

THAT '70s SHOW

Roger Manning Jr. takes his new band Malibu into hilarious disco territory

It takes a man firm in his musical convictions to make a record that not only embraces the days of peak disco but also beds them in a fury and leaves a cherry smoldering in the ashtray upon quiet exit.

Roger Manning Jr. is that man, an artist who revels in the sounds of bygone eras. From co-founding psychedelic jangle-pop combo Jellyfish in the early '90s to more recent analog voyaging in his *Moog Cookbook* and *TV Eyes* projects, Manning mines the past without apology.

"Everything I've done, what I've aspired to, is this acknowledgement of pop's past, everything from Burt Bacharach to Earth, Wind & Fire to The Smiths," he says. "It's an appreciation for the peak elements of different genres and really understanding the songwriting, arrangement styles and lyric writing, and presenting them to a new audience."

Holding fast to his musical values has led to remix work for the likes of Soulwax and Felix Da Housecat, a long stint in Beck's studio and touring band, and road and recording work with French band Air.

Most recently from Manning's alter-ego, Malibu, comes *Robo-Sapiens* (Expansion Team, 2008), an 11-track romp through disco in its many glamorous, powder-fueled forms: the feathered-hair frenzy of

Studio 54, the abandon of Cold War Munich and the rave vapors of '90s house.

But it's not all four-on-the-floor. Album opener "Yesteryear" flows like something on David Bowie's *Heroes* had Brian Eno invited Kraftwerk to those heady '77 sessions at Berlin's Hansa Studios. Others, like "Rubber Tubes" and "The Bounce," swagger like His Purple Majesty circa *Sign o' the Times*.

"This record was fun because I got to do a lot of old-school funk jams, whether that was Giorgio Moroder or more German synth-funk, to *Headhunters*-type organic funk," Manning explains as he leads *Remix* to his synth lab. Vintage keys line the walls in neat racks and form an island in the room's center.

Manning reads off some of those on the record: Oberheim SEM 2-Voice (most of the low end), Roland VP-330 (strings and vocoding), Sequential Circuits Prophet-10, ARP Pro-Soloist and ARP 2600, various Moogs, Yamaha YC-45 organ and a rare Gleeman Pentaphonic encased in clear Plexiglas.

Almost a dozen electric guitars hang on one wall, including twangy Japanese cult-classic Teiscos used on the album. Fender and Höfner basses and an acoustic guitar share the remaining wall space, while a couple of dismantled drum sets wait on shelves in the adjoining garage. For a musician/producer, it's an intoxicating workshop.

Nearly all signals route through Avalon Vt-737sp preamps feeding into a Digidesign 888/24 I/O unit, then into a Power Mac G5 Quad-Core running Pro Tools 7.

And Manning sometimes runs through the preamps in an old Trident board used primarily for rough mixes.


His mic of choice is a Soundelux U99, using it with an arsenal of effects pedals to produce vocal characters ranging from weary paranoia ("She Gets Around") to high-pitched yearning ("Time to Time").

Vintage lust aside, Manning's no Luddite. He worked Native Instruments soft synths, MOTU and IK Multimedia soft samplers and Tascam GigaStudio onto the record. But he doesn't trust plug-ins in terms of ambience effects and instead reaches for Roland's RE-301 Space Echo and an Ibanez AD-202 Analog Delay. ("I got hip to that from Air; they use it on everything.")

For an artist rooted in yesterday's sounds—his next record as Roger Manning Jr., *Catnip Dynamite* (so far available only in Japan on Pony Canyon), harkens back to Queen and Cheap Trick—Manning still thinks forward.

He offers *Remix* a lift when the car breaks down near his place, arriving in a large Dodge pickup powered by biodiesel that's delivered to his home. It won't save the world, he says, but it's his small contribution.

He also knows that future music depends on the balance between human and the machine, sometimes lost while making music in front of a computer.

"I don't mind that cerebral, compulsive-obsessive side, and I've always had a meticulous architectural side to my music making," he says. "Hopefully, I stay in balance with it and it doesn't just become digits. We've all heard music that becomes just ones and zeros. There's nothing more flat than that." 

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