

In Memoriam



photo by Jesse Goff Photography

Don Pearson
1942-2006

Don Pearson, a pioneer in the development of high-fidelity large-scale sound reinforcement systems over the last 30 years, died on January 9, 2006, during a medical procedure at Marin General Hospital in Greenbrae, California. Since the heart operation was expected to be minor, his sudden death came as a shock to his coworkers at Meyer Sound Laboratories, where he worked for the last year and a half, as well as to the sound reinforcement community at large.

Born Donald Michael Pearson in Chicago in 1942, he attended the prestigious Chicago University High School, after which he moved to Washington, D.C. He met his wife Frances while working at an ice skating rink in Virginia, and the two were married in 1967. Several years later, the Pearsons moved to the West Coast, where Don found work with rock groups like the Jefferson Airplane and its spinoffs, Hot Tuna, and the Jefferson Starship. During this time, three significant and interrelated events occurred that would shape Pearson's future and that of sound reinforcement.

One was the founding of rental sound company Ultra Sound by Pearson and Howard Danchik in 1978. The second was Pearson and Owsley Stanley convincing John Meyer to make a high-fidelity stage monitor for the Starship, which was instrumental in the birth of Meyer Sound Laboratories. The third was Pearson making the acquaintance of Dan Healy, then-Grateful Dead sound engineer.

In the end, these three events resulted in Pearson and Ultra Sound being the exclusive sound providers for the Grateful Dead for the group's last 15 years, using Meyer Sound systems. The Dead placed strong emphasis on making their sound the best possible, to which end they invested substantial sums of money and allowed Pearson (and, frequently, John Meyer) to conduct experiments that contributed to such advances as point-source arrays, source independent measurement, correct alignment in time of loudspeakers, cardioid subwoofers, foot-pad-triggered gates on microphones, and many more innovations. As a consequence, Ultra Sound established a reputation for consistently supplying very clean and clear sound, even in huge, acoustically difficult venues, and for taking a very rigorous approach to their systems that was grounded in science, rather than tradition or superstition. This caused artists as diverse as Andrea Bocelli, Primus, and the Dave Matthews Band to choose Ultra Sound's services.

Pearson searched endlessly for ways to improve live sound, most often focusing on basics such as proper AC power, grounding, phase coherency, loudspeaker interactions, and so forth. He was forever modifying equipment, devising new methodologies, and keeping abreast of technological developments and new products. Through many years of relentless touring, he accrued more hands-on experience than the vast

majority of sound engineers, working on what he estimated to be around 3,000 events in his career.

This massive amount of shows and his constant curiosity gave him a knowledge base and deep technical understanding that was much admired throughout the industry.

His expertise attracted many unique opportunities, such as optimizing sound systems for presidential conventions, inaugurations, and for Pope John Paul II's tour of America in 1987. Pearson was also at the mixing station in Centennial Olympic Park in Atlanta, GA, during the 1996 Olympics when the area was bombed by Eric Rudolph. Pearson was forever grateful to the wrongfully accused Richard Jewell for warning of the bomb, crediting Jewell with saving his life.

In 1978 Pearson published two articles in *Recording Engineer & Producer* magazine on the use of impulse response measurements in live sound. Several years later, he convinced the Dead to purchase a Bruel & Kjaer 2032 Dual Channel FFT analyzer and developed techniques, using it to understand the interaction between a sound system and its environment. These efforts paralleled and intertwined with Meyer's development of source-independent measurement and led to Pearson having an intimate involvement with the team developing SIA Software's SMAART program. Pearson's input found its way into the development of many other products, including consulting with JBL on optimization of their Vertec series of loudspeakers and Meyer Sound's Galileo loudspeaker management system, to name just two.

Pearson acquired his "Dr. Don" moniker while working on the Grateful Dead's *Two From the Vault* album, a 1992 release of a 1968 recording. Pearson transferred the tracks from the original 1-inch, ➤

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8-track into the digital domain, where he aligned all the tracks in time by correlating the waveforms of the various tracks. He even managed to ascertain that on the second night of recording the equipment had been positioned several feet from where it had been during the first night, thus, as he put it, “busting the crew 23 years later.” He signed the liner notes as “Dr. Don, the Time Master,” and the name stuck. Pearson was also involved in other Grateful Dead live releases, most notably the dual two-CD sets *Reckoning* and *Dead Set*.

In 2000, Pearson and Danchik sold Ultra Sound to Pro Media (now Pro Media/Ultra Sound), though he remained with the company for several more years. In 2004, he left Ultra Sound and took a position at Meyer Sound as a technical seminar instructor. His seminars consistently left seasoned audio professionals agog at the quantity and scope of information he conveyed. Pearson exerted a strong influence on Meyer Sound’s extensive education program right up until his death.

Personally, Don Pearson was an exceptionally warm, engaging man who gave freely of his knowledge (and opinions) to anyone who cared to talk with him. Speaking with him, one witnessed a man who took unabashed glee in his work and near-fanatical pursuit of excellence. After his death it was striking to this writer how many people felt themselves close to Pearson, and all of them, in fact, were.

Despite spending a great deal of his time on the road, Pearson was a devoted family man, cherishing his two daughters, Toby and Melissa, and doting on his grandchildren, Allison and Charles. He is also survived by a sister, Gloria Gross.

Donations may be made in Don Pearson’s name to the National Hemophilia Foundation at www.hemophilia.org.

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