

I design pedals for Visual Sound LLC. I have for some years now, but sometimes I still get asked about it.

I “met” Bob Weil, the owner of Visual Sound on the internet before there was a “world wide web” to speak of. Back in ... 1996, was it? ... Bob was working on a number of effects with the common thread of providing visual feedback to a guitarist so they could tell what they were doing on a loud stage.

He was chasing ways to make better tools for the working musician, a way to let them have some more ways to get their music out to the audience without having to mess with learning and coping with technology; in effect, preserving the intuitive and artistic nature of music creation more naturally.

But he was having a technical problem. Bob is a creative guy who understands what musicians need, and at the time had taught himself a lot of electronics technology, enough to get pedal designs going. The problem he was hitting is a common, but subtle one. He had ground noise issues. The visual display on the unit was causing noise in the audio.

Bob described the problem on ... um? ... alt.guitar.effects.something-or-other, the usenet newsgroups being the only net forums that existed at the time. I read his description, then wrote him back describing the circuit he was using and some possible solutions to the problems. That got his attention because he had not told me what circuits he was using, just the issues with noise in the output.

It was kind of a parlor-magic trick to play on him; I had done some designs with some of the ICs he was using and was also familiar enough with the ICs on the general market. Just the description of the problem was enough to nail the IC, and that was enough to pick out the problem and the solutions. But the solutions did work for him, and that made us both happy with the process.

It played right into some of my personal predilections. I have been a nut about guitar electronics and effects since before anyone would let me handle a soldering iron. Back in the dim reaches of time in my teens, I built compressors, distortions, and eventually an entire guitar amp for myself. And in the long Dark Ages of the late 70s and 80s when DIY electronics practically vanished, I was still scouring the literature for guitar effect applications and circuits.

The fanaticism held me in good stead, I guess. I got an EE degree, and a career. But it wasn't designing effects, and so I did that in my copious spare time. By the time I ran into Bob, I was already primed.

At the time, Visual Sound was only Bob. He was woefully unprepared from a technical standpoint, but completely fearless about diving in and learning electronics. He's never stopped that, and by now he's better with analog electronics than many “real” EE's I know.

I was meanwhile working for A Major Computer Company, and was too tied up into the process to have it make sense to leave my “day job”. Bob and I flirted with the idea of my coming to work for Visual Sound some day, enough to let me know he was serious. And I could soothe some of my musical electronics beast by offering help as Bob needed it. It worked for me, and it worked for Bob.

At the time, the late 90s and early 2000s, USA industry had adopted a new dress code: don't wear gray. Everyone who had more than 5-10 years of experience was regarded by the bean-counter shadow Mafia as a liability waiting to happen. Over that stretch of time, workers became more and more “surplus” no matter how well they did. I personally found it curious to get awards and recognition for jobs well done, then in a couple of months be told how poorly I was doing and how I needed to

improve. You get the picture, and I'm sure many of you are all too familiar with it.

So for some years, I was hanging on til I could afford to get out of what I didn't want to be doing, writing up what became Geofex, and collaborating with Bob on things I really, really wanted to do. Those years provided me some chance to “interview” Bob and Visual Sound.

I had some insight into the workings of the music industry. What made Bob stand out to me is that he was absolutely honest. That wasn't universal, if you understand my understatement. And his aim was genuinely to provide musicians good tools to ply their craft. Even now, the Visual Sound slogan on the banners “Real tone for real people” is absolutely straightforward, no sly grins or winks involved.

In effect, I got to interview for the job for several years. That's a bit odd in today's world, but it worked well for me.

I'm still impressed that Visual Sound values reliability. I've worked in places where the push is just to get the product out the door. I spend a lot of my time on quality control and looking for ways to make our products even more reliable than they were before. Visual Sound has marketed the same base set of products for many years. What doesn't show on the advertising is that the insides have been updated many times to make them last longer, perform better, be more immune to the sometimes-harsh conditions on a working musician's stage setup.

For a working musician, the worst possible sound when you step up on stage to play is ... silence. Visual Sound, as a company, cares more about real reliability and tone than glitzy, all-capital letter pronouncements with lots of exclamation points. I call it “quality the hard way” - making things work reliably by actually making them rugged and reliable. Novel concept, I know, but it appeals to me.

Visual Sound's a good place to work. We're not getting rich, but we're feeding the families, and doing what we (there are eight of us there now) like to do.

I like to think that I'm still interviewing for the job and that Visual Sound is still interviewing with me. At this point, I'd still hire them again. 8-)