

60 YEARS

of

YORKVILLE SOUND

The Canadian Manufacturer and Distributor
is Celebrating a Major Milestone in 2023

By Manus Hopkins

For a Canadian manufacturer and distributor of musical equipment to still be operating solely out of Canada, including the manufacturing portion of its business, is quite a feat. Add the fact that Yorkville Sound is one of the largest MI companies in the country, and it makes it all the more impressive. Through its long history, Yorkville has prided itself as a company on making and distributing quality products, never cutting costs to increase profits, and being careful about its business to keep its reputation. This year, as the company celebrates a milestone anniversary, *Canadian Music Trade* was invited to take a tour of its Pickering, ON headquarters and factory, and given the opportunity to speak with retired founder Jack Long, as well as his sons, Steve and Jeff, who currently run the company, along with the ever-expanding Long & McQuade. We chatted with the three Longs about the beginning of the company, where it's headed, and most important of all, how a Canadian musical manufacturer and distributor manages to stick around for 60 years and continue to expand throughout decades.



(L-R) JACK LONG & PETE TRAYNOR



(L-R) JACK LONG & PETE TRAYNOR

These interviews have been edited for length and clarity.

STEVE LONG

CMT: Tell me what a typical day for you looks like right now.

SL: I kind of evolved in both Yorkville and Long & McQuade, so I have two offices, one in each, because the two companies do operate independently. I kind of bounce around between the two buildings, which are close by, so I just walk back and forth. I try to schedule meetings for the days I'm in the buildings, but it usually never works out that way. So, I'm back and forth at least once, which is fine. Sometimes I travel to the stores, sometimes it's an office day dealing with whatever there is, and sometimes I'm visiting suppliers. It's really a broad variety of things that go on in a day, because we have so many moving pieces of the puzzle. We have 98 stores. And so, there's always something going on. Both my brother and I are pretty hands-on, and we deal with all the kind of stuff that happens. It's not your typical sit in the ivory tower and everybody work. We all deal with day-to-day customer issues, training issues, and whatever, all that regular stuff. It's funny, because it's like our

company's a small company that got big, instead of a big company. It doesn't really operate like a big company; it operates like a small company that has just multiplied.

CMT: How does it feel to have reached such a major anniversary with Yorkville Sound?

SL: I'm a funny guy in that I don't really make a big deal out of milestones. I'm not a birthday guy. Every day is another day. I think on the one hand, sure, there's a ton of history with Yorkville and I think that that has really helped us in that we really know what we're doing because we've been doing it a long time. So that's where the immediate positive comes in out of it. But at the same time, you still have to be looking forward because you're only as good as your last hit song, right? You can't live on your glory days forever. I try to be proud of our past and it's great that we've done so many great things. But I also like to look forward as well.

CMT: Looking forward, what are your plans for the foreseeable future?

SL: I think I think we're pretty solid in what we do. We make really good products. And I think that's one of the things that we're



STEVE LONG

very proud of. All of us in management are players. I'm a bass player and every bass amp that we've ever put out in the last 40 years, I'm super proud of; they're all great. And it's funny, sometimes I'll talk to a customer, and I'll say, 'you should really try this Traynor (amplifier.)' You might be thinking, 'whatever, it's Canadian.' But I say, 'try it out; you'll be surprised.' They do. And they're always like, 'oh, yeah, I was really surprised. It's real-



1970's WIRING LINE



EARLY 1970'S TRADE SHOW DISPLAY

ly, really good.' I always say the same thing. All our stuff is really good. Our PA systems are really good. I'm a singer and I play in bands and every PA system we make, I'm happy to sing through. It's all really reliable, and the nice thing we have, is, we get a lot of feedback from the Long & McQuade stores as to what people want. And then when we go to design products, we design products that are what people want. So, they're easy to sell because they're good.

CMT: Going back to your beginnings, when you were first brought on board, tell me a bit about how you came to join the team, what your vision was, and how you've carried it out.

SL: When I went to university, I took business, and I took engineering at McMaster. But after I finished that, I was really into music and I was in a band, and I wanted to give it a shot. So, I spent three years traveling around, saw lots of the country, but at the end of the three years, I went 'I'm probably not going to become like the next best bass player in the world.' First, you think you're not that good. And then you get to the point where you think you're really good. And then you get better. And you realize that you're not as good as you thought you were. I've always wanted to be the best at everything. I've always had that approach to everything. So, I got to the point where I realized that I was good, our band worked

all the time and traveled around and we did fairly well and everything, but I kind of realized that this was probably not going to be really what I wanted, it wasn't going to go where I wanted it to go.

So, I just talked to my dad, because he'd already asked me if I would come and work for the company after university. And I said, 'I could probably come in and work now if you want.' He said, 'oh, that'd be great. So, I just started in the manufacturing side of things. And I still played—I kept playing all the time and played every weekend for years and years, but it was a different headspace now. It was like, 'okay, I'm just having fun.' It was actually a lot more fun. Because there was no more goal. It was just 'we're making a couple hundred bucks tonight.' So, it was fun, but that's what I did after that. When I started at Yorkville, I think I would probably say I put a more scientific approach to it. Because of the education I had, I was pretty analytical. We looked at MRP systems to manage the components and we looked at automatic computerized machines. I think nowadays, if you came to the Yorkville factory and did a tour, you'd be very surprised at how automated we are.

One thing that's interesting to me, and I've kind of realized this a lot lately, is a lot of companies that we deal with, whether they're public or owned by a capital company, their main goal is, how can we make more money? How can we make a higher profit for the shareholders, or the owners? That doesn't come into our thinking here; our thinking is, how can we make a better product? How can we make it more efficiently? How can we make a process for our customers that's going to be better? And we don't really worry about the money, because I've always had the attitude that if you look after the process, the results will follow. We don't start with how we can make more money; we start with how we can make a better product. The overriding thought process from everybody is how can we do better? Is there a new machine that will do this faster? At the beginning, if we wanted to buy the machine, we'd have to scrape together our pennies. We've been successful enough that if we need a machine, we look at it and if it makes sense for what the machine costs and what the machine is going to deliver for us, we will definitely get the machine. That's been really nice that we can afford to do that. Just last week, we added in a second automatic surface mounts system, because the one we had was too busy. So, we got a second one for around \$300,000. We've added in a whole bunch of automated warehousing and spent about \$300,000 on that the last little while. And again, this is all stuff that that we know is going to let us

do a better job. And so, we proceed with that stuff. Originally, I think it was kind of me driving that bus. And I think now that philosophy is throughout the company, and there's lots of people driving that bus.

A lot of our people have been doing it 20-30 years, and they're still fresh—they're still looking at the newest things, and what's the best way to do it. We have a lot of great, great, great people.

CMT: What's that like, for you to have built this team that you're a part of, and working with for so long, knowing that those people around you are there forever?

SL: It's very comforting. When the pandemic came, that was a very tough time for a lot of companies because every day you got new rules. Our people were great. Everybody just came to work and did whatever they had to do. We weren't allowed to open for the first few weeks; we were told to close. And so, sales were bad. But once we got past that, and we kind of realized what was allowed what wasn't allowed, and everybody came back to work, and we got back to it, that was because we had so much experience and I think people were committed to the company, and they all wanted to see the company succeed through this. Everyone was willing to do different jobs, everybody was super cooperative, and it worked out really well.

CMT: On the distribution side of Yorkville Sound, that seems to be something that's also expanding all the time. How have you seen and overseen that develop in the time that you've been around?

SL: Distribution in Canada is difficult, because it's a chicken and egg thing. It's such a big country that it's expensive to send sales reps traveling around to visit all the different stores. But at the same time, you really can't represent a product line unless you're delivering it to the stores and talking the products up and educating the music stores on what they can sell. So, I think that was one of the reasons we originally wanted distribution, so that we would have enough products to make it worthwhile to send a sales rep to Lethbridge or Prince George, or Truro, Nova Scotia, or whatever. And so, we started to gain lines. But then I think some of the other suppliers found that we were a pretty good distributor, because we know what the customers want, and we have really good systems. Now, if you look at the brands we have, we have a lot of really good brands that complement each other and work well. And we have a very good salesforce with a lot of people. The dealers are getting regular visits, which really helps them to learn about

the products. I think we've got the logistics down pretty good. We ship, in most cases, the same day or next day, when orders come in. And that helps as well.

CMT: In your view, what are the key reasons that Yorkville Sound has lasted, you know, decades and lasted as long as they have?

SL: Number one is we've been very focused on sticking to what we're good at. We haven't veered from our business model, which I think is part of it. It's easy for companies to start getting into other things, like a shoe company making skates. But for us, we've kind of stuck to our guns. So that's one thing, I think, just being good at one thing and keeping getting better at it as opposed to always trying to jump into something new. There has been some luck, for sure. And when I say luck, it's like, we picked a field that has been fairly consistent. Where the luck would be is that people still want to play music. There's been a lot of technological improvements, but they've been kind of steady, as opposed to, all of a sudden there's this new product that just makes everything else obsolete. It's never really been that way.

I find it's always been fun. And I think a big part of that is because you're dealing with musicians all day. And musicians are unique compared to everybody else in the world. I'm very lucky that most of my day is not dealing with bankers and accountants, it's dealing with other musicians.

JEFF LONG

CMT: What does your day-to-day work look like at the moment?

JL: I work at both Long & McQuade and Yorkville, as does my brother Steve. We're the only two people who work at both companies. My role at Yorkville tends to do more with product direction and I spent a lot of time working in sales. Sometimes I'll be interfacing with the sales team. Sometimes it'll be interfacing with the engineering team or product development team. We'll do listening tests and product evaluation tests. And we'll discuss different aspects of our work, as we do manufacturing, and we do distribution. Sometimes we'll be talking about either of those topics, depending on doing on the day.

CMT: When and how did you get brought into the team?

JL: Because of the relationship between Long & McQuade and Yorkville, it's always



been a synergy that's worked very tightly together. I spent most of the early part of my career focusing on Long & McQuade with less input on Yorkville, and just a little bit on the product direction. But since I'm not in stores as much over the last 10-15 years, I've been spending more time sort of dual role between the two companies.

CMT: What made you want to go into the family business?

JL: I was very interested in music. Jack [Long] actually didn't push the kids to get into the business. We had to basically make our way in; we all started pretty much at the bottom and then had to learn the business from the ground up, which was probably a good decision. I started at Long & McQuade when I was 16 or 17. And it was basically cleaning ashtrays and sweeping floors and emptying garbage cans and stuff. And then eventually I worked in the repair department first and then the rental department and then the keyboard department and then eventually, when I was at university, I was working part time and just at the end of my third year of university, I went up to work at the store on Wilson Avenue. I was supposed to go back for an honours degree, and the manager talked me into staying on so I stayed on at that store for a few years and then went down to the Bloor Street store and managed the PA and recording department for a bunch of years, and then eventually the store.

CMT: With this year being a big milestone anniversary for Yorkville Sound, how does it feel for you knowing the company has been around this long?



VINTAGE PRO LIGHTING SYSTEM 1967



SOUND CREW 1977

JL: It makes me feel proud. Most manufacturing in North America has moved offshore. There are very few manufacturers who still operate in North America. There are some, but most of the mass production places have gone offshore. And we've always felt, and Jack specifically felt, we have a couple hundred people working in Pickering [ON], and we can't just leave them. So, we just sort of struggled through. And there were some tough years, because initially the stuff that was coming out of Asia had a huge price advantage. We would make a guitar amp here and pay more in taxes, and we wouldn't be paying duties on guitar amps that we would bring in from Asia. It was really a challenge, but we've able to navigate it and keep surviving and coming up with good products. We try to not make low-end products; we try to make a good quality mid and high-end product.

CMT: As far as the future goes, what do you see in the next year or two?

JL: We've got some interesting products we're still working on always, and we have an engineering team, that's continuing to work. And, of course, the distribution side has been key as well. We've picked up some

very good brands. We've been the Gibson distributor for 40 years, and we have a lot of other very strong brands. We'll continue in that vein, as well as expanding our portfolio. We don't really hunt out brands. Yorkville has a pretty good reputation as a distributor and brands usually approach us and say we would like you to take our product on for Canada, and we turn down more than we accept, but when it's good, it can make sense.

CMT: Have there been new products lately you've gotten excited about?

JL: We've had some very good success with lighting and some good speaker designs. We have a very good team designing speakers right now. Our products don't tend to be revolutionary. They're more evolutionary. If you're making speakers for a long time, they just keep getting better and better.

JACK LONG

CMT: With a major milestone anniversary, I'd love for you to take me back to the very beginning and tell me about the foundations of Yorkville Sound.



JACK LONG

JL: In the early days of Long & McQuade, we had a customer named Pete Traynor; he was a young guy, about 10 years younger than me, and every time he came in, he said 'when are you gonna give me a job?' So, he came in one day and I asked, 'can you really repair amps?' We said we would try him out and there was a pile of about 15 amps in the

back. We came back two or three hours later, and they were all done. I tried a few of them and they all worked. I said 'okay, Pete, you've got a job: halftime, four hours a day.'

A few months later, he said he had a band they used to play in, and they wanted him to build them columns. When he finished these things, the band was on the road and wasn't back for a couple of weeks, so the columns were sitting in a Long & McQuade store on Yonge Street, and people kept coming in and saying, 'what are those, and can I buy them?' By the time the band came back to town pick them up, we had three

orders. Okay, so we decided to see what we could do with it. And that's the beginnings of Yorkville Sound.

CMT: The story that the name came from a street sign, is that true?

JL: We were standing outside on a warm night in the early fall, standing in front of the store saying we needed to name the company. And we tried all kinds of names, then he looks right across the street and says, "I think we should have sound in it," so we tried it Yonge Street Sound, Traynor Sound,

whatever. Finally, one of us looked over at the sign and said, 'how's Yorkville Sound?'

CMT: How does this big milestone anniversary year feel for you?

JL: I feel pretty good. I'm quite proud of the company.

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MONO BLOCK II OVER 1500 CABINETS



ELITE 1980's



TS SERIES AD