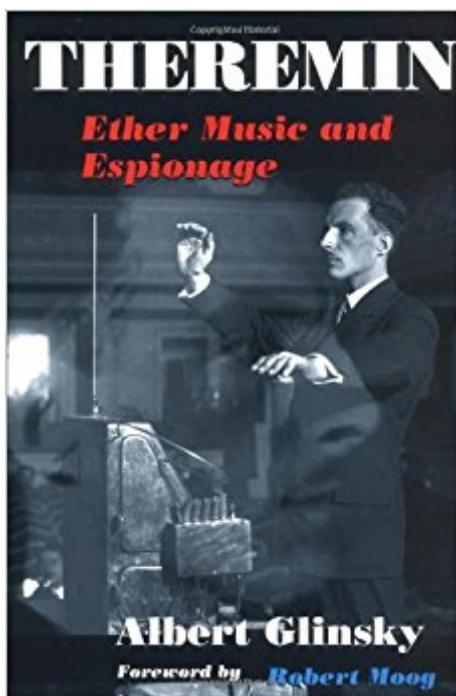


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Theremin: Ether Music And Espionage (Music In American Life)



Synopsis

Leon Theremin led a life of flamboyant musical invention laced with daring electronic stealth. A creative genius and prolific inventor, Theremin launched the field of electronic music virtually singlehandedly in 1920 with the musical instrument that bears his name. The theremin - the only instrument that is played without being touched - created a sensation worldwide and paved the way for the modern synthesizer. Its otherworldly sound became familiar in sci-fi films and even in rock music. This magical instrument that charmed millions, however, is only the beginning of the story. As a Soviet scientist, Theremin surrendered his life and work to the service of State espionage. On assignment in Depression-era America, he became the toast of New York society and worked the engines of capitalist commerce while passing data on U.S. industrial technology to the Soviet apparatus. Following his sudden disappearance from New York in 1938, Theremin was exiled to a Siberian labor camp and subsequently vanished into the top-secret Soviet intelligence machine, presumed dead for nearly thirty years. Using the same technology that lay behind the theremin, he designed bugging devices that eavesdropped on U.S. diplomatic offices and stood at the center of a pivotal cold war confrontation. Throughout his life, Theremin developed many other electronic wonders, including one of the earliest televisions and multimedia devices that anticipated performance art and virtual reality by decades. In this first full biography of Leon Theremin, Albert Glinsky depicts the inventor's nearly one hundred-year life span as a microcosm of the twentieth century. Theremin is seen at the epicenter of most of the major events of the century: the Russian Revolution, two world wars, America's Great Depression, Stalin's purges, the cold war, and perestroika. His life emerges as no less than a metaphor for the divergence of communism and capitalism. Theremin blends the whimsical and the treacherous into a chronicle that takes in everything from the KGB to Macy's store windows, Alcatraz to the Beach Boys, Hollywood thrillers to the United Nations, Joseph Stalin to Shirley Temple. Theremin's world of espionage and invention is an amazing drama of hidden loyalties, mixed motivations, and an irrepressibly creative spirit.

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Customer Reviews

For this biography, Glinsky admirably resurrects the name of Leon Theremin, the Soviet inventor of an electronic musical instrument played by moving one's hands in the space between two antennae, but his use of Theremin's life as a metaphor for the Cold War leads him astray. An engineering prodigy, Theremin (1896-1993) invented his instrument early in the 20th century. The synthesizer's forerunner, the theremin was most often used in soundtracks for science fiction films; an advanced version was also used in the Beach Boys' "Good Vibrations." According to Glinsky, Theremin was also a ladies' man. Married several times, he was rumored to be looking for female companionship when he was in his 90s. The inventor lived in the U.S. during the 1930s, where for a short time he was the toast of the town, but he quickly fell into debt. After he returned to the Soviet Union in 1938, he was arrested and spent time in a labor camp before he was freed. Only to be forced to remain in service to the state. Glinsky, a composer and professor at Mercyhurst College in Pennsylvania, is unable to resist the temptation to use Theremin as a metaphor for the political clash between communism and capitalism. Not only does this allegory lack nuance. Glinsky himself notes that U.S. leftists were persecuted, albeit on a much lesser scale, during the McCarthy era. But the political focus clouds the author's portrait of Theremin's personality and prevents him from using his talents to evaluate Theremin's musical legacy. Photos not seen by PW. (Oct.) Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Lev Sergeyevich Termen (1896-1993) grew up in St. Petersburg, the son of a lawyer and a mother who dabbled in the arts. Naturally inclined toward music and physics, Lev understood electromagnetic fields and applied these principles to design a "space controlled" instrument employing recently developed vacuum tube oscillators and amplifiers. Dubbing the device with his French ancestral name, Theremin, he toured Europe and America, training several to play it.

Returning, perhaps abducted, to Russia as Stalin rose to power, he was imprisoned in Siberia for months, then put in a special unit to develop listening devices to spy on the U.S. Embassy. Glinsky tells the tale of Termen's two lives with spirit and empathy, describing the horrors of the Soviet state and Termen's tenacity in continuing to create electronic instruments. Meanwhile, the original theremin inspired Robert Moog to develop his influential electronic synthesizers in the 1960s. Glinsky delves into the physics of Termen's creations, but principally this is the inspiring story of an inventive genius who launched a revolution in music making. Alan Hirsch Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved

At this date I am aware that Albert Glinsky's biography on Leon Theremin and his "Ether Wave" musical instrument, and on his involvement in Soviet espionage, has been subjected to quite an impressive number of reviews, including those here on . As a person who tried for over forty years to teach Americans about the Russian language, Russian literature, Russian (and Soviet) culture, I can attest that Glinsky's task was not an easy one. As you read, you encounter his constant attempts to provide us with explanations of Russian and Soviet history and politics, with arcane aspects of science and technology in radio wave generation and in television mechanics and electronics, and, of course, in music. As a teacher I can only admire Glinsky's constantly impressive ability to explain all these things so that the uninitiated reader can, at least with focused attention and effort at times, understand them and see how they give a context for Leon Theremin's accomplishments and his actions regarding them. When I was a graduate student in Russian Studies at Cornell University in the early 1970s I had occasion to meet and speak with Robert Moog, the "American Father of Electronic Music," who lived in proximity to Cornell outside Ithaca, New York. I remember that Moog was curious about how I, a non-Russian American from Montana, wound up studying Russian, and that was the topic of our brief conversation as I recall it. But, of course, he said nothing to me in that conversation about how it was a Russian, Lev Sergeevich Termin, who was essentially his inspiration and mentor in the creation of electronic devices to generate music. At that time I had never heard of Termen or the theremin. I could only recall this ephemeral contact when I read Moog's foreword to Glinsky's biography of Theremin (Termen). After reading the book, I went so far as to order a theremin of my own from an online source (not, I admit, a Moog theremin...though I may wind up getting one of those too). I equipped it with a used Fender guitar amplifier and set about to teach myself to play the theremin in my home office. I had Theremin's story of personally instructing Soviet founder Vladimir Ilyich Lenin in 1922 to play a well-known classical musical piece, and about how Lenin, at first guided by Theremin's hands from

behind, took over on his own and successfully completed the playing of the piece. This story gave me hope. Theremin, in Glinsky's biography, tells people, most potential customers for the instrument I suspect, that "anyone can learn to play this instrument in a fortnight." I have to say that my own experience is contrary. Even availing myself of the online instruction ably given by such theremin virtuosos as Thomas Grillo and seeing the wonderful performances of others, I still, considerably beyond a fortnight, am making only embarrassing squeaks and squeals. I can't even play a recognizable "Happy Birthday," or "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star." I don't think any musical group would welcome aboard what my theremin might contribute. I'll have to keep my day job. But only think...Glinsky's book made me give it a shot and I, alleged as an expert already, learned a great deal about Russia and the Soviet Union, and about Radio Waves, Television, Espionage, and even electronic music. The book is a wonder. You definitely should buy it. Highly Recommended.

Lots of geopolitical background, maybe more than is necessary as it tends to crowd out the main subject here, but it does help you understand the times he lived in, why he disappeared, and what happened to him afterward (forced "work" camp during the purge almost took him from us early on). Theremin was an electrical genius, and perhaps too bright when it came to "creative" finance, which may have been the main reason he left the US.

FANTASTIC - key to my research!

Everyone interested in world and music history should read this!

Interesting!

Glinsky has done a great job of compiling the factual story of Leon Theremin and electronic music, particularly the Theremin instrument through the years. I have several reservations. First, the writing style is pedestrian and not terribly stylish or interesting. Second, it would have been nice to have a bit more detail on how the instrument actually works. And last but not most serious, Glinsky is obsessed with the evils of communism and spends far too much time sneering at Americans fooled by Stalin and on wallowing in the grotesque history of communism in the USSR than is justified given that the book is about Leon Theremin, not Stalin, Lenin, Beria, Khrushchev, etc. etc. He gives us several pages on Beria and his fate, for example, when Beria actually had only an indirect link to Theremin. The point seems to be to portray Beria as an evil man. Fine, but this book is about Leon Theremin,

right? My last reservation is that in the end, I still did not feel we ever got to know Theremin. Why he did what he did, what he thought of events in his life, remains a mystery. It may well be that Theremin, a committed communist, was too alien to Glinsky's own imagination for him to be able to write about him with any insight or sympathy. We get, generally, a pretty clinical detachment. This is a fine book for the facts. I cherish it as a solid resource. But Leon Theremin himself remains unknown to us on a personal level, and so as a biography this book falls short.

You don't have to care about Theremin's inventions and achievements to find his life story fascinating but if you do you'll be delighted by this book.

Theremin has been introduced to me as one of the inventors of the passive wireless sensor interrogated through a radiofrequency wireless link, also known as "The Thing" (device for spying on the American ambassador residence in Moscow). This book shows how Theremin struggled on the one hand on promoting his musical instrument, and on the other hand was a successful radiofrequency engineer developing systems controlled remotely through impedance variation of an oscillator circuit. Very inspiring story.

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