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DSO Jubilee 2017

DBS Audio Systems' Dave Brotman: Thriving In the Regional Sound Scene for a Quarter-Century

Sarah Jones | Feb 27, 2020

DBS Audio Systems is ready to bring your biggest audio system concepts to life. A leader in production services, installations, sales, and rentals, DBS sees clients return again and again to collaborate on projects ranging from festivals, concerts, and other live events to complex audio installations for corporate and academic venues, mixed-use spaces, and houses of worship. Working out of his shop in Coatesville, PA, just 45 minutes west of his

hometown of Philly, DBS president Dave Brotman straddles horse-country living with projects in Washington D.C., New York, Maryland, Philadelphia and nationwide, as well as abroad, and the contrast suits him fine.

With more than 25 years in the business and an appetite for innovation and hard work that never seems to ebb, Brotman embraces the challenges and opportunities that come with being a trusted partner for both clients and equipment providers. I sat down with Brotman to gain insight about projects that inspire him, keeping up with a rapidly changing tech landscape, and building a business that lasts in an incredibly challenging industry.



Dave Brotman

Live Design: Tell me how you got into the business; I understand it all started when you were following the Dead.

Dave Brotman: I was following the Dead for quite a while...probably 15

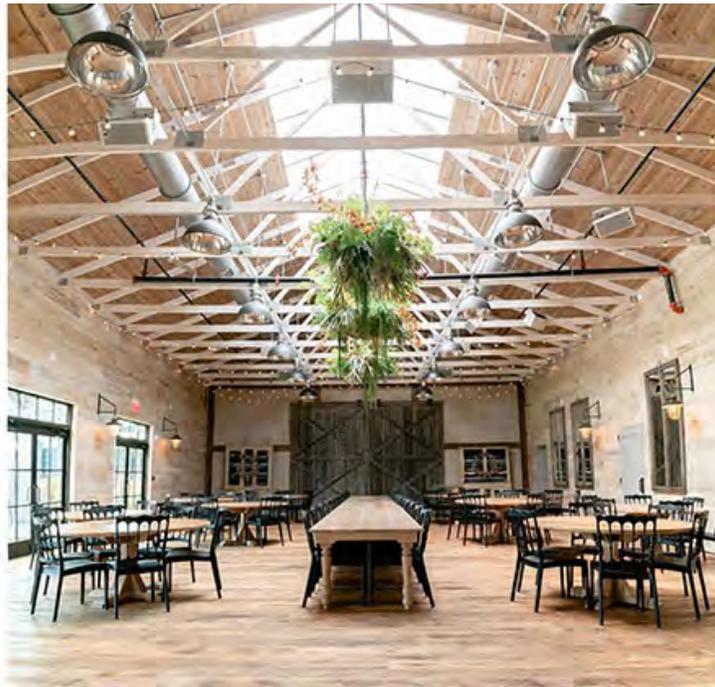
years. My older brothers and sisters saw the Dead in the early '70s and took me when I was a kid, and by around 1982, I was able to see shows with friends. Out of high school, I wasn't ready for college, so I took a couple of years off and went on the road.

My highest concentration of shows, from about '87 to '92, kind of evolved into recording shows. I was probably seeing at least 60 Dead shows a year. I got interested in taping through a friend.

LD: Did you have any music or audio background?

DB: I had no audio background. I grew up in a household with tons of music playing and my mother played a bunch of instruments, so there was always music in the house, and we'd go to festivals and things like that. But no, I got into recording the Dead and that got me interested in mics and tape decks. I stood there for so many years, staring up at [sound engineers] Dan Healy and Don Pearson, and I thought, "Well, that's a cool job," and wondered how I could get up there. I apprenticed with a couple of local sound companies in the late '80s. I got off the tour in '92 and started the company.

There was no vision of starting a company and having it grow. I started buying equipment, buying a console, doing little club shows and weddings and anything I could get my hands on. I was just making a little bit of money and seeing where it went. I never thought it would or could evolve to where it is today, or that I would want to be in it as long as I have. The company really grew organically, and by '95 or so, we were getting busy, and it seemed like a good thing, so we kept going.



Terrain Gardens

LD: I heard you launched your business with a loan from your mom.

DB: Yes! I had been doing things with a tiny amount of gear at that point. By '94, I had stood in front of Meyer Sound rigs for so many years seeing the Dead, and I thought I could never really afford them, but I wanted to see if I could. My mother loaned me \$10,000. I went to approach Maryland Sound Industries, and they had a handful of Meyer products, used stuff for sale. I ended up buying four Meyer UPAs and two 650 subs. They're still going strong today.

LD: Did you recognize a need for rental services then? Or did you simply want work in live sound and that was an avenue to do it?

DB: At the time, I didn't really recognize rental services; I just wanted to have a P.A. that was better than everybody else's in this area. Other sound companies had all these really nice, fancy mixing consoles, but their P.A.

systems were crap, so what was the point? I had a very basic mixing console, but I had the best P.A., so I won. It was simple as that. That decision immediately separated me from other local regional companies. Now we're probably at about 300 Meyer loudspeakers deep downstairs.

LD: Are your customers aligned with specific products, or are you able to choose your inventory based purely on technology and your needs?

DB: A little bit of both. We were a Midas house as soon as we could afford to be a Midas house. We bought our first big deck around 2000, after a lot of people had already had all these flagship boards, but that was the time for us, and we were building the P.A. inventory and such. I have always loved Midas products, so I went after their console; at the time, it was the most sought-after console. We went into Midas Digital when they finally put out a Midas digital console that was affordable. DiGiCo, on the other hand, was originally more of a client-based decision for us. I do like that product now that we finally have it, though previously we rented it. It eventually made sense to leap onto that platform.

We're not a huge rental house or I probably would have a variety of console manufacturers sitting here. Besides the quality of the products, customer service means a lot to us. Meyer—from the time we were a tiny company in a garage with six loudspeakers to our name, until now that we own hundreds—has always treated us the same.



Penn State University's Eisenhower Auditorium

LD: How does your project mix look, as far as installs versus production, versus sales and rental?

DB: We definitely started the company only doing production work and nothing else. We finally broke into installations in the very early 2000s and really enjoy both ends of the business. These days we are probably 65 percent production, 35 percent installation.

LD: Do you find that the kind of support that you provide gets more complex as technology gets more complex?

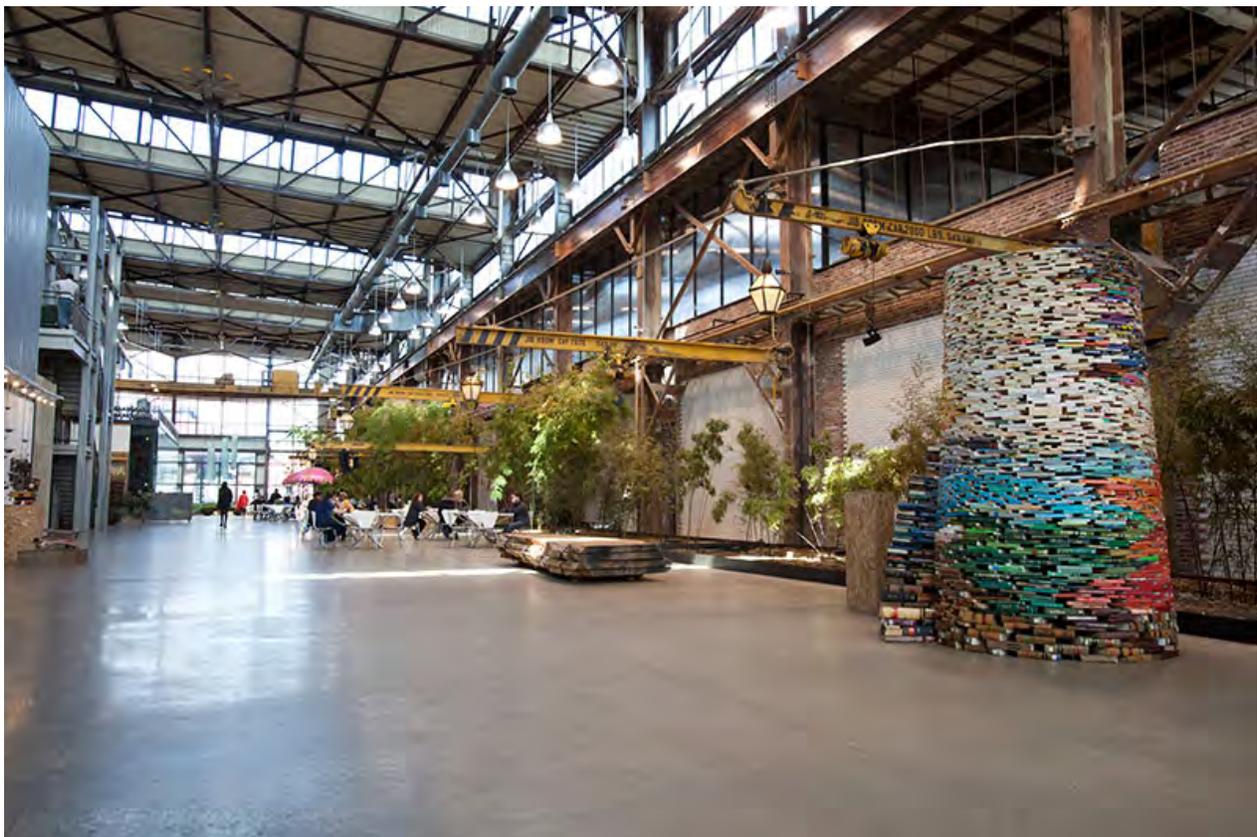
DB: We go for a specific type of install, and a specific type of client that is willing to trust us. We look to design systems that a client can use for decades with very low maintenance. Our care for making productions as perfect as possible definitely brought us into the installation world with a different set of values. Regardless if it's a sale and then you walk away from

that project, we like to support our installations for their life cycle. So we support them with preventative maintenance packages. And by being in touch with the clients for years after the installation's done, we can see how their system is evolving, what they need, what they want, and if they're perfectly happy.

LD: How fast do you respond to changes in technology?

DB: We're still a small company so it's hard to keep up with the pace of technology, though we do the best we can.

If I rent something over and over and over again, it probably is time to buy it. We are not the first usually to the table with brand-new products as soon as they get released, especially consoles. I like to have the bugs worked out first. The good thing about P.A.s is that they retain their value.



Urban Outfitters

LD: Tell me about some projects that have been standouts for you.

DB: I'm incredibly proud of a lot of our installs. Whether they've been large or small, they've been completely different. We do a lot of great production work, too; it's hard to pinpoint a single thing. We like a challenging opportunity that's completely out of the box and that forces us to rethink things.

Urban Outfitters, the clothing manufacturer, is a longtime client of ours, and we've done a ton of work for them, not in their stores but in their headquarters—charity events, for example. They have about eight buildings that they've purchased from the U.S. Navy. In 2010, we did a full install for them in about a 100,000-square-foot building. We set up a fully distributed P.A. rig where they can play music throughout the building and zone it, so they can do different functions in each zone. In the nine years since that install went in, it's been bullet-proof—super different and really slick.

Another one we did was Penn State University's Eisenhower Auditorium, a large Meyer Lyon and 1100 Leopard system, a left/center/right Broadway-style system. That went in seamlessly, and the client is ecstatic. Last fall, we did another Urban Outfitters project, to help Urban Outfitters break into the event market. We created a system in a place called Devon Yard, which is a high-end wedding venue with an outdoor ceremony space and a covered porch and indoor reception area. For the indoor room, they wanted to be able to flip three different directions, depending on the event. We came up with a user-friendly system of basically three different systems firing. The team has an iPad at the front end, so they can toggle between systems depending on how they want the room set up for that day.



Terrain Gardens

LD: Do you find that you are designing more for multipurpose spaces?

DB: Absolutely. We're designing one right now out in Glen Mills, PA, for another Urban Outfitters venue called Terrain Gardens. We're expecting the next one possibly in New York, before they move west.

LD: You've been in business for more than a quarter-century. What is the secret to that longevity?

DB: That is a good question. It's such a challenging industry, especially the production work, the hours, keeping happy, all those things. I have always tried to keep a positive attitude. I've been in it for a really long time, and I still love what I do. And I love the products I use. I can spec a system, whether it's an install or a production show, and know how it's going to turn out before I even get there. And it's good to have support from those

companies.

I write contracts and do designs, but the hardest part of my day is sitting by my desk. I'd rather be out flying a rig at a stadium or tuning a rig somewhere else or doing an install. I enjoy that part the most.

And most importantly, I would be nothing without my partner, Mike Shoulson, and my wonderful staff who push me every day to reach higher and strive constantly for perfection and nothing in between.

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