

Obituaries

Neil Muncy 1938–2012



The audio industry lost one of its most beloved figures this August with the passing of Neil Muncy after a lengthy illness.

Neil, a Life Member and Fellow of the AES, was something of an enigma

in pro audio circles. With an extensive background in electrical engineering, audio/acoustics research, and teaching, and having contributed to several U.S. and international patents, Neil was also known as a systems and equipment designer, recording guru, magnetic tape and vintage machine restoration expert, and broadcast consultant, depending on who you were talking to.

“Neil was the ‘Doctor Who’ of the tech world,” says close friend Earl McCluskie, a longtime AES Toronto Section Executive Committee member.

David Greene of Toronto’s Unlimited Productions recalls those formative years: “Neil and I met in Washington in 1961 when we both were just getting started ‘in the business.’ We would go to a bar on Wisconsin Avenue named the Zebra Room and order separate pitchers of beer. Among his many accomplishments was to build the console for studio A2 at A & R (Phil Ramone’s recording studio in NYC; a second console was built for studio R2). The first official sessions in that studio included the Guess Who’s ‘These Eyes.’”

Early on in Neil’s career, when his company SSI (Suburban Sound Inc.) was developing op amp multichannel recording consoles and tape duplicating systems around the eastern U.S., Neil was also lecturing and presenting one of the first college-level courses in

recording technology at the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, NY.

“As a student, I met Neil at Eastman Summer Recording Institute at a time when I had been reassigned to teach the audio curriculum at Sheridan, instead of the film courses I’d taught for 12 years and for which I had a degree,” says Jim Cox, formerly on the AES Toronto Executive. “Neil’s extraordinary teaching talent gave me a foundation of insight and confidence that carried me as a teacher of audio for the rest of my career.” From 1980–89, Neil was also a principal instructor in the Music Recording Workshop Program sponsored by National Public Radio in Washington, DC. He made some wonderful direct-to-disc classical, jazz, and choral recordings during this period, and his credits as technical location recording consultant include work on the late Curt Wittig’s recording of the Choral Arts Society of Washington ensemble’s 1985 performance of Sergei Rachmaninoff’s “Vespers,” at the Washington National Cathedral (Erato Records, 1987). In 1989, he began as consulting sound designer for the Toronto International Film Festival, a position he held until 2006.

When Neil arrived on the Toronto scene in the 1980s boom years, he developed recording and control room systems for studios such as Manta and Nimbus, leading to work as a systems consultant on several major theater and auditorium projects being developed in the city, which included the renovation of the historic Elgin Theatre, the CBC’s Glenn Gould Theatre, and the Hummingbird Centre.

Neil was most proud of the LARES sound-enhancement system installed at the Elgin Theatre. Steve Barber of Lares Associates recalls that Neil “was instrumental in leading both me and my colleague, David Griesinger, down the proverbial rabbit hole that led to the development of the LARES system, and provided a lot of the engineering expertise that led to the successful installation of the first system, which is still in daily use. Needless to

say, I am still in the rabbit hole, and thanks to Neil I’m still encountering things that are ‘curiouser and curiouser.’”

Neil, a former chair of the Washington, DC AES Section, was easily assimilated into Toronto’s pro audio and AES community; he became chair of the Toronto Section, established the role of membership secretary, and served as chair of the AES Standards Committee SC-05-05 Working group on grounding and EMC practices. He lectured extensively, was a contributor to the development of the Reflection Free Zone (RFZ) control room design concept, and authored many articles and papers.

While there were many impressive new digital systems hitting the pro audio market by the mid 1990s, there was a quiet revolution going on, much of it from within the AES working groups.

Neil’s paper, “Noise Susceptibility in Analog and Digital Signal Processing Systems,” appeared in the June, 1995 *AES Journal* special issue on grounding and shielding, and was almost a call to action of audio professionals in all disciplines at a time when new digital technologies were emerging by giant leaps. His paper specifically identified a deficiency in the grounds of XLR connectors in a wide variety of manufactured audio equipment, now classically known throughout the industry—by Neil’s own coined terminology—as the “Pin 1 Problem.”

That a paper on reducing hum and EMI became the buzz of the industry was something Neil was no doubt amused by. Earl McCluskie relates that, along with colleagues that included Bill Whitlock, Philip Giddings, John Windt, and Jim Brown among them, there was a strong core of professionals “battling on the same battleground” who, like Neil, were keen to deliver their knowledge to the industry.

Neil became something of an audio evangelist, and the surrounding years saw a number of educational seminars, workshops, pub-

lications and lectures on the subject of noise in audio systems, facilitated through AES Sections and working groups, audio manufacturers, and educational organizations such as SynAudCon.

The paper's popularity immediately marked Neil as the "grounding guru," and has since gone on to become one of the most widely-read publications in AES history. At a time when existing infrastructures were faced with the increased power demands all this new digital processing technology presented, Neil brought everything back to the whole idea of power, and showed us how to use it better. In doing so, he gave power back to the end-users; he demonstrated a reason to expect better from professional audio equipment.

Tom Shevlin, now senior noise review engineer for Ontario's Ministry of the Environment, recalls that he was designing audio wiring for a new broadcast center when Neil's landmark article surfaced. "It had a large influence on the eventual system design, and it soon became obvious that many manufacturers of pro audio gear, especially mixing consoles, had gotten the message and were modifying their input circuits accordingly. We have probably all had many fewer problems with hum, buzz, and RF in the past decades because of Neil's paper."

Bill Whitlock, president and chief engineer of Jensen Transformers, recalls how Neil motivated him to be an educator during that period: "I first met Neil in 1994, when he was speaking at a local AES event in Los Angeles. He seemed to identify me right away as one who shared his passion and he quickly persuaded me, in spite of my intense fear of public speaking, to 'get out there and tell those folks what you know about balanced interfaces.'" In retrospect, he was one of the most influential people in my life, since he essentially kick-started my writing and lecturing about interfaces. We had many lively discussions about the associated topics that spurred both of us to dig deeper and deeper. He was always kind, generous, and respectful, even when we disagreed. I have so much to thank him for. As do so many in various and diverse areas of the industry, who were lucky to have Neil as a mentor, colleague, teacher, and often, lifeline.

John O'Keefe of Aercoustics Engineering recalls one situation from the mid 1990s: "We had an acoustic scale model built for the renovation of the Royal Theatre (Victoria, BC). It took up the space of an entire office, here in Toronto. The conductor, the architect, and some members of the board of directors were due on Monday morning to review what we had done. The pressure was on; but I was alone in the office on a Saturday afternoon

and couldn't get anything to work. The 15,000-V spark source crashed my computer every time I snapped a spark. I called Neil, he invited me up to his house and, although even then, he was having trouble moving around, he saved my bacon—big time.

"Neil, the guru of grounding, put together an aluminum foil shield around our pre-amp that gave us 10 dB (or more) isolation from the spark source EMI. With that I was able to move forward and by Monday everything was fine."

Unbelievably generous with both his time and knowledge, whether you knew Neil as "The Ampex Guy" or the "Pin 1 Guy," he made himself available and was a regular contributor and resource to a number of audio forums.

Neil was one of the first people my publisher, Jim Norris of Norris-Whitney Communications, connected me with back in 1991, when I was a fledgling editor at his magazine Professional Sound. I remember being intimidated by the impressive credentials Jim rattled off to me, but upon meeting Neil, his easygoing nature and wry wit put me at ease and we became fast friends. You can certainly see his influence throughout the editorial over the years, as he was, in some way, linked to almost every major audio systems project in the country. Neil was my barometer for the industry, and the shortest distance toward getting people to accept my calls.

"When we started Professional Sound in 1990, Neil was a sometimes writer and a great guiding light," remembers Jim Norris. "Whenever I saw Neil over the years and I asked him how he was, he would always answer, 'plus or minus 3dB'. I always loved his sense of humor."

"Neil's ability to coin amusing expressions that would not have sounded out place in a Milton Berle monologue was legendary," says engineer Denis Tremblay. "My favorite was his description of the ready-made gazebo he had in his yard as a ga-cheapo."

Neil also had a reputation as a gracious host who loved to entertain, and there were many stimulating dinner parties around his table. "Visiting Neil at home was always an interesting experience. Invariably, you'd go home well fed, enlightened on some technical detail, and when the season was right, with a basketful of fresh tomatoes and basil," says Tremblay. "Following the meals we would often adjourn to the home theater, called the 'fun room' in Neil-speak, and either listen to some tunes or watch some TV. For someone whose artistic sensibilities ran heavily to Jazz, Neil had a fondness for NASCAR that was a bit out of character. He didn't make a big deal of the fact that he had consulted to NASCAR,

he just enjoyed the fun."

While Neil's illness may have left him wheelchair-bound in later years, his friends tried to ensure it did not leave him grounded. Neil managed to continue his course in electronics principles at Toronto's Harris Institute for the Arts via Skype from his home, and his extraordinary talent for teaching continued until recent months. He also produced some wonderful videos for the AES 'Oral History' project, and never stopped promoting the Society.

"Neil encouraged me to finally join the AES after nearly thirty years in audio," says Ike Zimbel of Zimbel Audio Productions, "something I now wish I had done sooner. I helped him with various projects, including a 5.1 seminar at the CBC and one of his grounding workshops at the PAL/MIAC show a few years ago. It was always a comfort to me to be able to call Neil up to get a straight explanation of some aspect of electronics that I was struggling with. I was especially proud to be at the AES in New York when Neil was awarded his Fellowship."

I'm sure everyone who knew Neil from the Toronto audio community felt like it was our patriarch being recognized up there alongside Phil Ramone and Bob Ludwig, who remembers Neil as a "very special person." To see him shake hands with these greats filled all of us with pride.

There are many people who I'd like to personally thank for the time they spent with Neil in his final years, going that extra mile to keep him comfortable, busy, and active. Along with Earl, Ike, and Denis, they include Arthur Skudra, Tom Young, John Harris, and Joe Dunphy, who spent a considerable amount of time with Neil in recent years, and whose new studio, Revolution Recording, shows Neil's direct influence in its design. I'm sure there are more. Blair Francey, membership secretary of the AES Toronto Section, should be commended for being with Neil and Mary in those final days and taking on so much. I think Neil taught us all well.

"I will remember him as a man who I am sure was a fine southern gentleman in another life. His wit and passion was brought to everything he did," says Martin Van Dijk of Engineering Harmonics. "He had an innate ability to bring ideas to reality. He was a human conduit between abstract theory and physical substance—always presenting the world with something you could touch, feel, or understand. "For me, I am a better person for having known him. I think that's the most rewarding legacy a person can leave behind...in his own way, he made the world a better place."

Shauna Kennedy