

SONS OF

Ten years after their last studio album as Japan, Richard Barbieri and Steve Jansen are reunited with their old colleagues as Rain Tree Crow. But how will the technology pioneers of the early '80s fare in a new decade? Interview by Tim Goodyer.

"I THINK THEY SHOULD SELL SYNTHESISERS without presets and all the parameters at zero, then only people who wanted to play synths would buy them. Now people buy synths because of the presets they've got."

It's a bold proclamation to make - and not one that the hi-tech musical instrument industry is likely to welcome at present, but you've got to admit that there's a lot of sense in it. The man with the perspicacity and the courage to make such a statement is Richard Barbieri, once keyboard player with Japan, now keyboard player with Rain Tree Crow - who share exactly the same line-up as Japan, but we'll come to that presently. In the meantime, Barbieri, who was one of the original pioneers of synth "programming" in the early '80s is in his element.

"If I went by those standards" he continues, "I'd never have bought the VFX because it's got awful presets. If synths didn't have presets, people would only buy them if they were prepared to work on them, but people just want *that* sound *now*, and that's why I think so much music sounds the same. In fact, I think digital keyboards are all much the same if you stick to the presets."

Barbieri built his reputation as a "sounds" man with Japan. Synth patches that convinced you they were actually acoustic sounds existing in some corner of reality you'd yet to encounter were one of the main ingredients in the band's ability to create unique and genuinely innovative music.

Since their heyday in the early '80s I've lost count of the respected musicians who've cited Barbieri as a unique talent. Much the same can also be said of the remaining Japan members: drummer Steve Jansen brought a fresh sophistication to pop rhythms through Japan's drum patterns and programming, and found himself in demand with bands as diverse as Propaganda and Ippu Do. Meanwhile, Mick Karn's approach to bass playing earned him something approaching over-exposure in the days immediately after Japan; more recently he contributed to Kate Bush's *Sensual World* LP.

Returning to Barbieri and Rain Tree Crow, we find the first important departure from the Japan days. One important element of Barbieri's programming was his reluctance to repeat himself - the patches in each song would be unique to that song. Few players are creative enough to maintain such a policy and even for Barbieri, after over ten years, it's time for a change.

"There are certain sounds I've come up with over the years that I see no reason I should leave behind", he explains. "When you look at musicians like Hassell or Fripp - any musician with a strong personality - they have a sound. And although keyboards can have so

many different sounds, when I find a good one I think I should stick with it and use it in other contexts. Until now every single track has had a new sound; every single overdub was a new program, but it's too much hard work."

Barbieri's second departure from old programming methods was necessitated by new methods of composition. Where everything used to be carefully scripted before going into the studio, all the Rain Tree Crow material has been written through a process of improvisation.

"I had to do my programming before we started playing because we didn't know what we were going to be doing", he recalls. "I programmed a wide range of sounds and hoped that would be all right. During the recording - actually with every album I've ever done - I spent time programming either early in the morning or late at night because I felt I was slipping behind. There's so much work, as far as sounds go, involved in an album. It's not just a matter of playing something, it's having a new sound that's going to work. So about halfway through the album I ended up having to start programming new things.

"A lot of the sounds that went down originally stayed there - those either work or they don't work. When we then got into the overdubbing stage and somebody else was working on something, I'd start programming again *then* with a better idea of what was going on. Before, it was just a matter of getting as much as I could from the VFX - that was my main keyboard on the album, along with the Prophet 5."

Along with his Ensoniq VFX and Prophet 5, Barbieri used an Emax, D50 and the System 700. All were set up as if for a live performance - routed through various effects processors and then to the studio desk. Anyone able to recall the image of Barbieri hunched studiously over his stage keyboard rig from the Japan days will remember the distinctive shape of an Oberheim OBX too.

". . . I sold it to Mick ages ago", he reveals. "I thought I'd given it to him, but now he's trying to sell it back to me at this ridiculous price! I just took him to have it MIDI'd - because he didn't know what MIDI was - and now he's put the price up even more. I can't get it back. But I'm holding the sounds, and I think it's my sounds he wants."

The Oberheim aside, the keyboard line-up remained the same throughout recording and overdubbing.

"It's very rare you'd find a keyboard that's so wonderful and so different from all the other keyboards you need it for a specific job", he comments. "People do it with guitars, yeah, but I don't think that's the case with digital keyboards - they're either better than one another or they're not. I mean, the

PIONEERS



PHOTOGRAPHY: THE DOUGLAS BROTHERS

VFX is better than the M1 because it's more readily programmable. The way I like to work is the way the VFX is set out. For me the M1 is too simple; you can't go deep enough into it for me. The VFX is the nicest keyboard I've come across since the Prophet. Although I still get some good things from the D50."

Unlike the approach to composition that helped make *Tin Drum* a milestone in popular music, the composition of *Rain Tree Crow* was completely based on improvisation.

"None of us had done any improvising or 'band' composition before", recalls Jansen, "but I think we've all dealt with that in some way since Japan split up. On our (Jansen and Barbieri) first album together we worked that way on a couple of tracks, and when I produced Mick's last album it was pretty much pre-structured, but there were a few tracks he'd left open.

"But this was new to all of us because there was no material and we had to come up with something as a band. There was no pre-production, it was all written on the spur of the moment, so what was improvisation

was also writing. There were no ideas, nobody had any ideas ready, it was just plug in and play.

"All the drums were acoustic, Richard was to one side in a booth. Mick was set up near me with the bass direct-injected to the desk. Dave was at the back end of the studio with his D50, M1 and Kurzweil DI'd as well and he chopped and changed between them, his guitar and a vocal mic. On top of that he'd be writing his lyrics as he went along. We'd be jamming and he'd start singing along.

"We worked like that for a few tracks and then started changing around, like we'd set up percussion and all play percussion. Or I'd play keyboards and Rich would be at the piano, David would be at the Hammond and Mick would be on bass clarinet. We'd just keep shifting around."

"At the end we had hours and hours of material that we had to listen to", continues Barbieri. "Some things we kept as the basis of a track, other things we thought 'it's working well here but we need to concentrate more on this part', so we'd go back and re-record that. . ."

➤ While sections of the improvisations were subsequently re-recorded, much of the original recordings appear as part of the finished pieces.

“‘Big Wheels in Shanty Town’ was built upon improvised bass and piano lines”, Jansen elaborates. “‘Red Earth’ was where we were all playing percussion, ‘New Moon’ was a reconstruction. The first track we recorded just formed itself - with all its dynamics and everything. Nobody spoke about it. . .”



Richard Barbieri's keyboard rig: Roland System 700, Roland D50, Ensoniq VFX, Prophet 5, E-mu Emax



Richard Barbieri at keyboards during recording

Barbieri picks up the theme: “Other tracks were in danger of falling apart. It was like a tightrope between what we'd improvised and what was needed to hold the arrangement together. In a lot of those situations we were fighting all the way. There was a danger of the track becoming like a patchwork quilt and we had to fight it. It was certainly a new way for us to work.”

“The nicest thing was not being so obsessed with your instrument and listening to what the others were doing”, continues Jansen. “It was what jazz improvisation is all about - you hear what somebody else is doing and you feed off it, or you play to it, or you cut down to let them breathe. And it was really fun, learning to do that.”

Apart from the musical considerations, the practicalities of recording a band using around ten

keyboards (many of which appeared at the desk in stereo), a full drum kit, bass, various clarinets and saxes and a multitude of percussion instruments presented its own problems.

“It was 64-track recording for most of the tracks”, explains Jansen. “Two Mitsubishi 32-track digital machines running together. Some of them made it on just one. . . We had a few nightmares besides the odd power cut that always seems to happen whenever we record. We had to completely reconstruct one track because something went wrong with the machine.”

“It was something of a job for the engineer”, agrees Barbieri, “he had almost every track permanently in record. There was stereo from every keyboard, Steve had about 12 tracks. . .”

“The other thing we were using was a Macintosh and Performer - you don't mind me mentioning that do you?”, says Jansen, light-heartedly.

“No”, comes Barbieri's reply. “All my keyboards and Dave's keyboards were going to a Macintosh that Steve was controlling. When we were playing live it was just receiving MIDI information from the keyboards, but it gave us the opportunity at a later date to go back over, say, four hours of music and find 30 minutes that we liked and keep it in its original form and reconstruct around it. And that's the only real way we used any sequencing.”

Sampling, too, has played only a small part in the recording process.

“On ‘Blackwater’ I decided I wasn't happy with the original brush part”, says Jansen. “The studio time had finished, so I had time to go away and think about it and I really didn't like what I'd done. I had taken samples of the sounds at the time so I took a SMPTE mix of the track home to our E16 and started to duplicate what I'd played using an Akai S1000 and the Macintosh. I used a variety of samples and literally compiled them on top of the original - slowing down where it slowed down and so on. Hopefully it doesn't sound too bad. I was surprised at the quality of the Akai; it was the first time I'd used one.”

Happily, the technicalities have taken second place to the music.

“It was a very creative time for everybody”, reports the keyboard player. “Because of that some of the recording has suffered - sometimes we had to take a bit of distortion or whatever - but it doesn't matter because we got a good performance and that's the important thing. We were less involved in being in the control room and knowing what was going on from that side of things because we were more concerned about what we were playing.”

WHEN JAPAN FINALLY TOOK THE DECISION to shut up shop in 1983, the event couldn't have been better tailored to the requirements of the popular music press. Stories of the personal conflict between Sylvian and Karn were perfectly synchronised with the height of the band's success. Japan's fifth studio album, *Tin Drum*, had shown them at their most creative, and packed concert halls had underlined their popularity.

“We started talking seriously about this in April '89”, recalls Jansen, “and we finally got it off the

ground to go into the studio in September that year.”

The news will be welcome to many, but why change the name if the lineup remains the same?

“We all differed on the reasons for that”, replies Jansen. “David didn't want to use it for reasons I can't specify; my reason was that we were going to have a long-term project happening, and to have a new name and a fresh start was a challenge. The name we've come up with isn't actually the name that everybody would like - we've just had to use *something*. But it is a Japan album basically. . .”

Arguments over the name of the project quickly reveal more significant problems, however. Jansen's references to a “long-term project” are contradicted by record company press releases declaring the album a one-off.

Jansen begins again: “A few months before the final decision to reform I remember talking to David about his idea of forming a band using improvisation. We were interested in that method of working and we were talking about it quite seriously, but at the end of the day he turned round and said ‘I may not have mentioned it, but if this does happen it has to go under my name’. So we all backed off immediately: ‘bye, see you next year’ . . .

“Then Rich and I were in Italy and Mick and Dave got together and started talking about what they wanted to do. They were really keen to see everyone working together again. We were surprised, but we got this phone call saying ‘it looks like it could happen’.

“When we got back to London we talked about what we'd like to do and we all agreed again that it would be improvised, we'd all co-write and there'd be no politics. We went into this knowing that we had to be very tolerant towards each other in the studio. Because we were improvising we had to be very careful in the way that we would give each person enough time to develop their ideas. We went into it very positively and it stayed that way well into the overdubbing period. *Then* it all started to get politically and morally screwed up. There were problems with the record company that were unavoidable - to do with finance. But then there were moral issues too. On the one hand Dave was trying to say that he wasn't too happy with what was going on but he was going to see it through, and on the other hand trying to make it his baby by taking the credit. Obviously we're a bit upset about that, and that's the reason I can't see us continuing to work together.

“At the end of the day he's tried to take it away from us. We weren't allowed to go to the mixing because he put up the money, and that, for us, doesn't show real respect. If he believed in the material that's there, he'd have believed that us being there was an important issue. I'm sure his reasons from his perspective will come across as being fair, but we see it from our point of view and he sees it from his. All I know is that we all went into it under a bond of friendship and respect and it ended up that the freedom he was allowed in his lyric writing was turned around by him saying ‘well, I've done most of the work then’. We were saying ‘have your freedom’ and he's thrown that back in our face. There's not an easy way to explain it.

“I know he believes he's right in what he's doing. He believes in himself to such a degree that he abuses his friends. That's the bottom line. It's obviously going to get talked about and I'm not going to sit here and lie about it - and I doubt whether he will either.”

Confronted with Jansen's statements exactly a week later (see interview elsewhere in this issue), Sylvian is visibly shaken by his brother's comments. After some moments of consideration he confesses to being



Thanks to Richard Barbieri for use of photographs from his personal album

Steve Jansen and “Improvised” percussion

“upset” and begins to put his side of the story. Instead of retaliating, he attempts to shed light on a difficult situation which involves more personal matters than the recording of an LP. But at almost midnight the same day, he is to send me a fax withdrawing all his comments on the grounds that there are “too many negatives” involved. Implicit in both his words and the fax is a sense of personal sadness that, five years after the public arguments that accompanied Japan's demise, it's in danger of happening all over again.

Returning to the interview in hand, Barbieri is more positive about the role of the record company in the project.

“I'm really surprised we got a preferential contract when they knew that we weren't going to call it Japan. There was a lot of pressure from them for us to do that ➤



Mick Karn - Steve Jansen & David Sylvian look on

➤ but we'd got David at the other end wanting it in the contract that the name wouldn't be used. We thought once that happened they'd offer us less money, less time to do the album, less of a deal. . . But they still gave us a good deal, so we can't complain."

The deal was good enough to take them on a minor world tour of recording studios. Starting at Miraval in France they moved on to Condulmer and Zerman in Italy, then Marcus in London and Tears for Fears' The Wool Hall in Bath. The mixing began in London's Olympic studios with the help of Japan regular Steve Nye, and was completed in Ireland - although neither Jansen or Barbieri were present by this time.

"The main reason we started off with those two studios was the rates", comments Barbieri. "We knew

that we were going to need a lot of studio time, and were getting these for about £800 a day - saving £500-600 on doing it in England."

Although the project began with guitarist Michael Brook in the role of producer, it quickly became apparent that the musicians could ably produce themselves. Instead Brook joined the ranks of guest musicians - alongside Phil Palmer, Bill Nelson and Salif Keita's backing vocalists - who contributed to the recordings. The result is an album that retains the innovative approach defined in Japan's closing days, but combines it with a broader outlook on other musical styles.

"There's quite a lot of aggression on the album" says Barbieri. "We haven't previously gone in for that, all the stuff's been harmonically pretty, but I like that side of it. I think it's more 'rock' than our other albums. There are phrases and sequences that are more blues and sometimes rock. I used to like Led Zeppelin; I think it's all coming back - I'll probably start digging out all the Pink Floyd albums next."

"That's something I've always been aware of", concurs Jansen, "we all enjoy listening to quite rough and ready music, and yet we rarely get that quality in our music - although we've tried to with this album. We have a tendency to over-polish what we do; with this album we haven't done that. I hope that's what will come across."

As for the future, Jansen and Barbieri are still active as the Dolphin Brothers and have a recording in progress for Virgin's Venture label.

"We've decided to do it as Jansen and Barbieri, not Dolphin Brothers", corrects Barbieri, "because we want to keep Dolphin Brothers as a commercial song project. The album we're doing now is probably going to be all instrumental - but not ambient. We had the deal with Venture to do this album before the group got back together - then it took a back seat. They didn't mind waiting for it because they thought the group was more important. But the budget was so incredibly small that we thought the only way to do it was to use the budget to buy some equipment and record on a 16-track. So we decided to do it that way. We've recorded about half of it so far."

There are various other projects under consideration too, but most of the musicians' enthusiasm seems centred on the possibility of some live work.

"The three of us really enjoy playing live", says Barbieri of himself, Jansen and Karn. "David's never really enjoyed it; I don't think he really considers himself a 'player', that's not his thing. We'll ask him and he'll probably say no, but we'll probably go ahead with some of the new stuff because a lot of it's instrumental and it was all co-written. So we're getting a band together ourselves; David Torn's probably going to be involved. We could do concerts and 'feature' things from the Dolphin Brothers and from Mick's album, from the Rain Tree Crow album and from David Torn's album."

Taking the strength of the music on *Rain Tree Crow* and David Torn's recent release, *door x* (on Windham Hill), and the fact that Torn is currently in Italy producing Mick Karn's forthcoming solo album, a live date could be essential for your diary. ■

EQUIPMENT LIST

DAVID SYLVIAN

Hammond Organ
Korg M1 Workstation
Kurzweil 250 Synthesiser
Roland D50 Synthesiser
Sequential Prophet VS Vector Synthesiser

RICHARD BARBIERI/STEVE JANSEN

KEYBOARDS

Ensoniq VFX Synthesiser
E-mu Emax HD Sampler (2)
E-mu Emulator Sampler
Sequential Circuits Prophet 5 Synthesiser (2)
Roland System 700 Modular Analogue Synthesiser system
Yamaha DX7 II FD Synthesiser

RECORDING

Alesis Quadraverb Multi-fx Processor
Apple Macintosh SE Computer

Fostex E16 Multitrack & 4050 Autolocator
Korg SRV2000 Reverb
Lexicon PCM70 reverb
Mark of the Unicorn MIDI Timepiece Software
Mark of the Unicorn Performer Software
Roland SBF325 Stereo Flanger
Roland SDE3000 DDL (2)
Sony DTC1000ES DAT Recorder
Soundtracs PC MIDI 16-Channel Mixing Desk
Stereo Ring Modulator
Yamaha SPX90 II Multi-fx Processor

RAIN TREE CROW RECORDINGS

Emax HD processed by Stereo Ring Modulator, SBF325 & Quadraverb
VFX processed by SDE3000 DDL
D50 processed by SDE3000 DDL
System 700 processed by Ring Modulator, SBF325 & Quadraverb
Prophet 5 processed by SPX90 II

All keyboards simultaneously recorded to tape and into Performer except the System 700.