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John and Helen Meyer: audio mavens with a sound relationship

Aidin Vaziri

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John and Helen Meyer owe their success, in life and work, to a cheap turntable.

As they sit in the conference room of the sprawling Meyer Sound Laboratories on San Pablo Avenue in Berkeley where they've been making some of the most sophisticated professional audio equipment in the world for more than 30 years, they recall the moment they first bonded over high fidelity.

It was on their first date in 1967, when she was a student at Cal and he sold stereo gear at Berkeley Custom Audio. John decided to eschew ordinary romantic gestures and instead right what he considered a great wrong.

"He took me to the shop he worked at and played the Beatles' 'Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band' for me, because I just had this crappy little record player," says Helen. "He said, 'You've got to hear it on a great sound system.' And he was right."

John's interest in audio had started to bloom years earlier, when he used to tag along to work with his uncle, a sound technician for "The Mickey Mouse Club" at Disney Studios. "My family wanted me to audition to be a Mouseketeer," he says. "I had no interest in that. I was interested in the technology."

Through observation, he was able to teach himself how to use some fairly complicated broadcast equipment and, by age 12, he had secured an FCC license and radio program on KPFA, repairing the transmitter whenever it went out.

"It was so serious that they sent someone out to make sure that this kid, before he meddled with these huge transmitters, was actually qualified," says John, 70.

Tinny system

Helen, now 66, recalls another date - a year after the first one - when they went to see her favorite artist, the Scottish singer-songwriter Donovan, at the Oakland Coliseum in 1968. John couldn't focus on the music or the wild scene unfolding around him because he was too distracted by the tinny sound system. "John turns to me and says, 'I could do something better than that,'" she says.

It's this obsessive, borderline fanatical quest to change the way things are heard that has made John Meyer one of the most revered figures in the world of professional audio.

With his long, unruly beard, gray ponytail and gentle demeanor, he has the air of a sorcerer, which to his most devoted followers is probably not too far off the mark. He has logged a staggering number of industry patents - more than 40 - and can talk at length

about intricacies of Swiss watches and high-end camera lenses in relation to his own innovations.

Instead of discussing his own inventions over lunch, John goes into a long ramble that touches on how cryogenic technology was received in Japan; how a group of Harvard neurobiologists introduced computers to a remote village in Africa; and how an experiment conducted on slime molds revealed the roots of our collective consciousness.

"When I first met John I had never heard anyone talk about different subjects as intensely or passionately as he did," says Helen.

After some four decades together, she has grown adept at reeling him in when he goes off on one too many tangents.

"We need to stay on topic," she nudges him, more than once.

The Meyers started their first professional audio company, Glyph, in 1969. Working out of their home, which was less than a mile away from the current Meyer Sound facility, the newlyweds had just one client, a club in San Rafael called Pepperland, for which John installed a quadraphonic sound system.

The club shut down in less than a year and the Meyers never got paid for their work, but while it was up and running, the state-of-the-art system drew the attention of local news crews and members of the Grateful Dead.

It also helped John get a job with McCune Sound System, which in 1971 sent him to Switzerland to build a lab called the Institute for Advanced Musical Studies. He was recruited to conduct research on low-distortion horn speakers and large-scale sound systems.

When his five-year contract was terminated after only two years because the company ran out of funds, the Meyers returned home with all his patents and audio equipment as reimbursement. He initially tried to take his ideas to other companies, like JBL, but had trouble selling them.

Ambitious idea

"He came home one day and said, 'We're going to start a company,'" says Helen.

The first Meyer Sound campus opened 35 years ago, in 1979, in a small industrial park in San Leandro.

Four years later, they moved to the current facility in Berkeley, where all their products are made from the ground up and used everywhere from Broadway and West End theaters to Cirque du Soleil productions, as well as prominent local venues such as Davies Symphony Hall, the SFJazz Center and UC Berkeley's Zellerbach Hall.

"We brought back an appreciation for hand-built quality from Switzerland," says John.

For sound designers and a long roster of touring acts, including everyone from Metallica to Michael Bublé, their elaborately intricate high-end systems such as the Constellation and Lyon represent the gold standard in audio engineering.

"The sophistication of their products is mind-blowing," says David Gockley, general director of the San Francisco Opera. "They are the best in the world."

New York nightclub impresario Michael Dorf's latest City Winery venue in the Napa Valley Opera House opened its doors earlier this month, equipped with the award-winning M'elodie line array loudspeaker system from Meyer Sound. The Dubai Mall, too, which claims to be the world's largest shopping center, also recently installed close to 1,000 of the company's signature self-powered loudspeakers.

This year, the Meyers will help renovate the UC Theatre in Berkeley, the University Avenue cinema that will reopen as a live music venue after a \$5 million upgrade with hopes to rival the Fillmore.

"John has spent his entire life helping musicians like me get the products we dream of having," says the musician Steve Miller, who first tapped Meyer when he was still working at Berkeley Custom Audio to build a rig for his band to use at the Monterey Pop Festival in 1967.

Helen, meanwhile, represents the public face of the company. She sits on the boards and advisory councils of numerous local and national institutions, including the Mark Morris Dance Group, the Berkeley Symphony Orchestra and the Paul Dresher Ensemble.

The Meyers are as well known for their philanthropy, particularly in the Bay Area, as for their gear. They played a significant role in subsidizing the relocation last year of San Francisco's City Arts and Lectures to the renovated Nourse Theater when the Herbst Theater was closed for seismic retrofitting.

'Bowled over'

"I am not the first person to be bowled over by John's brilliance and Helen's legendary generous spirit," says Sydney Goldstein, the founder and director of City Arts and Lectures. "Having Meyer Sound on your side as a nonprofit presenter and theater operator is like a small art school having David Hockney as a teacher and donor."

Despite the scale of the enterprise, Meyer Sound remains a family business. John and Helen are fixtures at the office. Their son Perrin, 43, is the company's software research and development manager, while daughter Tara, 39, serves as the in-house photographer.

Then there is the extended family - a staff of nearly 350 people who work inside the state-of-the-art factory. "People thought we were nuts when we said we wanted to do it here," John says, bristling at the suggestion that they could move their operation somewhere more cost-efficient.

"We have a good arrangement in Berkeley," Helen adds. "It feels like the right place for us to be. There's a certain spirit here."

The original building is now used primarily to house trophies and plaques the company has picked up over the years. It also includes the custom-built Pearson Theatre, which regularly hosts public lectures and performances. The building was even used as a recording studio for the making of mezzo-soprano Stephanie Blythe's latest album, "As Long as There Are Songs."

The production, meanwhile, has grown from just one building to six loosely connected structures of prime real estate spread over two blocks, including the old Heinz ketchup factory, which still bears the "57" imprint.

Every component but the speaker cabinets is made on site, where a research and development staff of lab-coat-sporting employees - including chemical and material science engineers - meticulously construct the products by hand in sectors named after planets and constellations.

"Everyone in the company knows the work they do contributes to the final product," says Helen. "You get a real sense of pride, a real sense of ownership."

"One of the things you really learn is all parts of the company really matter," says John, whose latest challenge is convincing people that high-quality audio still matters in a digital world where cruddy earbuds have replaced crappy record players.

"This generation doesn't know the difference," John says. "The iPhone will be their whole world of sound. If we don't introduce them to something else, we can lose a whole generation."

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