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CENTERPIECE

# Revolutionary sound in the house

By Terry Date | tdate@eagletribune.com  
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Bill Hanley, the father of festival sound, lives in quiet Merrimac.

Author John Kane, now a part-time Merrimack College instructor, spent eight years and hundreds of hours with Hanley and his wife, Rhoda Rosenberg, at their home interviewing them for his book, “The Last Seat in the House: The Story of Hanley Sound.”

The 500-plus page book delves into the audio engineer’s life and place in the history of Rock ‘n’ Roll.

Hanley Sound, founded by Bill and his younger brother, Terry, delivered the music at seminal events, their work and innovations guided by a desire for improved communication, for everyone present to clearly hear the concert music.

On July 25, 1965, Bill Hanley was the sound engineer at the Newport Folk Festival when Bob Dylan plugged an electric guitar into the sound system for a set of rock-influenced music. This shift from acoustic to electric music is considered a watershed moment.

He did the sound for The Beatles at Shea Stadium, the Rolling Stones at Madison Square Garden in 1969 and, that same year, for the historic Woodstock concert and album.

He delivered the music and critical public address messages to more than 400,000 listeners at the Woodstock Music and Art Fair, Aug. 15-18, 1969.

Yet, the father of festival sound’s beginnings were as a boy on roller skates.

In the early 1950s, as a young teen, Hanley wheeled over the Bal-a-Roue rink on Mystic Avenue in Medford, his shoulders swinging, legs striding and heart pumping to music played live by Benny Aucoin, a former silent film organist.

“He was fabulous,” says Hanley, sitting with his legs crossed in the living room at his Merrimac home.

Hanley remembers, distinctly, how his Bal-a-Roue reverie sank to annoyance whenever distorted sound, from record albums, blared over a skating rink’s public address system.

“It was hideous,” Hanley says. He heard the same poor sound quality at multiple rollerskating rinks including Skateland in Haverhill and at dance halls.

From Hanley’s interests in electronics, roller skating and dance was born his quest to bring clean, expressive music to listeners’ ears.

“He truly felt that he could make the world a better place by delivering quality sound,” says Kane, who also teaches at St. Anselm College in Manchester, New Hampshire.

Hanley’s audio fascination dates to when he was 6 or 7 and fashioned a crystal radio from a Quaker oatmeal box.

He and Terry were forever hatching plans.

They played Christmas music albums to the neighborhood from speakers pointing outward from their attic window.

They treated ice skaters on the Fellsmere Pond Reservoir in Malden to music, played from their father’s 1937 Buick Roadmaster, parked in a hidden, elevated spot.

He would soon start a sound company with his brother in their parents’ basement.

As a youth, hired to clean gym lockers at Tufts University, Bill Hanley picked the brains of engineering students.

He read MIT professor Leo Beranek’s book “Acoustics,” learning more about the influences that rooms, architecture, microphones, loudspeakers and amplifiers have on audio.

He enjoyed tinkering with sound equipment and toying with microphone and speaker placements.

Kane says that Hanley’s experience doing sound for the Newport festivals prepared him

for tackling the challenges posed at larger music festivals, including Woodstock.

## Listening and learning

The yard outside Hanley and Rosenberg's home hold vestiges of Hanley's years setting up the sound systems at large festivals and events.

The list of performers at these festivals included Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, Led Zeppelin, Crosby Stills & Nash, Ten Years After, BB King, Freddie King, Sly & The Family Stone, James Cotton and Canned Heat.

Meanwhile, Hanley introduced audio innovations or improvements including multi-micing, using stage monitors so musicians could hear themselves and using construction-grade materials and staging to support speaker towers and other sound infrastructure.

He also introduced innovative safety measures such as raising the stage and creating a space between the stage and crowd for egress.

Hanley's functioning public address system at Woodstock was a lifesaver, Kane says.

His early placement of multiple mics, one for each musician, was a breakthrough at a time when the standard sound system consisted of a single mic in front of the vocalist.

At large concerts, Hanley arrayed the speakers throughout the grounds rather than centralizing them.

He distributed sound evenly, letting it drip down to each row, each person.

Kane says Hanley was in demand by groups including The Beach Boys, Buffalo Springfield, The Chambers Brothers and The Cowsills.

He provided the sound, its amplification and distribution for 75% of the pop and rock

festivals in the late 1960s and into the '70s.

By the mid- to late 1970s, Hanley innovations were being mimicked by smaller companies and his business sway fell to the wayside.

Kane's book title "The Last Seat in the House," refers to Hanley's desire to make music as delightful to the people located the farthest from the stage as it is for those closest to the musicians.

The book explores the state of live sound before Hanley began his career, and how Hanley's work served the needs of a developing music business.

Memories and mementos

Rosenberg, an artist and printmaking professor at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts at Tufts University, says her husband is an inventor at heart.

He knew about acoustics and electricity, and through designing and building systems, he put them together to make audio, she says.

He was and remains a humanist.

Hanley's delivery of sound was not limited to music. He wired the second inauguration of Lyndon B. Johnson on Jan. 20, 1965, in Washington, D.C., and large anti-war and women's rights marches.

Also, he loved the musicians, she says.

"He cared for them," Rosenberg says. "Not all of them, but a lot of them. He appreciated them. He loved his job."

He still works sound projects. Up until the pandemic, Hanley was the sound person for Jocko's Jazz, a hot spot for world-class jazz at the Sahara Club and Restaurant in

Methuen.

Ultimately, Hanley says, he was motivated to improve communication and understanding.

“I was dedicated to people being able to be heard, and to understand what they are saying,” he says.

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