

Interview with Chuck Surack, Founder and CEO of Sweetwater Sound, Inc.  
May 20, 2019  
Sweetwater Sound, Inc.  
Fort Wayne, Indiana

Robert Willey: I think the Midwest's strength in the music business is in retail. We're not a center of tracking and live performance. I try to foster communication skills and character strengths like grit and let them know about the great opportunity working at Sweetwater if they love gear and want to help connect people with the right products.

Chuck Surack: Thank you.

RW: The research I've been doing lately is investigating what is behind Sweetwater's success. I read a book by Simon Sinek called *Start With Why*. He says that many successful companies start communicating first WHY they are in business and what their vision is before they get to HOW they run their business and WHAT they offer customers. He says that the non-verbal limbic center of the brain that deals with emotions is where decisions happen, followed by the rational mind looking for good reasons to justify them. He uses the example of Apple and the two Steves who said that they wanted to put the power of the computer on everyone's desk in order to empower individuals to do creative things and change the world. Sinek says you should start with WHY, and that after connecting with what people believe in in then you can go on and talk about your design and recycling program and the computers you sell. He compares Apple with most other computer companies and says that they start with WHAT they offer and list specifications and point to low prices, which turns their products into commodities and starts a race to the bottom, and that doesn't develop brand loyalty. Consumers today choose between Apple and Windows, not between Apple and Dell. I'm looking at Sweetwater's success using Sinek's model, starting with WHY you exist and looking at whether customers and employees are as aware of that as much as they are with HOW you do business and WHAT you offer. What I wanted to ask you is how important you think it is to communicate WHY you are in business compared with HOW you operate.

CS: I'm not sure the WHY is as succinct for me as the HOW is. The big 10,000-foot view of WHY is I just love helping people fulfill their dreams. I don't think of myself as selling equipment as much as I sell the dreams and aspirations people have.

RW: On the "Who We Are" page of Sweetwater's website it says "Since 1979 we've helped music makers all across the world build their dreams. We're a dream of gear heads who are committed to doing the right thing for our customers. On the "The Sweetwater Difference" page it says, "From day one Chuck was committed to providing a retail experience for his customers that was unparalleled, the sort of experience he always sought as a customer." Were you already thinking along those lines when you started your recording business, or did it become the focus later when you got into retail?

CS: It goes back even further for me. Growing up as a Boy Scout is what really set the tone for me. A Boy Scout learns to be trustworthy, loyal, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean, and reverent. Those are amazing principles to live by personally and professionally. I learned to always give back and help others, leave the place better than you found it, to make things better. The Japanese have a term *kaizen* which means continual improvement. That's where my head is, that's where my heart is, and so when I started the recording studio in 1979 out of the VW bus, I always tried to find ways to add value for the customer. That meant things like charging a for a little less time than I actually used, giving them extra cassettes or albums, just being all in, all in, all in. Fast forward 40 years later to today and it's the same thing, whether that's the two-year warranty that we offer, 50 people in our tech support department, or the 55-point guitar inspection. None of our competitors do any of that. It's a way for me to add extra value.

RW: I've heard that about two thirds of the employees are musicians. Does the website describe you as gear heads in order to be more inclusive?

CS: I'd say that two thirds of the 1,700 employees are musicians. Some are more into gear, some are more into playing.

RW: I would think that the common ground with more customers would be a love of music. Not all of them are going to be gear heads, that's why some of them call your team of trusted advisors in order to get the expert advice.

CS: Absolutely.

RW: It seems that when people interview you they are mostly interested in finding out your secret to success and how you've grown so fast. You tell them about "Do the right thing" and that you didn't start out chasing the money, that instead over time you've built up a group of loyal customers. "Do the right thing" comes through very clearly. I don't think as many people know that it started with you helping people use the K250. Do you think that it's as important to get people to resonate with "We're musicians and we want to help you achieve your dreams"? According to Sinek you should say that first before you get to "We do the right thing."

CS: Maybe, I haven't thought about it in those terms. I just spoke to a new class of 42 recruits today for two hours, about how we want to always do the right thing. It sounds awful from a business guy, but I don't care if we make money on the first, second, or third sale, what I'm interested in is doing the right thing for the customers, treating them well. The money, referrals, and repeat business will come. I just want to be able to lay my head on the pillow at night and know that I've treated people the way I would like to be treated. My real point to them is that I am empowering them to think the same way. I promised them that they would not get in trouble if they replaced something, or paid for an Uber ride, or bought lunch, and that in fact that they would get in more trouble if they DIDN'T do that, and that if they ever get into any bit of trouble from any manager they can just pull the Chuck card and say "No, no, Chuck said I wouldn't get in trouble."

RW: Sinek says that you need to connect with people who believe in the same things that you do. Once the WHY is balanced with the HOW you do things and WHAT you offer you develop loyal customers who are willing to pay a premium or put up with an inconvenience. The last time I was here I talked with some employees and asked them WHY you are in business.

CS: I don't think you're going to get a real clear opinion from employees about WHY I started the business. It's not something we talk about. I'm not sure it's going to resonate very much.

RW: When I was here last time I asked some employees, and some of them can recall the creation story about your remote recording service, perhaps because every day they walk by the VW van and the equipment you used that's on display in the lobby. I got comments about your love of gadgets and passion for riding the technology wave. What they are very clear about is HOW you do business by offering superior customer service, an approach that is encapsulated in the "Do the right thing" slogan. Do you do any research on customer satisfaction?

CS: We get hundreds of follow-up emails and I read every one. I'm closer to the customer than most CEOs are. I have a pretty good idea of what they are thinking.

RW: Is that why you started the retail business, to give your friends the kind of retail experience that you would want to have yourself?

CS: It depends on what level you are asking the question. I started the company because I'd been on the road for 5 years and wanted to come home, and recording was something that I knew how to do. I loved playing music, I loved being around musicians, I'm a musician myself. There wasn't that sort of recording studio service in the area. I was fortunate that there was a job that was my vocation as well as my avocation. What really changed my direction was the Kurzweil K250. Once that came out I reverse-engineered how it worked and designed more sounds for it. It was a lot of fun to hang around with famous musicians and help them with their instruments. In the early studio days I was the guy that would do everything, including sometimes tuning their guitars, or grabbing their synthesizer and reprogramming it for them. I was always into technology as well as running the mixing console, so the K250 was just an extension of that. I did anything I could to help people make better music.

RW: What do you think would have happened if you hadn't latched onto the?

CS: My life would have been a lot different. It's hard to predict. I had a good friend who was a Yamaha dealer. The Yamaha DX1 had come out at the same time, and he was desperate for me to be a representative in the local market. I looked at one in Chicago. It was cool, had lots of lights and a great keyboard, but it just didn't sound real to me. The K250 was a digital sampler, the first one that was relatively affordable. The DX1 was a bunch of FM synthesis, which was pretty powerful, but I went with the Kurzweil. I could have easily gone with the DX1, and I don't think I would have had nearly the success that I did with the K250. It was a high-ticket item, but

more importantly it was used by higher end customers, people who could afford it. That opened a lot of other doors for me.

RW: Has your WHY changed over the years? You own the company and could retire at any time and buy five helicopters.

CS: I've got nine already, so that would be going backwards. No, I love watching people do music. I played last Wednesday night at a club here in town for a CD release party for a guy that is the current lead singer of Tower of Power. He's a phenomenal singer. It was so cool to be playing his music. I love watching people get successful with their music, whether it's commercially successful or just personally successful. I'm thrilled with that, helping them fulfill their dreams.

RW: Do you have a special sector of charities that you give to?

CS: We support literally almost everything that is music or arts in this region. Every elementary, middle, and high school, every after-school non-profit, even some for-profit organizations that have to do with music and arts, whether it's the marching band, the swing choir, the jazz band, or other things for children. The other thing that is important to my wife and I is the human welfare side. We have a real feel for folks who are less fortunate than we are. I think all of us that have been successful have a responsibility to give back and help others. We've got a roof over our head and three meals a day, probably driving a car, all those sorts of things. We are all just one bad incident from being homeless. So we are engaged with all the types of things that are involved with human welfare, hungry people, rescue missions, the Salvation Army, that sort of thing. What we don't support are any of the sporting kinds of things—not because I have anything against sports, in fact there's lots of value to it. If my employees' kids are in Little League we'll sponsor that, but I just can't afford to sponsor everything there is, so I draw the line at sports because there are a lot of other people who are into sports more than I am.

RW: Are you concerned about gobbling up the business from small mom and pop stores? I'm hoping that this research can help people learn how you have achieved success and apply it to their own businesses. Do you have any tips for them? Are there any advantages they can take from being on the ground in their local communities?

CS: I'm not predatory by instinct. I encourage and invite people to our building. I have no secrets, I have a bunch of dealers coming tomorrow from Canada. I want to make the music business get bigger, I don't want to steal their part of it. I've watched for years how people try to compete with Guitar Center before we came along. They try to out-Guitar-Center Guitar Center. That seems really silly to me. Do what you do really well. For a long time, Guitar Center didn't give lessons, they finally are now. Guitar Center wouldn't give loaners, there are so many things that they don't do. If I was a local store, I would be focusing on doing a great job and capitalizing on what I do best. I wouldn't go after Guitar Center or Sweetwater, because I've already got a huge head start. I have 450 sales engineers and all this infrastructure built and ready to go. I would use that to my advantage if were a local store, I'd be more nimble than

Sweetwater, I would find some unique products, I would focus on lessons. We didn't steal local stores' business, in fact a good portion of the business we grow is from all the education that we do. They let it go. If it wasn't to us, the business would have gone to Amazon, or a hot tub, or a new car. A lot of music stores are run really well, but a lot of them are not run so well. They shouldn't think that they own the business just because they happen to be in a town. The cheese got moved on them. There are a lot of great music stores all across the country that are doing well, in spite of Amazon, Guitar Center, and Sweetwater, because they figured out what they're really good at and they do it in such a way that either we don't want to compete, or we can't compete. I would tell local stores to focus on what they're really good at. It is amazing to me that we have a reputation of providing better customer service than most stores when they have the advantage of the customer walking into their store and seeing their product. We're not selling things cheaper than anyone else, in fact sometimes we charge more. I have more infrastructure here. I've got 50 people in tech support giving free advice all day long. I invest 13 weeks of training in every one of my sales engineers, that's after they have a 4-year music technology degree. I can't allow a sales engineer to be on the phone and borrow from our brand and credibility as a company. That's not true of a local store. They don't invest that much in their new employee, they put them on the floor the first or second day. I'd say that the local store has far more advantages than I do, but shame on them for letting the customer walk out the door without buying something or coming back to that place.

RW: You've said it wasn't about the money, you trusted that it would come. How do you control your expenses and growth to get over the hump so that you can gradually ramp up?

CW: I've been doing it for 40 years. I started with a hand-me-down VW bus that my mom had wrecked and blown the engine on. I filled the front with two gallons of Bondo. I bought two headlights from Tractor Supply that looked like bug eyes, and I painted it with 99 cent cans of blue spray paint. I learned how to rebuild the motor out of a book. I started with nothing and every day I put one foot in front of the other and every dollar I made I invested back into the business. If you get enough economy of scale and motion going it starts to grow faster and faster, which makes it easier today.

RW: Is there a limit to how big you want to get?

CS: I don't think there is a practical limit. The only limit I would personally impose is if we couldn't handle the customer as well. My goal is to always do the right thing for the customer. We're controlling our growth now. We're adding 100 sales engineers this year. In six or nine months they'll be each doing about a million dollars in sales, so I know that I'll be adding roughly a 100 million dollars to our top line. If I look at the business, we'll be doing about 800 million this year in the U.S. and are about a year away from doing a billion dollars, That's before I count overhead speakers and amplifiers, which is another 12 million dollars of business, and we sell that stuff, too. There's about a 20 billion dollar business in the U.S. We're number one online, but Guitar Center is twice our size, and there are 5000 other music stores. I can't see getting all the local business in the U.S. in my lifetime. My problem is getting enough sales engineers who can each handle 2,000-5,000 customers. If we did, then I would consider going

to Canada, Mexico, or Central and South America. To jump over the water we'd have to have a call center that could develop the same sort of relationships and deal with the language and time zone differences. We don't see that there's any end in sight, at least in my lifetime.

RW: I heard that there's a German company that is doing something similar in Europe.

CS: Yes, their name is Thomann. The owner is about my age, his dad started the business. They do more band instruments, which we don't, as well as technology stuff.

RW: Sinek says that the risk to success is that the WHY will get diluted. You're going to have so many employees and as a result will have less influence on them, and won't be able to make all the decisions by yourself. How do you maintain the culture as you grow so fast?

CS: That's why I sat down with the new employees today, to make sure they heard it directly from my lips. I've got a phenomenal set of lieutenants on the Executive Team that have been with me a long time—30 years for most of them, and they know how I think. I've been pretty clear. It would be pretty easy for people around here to know what Chuck would do if I were gone. I think it's going to continue for a long time.

RW: You've said that you don't always base your decisions on facts and figures, that you go with your gut. Is there anyone else here whose intuition you trust?

CS: Yes, I have three or four people at that level. We also have a lot of facts and figures and we use those, but at some point you have to go with what you really believe in.

RW: So there's someone who can take over for you if you decide you don't want to do it anymore.

CS: I love what I do. My grandfather lived to be 96, and he was reading The Wall Street Journal until the day before he died.

RW: But you're flying helicopters.

CS: I'd rather fly a helicopter than drive a car.

RW: How do you make gut decisions. How fast do they happen?

CS: It depends how monumental the decision is. This sounds arrogant, and I don't mean it this way, but when you first start it's somewhere between a guess and a gut decision or an instinct, I'm not sure which it really is. The more you do of those the more accurate you become, it's like anything else. Now I can look at something and I have 40 years of being in the business and 62 years of experience in life I can make a pretty quick call: "That's going to work. That's not going to work" and once in a while "I don't know." But I don't shut down stuff, I don't consider failure to be an option, there's always a way. There have been some times when we've started on

something and we decide that we have to turn it a little in a new direction. We don't usually do reversals, we don't stop. I'm pretty good at reading the tea leaves, and I have a couple of others that have really good gut instincts, too. I don't know if it's a gut instinct or just a lot of experience.

RW: The unconscious part of the brain is so fast and can make decisions almost instantly. On bigger issues, like deciding the size of a new expansion, you don't make those decisions in less than a second, but I bet a lot of times in meetings you can just about instantly say "Yep...nope...".

CS: For example, when considering the size of the new warehouse, which is 385,000 square feet, I'm pretty certain that if I had guessed I'd have been in the ballpark. I knew we had 130,000 square feet. I know that if we continue to grow 20% a year that in less than 4 years we'll have doubled in size. I could have easily come up with the figure of 260,000 square feet. We didn't back into it with numbers. It can be hard for me when I know the answer so quickly, but I try to be the last one in the room to speak. I've got all these great people in the room working for me, and I want to hear their opinions, I want them to feel valued. It would be really easy for me to make a quick decision, but it wouldn't be fair to them, and so quite often I sit on my hands and keep my lips closed. I hear the rest of the room and then at some point I summarize, and it usually goes the right way.

RW: How will the new warehouse interface with the old one? I heard it has a conveyer belt that cost a million dollars.

CS: I think it cost a couple million dollars. The new warehouse will have a 20-million-dollar conveyer belt system. All the stuff from the original one will go to Mexico or somewhere. We've ordered all new equipment with new technology. We'll have to haul stuff around quicker because it will be much bigger.

RW: So, you'll be closing the old one instead of combining it with the new one.

CS: Right. We have 4 different warehouses now. Two of them connect and there are two separate ones. That all adds up to about 130,000 square feet. The new one at 380,000 square feet will bring everything under one roof.

RW: Steve Jobs said Apple's new headquarters was his final creation and embodies how works. Did you design in any of Sweetwater's philosophy into this latest expansion?

CS: Not really. Having the extra space will be much more efficient, that's the main thing for us. My wife and I own 100% of the company. We have no shareholders, no other investors, and we're conservative. It may sound arrogant, but mathematically at the rate we're growing we'll double in size in four years. When I go to build something new, can I really be so confident that it's going to continue to grow 20% every year? And if it does, how big should I build it? Do I build it just for four years, five years, six years out? It's really hard for us. On the other hand, if I

look in the rearview mirror and see how we've been growing, and don't see any external signs that suggest that things are not going to continue that way, it's a little short-sighted to not build enough. I always build on the shorter side, so we outgrow the building faster than I want to. Maybe if I were a publicly-traded company or had an unbelievable amount of cash I would build it bigger, but being conservative and owning 100% we're careful of what we do, and are probably too conservative sometimes.

RW: You considered opening the new facility in another state. Why did you decide to stay in Indiana? Is there something about the culture that is a good fit for Sweetwater?

CS: That was the big reason. I have a company in Florida with about 100 employees down there, they do new sound installations, and I've been to lots of companies around the country. I'm pleased with the values in the Midwest. People work hard here. It's partly the culture we've set up in our building called "Sweetwater Time". We pedal fast and our clock runs a little faster than most other people's clocks. I think there's a real quality of life and an appreciation of employees that work hard that's probably part of Midwest values. For example, I have a home in Florida. Sometimes if I'm doing some construction thing there the crew might show up at 8:00 or 9:00, then they go to lunch, and then go off for fishing the rest of the afternoon thinking they've worked all day. That doesn't happen in Indiana. I think the people here are just good and hard-working.

RW: I interviewed Troye Kinnett, the keyboard in John Mellencamp's band. He told the story of Hoosier basketball, which is based on mastering the fundamentals and doing the hard work. Troye said that Mellencamp's band doesn't run on the star system, that when they are preparing a new show they practice it over and over in order to make sure that all the details are worked out.

It sounds like you're willing to share your business practices. It's not a secret or a zero-sum game. Your limit is the number of people you can hire and train.

CS: I want to encourage other people to be successful. They're welcome to take anything they can from what I've done or learned and to apply it to their business. I'm happy to share.

RW: I'm sure that a lot of people who come to GearFest would enjoy hearing you give a presentation about how the business is run. Many attendees probably run their own businesses or work for other companies that could benefit from your approach.

CS: (laughs) We've never talked about that. I sit out front and meet most people as they come in the door, but they've never asked me to give a talk. It could be interesting. It's too late for this year, but maybe next year.

RW: I would love to have someone record it. Has anyone asked you to write a book?



CS: I'm asked about doing a book all the time, but I don't have time to breathe let alone write a book.

RW: Derek Sivers, who started CDbaby, compresses books into "directives". No one has time to read a book anymore, and sometimes if you trust the author you wish they would just skip to the theory and explanations and cut to the parts where they tell you what to do. Maybe there are 15 things that you could tell people to do in a half an hour and put that on your website.

When did "Exceed expectations" come along? Is that just icing on the cake after you master the habit of doing the right thing?

CS: That goes back to Boy Scouts and just always doing things the best that you can. If it's worth doing, do it well. Don't just do it halfway or part way.

RW: Was there an "aha moment" when it all came together and you realized that "Do the right thing" would be the perfect slogan?

CS: I suppose it was a marketing decision early on. It's just me, being a Boy Scout, what I did at school, as a volunteer. I've always tried to do the right thing, it's pretty simple. I can't imagine NOT doing the right thing, frankly, I wouldn't know how to do that. I can remember as a 5-year old when I made potholders and would sell them for 15 cents for one or two for a quarter. If you didn't exactly go up and down correctly you would miss a loop, which was a mistake. If that happened, I would pull the whole thing apart, even if it was the last step. I would pick it all the way apart and fix it, because I wasn't going to put it out if it wasn't perfect. That was "Doing the right thing."

RW: So it was always there, you just hadn't made it a slogan. I've suggested that Sweetwater makes "Do the Right Thing" buttons and pass them out at GearFest, or add to the boxes with orders along with the bag of candy that customers get. I've decided to make them myself and hand them out at GearFest for people who fill out a questionnaire for my research. I remembered the buttons yesterday when I was preparing to talk with you and wished I had one to give you as a Thank You.

CS: (laughs) That's a good idea.

RW: Are you a loyal customer of any other companies? Whose values do you resonate with?

CS: I'm a huge Apple user, though I'm not sure how I feel about them today. I think they've lost their way in the last few years. I bought a Macintosh 128 in February of 1984, so I've been into it for a long time. I didn't always agree with the closed architecture, but it was a great company during the Steve Jobs years. I like their design philosophy in general—the simplicity, and that they were remarkably different from Microsoft. In fairness, the rest of the world has caught up with them. Everyone copied them and is nipping at their heels, and there are a lot of great companies making a lot of great products today. There have been some others through the

years. Everyone talks about Nordstrom. There used to be a hard drive company called APS whose philosophy I loved. They went out of business so maybe their philosophy didn't work (laughs). I love anything that's done well, anything to extremes. It's the same with events I like to see, whether it's sports or music. I don't care what the genre is, I just want to see it done really well.

I admire some of the higher-end cars and what it takes to engineer, market, and sell them—who their customer base is. I'm really impressed by cars like Porsche. I also like Hondas. I've got a Honda minivan in Florida that I love. My wife teases me about it, that I shouldn't have a minivan, but it's great for hauling people, and it's a great vehicle.

In the aviation world there's a line of airplanes called Cirrus Airplanes. They have redefined personal aircraft from my point of view. Everybody was flying Cessnas and Bonanzas. This is a modern new airplane with a parachute and modern avionics. They're very customer service-centric.

RW: What do you think about Yamaha?

CS: Yamaha is a phenomenal company. I went to visit them three or four years ago and met their president. I had always thought their products were dead reliable and sounded good. But after going over there and seeing the kind of things they do technically and the way they think I came away dumbfounded and even more impressed. People have no clue what they do, from simple things like having a room where they heat a product up and then freeze it, and then heat it up and freeze it again, just to see what the effects are of the cycle. They vibrate the products. That's not that unusual in manufacturing, but it doesn't happen in our industry. There's a reason that Yamaha products are more reliable than other brands.

RW: I think Yamaha started out making organs and eventually diversified into so many other areas, beginning with sailboats after realizing that the fiberglass that they used for the key slips could be used on hulls. I love Yamaha's computer-interfaced pianos, but it seems like they never really articulated the WHY of the Disklavier, especially in the education market. I think they thought of it as a luxury item, but after the dot com bust there were fewer people who could afford them. Why do you have a Disklavier, and how much of its technology do you take advantage of? Do you have the Disklavier TV and Disklavier radio hooked up, and play those audio plus Disklavier tracks?

CS: I've got all that stuff hooked up, but frankly the reason I got it was because I have a daughter and I wanted to inspire her to learn piano, so I bought the greatest Yamaha piano I could with the all new stuff. I'm not sure it was worth it.

RW: (laughs) Maybe the problem with their new line was calling it "Enspire" rather than "Inspire".

CS: She takes lessons on it, and I play it late at night.

RW: I think being able to watch the keys go up and down is a great educational opportunity. My son has learned to play songs by watching YouTube Guitar Hero-like videos that show when to push down the keys. Watching the piano and being able to fit your fingers over the moving keys would be even better.

I've organized online centennials for Scott Joplin and Conlon Nancarrow. The idea of the websites was to help people who own Disklaviers put on concerts of their music. Some of the Joplin sequences are from Max Morath, most were played by John Arpin courtesy of PG Music. You're probably less familiar with Nancarrow. Here is a flash drive with some MIDI files that you can play on your Disklavier with sequences we've collected. You might want to turn the volume down and fasten your seat belt if you play Nancarrow's *Study No. 21*, since it winds up to over a hundred notes per second at the end. One of my students didn't take the warning seriously to fasten his seat belt and fell off the piano bench when it got to the climax.

CS: Awesome! Thank you.

RW: I did an interview with Rick Kinney for *Introduction to the Music Industry: Midwest Edition*. It was an inspiring story of a soundman got all his ducks in a row and ended up building the Clyde Theater, and it reminded me in some ways of your trajectory. There is quite a bit about The Sweetwater Difference in it, and it ends with you coming on as a co-owner. I haven't made it a show there yet. How is it going?

CS: It's been exactly a year since it opened and we've had about 80 events with a great cross section of artists. It ended up costing a lot more than I wanted, which is one of the reasons that Rick is no longer involved. But it sounds phenomenal. I had Russ Berger, a famous acoustician, help with the acoustics in the room. We have a top-of-the-line JBL / Harman system, and it sounds great. The audience notices that it sounds great, the bands on stage notice it sounds great.

RW: I imagine that it will be a flowering enterprise, too. Are you still doing shows at the Sweetwater Pavilion as well?

CS: Yes.

RW: So now you have more live sound people on staff to handle all the live shows.

How do you control the background tracks when you perform with your combo?

CS: I have two groups that I play in. One is the Sweetwater All Stars. They are top shelf first class musicians, some of them were first string down in Nashville that we moved to Fort Wayne, so now we've got a full-time rhythm section. I play sax and we play R&B and soul music, and that's all live. The trio that I play in has about 650 songs and we can go instantly from one to another, and use background tracks to fill out the arrangements. I load a big file into Digital Performer at

the beginning of the night and drive it all from a Kurzweil K2661 using all the switches and controllers to pull up different chunks and Performer tracks. They sound like the original number one songs with all the drums, guitars with effects, and bass. It also has MIDI effects so we have reverb, delay, or harmony depending on what the song is. Live video plays in sync, so if we play “Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy” you’ll have the Andrews Sisters projected behind us.

RW: So the chunk system works for you as well as Ableton Live?

CS: The chunks work great because I have them all mapped to individual songs in DP. I just call up a song, hit GO in the transport, and it starts. It also allows me to loop sections of a song.

RW: So if you’re playing a wedding and the bride and her father get up to dance just before the background track ends you can open it up and repeat a section.

CS: That’s correct.

RW: Who did all the programming of the background tracks?

CS: I did all that. I’ve been with Mark of the Unicorn since the beginning. I was into Performer back in the early days when it was called Composer, which was a transcription program.

RW: I started with Opcode’s Studio Vision running on a little Mac SE. It had a similar feature as DP’s chunks that allowed you to change the arrangement on the fly.

Well, that’s everything I wanted to ask you about. Thank you so much for taking the time to do this interview. It was so great to have a chance to talk with you.

CS: You’re welcome. I hope it helped.