

My Life as a Rock 'n Roll Roadie

Mark Trueblood

While attending Brown University, I worked part-time for Fedco Audio Labs, in Providence, RI during 1970 and 1971. This company was owned by Lyle Fain, the son of a businessman (Irving J. Fain) who began in the tire and plastics businesses, then expanded into department stores and other businesses. His company at the time was known as Teknor-Apex. Lyle had majored in physics at Brown and had entered Brown's physics Ph.D. program, but left when his father became ill to help administer his father's businesses. His father died about the time I met Lyle.

I was introduced to Lyle by my friend and classmate (1970) Fred Ehrhardt, who was an electrical engineering major. Fred met Lyle at a Brown University Orchestra concert that Lyle was recording. Since Fred was also interested in audio equipment, he introduced himself and thus began a long business association and friendship. When Lyle's father died, Fred took me to Lyle's parents house on the East Side where I met his mother and other members of his family. We expressed our condolences, and I thought that was the end of it.

Around 1969 (my junior year at Brown), Lyle decided to build a remote recording studio into a step van (the type of truck UPS uses, only this was 22 feet long). He purchased the truck chassis, had it outfitted at a local truck body plant, and it looked dashing in its white and light blue livery.

Shortly thereafter, Fred told me Lyle wanted me to work part-time for Fedco, helping to build electronic equipment. One of Lyle's hobbies for some time had been very serious stereo listening of music and stereo recording, and he had an idea to build a mobile recording studio in a step van. Lyle and Fred began outfitting the van in 1968.

The key to making it work would be to shrink the size of the audio engineering console or "board" (with all its faders, switches, and other controls for each microphone that permits the engineer to shape and mold the sound as it leaves the singer's lips) from studio size (something the size of a large executive desk, maybe 10 to 12 feet long by 4 feet wide) down to something that would fit into the truck (about 4-1/2 feet by 2-1/2 feet). At the time, that was considered impossible for a board with 16 microphone inputs and 8 tape recorder (line level) outputs in 6 sub-groups, fully equalized, capable of handling what is called "phantom powered" microphones (very expensive condenser microphones that are powered over the signal lines with a remote power supply). The six sub-groups were later converted to full microphone inputs. The board was built by Automated Processes Inc. (API) in Farmingdale, NY. The first-stage transistors were individually screened for low noise.

To obtain the needed size reduction required using what was then ultra-modern, untried modular operational amplifiers, or op-amps, the first step towards integrated circuits. It was a radical step in those days, especially for a conservative industry like the recording industry. But when it was done, it worked flawlessly. Lyle wrote a paper (<http://www.aes.org/e-lib/browse.cfm?elib=1362>) on the board for the professional audio engineering society journal,

then began selling the capability of this recording studio. Lyle named his recording company Fedco, for Fain Electronic Devices Company.

Lyle began by making records for college singing groups, mostly throughout New England. I did not go on any of those sessions, but Fred did. Among Lyle's many talents was that he had learned to drive semi-trailers from his father's department store chain, and had acquired a Commercial Driver's License in RI. So he taught Fred how to drive the 22-foot long International Harvester step van (which did not require a CDL). They made several recordings, including female groups at Vassar College and Pembroke (Brown). Fedco made the tape recordings, sent them to a place that made the records, got a master made, had the master pressed into vinyl records, made sure they were of high quality, had labels placed on each record, had them inserted into jackets and covers, and delivered them to their customers. That is a lot of work for a small run of records, and there is not much profit in it.

And, not a lot of fun listening to the same cover of some early 1960's song sung in the late 1960's for the 50th time by the 15th college group more or less the same way. Especially if you were as into the Beatles, Stones, Grateful Dead, Cream, Hendrix, etc. that we were at the time. We all were looking for something a little different. Along about my senior year at Brown, we got our chance.

Lyle attended another audio engineering society in New York and announced he was in the remote-location recording business. At that time, the only serious person in the same business was Wally Heider in Los Angeles (far enough away not to be a serious competitor).

Our usual routine was to drive the truck (which I did on several of the gigs), arrive at the remote location, string out a power cable and hook into the location's main breaker panel, and string a custom cable containing dozens of shielded microphone cables. All cables were stored on reels at the rear of the truck. We just opened the doors and started hauling on the cables. The large custom mike cable went into the mixing console in the truck, and the other end connected to a splitter box about 6" x 6" x 18" full of audio transformers and switches. Each microphone had two outputs: a direct feed for Fedco so they could feed the DC phantom power to the microphones, and the other from an audio transformer to feed the local sound system. Someone (often I) would flip the switches on command from Fred in the truck to try to kill ground loops that sound like buzzing. Once the box was in place, I would help set up microphone stands and microphones, unless the place was unionized, in which case we just handed the equipment to the union workers and let them do it. We would then string shielded audio cables from the microphones to the box.

This truck went all over New York and New England, but most of our business was at Bill Graham's Fillmore East (on Second Ave. near East 6th Street), a theater holding about 5000 with a superb sound system and the White's Joshua Light Show providing a dynamic, "psychedelic" backdrop to the band on stage. When we recorded at the Fillmore, we would typically arrive in late morning or early afternoon, set up, and get an early dinner at a local deli. One thing about the Fillmore was that we did not have to set up mikes. Bill Graham, recognizing how historic many of these performances were, had taps off his sound system to permit him to tape these live performances. They are now available from Wolfgang's Vault (Bill Graham was born Wolodia

Grajonca in Berlin, Germany, in 1931 and given the nickname "Wolfgang" by his family), see <http://www.wolfgangsvault.com>.

My pay was \$20/day plus expenses (meals and hotel). Some of my personal highlights are:

- Sitting on a couch in the same room as Judy Collins as she sang "Patriot's Game" over and over again for the Whales and Nightingales album. She sat on a couch with someone playing a zither or similar instrument, and I was on another couch wearing headphones and a microphone so I could communicate with the truck. As I recall, the couches were arranged in an L-shape. I spent that evening trying not to cough or otherwise mess up the recording. The apartment was a loft in a warehouse in lower Manhattan.
- Fillmore East concert featuring Taj Mahal as the opening act, then B.B. King, then John Mayall and the Bluesbreakers, whom we were recording March 13-14, 1970. I love the blues, and this was quite a lineup. I was sitting in the basement under the stage the box where all the microphones plugged in. When I was doing that and listening to the concert, I walked Bill Graham with the American composer Aaron Copeland in tow. Copeland loved all American music, including the blues. So, I was inches from two icons of American music simultaneously. Before going in the stage door to get to my post and during breaks between shows, some groupie was hanging out in the truck strung out on speed. She eventually found a way past the guard at the stage door, made it to the backstage dressing room of Mayall, and got the band drunk, ruining the second act of the band that night.
- Joe Cocker at the Fillmore East on March 27-28, 1970. He had Leon Russell doing his arrangements and leading the backup band and singers. They filmed the "Mad Dogs and Englishmen" album as well as recording the performances using Fedco. I could not understand at the time what people saw in Cocker, as what he did could not be called "singing". It was more like screaming. Fred's brother attended that concert, and distinctly remembers Russell's white Rolls and trailer.
- Eddie Kramer (b. in South Africa) was a leading rock audio engineer from Atlantic Records, which hired Fedco to do several of its live recordings. Eddie later mixed the second Led Zeppelin album. He did several of the shows with Fedco at the Fillmore East. I remember he drove a BMW 2002, which was a very hot car in its day. That was the first time I ever saw a BMW, and it was love at first sight -- though for other reasons, I would rather have either a Ferrari or a Mini Cooper S. Eddie did not dress in "geek" subdued tones. He was an "artiste" and dressed the part, with, for example, a purple sport jacket, green corduroy pants, and a red scarf. Before one concert began, he was watching some live program on TV in the truck and commenting on the director's live cuts among the various cameras. He would have (and probably did) made some great music videos.
- Randy Newman at The Bitter End 17-19 September, 1970 that resulted in his Randy Newman Live album released in 1971. The Bitter End was a Greenwich Village coffee house and music venue run by Fred Weintraub until he sold it to his business manager in the mid-1970's. The album contains songs such as "Short People", "Mama Told Me Not to Come", and "Davy the Fat Boy". I also remember Newman singing a lover's lament about Lucinda, a fictional girlfriend who fell asleep on the beach and was run over by a sand machine, the

beach equivalent of a Zamboni, picking up the sand, removing the trash, and putting it back down again. Very weird.

I remember Randy Newman coming out to the Fedco truck in a black leather jacket. He introduced himself, met everyone, and talked to the audio engineer a bit. This rarely happened on the other gigs, where the band we were recording would stay holed up in their dressing room with their groupies between sets.

This was in the era when Newman was a folk/rock songwriter. He later moved to LA where he worked as a Hollywood film scorer like two of his uncles, Alfred Newman and Lionel Newman.

- During the day in the middle of the Randy Newman gig on September 18, 1970, Eddie (probably, as he had mixed all Hendrix albums) or someone connected with our customer asked Steve Bepko (a physics grad student working for Fedco doing his Ph.D. research using lasers) and me to take a couple tapes over to Electric Lady studios, which was Jimi Hendrix's record label. When we got there, they were all in funk, as they had just heard the news that Hendrix had died earlier that day in London of a drug overdose.
- Sha-Na-Na at Columbia University in 1971, resulting in Side A of their third album named solely after the group. They began as students at Columbia in the singing group The Kingsmen, but changed their name after another group by the same name covered "Louie, Louie". They focused on pre-Beatles music of the 1950's Doo-Wop era. After their concert, they also visited the Fedco truck, and I met the group. I especially remember Lennie, the sax player, who reminded me a bit of Lester Young in his playing.

When they appeared in 1969 at the Woodstock Music and Arts festival right before Jimi Hendrix, Sha-Na-Na inspired a 1950's nostalgia craze in the 1970's that spawned the TV show "Happy Days" and the Broadway musical "Grease". They also had their own TV show 1977 to 1981. Their signature costume was 3 singers in gold lame jump suits with the rest of the band in "greaser" leather jackets.

After I graduated from Brown and was attending graduate school at Wesleyan in Middletown, CT, I attended a show featuring Carole King as the opening act (she lived nearby, and didn't need the money -- I think she was doing this as a favor) and Sha-Na-Na as the headline act. King had released the Tapestry album the year before (1971) that eventually sold 20 million copies. At the concert, while King was trying to play her set, the crowd kept chanting "Sha-Na-Na". I felt like jumping up, and explaining to the crowd that this was the person who wrote half the songs that "Sha-Na-Na" sang (between 1955 and 1999 she wrote 181 Top 40 hits -- the most of any American pop composer). She got fed up and left, then it was another 45 minutes before Sha-Na-Na appeared due to a costume malfunction (I think one of the guys in a gold lame jump suit had been downing too many burgers and split his costume).

- Not every gig was with our rock and roll heroes. We got word that Liberace was playing in Westerly, RI and that Fedco would record it. We mumbled something about demanding combat pay, but nothing ever came of that. We drove the truck over, set up, and Wow! What a show, with several changes of costume (some of them lit up). After the performance, he came out to the truck to listen to the tape and to speak with his producer. I was inside the truck at the time standing near him, but was not formally introduced.
- Another gig that was not as appealing as those at the Fillmore East was at the Felt Forum, a relatively small venue (holds a few thousand patrons) under Madison Square Garden. We were there to record The Association and their hit tune "Everyone Knows It's Wendy". Yuch! However, they used modern transistorized amps with a good ground instead of the old Fender tube amps that made one side of the output have 120 volts AC on it. If you hit the steel strings of your guitar and got zapped, there was a switch on the Fender amp to reverse polarity and take this out. We did not have to deal with any of this. On the same bill was The Byrds, who had really fancy costumes at that time, especially David Crosby. And we heard that 12-string Rickenbacker guitar that Roger McGuinn played. What a sound! I was going up the steps to get onstage to fix something while The Byrds were coming offstage, so I brushed by them. Something else was going on at Madison Square Garden (probably a hockey game or something) and CBS had a fleet of sound and video trucks there. That made Fedco's little truck look puny by comparison.
- The Doors at Boston Arena. I had to tend to the microphone box, and this time instead of being in a tiny room under the stage, it was on the stage. So, I was on the same stage with Jim Morrison at the same time, but off to the side and trying to hide from photographers and hear instructions from the truck over the roar of the bass woofers.
- Driving the Fedco truck up to Woodstock, NY in the summer of 1970. No, it was not the Woodstock Music & Art Fair held in 1969 not in Woodstock, but on Max Yasgur's 600-acre farm near the hamlet of White Lake in the town of Bethel, NY. Our gig was in the actual town of Woodstock to record folksinger Fred Neil, who wrote "Everybody's Talkin' ". Another Fedco employee (an underclassman) and I drove the truck up the main highway into the Adirondack Mountains, and the truck overheated and got vapor lock, so we were a bit late arriving on location. There were rumors ahead of time that Bob Dylan might show up, but he was a no-show that night, and essentially, nothing worth reporting happened. But I remember the gig.
- While I was in graduate school in physics at Wesleyan University, I got a call from Fred asking if I could help out on a gig at Queens College in Long Island. The band was Yes, whom I had not heard of. They were very good, played all their hits, and put on a great show.
- A few years later, while I was working in the Washington, DC area as a computer programmer for Computer Sciences Corporation, I got another call from Fred saying that they would be recording Patti Smith live at a club in Georgetown and asking me if I wanted to see their new truck. I had a date that night, and she agreed to being in the truck instead of in the audience. By this time, Fedco had retired the old stepvan and acquired a "box and cab" truck. This truck had a lot more room for people like music producers as well as audio

engineers. This producer was sitting there ignoring Patti Smith (a punk rocker who sounded a lot like Joe Cocker to my untrained ears) and telling me that the next really big act was going to be Bruce Springsteen. I had just heard "Baby we were born to run" and thought it was good, but not great. This guy obviously knew a good act when he heard one, and I did not.

- Another time while I was living in DC, Fedco recorded Beverley Sills singing the lead role in Donizetti's "Daughter of the Regiment". They were doing a sound check during the dress rehearsal, so although I did not see the live performance, I did see the rehearsal. One thing I remember is that the military tunic for Ms. Sills didn't quite fit her full-figured torso, and she was trying to button it up and was giggling over it. I'm sure the wardrobe person took care of that by the next day's performance.

Well, I did not go on all Fedco gigs while I was at Brown, but I did work most of them during the years 1970-1971. It was very interesting to see some of my favorite groups and to learn some audio engineering and something about the great rock era of the late 1960's and early 1970's. I never would have had this opportunity if I had attended Harvard!



Fig. 1. The Fillmore East in 1970



Fig. 2. White's Joshua Light Show at the Fillmore East. The various colored patterns were made by people behind the projection screen at the rear of the stage. They pressed dyed liquids between two concave pieces of glass and projected the resulting pattern using a large overhead projector. This pattern would dance in time with the music as the people moved the pieces of "watch crystal" glass toward and away from each other, and help set the tone of the entire performance. The colored liquid patterns were superimposed on movie clips run through Super 8 movie projectors.

Here are just some of the people who believe in Fedco!

Danny's Song Anne Murray	<i>Live at Carnegie Hall</i> Dory Previn
<i>The Byrds</i> The Byrds	<i>Sleeper</i> Woody Allen
<i>Land of Make-Believe</i> Chuck Mangione	<i>Dyn-O-Mite</i> Jimmy Walker
Bob Dylan and the Rolling Thunder Revue	<i>From the Streets of New York</i> Sha-Na-Na
Carole King	<i>Rocking the Fillmore</i> Humble Pie
Elton John	<i>PBS — In Performance at Wolftrap</i> Beverly Sills
The Rolling Stones	<i>Live at Madison Square Garden</i> Dion & the Belmonts
Bette Midler	<i>Jazz Blues Fusion</i> John Mayall
Chicago	<i>Some Time in New York City</i> John Lennon and Yoko Ono
Stevie Wonder	<i>Living in the Past</i> Jethro Tull
The Supremes	<i>Newport Jazz Festival — New York</i> Newport Jazz Festival
Joni Mitchell	<i>Rock of Ages</i> The Band
Paul Simon	<i>Marblehead Messenger</i> Seatrain
Cat Stevens	<i>Every Night is New Year's Eve</i> Guy Lombardo
Bruce Springsteen	<i>Live</i> Kiss
Backman-Turner Overdrive	<i>En Route</i> CBC-TV
Leon Russell	<i>Melanie at Carnegie Hall</i> Melanie
Janis Ian	<i>Lenny</i> Original Broadway Cast
Buck Owens	<i>Live in New York City</i> Gato Barbieri
New Riders of the Purple Sage	<i>Whales and Nightingales</i> Judy Collins
Rick Wakeman	<i>Long Player</i> Rod Stewart & Faces
Procol Harum	<i>David Steinberg Disguised as a Normal Person</i> David Steinberg
Peter Frampton	<i>Junior Miss Pageant</i> CBS-TV
Barbie Benton	
Dave Dudley	
Yes	
Kool & the Gang	
Roxy Music	
Rufus	
Doobie Brothers	
Fleetwood Mac	
War	
Emmylou Harris	
Dave Dudley	
<i>Absolutely Live</i> The Doors	
<i>Mad Dogs & Englishmen</i> Joe Cocker	
<i>Good Evening</i> Peter Cook & Dudley Moore	
<i>Caught in the Act</i> Dick Gregory	
<i>In Concert</i> ABC-TV	
<i>Fort Yawuh</i> Keith Jarrett	

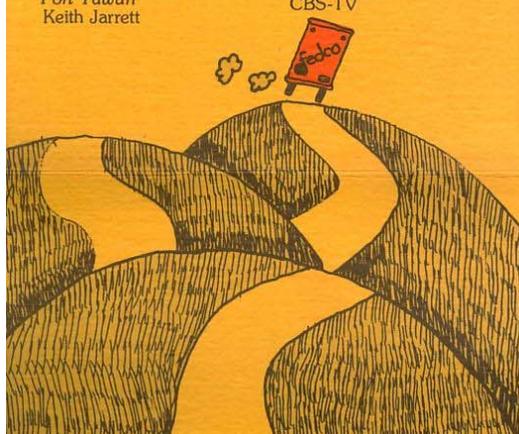


Fig. 3. The back of a later version of the Fedco line card, showing all the jobs they had worked.