

SKYTHEATER TAKES MOVIES TO THE MAX

Earlier this year, a flying theater rolled up to the Signature FBO on Teterboro Airport's south side in the form of a Global Express XRS equipped with an entertainment system called SkyTheater. With it came SkyTheater founder Gregg Launer, 52, a friendly bear of a man who tries for modesty but whose enthusiasm spills close to hubris when he describes the custom-built entertainment package as being to the average movie experience what Sofia Vergara is to simply being female. Launer is something of a likeable version of Steven Jobs. His knowledge in the world of sound is such that he frequently stops and searches his vocabulary for language that the average listener will understand. And frequently failing, he will offer an apology and start over. In his own circle, he is often described by clients as a genius. To lesser human beings, his thoughts seem to run like a pinball through the random light and sound of an arcade game, with a purpose difficult to recognize.

"I'm a true audiophile, and what I'm building is a sensory experience that will so completely absorb my clients that it becomes reality and they lose themselves in the world that the director or cameraman or composer

SkyTheater. And as if life had determined to create a movie script for him, Launer's first customer and later friend was Alexander Zuyev, the pilot who defected in spectacular manner from the former Soviet Union in 1989, at the same time delivering a MiG-29 into western hands. "He loved America and would have the most incredible Fourth of July parties. But instead of beer and burgers, he would serve vodka and caviar. It was his belief in me that helped launch SkyTheater."

Getting Off the Ground

Launer's first theater in the sky was for businessman and entrepreneur Wayne Huizenga of Blockbuster and the airplane was a BAC 1-11. Then came a Boeing 727-200 and Launer was off and running.

It was a time when digital technology was in its infancy and the reliability was still in question. So Launer devised a way for all the soundtracks to play through a single system (either 7.1 or 5.1 surround sound), with 19-inch touchscreen, video monitor/controllers throughout the cabin and two 43-inch plasma monitors. "Ten years later," claims Launer, "that airplane was still state of the art."

In the late 1990s some of those working for producer/director George Lucas' Skywalker Ranch happened to listen to the SkyTheater system Launer had installed in the 727. He was immediately recruited and spent the next two years—off and on—there, working and learning. Launer remembers being "incredibly fortunate" to be part of a group that was "setting the standards that still exemplify visual film and movie soundtracks today."



PHOTOS: KIRBY J. HARRISON

SkyTheater founder Gregg Launer put nearly 1,000 movies into a Global Express Avod.

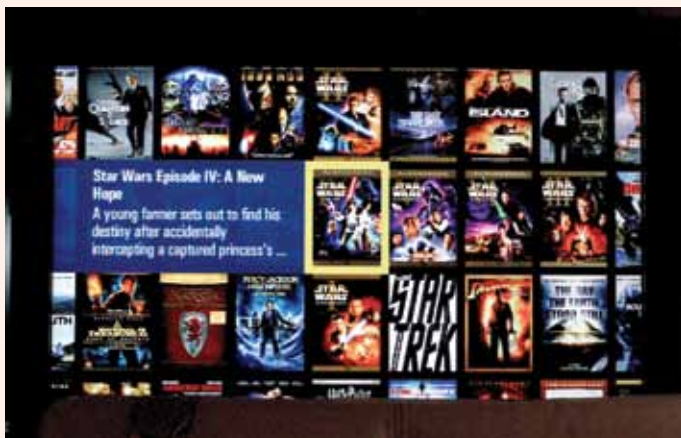
created," he explains. "I build every system as if it were going into my own airplane. I want to impress even myself, and I'm my own worst critic."

His earliest memories are of music and theater and lying awake in bed and listening to legendary DJ Cousin Bruce lay down a cascade of rock and roll on New York's powerhouse WABC. Even decades later, one of his favorite toys at home is a Rock-Ola jukebox. "When you listen to Dean Martin, or Elvis, or Chuck Berry on a jukebox, you're hearing rock and roll the way it was made to be heard," he avows.

And he recalls a summer when his parents took him on vacation to the Deauville Beach Resort in Miami Beach, where The Supremes were performing. "They were in the room across the hall from us, and Mary Wilson and Flo Ballard shared a cabana next to ours. I was too young to attend the show, but the resort manager had mercy on me, took me by the hand and put me in the front row."

By the age of 18, Launer held a first-class radiotelephone license from the FCC and by 19 was an audio engineer producing music tracks at NBC in Miami. And along the way, he also indulged what he describes as his alternative passion of flying, picking up his private license and going on to become a flight instructor.

At the age of 32, he and wife, Blanche, formed a company that two years later became



In the meantime, Launer had formed a SkyTheater partnership in Fort Lauderdale with friend and fellow traveler Andrew Guenther, who owns Advanced Audio Design, a home-theater firm in Sarasota, Fla.

"He handles a lot of the equipment and designs the electronics that make everything work. Andrew does a guy's home theater, and if the guy owns an airplane, SkyTheater does the cabin entertainment," says Launer.

Guenther's talent and influence is such, claims Launer, "that high-end audiovisual electronics manufacturers will often come to him for his input before introducing some new technology at a major trade show."

Among Guenther's home theater customers are movie actor John Travolta, basketball coach Pat Riley, singer Gloria Estefan "and more who prefer not to be named," he says.

Though focused on two different theater markets, Guenther and Launer are involved together in a music project designed to "recruit and produce live venues for musicians

in unique multi-channel surround-sound, as well as to promote them to the film and television industries for soundtrack recordings.”

In 2007, “an executive closely associated with the Internet industry came to Launer with his new Global Express XRS, and made it clear that what he wanted was far beyond anything off-the-shelf.” In 2008 the airplane was delivered with a complete and custom-built SkyTheater that includes:

- 1080p high-bandwidth wiring throughout
- monitors and speakers
- audiovisual on-demand (Avod) with a library of more than 1,000 movies.
- a SkyTheater app to allow passengers to use personal iPhones and iPads to control all aspects of the entertainment system.
- a customized touch-screen control package.

“The owner can also customize the sound balance in the cabin by simply going through the field until he finds a ‘flavor’ he likes,” explains Launer. “In this particular airplane,” says Launer, “SkyTheater is pre-tuned for the owner’s personal tastes to reproduce audio identical to what he would hear in the Hollywood Bowl or Lincoln Center or some other popular venue.”

Totally Absorbed in the Moment

Putting SkyTheater through its paces on the Global, Launer selects surround sound and asks visitors to walk through the entire cabin, to sit anywhere they like, even lie on the floor and note any change in the audio. His grin broadens as not one individual professes to detect a difference.

Launer goes on to select *Star Wars Episode VI: Return of the Jedi*, picking the scene of the chase on Ewok speeder bikes through the forest of Endor. “Now listen closely,” he advises. As the action roars across the screen, it is perfectly paced by the sound in that reality, “and if I hadn’t told you to listen, you would have been totally absorbed by the experience without realizing why.

“What I aim for is not only a perfect audio system, but one that is perfectly synchronized with the film,” he says.

But is it high-definition? Launer expresses mock surprise at the question. Then he admits that not everything in the Global’s film bank is HD; however, he also points out that with the technology to tune the system properly, even a pre-digital recording will be rendered in sufficient high definition as to be almost unrecognizable as anything else. And he also

explains that simply having a Blu-ray player or Avod and an HD monitor does not ensure an HD experience. “You have to have the bandwidth to carry the signal that will allow 1080p between the origin and the final destination.”

While the system in the Global Express XRS is now almost four years old, and SkyTheater has since done several more airplanes, including Donald Trump’s recently completed Boeing 757, the entertainment package in the XRS remains, he claims, “years ahead of anything else.”

Warren Justice, chief pilot on the Global, chuckles when he remembers his first meeting with Launer, “a big guy dressed like a biker and wearing a black beret. But he knew what he was talking about and no one in this company has regretted listening,” Justice continues. “I’ve never heard anything like what he put into this airplane. Even after it was installed, he insisted on going with us on a flight test to tune the sound for cruise at 41,000 feet. He personally programmed the individual controls. It was so well thought out that the owner went right into it on the first day and didn’t need a single lesson.”

Since installation, the airplane has been all over the world and not a single component of the entertainment system has needed to be changed, said Justice. However, he adds, on several occasions, when the airplane was passing through Florida with a stop-over, Launer has insisted on coming out to see if the system was still properly tuned.

The system is not inexpensive, allows Justice. Just a little north of a million dollars. But he adds, “If this is what you want, you’ll definitely get what you pay for. I don’t know how we could have done any better.”

Theo Kalomirakis, president of Theo Kalomirakis Theaters of Brooklyn, N.Y., is one of the foremost designers of home theaters in the world and has consistently turned down requests to do an in-flight theater. “I have been skeptical of the ability of anyone to control sound in such an environment,” he told AIN. “What Gregg designed and built on that Global Express is the first serious system I’ve heard. Gregg has tamed the beast.”

But it isn’t just a matter of being good at what you do, says Launer. “It’s a matter of passion, and of loving what you do. Think of SkyTheater as a personal transporter [a la Star Trek]. You step into it in New York City and you step out of it in Los Angeles, and everything in between was just a moment in time.” —K.J.H.