

Bob Heil, Whose Innovations Enhanced the Sound of Rock, Dies at 83

A groundbreaking audio engineer, he provided the large-scale systems that brought tours by the Who and the Grateful Dead to life.



By Alex Williams

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Bob Heil's career as a groundbreaking sound engineer who brought thunder and rich sonic coloring to tours by rock titans like the Grateful Dead and the Who began behind a pipe organ in a 1920s movie palace.

Mr. Heil, who helped usher rock into its arena-shaking era by designing elaborate sound systems that allowed rock juggernauts of the late 1960s and '70s to play at volcanic volumes, first learned to appreciate the full spectrum of musical tones as a teenager, when he took a job playing the massive Wurlitzer pipe organ at the opulent Fox Theater in St. Louis.

"We had to voice and tune 3,500 pipes, from one inch to 32 feet," he said in a 2022 video interview with the audio entrepreneur Ken Berger. "Voicing taught me to listen. Very few people know how to listen. Listening, you've got to mentally go in and dissect."

Mr. Heil died on Feb. 28 of cancer in a hospital in Belleville, Ill., his daughter Julie Staley said. He was 83. His death was not widely reported at the time.

Although he worked behind the scenes, Mr. Heil was enough of a force that the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland credited him with "creating the template for modern rock sound systems" In 2006, the Hall installed a public display containing

his mixing boards, speakers and other items.



Mr. Heil developed some of the first effective sound systems for large rock concerts in the 1970s. The two men here were unidentified. via Heil Sound

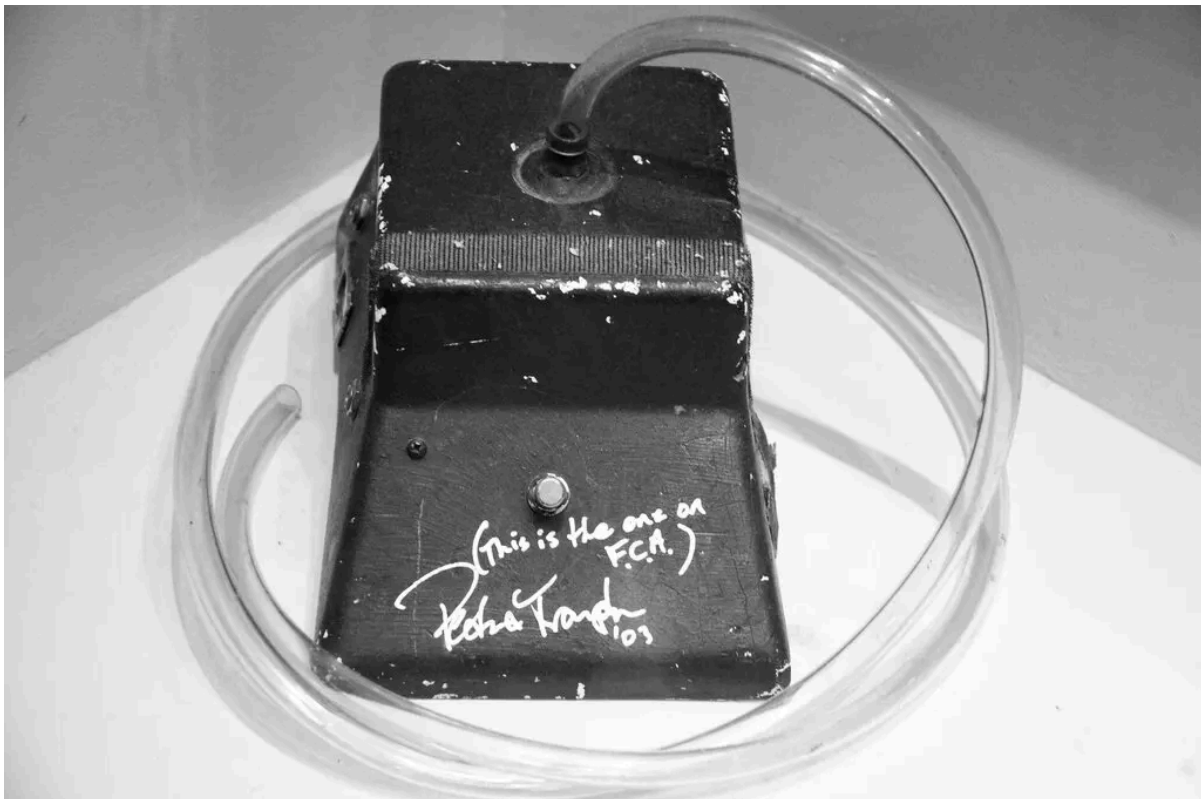
“The concert business became what it is today because he made the experience so much better for the customers,” Howard Kramer, who at the time was the Hall of Fame’s curatorial director, said in an interview that year with The Houston Chronicle. “No one made the leaps in live sound that he did.”

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Mr. Heil got started in the business in 1966. Up to that point, top rock 'n' roll bands often had to rely on feeble sound systems that were drowned out by screaming fans. That roar, Keith Richards of the Rolling Stones wrote in his 2010 autobiography, "Life," was often so deafening in the band's early days that audiences could hear nothing more than the drums: "We used to play 'Popeye the Sailor Man' some nights, and the audience didn't know any different."

Mr. Heil gave rock shows the sound arsenal they needed. "We were the first company back then to build a package P.A.," he said in a 2008 interview with the audio magazine TapeOp. "You could come to Heil Sound in 1972 and leave the facility with a complete system: snakes, road cases, everything — even a modular mixer."

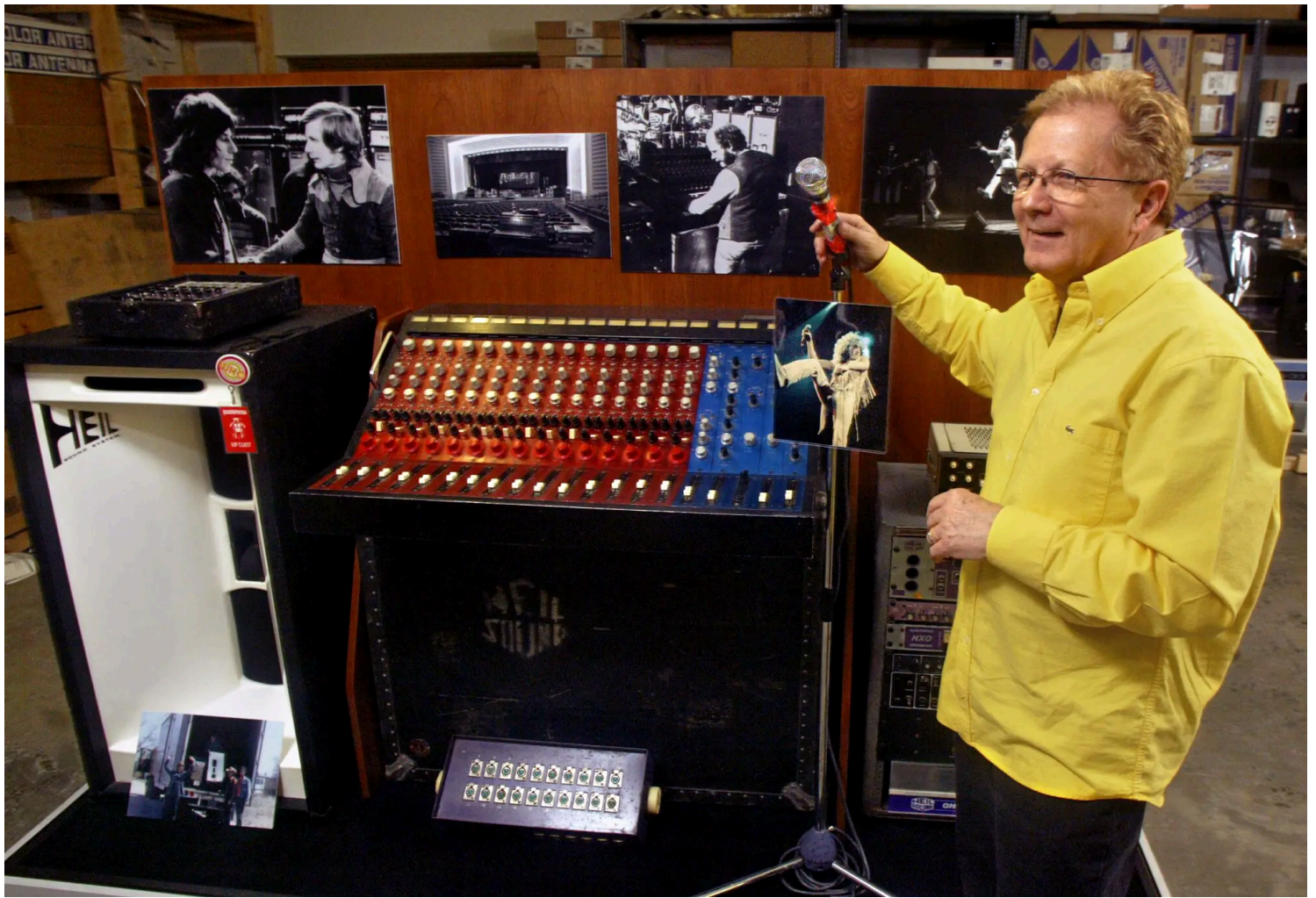


Mr. Heil put a distinctive stamp on 1970s rock with the Heil Talk Box, an effects pedal that was a signature of Peter Frampton's monster-selling 1976 double album, "Frampton Comes Alive!" Carl Lender

He also put a distinctive stamp on 1970s rock with the Heil Talk Box, an effects pedal that transformed guitar parts and vocals into an interstellar drone. Joe Walsh used it in memorable fashion on his hit “Rocky Mountain Way” in 1973, and the Talk Box was a signature of Peter Frampton’s monster-selling 1976 double album, “Frampton Comes Alive!”

Mr. Heil’s career took a major turn in 1971, he told Mr. Berger, when a manager for the Who frantically called him in St. Louis, asking if he could get his crew to Boston the next day. The opening show there, part of the band’s tour in support of its hallowed album “Who’s Next,” had been a disaster, with one newspaper noting that the band’s “soaring brand of rock could not be heard” under the venue’s “miserable conditions.”

Roger Daltrey, the band’s lead singer, threatened to fly back to England until Mr. Heil arrived with his rig. When Mr. Daltrey “did the sound check,” Mr. Heil recalled, “it was OK, because it was a monster P.A.” He would work with the Who for the next decade.



Mr. Heil with a microphone used by Roger Daltrey of the Who and the mixer he built for the band's 1974 tour. The equipment was part of a 2006 exhibition at the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland. Wayne Crosslin/St. Louis Post-Dispatch

Robert Gene Heil was born Oct. 5, 1940, in St. Louis, the elder of two children of Robert and LaVerna (Bills) Heil. His parents owned a clothing shop in the small town of Marissa, Ill., about 40 miles east of St. Louis.

As a youth, Bob not only played the accordion and the organ but also became a ham radio enthusiast, which gave him an early opportunity to fiddle with electronics. After graduating from Marissa Township High School in 1958, he spent time studying at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign and the St. Louis Institute of Music.



Mr. Heil in 1959, when he worked as a demonstrator of Hammond organs. via Heil Sound

In 1966 he opened Ye Olde Music Shop in Marissa, where he rented Hammond organs and repaired instruments for professional musicians. He also began to design his own audio systems.

Before long, he was supplying them to country acts like Dolly Parton and Little Jimmy Dickens as they came through St. Louis. His big break came in 1970, when management of his old employer, the Fox Theater, called him and told them of a crisis: The Grateful Dead was set to play there, but the band's P.A. system had been confiscated by authorities in a drug raid.

On a subsequent call with Mr. Heil, Jerry Garcia, the band's lead guitarist and vocalist, "almost dropped the phone" when he learned that Mr. Heil had a sophisticated system featuring an amplifier by McIntosh, the high-end audiophile

brand, Mr. Heil told Mr. Berger. Performing Musician magazine later called the resulting concert “the night that modern live sound was born.”

In addition to his daughter Ms. Staley, Mr. Heil is survived by his wife, Sarah (Benton) Heil; another daughter, Barbara Hartley; a stepson, Ash Levitt, the president and chief executive of Heil Sound; a sister, Barbara Schneidewind; and seven grandchildren. Both daughters are from his first marriage, to Judy Mortensen, which ended in divorce.

By 1980, Mr. Heil had grown weary of life on the road, so he created a new line of headsets and microphones for the ham radio industry. At one point, Joe Walsh, another ham enthusiast, told him he wanted to use one of his microphones onstage.

Mr. Heil protested that the microphones were not concert quality. Mr. Walsh disagreed. “I was at his house and went downstairs to his little studio and he proved it to me,” Mr. Heil told TapeOp. “So I had to start listening all over again.”

Alex Williams is a reporter in the Obituaries department. [More about Alex Williams](#)

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