NEWS

Artistic Finance: Lighting Up The Dance Floor With Lighting Designer Marsha Stern

By **Ellen Lampert-Greaux** • Jul 21, 2022 08:15am

Artistic Finance Podcast | Lighting Designer | Acclaim Lighting

(Artistic Finance podcast)

My friend Marsha Stern has been in this industry almost as long as I have! Identifying as a lighting designer, she moved to New York City in 1976 for a career in music: playing, composing, and producing. She got a job as a publicist at The Howard Bloom Organization, where she was introduced to disco and rock'n'roll clients. Those business relationships morphed into friendships and a series of jobs, culminating with The Joe Long Sound, a music production team. When that disbanded, Marsha was offered $35 a night (and all she wanted to drink) to work lights at a local club in the West Village. The rest is history.

On her episode of the Artistic Finance podcast, Stern discusses the finances of a freelance career starting in those NYC nightclubs in the late1970s. She transitioned to "architainment" in the 1990s and joined Acclaim Lighting, the architecture arm of ADJ Group in the 2010s.

Marsha was interviewed by lighting designer Ethan Steimel, host of Artistic Finance. They chat about how she became friends with many top *Billboard*-reporting DJs and lighting operators from back in her days in the music business, which led to a job at New York, New York, a prominent club in midtown Manhattan (the owners were rivals of Studio 54). A friend in charge of lighting was leaving for a summer residency on Fire Island. He said, "Marsha, you know the music. If you can figure out the controls, you've got a job." That started more than a decade of designing and operating lights for clubs.

Marsha was asked to look at the lighting in an artistic way, which is why it was important that she knew the music. "I was fortunate that I also had the technical capabilities to understand what was going on and how to do this. That's a whole other skill set. Just because you can flip a light switch doesn't mean you can wire a room," she says.

Since the pandemic, Marsha has tapped back into the music side of her career. Marsha inherited much of the archives of her friend, DJ Roy Thode, including more than 100 reel-to-reel master tapes that she has been digitizing for more than 15 years. She discusses the music and the NYC nightlife of the 1970s and 1980s on her podcast The Heartbeat Of The Dance Floor®. An upcoming episode will focus on lighting back in the day, with Anne Militello (world-renowned, multi-faceted lighting designer), Paul Gregory (Focus Lighting / *Saturday Night Fever* dance floor), and Jason Kantrowitz, and Ken Billington (Broadway / The Red Parrot).

A skiing accident blew out Marsha's knee and with it went her ability to climb ladders and do the other technical work needed for nightclubs and special events. She transitioned to architecture in the mid-90's by working with Johnson Schwinghammer for a huge installation at FAO Schwarz's new store, a part of the expansion at Caesar's Forum Shops. She introduced the architectural lighting designers to moving lights by proposing various ways to use Vari*lites.

At the time, Vari*lites could only be rented, however the patent had recently expired opening the door for other manufacturers to now produce a moving head fixture. Since the client (FAO Schwarz) wasn't interested in the long-term rental being offered by Vari*lite, Marsha was able to work with High End Systems to use

Beta versions of their about to be released Studio Color fixtures which FAO Schwarz purchased to use them at Caesar's. Marsha clarified that this was a perhaps the first moment in which actual moving-head lights were used in an architectural retail installation. Not moving mirrors or scanners but actual moving lights.

The transition into architecture eventually led to her own clients also causing Marsha to incorporate as Marsha Stern Lighting Design & Consulting, Inc.. That was predominantly for liability protection and was actively used for her work as an independent designer, programmer and consultant until 2017 when she joined Acclaim Lighting, the architectural division of ADJ Group. The corporation is actively registered in New York state even though Marsha hasn't used it for a few years. She isn't seeking out lighting design work but anticipates a job will come her way. When it does, it will require the structure of the corporation.

In response to Ethan asking if the corporation helped with a retirement savings structure, Marsha explained that it didn't change anything. In the nightclubs, she was often on the payroll of a venue. As such, a portion of her checks went to build her social security, which she opted into during the pandemic. In the 1970s, while pursuing the music business it was the same, a W-2 paycheck situation with taxes and FICA being deducted automatically. There were the occasional clubs that would pay either all cash or she would sometimes get payment half in cash, which didn't go toward social security or into a retirement account. Marsha eventually started setting money aside from her 1099 paychecks. She started with CDs at her bank and eventually moved to stocks and bonds in brokerage accounts.

For Marsha, 2020 and the Covid-19 Pandemic brought everything to a grinding halt, including her tenure with ADJ Group. During the past 2 years Marsha has delved into a couple of her passion projects which resulted in creating a legacy website dedicated to Roy Thode an iconic DJ from the glory days of disco. That led to her podcast, The Heartbeat Of The Dance Floor®. “I’m embracing what seems to be my third career as a Nightlife Historian, which combines my life experiences from both the musical and lighting/production world,” she notes. These new projects are under the umbrella of Backlit Productions, LLC which Marsha formed in Florida in 2011 for her music-oriented ventures.

Several times during the interview Marsha mentioned the wonderful and loving relationships with her colleagues. "The entertainment business in general is made up of loving relationships, that are probably more friendship than business sometimes. And sometimes those friendships are more business than friendships. Which is why they are sustainable." Ethan observed Marsha's energy and love of music, lighting, and her collaborators. That energy is infectious and carried into the end of the interview with a discussion about LDI. Marsha and Ethan will both be in Las Vegas in November to record a live episode of Artistic Finance.

https://heartbeatofthedancefloor.com
https://roythode.com

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