



Press Release

Chris Huggett and the history of Novation



With the SL range, Novation is now leading the way around the world in terms of cutting edge controllers. But this shouldn't be too much of a surprise, because at the heart of Novation's research and development lies an inventive pedigree that stretches right back to the early days of British electronic instrument design...

If you look back at the Novation range of synths, controllers and modules, there is one man who has been involved almost from the start. That man is Chris Huggett and he has been a major design influence in the Supernova 1&2, Nova, A- and K-Station, KS range, ReMOTE 25/25 Audio, X-Station, and the latest ReMOTE SL controller range with its revolutionary Automap mode to help you control whatever software applications you want.

But Chris' career didn't start with Novation – far from it! In fact it's no surprise that he is helping design today's cutting-edge instruments for Novation, because he has brought a wealth of experience to the company with a background that saw him involved in at least two more revolutionary instruments, which you might just have heard about...

Rewind the tape

“I was always interested in dabbling in electronics and electrical things,” says Huggett. “I remember buying a second-hand Ferrograph tape recorder – you know those great big battleship things. It was possible to do a recording and then keep bouncing it to the opposite track while adding more until the quality got awful – early multitracking with very primitive guitar playing!”

“I did electrical/electronic engineering at university and wanted a job to do with audio. The most appropriate job that was available was one at Ferrograph and that seemed absolutely ideal. I then wanted to get into the music business and my girlfriend was moving to London so I got a job at 3M servicing tape recorders in the big studios and started learning something about the music industry.”

“I ended up doing the same thing freelance, servicing tape recorders in various studios around London - I wanted to be my own boss. While I was doing this, I bumped into Adrian Wagner, an electronic musician. As I was attending to his multitrack (which happened to be a 3M one), he told me that he'd had an idea to do a synthesiser which would be revolutionary in that it would sound good but be very cheap, you know, everybody's synthesiser.” What Huggett and Wagner ended up with was one of the most unique synths in history, the Wasp. Simple, small, but most important of all, affordable.

“It was extremely enjoyable because not very many people were in that business in this country, so it felt as if you were on a special mission,” remembers Chris. “There were some interesting new possibilities with the components around at the time, particularly CMOS, using them in slightly non-standard ways, and it was a case of making the best of what was available. Each of the parts in a typical Moog system presented its own problems, so solving it with real components in a system that would work and be as cheap as possible was a nice challenge.”

The Wasp went on to sell a few thousand units but the business was not exactly how you'd run a profitable electronics company these days. Chris: “We had ladies coming in from the neighbouring village to do the soldering! It was all very nice working in this environment, watching cows graze in the next field, but in hard business terms it wasn't right.”

So, despite another couple of small animal-named products, namely the Gnat synth and Spider sequencer, Chris decided to form his own company, the Oxford Synthesiser Company and here he made history with the truly-inspiring OSCar synth. With its unique character and sound, is now regarded as a classic synth (and was recently 're-imagined' by the folk at GForce as the impOSCar soft synth.).

“I'm very pleased with it,” says Chris looking back at the ground-breaking hardware. “Paul Wiffen had a lot to do with it. He was as keen as I was to do something new and ended up being a sort of synthesiser advisor again, like Adrian Wagner was for the Wasp. Again, it was quite an interactive sort of thing. He told me what he thought he wanted by way of controls and performance, and I said what was actually possible. We ended up with a formula and later added a few things like the dual filter and other bits and pieces. Less than a year later it came out. We took the first one out to Frankfurt [massive music equipment show where all the new releases are showcased every year] all very economically, sharing stands, cheap flights, cheap hotels and showed it.”

The synth might now be a classic but at the time of its release it went up against Japanese synths which had, on paper anyway, better specs. Chris: "The price of the OSCar was £500, but around the time I was finishing it off, out came the [Roland] Juno 6 at a similar price so all of a sudden you had decent, cheap polyphony and that knocked it [the OSCAR] a lot."

From one revolution, to another

Eventually, after selling a couple of thousand OSCars, Chris decided that the Japanese development methods couldn't be fought by a small company and should instead be embraced, so he ended up joining Akai.

"The crucial thing was that the OSCar didn't really make me any money," says Chris. "I thought: 'well, there's too much competition from Japan and it's getting too difficult, so maybe I'll just put my stuff aside for a while and go and work for a bigger organisation.'"

"I discovered that Akai were recruiting for samplers. David Cockerel, who used to work for people like EMS, had already worked on the S900 and the previous S612, and I think he did pretty much all of the electronics design and the software. Akai realised that David didn't have time to do all of this for the next product, so I took the job. David did the hardware and I did the software." This 'next product' turned out to be the Akai S1000, surely the piece of sampling hardware that revolutionised the whole industry. The product brought affordable sampling to the masses and, quite literally, changed the course of music production and indeed the music that we listened to at the time. And you'd think that a revolution on this scale would be taking place at Akai's HQ in Japan, but you'd be wrong...

"There was this crash 'learn about samplers' thing where I just took an S900 and looked at everything that it did," says Chris. "Then the hardware came up – a big crate built by Tim Orr who built a lot of their prototypes (he was brilliant at that) – and I spent the next year or so doing S1000 software in my house in Headington!"

"That was brilliant, yes, that was superb," says Chris looking back on the success of the sampler. He stayed with the company and was involved in many of the other models in the S-range but eventually looked to the future and realised that hardware sampling would be under threat from software, so he joined the then young Novation, a British company that had already enjoyed tremendous success with the release of the bass sound module, the BassStation.

The future is control

"I joined Novation after the BassStation but I did have something to do with it as the BassStation had the Wasp filter in it," reveals Chris. "I was still working for Akai at the time so I had to sneak that in over the weekend! I joined Novation just after the DrumStation and the Supernova was my first project. It went down very nicely. Waldorf and Access were the main competition. Ironically we shared a stand with them at Frankfurt so there were inquiring eyes flashing around in all directions, nobody saying much or giving anything away!"

Success with the Nova and Supernova 2 followed and then the focus became smaller and cheaper synths as software synths became more dominant. Indeed their dominance eventually meant a shift in emphasis towards

hardware controllers, but these were no less revolutionary than the synths that Chris helped design. The SL range is proof, offering total control over whichever software you select.

“We have spent a long time on the SL, doing a controller the way we always thought it should be done. That’s the way the SL has been designed.”

So what is he most proud of, looking back at his career?

“That’s a hard one. The ones that I reflect on most fondly are the early ones because they bring back the ‘pioneering days’ feeling. I suppose that means Wasp, OSCar, the samplers... But when I look at my synth pile, I’ve got to say there isn’t one I’m not proud of.”

And of Novation’s current plans, Chris is tight-lipped...

“It’s still pretty much very small team stuff,” he says. “We make the early decisions about what the product is going to be and how it’s going to work and then people like me just go off and do it. I work in the same office as I have done for a long time and out comes the product! There might be something more revolutionary although I can’t say anything more than that!”

Pictures supplied

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Further information and high resolution product images (see the VIP area) at www.novationmusic.com

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For further info contact:

Giles R Orford
Focusrite Audio Engineering Ltd.
☎ 01494 836307
✉ giles@focusrite.com
🌐 www.focusrite.com