

The One Man Orchestra Machine

These days, using a synthesizer or a computer is the easy way to re-produce the sound of a musical instrument without having to actually play that instrument. However, before the digital age of the late twentieth century, a musician had to play that instrument in order for people to hear it. Then, in 1949, a man from Wisconsin had an idea. Why not develop a machine that families could use at home to play and listen to songs without using any instruments at all?

While recording himself playing the organ, Harry Chamberlin realized he could record instruments on magnetic tape, then use those tapes in a playback machine. That was the day Harry invented the Chamberlin, later known as the Mellotron. The Chamberlin instrument employed a piano-like keyboard with banks of upright audio tapes inside. They were activated to play recordings of different musical instruments when the keys on the keyboard were pressed. You could even press a number of keys at the same time. Organ was the first instrument available on the

tapes, but eventually the recordings played by the Chamberlin and Mellotron included flute, cello, violin, oboe, piano, harpsichord and many others. Even male and female voices could be played back like a full choir. Each note the keyboard played was a recording of that instrument playing that very note on the musical scale. So, instead of needing multiple violin players, one keyboard player could now play all the violins at once. In the recording studio, Chamberlin and Mellotron players could take that a step further and play chords from multiple instruments on multiple recording tracks and essentially replace an entire orchestra!

So who were the musicians that Harry Chamberlin employed to be on the Chamberlin tapes? If you've ever heard of Lawrence Welk, you probably know he had his own orchestra that performed on *The Lawrence Welk Show* nationwide for thirty-five years. Harry decided to record the Welk musicians during the 1940's and 50's while producing and developing the original models of the Chamberlin instrument. Interestingly, Lawrence Welk offered to fund Harry Chamberlin's company if he changed the name of his product to the "Welk Machine".

Harry refused.

Chamberlin and his children did the majority of the labor and business in his small factory, but one day a man named Bill Franson, Harry's window cleaner at the time, offered to be a salesman for the Chamberlin. He subsequently traveled the nation selling the machine to nightclubs, parlours and music stores. Then, Bill Franson disappeared for two months! During that time, Franson had secretly travelled to England with two Chamberlin machines. He changed the product labels then, with the help of some new business and production partners began selling the machines in England. This machine eventually developed into what is now known as the Mellotron, and became one of the major musical tools of British musicians starting in the mid 60's.

Not surprisingly, Harry Chamberlin wasn't happy at what his former window cleaner had been up to. Eventually through legal agreements and royalty payments, the English company, Streetly Electronics, agreed to produce and sell their Mellotrons only in the United Kingdom. Harry would continue to produce and sell his Chamberlins only in the United States, and receive payments for all Mellotron sales.

So, which artists have sought out the Mellotron and Chamberlin over the years? Listen to the beginning of *Strawberry Fields Forever* by the Beatles to hear their use of a Mellotron.

Led Zeppelin used a Mellotron in *Kashmir*, Mike Pinder of The Moody Blues used it famously in their song *Tuesday Afternoon* and even artists like David Bowie and the Rolling Stones used the Mellotron. British progressive rock bands like King Crimson, Yes and Genesis used the Mellotron extensively for years as it helped give them their signature symphonic sound at the time.

In America, lesser known jazz and rhythmic acts utilized the Chamberlin, but famous bands like The Beach Boys, Bob Seger, Three Dog Night, and Stevie Wonder recorded with the instrument as well. These days, artists like Kanye West and Radiohead still use the tape-based Mellotron, even in our age of digitally synthesized audio perfection.

When he invented this ingenious musical contraption, Harry Chamberlin just wanted a device that American families could enjoy playing in their living rooms. However, the organic and haunting sounds produced by Harry's amazing machines, in the songs and performances of musicians from around the globe, will play on forever.