can be seen in the right corner of this arrangement, using three keyboards, i.e. he was sitting behind his Hammond and one other electronic keyboard when he was facing the rest of the band, and encircling him from the back there were a grand piano, his Hiwatt amplifiers and, among other speakers and devices, a Leslie- cabinet. Obviously the huge speaker backline was set up in a way so that each musician was able to hear the others, as there were no front monitors and, concerning the keyboards, several additional Leslie-speakers were to be seen behind the drummer and guitar player on the left.

Another example of the encircled keyboarder is Keith Emerson, who, with his group Emerson, Lake and Palmer, featured the use of several keyboards. Strikingly, he was often using two Hammonds, as can be seen at a Beat-Club performance in 1970/71.¹³ Both set up in right angle to stage and facing their keys, with Emerson standing in the middle, playing both of them simultaneously and in this way usually facing the audience. That was his favourite position, no matter if his equipment was left, right, or center of the

stage and he continues to act this way in the 90's.¹⁴ As many players who use two keyboards set them up in right angle for easy handling, as Jon Lord does in the 90's,¹⁵ Emerson's arrangement was, undoubtedly, for visual effect also. On top of one organ there was the manual for the Moog modular synthesizer system, which was erected as a tower, attached behind the organ. As a kind of early freedom he also used a remote slide control, which was able to produce glissando effects out of the Moog. Similar to Jon Lord of Deep Purple, Emerson filled his show with visual effects, but he attacked his Hammond to a much intenser degree. He shoved it till it really tipped over, with Emerson lying under it, still playing.¹⁶

With this kind of action Emerson, though encircled by his instruments, was and is surely a kind of an entertaining frontman. This is surely also partly due to the fact that his band consisted of three members only and that there were no guitar players.

A similar setup of instruments was used by Rick Wakeman, who enlarged his equipment by a second line of keyboards facing each other, among others a Fender Rhodes piano and a Mellotron, and backing in right angle, to close the working place, was usually a grand piano, so that Wakeman could only go out at the front.¹⁷

With more and more equipment, the place needed grew. Geoff Downes used more than ten keyboards on his first tour with the group Asia in the early 80's, he was lifted on a platform above the rest of the band in a kind of a second floor, so he had the same width of the stage that the other musicians shared, for him alone.¹⁸ A part of the equipment was surely set up because of a visual show.

That was before midi made it possible to play, or better direct several instruments from only one master-manual. Regardless of this breakthrough in technology, keyboarders like Emerson go on using their former setup of instruments, slightly and hardly visible altered - with the aim of an impressive performance. Also new was, since the mid 80's, the growing number of good sounding imitations of other keyboards (and at least from the 90's on, of all imaginable instruments); so one synthesizer allowed to give acceptable organ, electric piano and acoustic piano sounds, all in combination with its own, individual sound possibilities.

Since then, a reduction of equipment is possible, unless the reputation of the band or the keyboarder asks for a certain visual impression. Musicians like Emerson or Jon Lord might be thinkable on stage only with one Hammond, or, in certain sessions, even with a grand piano only,¹⁹ but surely not with just a small synthesizer-keyboard, no matter what sounds it would be able to produce.

A new kind of liberty, i.e. freed from the fixed position on stage, was made possible by the so-called remote keyboards, which, for example, were intensively used by Geoff Downes,²⁰ Jan Hammer²¹ and Gary Wright²² since the late 70's. Although keyboarders can move freely like guitar players with these devices, the remote keyboards have not won enough agreement among musicians up to now, maybe because most of them are controllers only and do not have tone generators of their own. So the remotes keep their place as simple add-ons for special solos and they still are seldom seen on stage.

What with the 90's? The established keyboarders go on using their old equipment, but combine it with new instruments, so Jon Lord, for instance, piled up newer, smaller Hammond organs upon his old one and put piled up Korg and Roland keyboards in right angle to add new sounds.²³ New designs of keyboard stands were meant to give a „cool“ feeling to standing players, such as the Ultimate stand that was supposed to have a futuristic design. In fact, it took not much place, could handle two keyboards and was definitely designed to stand at it. In this way it was used by Vince Clark of Depeche Mode²⁴ and many others of the so-called „Synthipop“ style who often used one, small but electronically powerful keyboard.

As a summary, the following results should be in mind:

Keyboarders can still choose their instrument that fits best to their musical style, they can use one or more of them. Once chosen, they have to decide where they want to put up their instrument(s) on the stage. Left, right or even in the center? Do they want to face the rest of the band? So the keyboard's angle to the stage determines the keyboarder's line of sight. The usual, most used setup is: far left or right on stage, facing band or audience. If there are more keyboards, they can be piled one upon the other or/and set up in an angle, usually a right one. With still more instruments, the player will be surrounded or circled in (often for a visual effect). And last, but not least and always of importance: The keyboarder can choose if he wants to play while sitting or while standing.

Some musicians do not want or need to be entertaining frontman, but usually all of them want to be seen (and heard) at least. Some kinds of musical styles rely on prerecorded keyboards or computer sequencers, like in dance floor or techno, but as the majority of pop and rock music is handmade, a real, living keyboarder will contribute a lot to a band, and his place on stage, wherever it may be, will play an important role for a group's performance.

Notes

¹ Cf. Doerschuk, Bob. Rock Piano. Jerry Lee Lewis, Fats Domino, Little Richard and Other Pioneers. in: Doerschuk, Bob. (Ed.) Rock Keyboard. New York, 1985. p. 5-6. Meant here is the Paramount Picture „Mister Rock and Roll“.

² Cf. The Golden Age of Rock 'n' Roll: Great Performances. Super Channel, 1990.

³ Cf. Krug, Thomas (Hg.) 25 Jahre Pop Musik in Wort, Bild und Ton. 1984: Die Jugend und ihre Idole. Köln, 1989. p. 77.

⁴ Cf. Piltz, Albrecht. Tori Amos Revisited. in: Keyboards 3/94, p. 46.

⁵ Cf. Carson, Barry. Keyboards. in: Paul Trynka (Ed.) Rock Hardware. London, 1996. p. 33.

⁶ Cf. Vox-Catalogue, CEI-Organs, Early 70's.

⁷ Cf. Beat-Club, Radio Bremen TV, „Rückblick 1965/66“. Repeated with new compilation 1993.

⁸ Cf. Cover of CD „Deep Purple. Made in Japan“. EMI, 1972.

⁹ Observed on an open air concert of the band in 1999, Giessen, Germany.

¹⁰ Cf. Inner Cover of LP „...Very 'eavy, ...very 'umble“. Bronze, 1970.

¹¹ Cf. Beat-Club, Radio Bremen TV, „Rückblick 1965/66“. Repeated with new compilation 1993.

¹² „Pink Floyd live at Pompeii“. VHS-Video. 80 Min. Directed by Adrian Maben. RM Productions, 1972.

¹³ Cf. Beat-Club, Radio Bremen TV, „Jahreswechsel 1970/71“. Repeated with new compilation 1993.

¹⁴ Cf. Piltz, Albrecht. Welcome Back My Friends to the Show that Never Ends: Ladies and Gentlemen... Keith Emerson. in: Keyboards 1/93, p.17.

¹⁵ Cf. Piltz, Albrecht. 25 Jahre Deep Purple: The Battle Rages on... Interview mit Jon Lord. in: Keyboards 1/94, p.17.

¹⁶ Cf. Milano, Dominic. Keith Emerson. The Triumph of Virtuosity. in: Doerschuk, Bob. (Ed.) Rock Keyboard. New York, 1985. p. 61.

¹⁷ Cf. Bacon, Tony (Ed.) Rock Hardware. The Instruments, Equipment and Technology of Rock. London, 1981. p. 94.

¹⁸ Cf. Milano, Dominic. Geoff Downes. The Dream Survives. in: Doerschuk, Bob. (Ed.) Rock Keyboard. New York, 1985. p. 75, 79.

¹⁹ As did Emerson at the Beat-Club-performance of the song „Hang on to a dream“ with the „Nice“ back in 1969. Cf. Beat-Club, Radio Bremen TV, „Herbst 1969“. Excerpts of Autumn 1969, Repeated with new compilation 1993.

²⁰ Cf. Milano, Dominic. Geoff Downes. The Dream Survives. in: Doerschuk, Bob. (Ed.) Rock Keyboard. New York, 1985. p. 75, 81.

²¹ Cf. Piltz, Albrecht. Jan Hammer. Ein Farmer im Fernsehland. in: Keyboards 6/1989, p. 18.

²² Cf. Doerschuk, Bob. Multi-Keyboard and Mega Rock. Advent of the New Romantics. in: Doerschuk, Bob. (Ed.) Rock Keyboard. New York, 1985. p. 103f. and: Milano, Dominic. Gary Wright. The View from Center Stage. in: Doerschuk, Bob. (Ed.) Rock Keyboard. New York, 1985. p. 112, 115.

²³ Cf. Piltz, Albrecht. 25 Jahre Deep Purple: The Battle Rages on... Interview mit Jon Lord. in: Keyboards 1/94, p.17.

²⁴ Cf. Perna, Alan di. Vince Clarke. in: Keyboards 4/1990. p. 19.