

# Breaking into Concert Sound: Getting in the Door at Maryland Sound

*Every industry has its movers and shakers, pillars of industry which shape and change the course of events. In computers it's the seemingly omnipresent IBM and the ubiquitous Apple Computer Corp. Professional sports has the Los Angeles Lakers basketball dynasty of the 80s, and the San Francisco 49ers, going for four Super Bowls in a row.*

THE CONCERT SOUND FIELD IS NO EXCEPTION to this rule, with power companies like Clair Brothers and ShowCo, their huge mega-systems covering the largest touring entourage in the world.

It is also true, however, that there are smaller companies in each of these industries which come along and make a big splash with an amazing product or service. The home computer market, for example, was nearly cornered by the lowly Commodore 64 during the 80s. The Houston Rockets shocked the Lakers with elimination in the 1986 NBA playoffs. And in sound reinforcement, there is Maryland Sound Inc., a bright, efficient and well-managed sound company with a reputation for 100 percent customer satisfaction, a long client list of major superstars, and a bit of an image as an upstart underdog.

In this third and final installment of our series on breaking into live sound, we will spend the afternoon at the West Coast operation of Maryland Sound, learning about the company's history and getting the inside story from Michael Stahl, general manager of Maryland Sound West Coast. We will then visit with two of MSI's employees, Stephen Zelenka, concert production manager, and Carla Hixson, a relative newcomer who is moving up fast, and one of the few women active in concert sound.

## THE COMPANY

Maryland Sound was founded in 1970 by Robert Goldstein, a former employee of Clair Brothers. Goldstein, a man who believes that cus-

tomers service must be the number one priority of a sound reinforcement company, founded his company on the precept of quality. He committed his company to three important concepts. The first was to never compromise the sound of a concert system. This meant a great deal of research and extra labor to insure that only the highest quality components and engineering were used in his systems. The second concept was that each and every employee, from the secretary to the front-of-house mixer, is important to the company and is in essence an ambassador to the world for Maryland Sound. The third concept was to have the right people in place, with the skills and experience to do each job right the first time.

These three concepts still permeate each and every job for which Maryland Sound is contracted, whether it be a permanent installation such as the Universal Amphitheatre, or a large touring system like Pink Floyd or Neil Diamond might require. The outstanding quality of Maryland Sound systems is well-documented and the loyalty and satisfaction of their employees is obvious from all the smiling faces one encounters upon entering the unassuming red brick building in North Hollywood, far from its more humble beginnings.

The mid to late 70s was a busy time for the young company with tour dates and reinforcement jobs. Acquiring his first major account, Frankie Vali and the Four Seasons, during this period, Goldstein concentrated on client retention, building his inventory of equipment and

strengthening his position in the industry. He made many contacts and enriched existing relationships with other sound mixers.

The 1980s was a period of rapid growth for Maryland Sound and saw the acquisition of several medium-sized sound companies complete with equipment and clientele. The biggest turning point of this period came when Maryland Sound acquired Northwest Audio, out of Portland, OR. This provided the company with headline acts such as the Eagles, Neil Young, and Crosby, Stills and Nash.

Around 1983, Goldstein began to do permanent installations on the East Coast under the leadership of Will Perry, another Maryland Sound engineer. These smaller installations were the forerunners of the large installations at venues like the Greek Theatre in Los Angeles and Universal Studios in Florida. Today, Maryland Sound is at the forefront of the permanent installation field, with major contracts in theme parks and clientele worldwide.

In late 1988, Maryland Sound made two extremely important acquisitions. The first purchase was the assets of the bankrupt Stanal Sound, whose client list included Neil Diamond. Industry interest in Stanal was high, and included such sound companies as ElectroTech and Clair Brothers, but Maryland Sound prevailed. This acquisition was a big boost to its West Coast operation. The second acquisition was the purchase of Audio Techniques, which was providing sound for the group Chicago. Audio Techniques had developed an excellent propri-



*Figure 1. Maryland Sound technician Bryan Nemecek performing a console modification.*

etary sound system and this equipment and technology became the sole property of Maryland Sound, which continues to expand on it.

A quick tour of the facility revealed stacks of high-tech sound equipment of every variety: Digital reverbs from \$300 units to top-of-the-line \$5,000 units; hundreds of speaker

cabinets stacked to the ceiling; thousands of watts of power; every conceivable microphone; and a very well-equipped lab, where all incoming equipment is thoroughly checked out. Even major modifications to the consoles can be and often are performed here in this high-tech wonderland.

In 1990, Maryland Sound continues to be a major force in the sound reinforcement industry. Reviews of the sound quality of Maryland Sound systems have been extremely positive and several concert reviewers stated it was the "best they have heard." This stands as a testament to the commitment to quality that drives this company.

## THE WEST COAST MANAGER

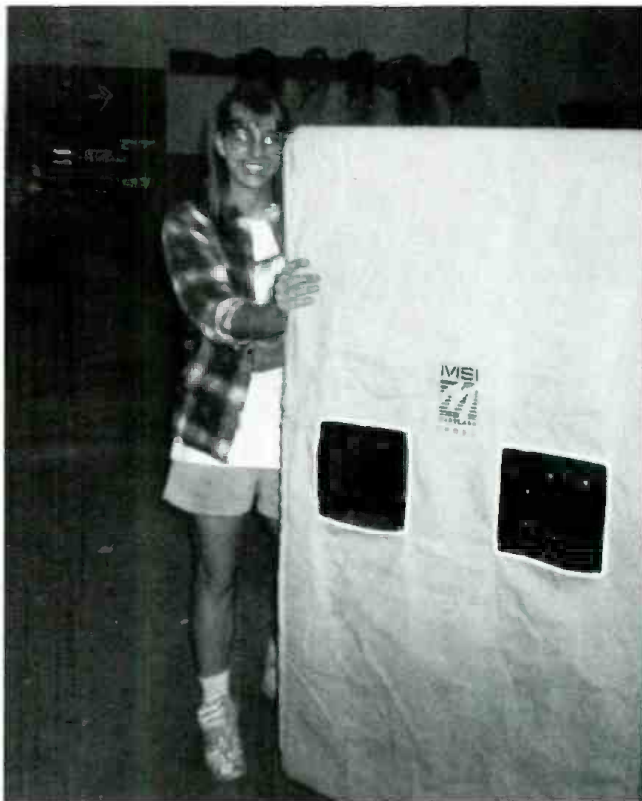
Stahl began his career at about the same time Maryland Sound was getting started. After graduating with a degree in Political Science, Stahl started his own 8 track recording studio and a small sound reinforcement company. His system consisted of 16 Perkins boxes and a variety of 16 horns per side, with a 16 channel Tascam console. He did some work at this time for Stan Miller of Stanal Sound and for Clair Brothers. When the fuel crisis of 1972 hit, Stahl was unable to get the fuel for his trucks and was practically put out of business. He decided to look into working for someone else and was immediately hired by Clair Brothers, who

also purchased much of his equipment.

Stahl remained at Clair for the next 12 years, rising rapidly through the ranks, to mix shows like the Beach Boys, Chicago, Queen, KISS and finally ending his career at Clair in 1984 on a triumphant note with the ten-month-long Jackson's Victory Tour. After many years on the road, and in particular the extremely arduous Victory tour, he was somewhat disenchanted with the life of a touring engineer and his position at Clair Brothers. Stahl felt it was time for a change, so he said his goodbyes to Clair Brothers and the rigors of the road. After a brief stint with Mountain Productions who staged the Victory Tour, Stahl moved to Los Angeles to seek employment as a "non-touring" sound engineer.

To Stahl's surprise and chagrin, the only job offers forthcoming were to go back out on the road. This was contrary to the purpose of his coming to Los Angeles, so he turned down all offers. A point of irony in his story is that he unsuccessfully applied at both Stanal Sound and Audio Techniques, both of which were acquired

*Figure 2. Carla Hixson demonstrates that she can keep up with the best of them.*



by Maryland Sound and whose assets Stahl now controls.

Finally, out of necessity, he began to look for employment elsewhere.

This led him to a three year stint in the construction field where his skill as a crew manager served him well, but the audio engineering story





*Figure 3. Michael Stahl makes a point to the author about getting into the concert sound field.*

being written here, might have ended there.

When an old friend, Leo Bonamy, former production manager for Chicago, became production manager at the Universal Amphitheatre, he called on Stahl to do some work for the Universal Studios Tour. Stahl soon found himself working part-time as stage manager at Universal

Studio's Screen Test Theatre, as well as doing occasional shows at the Amphitheatre.

It was this work and Stahl's continuing contact with Bonamy that opened the door to Maryland Sound. Bonamy told Stahl that Goldstein was looking for a West Coast manager and recommended that Stahl apply. It took some time for Stahl to

decide if this was something he wanted to pursue, and he let several months go by. While Stahl was in Boston during a family illness, Bonamy called to urge him to call Goldstein, and he did. Goldstein suggested they meet and talk about the West Coast position—which they did. He was favorably impressed and persuaded Stahl to take the position as the new West Coast manager of Maryland Sound.

A most interesting and ironic point of Stahl's rise to the top is that years before, as a mixer on the road, he met Goldstein at a show where both were mixing for different acts, and now years later, Goldstein was in the position to offer Stahl an incredible career opportunity. This underlines the concept that one should never burn bridges, because one never knows where a person or band will end up. Remember that bands like U2 and The Beatles were once opening bands for someone else.

## THE STAFF

The saying goes that a chain is only as strong as its weakest link. So, too, a company is known by the employees it has. This is one area where Maryland Sound really shines. The company seems to have a deep commitment to fairness towards each employee and a real respect not only for their skills and abilities, but respect also for who they are as people. During the course of the afternoon, we were able to speak with several Maryland Sound employees about their history and feelings about the company.

## CARLA: A FRESH FACE IN PRO SOUND

Carla Hixson is a new face on the pro sound scene. Only 23, she is very excited to be involved with Maryland Sound. Hixson started her career in her home town by running sound for small local bands in Illinois, and began to develop an interest in sound and electronics. This led her to attend a technical trade school in Arizona to study electronics. Upon graduation, she put together a resume of her education and experience and sent it to several large sound reinforcement companies.

"Maryland Sound responded within a week," Hixson said. "Michael Stahl called me in Arizona and asked me to FAX a copy of my re-



*Figure 4. Stephen Zelenko stressing the importance of bringing enthusiasm to the job.*

sume out to Los Angeles." Because of time constraints, however, the position she applied for was filled by someone else, but Stahl encouraged her to stay in touch.

"I made a follow-up phone call about a week or two later and Mike said that they were looking for someone to work out here in the lab. He wanted to fly me out that day!" she said. Maryland Sound eventually did fly Hixson out to Los Angeles for a week-long trial run which gave her the opportunity to be evaluated 'under fire', and to meet the other Maryland Sound staffers. "About a week after I got back, and after they interviewed several other people, they called me back and offered me the job. I accepted," she said smiling.

Hixson worked for a year in the lab fixing, tweaking and learning the equipment from the inside out, but had her sights set on eventually doing mixing for shows. "I figured that knowing how to fix equipment would help me in the long run," she said. "If I go on tour and something breaks down, it's one less thing I would have to send back if I can fix it there."

After Hixson's year as a lab-tech, Stahl talked to Geep Parker, shop foreman and equipment manager, and they decided to give her the chance to move up. Now she is working in the shop and doing set-up for smaller shows. Hixson is closer than ever to her coveted mixing position.

There are not a large number of women active in live sound, and Hixson responded to a question about being female in a male-dominated industry, as well as the attitudes she has had to cope with. "It's never been 'You can't do this because you are a female', but it's an attitude that you sense," Hixson said. "The men will brush you aside or select other men to do certain jobs, as if all you could do is wrap mic cables or some simple job." When asked how she handles the situation, she smiled and said, "I try to be assertive and sort of stay in their face. I'm not naturally an aggressive person, but to make it out there you've got to be!"

Asked what her goals are, Hixson was quick to respond. "I want to go out on the road. I want to be the front-of-house mixer for a major tour!"

A smiling Stahl quickly added, "And I see no reason why she can't

attain that goal. No reason whatsoever."

## STEPHEN: BRINGING IN NEW BUSINESS

Stephen Zelenka is the person responsible for getting new acts onto the Maryland Sound bandwagon. His career began as a bass player in his native London. After buying himself a top quality bass rig, he found that others wanted to rent his equipment. Tagging along on the more interesting rentals, he made many contacts in the music business. Finally, he purchased equipment from a band called Gentle Giant and became friendly with the band. He was soon offered a job as third man on the PA, and with his acceptance, Zelenka's career in concert sound was launched.

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Early in his career, Zelenka was given the nickname 'Zoomy' by his peers because of the way he worked. "Sometimes I was like a wild man, trying to do three things at once and running around at top speed, so they started to call me Zoomy," he said. "It helped me get more done and the name still sticks today!" As he grew in knowledge, his determination to move into the upper echelons of concert sound also grew, but he found the desire easier to come by than the next job.

"I wrote letters of introduction and sent them all around. Unfortunately, over a period of time, I got no positive responses," he said. "The main complaint was that I did not have enough experience. That old catch-22!" Not being a quitter, Zelenka laughingly related a story where his determination and creativity finally landed him a job with a major touring company which was doing sound for Rod Stewart.

"I got in by being persistent and gutsy. I literally crawled in under a receptionist's desk, and waited all day outside the hiring person's

office," he said. "When I finally got to see him as he was leaving for the day, he hired me on guts alone!"

Zelenka's career also had some elements of luck which helped him rise even faster. He was asked to assist on a production of The Who's rock opera "Tommy," and consequently met Pete Townshend. Because of technical problems, Zelenka and Townshend had to work closely together and Zelenka's natural enthusiasm for the job impressed Townshend so much, he hired Zelenka to run his private sound company.

Zelenka's career now spans over fourteen years and has included tours with major world-class acts such as The Who, Bob Seger, and Deep Purple. He was employed at Stanal Sound when it was acquired by Maryland Sound and stayed to take a less road-oriented position as production manager. He now finds himself in the position to give input on hirings and firings.

## SUGGESTIONS TO THE UP AND COMING

When the subject of getting in the door for aspiring engineers and sound people came up, each of the three had some good input about attitude, education and getting started.

### Important Attributes of Beginning Sound People

Michael Stahl: The three most important things I look for in a new employee are attitude, attitude and attitude! I would rather train a total beginner with a great attitude than some know-it-all who's impossible to work with. We are a team. We work together toward the same goal. If a person doesn't want to be a team player, then get off the team.

Stephen Zelenka: I think one of the things I look for the most is enthusiasm. If someone has enthusiasm for the job, that is very infectious and represents the company very well to others.

Michael Stahl: If you want to make it, you've got to be where it's happening. That means you might need to relocate to Los Angeles, New York, etc. Also, never lose the attitude of learning your craft. If you are flying 20,000 pounds of equipment over patrons heads, it better be *perfect* the first time!

Stephen Zelenka: I would suggest latching on to a local band that has a



future and mixing for them. Also, you can get a job in club where touring acts come through and be as helpful as you can. They might need someone and they will remember you if you are very helpful.

#### On Education in the Audio Field

Carla Hixson: It was my interest in electronics that led me to ITT Trade School in Arizona to study it. This was one of the things that interested Mike on my resume. That knowledge has helped me a lot in the lab and out in the field.

Michael Stahl: I'm a firm believer in education, but it's important to remember that a degree in audio won't necessarily get you a job. There are many other attributes I look for in a candidate but education will never hurt you. You never stop learning.

Stephen Zelenka: If someone comes in here and says he's put in four years at say, Berklee School of Music and now he knows everything, I'm really put off by that.

#### I don't buy the line that women can't do the job because of the lifting or living arrangements

It's a catch-22 that experience often counts more than education, because how do you get experience if no one will hire you?

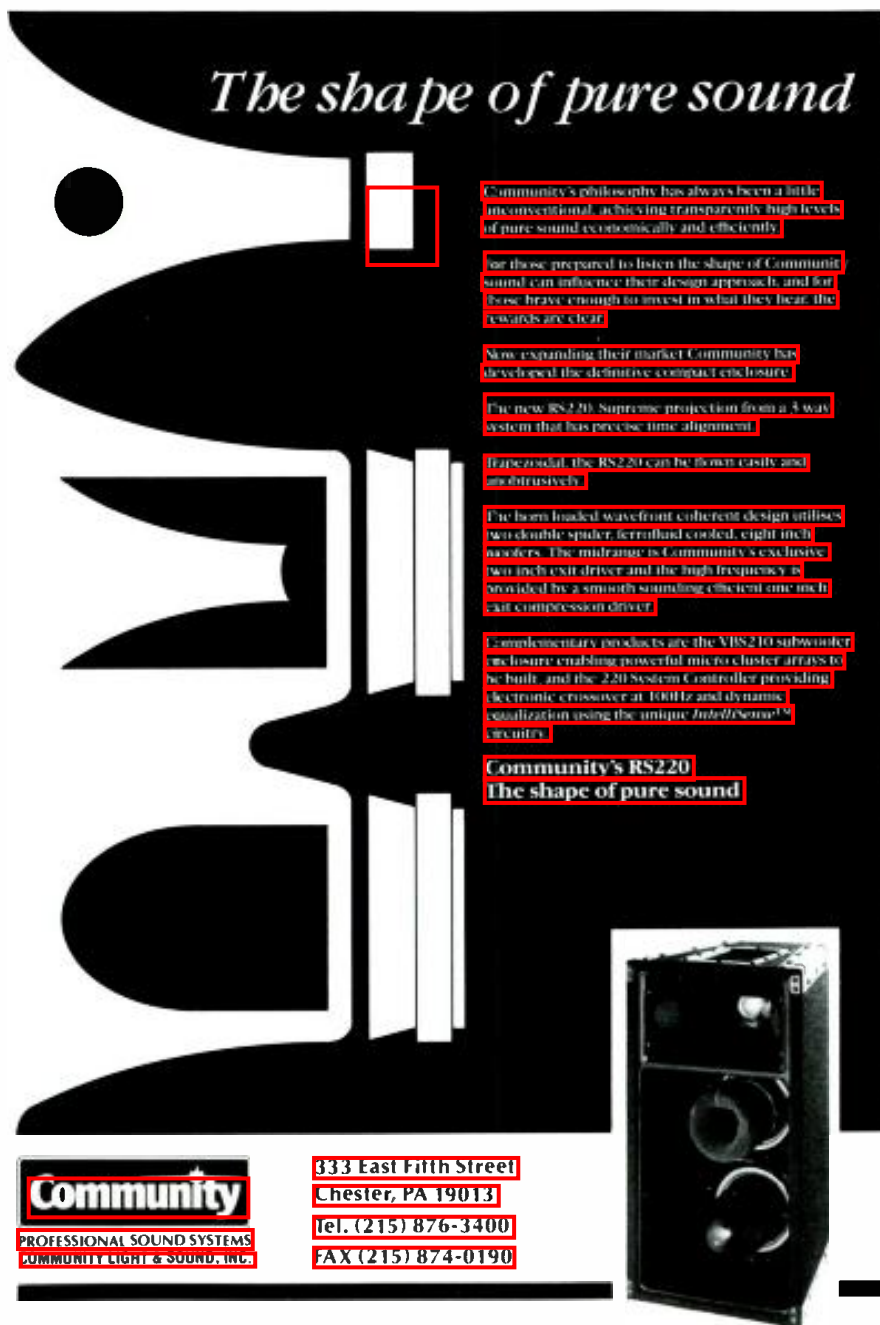
#### On Women Getting Into Audio

Carla Hixson: If you are a woman, don't get discouraged. There are places you can work and people who will hire you. If I can make it, so can other women!

Michael Stahl: I don't buy the line that women can't do the job because of the lifting or living arrangements. I believe that is used as an excuse for not hiring women. One of the best engineers I ever worked with was Cathy Sander who was my second on the Chicago tour. Cathy caused far less problems than the men, and always found a way to get every job done.

As the clock was showing nearly 2:00 p.m., it was obvious the Maryland Sound staffers were gearing up for another night's show. The trucks were being loaded, and the air was charged with excited anticipation.

These people obviously love their job, and it was with a bit of lingering regret that I shook hands all around, said my goodbyes, and prepared to leave. As I watched Maryland Sound's busy loading dock fade in the rear view mirror, I couldn't help feel a bit of envy for Carla, Stephen, Michael and all the gang there. It was obvious from their smiles and anticipation that as my day's work drew to a close, the excitement of their day was just beginning!



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