

In Profile: TC FURLONG

Always seeking a better way. *by Kevin Young*

BASED JUST NORTH OF CHICAGO in Lake Forest, IL, TC Furlong Inc. is celebrating its 40th anniversary this year, marking the occasion in various ways that all relate to the company's long-time slogan: "Better Audio By Design." Although they serve clients throughout the U.S. and occasionally Canada, the primary focus remains on regional business, founder and president TC Furlong emphasizes.

"We think renting locally and regionally is still a good thing because of our ability to provide high level service, particularly if someone needs something last minute," he states. "It's about respect. You respect your client by giving them good service and being responsive. That's why we have a rule that everyone gets called back in five minutes, no matter what.

"And because the curtain doesn't come up during regular business hours, we have a 24/7 Emergency Audio Response (EAR) service," he continues. "It doesn't matter what day of the year it is, we'll dispatch somebody to help. There are always opportunities to offer better service and always a better way to do something and we're always digging in to find a better way to do audio."

In fact, finding a better way to do things has long been a preoccupation for Furlong, one that informed his passion for both music and audio from the outset.



TC Furlong (left) and Jeff Cech



FAST FACTS

Location: Lake Forest, IL

Years in the Business: 40

Favorite Tools: Meyer Sound SIM 3 audio analyzer

Worked With: National TV productions such as PBS Soundstage and Harpo Productions, houses of worship including Willow Creek Community Church, various performing arts organizations, venues and theatres, the Lyric Opera of Chicago, The Steppenwolf Theater, educational institutions such as Northwestern University, and artists like Robert Plant, Keith Urban and The Black Eyed Peas.

A GOOD EXPERIENCE

Born in Cincinnati, Furlong moved to Illinois at age nine – about the time he first picked up the guitar. "I never really studied formally, but I was always learning how to play better." His initial experiments with loudspeakers were also somewhat informal. "In fifth grade I was taking radios apart, putting the speakers in different enclosures and experimenting with every kind of loudspeaker I could. I'd seen The Beatles on TV and got into music, but I was always fascinated with loudspeakers, because that's the link between performer and audience."

At a time when live concert audio was a blend of musician's amplifiers and acoustic drums, supplemented by reinforcement of vocals and quieter instruments, he adds: "How to get that blend and provide the audience with a good experience really intrigued me."

That led him to indulge his twin passions in equal measure. In 1973, at age 18, Furlong rented an industrial space in Highland Park, IL and started Steamer Sound. Around the same time, he adds, he fell in love with the steel guitar. "During the day I'd run the business

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and build speakers. At night, I'd gig. I worked a lot," he notes, laughing, "but it allowed me to understand the artist's side of the equation and fold that into what the company provided."

Originally, Steamer Sound was purely a manufacturer that built and sold loudspeakers integrated with protective road cases called Steamer Cabinets. The chief designer was Tom Danley, Furlong says. "I always mention Tom because he's gone on to great notoriety and still lives a few miles from me."

Originally, he hadn't intended to offer rentals, but soon began to do so in order to meet client demand. "But quantity wasn't our focus – we'd build a certain number of speaker boxes in order to be able to supply local events and concerts. Providing quality gear and having quality people work with us was the most important thing."

As the business grew, Furlong remained active as both a musician and audio supplier, but as a member of Chicago based country-rock band Rio Grande and later The Jump in the Saddle Band, became so busy with music that he decided to shut down his commercial space and continue to build custom orders in his basement. By the late 1970s, however, he abandoned building proprietary gear in favor of offering other manufacturer's products to clients. Still, he was able to run the business from his property when not touring with the band, which had a major hit in 1983 with "The Curly Shuffle."

NATURAL & ORGANIC

While the band's international notoriety was relatively short lived, they remain active to this day and Furlong is still in demand as a live and session player. That said, in 1990 he cut down on touring to start a family with his wife, children's author Mary Gauthier Furlong. "She's a musician as well – a wonderful bass player and singer," Furlong adds, "and we actually met when we were hired



A youthful TC Furlong with a Steamer Sound cabinet.

for the same band."

He characterizes the company's growth since as natural and organic. "Our client list has grown 100 percent by referral. We'll do a live rental for somebody, then become their go to sound person. Then they'll say, 'Can you help us find a solution for this?' and we'll say, 'Yes, we'll do our best' and grow to meet their needs."

Expansion of services was often a result of consciously expanding into areas underserved by others. "Theatre, corporate theatre, wireless microphones, loudspeaker alignment; those things weren't available in our region," he notes. "In 1989 we started getting into wireless microphones in a big way, made a sizable investment and tried to become as expert in that as we could."

"Before I arrived," adds general manager Jeff Cech, "the company was known for expertise in wireless microphones, and renting wireless systems and intercoms was and is a major part of our business, but earlier no one was doing it."

Growth was further fueled by Furlong's ability to identify other emerging areas of business and apply the compa-

ny's expertise to creating better solutions for those markets specifically. "When corporations started to embrace audio as part their presentations, we were right there trying to do more elaborate designs than what a lot of A/V companies were doing," Furlong says. "After we got into wireless microphones and corporate A/V we noticed there was an unfilled opportunity in Chicago for theatrical sound. We continue to do a lot of it, but all of these things naturally evolved out of each other."

The company also began designing and commissioning systems, but the concentration continues to be on special events and maintaining long term, mutually beneficial partnerships. "We have clients who've been with us for 20 to 30 years, and we've built those relationships, slowly and carefully, by putting our efforts, not only into marketing to potential clients but into keeping the clients we have by providing a very high level of service."

One of the milestones of the late 1990s was the development of a relationship with Meyer Sound that continues going strong to this day. While

the company carries a wide range of other loudspeaker systems, Meyer is the primary brand. Also during that time, the company began providing audio for television concert broadcasts for shows such as Soundstage on PBS, with Furlong mixing many of those shows.

He says that mixing and system alignment have always been an integral part of his personal contribution to the company's work. "Sometimes the equipment is secondary. Sometimes the live mixer is secondary. It depends on the client, but often we'd get hired because they wanted me or one of our excellent engineers to mix."

GROWING CAPABILITIES

"Another milestone was TC foreseeing the importance of digital consoles in 2001-2002," Cech states. "We bought early versions of a lot of different mixing consoles from many manufacturers, and developed the expertise in-house to rent, deploy and use them on shows. Today we have more consoles and more types of consoles than any other provider in the region."

Cech did freelance work for the company for 15 years and also often rented equipment while managing Northwest-

ern University's Performing Arts Center before officially coming onboard 2000. "We call that era 'the Garage Days,'" Cech says, referencing the warehouse Furlong built on his property that served as the company base through the 1980s and 90s.

With Cech signing on, Furlong was able to concentrate more fully on developing strategic partnerships and indulging his passion for system alignment, which, Cech says, "He has both a love and a gift for." The subsequent move to the current facility was a catalyst for further growth, but Furlong's desire to relocate had other motivations as well. "I just decided one day, when I saw 14 cars parked in my driveway, that it was time to move," he says, laughing.

Since, the company has continued to work with long-term clients like Willow Creek Community Church and Northwestern University – for whom they've provided audio for commencement ceremonies for 20 years in addition to serving the needs of the university's athletic, performing arts, radio, television and film departments.

Fitting his mantra to provide complete, appropriate solutions without fail

is a commitment to education. This drives the company to host monthly events aimed at educating clients and potential clients about everything from the operation of digital consoles to RF coordination and system alignment

It's a way of giving back, Furlong notes, which is something that also drove his creation of an entirely separate company, TC Furlong Custom, and the development of the TC Furlong Custom Split, a recent product but one he began developing way back when he was building Steamer Cabinets. "The Split is my effort to give something back to the steel guitar community – a way to get the fantastic sound of tubes from a really lightweight amp. As musicians get older they don't want to carry heavy equipment, so if I can provide an amplifier that's light but still provides big sound, I think I can help people continue to be inspired to make music. And being able to contribute to a musician being inspired to play – either more often or longer – that's an honor."

For Furlong, Cech and the entire company, the most important part of the equation comes back to respect. "Respect for the music, for the audience and for musicians. Most people working here are musicians. We often say that if you're not a musician you should start taking lessons if you want to mix live sound. If you have experience as a musician, you understand the position of the person on stage whether they're a performer or presenter, and that's something I think we're known for.

"When we meet someone – an artist, a technician or a client – our first question is, 'How can we help you have a better day?' It's been that way from day one. Anybody can provide equipment; it's the way you implement that equipment and the attitude you have that makes for a successful event." ■

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A "sound isolation helmet" circa 1974 that was designed, built, and deployed by the Steamer Sound team to isolate from the main system in order to mix on headphones for a live radio broadcast. Note the built-in "life support system" – boxer fans that would draw fresh air through the helmet to prevent suffocation and heat exhaustion.