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TO AUDIO INTERFACES



Dave Smith and Suzanne Ciani  
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## Keyboard Power Users Guide



**CARY GRACE**  
DIY ALL THE WAY

Reviews



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# Cary Grace

Singer-songwriter, synth builder, and DIY all the way

“I’m not really a keyboard player,” says recording artist and instrument maker Cary Grace. “I’m more of a synth player. What interests me is using a monosynth as a lead instrument and creating interesting sounds with modular. I’m more into sound creation and expression than being a virtuoso musician.”

Grace’s most recent release—a limited-edition, lathe-cut 12” record—features a reading of Pink Floyd’s *Atom Heart Mother*-era tune “Fat Old Sun,” inspired not by the relatively simple album version, but by the band’s epic live performances. On it, Grace’s group spins the David Gilmour composition out to more than 15 minutes, allowing plenty of space for sonic shade and light, and instrumental spotlights featuring organ, guitar and violin.

Cary Grace has followed a winding and unlikely path to arrive at her current situation. Born and raised in South Carolina, and currently living in the United Kingdom, she began her musical career in the Nashville singer-songwriter scene. Today, she not only makes progressive rock albums, but also she owns and operates Wiard, a modular synthesizer company.

As a child in South Carolina, Grace would dig through her father’s vinyl records. “Later in his life, he mostly listened to classical music and had a huge collection of classical CDs,” she says. “So, all the old

rock records didn’t really get listened to very much.” She recalls time spent with those records as her first musical contact with artists such as the Doors, Paul Simon, Miles Davis, Traffic, and Pink Floyd.

But it was the music of Simon—as well as a slightly later discovery, Bob Dylan—that sparked Grace’s interest in songwriting. “I was always really into words, writing and poetry,” she recalls. “I loved language. And listening to those two people, in particular, and realizing what you could do in the context of a song with language was what initially drew me to songwriting.” Grace recalls saying to herself around age 15, “Well, I could do that. I could write songs.” She taught herself some chords on guitar and got to work.

Grace documented her early songwriting efforts using a decidedly low-tech method. “The first overdubs I did were with two cassette boomboxes,” she explains. “I’d play something back on one and add another track, so to speak, by recording on the other one. Of course, it sounded terrible, but that was my

first multitracking.” When she was about eight years old, her family moved to Nashville, where her father had a job in audio tech for the Nashville Network country music cable channel. She soon got a 4-track cassette deck of her own. “I learned some stuff from my dad, like how to make my own cables, and how to solder,” she says. “He was always a good person to have around when I’d ask, ‘Hey. How do I do this?’”

Grace moved to the UK in 2005 and, not long after, put together a band. But she admits that “it didn’t do particularly well, and kind of dispersed.” Soon after, she met Andy Budge, who has played on nearly everything Grace has released since she’s been in the UK. “Andy’s just a remarkable bass player; he plays guitar as well. We have a lot of musical tastes in common, and enough differences to make it a good kind of collaborative effort.”

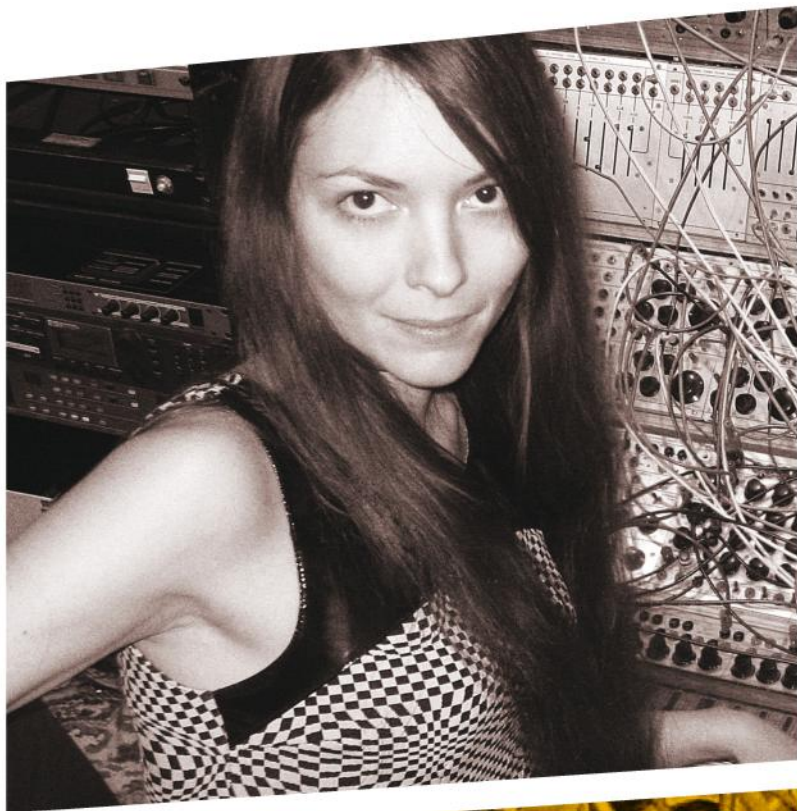
Grace’s first release with Budge was the 2009 double-album *Perpetual Motion*. The album also features multi-instrumentalist John Garden, who today tours with Alison Moyet. Other frequent collaborators are drummer David Payne and guitarist Steffie Sharpstrings, who has guested on a number of Grace’s album projects and selected live dates.

Grace recalls the *Perpetual Motion* sessions as “an eye-opening experience,” one that whetted her appetite for further long-form progressive rock excursions. To date she has released seven albums and three sin-





HARRY COLLISON



GRANT RICHTER

BY BILL KOPP

gles via Bandcamp; several have also been released on physical media, many featuring hand-printed sleeves with design and artwork by the artist, herself.

The exposure to the world of modular synthesis came rather late in Grace's career. "The first time I ever got to really play with the things was when I came over to England," she says. And she was quickly hooked. "Through music connections, and because of having a self-taught technical background, I've ended up building them."

It was while hosting a radio program called "Airtight Garage" that she met Grant Richter, founder of the Wiard Synthesizer Company. "After playing his band's music on my show, I got in touch with him," Grace says. She learned that Richter was facing the potential shutdown of his company because health problems prevented him from building modules.

"He was looking for somebody who would be a worthy person to take it on and, at the time, I was kind of looking for something else to do," says Grace. In 2012, she bought the rights to manufacture Wiard gear, calling her company Wessex Analogue. Today Grace does all of the work herself in a small yet well-appointed electronics workshop of her own.

Grace describes Wiard products as "boutique, made-to-order units." "Somebody will get in touch with me and let me know what modules they want, and put down a deposit," she says. "And then—or at

the point where I clear whatever I'm working on—I'll start building. Every single solder connection is made by hand, by me." Many of the customers for her modules are "people who do film scores and things like that; people who are looking for sounds that you can't just make with a soft-synth plug-in."

Along with her livelihood as a builder of modular gear, Grace is something of a collector of newer and vintage synths. Her studio setup—some of which is pressed into service for live shows—includes several modulars, a '70s-era Minimoog, an ARP 2600 (serial #13), an ARP Odyssey, and a EMS VCS 3. Recently, Grace has been focusing more on live performance, playing festivals in and around the UK. "I've had hardly any time in the studio this year," she admits. "But now I'm going to sit down and work on the next album; I'm excited about that."

Through her years as a musician and synth builder, Grace has been on the receiving end of a lot of advice, "some of which is ridiculous," she explains. "You hear a lot of this stuff like, 'Oh, you have to figure out what genre you are and stick to it, or you just confuse people.' Fuck that!" The variety of her music, as showcased on her albums, backs up her response.

However, Grace *has* taken some advice to heart. "There are a couple of things that I always go back to," she says. "One is: 'If in doubt, take it out.'" The other has served as a creative guide. "If you ever get

to where you just don't know where to go with something, listen to The Beatles. That usually works."

Asked if she has advice of her own to offer, Grace pauses a moment. "I wasted a lot of time being insecure in myself, thinking I had to do things the way somebody else said was the right way to do it, because I didn't know how to do it and they did. You should always be open to learning, but I think it's very, very important to not let yourself be influenced by people who are saying, 'This is the wrong way to do it.' It's music, it's art, you know? It's totally subjective."

Grace points out the way in which perceptions of music differ. "You can love three of the same songs that somebody else loves, and if you ever get into a conversation about why they like a song, chances are it's going to be for completely different reasons than why you like it. And that's wonderful. It's just about our humanity and our uniqueness, and that's the most important, special, vital thing that we have."

Between writing, recording, touring, and building synth modules, Cary Grace is used to tackling multiple concurrent projects. "I'm either scattered all over the place, or just hyper-focused on something," she says. "So, on any given day, I might set out to do something but wind up doing something completely different because I get distracted. But more than anything, life, and creation inspire me." ■