

In Memoriam



Walter Sear
1930-2010

In the early hours of April 29, Walter Sear died. Traditionally, the second sentence of memorial essays such as this state the main accomplishments of its subject. Those of us associated with the AES know all too well that a sentence alone cannot begin to describe the man and his legacy. In a letter announcing Walter's all-to-soon passing to my students at NYU I wrote, "Walter Sear, master musician, legendary audio purest, professional curmudgeon and storyteller, and friend of all who aspire to artistic perfection died today." I felt like I was at least beginning to scratch the surface.

While we all know Walter for owning and operating Sear Sound on 48th street in NYC since the days of the Neanderthal, some may not know that he was a virtuoso tuba player and tuba designer and a collaborator with Robert Moog on, of all things, a guitar

amplifier (Walter once confided in me that it was "kind of crappy"). He produced and scored films, became the world's first Moog synthesizer salesman, made, sold, and masterfully played the Theremin, was a husband, father, and grandfather. He was one of the original creative entrepreneurs. It is hard to believe that this iconic figure in grey slacks, blue blazer, and turtleneck sweater will no longer be there to greet us at his hallowed studios.

The novelist Muriel Spark once said something to the effect that characters are compelling and only ring true when they are filled with equal doses of consistency and contradiction...the more contradiction and paradox the better. His motto, "The recorded sound sucks—we're trying to make it better" is exactly the type of contradictory, inflammatory comment that Walter loved to use at the opening of an interview or conversation. He pissed

you off, goaded you, and then went about defending his thesis. You often walked away from these diatribes a little angry and a little confused, but always better informed. He had no fear of people that I could see—he constantly questioned convention, challenged your methods, your motivation, your commitment to excellence. Whether it was standing up at an AES meeting and saying "We hated how 16 track sounded when compared to 8, and now you people are ready to extend it to 24," or berating the early days of transistors, digital recording, virtual instruments, etc. He made you shut off autopilot and think. A professional curmudgeon indeed, but a curmudgeon

with a clear sense of purpose. One particular story that speaks to the complexity and just flat-out humor of his character involved an artist I was working with at Sear being admonished for lighting a cigarette in Walter's studio with a match. While one might think that lighting up in his recording studio is what got Walter angry, it was the match that got him going. He yelled, "The sulfur in that match is going to kill you, here use my lighter." The next morning, with great concern he gave me a new lighter and said, "give this to your artist, those matches are not healthy."

Over the past 5 years, I brought my students from NYU to Walter's studio for a very special annual lecture. He would bring the room of aspiring music professionals to near tears with the truths and compromises of our business, and then turn to me and say, "I hope I wasn't too

hard on them?" No, Walter, it was pitch perfect. He spoke about his prized collection of microphones, his Neve console (so clean you could perform surgery on it), his mic pre-amps, tape machines, and army surplus compressors. Most important, he would talk about what it really means to be a professional. While his stories of greeting clients at the door each morning, offering drinks and snacks, (I think he owned stock in Entenmann's bakery), having chairs that don't squeak, and always keeping the studio clean and comfortable seemed anachronistic to some, his devotion and passion to running a first-class studio was evident to all. He was a producer's producer, a musician's musician, and an engineer's engineer. His message was consistently priceless, and I can say with certainty that this message was loved by the younger generation of our business. Many of the students and younger artists I took to Sear Sound took the news of his death with great sadness.

Walter represented a generation that stuck to principles, worked hard, constantly honed their craft, and actually cared about quality and reputation. Whether you agreed with his take on things or not it was hard to refute his bank of knowledge, success, and longevity. He was a shrewd businessman. While studios around him were charging less and less to keep pace with dwindling recording budgets, he stuck to his guns and kept the prices high; against all odds people kept coming.

News of his passing has affected me more than I anticipated. While we were not personal friends outside the music world, he was always very kind to my artists, my students, and me. While, like all of us, he had his foibles, he represented a period in our history that valued education, quality, decorum, and long-term consistency. To me, he not only represented the term "old school," he was the old school. I will miss him dearly. Thank you, Walter.

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