

A Breath Of Fresh Air

By [Jay Asher](#) • April 11, 2011



Judd Miller is a Los Angeles based musician and composer who is well known for bringing exceptional, expressive qualities to numerous film scores and albums, created with his unique sample and synthesizer libraries. He has performed on scores for composers such as Maurice Jarre, Stewart Copeland, Danny Elfman, James Newton Howard, John Williams and James Horner. He has done programming and sound design for such artists as the Yellowjackets, Michael Brecker, Peter Erskine, Vince Mendoza, Jimmy Haslip and Bob Mintzer.

Jay Asher: Hi Judd, Thanks for doing this. We first met many years ago when you were an excellent trumpet player and I was playing piano on the same sessions. What brought you to the EVI?

Judd Miller: In 1981, I was on a gig with woodwind player Terry Harrington. He was talking about Nyle Steiner who invented the EVI, and it peaked my interest. I took a trip to meet Nyle and find out more about his instrument. I really liked the whole concept and decided to jump in.

How difficult was the transition from playing the trumpet to learning to play the EVI?

It was a big transition mentally and physically.

What about the actual breathing and stuff?

It's completely different. I feel that the EVI is a harder transition and concept to grasp for a trumpet player than the EWI is for a woodwind player. Woodwind players are more used to switching and doubling on more diverse instruments.

It's a bigger difference than going from trumpet to flugelhorn for instance?

Yes

Who is the first composer who actually hired you to do this?

Joe Conlan.

Joe seems to have been a jumping off point for a few guys I have talked to. He was pretty progressive for the time, the way he looked at things.

Yes he was. I got the instrument and two weeks later he hired me for a TV movie. Then about a year later I got a call to play trumpet for Donny and Marie, the only road gig I ever did.

So you were “a little bit country and a little bit rock ‘n’ roll.”

(Judd laughs) It was a great band. The great thing about that gig was that I was the only horn player. So, on the first rehearsal I took out the EVI and Donny really liked it and gave me the freedom to use it whenever. This was pre-midi, around 1983. I was playing the original EVI by Crumar (which had a great sawtooth wave, filter, etc, with mods by Nyle.

What was the first hardware synth you purchased?

It was an SMS synth, that I bought from Dave Boruff, who probably was one of the first EWI players. SMS was a small company that I believe Wendy Carlos had something to do with, based in the San Francisco area. The real eye opener came with the next synth purchase around 1985, the Oberheim Xpander. Michael Brecker was doing incredible things with his EWI and his Xpander at the time. We met at Nyle's one evening and became very close friends.

The Xpander was a great sounding box.

That's the only hardware synth that I still own.

So when MIDI came along this opened up a lot of possibilities. At what point instead of always playing it live and recording did you start entering parts into a sequencer?

Around 1986, I think. I remember it as a year when things for me started changing, as far as playing live or sequencing. I was on a session with synth great Michael Boddicker and he liked what I was doing. He introduced me to Maurice Jarre. The first movie I did with Maurice was just Michael and I, and I played only the Xpander. Still, no midi. Nyle was just finishing the mods for a Cooper control voltage to midi box, but it wasn't quite ready. Michael Boddicker then suggested me to Bill Conti for "The Karate Kid 2."

We're talking about the pan flute sound?

Yes. Mr. Miaggi's sound. Zamfir played the real pan flute on the first Karate Kid, but couldn't do the second. I had played trumpet for Bill on some films such as "Rocky 2", so I knew Bill. Right at this time (1986) Nyle finished the Cooper midi box. I showed up to the first Karate Kid session (with a 90 piece orchestra) never trying out the new box or pan flute sound, which was on Michael's Emulator. Luckily it worked. It worked really well. I was now thrown into the world of midi, and also a lot of work.

(Jay laughs) Oh good lord, no pressure, right?

Yeah, no pressure at all! All I can say is a big thanks to Nyle for everything. Without Nyle, none of this musical chapter would have been possible.

What was the first sampler you owned?

A Prophet 2002. I remember getting the memory upgraded to a half a meg from a quarter of meg. \$500.00. The sampler sequence of purchases is as follows: Prophet 2002 to Akai S1000 to Roland SP700 to Emulator 4 to Giga studio to Kontakt. It was a lot of work transferring sounds with each new purchase. Garth Heije of Chicken systems made it infinitely easier to transfer sounds later on. The E4 was the most significant hardware sampler. Kontakt is now my choice.

So when you get a new library do you have to do a lot of tweaking to make it work as responsively as you would like?

Yes. There is a lot of programming to be done.

So nowadays, composers live all over the world, not just in media centers and they may not have access to a Judd Miller. If he decides he wants to learn to play and EVI or EWI and not just a breath controller and they were not originally a trumpet player or a woodwind player. This would be a pretty daunting task, I assume?

First, let me say that they do have access to me through the internet. I do it all the time. However, if someone wants to jump in there is a learning curve, as in any instrument, to be able to play an EWI or EVI.

So it is really only practical for someone who is already at least a decent player of those?

Hard to say. One can take it up as a brand new instrument if they're interested.

Yes, and that is why a keyboard player playing samples and trying to make them sound exactly like the real thing is an illusion to me. Even if you are a good orchestrator and you know the instrument, you just do not have the same relationship with a specific instruments along side a couple of guys playing together with their specific instruments and their relationship to it, if we do not play the instrument well ourselves, there is no way we have that same emotional and personal relationship with it that a great players has and brings to the table.

OK

I assume though that most of the time if they hire you, your version is going to be a finished part in the project, or why go to the expense and effort?

That's right.

Typically, do composers send you a MIDI score with their version of the parts and say, "Do it like this but make it sound better?"

Sometimes I work like that.

I probably would send you my MIDI with the directive to make it better and then get it from you as audio files.

Yes, that is what I mostly do when working out of my studio. Ill send them MP3 files for them to check out and then I'll send them the wave files.

So for a decent trumpet or wind player, about how long would it take them to get to be reasonably adept?

Let's say around 6 months.

But aren't the fingerings different?

Fingerings are close to the trumpet or woodwind fingerings. It takes work getting around the octave changes. Programming takes a lot of time. To bypass that, my good friend Matt Traum at Patchman Music, <http://www.patchmanmusic.com/> makes and sells great banks of sounds for EWI, EVI and other windsynths.

Most are probably going to want to use their own libraries anyway.

If that's the case, be prepared to spend a lot of time programming, especially in the sample world.

Would you sometimes find it more exciting to play analog sounds rather than orchestral sounds if you had your druthers?

It depends on what's needed at that moment. Analog, such as Xpander and sample modeling, such as WIVI are more expressive than playing samples. Sometimes playing a simple sawtooth wave has a refreshing soulfulness. Just think back to Tom Scott and his Lyricon. I was working with Tom with Dave Koz on one of Dave's first records, and we were searching for something interesting and soulful that Tom would play on his Lyricon. We chose an Xpander patch, a sawtooth, with some minor additions. I believe that you could hear who the player really is when they're using a less complex sound. Take an old Minimoog and give the same patch to Herbie Hancock, Joe Zawinul, Jan Hammer, and Tom Scott. You'll know the player immediately. Sometimes, with all the complex sound available, it's not as clear. The simpler the sound, the more you hear the player.

I would that with so many scores now taking a more sound design approach and hybrid scores mixing orchestra and samples and synths, that this is an area that could be explored a lot more. Do you agree?

Yeah. I thought Mark Isham did a great job re-exploring the analog realm in his score for "Crash." I thought that was a great score, reflecting back to what he and Maurice were doing in the 80's.

Thanks Judd, it was great talking to you.