

# *The Last Seat in the House: the Story of Hanley Sound*

REVIEWED BY KARL G. RULING

I HAVE THREE BOOKS in queue for book reviews, and stacks of books for fun or to make me a better person besides my bed and on the floor under my desk, but *The Last Seat in the House* is the one I keep picking up and thinking about. Author John Kane gives us a fascinating story of the development of sound amplification for large concerts and events—mainly rock concerts, but also pop, folk, jazz, and orchestral music, plus presidential inaugurations, political rallies, and anti-war protests—primarily by tracing the career of Bill Hanley, the founder of Hanley Sound, the company that provided the sound system for the Woodstock Music and Art Fair. I write “primarily” because, while Hanley’s career provides the through-line, there is a lot in the book about concerts, events, and musical sound reinforcement gigs that Hanley was not part of. They established the context in which Hanley worked, and are part of the bigger story of how large event sound reinforcement developed through the 1960s and ‘70s.

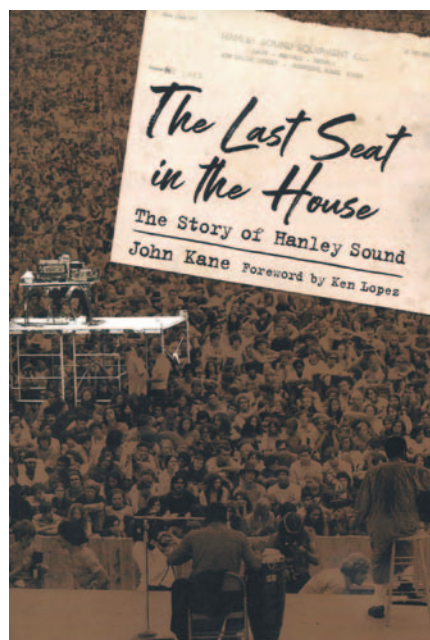
The book is a collection of stories stitched together into a narrative. Kane writes in the prologue, “This is not a manual on sound reinforcement. It is an historical recollection on how the industry came to be, with important technical details thrown in.” Ken Lopez, former vice president of JBL, writes in the preface, the “tale is told through the voices of those who were involved in this work.” Kane interviewed over 100 people and referenced several books and magazine articles, collecting stories in the words of those who lived the events. From this he has constructed a roughly chronological

narrative over 58 chapters and an epilogue, with stops along the way to linger on certain topics.

The narrative is not a coherent story. People remember things differently from what other people remember; they offer as fact stories about things they didn’t experience and couldn’t possibly know; numbers don’t add up. All the stories are presented as equally true—which they are if they are reported as recollections. Into this mix Kane folds in stories that really aren’t about sound or concerts, but they’re interesting. One of the off-topic tales is of Bill Hanley being a passenger aboard a hijacked plane on September 19, 1970. Hanley was returning to Boston from a show in Pittsburgh, and he lived to do other shows, so perhaps that’s the sound connection—but never mind. It’s a good story. The book is full of good stories.

How much a reader enjoys this book will, of course, depend on the reader. For me, it was a reminder of music groups I saw in the San Francisco Bay Area at celebrated venues when I was old enough to drive but too young to drink, and gives me a taste of events I wish I had attended (e.g., the Human Be-In in Golden Gate Park, the Fantasy Fair and Magic Mountain Music Festival on Mount Tamalpais). Hanley worked principally on the East Coast, but Kane doesn’t skip sound companies, venues, and concerts elsewhere. They all were important in the evolution of large event sound reinforcement.

The Woodstock Music and Art Fair gets the most words and ten chapters—a lot, but appropriate given the extraordinary event



and Hanley having done the sound. Kane describes the precursor music festivals held in the Woodstock area going back to the Maverick Festival (1915) and the Sound-Out concerts held at the Peter Pan Farm, near Woodstock, starting in 1967. He describes the search for a site, the aborted attempts to have the Music and Art Fair at the Howard Mills Industrial Park in Wallkill, then on the grounds of the El Monaco motel, before finally settling on Max Yasgur’s dairy farm in Bethel. Many other writers have covered this and the performances, the mud, the trash, the trips, the toilets, the joy, and how it could have gone terribly wrong, but didn’t. However, I think none of them have covered the sound equipment as thoroughly as Kane—both the equipment that was used and that was not. Kane includes a story of a

mixing console designed and built just for the event, but finished late, so it had to be flown to the airport at Monticello—landing about 12 hours before the first act took the stage—and then carried on a motorcycle through the traffic and crowds to the mix position. It didn't work. A plugged-together combination of Shure, RCA, and Altec mixers was used. The only other mixing console onsite was for recording purposes.

Most of the chapters are about sound reinforcement for concerts and music festivals, but four chapters are about providing sound for anti-war protest rallies. Hanley provided sound reinforcement for the March Against Death rally on November 15, 1969, in Washington, DC, with half a million people in attendance—100,000 more than were at Woodstock. He and his crew were arrested as they were striking the sound system at the end of the gig. He also provided the sound system for the anti-war demonstration with about 150,000 people

on the Washington Ellipse on May 9, 1970. The following year he provided the sound system for a May 1 anti-war rock concert, with a crowd of about 35,000 people, at the West Potomac Park. He also had provided the sound system for a smaller concert scheduled for May 2 at Sylvan Park, but that event never happened. The police revoked the permits, and swept the parks clear of people. Massive demonstrations followed on May 3, resulting in the arrests of about 12,000 people, so many people that two sports arenas had to be turned into detention camps. These events are offered by Kane as examples of Hanley's ability to provide sound systems for large events under difficult circumstances with little advance notice.

Can you imagine being able to stand shoulder to shoulder with a few hundred thousand of your closest friends, listening to music? I'd accept a whiff of teargas for that. ■



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