

CAN YOU HEAR WHAT I HEAR?

Walter Sear and his Sear Sound are the last of the analog champions

BY DAVID MARCHESE • PHOTOS BY TODD WESTPHAL

Sometimes, when Walter Sear hears something particularly asinine, he deviates from his usual soft, measured tones, and lets loose with something best described as a combination of resigned laughter and derisive cackling: “aaAAAhhhhAAaa.” The effect is doubly disconcerting. There’s the sound itself—a thin, reedy yawp—and then there’s the idea behind it. I don’t expect someone like Walter, the proprietor of New York’s oldest independent recording studio—a man, by definition, enamored of the craft of beautiful sound—to emit such a peculiar noise. The effect, I imagine, is akin to hearing Queen Elizabeth bust out a thick, growling belch—ontologically inappropriate. Walter, whose fine, light brown hair is neatly parted and whose shoes are always polished, doesn’t make that sound very often, but, when he does, it’s most likely directed at the recording industry. Double down that the subject is digital sound. Fact is: Walter’s been sounding a note of disgust with the recording industry for almost thirty years.

Walter, the seventy-five-year-old owner of Sear Sound, is no latecomer to the cause of analog sound. He began sounding the alarm in 1979, with the arrival of the compact disc. Philips and Sony had assembled a task force to ensure that CDs would be compatible across all playback machines. (A lesson learned the hard way from the VHS/Betamax debacle.) After more than a year of work, they unveiled the new digital format—which was able to play on everyone’s machines just like the old vinyl LPs, but more durable and free from annoying crackles and pops—at the Audio Engineering Society’s convention. They were the ones, after all, charged with capturing the sound that the recording industry hoped to sell. Walter wasn’t impressed. “Digital,” he says, “sounds like shit.”

His more technical objections to the CDs were similarly devastating: the sampling rates weren’t high enough, the cut-off filter was set at the wrong level, there was an increased risk of line loss, and so on and so on. “There was nearly a riot,” he tells me. “They came after me with baseball bats.”

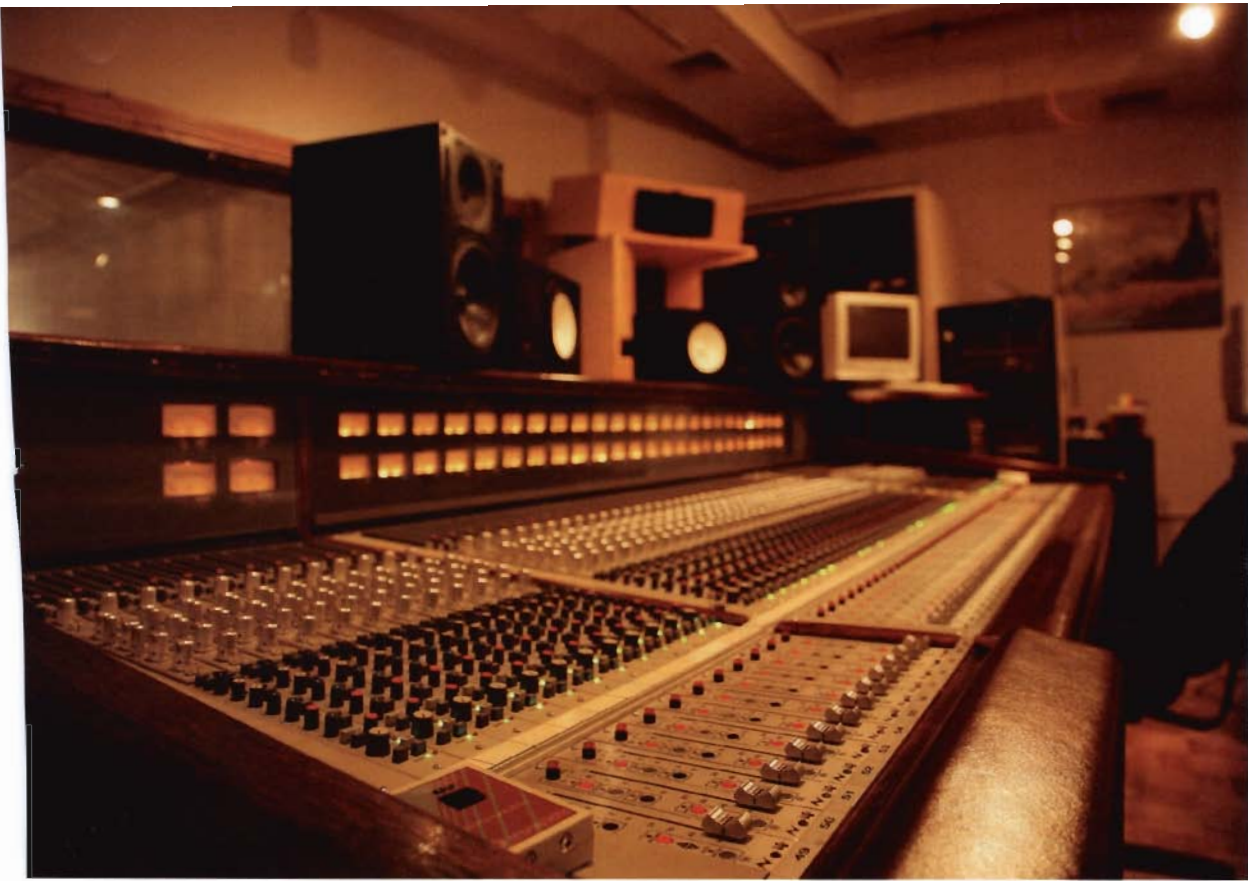
The scene at Walter’s studio is more tranquil. In fact, the silence, as I stand in one of Sear Sound’s two recording rooms, is the space’s most striking characteristic. We’re in the heart of midtown, with traffic streaming by, people filling the sidewalks, and a subway station nearby, yet the only thing you can hear is a cell phone vibrating in my backpack. “I was wondering what that was,” says Walter, who painstakingly designed the room to ensure such disturbances did not go unnoticed.

The silence isn’t the only thing noticeable about the room. A stately grand piano gleams in the light pouring through the large soundproofed windows overlooking 48th Street. A gaggle of vintage microphones stands in a corner like metallic flamingos, all long necks and strangely shaped heads. The

adjoining control room is stocked with a panoply of retro-futuristic machines covered with buttons, meters, and faders. It’s all very starship *Enterprise*. Two reels of black magnetic tape—each about the size of a large pizza—sit waiting and ready, just like they did for Paul McCartney, Wynton Marsalis, and Sonic Youth—all of whom have recorded here. As Walter speaks, the smoke from the Kentucky Gold cigarette he holds at waist-level curls upwards, around his healthy gut and over his slightly stooped back. He looks like a treble clef filled out and come to life. Walter’s casually classy appearance is in complete sync with the ethos of his studio. Sear Sound’s elegant beauty and vintage equipment—even its silence—are testament to Walter’s sonic perfectionism and devotion to analog recording.

So what exactly is analog recording? Simply put, analog recording is an attempt to copy a sound. When sound is recorded on tape, for example, it is stored as a fluxuation in a magnetic field strength in a magnetic tape recording. On records, the sound is transcribed into the vinyl in the same shape as the original sound wave. A physical element is present in both cases. In digital recording, however, the sound waves are analyzed by a computer, which then assigns a numerical value (a series of ones and zeroes) to each instance of a given sound. When the music is played back, it goes through another computer (your CD player or iPod), which retranslates those numbers into the sounds that they represent.

According to Sear, this translation and retranslation process saps sound of something essential. Walter’s analog advocacy is rooted in more than just personal preference. He doesn’t just dislike digital technology; he blames it for the recording industry’s current woes (sales of recorded music have declined almost twenty percent since 1999).



He boils it down: “We’ve failed because we’ve allowed bad sound to get out. The old technology was better. The public finally caught on and they stopped listening.”

Sear’s views have attracted a following. “Walter is an inspiration, both as an innovator and for his attitude about digital in the face of the reality we see taking over,” explains Kevin McMahon, the house engineer for Marcata—one of New York’s other analog recording studios. In an industry dominated by digital, Walter is hunkered down in his studio with hard-to-manipulate reels of tape, temperamental vacuum tubes, and, of course, a small collection of vinyl LPs.

Walter relies on more than just his own ears for evidence of “bad sound.” He explains, for example, that the industry’s standard digital sampling rate of 44.1kHz is far too low to ensure high fidelity. (Digital sound is produced by sampling an electrical version of a sound and then expressing it in binary code—the higher the sample rate, the higher the fidelity to the original sound.) Walter’s studio can sample at 192.1kHz—which, were it the industry standard, would make recorded music even more expensive than it already is. “It costs too much to make an LP record,” says Walter. “CDs are much cheaper—they’re cheaper, but they suck.”

MP3s, which compress CD wav files by up to twelve times, draw even more of Walter’s ire. “MP3s take out seventy percent of the sonic material,” he says. “That’s where the music is. You may as well listen over the telephone.”

Toward the end of his digitally directed jeremiad, Walter recommends I read Oswald Spengler’s *The Decline of the West*. “That’s what’s happening now,” he says. “It’s all

sliding slowly away.”

The son of a traveling salesman, Walter was expected to learn basic plumbing and carpentry skills at an early age. During breaks from fixing the house, he took piano lessons (“like anyone who wanted to be civilized”). Since he always had tools instead of toys, tinkering with machines was his idea of fun. He built his first crystal radio at the age of twelve and started messing around with hi-fi systems soon after. His dual enthusiasms for sound and science never wavered, and Walter eventually earned degrees in Music (from Philadelphia’s prestigious Curtis Institute) as well as in sociology and chemical engineering. After a stint in the Air Force—spent mostly playing tuba in the main bands—he worked as a freelance sound engineer and performed in the pit orchestra at places like Radio City Music Hall. Then, in the early 1960s, he and Robert Moog—the father of the modern synthesizer—joined up to sell cheap guitar amplifiers in an effort to capitalize on the Beatles’ success. The venture failed, but Walter had made an important connection.

“Walter was Bob Moog’s East Coast salesman,” explains Trevor Pinch, professor of Science and Technology Studies at Cornell and the author of *Analog Days*, a history of the synthesizer. “Bob counted on Walter to tell him what the customers were looking for. At one point, Moog was thinking of eliminating the keyboard and Walter convinced him to keep it, saying it would be easier to sell to musicians.” Walter was right. Synthesizers quickly became a familiar sight in recording studios across the country. It wasn’t long

Dewar's "White Label"



ONLY IN SCOTCH
WHISKY CAN
AGE AND BEAUTY
PERFECTLY BLEND



DEWARISM.COM

PROVE YOUR RESPONSIBILITY, NOT YOUR CAPACITY.
©2006 DEWAR'S, WHITE LABEL AND THE HIGHLANDER DEVICE ARE REGISTERED
TRADEMARKS AND DEWARISM IS A TRADEMARK. IMPORTED BY JOHN DEWAR &
SONS COMPANY, MIAMI, FL. BLENDED SCOTCH WHISKY - 40% ALC. BY VOL.

before Walter opened a studio of his own.

The office above Walter's studio has the feel of a distinguished writer's retreat. The bookshelves are lined with weighty tomes like Schoenberg's *Lives of the Great Composers*, Hedrick Smith's *The Russians*, and multiple volumes of Third Reich military typology. A twelve-year-old Mac stares H.A.L.-like at an electronic typewriter. ("It still functions for what we need to do," says Walter, "so why replace it?") About a half dozen bottles of alcohol stand sentry over some old LPs.

He speaks quietly, so as not to disturb Roberta, his manager of the last twenty-seven years, who happens to be sleeping, tired from a night at the opera. I'm tired too, and Walter offers to have one of his scruffy young assistant engineers bring me a cup of coffee. "It'll be hot and fresh," he says, a smile beneath his Cronkite-esque mustache, "that's how we do it here."

The wealth of technical and scientific information Walter presents in support of his beliefs are logical but not entirely convincing to anyone who has grown up listening to digital music. Mostly, I'm not convinced for the simple reason that I can't hear what he hears. To my ears, CDs and MP3s sound...well, they sound just fine. I certainly don't find them "grating," which is how Walter describes them when he's feeling generous. In what may be a simple bid to salvage my pride, I begin to wonder if my sonic insensitivity is really so bad.

The idea that digital sound is inherently grating—or even inferior to analog (i.e., a more accurate reproduction of sounds), isn't the consensus Walter makes it out to be. Dr. Glenis Long, director of the Hearing Sciences Lab at the City University of New York, where doctors and scientists study hearing and treat hearing loss, doubts that digital sounds so unpleasant.

"I can't think of any reason why someone would actually hear digital as being grating or harsh in relation to analog," says Dr. Long. "No recording method gives the full dynamic range of our hearing, but digital is still better than nearly all analog techniques at capturing that dynamic range."

But if the difference between digital and analog wasn't as dramatic as Walter made it out to be, surely there was some reason for his passionate feelings. It turns out that the collision of a sound wave and the ear is only the beginning of the process, explains Professor Pinch. "The brain is doing something when it receives those sounds. To say sound is just waveforms hitting the ear is like saying pictures are just light reflected onto the eyes. It's possible there is something of a placebo effect going on when people make judgments about sound. If you think digital is harsh," he says, "you will hear it as harsh." So it's possible that Walter was reacting to something other than the sound *qua* sound of digital music. This made sense. There's nothing inherently unpleasant about the sound of someone moaning in pain, but we find it unpleasant because of the meaning attached to it. Could it be that Walter was hearing time and technology pass him by?

Studio G sits across from a gas station and a careworn diner on a quiet, gray stretch of Williamsburg's Union Avenue. Housed in a shuttered red brick building with a latticework of protective bars across the windows, the studio feels further away from Sear Sound than my map says it is. I'm here to speak with Joel Hamilton, Studio G's house engineer, producer, and part-owner. I want to know his reasons for running an analog recording studio.

Arriving on a sunny day in late winter, I'm greeted by Hamilton. With his rectangular black-framed glasses, a thick wallet-chain dangling from his pocket, and a gravity-defying haircut, Hamilton, thirty-five, looks like a punk who chose steady recording work over a life of endless touring—which is exactly what he is. Looks aside, it's clear that the cultural differences between Studio G and Sear Sound are just as telling as the physical ones. Old posters advertise concerts by avant-punk heroes like Tom Verlaine and Pere Ubu while I spy Philip K. Dick novels resting on the shelves of the giant storage unit that covers an entire wall. The bathroom, a toilet really, is separated from the rest of the studio by a hanging black curtain. It's easy to understand why, apart from the analog technol-

ogy, sonic outsiders like Tom Waits and Frank Black of the Pixies come here to record: the studio hums with a relaxed, anything-goes atmosphere.

It also hums whenever the L train passes underneath. "It's never been a problem," says Hamilton, referring to the subway station below the studio. The faint rumble of the subway (what would Walter say?!) confirms my feeling that Hamilton's motivation for running an analog studio has little to do with any abstruse standards of sonic perfectionism. But if analog sound isn't all that matters, why not go digital?

"There's no reason to champion one format over the other," explains Hamilton, distancing himself from Sear's purist stance. "I happen to like the sound of analog, but the music doesn't come from the machines, it comes from the performer." Then he reminds me just how unscientific all this can be: "If it makes the band feel better to see big tape reels start moving, or to know they're recording the same way as the Kinks," says Hamilton, "then that's fine. It's cool that people like Sear hold a torch for analog, but that's like saying we should only paint in primary colors. The bottom line is that the more people there are making and listening to music, the better."

Before I leave, Hamilton gives me a brief tour of the studio. Brief because you could probably fit three Studio Gs into Sear Sound. But there's still plenty to see. A nicked piano with slightly yellowing keys sits in the corner: bought from some "Liberace" in the East Village. The vaguely medieval contraption resting on a speaker: an antique combination of violin and ukulele called a Hawaiian art violin. A strange, bottle-shaped microphone: "That's an RFT 1949," says Hamilton. "Walter and I probably have the only ones in New York."

I'm standing in Walter's studio with my back turned to what may be New York's only other RFT 1949 microphone. He's expounding on the woes of modern recording, and I am listening with respect, if not complete sympathy. Walter's unwavering commitment to analog recording (to what he believes is *right*) has resulted in a beautiful, successful studio. But it also seems myopic and elitist. After consulting with Dr. Long and Professor Pinch, the issue seems less clear-cut than Walter believes; and with technological innovations in the works (MP4s, etc.), it seems it will only become less so. But what *is* clear is that digital sound has opened music up in a way analog never could. Studio capabilities that would have cost \$50,000 just ten years ago can now be had for the cost of a home computer and less than a thousand dollars worth of software. And while the iPod may not be more ubiquitous than the Sony Walkman was, it's a lot easier for an unknown band to get their music online and onto a stranger's iPod than it is to get it into a record store and onto a stranger's stereo. And when you combine the number of downloads with CD sales and radio play, more people are listening to music than ever before. I ask him: isn't that a *good* thing?

He doesn't answer my question so much as question the terms with which I pose it: "I wouldn't call what most people are doing 'listening,'" he says. "It's background noise for other things. The technology has gotten so bad that there's no longer a standard of taste. Nobody listens to music because it grabs them and moves them emotionally—it just isn't there. And it isn't there because either the group didn't have it, or the recording process leached it out." As I leave his studio for the last time, Walter again recommends I read *The Decline of the West*.

Not long after meeting with Walter, I walk through Union Square at rush hour. The cars whoosh by. Music blares from the Virgin Megastore. Voices yammer into cell phones. I put on my headphones and press play. A slide guitar traces a simple, mournful melody. It's soon accompanied by a wordless, wandering moan. Blind Willie Johnson. "Dark Was the Night, Cold Was the Ground." First recorded onto a piece of shellac in 1927, now, it's a ghostly bunch of ones and zeros. Walter would probably think it sounds terrible. But right now, it just might be the most beautiful thing I've ever heard. ●

DAVID MARCHESE is a freelance writer living in Brooklyn.

Dewar's "White Label"



EXPLORATION MAKES
ONE WISER; EVEN IF
THE ONLY WISDOM
GAINED IS TO KNOW
WHERE NOT TO RETURN



DEWARISM.COM

PROVE YOUR RESPONSIBILITY. NOT YOUR CAPACITY.
©2006 DEWAR'S, WHITE LABEL AND THE HIGHLANDER DEVICE ARE REGISTERED
TRADEMARKS AND DEWARISM IS A TRADEMARK. IMPORTED BY JOHN DEWAR &
SONS COMPANY, MIAMI, FL. BLENDED SCOTCH WHISKY—40% ALC. BY VOL.