

Bill Hanley: The Father of Festival Sound

by John Kane

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Editor's Note: While not exactly a household name, Bill Hanley (seen here in a recent photo) made an indelible impact on the development and advancement of modern live sound systems. He's often referred to as the "Father of Festival Sound," and there has been growing interest to encourage the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Foundation to induct Mr. Hanley. Longtime readers of FRONT of HOUSE may recall a decade ago, when he was selected for the 2006 Audio Innovator Award at the Parnelli Awards. Hanley is certainly deserving of that, but we also felt this would be an appropriate time to not only revisit his historic career, but also allow researcher John Kane a platform to expand his efforts to further honor the work of Bill Hanley. —George Petersen

Each year, the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Foundation determines who is deserving of its celebratory accolades amidst an elite and secretive balloting system. Occasionally, it seems like there are always one or more nominations that seem questionable of such exemplary recognitions in the public view. It's a difficult task I suspect, as we watch the institution strive to convince us that these new definitions of rock, pop and R&B be acknowledged as significant forces in the industry.

As stated on its website: "One of the Foundation's many functions is to recognize the contributions of those who have had a significant impact on the evolution, development and perpetuation of rock and roll." Perhaps there is some wiggle room in this statement to include a pioneering group of production people who have remained in the shadows of the performers, which adorn its hallowed halls. For the many music legends who have been fortune'd with this crowning status, there is also an equal amount (if not more) hardworking sound engineers, lighting crews, roadies, truck drivers, guitar techs, stage/tour managers and others that helped pave the way towards their initial rise to fame.



So the question remains, who is eligible for such acknowledgments and how is it measured? In a previous interview, Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Museum Director and CEO Greg Harris said "We look at rock as being a big tent, and there's room to have all these genres under that tent." If true, then its nominating committee, (which also includes Harris, musicians, critics and other industry professionals) may realize that in order to build this metaphorical rock 'n' roll "tent," it must first be constructed by crews of dedicated production people.

Regaling in the myth and lore of a standout 1970s roadie or tour manager in book or film formats is now commonplace. These backbreaking jobs — long glorified and romanticized in Hollywood versions — depict the free-spirited lifestyles of individuals who travel from town to town like circus gypsies, partying late into the night, fraternizing with groupies. Although not an entirely accurate picture, amidst of all the sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll, was an industry shaping

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itself. In 1977 artist Jackson Browne (who by the way was deservedly inducted into the RRHOF in 2004) poignantly penned such a song. Titled "The Load Out," the piano piece gave poetic accolades to the individuals who made Browne's and other rock 'n' roll road shows happen successfully.

This article is intended as a homage to one in a breed of technical innovators who entered the industry at a time when many in the music business were in it purely for the music, and nothing more. It is also intended to shed light on the other rock stars; those throughout music history who innovated better stages to perform on, better lighting systems to be seen with, and better sound reinforcement systems to be heard.

For me, the earliest protagonist within in this rock 'n' roll technological timeline is 79-year-old pioneer sound engineer Bill Hanley. Since 2011, I have had the fortune of spending much time with Mr. Hanley, completing a doctoral thesis on his life and career in 2014. What became most evident was that, during rock's early years, the sound engineer was almost never mentioned, and often forgotten about. The reason, I suspect, is because the role of a "sound man" had not yet been defined. As I kept digging, I found traces of sound reinforcement innovation spotted throughout the country. Beginning with Hanley on the East Coast from about 1955 to 1975, he was part of a small community of first generation sound engineers who set a standard of how "good" live concert sound was to be done. A 2006 Parnelli Award winner, Hanley is one of the last living sound engineers of this era.



Some Hanley History

Born in 1937 in Medford, MA, Hanley is the oldest of five children. By the age of six, his father bestowed upon him his first crystal set, followed by a one-tube radio, then a six-tube radio, setting off an early interest in electronics. During his teens, he and his younger brother Terry would install TV antennas on roofs of homes and fix the neighbors television sets for extra money. This innocent act of generosity made Hanley's parents extremely nervous, as television sets were quite expensive at the time. At Christmas, the Hanley brothers hooked up one of the amplifiers they built to a large speaker, pointed it out their attic window and blasted holiday music for the neighbors.

It was during Bill's time in vocational school when he became unimpressed with the state of public address technology used for the live music scene. However, he was impressed by the sound system at a local roller rink, which developed into a long-lasting love for the Hammond organ and jazz music. Hanley realized if he had the opportunity he could make a real contribution, so he continued to keep his eye on the prize.

From the onset of his career, Bill often needed to convince promoters and musicians that "quality sound" was important. So in 1957, he managed to chase down Newport Jazz Festival promoter George Wein with the same emphatic fervor. These strong convictions led to a long and successful career with the impresario festival producer. As a result, Hanley Sound established itself as Newport Folk and Jazz Festival's premier sound company for almost ten years.

With his reputation growing and other "bigger" jobs trickling in, Bill Hanley opened "Hanley Sound Inc." at 430 Salem St. in Medford, MA. By 1966, a job for the local Boston band — The Remains — allowed the young engineer an opportunity to support the group on their accompanying tour with The Beatles. Soon, Bill found himself behind the mixing console for the eastern portion this historic tour.

The Jon Landau Connection

Before music industry icon Jon Landau (and now chairman of the nominating committee for the RRHOF Foundation) became Bruce Springsteen's manager, he was a successful rock music critic. Realizing he was not going to make it as a musician (his first passion), he moved on to another art form as a rock journalist. When Landau was 27, he wrote: "I at least found a substitute outlet for my desire to express myself about rock. If I couldn't cope with playing, I may have done better writing about it." Landau wrote for magazines including *Broadside*, *Rolling Stone* and *Crawdaddy*. However, I suspect he is most famous for a 1974, piece a Boston weekly newspaper called "The Real Paper." After attending a Springsteen performance at the Harvard Square Theater on May 9, 1974 he penned an article titled "Growing Young With Rock and Roll," proclaiming that he "saw the future of rock 'n' roll" and its name was "Bruce Springsteen." It was only five months earlier in January that Hanley recorded and provided sound for Springsteen's historic weekend-long tenure at "Joe's Place" in Cambridge, MA.

Before Landau's admiration of Springsteen's 1974 performance, he proclaimed a similar reverence for the boisterous Boston garage rock band called "The Remains," also known as Barry and the Remains. The Remains played loud, hard rock and got even louder later in their career, skyrocketing them to a now-cult status. All along the band was outfitted with a sound system provided by Hanley Sound. In a 2011 interview I had with bandleader Barry Tashian, he reflected on Hanley's influence on their sound.



“We attempted to enlarge our sound system before Hanley. At first, we were used to simply plugging our microphones into our Fender guitar amplifiers and playing everything through them, including vocals,” Tashian recalls. “I remember we were playing a gig at some college or auditorium and Bill (or Terry) showed up with a trailer full of equipment, which included Voice of the Theater speakers, all kinds of power amplifiers, and some groovy microphones. After this, we were kind of beefed up. When Hanley came on the scene, there were some major changes.”

When The Remains landed the gig of a lifetime backing the Beatles on their 1966 tour, the Boston sound engineer arrived unpaid and unannounced at Chicago Stadium. It was here where he convinced the band to use his equipment. As luck would have it, Beatles manager Brian Epstein heard the quality of The Remains sound system and hired Hanley on the spot; even inviting him to accompany the band(s) for most of the East Coast tour

dates.

In the mid-1960s, Boston-based agent John Sdoucos with Music Productions (who did regional bookings for the local college circuit) realized that most universities had large budgets and could afford popular bands to play in their gymnasiums. However, football stadiums, ice rinks, and college gymnasiums had poor acoustics and were most often outfitted with weak public address systems. Sdoucos occasionally worked with impresario music producer George Wein at the Newport Festivals in Rhode Island. Wein’s folk and jazz festivals were thriving, not just because of the yearly stellar lineups, but because of the outstanding sound provided by a young and emerging sound engineer named Bill Hanley.

For years, Hanley used the Newport Festivals as his sound laboratory, trying out new ideas, which he initially tested out in the basement of his family’s home. Hanley’s unique talents did not go unnoticed, however, as Sdoucos admired his work so much he hired the fledgling company to assist with the countless bands he was booking in and around New England.

For many of these concerts, a college-aged Jon Landau was in the audience. Later Landau reflected upon several Boston-area concerts that Hanley provided sound reinforcement for. Like the Beatles at Suffolk Downs, where he recalls the band being “plainly audible” yet “beautiful to look at.” An accurate recollection as Hanley intermittently struggled with sound on this tour. It seems that overcoming the extreme decibel levels of thousands of screaming girls was technically unachievable in 1966, even with 600 watts of amplification behind you.

Additionally, Landau recalls “flipping for the Animals’ two-hour show at Rindge Tech,” the Rolling Stones at Lynn Football Stadium and Mitch Ryder and the Detroit Wheels, “overcoming the worst of performing conditions at the Walpole Skating Rink” — all Hanley Sound Inc. supported concerts.



Changes Afoot

This was a formative time when both the music industry and concert sound reinforcement businesses were born. By the end of the decade, good sound became something that managers, musicians and audiences were starting to expect.

Hanley’s good work made the rock ‘n’ roll art form even richer. For example, his sound company was often written into an artist’s rider, such as the Beach Boys and their 1966 tour. When Brian Wilson heard Hanley’s system at a previous event, he hired the company for a good portion of their dates. Hanley Sound quite often received top billing along with big-name acts like Janis Joplin, The Band, Jefferson Airplane and Donovan. It was not uncommon to see “Sound by Hanley” on a marquee or in a concert advertisement.

By the end of the 1960s, Hanley was the most well-known sound engineer in the business, in particular for his work at the famed Woodstock Music and Art Fair in 1969. At this event, Hanley deployed one of the most powerful, largest and expensive sound systems for the time. This one act — which proved to be his career-defining performance in sound reinforcement — sent shock waves through the rock ‘n’ roll community.



Beyond Woodstock

Following Woodstock, Hanley was called in for some of the biggest shows in rock history at Madison Square Garden and several large-scale festivals thereafter. Known amongst his peers as the “Father of Festival Sound,” this well-deserved moniker describes an individual who provided innovative sound reinforcement technology for so many the pop and rock festivals during this formative era. Moving into the early 1970s, a flurry of new and smaller sound companies were establishing themselves across the country even mimicking Hanley’s work to some degree.

By 1974, Hanley was doing smaller gigs. As the festival circuit dried up, a new era of sound reinforcement moved in and Hanley watched the industry he laid the groundwork for develop even further. What Hanley founded years prior in Boston was the catalyst for the big rock arena shows that major artists now offer to global audiences.

Based on my years of research on Hanley's work, his influence has been insurmountable with regard to the contemporary live concert industry infrastructure. The early use and application of portable hydraulic staging, multi-mic techniques, video projection, speaker scaffolding construction, multi-date regional (and international) concert touring via air-ride tractor trailers, foot light (wedge) monitor application, and the use of the CM Winch-hoist for line array speaker deployment are all clearly evident throughout Hanley's prolific career.

The Next Step

It is my hope that a nomination acknowledgment by the RRHOF for Bill Hanley may open the floodgates for others who pioneered the rock music industry. Most of the general public has some knowledge about the history of rock music and its key players. But there are others who lie hidden within the details of its formation, which are often left behind. So far, the main visual representation and/or example of sound reinforcement through the eyes of the RRHOF is an exhibit of inductee inventor/sound engineer Bob Heil. His late-1960s Langevin FOH console and other devices are on display there.

In my view, there are countless others who should be recognized yet remain unnoticed, such as: Harry McCune Sr. of McCune Sound (West Coast), Don Neilson of Swanson Sound (West Coast), Jim Meagher of Meagher Electronics (West Coast), Bob Kiernan of Kiernan Sound (NYC), and long-time Neil Diamond sound engineering pioneer (and Parnelli Award recipient) Stan Miller of Stanal Sound. Among others deserving of such honors is pioneer concert lighting designer Chip Monck, whose pioneering influence on countless festivals and tours is mammoth.

Lastly, Fillmore East technician and Woodstock technical director mastermind Chris Langhart, who in my opinion, is an unsung hero of rock production. Langhart, in particular, is among a laundry list of Fillmore East technical wizards who assisted Bill Graham in making his venue as legendary as it was. I could go on and on, as there are too many technical innovators of the early live concert music business; specifically production people within the sound reinforcement, lighting and staging industries.

It's this unique group of pioneering individuals that comprised the behind-the-scenes nuts and bolts of the concert business paving the way for others to come. If not for the initial curiosities of this elite family of rock 'n' roll innovators, there would be no rock 'n' roll industry to speak of.

You Can Help!

To sign an online petition to support sending Bill Hanley to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, go to www.thepetitionsite.com/takeaction/403/733/409/ (<http://www.thepetitionsite.com/takeaction/403/733/409/>).

For the past five years, author John Kane has been researching the life/career of Bill Hanley as well as this formative era of sound reinforcement and music/concert industry history. Dr. Kane currently teaches at several New England universities and lives in Massachusetts. To visit John Kane, go to www.thelastseatinthehouse.com (<http://www.thelastseatinthehouse.com>).

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