

# KEYBOARD JAM

By Pat Kramer

**A**s part of our ongoing Roundtable series, we talked with five leading keyboard players—Bruce Springsteen's piano man Roy Bittan, Rolling Stones keyboardist Chuck Leavell, Peter Gabriel sideperson/solo artist Joy Askew, Tangerine Dream's hi-tech mastermind/solo artist Christopher Franke and Roger Manning, formerly of Jellyfish and now with newcomers Imperial Drag—and asked them several questions pertaining to the art of keyboard playing: their musical influences, were they self-taught or formally trained, when and how they practice, favorite equipment, the future of the piano and what advice they have for beginning artists.



**ROY  
BITTAN**

**Credits:** Bruce Springsteen, Bob Seger  
**Contact:** N/A

## WHO WERE YOUR MUSICAL INFLUENCES?

"Certainly the radio was my biggest influence. I mean I was very attracted to Jerry Lee Lewis and Little Richard. I didn't know who they were when I was a little boy, but I remember having a little transistor radio and putting it on my dad's little studio upright piano with 66 keys and I used to listen to the radio and play along. And obviously, the things that hit me the strongest were by Little Richard and Jerry Lee Lewis. Also, I have to say, my father, who played the piano a little bit by ear, introduced me to a lot of popular music. Because he was older, I listened to a lot of stuff from Al Jolson on through Dixieland jazz. The first song he ever taught me on the piano, and one of the few songs he knew how to play, was 'St. Louis Blues.' I would say, I was playing 'St. Louis Blues' when I was six years old."

## ARE YOU SELF-TAUGHT OR FORMALLY TRAINED?

"I was self-taught on the piano. I never took piano lessons, but I did take accordion lessons when I was a kid. I really studied the accordion for about five or six years, from the time I was six until I was almost twelve. And then, with the accordion being very similar to the piano, I kept playing the piano.

"I never really studied piano until I went to college, when I did take some theory courses and performance courses. It was kind of funny in a way because I kind of knew all the stuff anyway and I just wound up learning the labels and the names in music theory. When I was a little boy, I would play parties, and my parents would get me various little gigs to do—I would make five dollars here and ten dollars there, and I would play all kinds of popular music just by ear."

## WHEN AND HOW DO YOU PRACTICE?

"What I do now is I tend to play. If I feel like I'm not particularly agile, I tend to go to a warm-up routine, which is basically some scales and arpeggios. Otherwise, I tend to just basically play, you know, and if I'm playing on a regular basis, I tend not to play scales and arpeggios. I will sit down and launch into whatever comes at the moment."

## FAVORITE EQUIPMENT

"My favorite piece of equipment is my piano. I guess that is because it is the most directly responsive, the most expressive instrument. The synthesizer doesn't even come close to the expressiveness of a piano. I guess, for that reason, much as I have used other pieces of equipment, whenever I'm really trying to nail down something, I tend to go back to the piano, the acoustic piano. I have an old Yamaha."

## THE FUTURE OF THE PIANO

"That's an interesting question. I think that everything runs in cycles, and I think that it is true that there has been a trend in recent years, with bands who have been called alternative, to sort of create with guitars. But I think that the piano is something that will never die out. I think that it's an incredible tool and also an expressive instrument.

"I think the trend now is back to more musicality, back to more classic song form, bigger melodies, more sophisticated chord construction, and I don't think a piano will ever be out. Even at the height of this alternative thing, there have been artists who have continued along with the piano.

"So, if anything, I think there's going to be an increase in keyboards."

## WHAT ADVICE DO YOU HAVE FOR FLEDGLING ARTISTS?

"Become a doctor, become a lawyer—no [laughs]. I would say, the first thing is, you have to believe in yourself. You have to create from that center of yourself and not be swayed or misled by what 'formats' and what

doesn't 'format.' There's always a niche in the marketplace for something that is excellent and unique.

"I think that the great mistake that some artists and record companies—especially A&R people—make is they look for copycat bands. When Nirvana came out, everybody was looking for Nirvana. When Pearl Jam came out, they wanted to sign bands like Pearl Jam. I think that's all well and good, if you have another band that shows talent and promise and is of that ilk. But, in general, I think the mistake they make is that they don't go for the unique and unusual, and I think that is ultimately what makes not only musical artists, but it makes movie stars. It's their personality and their ability to set themselves apart from the rest of the crowd, and that's what makes them a star. That's the big thing."



**ROGER  
MANNING**

**Credits:** Imperial Drag, Jellyfish  
**Contact:** WORK Group: 310-449-2500

## WHO WERE YOUR MUSICAL INFLUENCES?

"Boy, the list is so long. I'll just try to narrow it down to a few names. Let's see, Chick Corea, Bill Evans, Keith Emerson and Rick Wakeman."

## ARE YOU SELF-TAUGHT OR FORMALLY TRAINED?

"I've had a tremendous amount of schooling since I was five. A lot of people accuse me of having too much education. I'm so used to playing classical and jazz, since I was five up through high school, that when I started getting into pop and rock stuff, I realized that there were a lot of great rock & roll songwriters who didn't have any education at all. And it was kind of like I had to learn to divorce myself of all of the rules and break them in hopes of bettering myself as a musician, in terms of tapping into a lot of emotional things that

microphones, without experiencing the bleedover that occurs when you use microphones or the feedback that might have occurred in previous years before this technology. In particular, I use a Yamaha PF-500, and they also have a new instrument that I use in smaller situations. If I'm going to sit in locally with bands, or if I'm going to go write with someone, they have an instrument called a PF-150 that I also like very, very much. For a piano sound, those two instruments, in particular, I'm fond of. As far as the other sounds that I might use, such as a Fender Rhodes-type sound, a Wurliizer electric piano-type sound or other synthesizer-based tones and textures, I like the Korg products. In particular, the 01/W series and the new Trinity."

## THE FUTURE OF THE PIANO

"I think the piano sound is as constant as the Northern Star. The piano, in my mind, is the most amazing instrument ever developed. The real piano itself is still an incredible example of mechanics and craftsmanship and certainly sound and tonality. And still to this day, if I'm playing in a room by myself, I'd rather be on a wonderful Steinway, or these days a good Yamaha, but a real piano is still my first—and will always be—my favorite love."

## WHAT ADVICE DO YOU HAVE FOR FLEDGLING

### ARTISTS?

"You know, a lot of people have said to me, 'Chuckie, you've been so lucky in your career.' And I have been lucky, but there's an old saying that luck is at the intersection of preparation and opportunity. You know, the first word in that analogy is preparation. You have to practice, you have to be prepared and you have to feel confident about what you can do and you certainly have to have a love for it and the joy you receive from it."

"The second word is opportunity. You have to learn to recognize opportunity, and you have to be willing to go the extra mile to get that opportunity. I remember, early in my career, when I was growing up in Alabama, the closest well-known recording studio was up in Muscle Shoals, and when I was probably fifteen, standing outside the door at Muscle Shoals Studios, just waiting for whoever was recording to take a break so I might be able to walk in, meet some people, sit down, play the piano and have somebody hear me. And you know, it takes that kind of desire, looking for opportunities. I would say, put those things together, preparation and looking for opportunity, and you'll find it."



### JOY ASKEW

**Credits:** Peter Gabriel, Joe Jackson and Private Music solo artist  
**Contact:** Private Music: 310-358-4558

## WHO WERE YOUR MUSICAL INFLUENCES?

"The biggest influence for me—and this is going to be surprising—is Hendrix. I am an incredible guitar lover. I think that's why I don't play the guitar hardly at all, so being a keyboard player and a guitar lover, I always wanted to play with guitar players. I think that was my approach."

"When I was a very young teenager, like thirteen, I became a blues freak. It was all piano players—Otis Spann, Champion Jack Dupree—then all the blues singers—Memphis Minnie, Bessie Smith. I was completely obsessed and just wanted to get a hold of anything I could. Then I really picked up on the British wave, the original Fleetwood Mac with Peter Green and Jeremy Spencer. Then I picked up on Miles Davis. And then Keith Jarrett. And those were early influences alongside Cream, the Rolling Stones and the Beatles. In 1989 I got to meet [the late] Nicky Hopkins and hang out

with him and play with him. He came to see me play at CBGB's. He came backstage and said, 'I love it, I love it.' And that was just incredible to me! I said, 'Oh, I can never be that kind of player.' He was such an influence."

## ARE YOU SELF-TAUGHT OR FORMALLY TRAINED?

"I took lessons from about ten to fifteen, classical lessons, but of course, the blues influences were me taking that off record. But I did classical music, then I did go to jazz college—Jazz And Commercial Music College in Newcastle, England."

"In fact, they were swamped with keyboard players, and I had just bought a saxophone. They took one look at me and said, 'We need saxophone players,' so I did that as my first study. And I was kind of intimidated by the keyboard players, so I didn't step out as a keyboard player until a few years later when I got a job backing the Flirtations. The Fender Rhodes became my ax, so I did that for a few years after I left college."

## WHEN AND HOW DO YOU PRACTICE?

"I get up in the morning and play and sing. And sometimes it's incredibly early and I worry about the neighbors, but I have a kind of rule: If you want to do it, go with it. Because I put my creativity first."

## FAVORITE EQUIPMENT

"I play a Prophet 5 synthesizer, which is the original polyphonic synthesizer, and I bought it in '81. I still have my original one, and I had it updated. That's my favorite. I also use an Akai S-1000 sampler, so most of my record is made up of samples and Prophet."

## THE FUTURE OF THE PIANO

"It's difficult, you know, but I do love the fact that Tori Amos is out there pushing it with her thing. It's a difficult future, but I see it in recordings, let's put it that way. I think it will always be there. You know, I'm not quite sure what the next trends will be pop-wise, but I certainly would still put it in my music."

## WHAT ADVICE DO YOU HAVE FOR FLEDGLING

### ARTISTS?

"Absolutely follow what you want to do and seek out your own sounds. You've got to have the music inside of you, and I think you can interpret it on anything. And I would say choose a good color, like an organ or a piano or a good analog synthesizer, and make sure you have it in yourself before you get caught up with technology."



### CHRISTOPHER FRANKE

**Credits:** Tangerine Dream  
**Contact:** Cori Chill at C.I.A.: 310-657-2211

## WHO WERE YOUR MUSICAL INFLUENCES?

"In terms of the keyboard playing, I always admired Keith Jarrett. He was also the person who gave me the insight into what spontaneity is all about. I was raised with classical music, where everything was composed out and there was not much room for the player. And Jarrett instilled the idea in me, when I was maybe nine or ten, that even as a performer, there is a gateway into the composer, and he said, 'Hey, why can't that be the same person?'"

"And also there are classical composers like Charles Ives and Claude Debussy, who influenced my musical taste. But a lot of influences came, not from musicians, but from painters like Miro, Kandinsky and Salvador Dali. Also, Kurt Weill and John Cage."

## ARE YOU SELF-TAUGHT OR FORMALLY TRAINED?

"I have a music background through my parents because they are also musicians. I started to learn the violin when I was four and went into trumpet because everyone played the violin in my house—my sisters, everybody—and I wanted something louder [laughs]. So I chose the trumpet as my classical instrument."

"In Germany, when you study one instrument, you also have to take the piano as a side instrument and harmony. Later on, I took composition as a guest student, before I even became a student, so I could do that in the afternoons with the Berlin Conservatory. So I had that classical study, but in addition, I did a self-teaching thing for percussion and drums and then synthesizers. Because I had the first synthesizer in Europe and there was no teacher around, I had to become one myself. I started it and became like a pioneer of electronic music in Europe."

## WHEN AND HOW DO YOU PRACTICE?

"After a while, the most natural practicing thing was to play live onstage. I did hundreds of concerts around the world with my band, Tangerine Dream. I did that for eighteen years, but the last few years I concentrated on film scoring and TV scoring and studio albums. My last concert was three years ago."

"In the studio, because you don't really get the same daily amount of training, you play differently. It's interesting that we're talking about this, because right now I'm starting to do something which you can call practicing, which I haven't really done in ten years, because I really got enough practice just by doing those concerts all the time and practicing for the concerts. So now I go back to my old classical composers and just play my etude or I play some modern music."

## FAVORITE EQUIPMENT

"I just got a new keyboard, a Kurzweil K2500. If you say that name to musicians, they get wet eyes because it's such a beautiful new keyboard instrument. It has an excellent weighted master keyboard and has a so-called ribbon above the keyboard which you can use instead of a pitch wheel to modulate the pitch. It's my favorite instrument of the month. Besides that, I'm using a Wave Frame 1000 Wavestation—that's one of my favorite instruments—then an Emulator IV and then an AKAI S-3000. There you have my favorites of the day."

## THE FUTURE OF THE PIANO

"The future of the piano is as bright as one can imagine because it leads you from an acoustic instrument into the whole electronic world of interaction of new communication because it's always the keyboardist in a band who has to touch that. So, with their use of computers, of new electronic gear, they're also the behind-the-scenes helpers and creators of the music for all interactive and CD-ROM media and internet activities. Therefore, the whole instrument is involving a totally new world. And the keyboardists in ten years will be in a very excellent position to really be the force behind new music styles. And it may be by accident. It could have been the guitar player, but it happened that all electronic advancements came, somehow, through the keyboard."

"And in just the physical acoustic way, even the pianos are progressing. In Germany, I just played a new piano. It's twelve feet high, it weighs two tons and the actual keyboard is on the second floor of that monster. There's actually a spiral staircase going to the second floor. And then you sit on the keyboard with all the strings in front of you."

## WHAT ADVICE DO YOU HAVE FOR FLEDGLING

### ARTISTS?

"My strongest advice is: When you play keyboards you should practice singing and drumming because then you can express yourself better on a keyboard."

And you just have to be patient, and don't run after success." 