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No Presets Allowed

Hans Zimmer

by [Ralph Denyer \(/search/a/Ralph+Denyer\)](/search/a/Ralph+Denyer)

Hans Zimmer is the complete antithesis of the serious German synthesist - he smiles a lot for a start! As co-founder of Lillie Yard studio and the proud owner of a surviving Moog Series 8 modular synth, his approach to sound synthesis is a refreshingly traditional one eschewing the very thought of ever using an unmodified factory preset on any of his work! Ralph Denyer explains why.

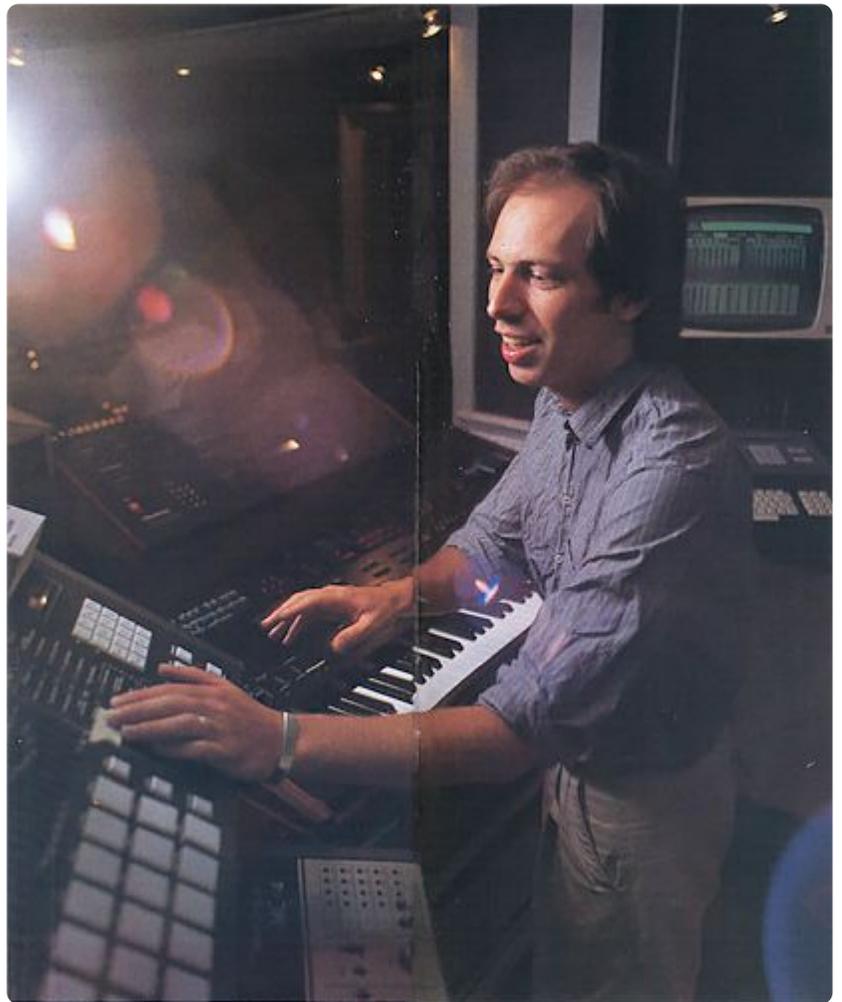
Hans Zimmer and Stanley Myers may initially seem an unlikely musical combination but after all, unlike poles do attract. Hans is one of those people who have been working away in the field of electronic music for years, while choosing to maintain a relatively low profile. It was, in fact, towards the end of the second day of the interview that he almost reluctantly mentioned that he was a Buggie during the nine month lifespan of the group that produced *Video Killed The Radio Star*. He slogged around in groups a bit before deciding that the inside of a bandwagon was not quite the ideal cultural environment in which to nurture and exploit any talents he might have. Conversely, he realised that working as a session player in recording studios afforded him the opportunity to play music, constantly meet new people and face new musical challenges. And he seems to be as at home in the recording studio as an orchid in a hothouse.

Myers gained perhaps most recognition beyond that of serious music circles and the music industry when his composition *Cavatina* - in the adroit hands of the guitar-playing John Williams - reached millions as the theme for the film *The Deerhunter*.

Hans is still quite in awe of Myers' musical talents and mutual respect seems to be a vital ingredient in their working relationship. They met on the same recording sessions and Hans was close to ecstatic when they teamed up to work together. Initially they decided to buy a Fairlight CMI and record an album together. The

Fairlight spawned Lillie Yard recording studio in which they are partners and have now been operating for two years or so. The album was never completed but they have subsequently written and recorded masses of music for films, television and commercials. Their credits include the music for *My Beautiful Laundrette*, *Moonlighting*, *Eureka!*, *Insignificance*, *Dream Child* (recorded at Lillie Yard), *The Lightship* and the TV series *Widows*.

During the week in which we planned to fit in an interview, one session led to another for Hans with the net result that the first free time he had to meet was at 10am on the Sunday morning at Lillie Yard studio. That withstanding, as soon as we were under way and Hans had committed himself, he gave me lots of his time and was happy for me to check out the sessions going on at the studio. On the Sunday afternoon it was a foray into production for Hans, and on the Monday the studio was hired out for a Bucks Fizz 12-inch remix, for which incidentally, a twin-pack of Sony 24-track digital recorders were hired in.



Hans was very accessible and sees humour in just about everything, including stereotyping. "Being German," he said with a smile, "naturally I had to be a synthesizer player. I couldn't be a guitarist or anything like that." And during the photo session later he asked, "Shall I do my serious German synthesist expression now?"

BEGINNINGS

So the initial album with Stanley was never released?

"No, but it was a great way of getting to know each other. We are so different. Stanley comes from a classical background, I come from a bluffing background. My musical education was two weeks of piano lessons and working with a lot of people who knew what they were doing, hanging around and watching them. While Stanley, he knows his notes, put it that way. He's the most untechnical person I know. He still doesn't know where the on/off switch is on the Fairlight."

"When we do films together we both write the music. I'm always late getting to the studio so I come in and usually Stanley's already gone off somewhere, and left me this backing track. I just overdub something that I

feel could add to what's there. And we're not precious about anything we do either. That doesn't mean we don't argue a lot. I mean, Stanley is quite forthright in telling me that what I've done is a load of shit and vice versa. But operating like this, we usually come up with something good. For film music, it is in many ways an advantage to have two composers on the job because usually in a film you have an antagonist and a good guy. And very often we divide the characters up: 'You do the good guy and I'll do the bad guy.' It helps emphasise the different emotions of the film."

LILLIE YARD

The studio is located literally in the shadow of Earls Court exhibition hall. Though called Lillie Yard, the small cul-de-sac has more of the atmosphere of a mews and the studio is quite isolated from the bustle of the city. Walk in through the ground floor entrance and to the right through sliding glass doors you'll find the studio control room. Turn left through similar doors and you are in a large room now being utilised for live work but formerly rented out to a photographer who has since moved on.

On the days I was there, I was confronted by entrails of Moog synthesizer as Hans' colossal modular Series 8 was undergoing serious surgery. The control room houses an extensive range of synths and effects as well as the recording equipment and usually the modular Moog occupies a complete wall.

There's a booth for live instruments, vocals and sampling, with a composing and programming suite upstairs containing a duplicate set of all the synths in the studio. Hans takes up the story.

"All we did to start with was build a control room stacked full of synthesizers because we had the Fairlight and all we then needed was a booth to do vocals and sampling. Everything else was pretty much done by machines. If I wanted to use a big orchestra or something, I would go some place where they are good at recording big orchestras - like Air, CTS or Abbey Road studios."

"All I wanted here was a control room to do synthesizer overdubs. At the time it seemed to me, when we were working on an album as opposed to a film, that we would spend a week in the studio putting down rhythm tracks and then for three months nobody would go near the studio because everything else would be done in the control room. So it seemed crazy to just have a room lying empty. In those days - that was a couple of years ago - everybody wanted to do everything on synthesizers. Now it's turning round a bit and people are saying: 'Hey, real people playing is actually quite good fun,' provided you can find an engineer who knows how to record a real drum kit!"

"There was a time when people thought it much cheaper and quicker to use synthesizers. It's not anymore. People spend forever programming sounds."

I suggested to Hans that the amount of time spent searching for new sounds has generally increased simply because the standards have been set so high over the past five or so years. So it must take longer to create sounds that are both better and different.

"It's easy to do things that are different. It's hard to do them *better*. The best Fairlight programmer in England must be **Steve** Rance and I love his attitude to all this. He won't use any of the preset sounds and he refuses to record a preset on a DX7. For my own projects, certainly I'll never use one of the presets. You have to start from scratch, make a new sound that fits the piece of music as opposed to something that fits another piece of music, that you stole."

So as standard policy, Hans Zimmer never uses a preset?

"No, not really. I don't really have any finished programs in my synthesizers, I just have the neutral program I go from and I set up each sound individually as it comes along, because it will never be right just calling up a preset. It'll never be as perfect as if you tweaked it and actually spent a bit of time on it, because synthesizers are not like acoustic instruments."

"If you get a violinist in, it's always a violin sound but the way he plays will change the sound drastically from one track to another because he generates the sound himself with his fingers and his bow. But with a synthesizer, if you go to the string patch, it doesn't give a shit if it's a Break Dance track or some moody acoustic thing. Do you know what I mean? It'll sound the same and it won't be right. That, in a way, is why I never bother to use presets."

"We do have a really large library of Fairlight samples here - I never throw anything away. They're stored somewhere and if other people want to use them, fine. But usually what happens is you load a sound in and immediately start changing it to adapt to what you are working on at the moment, and the mood you're in at the moment. So for me there isn't such a thing as a great sound, which is why we keep such a variety of synthesizers, because if you stick a cheap Roland SH101 or something against a track full of Fairlights, it'll sound great because it's a different tonal colour."

RE-QUESTED MONITORING

Hans Zimmer has quite a disarming personality and as we spoke it became apparent that he knows just about everyone in the recording industry, from George Martin down. Hans says his working relationships are usually based on personal empathy, as was the case with Roger Quested who supplied the Quested Dome studio monitoring system at Lillie Yard. Hans acknowledges his assistance with lots of advice and help with the studio and acoustics.

"There are lots of monitors that are great and it's very much down to personal taste. The reason I went with Roger Quested was again, I thought he was a nice guy. We had a great time chatting and we seemed to have similar ideas. The other thing is that Roger is into experimenting - or certainly was with us because he lives just down the road - and he wanted to try out a new type of monitor. The Quested monitors we have are quad-amped. They also have an extra 18-inch driver added just for the extra bass-end, which Roger hadn't done anywhere else before."

Hans says that good bass-end monitoring is particularly critical for film work.

"The wonderful thing about film work is that you're not worried about how it will sound on a transistor radio.

You just want it to sound really good in a big cinema on really big speakers. Roger Quested built this monitor system that is great for doing records and you can hear all the faults that happen at the low end. For instance, I've got one of the old Moog modular synthesizers which occasionally does put out a lot of bass-end stuff around 25Hz, and you can actually hear it. Well no, you can't hear it, rather you can *feel* it. When the fillings are shaking out of your teeth, you know it's time to switch the mixing desk's high-pass filter on!"

"We went for the DDA mixing desk because with all the technology we're plugging into it, in many ways there's such a degradation in sound already - all the toys, all the VCAs, transformers and what have you - we went for the DDA because the audio was designed with digital in mind. It's the cleanest desk around. I mean, spec-wise it's untouchable at the moment as far as audio performance is concerned and DDA were very helpful with all the mods I wanted. I looked at their standard desk and I knew we were already out of patchbay, so they added another one for us. They also added a second line input to the channels so that all the synthesizers are normalised to the desk and when I come in in the morning, I don't have to patch anything in. You just GO! And if you want to use the channel line input for something else, you just flip a switch."



Hans Zimmer with one of the few remaining examples of the Moog Series 8 modular synthesizer.

"Because a lot of the stuff we do here is synthesized and synthesizers just sound dead without the right ambience, we've gone pretty crazy on digital reverbs. I can't recall exactly but I think we've got around eight digital reverbs at the moment, four or five harmonisers, six DDLs, masses of compressors, phasers and flangers - you name it. Let's face it, outboard gear is pretty inexpensive these days and the more you can lay your hands on the better because each piece of equipment has its own sound and you never know when it will come in handy."

"I still like mixing very cheap effects with very expensive effects. My favourite graphic equalisers have always been some very cheap Roland units which sound great. I'm sure they'll have a horrendous spec if you looked at them through any analysing equipment, but they sound good to me. Very often it's the chain of equipment you use anyway, not a piece of equipment by itself. For example, if we play a Fairlight bass drum into a Roland graphic, into a DDA desk and onto a Studer tape machine, I know we can get a good sound. It's just a matter of finding out what each device can do, by driving it to its limit and then seeing what it's not so good at - which category it fits into with other pieces of equipment."

In the interests of maximum ease of use and flexibility, Hans says they really went over the top with the wiring in the studio - some six miles of cable were used. Also, anticipating the necessity for virtually continuous upgrading of equipment, they have made the wiring looms as accessible as possible. They've used some unexpected materials too. Hans finds the incongruity of using plastic drainpipes and Hoover corrugated tubing to house wiring looms quite amusing. But their practicality is undeniable: cables are kept tidy and protected while at the same time they can be got at almost instantly."

THE FAIRLIGHT MENTALITY

"I bought a Fairlight instead of a Synclavier because when you buy something like this you are really buying the mentality of the people who designed it. And the guys at Fairlight (Australia) always seem to me to have the attitude that it doesn't matter how something looks on the oscilloscope, if it sounds OK, it is OK. Whereas the guys from Synclavier - who are very much university related - always seem to come up with the great science behind their instrument. I'm always more interested in how something sounds and rarely in what the science behind it is."

"The Fairlight is very dodgy. There are certain things it can do very well and certain things it can't do at all. But it lets you get in there and mess about very quickly. People should stop complaining about the crunchiness of the Fairlight Series II sound. It's not bad quality, it just has a sound of its own, which I find very attractive. It's so faulty, it's nearly human."

The reedy pipe sound is absolutely entrancing.

"Oh, you mean ARR1, the most over-used sound in the world. That started life as a voice actually, it's one of the original Fairlight factory presets. So is the big orchestral chord. That's from Stravinski's Firebird Suite I think. That shows you how wonderfully conservative the music business is: seven years on and the original

presets are still the most famous Fairlight sounds!"

"The major problem with the Fairlight is that it makes it so easy to turn out real drivel because all you have to do is load a big orchestra sample into it and it knocks your socks off! You're so impressed by such a massive sound coming out of such a little machine that you just stop trying to write anything decent. Why bother? All this crap about THE SOUND IS SO GREAT and working forever on the sound. I mean, very few people bother to listen to what they're writing anymore. I think it's coming back though. I think people are fed up with THE GREAT SOUND and are actually looking more at the songs."

MOOG SERIES 8

Hans Zimmer's famous Moog synthesizer is in fact more than just a conversation piece and he has a great deal to say in favour of not only the sound quality of older analogue synthesizers but also in the way that such instruments are far more accessible to the user. Historically, Hans acquired his Moog from Chris Franke of Tangerine Dream during a visit to Berlin. Previously Hans had been using another well-known manufacturer's near facsimile of the Moog.

"It was the MicroComposer more than anything else that initially made the Series 8 such an attractive proposition, the other obvious but less practical alternative being eight MiniMoogs! So a big Moog was ideal and it sounded good. It still sounds better than anything else around. I have a theory that every year the manufacturers make synthesizers that sound slightly less good but have more functions. But it's really quite peculiar that if you set up one sound on any of the synthesizers around at the moment and you set up the same sound on the Moog - particularly bass sounds - the Moog just has so much more punch and quality. And that's why it's still around. It's sort of MIDI'd up too."

"The other great thing about it, compared to a modern day synthesizer, is that you always know where you are. People always think that these big modular synths are very complicated, when actually they are far less complicated than a DX7 because all you do is look at where the patch lead is going from one module to the other and you know what's happening. The general thing about it also is that it's great for experimenting. By that I don't mean that I sit around and experiment, but very often things go wrong. By accident you put a plug into the wrong hole and something wonderful happens - or not."

FINDING A NICHE

Hans has a great store of hilarious stories from his impetuous youth when he battled to control early volatile and temperamental synth technology on the road. His favourite stories are of the times when the technology crashed, leaving the musicians standing on stage with large amounts of egg on their faces.

"I was never interested in being a rock star. There are very few people who can pull it off successfully and there are even fewer who can sustain it. The niche I've fallen into is writing film music. I can still do that in twenty years time and I don't need to worry about being fashionable."

"I've never really worked in bands. The only band I've been in for any length of time was The Buggies with Trevor Horn and Geoff Downes. I had a Prophet synth, Geoff had a MiniMoog and Trevor didn't even have a bass in those days, so it was like a marriage of convenience. I spent nine months or so doing that and doing the album. But I was always very restless."

"For a while I was producing dodgy records that never made it. I was working with The Damned and stuff like that. But I don't like producing very much. I hate having to tell other people what to play or what not to play, which is more often the case. I was talking to George Martin once and he said the producer's job very often is to stop people from doing what they want to do, because on one side you're supposed to be responsible to the record company and on the other you're supposed to be responsible to the artist. And nowadays, very often the producer is just doing the producer's solo album and the artist comes very much in second place. I'm not really interested in being The Great Dictator."

Hans feels that the recording industry is now such that anybody who wants to make records has to develop at least a basic understanding of what a harmoniser, flanger, or any other commonly used piece of recording equipment does. It is no longer advisable to place yourself at the mercy of the technocrats.

"People are still always amazed to hear that when session drummer Simon Phillips was sixteen or whatever, he kept telling engineers where to put the microphones on his drums. It's his drum kit, he knows it, he should know how it should be recorded. I think that's very commendable. Obviously he spent a bit of time finding out how it all works. And he's going to get the sound he wants as opposed to the sound the engineer wants. The producer and the engineer should be at the service of whatever the project is, whatever the music is, as opposed to the other way around, especially with all this sampling stuff and synthesizers etc. Hi-tech kids like me, I can baffle anybody with science, you know? And there are very few people in this industry who will actually pull you up and say: 'Yeah, but does it sound any good?'"

FILM SCORES

Hans generally finds the mainstream 'hit factory' approach to making records somewhat less than perfect. For a technically orientated person his approach is remarkably humanistic and this seems to make film work an ideal vehicle for him.

"I can look at a film and immediately it inspires me. I can get drawn into a film so much that the notes just happen automatically, I don't have to think about them anymore. That's the great advantage of film music. It's very hard to write a good song because you have to come up with the stunning idea to base it on and somehow you're always starting from scratch, all you're doing is drawing on your own experiences and emotions. Whereas with a film, you're drawing on a whole load of people's feelings and emotions which are all there set out in front of you in a picture. So, of course, it's much easier to write music for film. Half the story is told for you and you just colour that in."

"The other thing is that every decent film editor has a rhythm. They're like visual drummers. They know how

to set out a piece of film and there is an inherent rhythm in their work. You just have to pick up on it, switch the film off and write."

Hans also finds that there is a danger in spending too much time looking at the film, in that you can then end up going beyond what is required of you. When the audience sees the film, the music's impact must be instant.

"The audience is only going to see and hear it once. If you get too clever with the music, it's not going to achieve the purpose of being instantaneous and accessible."

"Very often, if there is a sad scene, I write something moderately jolly against it because it makes it even sadder. What happens so often these days - with bad BBC and Channel Four cheapo music productions - is this 'leading the audience' business. If they're supposed to feel sad, they're going to bring in a piece of sad music. It's not very intelligent to do that. There are much smarter ways of achieving things. That's something that I learned from Stanley Myers who is a master at placing sound against picture."

"There is a psychological relationship between music and pictures. For example, if you lay the music up before the cut or the actor's reaction or whatever, it feels terrible. If the music is slightly late, it feels much better. Laying up music to film is a fine art. The eye needs time to digest things first, then the ear needs to pick things up and correlate the two. It's a question of learning those important things which you can't really be taught. Anybody can turn out a dumb score. You have to know when to pull back and when to do something major."

"You do sometimes get the situation where the film director says to you: 'We really couldn't make this scene happen. We need a lot of music here. Just make it happen!'. That's different.

But if you have a film which is well directed, well scripted, well acted and well cut, all you are doing with your music is enhancing the moods. Whereas with a badly cut film, all you are doing is putting bandaids on it all the time!"

I asked what Hans would do if, just as we finish the interview, he gets a telephone call from the film director whose work he most admires. The director briefly describes his next movie and it sounds like it will be his piece de resistance and he is considering offering Hans the score. He's also on his way to Heathrow Airport to catch a flight and wants to call in at Lillie Yard studio and hear some of Hans' work but will literally only have minutes to spare. What does Hans play to him?

"Mmmm, I would... in other words, you wanna know where I did my best work? Well, I would probably play him stuff from the Nic Roeg movies because Nic definitely brings out the best in me. He's one of those guys who turns around and says if he thinks something is awful and then explains why. That puts tremendous demands on you. On *Eureka!*, for instance, he had the scene where Gene Hackman finds the gold in the mountain and he told me that he wanted some music there. I asked him 'what?' and he looked at me as if I was completely stupid. 'Can't you see?' he said, 'I want the sound of the earth being raped!!'"

I don't think there's a synth preset for that is there?

"No," said Hans, "there's DEFINITELY no preset for the sound of the earth being raped!"

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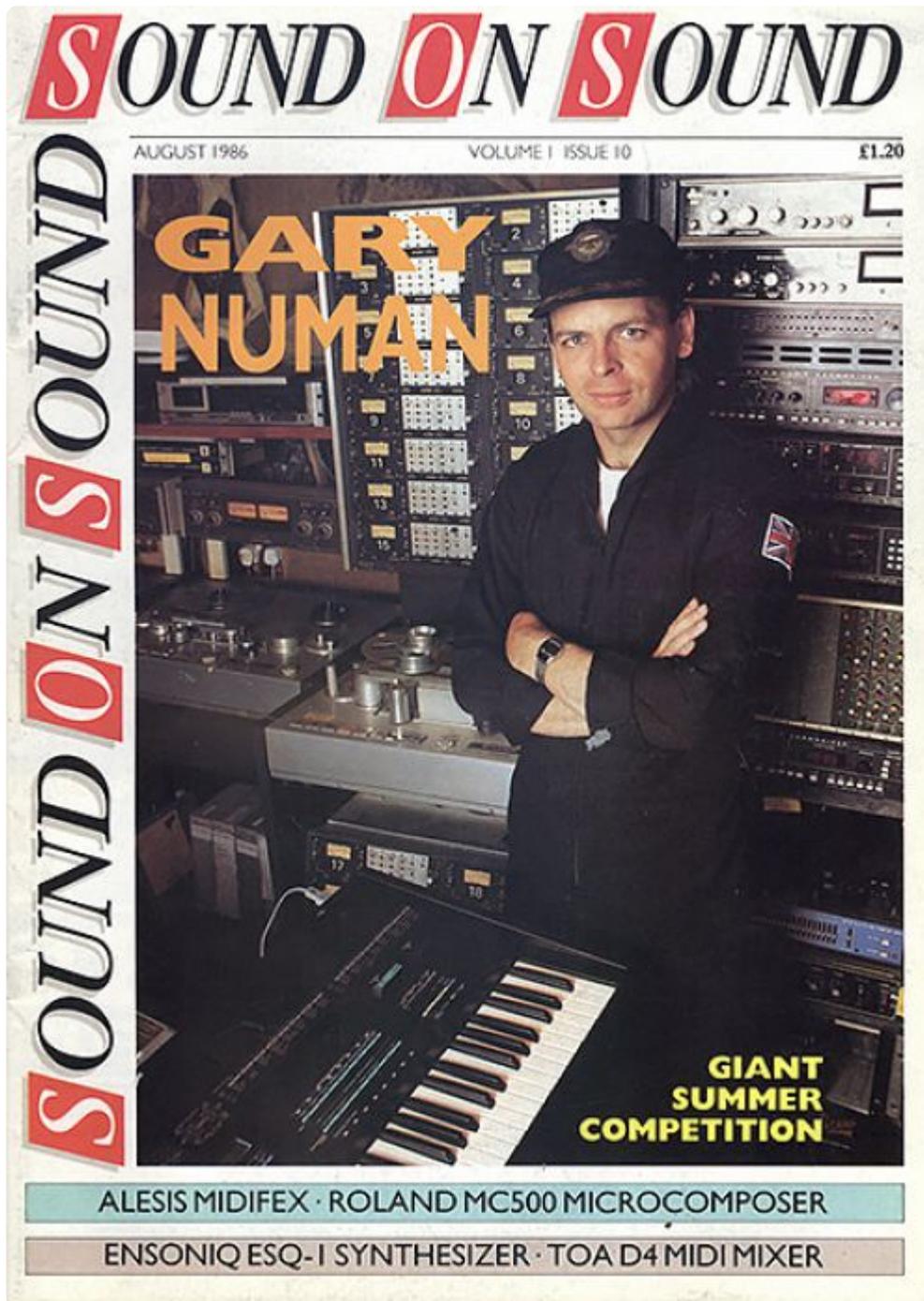
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