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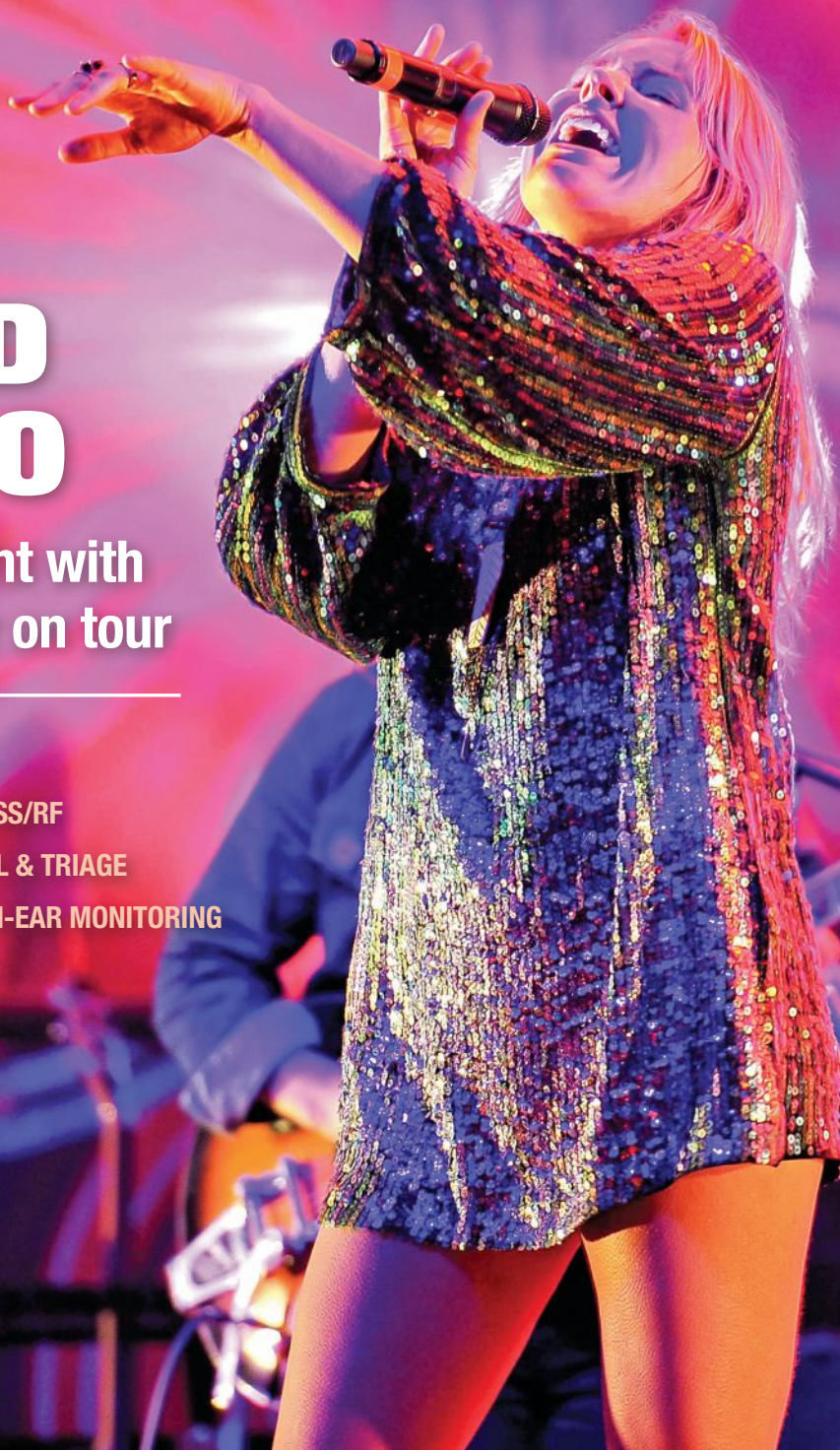
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# IN PROFILE: **LOU MANNARINO**

A dynamic pro audio career fueled by burning passion. *by Kevin Young*

TO SAY LOU MANNARINO has accomplished a lot as an entrepreneur, audio engineer, teacher, conductor and musician is a huge understatement. But he's always been high energy: "My dad used to say to me, 'I just watch you and I get tired. Can you please slow down?'" That energy, and his approach to business, are fueled by a passion for music and audio, as well as his belief that "it's hard to compete with someone who really loves and believes in what they do."

Born in Staten Island, NY, Mannarino got into audio and music virtually simultaneously. "My older brother was in a band. I was a bass player – still am – and wanted to perform without relying on other people's equipment," he says. "When I started playing gigs I started buying gear. I was 11 years old, going to school, then working a two-dollar-an-hour restaurant job until 2 am, making 20 bucks a night, which I'd use to buy gear."

His father, a musician himself, was heavily involved in the local scene and would pick up incoming players from the Staten Island Ferry. After asking who the people were in pictures around the house, his father answered by sneaking him into clubs in the Village. "I think it's because my mom wouldn't let him out of the house unless he took my brother and I," he adds, laughing. "But I'd see artists like Chet Baker, Gerry Mulligan, Maynard (Ferguson) and Gene Krupa."

To this day the most animated conversations around the dinner table with his father are about, "People giving it their all in music, not just performers but engineers, designers, everyone. What's romantic and beautiful about our industry is the necessity of the different requirements and

the opportunity to potentially be part of the greatest day in someone's life."

## STARTING EARLY

By junior high, Mannarino had amassed an impressive array of equipment, and given the lack of full-service production companies in the area at the time – only various entities providing different services like design, rentals and transportation – he began renting his gear and services to friends, high schools and colleges for everything from musicals to punk shows.

"I felt confident that people would like my work. I'd say, 'If it doesn't work you don't have to pay me.' It was a one-stop shop. My first gig was in 1976 when I was in eighth grade. I provided design, gear, labor, trucking (my dad drove me with his station wagon) and mixing. My music and audio expertise developed, and soon I actually started working with manufacturers helping with new ideas. This has been symbiotic of my whole career, leading (at present) to the new distribution company with K-array."

By 1980, on his 18th birthday, Mannarino officially registered the company, and since then, L&M has designed systems for diverse event spaces ranging from theatres to museums, including Lincoln Center's Avery Fisher Hall (for The New York Philharmonic), as well as provided full lighting, video and staging services. Early on, however, his mother felt he should also have a "plan B" and suggested studying teaching. Taking that advice, he went on to get a B.A. in Music Performance/B.S. in Music Education at Wagner College, followed by an M.S. in Music from The Aaron Copland School of Music, Queens College.



Mannarino with K-array Firenze gear at the L&M shop.

"I taught for 20 years in colleges and high schools while running my company, and loved every second of it. I raised my kids that way, but my passion was always to create," he says. Ultimately, he chose to run L&M full time and remains as passionate about music and audio now as he was as a teenager. "I'm doing a gig this weekend, and I still sketch ideas of what I want to make and build. Over time I also learned to be an electrician and welder."

Rather than give up teaching entirely, however, he incorporated it into his life in a way that worked, founding The Julia Music Performing Arts School in 2005. "It was a black box theatre with seven music rooms that I built with a small crew," he explains. "I learned steel fabrication, masonry and carpentry. I wanted to continue to teach privately because I felt my life would be empty without it." He taught bass and audio, often to students who ultimately joined L&M, but as the company grew, it took over the building before moving to a larger facility.

In 2009, the Julia Music School became Little Shop Studios, a multi-purpose, 100-person capacity, 1,800-square-foot event space with in-house AV and lighting systems. "It's similar to Julia Music, with the addition of a theatre component, and instead of me doing all the teaching, people rent space for classes," he says.

## A GROWING ENTERPRISE

As L&M continued to expand, Mannarino made substantial investments in technology, including K-array loudspeakers, Midas consoles, and Sennheiser

## :: In Profile ::

wireless systems. “When the economy tanked, I spent money I’d saved bringing loudspeakers to the U.S. that weren’t sold here. That’s when I met K-array. L&M grew because we took on K-array.”

Still, when asked if he would distribute K-array in the States exclusively, he initially declined. The company was resolute, noting how big of an impact he’d had as an ambassador of their brand. “People say I’m a great salesman, but I can only sell things I love and believe in,” he explains. “But if you love what you do, you find the energy to do it.”

Consequently, Mannarino took on the gig and formed K-array America in mid-2015. Shortly thereafter, he deployed a Firenze KH8 system at CityServe/City-Fest, which featured multiple bands and evangelist Luis Palau on Central Park’s Great Lawn. “At the time we got the (contract for the) event, I wasn’t sure

as director of sales. “It was a natural progression to bring people together for something we’re all passionate about, and that’s what every company I’ve had is based on.”

### PAYING ATTENTION

During his career, Mannarino has designed and engineered for some of the biggest artists in music – across multiple genres – including Akon and Jay Z, Dizzy Gillespie, Paul McCartney and Jon Bon Jovi, Rihanna, Wynton Marsalis and the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra, among many others. He’s also created systems and mixed in classic venues like Madison Square Garden, Carnegie Hall, The Beacon Theater, Lincoln Center, and The Hammerstein Ballroom, for theatres at educational institutions such as Columbia University, and at spaces that include the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Waldorf Astoria and MoMA.

I say so.” Most importantly, he believes it’s often a matter of really listening when musicians try to express what they desire, offering an example of a sound check with a great acoustic guitar player who immediately asked for “something” in his monitors, but it wasn’t readily clear as to what that “something” actually was. He shut off the monitor, walked on stage, and listened from the guitarist’s perspective.

“Sometimes people can’t verbalize it exactly,” Mannarino notes. “He played, and from where he was playing it’s a completely different sound. After I turned the monitor back on and made the change, he asked, ‘Wow, how did you get that?’ I explained that what he’d asked for wasn’t exactly what he wanted.

“Here’s a more extreme example,” Mannarino continues. “When you mic a harp, people want as direct of a sound as possible to get good gain before feedback. Then, however, it doesn’t sound like a harp anymore; you’re getting nail clicks from the strings, for example. The instrument sounds different from five feet away. So how do you capture the harp given the physical restrictions of audio? You might not use the most expensive mic in the world. You’ll probably use a less expensive mic.

“It’s not about specific gear. If someone says, ‘I can’t get you the console you wanted, can you still mix the show?’ Of course I can. These are techniques that respect equipment and what manufacturers are offering. They’re tools. My approach is to use them to come up with what the musicians want to hear and be a part of their dynamic performances.

“I’d rather re-position a microphone than cut something in the EQ to fix issues. It’s about the sound being created. It’s not a perfect environment when we play live. It’s a marriage of the performer – their personality, equipment and artistry – as well as the venue, and the understanding of how they interact.”

“To put it another way,” he adds, “My goal is to try to listen to everybody first before I begin to attempt change.”



we were going to be the distributor. I’d bought the Firenze KH8 rig the previous year, and doubled it for that event.”

Meanwhile, L&M is currently based in a 15,000-square-foot facility on Staten Island but is looking at expansion again, potentially doubling in size. The continuous growth has allowed him to involve his two sons in the business as well as to hire long-time friend and mentor Joshua Radin

How does he draw such a diverse group of artists and clients? “Initially, I think it was, ‘Let’s get that big guy who really loves music and smiles a lot,’” he replies. “It’s word of mouth. I’ve never advertised. I was always too busy. It’s been like that for 30 years.”

Mannarino’s approach to mixing is honest and forthright: “If I make a mistake, I say so. If I don’t know something,

## EXPANDING HORIZONS

That's no mean feat when it comes to mixing the ensemble he's most proud of when it comes to his work as a sound designer and engineer, the New York Philharmonic, his favorite orchestra. "Getting the call to mix the Philharmonic seven years ago was like getting a call to pitch at Yankee Stadium during the playoffs," he says. "I almost dropped the phone. Chair for chair, they're the best musicians in the world. You put them together in front of a conductor to drive that band so they sound a specific way, and only sound that way, because so many members together can create that sound acoustically. It has very little to do with audio. To me, that kind of artistry is just amazing. It just doesn't get much better."

Given how much Mannarino's accomplished and how busy his life has been – helping to raise his three children (all of whom have followed in his footsteps in music in different ways), continuing to gig as a bassist and guitar player, and running multiple companies, one would think he wouldn't be all that inclined to take on new disciplines. Yet he continues to expand his creative horizons with an eye to better his understanding of his work in music and production.

For example, when L&M got more heavily involved in lighting, he took up photography, finding that some photographers weren't effectively capturing the full impact of aspects such as new LED color. "I was trying to learn more about the balancing of light through photography," he explains. "It was another opportunity to negotiate an art form, a different point of view." And in fact, the lens, the focus on composition and color, and it's relation to lighting and video, has impacted his audio designs.

Among the shots he showcases on his website ([www.loumannarino.com](http://www.loumannarino.com)) are photos from his travels for work and pleasure. It's definitely a hobby, he says, adding that he refuses to sell his work for profit. "When people buy my art, it's for charity," he says,

citing his annual 'Gallery for Charity' event.

Variety of expression and creativity is important to overall artistry, something he readily supports others doing as well. "I encourage my staff to do similar things; to take on other jobs and come back with a new fever for what we love to do." Exploring alternative avenues, he notes, leads to understanding what you do that much better, "And to have more respect for it;

humility and respect are two really important words in the formula for my success," he concludes. "If you approach something with enough humility, you'll have a respect for it and will be able to truly internalize and ultimately share it with others." ■

*Based in Toronto, KEVIN YOUNG is a freelance music and tech writer, professional musician and composer.*

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