

# DAVID FRANK:

# The Systematic Hitmaker

**Twenty years ago, when MIDI was young and the airwaves percolated with the first generation of synth-pop hits, David Frank ruled the charts, both as a member of the hitmaking duo The System, and as a songwriter and arranger for such artists as Phil Collins, Robert Palmer, Chaka Khan, and others.**

BUT TIMES HAVE CHANGED, AND TODAY...NO, ON SECOND THOUGHT, TIMES haven't changed. David Frank remains at the top of his game, having penned recent hits for Dream, 98°, O-Town and Justin Guarini, not to mention Christina Aguilera's record-breaking smash, "Genie in a Bottle." And his latest endeavors include songwriting sessions with Kelly Clarkson, Hilary Duff, and Michael McDonald.

How did this Boston-bred, classically-trained musician attain such longevity in the fickle pop market?

"My approach," explains David, "has always been to integrate harmonies and melodies that affect people's emotions with rhythms that make them want to move. And of course, the lyrics are a big component as well. When all those things coexist together, well, those are the times when I've had hit records." As examples of that winning formula, Frank cites The System's "You Are in My System" and "Don't Disturb This Groove," 98°'s "The Hardest Thing," Dream's "He Loves You Not," and of course, "Genie in a Bottle."

Like most of Frank's hits, those songs are powered by infectious, sequencer-based grooves. David says he's been fascinated by music

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technology since age 12, when his music theory teacher at the New England Conservatory of Music exposed the students to Wendy Carlos' *Switched-On Bach*. "I remember thinking it was cool," recalls Frank, "but I didn't get deeper into it until a few years later, when someone brought an ARP Odyssey synthesizer to a gig I was on. He set it to a sound, and I played the song melody on it. It probably sounded awful, but I bought one the very next day. I'd spent many years learning jazz and classical and all the theoretical foundations of music, but at that point I became fascinated with the technology."

When MIDI debuted in the early '80s, Frank was one of the first pop writers to realize its potential. "The new synthesizers and drum machines allowed you to create a new sort of music," he explains. "You could have more parts co-existing at the same time and have new control over the music's rhythm. Musicians used to spend countless hours in the studio replaying things, aiming for that sort of precision. I became fascinated by the fact that you could now quantize music, which enabled you to create more music in a smaller space and have it sound better."

These days, two Yamaha Motif keyboards sit at the center of David's studio. "I love both of them," he says. "I've seen a lot of things come around with synthesizers, and I have to say that Yamaha definitely got it right with the Motif. I still use my original Motif8, which has weighted keys, plus my newer ES7 which has synthesizer action. I usually find myself using them in multi-timbral mode — I might have four or five parts coming from the ES7, and then a few more from the Motif8. I always have a lot of different gear in my studio, including many of the new virtual synths, but I still find myself using the Motifs a lot, because their sounds are just so great, especially the drums. The Motifs are great instruments, and I'm really grateful to the people who designed them."

Frank still clocks many hours at his keyboards. In fact, he estimates that three-fourths of his music time is spent creating grooves. "It's been that way for 25 years," he claims. "I know that a lot of songwriters would insist that if you don't have the words and the melodies, you have nothing. But I've found that if you have a really great track without a melody, it can inspire the writers to think of better lyrics and melodies. It's not an illusion — it's worked over and over for me. That's why most of my songs existed as completed instrumental tracks before they were songs. 'Genie in a Bottle,' for example, was a complete track before it had lyrics or a melody. Later I wrote a melody and a lyric together with a couple of writers who specialize in those things. I do occasionally write a song from scratch with other writers — that was the case with O-Town's 'These are the Days.' But I still spend most of my time writing track ideas, because I believe so strongly in the importance of those underpinnings. And I still find myself waking up in the middle of the night with an idea for a new track."