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5C

For the record, Pilhofer's a musician again

"I'm Herb the musician again," he said. "It was an ongoing struggle saying, 'Hey, I'm Herb the musician, not Herb the businessman.'"

Going to have a look at Herb Pilhofer's newest musical and electronic toys has been an occasional pleasure through the decades, but there seemed to be a special glee in this latest showing of new toys.

Back in the '50s, there was no question that he was Herb the musician. With Pilhofer at the piano, the Herb Pilhofer Trio played a lot of jazz at the old Herb's Bar (run by a totally other Herb), and otherwise they worked gigs all over the area.

Then Pilhofer got into the music-recording business and gradually developed the super-high-tech recording enterprise that became Sound 80. As multiple-track recording kept advancing, Pilhofer's people always seemed to be recording with more tracks than anyone else. They did albums, movie and TV scores, TV commercials, radio jingles. Pilhofer was ahead of his time with musical synthesizers, and he was the first person anywhere to do anything serious with digital recording, as developed by 3M.

When Douglas Trumbull, the Hollywood movie-effects whiz, was inventing an ultra-high-fidelity system for projecting theatrical movies for Paramount, he chose Sound 80 to develop the unprecedented sound system that would accompany it. The whole system proved too expensive for movie theaters, whose current customers don't care that much about sound-and-picture quality anyway, but Pilhofer still is glad to have been in on the experiment.

"It was a \$40,000 contract, of which I spent \$39,500 hiring musicians, but I don't care how much money it cost me," Pilhofer said. "I wouldn't trade what I learned in that year for anything."

Then came the confession:

"The truth is, the only reason I went into the recording business in the first place is that I wanted the toys. The equipment and the studios were a way of expanding my music, exploring new directions."

Before long, the enterprise was so big that he spent more time looking at profit-and-loss statements and being an executive than he did making music.

"I know there have been a lot of stories around town about what has happened to Sound 80," Pilhofer said, "but what I have been trying to achieve is a constructive dismantling of Sound 80, along with a reorganization of my own life. I went through a divorce five years ago, and that hit me pretty hard, and it also started me thinking about what I want to do with the rest of my life."

So the spacious studio building in south Minneapolis is closed. An entity called Sound 80 still exists, but only to operate a small commercial



Will Jones
after last night



Staff Photos by Mike Zerby

Herb Pilhofer at the keyboard of a digital music synthesizer.

recording studio in the IDS tower, a busy convenience to the advertising, film and TV trades that was once a satellite of the larger enterprise.

"The other day I had a ceremonial burning of all my business cards that said *President* on them," Pilhofer said with some satisfaction. "And all the good recording people who worked with me are still working, but now they're on their own, and doing well. Sound 80 was right for its time, but the business has changed, and it's time to get on to other things."

So Pilhofer, now 51, is still busy, working day and night making music tracks for films and commercials and multi-media presentations, but the scene has changed. As always, there are new toys, still ahead of their time.

The major toy is a large old Kenwood house where he lives, but which he has remodeled to serve his needs for a substantial recording studio. His 25-year-old son, Eric, an artist with some schooling in communications, helps him as a studio techni-

cian.

"This is not a public studio," he said. "This is my personal workshop. If I get an idea I want to play with, I don't care if it takes two hours or 10 hours. I don't have to count studio hours. I don't give a damn for year-end statements. I've got stacks of work to do, and I get paid for it, I pay my bills, but I don't worry."

Pilhofer tore a bathroom and a laundry out of the high-ceilinged basement, and even expanded the foundations of the house, to accommodate a totally computerized recording studio combined with a video mixing studio.

The key toy within Pilhofer's studio layout, among such other toys as two 24-channel mixers and a computerized mixing console, is a digital music synthesizer with a piano-like keyboard that is linked with a music computer. Anything Pilhofer creates at the keyboard goes into the computer's memory, to be played back, altered, played with, improved, in an infinite variety of ways. It also can be printed out as musical notes.

"I can put notes into the computer, and the computer can put them anywhere I want them to synchronize with the picture," he said. "By the old method, if a piece of music is too long, you edit. But now, if I want to, I can speed up a piece of music without changing the pitch. You can't do that with tape."

"Before, if you were doing the music for a commercial, you almost always did the music first. Then, if the picture was animated, the animators would create the picture to the beat of the music, or if it was photography, the film editor would edit to the music."

"Then afterward, when it was put together, I'd usually say, 'Man, if I had known what you were going to do with that picture, then I could have done better with the music. But if you tried post-recording the music, then the editor didn't have anything to go by when he was starting out."

"Now I have a choice, and in most cases, I prefer to do the music after the images, because I'm impressed by what I see. I respond musically to what's in the image."

Pilhofer said he developed his preference for writing music to fit images he already had seen back in the days of Sir Tyrone Guthrie, when Pilhofer was the Guthrie Theater's staff composer.

"I always worked better after I'd seen the action," he said. "Guthrie would envision a scene and tell me, 'All right, I want two minutes of entrance music here,' and I'd work all night creating two minutes of entrance music. Then, after he got the action onto the boards, he eventually realized that what he needed was 12 seconds of entrance music. I could have done it better if I had waited."

Pilhofer now has an easy choice between pre-recording or post-recording, or both. To demonstrate, he put onto a monitor tapes that had captured various stages in the production of a new TV commercial, "Banks Are Changing," created by the Paragon ad agency in behalf of Full Service Banks.

The commercial combines computer-generated animation effects with the photographic image of a bank spokesman in a way that's full of fascinating visual stunts and surprises. Working with the animator, Larry Lamb, Pilhofer saw early test tapes of Lamb's concepts, and wrote his music to complement those.



What Pilhofer plays can be displayed as musical notes.

"When they came in for the final mix, I saw those little bouncing Ping-Pong-ball effects and those other small flashing effects that hadn't been in the picture before," Pilhofer said. "They were right up against a deadline, but I pleaded, 'Just give me two more hours,' and I was able to do the music much better, in response to the full image."

"The ideal situation, of course, is to create the sound and the picture at the same time. The thing I look forward to most is to sit beside a video artist and work together."

Then, swinging away from the console where he had been tapping buttons and computer keys to make music and picture happen, Pilhofer said:

"None of this, mind you, will ever replace real instruments and musicians. I still fill this place up with real musicians and real strings when we do something like the Perkins commercials. There's no other way to get that sound."

"And there's a time, after all this, when nothing is better than just to go upstairs and play the piano, or listen to a good oboe."

Waiting for him upstairs in his living room, when he chooses to relax that way, is 97-key Bosendorfer concert grand for which he had to trade in a sizable Steinway and then take out a substantial mortgage. But next to it, just in case he wants to use it for scoring a film, are discreet wall patches for both sound and video equipment.

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