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Meyer Sound and the Grateful Dead: A Long Strange Trip

In the early 1970s, the Grateful Dead's legendary sound engineer Owsley "Bear" Stanley tapped John Meyer to help realize a radical vision: the Wall of Sound. What began as an experimental dream—delivering pristine, full-range sound directly from each musician to every seat—would evolve into a decades-long collaboration rooted in shared obsession, innovation, and respect for the audience experience.

That collaboration deepened in 1979 when John and Helen Meyer founded Meyer Sound. Since then, the Berkeley, California-based company has remained an integral partner to the Grateful Dead's extended family, supporting legendary side projects and solo tours with custom solutions and breakthrough technologies.

From the early UM-1 UltraMonitors that helped shape onstage sound for Jerry Garcia Band and RatDog to the powerful LEO and LYON systems used on landmark shows like Fare Thee Well and early Dead & Company tours to today's flagship PANTHER large-format linear line array driving Dead & Company's final stadium shows, Meyer Sound has been there at every step. Meyer Sound systems have supported offstage ventures including Bobby Weir's TRI Studios, Sweetwater Music Hall, Phil Lesh's Terrapin Crossroads, and most recently Garcia's in Chicago. Backed by more than 100 patents, innovations like these have helped the Grateful Dead and their extended family push the boundaries of live performance, raising the bar for what audiences expect and what artists can achieve.

Dead & Company's final tour in 2023 closed a historic chapter, bringing together three generations of Dead Heads across stadiums and pavilions with a PANTHER-powered rig that delivered every nuance, from hushed, spacey jams to kaleidoscopic peaks. FOH engineer and UltraSound CEO Derek Featherstone—who has been at the helm since the mid 1990s—credits Meyer Sound's responsiveness and reliability with helping him stay in sync with the band's dynamic performances. "This band genuinely values high-end audio," he says. "They notice the changes and respond to the sound. Meyer Sound delivers that level of precision."

That kind of trust doesn't come out of nowhere—it's built on decades of shared history and experimentation. Early Meyer Sound technologies were tested live on the Grateful Dead's stages, with UltraSound and Meyer Sound working hand-in-hand to pioneer solutions for large-scale touring and road-worthy fidelity. That lineage is quite literally built into Meyer Sound's campus in Berkeley: Bear's Lab—named for Owsley "Bear" Stanley—honors the sonic visionary who helped spark the company's earliest innovations, while the Pearson Theatre commemorates Don Pearson, co-founder of UltraSound and a key architect of the Grateful Dead's groundbreaking live sound. Longtime collaborator and the Grateful Dead's percussionist Mickey Hart has also played a vital role in shaping Meyer Sound's creative and technical path, from low-frequency research and immersive experiments to large-scale projects like the eruptive soundscape for the Mirage volcano in Las Vegas. Together, these relationships reflect a partnership that wasn't just technical—it was philosophical, creative, and deeply personal.

Today, Meyer Sound systems are heard around the world—from global stadium tours with Metallica and Ed Sheeran to iconic venues like Vienna’s Konzerthaus and Jazz at Lincoln Center. That same commitment to sonic excellence also powers hometown institutions like the Bay Area’s Fillmore and Fox Theater—legendary venues that continue to evolve with Meyer Sound at their core.

At the heart of it all is a culture of collaboration, born from the company’s earliest experiments with the Grateful Dead. That spirit lives on in technologies like Spacemap Go and Constellation, which allow artists and engineers to shape sound with new creative freedom. It’s also why Meyer Sound continues to lead in touring, theater, immersive experiences, and fixed installations worldwide.

But for Meyer Sound, the story isn’t just technical—it’s personal. The company’s long-standing relationship with the Grateful Dead helped define its ethos and its evolution. As Helen Meyer puts it: “The Grateful Dead are part of our DNA. We learned together. We grew together. And we’re still on the journey.”

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