

Current Issue

Anniversary

80 Years of Hammond Organs



The name "Hammond" is as hallowed as that of any guitar maker in the MI business, responsible for the soul of generations' worth of hits thanks to its classic B3 and C3 model organs and the irresistible sound it made when

combined with the Leslie speaker cabinets. From Stax Records cuts to Deep Purple proto-metal, from '70s reggae to '90s pop like the Wallflowers – a Hammond organ could stoke an unmistakable glow in the core of almost anything it touched.

The company is turning 80 years old this year, celebrating the occasion by inducting the first class of its new "Hammond Hall of Fame" (honorees include Dr. Lonnie Smith, Felix Cavaliere, Booker T, Greg Allman, Ethel Smith, and more). The brand name is a bona fide classic, but the interesting thing about Hammond is its recent move to bring the brand to the forefront of digital performance, including a number of highly portable keyboards with a variety of gigging uses in mind. As Hammond project manager/artist liaison Scott May says, "Whether it's our classic instruments or the newer digital models, there's something underneath the keys that inspires and makes you want to play."

Hammond has made strides in the digital keyboard realm in the last 12 years or so, and sales and marketing manager Gregg Gronowski says that business has trended upward. "With the advent of the Sk portable series we are seeing not only the traditional Hammond player, but a new demographic of players demanding the best in a true performance keyboard."

Beginning with the introduction of 2002's "New B3," Hammond's team of developers has "reverse engineered" both the clockwork mechanics of the classic's tonewheel devices and their coveted idiosyncrasies in order to build endlessly customizable tools for modern musicians.

Terry Lawless, a veteran organist who's toured with U2 for over 10 years, along with tours with Pink, Bruce Springsteen, and more, says the brand's move to digital has maintained the original mystique and nuances. He keeps a 1959 B3 in his home studio but hits the road with the XK. "Hammond goes out of their way to still make the original sounds available to you, I always tell people that it's about having the biggest palette to choose from," he says. He notes that many unique studio effects that used to require mic'ing speakers and manipulating the signal later can now be done simply with effects pedals.

"At the gigs I play, I can do about 90 percent of what I need simply with the new Hammonds."

The moves to modernize are reaching younger players as well. Alex Nester, a pro performer based in Los Angeles who often performs with Salvador Santana, makes the Hammond Sk2 and Sk1 staples of her sound, including an inspired new solo record from last year, *#BurnItDown*. The Sk1's portability is a bonus. "For any kind of gig I might get at the last minute, I just grab that little thing and run out the door," she says. "It's great."

It's a long way from the early days, when Felix Cavallero kicked Hammond bass pedals to drive the scorching sound of the Rascals in the '60s. Just as the digital technology is driving innovation now, the wide open sound of the Hammond organ inspired a whole range of creativity in those days for everyone from musicians to gear junkies. In fact, the organ's most well-known modification – its pairing with Donald Leslie's custom "Leslie" speaker – came about as result of the initiative of one earnest tech, Donald Leslie.

It was the Leslie/B3 sound – a tremolo achieved by a spinning speaker horn – that reinvigorated the organ for popular music and left its mark on pop records through the '50s and '60s. It fell out of favor as new synth keyboards began to break out in the '70s, and the B3 ceased production altogether in 1974. In 1989, Suzuki Corporation bought both the Hammond and Leslie names. Meanwhile, as digital became the norm and tech became ever more accessible, other companies have made runs at emulating the sounds of old Hammonds in software and plug-ins, something Hammond doesn't intend to do. "While we continue to evaluate this product category, we do not currently have plans to release a software-based plug-in," says Gronowski. "An interesting observation is the growing number of songwriters, players, and producers who are using products like our Sk series, which are MIDI-compatible in the studio."

This means the company has doubled down on quality hardware. With the luxurious B3 mk 2 in production to replicate the feel of old models and with the versatile XK and SK series keyboards in full swing throughout professional music communities, Hammond is again in a great position. "We're back in style," says Gronowski.

Written by Matt Parish
Published: 22 January 2014

