

view from the top

Man of the Ear

Marty Garcia, Founder, Future Sonics

by Fred Goodman

In the early 1970s, Marty Garcia was a land surveyor. At that time, his survey colleagues were also local musicians in Philadelphia. The band worked a lot opening locally for artists including Bruce Springsteen.

Garcia eventually left surveying and ended up at Bearsville Studios in Woodstock, NY with the band to record with John Phillips. There, he met and worked with several artists in various capacities. This included Orleans as drum tech, working with Todd Rundgren's road crew and then Hall & Oates (in 1978, Along the Red Ledge tour) as a carpenter.

"Audio was clearly my forté," Garcia recalls, "and I began to develop my own ideas for speaker systems, mixing consoles and packaging while on tour with Hall & Oates. My vision was for Todd Rundgren and Chris Anderson (FOH engineer for Todd) to try these systems once I had them built."

By 1979, Garcia recruited like-minded people to help construct these concepts, and that evolved into his first audio production company, Crystal Sound. The company designed active 2-way wedges that were manually time-aligned by using a 6-inch stovepipe for the high-frequency horn to travel up and down. This kept the wedges low-profile and compact for cartage.

By 1980, Anderson arranged for Garcia's company to provide audio for one of its shows in New York. "That was a very successful show, Garcia says, "and helped to build our reputation for excellent audio quality." The primary Philly-based promoter at that time, Electric Factory Concerts, hired Crystal Sound to provide audio for shows, where it worked with hundreds of groups not carrying their own production.

Garcia remembers that while touring with Rundgren back in the early '80s, there was a huge issue with vocal fatigue when doing shows in a wide range of venue sizes. "Even though our monitor system designs were very creative at the time, some artists were not having it easy with vocal-cord stress," Garcia points out. "My inspiration and motivation for creating my first custom-fit earphones in 1982 was to get the sound in Rundgren's head—literally. For Todd, I started with a box of generic ear buds that came with the first Sony

Walkman players and some gel denture adhesive to create the seal. From there, we worked with literally thousands of transducers at a time to get a few hundred good ones." Eventually, Garcia's company created the new designs for what became the Ear Monitors brand in 1985.

In 1990, Garcia believed the market was ready for the personal monitoring concept, and he started Future Sonics. Quickly, the new company was providing Ear Monitors-brand products for high-profile clients such as Gloria Estefan, Reba McEntire, Steve Miller, Phil Collins, Todd Rundgren, Kathy Mattea, and many others. "I am proud to say," Garcia notes, "we continue working with those early believers today."

Garcia says that his philosophy today is the same as it was from the beginning: "Listen with your ears, not your eyes." He elaborates, "This just means that what you see on paper for the product specs usually does not hold true or actually tell you what the products or systems sound like. My influences are my experiences with talented audio mixers, musicians, manufacturers and the desire for knowledge as we work to develop superior and safer audio. I have always believed that it is best to surround yourself with people who share similar philosophies, experiences, passion for knowledge and the drive to make the next gig or product better."

Garcia reports that his other objective was hearing conservation. When the Walkman first came out (around 1982) there was (and continues to be) controversy regarding hearing damage from the open earbud-type earphones in consumer products. He felt the same concern with the musicians and loudspeakers on stage.

According to Garcia, his team must relate to musicians, managers, audio personnel, touring schedules, shipping, prompt service, and how all these related people make a live show, TV, Broadway play, church production or other performance happen no matter what obstacles get in the way. "Our staff consists of extremely dedicated people who are audio professionals, musicians and in other entertainment work," he stresses. "Our offsite regional people are the mixers, musicians and touring personnel who truly understand our technology, why we do it the way we do it, and trust us to share our au-

dio backgrounds and experience with hundreds of tours, especially the tours that are successful with personal monitors."

Future Sonics believes in, and dedicates itself to, as Garcia states it, one simple philosophy: "Best sound first. Whatever it takes, get creative and develop the best quality while looking at the big picture of audio. This includes reliability, durability and comfort, but it also means that we may go against the grain occasionally from the marketing hyperbole. We have clients who still use some of our original Ear Monitors products going back 20 years and refuse to so much as change a cable, like one of your favorite vintage instruments, cabinets or microphones."

He continues, "Today, many personal monitor users, musicians or audio mixers, trust the marketing hype rather than understanding what works best off the stage first. It is very difficult to try custom ear products. As a result, Future Sonics developed a lower-cost universal earphone product that represents our 'audio signature.' That signature sound is inherent in all our products. This means providing the full spectrum in our earphones that not only have great sound but must also provide the energy to go with it in a very tiny device." Garcia explains that the price differences are in build materials, generic styles, custom colors, custom designs, etc.

When asked what the biggest markets for Future Sonics are right now, Garcia reports, "When times are good, people want to see live music, just like when times are tough. For us, the touring industry is still our best customer, and we continue to hear from our clients who express a real need for what we do and for what makes us different. The area of growth that impresses me has to be the incredible attention we have received from bloggers, online news sites, podcasts and social networking. We were one of the earliest businesses to get into things like Twitter as we were in the earliest days of the web, MySpace and Facebook. Those avenues continue to be very effective for us in a world that seems to spin on its mobile communications these days. Combining pro audio and portable digital media products is very exciting. There is a new blending of the lines between pro and personal as people are better educated, have high-quality dig-



ital media players, smartphones and even record good quality music in their home studios. It's a far cry from the old 4-track cassette recorders."

In dealing with the competition, Garcia flatly states, "If we did not have competition, the end-user would not know what makes us different from other companies. We have excellent relationships with some of the competitive companies. Our philosophies may differ in terms of the transducer technologies and enclosures that we find in different earphone products, but there are a couple of like-minded companies regarding hearing conservation. Future Sonics designs and manufactures our own proprietary dynamic transducers as we have since the mid-'90s. We did not invent the speaker; however, we did improve the design of the miniature dynamic speakers. We design and build them to sound like full-range speaker systems, along the same lines as those in a recording studio.

"In addition, we really believe in continuing to support nonprofit Hearing Conservation organizations, including H.E.A.R. (Hearing Education Awareness for Rockers) for more than 20 years. We believe our products provide 'BIGGER SOUND @ lower volumes,' and it is a real part of our mission. It is not about how loud it gets; it is about providing the brain the big spatial sound and energy, as if it is louder."

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