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CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

Artificial, With a Human Touch

By Jon Pareles

April 28, 2014

ASHEVILLE, N.C. — Geekiness reigned, proudly and openly, at Moogfest 2014, the largest iteration yet of a festival created by Moog Music, which makes all of its synthesizers and other equipment by hand at a small factory here in downtown Asheville.

It was a five-day festival devoted to the interaction of the human and the synthetic, the electronic and the organic. How geeky was it? Some festivalgoers wandered the streets of Asheville, wearing headset brainwave sensors that were paired with iPhones. Through their earbuds, the phones played music guided by those brainwaves from an app, Conductar, that also used location data to display a virtual-reality rendering of the streetscape.

The festival connected current music to the legacy of strange sounds and engineering breakthroughs like those made by Robert Moog, the inventor of the Moog synthesizer, who settled in Asheville in 1978 and died in 2005. Half a century after Moog hooked up the voltage-controlled oscillators that drive analog synthesizers, Moogfest mixed the retro and the futuristic, reveling in artificial sounds that could still be tweaked further.

Moogfest, which ran from last Wednesday through Sunday, was an outlier among the music festivals this spring and summer, booking many musicians who aren't working the circuit from Coachella to Bonnaroo to Governors Ball. It offered a broad sonic spectrum, from neat pop hits to noise experiments, in an outpouring of what music technology can do best: drones, repetitions, dense layerings and happily unnatural tones and timbres.

There were more than 100 club and concert performances by musicians and D.J.s featuring electronic sounds, made with or without Moog equipment. The lineup included arena shows by Kraftwerk (who performed three sets with 3-D video for

audiences wearing polarized glasses), M.I.A. and the Pet Shop Boys. It also offered free outdoor dance parties with disc jockeys including Giorgio Moroder, who brought electronics to dance music with his productions for Donna Summer. There were about 7,000 ticketholders and an estimated 25,000 people attending the free events.

Moogfest also included lectures and panels with futurologists, musicians, artists involved with technology and electronic-instrument pioneers. Claire L. Evans, a science journalist and the singer of the band Yacht, invited listeners to consider the kind of music that might be made by true artificial intelligence: a "symphony of pure data" that might be inaudible or destructive to the human brain.

Instrument makers noted a technological paradox; although electronic music can now be made by software — even with a smartphone app — many musicians have found themselves missing the physicality of hardware instruments, with knobs and sliders and keyboards. Roger Linn, whose LinnDrum put the beat in many 1980s hits, demonstrated new controllers that are sensitive to more parameters than keyboards, aiming to restore virtuosity and a human touch to electronic music.

On three afternoons, the festival presented four-hour "durational performances": leisurely, improvisational explorations — sometimes meditative, sometimes propulsive and bristling — by Dan Deacon (whose gear included an upright piano that mysteriously played itself); Gavin Russom from LCD Soundsystem; and the duo of Bradford Cox from Deerhunter and Nick Zinner from the Yeah Yeah Yeahs.

While part of the festival looked forward, another part looked back. Moog Music is riding a resurgence of interest in analog synthesizer sounds, which are more complex and unpredictable — and often rawer — than the smoother digital tones that became fashionable in the 1980s.

The progressive-rock keyboardist Keith Emerson, who headlined the first Moogfest in 2004 when it was held at a club in New York City, returned for a theater-size show featuring the vintage customized Moog he has been playing since 1969: an assembly of modules that is the size of a refrigerator. At some acme of geekiness, Moog Music announced that it has now painstakingly copied the whole thing, down to its circuits, for sale in a limited edition. Moog engineers had to use 3-D printing technology to replicate some small parts, like switches, that are no longer commercially manufactured.

There was a disco streak at Moogfest: not just with Mr. Moroder but with Chic, whose arena show defied the prevalence of machine-made music. Its leader, the guitarist, songwriter and producer Nile Rodgers, had done an onstage interview earlier in the day, demonstrating the abstruse jazz chords that are tucked into Chic songs like “I Want Your Love” and “Le Freak.” Onstage, as he led the band through Chic’s disco-era hits and the songs he went on to write for Diana Ross, Madonna and David Bowie, his endlessly inventive rhythm-guitar syncopations were the all-natural mainspring of the music.

But some of Moogfest’s best music was a world away from pop, exploiting the flexibility and tirelessness of electronics and often bolstered by eye-popping video. Flying Lotus repeatedly whipsawed between lush chords and brutal beats with deep basslines. Holly Herndon layered her voice into airy vocal harmonies that sailed above jagged, tricky percussion.

Blondes, a duo, started with quiet, almost subliminal dance beats and added layer upon layer of riffs and rhythms until a seated theater audience was up and dancing. Teengirl Fantasy encoded mixed emotions into its electronic music, a calibrated mesh of brooding minor chords and perky, quickly mutating beats. The D.J. Green Velvet served up techno as a stark, effective slam that was usually nothing but a beat. And the English band Factory Floor mixed the human and the electronic, with fast, relentless beats matched and elaborated by a very hardworking drummer, in a set that built toward an ominous frenzy.

One of the most forward-looking things I heard at Moogfest was 50 years old. Herbert Deutsch, a composer who collaborated in the invention of the first Moog synthesizers, played a tape recording that Moog had sent him in 1964. It was a demonstration, using familiar melodies, of the swooping, unruly, proudly artificial sounds that Mr. Moog had just created with the synthesizer prototype that he was calling “the Abominatron.” In comments between the tunes, he asked Mr. Deutsch “what you think the potential of a contraption like this is.”

He added, “It doesn’t sound like much when I play it. Maybe someone with more musicianship and imagination can get some good things out of it.”

He was right about that.

A version of this article appears in print on April 29, 2014, Section C, Page 1 of the New York edition with the headline: Artificial, With a Human Touch