



# Legacy Business Registry Staff Report

Hearing Date: December 11, 2023

## EARWAX PRODUCTIONS

*Application No.:* LBR-2022-23-047  
*Business Name:* Earwax Productions  
*Business Address:* 916 Kearny St.  
*District:* District 3  
*Applicant:* James McKee, Owner  
*Nomination Date:* June 30, 2023  
*Nominated By:* Supervisor Aaron Peskin  
*Staff Contact:* Richard Kurylo and Michelle Reynolds  
legacybusiness@sfgov.org

### BUSINESS DESCRIPTION

Earwax Productions was founded in 1983 by a group of composers, electronic musicians, and journalists: James (Jim) McKee, Barney Jones, Bob Davis, Markos Kounalakis, and Jean-François Denis. The group found a niche providing sound design to local Bay Area theater companies and was one of the first businesses to cater specifically to sound design for theater. Their first facility was housed in a converted mic closet at Hyde Street Studios on 245 Hyde Street.

Earwax Productions' expansive approach has included innovation in the craft of storytelling through sound, music, and interview. Earwax Productions helped create some of the first audio tours with the Antenna Theater, beginning with the Liberty Ship S.S. Jeremiah O'Brien, the Aquarium at the California Academy of Sciences, and the de Young Museum. Alcatraz is probably the best-known tour still in operation with the National Park Service. In the later 1980s, Earwax Productions with Apple Computer worked to create some of the first interactive media products, including The Visual Almanac with Apple's Multimedia Group, GTV with National Geographic/Lucas Learning, Internet sound design, and cutting-edge digital technology providing some of the first digital audio post for film.

Today, Earwax Productions designs sound for theater, film, television, the Internet, and radio, as well as audio for tours, installations, toys, and electronics. Their projects range from major Hollywood features to mobile apps, and from animation to interactive museum installations. Earwax Productions is dedicated to creating the most engaging audio experience possible, across all media.

### CRITERION 1

**Has the applicant operated in San Francisco for 30 or more years, with no break in San Francisco operations exceeding two years?**

Yes, Earwax Productions has operated in San Francisco for 30 or more years, with no break in San Francisco operations exceeding two years:

245 Hyde St. from 1983 to 1996 (13 years)  
615 Battery St. from 1996 to 2000 (4 years)  
935 Natoma St. from 2001 to 2003 (2 years)  
916 Kearny St. from 2003 to Present (20 years)

**Legacy Business Program**  
Office of Small Business  
City Hall Room 140  
1 Dr. Carlton B. Goodlett Place  
San Francisco, CA 94102  
(415) 554-6680  
legacybusiness@sfgov.org  
[www.legacybusiness.org](http://www.legacybusiness.org)





## CRITERION 2

**Has the applicant contributed to the neighborhood's history and/or the identity of a particular neighborhood or community?**

Yes, Earwax Productions has contributed to the history and identity of the Financial District neighborhood and San Francisco.

The Historic Preservation Commission recommended the applicant as qualifying, noting the following ways the applicant contributed to the neighborhood's history and/or the identity of a particular neighborhood or community:

- Earwax Productions was one of the first businesses to cater specifically to sound design for theater. Sound design for theater goes back to early Chinese theater and Greek tragedies. The great American playwrights Eugene O'Neil, John Houseman, and Orson Wells of Mercury Theater all included sound descriptive notes in their screenplays. The tradition goes back to early theater when sounds effects were produced off stage by thunder machines and "aeoliphones" wind machines. As recording technologies got cheaper in the early 1980s and theaters started including sound reinforcement, Earwax Productions used their skills as composers and recording artists to work with playwrights to create sound cues for their productions.
- Earwax Productions has worked with, and provided audio services for, American Zoetrope, Lucas Film, the Kitchen Sisters, and Erik Bauersfeld of Bay Area Radio Drama. They began recording Lawrence Ferlinghetti in 1998 for radio plays and have over 100 hours of recording from his selected collection of poetry.
- The building out of which Earwax Productions operates is listed as an Article 10 Landmark No. 33, Columbus Tower. The historic Columbus Tower (originally known as the Sentinel Building) at 916 Kearny Street, which became a Historic Landmark in 1970, is one of the City's early skyscrapers and marks the transition between downtown on the south and Jackson Square, Chinatown, and North Beach. The structure was built for Abraham Ruef, one-time political "Boss" of San Francisco. Designed by architects Herman Kahlberg and Sol Field in the "Flatiron" style, it is one of the last of the style to be constructed in San Francisco. The building was under construction at the time of the 1906 Earthquake and completed in 1907. That it was as advanced structurally as any of its time is evidenced by the fact that it was not materially damaged by the Fire and Earthquake. In the 1930s and 1940s, it became an adjunct of the bohemian artists' and writers' colony centered in the late Montgomery block and Telegraph Hill. In 1958, the building was renovated by Henrik Bull. The site is called out in the draft Architecture, Planning, And Preservation Professionals: A Collection Of Biographies Historic Context Statement for its association with Henrik Bull as the architect.
- Earwax Productions has been featured in the San Francisco Examiner, SF Weekly, and Bay Crossing. They have received numerous awards and accolades, including honors in the Bay Area Critics Circle awards, Northern California Broadcasters, Association of Independents in Radio, as well as contributing to an Academy Award for Francis Ford Coppola's production of Bram Stoker's Dracula.

## CRITERION 3

**Is the applicant committed to maintaining the physical features or traditions that define the business, including craft, culinary, or art forms?**

Yes, Earwax Productions is committed to maintaining the physical features and traditions that define the business.

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## **HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION RECOMMENDATION**

The Historic Preservation Commission recommends that Earwax Productions qualifies for the Legacy Business Registry under Administrative Code Section 2A.242(b)(2) and recommends safeguarding of the below listed physical features and traditions.

Physical Features or Traditions that Define the Business:

- Sound design studio.
- Highest quality and innovation in audio and audio technologies.

## **CORE PHYSICAL FEATURE OR TRADITION THAT DEFINES THE BUSINESS**

Following is the core physical feature or tradition that defines the business that would be required for maintenance of the business on the Legacy Business Registry.

- Sound design and audio production.

## **STAFF RECOMMENDATION**

Staff recommends that the San Francisco Small Business Commission include Earwax Productions currently located at 916 Kearny St. in the Legacy Business Registry as a Legacy Business under Administrative Code Section 2A.242.

Richard Kurylo and Michelle Reynolds  
Legacy Business Program

### **Legacy Business Program**

Office of Small Business  
City Hall Room 140  
1 Dr. Carlton B. Goodlett Place  
San Francisco, CA 94102  
(415) 554-6680  
[legacybusiness@sfgov.org](mailto:legacybusiness@sfgov.org)  
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# Small Business Commission

Resolution No. \_\_\_\_\_

December 11, 2023

## EARWAX PRODUCTIONS

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legacybusiness@sfgov.org

### **Adopting findings approving the Legacy Business Registry application for Earwax Productions, currently located at 916 Kearny St.**

**WHEREAS**, in accordance with Administrative Code Section 2A.242, the Office of Small Business maintains a registry of Legacy Businesses in San Francisco (the "Registry") to recognize that longstanding, community-serving businesses can be valuable cultural assets of the City and to be a tool for providing educational and promotional assistance to Legacy Businesses to encourage their continued viability and success; and

**WHEREAS**, the subject business has operated in San Francisco for 30 or more years, with no break in San Francisco operations exceeding two years; or

**WHEREAS**, the subject business has operated in San Francisco for more than 20 years but less than 30 years, has had no break in San Francisco operations exceeding two years, has significantly contributed to the history or identity of a particular neighborhood or community and, if not included on the Registry, faces a significant risk of displacement; and

**WHEREAS**, the subject business has contributed to the neighborhood's history and identity; and

**WHEREAS**, the subject business is committed to maintaining the physical features and traditions that define the business; and

**WHEREAS**, at a duly noticed public hearing held on December 11, 2023, the San Francisco Small Business Commission reviewed documents and correspondence, and heard oral testimony on the Legacy Business Registry application; therefore

**BE IT RESOLVED**, that the Small Business Commission hereby includes Earwax Productions in the Legacy Business Registry as a Legacy Business under Administrative Code Section 2A.242.

**BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED**, that the Small Business Commission recommends safeguarding the below listed physical features and traditions at Earwax Productions.

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Physical Features or Traditions that Define the Business:

- Sound design studio.
- Highest quality and innovation in audio and audio technologies.

**BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED**, that the Small Business Commission requires maintenance of the below listed core physical feature or tradition to maintain Earwax Productions on the Legacy Business Registry:

- Sound design and audio production.

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I hereby certify that the foregoing Resolution was ADOPTED by the Small Business Commission on December 11, 2023.

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Katy Tang  
Director

RESOLUTION NO. \_\_\_\_\_

Ayes –  
Nays –  
Abstained –  
Absent –

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# Legacy Business Registry

# Application Review Sheet

*Application No.:* LBR-2022-23-047  
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**CRITERION 1:** Has the applicant has operated in San Francisco for 30 or more years, with no break in San Francisco operations exceeding two years?  
 Yes  No

245 Hyde St. from 1983 to 1996 (13 years)  
615 Battery St. from 1996 to 2000 (4 years)  
935 Natoma St. from 2001 to 2003 (2 years)  
916 Kearny St. from 2003 to Present (20 years)

**CRITERION 2:** Has the applicant contributed to the neighborhood's history and/or the identity of a particular neighborhood or community?  
 Yes  No

**CRITERION 3:** Is the applicant committed to maintaining the physical features or traditions that define the business, including craft, culinary, or art forms?  
 Yes  No

**NOTES:** NA

**DELIVERY DATE TO HPC:** September 20, 2023

Richard Kurylo and Michelle Reynolds  
Legacy Business Program

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City and County of  
San Francisco



President, Board of  
Supervisors

AARON PESKIN

June 30, 2023

Director Katy Tang *via email* <[Katy.Tang@sfgov.org](mailto:Katy.Tang@sfgov.org)>  
San Francisco Office of Small Business  
City Hall, Room 110  
1 Dr. Carlton B. Goodlet Place  
San Francisco, CA 94102  
(415) 554-6134

Dear Director Tang,

It is my honor to nominate Earwax Productions Inc., located at 916 Kearny Street in Jackson Square, for inclusion on the Legacy Business Registry.

Established in 1983, Earwax Productions Inc. was created by a group of composers, journalists, and electronic musicians with a focus on the craft of storytelling through sound, music and interview led by Co-founder, Jim McKee, and Composer and Sound Designer, Emma Jackson. They have been designing sound for film, television, the Internet, and radio, as well as audio recordings and sound for tours, art installations, and sound effects for electronics products for forty years, developing a well-respected and distinctive brand. The scope of their audio projects range from major Hollywood features and animated works to interactive museum installations.

Earwax Productions Inc. has received numerous awards and accolades, including honors in The Bay Area Critics Circle awards, Northern California Broadcasters, Association of Independents in Radio, as well as contributing to an Academy Award for Francis Ford Coppola's production of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. Earwax Productions Inc. has designed sound and composed music with many theater institutions in the Bay Area including Antenna Theater, Magic Theater, and former Eureka Theater, now the Gateway Theater. Their collaborations are wide-ranging and have included work on The Kitchen Sisters' Peabody Award-winning series *Lost & Found Sound*. Throughout their four decades of cutting edge work, they have maintained some of the highest standards in film, radio, and advertising.

As the City looks to revitalize a once vibrant independent film and video industry locally, small businesses like Earwax Productions Inc. deserve our support and attention. They would benefit greatly from being added to the Legacy Business Registry.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Aaron Peskin".

Aaron Peskin



# Legacy Business Registry Application



## Business Information

**Business name:** Earwax Productions

**Business owner name(s):** James McKee

*Identify the person(s) with the highest ownership stake in the business*

**Current business address:** 916 Kearny Street, San Francisco, CA 94133

**Telephone:** (415 ) 860 – 9403      **Email:** jim@earwaxproductions.com

**Mailing address (if different than above):**

**Website:** https://earwaxproductions.com/

**Facebook:**      **Twitter:**

**7-digit San Francisco Business Account Number (BAN):** 0 4 3 2 5 4 3

**Do any of these describe your business?** (select all that apply)  
*Requires at least 51% of the business be owned, operated, and controlled by the business designation below.*

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Immigrant-Owned Business | <input type="checkbox"/> Owned by Person with a Disability |
| <input type="checkbox"/> LGBTQ+-Owned Business    | <input type="checkbox"/> Veteran-Owned Business            |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Minority-Owned Business* | <input type="checkbox"/> Woman-Owned Business              |

*\*Minority is defined as one or more of the following racial or ethnic groups: American Indian or Alaska Native; Asian; Black or African American; Hispanic or Latino; Middle Eastern or North African; Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander*

## Contact Person Information

**Contact person name:** James McKee

**Contact person title:** Owner

**Contact telephone:** (415 ) 860 – 9403      **Contact email:** jim@earwaxproductions.com

## Business Location(s)

List the business address of the original San Francisco location, the start date of business, and the dates of operation at the original location. Check the box indicating whether the original location of the business in San Francisco is the founding location of the business.

If the business moved from its original location and has had additional addresses in San Francisco, identify all other addresses and the dates of operation at each address.

**Original San Francisco address:**  **Zip Code:**

**Is this location the founding location of the business? (Y/N):**

**Dates at this location:** **From:**  **To:**

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**Other address (if applicable):**  **Zip Code:**

**Dates at this location:** **From:**  **To:**

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**Other address (if applicable):**  **Zip Code:**

**Dates at this location:** **From:**  **To:**

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**Other address (if applicable):**  **Zip Code:**

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**Dates at this location:** **From:**  **To:**

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## Applicant Disclosures

### San Francisco Taxes, Business Registration, Licenses, Labor Laws and Public Information Release.

This section is verification that all San Francisco taxes, business registration, and licenses are current and complete, and there are no current violations of San Francisco labor laws. This information will be verified. A business deemed not current with all San Francisco taxes, business registration, and licenses, or has current violations of San Francisco labor laws, will not be eligible to apply for grants through the Legacy Business Program.

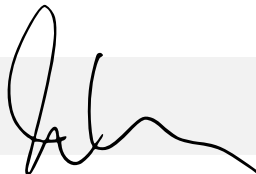
In addition, we are required to inform you that all information provided in the application will become subject to disclosure under the California Public Records Act.

Please read the following statements and check each to indicate that you agree with the statement. Then sign below in the space provided.

- I am authorized to submit this application on behalf of the business.
- I attest that the business is current on all of its San Francisco tax obligations.
- I attest that the business's business registration and any applicable regulatory license(s) are current.
- I attest that the Office of Labor Standards and Enforcement (OLSE) has not determined that the business is currently in violation of any of the City's labor laws, and that the business does not owe any outstanding penalties or payments ordered by the OLSE.
- I understand that documents submitted with this application may be made available to the public for inspection and copying pursuant to the California Public Records Act and San Francisco Sunshine Ordinance.
- I hereby acknowledge and authorize that all photographs and images submitted as part of the application may be used by the City without compensation.
- I understand that the Small Business Commission may revoke the placement of the business on the Registry if it finds that the business no longer qualifies, and that placement on the Registry does not entitle the business to a grant of City funds.

Name: James McKee

Signature:



Date: June 24, 2023



# EARWAX PRODUCTIONS

## Written Historical Narrative

### INTRODUCTION

**a. Describe the business. What does it sell or provide?**

Earwax Productions designs sound for theater, film, television, the Internet, radio, as well as audio for tours, installations, toys and electronics. Their projects range from major Hollywood features to mobile apps, and from animation to interactive museum installations. Earwax Productions is dedicated to creating the most engaging audio experience possible, across all media.

**b. Describe whom the business serves.**

Serving the San Francisco Bay Area since 1983, Earwax Productions has worked with local playwrights, filmmakers, artists, and inventors. Beyond San Francisco, they have had the privilege to help produce film soundtracks, radio, museum installations, teach, and lecture in Helsinki, Dublin, and Johannesburg.

**c. In about 2-5 words (15-30 characters), describe what the business is known for.**

Engaging sound design across all media.

### **CRITERION 1: The business has operated in San Francisco for 30 or more years, with no break in San Francisco operations exceeding two years**

**a. Provide a short history of the business, including locations and owners.**

Earwax Productions, currently located at 916 Kearny Street, was founded in 1983 by a group of composers, electronic musicians, and journalists: James (Jim) McKee, Barney Jones, Bob Davis, Markos Kounalakis, and Jean-François Denis. Much of the group studied at Mills College Center for Contemporary Music in 1980-81, which was when the business began to form.

The group found a niche providing sound design to local Bay Area Theater companies such as Antenna Theater, Magic Theater, SOON3, Eureka Theatre Company, and One Act Theatre Company among others.

Since the business worked primarily with theaters and performance artists, the name “Earwax Productions” somehow seemed appropriate, although the name has always raised eyebrows. Years later, when they transformed into a partnership and then a corporation, the co-owners had long discussions about changing the name, but never came up with anything suitable. “Quality Sound” was considered jokingly. The business actually had one client who refused to write “Earwax Productions” on his checks.

Earwax Productions' first facility was housed in a converted mic closet at Hyde Street Studios, located at 245 Hyde Street.

As the business grew, they became a partnership in 1986 and took on more space at Hyde Street Studios, eventually taking up Studio E and various rooms in the building. Andrew Newell joined the business as a co-owner at that time, while Markos Kounalakis and Jean-François Denis left the business. Markos left for journalism studies at Columbia and then worked with Newsweek and moved to Moscow covering the fall of the Soviet Union among other things (<https://www.markoskounalakis.com/>). Jean-François is a Canadian citizen and moved back to Montreal where he is still active the new music scene ([https://electrocd.com/en/artiste/denis\\_je/jean-francois-denis](https://electrocd.com/en/artiste/denis_je/jean-francois-denis)).

In 1996, Earwax Productions became a corporation and moved downtown to 615 Battery Street alongside Russian Hill Recording (Crescendo Studios). Bob Davis was bought out when the partnership became a corporation.

After their lease ran out, they took on a temporary warehouse space in the South of Market neighborhood at 935 Natoma Street in 2001 hoping to construct a new state-of-the-art facility. Andrew Newell was bought out at the end of the lease at Battery Street. He started a new business, Ripe Sound, focusing mostly of advertising work: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/andy-newell-887aa04/>.

After the dot com bust and the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, the paradigm of post audio facilities was abandoned, and Earwax Productions found a new home in 2003 in American Zoetrope in the historic Sentinel Building at 916 Kearny Street in North Beach. American Zoetrope is a studio and community for writers, filmmakers, and other artists.

Since the autumn of 2008, the business has been operating as a sole proprietorship with James McKee as the sole owner.

**b. Provide the ownership history of the business in a consolidated year-to-year format.**

1983 to 1986	James McKee; Barney Jones; Bob Davis; Markos Kounalakis; Jean-François Denis
1986 to 1996	James McKee; Barney Jones; Bob Davis; Andrew Newell
1996 to 2001	James McKee; Barney Jones; Andrew Newell
2001 to 2008	James McKee; Barney Jones
2008 to Present:	James McKee

**c. Describe any circumstances that required the business to cease operations in San Francisco for any significant length of time.**

Earwax Productions had a rough financial patch after the dot com bust, but never closed their shop since the business was founded, including during the COVID pandemic from 2020 through 2023. From the beginning of the pandemic, things got very busy – actually, the most busy creatively and financially. People were still interested in staying busy with work, and as long as

there was a good Internet connection and the technology to share mixes online, work was very smooth and efficient.

## **CRITERION 2: The business has contributed to the neighborhood's history and/or the identity of a particular neighborhood or community**

### **a. Describe the business' contribution to the history and/or identity of the neighborhood, community, business sector, or San Francisco as a whole.**

From the company's founding in 1983, Earwax Productions has charted a singular course across the sonic landscape. The team's expansive approach has included art installations and innovation in the craft of storytelling through sound, music and interview. At the same time, Earwax has established a praiseworthy reputation in the fields of commercial and radio sound design, sound for feature films and documentaries, and iconic sound effects for some of the world's most respected brands.

Earwax Productions was one of the first businesses to cater specifically to sound design for theater. Sound design for theater goes back to early Chinese theater and Greek tragedies. The great American playwrights Eugene O'Neil, John Houseman, and Orson Wells of Mercury Theater all included sound descriptive notes in their screenplays. The tradition goes back to early theater when sounds effects were produced off stage by thunder machines and "aeoliphones" wind machines. As recording technologies got cheaper in the early 1980s and theaters started including sound reinforcement, Earwax Productions used their skills as composers and recording artists to work with playwrights to create sound cues for their productions.

Earwax Productions also helped create some of the first audio tours with Antenna Theater beginning with the Liberty Ship S.S. Jeremiah O'Brien, the Aquarium at the California Academy of Sciences, and the de Young Museum. With the invention of the "Walkman" and portable sound devices, the idea came to Chris Hardman of Antenna Theater that you could produce a soundtrack for a play that individual audience members could wear and listen to dialogue, music, and effects much like a radio play. Once Earwax Productions figured out how to communicate movement and directions to the audience, it became clear the same could be applied to audio tours. Initially, there was a small group of journalists interviewing merchant marines collecting oral history about WWII and the Liberty ship that was docked in Sausalito. Those same interviews became the body of first commercial tour that Antenna Audio produced. Alcatraz is probably the best know tour still in operation with the National Park Service.

Together with Apple Computer, Earwax Productions worked to create some of the first interactive media products in the later 1980s, including The Visual Almanac with Apple's Multimedia Group, GTV with National Geographic/Lucas Learning, Internet sound design, and cutting-edge digital technology providing some of the first digital audio post for film. Earwax Productions continues to explore and research new technologies for film and radio, as well as interactive audio, product design, and VR/AR applications with Google, Facebook, and

American Zoetrope. They received a patent for [Walk-in Theater](#), a 3D visual and sound App developed in 2012.

**b. Is the business associated with significant people or events, either now or in the past?**

Earwax Productions has worked with, and provided audio services for, American Zoetrope, Lucas Film, the Kitchen Sisters, and Erik Bauersfeld of Bay Area Radio Drama. They began recording Lawrence Ferlinghetti in 1998 for radio plays and have over 100 hours of recording from his selected collection of poetry.

**c. How does the business demonstrate its commitment to the community?**

Earwax Productions began working with the Public Media Center in North Beach back in the early 1980s. Public Media Center (<https://bizstanding.com/p/public+media+center-172816671>) was a small group of producers working on non-profit advertising, with the primary contacts at the company being Elizabeth Garsonnin and Robert Dalva.

In the mid-1990s, Earwax Productions began working together with Alameda Waste Management on a radio campaign designed to help with the transformation of trash to the current model of landfill, compost, and recycling. In the early 2000s, Earwax Productions continued the work with Underground Advertising and for decades have helped to create a radio and Internet campaign with Recology to inform and transform the way we deal with recycling and food waste.

Since 2016, Earwax Productions has been creating the documentary [Left Turn](#) about City Light Bookstore and publishing company.

**d. Has the business ever been referenced in the media, business trade publication, and/or historical documents?**

Earwax Productions has been featured in the following media:

- *Stage's Sound Investment* by Scott Rosenberg, San Francisco Examiner, August 29, 1989.
- *Pet Sounds* by Liz Sizensky, SF Weekly, July 3, 1991, copyright excerpt 1725w.
- *Chance of Alcatraz Makes Its Podcast Debut*, by Paul Duclos, Bay Crossings, February 24, 2020, <https://leonardo.info/contributor/22771/jim-mckee>.

**e. Has the business ever received any awards, recognition, or political commendations?**

Earwax Productions has received the following awards:

- "Best Sound Team," Bay Guardian "The Best of Arts and Entertainment," July 30, 1986
- "Outstanding Achievement" for *Deer Rose*, The Bay Area Critics Circle awards, 1986
- "Outstanding Achievement" for *Walking Home*, The Bay Area Critics Circle awards, 1987
- "Outstanding Achievement" for *Talk Radio*, The Bay Area Critics Circle awards, 1988

- “Outstanding Achievement” for *Breaking the Code*, The Bay Area Critics Circle awards, 1988
- “Excellence and Innovation” for *Songs from the Tenderloin*, AIR Association of Independent Radio awards, 1991
- “Finalist Award” for *Metal: Views from the Karamazov Vista*, International Radio Festival of New York, 1990
- “Entertainment Award” for *Virtual Paradise*, AIR Association of Independent Radio awards, 1994.
- “Best Sound Editing” Oscars, 65<sup>th</sup> Academy Awards for being on the sound effects editing team with Tom McCarthy on American Zoetrope’s *Bram’s Stokers Dracula*, 1993, <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0571170/>
- 28 Clio Awards for excellence in advertising.
- “Gold and Silver Winner” for *Miss Experience White* podcast by Milo Johnson, Signal Awards, 2022.
- Two Silver Lions from the Cannes Film Festival, among others. Earwax Productions partner Andrew Newell ([https://en.everybodywiki.com/Andy\\_Newell](https://en.everybodywiki.com/Andy_Newell)) won these awards for his work in Advertising with Goodby and Silverstein, among others. Andy passed away in 2014, and there are no further details about these awards.

**f. How would the community be diminished if the business were to be sold, relocated, shut down, etc.?**

Much of Earwax Productions’ post audio services have gone online, and there are many individual and post audio groups providing similar services. What Earwax Productions is unique in providing is the knowledge and services of the history and restoration of audio during a critical transition of audio media from analog to digital. They currently provide these restoration services to much of the film and radio communities.

**CRITERION 3: The business is committed to maintaining the physical features or traditions that define the business**

**a. Is the business associated with a culturally significant building, structure, object, signage, mural, architectural detail, neon sign, or any other special physical feature that defines the business?**

Earwax Productions is currently housed in the historic Sentinel building at 916 Kearny Street. Built in 1906 and 1907, before and after the earthquake, the building has a rich history of music and film production. A history of the building can be found on the following website: <http://jerrygarciasbrokendownpalaces.blogspot.com/2012/03/columbus-recorders-sentinel-building.html>.

**b. In a few words, describe the main business activity you commit to maintaining.**

Earwax Productions is committed to maintaining the highest quality and innovation in audio and audio technologies.

**c. What challenges is the business facing today?**

In all honesty, Earwax Productions has never been as lucrative or seen as much creative growth as it has over the years since the COVID pandemic. In 2021, the business even hired an intern from London. Earwax Productions has had many employees over the years, but this intern was the first in over 10 to 15 years. That said, the process of getting her approved for the student visa and subsequent requirement of having her be an employee, signing up with the EDDS, workers' compensation, and taxes was daunting and could use improvement and streamlining.

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**Legacy Business Program staff will add the following details:**

**a. Features or traditions that define the business and should be maintained for the business to remain on the Legacy Business Registry.**

Sound design studio.

**b. Other special features of the business location, such as if the property associated with the business is listed on a local, state, or federal historic resources registry.**

The Planning Department Historic Resource Status of the building at 141 Columbus Avenue and 916 Kearny Street is "A - Historic Resource Present." The Sentinel Building / Columbus Tower is rated as the "highest rating for architecture" in 1976 and of "highest importance" in 1978.

Other information from the Planning Department's Property Information Map website (<https://sfplanninggis.org/PIM/>):

"Prominently sited at the acute angle of Columbus Avenue and Kearny, the building dominates all vistas along Columbus. It has a 2/3 round 7-storey bay, topped by a steel cupola a finial, at the apex of its lot. One of last S.F. Flatiron bldgs and one of its earliest skyscrapers, it was under construction at the time of the '06 quake, but was not seriously damaged. This is the most outstanding known work of the 1880-1910 architectural practice of Salfield & Kohlfield which was also known for good residences, medium sized business projects, and the pre-fire Rosenthal Building. One of the original owners and occupants was Abe Ruef, infamous S.F. Political boss imprisoned in San Quentin as a result of the 1907 graft prosecutions. In the 1930's and 1940's it became an adjunct of the bohemian artists' and writers' colony centered in the late Montgomery Block and Telegraph Hill. Remodeled 1958 by Henrik Bull."













# San Francisco Examiner

# Style



Members of the earwax productions team, clockwise from bottom left, are Andy Newell, Barney Jones, Bob Davis and Jim McKee.

## Stage's sound investment

earwax creates theater ambiance worth hearing

By Scott Rosenberg  
EXAMINER THEATER CRITIC

THE TENDERLOIN sound studio of earwax productions is jammed with mixing boards and monitors, keyboards and computers. Importing a Walkman recorder to conduct an interview here is like smuggling a kazoo into a symphony rehearsal: You'll never get away with it.

"Got a cassette in there?" asks Andy Newell, one of the four composers who are partners in earwax, and who have gathered in the studio to talk about their innovative company's work.

Yes, the tape is rolling, and, along with the interviewees' voices, it's picking up the soundtrack of earwax's current big project: an interactive videodisk history of the North American continent, being produced by Lucasfilm for National Geographic.

"It was as though the North and South were becoming two separate countries." The authoritative voice

of Bay Area actor John Bellucci booms out of a video monitor as the screen's map of the United States bisects along the Mason-Dixon Line. "The deepest division between them was slavery."

Earwax partner Jim McKee turns off the videotape. "One of the nice things about this project," he says, "is that we've been able to hire a lot of the actors we work with in the theater."

### Convincing George Lucas

"We finagled a situation where we convinced Lucas that we know better actors and voices than they can find at the price they can pay," adds Bob Davis.

Although earwax's business now extends into radio drama, film soundtracks, commercial and corporate work, books on tape and CD-ROMs (a new computer data medium), the company is most visible for its omnipresent work in Bay Area theater. Sound designs by McKee, Davis, Newell and their other partner Barney Jones have graced shows at virtually every local company — from the Magic (where earwax designed the entire past two seasons) to the American

[ See EARWAX, B-5 ]



◆ EARWAX from B-1

## They're theater's sound investment

Conservatory Theatre, the Eureka, Berkeley Rep and San Jose Rep. Davis is composer for the avant-garde troupe SOON 3.

Newell leans forward, interrupts the interview. "I just want to say one thing about your mike placement: You're going to get a lot of fan." Looking concerned, he points to the Walkman, perched on a desk near a noisy appliance.

His partners spring into action. Davis moves a music stand to the center of the studio, raises it and places the recorder on it. "It'll be like a reflector."

"How's that?"

"I don't know — precarious."

"There we go."

That may be the easiest sound design job earwax has performed recently. (What else, for no fee?) More typically, the composers are called upon by theater directors to create the "sound environment" of a show — which can encompass everything from a full-length, continuous score to the sensitive use of silence.

### Sound: The newest frontier

Says Davis, "Costumes, lights, sets, properties — these have been with theater ever since it went indoors. Sound is the newest of the design elements in theater. We educated a lot of theaters as to what they could do with sound, and what they have to give the sound designer in order to do his art — not just financially but in terms of time in the theater, in terms of quiet in the theater, so we can hear what the hell is going on."

"The bottom line," Jones adds, "is that there are many fewer rules about sound design. In lighting, you know, you have to see everybody, you have to turn on the lights at the beginning of the show, bring the house lights down — there's all kinds of things that are just part of the package. With sound it could be

anything. Half of the design job is just going in and figuring out what the script needs, what's already there, what it can use, how far you can go, what the director wants."

And every director is different. "Let's compare three directors: Woodruff, Takazauckas, and, say, Finneran," says Jones. (Robert Woodruff directed "Nothing Sacred" at ACT last spring; Albert Takazauckas directed "Breaking the Code" and "Frankie and Johnny in the Clair de Lune," two hits at the Magic; Alan Finneran is director of SOON 3, which most recently presented "Poison Hotel" at Theater Artaud. Earwax designed sound for all these shows.)

### A maverick director

"They're all really smart, good directors with a lot of ideas," Jones continues. "Woodruff is kind of a maverick; he was calling me three or four months before and saying, 'Waddya think, you know, I kinda like Bulgarian drums.' And you try and figure out what he means. It's really collaboration."

"Takazauckas, who is equally smart and equally cool as a director, knows exactly what he wants at the first designers' meeting. He comes in and says, 'I want this, it's gonna last 15 seconds, and I want this, it's gonna be 20 seconds...'

"And Finneran is the opposite — he says..."

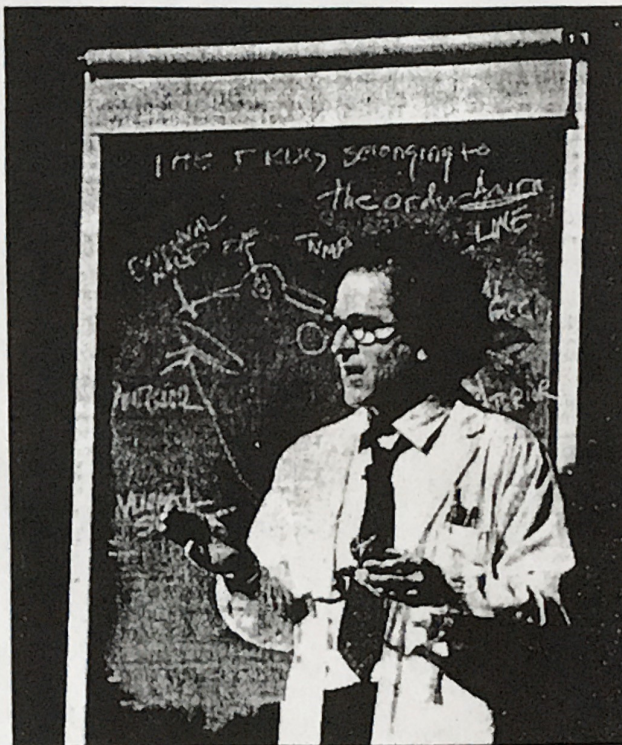
"He says, 'Show me.'" Davis interjects. "Alan will actually say to you, 'Just write me something — we'll see how it goes.'"

An interdisciplinary collaborative group like SOON 3, of course, is creating new works from scratch, and that sets a different task for a designer than the embellishing of an already-written script. Neither kind of job, though, fits the traditional career expectations of "serious" composers.

### A changing audience

So why have four talented young composers devoted so much energy to the stage?

"You're not gonna get a lot of money," says Newell, "and you're



Ed Hodson in "Nothing Sacred," an ACT production scored by earwax's Barney Jones.

gonna get minimum publicity, because what critics and audiences are looking at usually is the script and the lights, and that's what they should be looking at. They should hear the sounds and the music as part of the overall package. It's completely different from an academic piece, where you go to a concert hall, sit there and figure something out about the music. What's nice about it for me is that you don't know who's gonna be there, whereas with an academic piece, you know exactly who is gonna be in the audience, and they've got a mind-set."

"Theater audiences come with fresher ears than the audiences for academic new music," adds Jones.

And, of course, they keep com-

ing, night after night.

Though the theater provides earwax with a lot less income than film and corporate work these days, it's still the company's roots. McKee and Jones did their first job together in 1981, for Berkeley Stage Company, then hooked up with Chris Hardman's high-tech Antenna Theater. After several years of operating Hardman's sound studio, the two men split-off to form their own business with a third partner, Jean-Francois Denis, who has since left. Davis joined in 1985, Newell the next year.

### Brain storm in a hot tub

The odd, insistently lower-case name was adopted at a hot-tub

conference. "They spent all this time making up names," says Davis (who hadn't joined the firm at that point), "but didn't write any of them down because they were in a hot tub — where do you keep the pencil and the paper? And the ink runs... So the next day, of all the names, earwax was the only one that everyone could remember."

McKee: "We haven't been able to get rid of it."

Newell: "We've had some pretty important people tell us to change it."

Davis: "One time one of our largest clients refused to write it on his checks."

By now the name must be familiar to most Bay Area theatergoers who bother to read their programs. But though the partners expect to remain active in stage work — "It's almost a karmic thing," says Jones — their sonic business has been booming in other areas.

There's film work, for projects as disparate as "Innocent Heroes," a World War II drama produced by Pathe, and "Vegas in Space," the forthcoming flick by local drag group Sluts a Go Go. There's a "Visual Almanac" for Apple Multimedia. There are corporate projects — like a pep song created for the East Bay Shell Oil Distribution company, set to the "Bonanza" theme ("It's a very fast song, too fast to sing, there's no way to get all those words in, so we had to slow the piece down and then raise its pitch," Jones recalls).

### Talking collages

There are "audiographs" — sound-collages that use the words of interviewees as compositional el-

ements, for their rhythms and sounds as much as for their meanings — on topics like the homeless of the Tenderloin or the teen cults of heavy metal fans. There's the first "earwax product" — a beautifully produced, liltingly read cassette-tape version of James Joyce's classic short story, "The Dead," featuring Danny Huston and Kate Mulgrew.

And there's more. "We're very keen right now on the idea of doing syndicated audio cartoons for radio, like for the rush hour people," says Davis.

"Basically," Newell says, "we take a shotgun approach to how you can use sound in life."

All this activity has brought earwax, which unlike many other arts institutions is not organized as a non-profit corporation, a measure of financial security little known in its new-music and small-theater milieu.

"The fact and idea of being on salary with health and dental benefits just blows me away," says Jones. "If I want to brag to people that's what I brag about. I got dental benefits."

### MTV's singing bug

The two worlds of art and commerce can meet in mysterious ways when a company like earwax straddles them. Consider the station-break commercial for MTV, for which earwax provided the sound.

"They had a little logo of a bug-eating photocopy machine," Newell remembers. "Jim came up with words for the bug — which were actually from Beckett, from 'What Where.' Beckett really sounds good as an alien space bug."

"Only backwards."



# SF WEEKLY

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## PET SOUNDS

Are they composers? Technicians? Avant-garde artists?

The members of earwax productions have been creating and collecting strange noises for years.

Liz Sizensky visits the guys who run S.F.'s "one-stop shopping center" of cutting edge sound design.

*page 15*





Are they composers? Technicians? Avant-garde artists? S.F.'s earwax productions have been creating and collecting strange noises for years. Liz Sizensky visits the guys who run the "one-stop shopping center" of cutting edge sound design.

# RAW SOUNDS



Amplification Jim McKee (l), Andy Newell and Barney Jones (r) are the brains behind earwax.

WHEN A LOUD fly buzzed into their quiet, well-equipped sound studios one day, the proprietors of earwax productions made the most of it. "We happened to need a fly sound," recalled earwax partner Barney Jones, "so we got a good microphone, put it in a central position, went out and bought fruit, and grouped it around the mic. One of us chased the fly around the room to get it where it needed to be for the recording and another one of us was running levels. It worked. We got a good fly."

Recording the humming of flies is just one aspect of earwax's extensive work in sound. And although earwax has done recording and engineering work on albums by musicians such as Joe Satriani, Exodus and the Potato Eaters, that, too, is a small part of the company's business. Earwax specializes in work that employs the full range of the partners' creative and technical talents in music composition, music production, sound design, sound engineering, sound editing, sound effects and recording. Unlike other sound companies, this one brings together the entire spectrum of sound work in one place. As partner Andy Newell puts it, it's "one-stop shopping" for sound.

The passion and knowledge of earwax partners Jones, Newell and Jim McKee rings through loud and clear as they explain wave forms, sound envelopes, harmonic and non-harmonic sounds, why voices don't sound the same on the telephone as in person, why synthesizers sound unnatural, and how audio evidence proves that someone other than Lee Harvey Oswald fired at John F. Kennedy.

"People don't understand the power of sound — and that's a great thing," says Jones. "Sound operates on a much more subconscious level." From the emerging work of avant-garde sound artists to the aural playfulness of rap music, sound is currently a fertile area of exploration and experimentation in the arts.

Earwax grew out of an audio lab at Antenna Theater, and while the partners compose music and create sound designs for many local theaters, including ACT, Magic Theatre, Berkeley Rep and SOON 3, they have expanded into radio drama and audiographs, books-on-tape, creating sound and music for film and multimedia projects, and even their own video.

A typical week at earwax's studios begins with Jones, McKee and Newell holding a jobs meeting. Here's a typical meeting's agenda:

Newell is working on John Williams' score from *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, to be used in the forthcoming LucasGames' video game. Using sequencers, samplers, synthesizers, hard disk recording devices and multi-track tape recorders, he's digitally recreating Wil-

liams' orchestral music. Williams asks Jones to do one section of that.

McKee is working on sound icons for the Discovery Group of Apple Computer — sounds that help orient the user through an interactive environment. He has to choose, categorize, acquire and place the sounds. He asks the others, "Do you know a good wolf sound? I need a wolf sound. I also need a slicing sound."

Jones is working on an audiograph about a homeless person's death called *A Wake for Tom*. He asks Newell to call the coroner to arrange for an interview about the processing of indigent corpses.

**E**ARWAX'S WORK so often stretches the boundaries separating "music" from "sound" that the distinctions between the two forms can seem pointless. Harmonic and non-harmonic sounds can be either sound or music, depending on how they're used. The earwax partners are fully aware of John Cage's idea that all sound is music and of Edgar Varèse's concept of the organizational difference between sound and music (sound is randomly organized and music is consciously organized), but rather than steeping themselves in theories they opt for a more practical approach.

"I don't make a clear delineation between music composition and sound design," says McKee, "although you can say that there's music at one end, sound at another, and maybe sound design fits in between somewhere. The Western orchestra, and rock and jazz instrumentation, have their vocabulary and their emotional effects and you can stretch those to the nth degree in terms of what your range is. But my sensibility right now is finding elements like voice and sound effects and using the vocabulary that exists within them. It seems like the best place for that is in radio drama and film. When I choose which cricket sounds and which footsteps to use, I create an emotion and I work in the same way as a composer who says, 'Oh, let's use a clarinet instead of a flute or a trumpet.'"

There's a big difference between the old-style radio drama of the 1930s and 1940s and the kind of work earwax does. The art of recording came about after old-style radio drama was born and matured. Radio drama was performed live, and closely resembled live theater. Now, sound effects and sound designs on many different levels can be added to tape to enhance the drama and amplify its meanings.

In addition to radio drama, earwax's radio work includes audiographs. A term coined by former partner Markos Kounalakis, an audiograph consists of journalistic-style interviews cut and shaped into musical forms. It combines aspects of radio

drama, documentaries, and concerts. Earwax's radio pieces are so full and rich that with each successive listening, new levels of meaning emerge from the skillful juxtaposition and layering of sound, music and words.

"Songs From the Tenderloin" is an audiograph that was commissioned by New American Radio, and created by Jones, McKee and Kounalakis. McKee composed the musical structures and Jones, looking for musical turns of phrase within the interviews, made the voices sing inside those musical structures. The words and intonations of the homeless and unemployed interviewees repeat in a musical pattern, powerfully and poetically expressing the reality of the speaker's lives.

"Songs From the Tenderloin" was created in 1987, and earwax has maintained contact with the audiograph's interviewees. In the ensuing years, however, a lot of people interviewed have died, including Tom, one of the principal voices on the tape. A new audiograph, *A Wake for Tom*, has grown out of that sad fact. "I started seeing all this death on the street," says Jones as he explains the origin of the project. "I also felt like making something for Tom."

*Metal, or Views From the Karamazov Vista* is an audiographic example of earwax's ability to sonically make the most of a situation. At one point, a lot of heavy metal musicians were hanging around Hyde Street Studios complex, so earwax decided to make a piece surveying the metal scene. *Metal* has a complicated underlying musical structure and features interviews with fans and musicians, including the amazingly articulate an cosmic Sandy Pearlman, head of Popular Metaphysics Records and manager of Blue Oyster Cult.

**I**N ADDITION to combining sound and music with words, earwax has ventured into the visual arena. Among other film projects, they created sound for Pathé Entertainment/Cannon Films' *American Ninja IV* and composed the music for Vox Films' *The Color of Honor*. They've produced music and sound designs for multimedia projects such as GTV and the Visual Almanac. GTV is a set of interactive laserdiscs developed by Lucas Film and the National Geographic Society for teaching American history. The Visual Almanac is an interactive laserdisc by Apple Computer Multimedia Lab on subjects ranging from space exploration to marine life.

The visual elements of film and multimedia create new challenges for the composer and sound designer. "If there's the right marriage between the sound and the visuals, you've got an impact you can't get anywhere else," says Newell. "It creates a superimage.

Turn down the sound and it's something completely different." Adds McKee, "We've got handles on the metaphors and vocabulary that we've identified in sound. We know what a particular kind of scream is going to do to a scene, or particular kinds of strings."

Earwax's "silent" partner Bob Davis is also working in film. A founding member, Davis has taken a break from the day-to-day work at earwax, but maintains an association with the company. He's composed most of the score and created the sound design for *Vegas in Space*, a long-awaited camp sci-fi romp produced by Doris Fish and Philip Ford that's scheduled for a fall release at the Castro. In collaboration with Jones, Davis is currently working on *Ecomania*, an audiograph about the timber industry. Davis and Jones also worked together on *Flying Hormones*, a radio drama about sexual information for teenagers written by Erin Cressida Wilson.

The company's endeavors in film and multimedia have led to their newest venture, *Microtheater*, a video directed by Starr Sutherland. The piece is a collection of playful and very short (30 to 90 second) performances by 15 Bay Area artists with strong local followings. Although New American Makers screened *Microtheater* at Opera Plaza Cinemas in May, earwax envisions it as an interactive piece to be shown in places such as South of Market clubs, an airport or a hotel.

"We're always making sound and music in a multimedia environment," Jones says. "That is, making sound and music that works with some other elements to have its effect. It's a pronounced difference from the kind of work concert composers do, and we found we could make a living doing this."

The earwax partners have an easy camaraderie, and although their conversations are peppered with jokes, they take their business seriously. Each averages a 60-hour work week and they have yell at each other to take vacations. Newell may say with wink, "We want to become the McDonald's of multimedia production," but almost in the next breath, he'll counter that with "We're not audio dreamers. We want to go into something thinking, 'Yes, this is definitely achievable, how do we do it?' Certain things are serendipitous, but we really plan it out. There's nothing magical about it. It's really a lot of hard work." For the award-winning artists at earwax, that hard work seems to have paid off. Business is humming right along.

For a catalogue of available takes contact earwax productions, 245 Hyde Street, S.F. 94102, or call 775-8561.

## AFTER DARK

*The best of SF art  
and entertainment***Best sound team**

Next time you see Earwax Productions listed in your theater program credits, prick up your ears. This ace seven-member crew of sonic wizards provides music, background noise and sound collages for many productions by the Magic Theatre, San Jose Repertory Theatre, Antenna and other companies, and it does so with flair and imagination. Earwax made golden rock oldies sound better than ever in *Sharon and Billy*, deftly mixed electronic boogies with Lloyd Bridges' fish narration for Antenna's new Steinhart Aquarium Tour and cooked up the eerie mood music for *Honeymoon*, and that's just the tip of the iceberg — these guys get around. With multi-track recorders in hand, long may they reign.

*Earwax Productions, SF.*

Bay Area

Theater Critics Circle

Award


*Jim McKee & Nina Wise*

For Outstanding Achievement

in

*Original Score  
Walking Home*

*Lee Lutz*  
President



Bay Area

Theater Critics Circle

Award

*Jim McKee*

For Outstanding Achievement

in

*Sound Design*

*Walking Home*

*Lee Hartgrave*  
President



Bay Area

Theater Critics Circle

Award

*Earway Productions*

For Outstanding Achievement

in

*Sound Design*

*Deer Rose*

*Lee Hartgrave*  
President



Bay Area  
Theater Critics Circle  
Outstanding Achievement Award  
1988

*Earwax  
Sound Design  
Breaking the Code*



*Jerry Friedman*  
President

Bay Area  
Theater Critics Circle  
Outstanding Achievement Award  
1988

*Earwax  
Sound Design  
Talk Radio*



*Jerry Friedman*  
President

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*Gerald M. Goldberg*  
GERALD M. GOLDBERG  
PRESIDENT



# LEGACY BUSINESS REGISTRY EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**HEARING DATE: OCTOBER 18, 2023**

*Filing Date:* September 20, 2023  
*Case No.:* 2023-008839LBR  
*Business Name:* Earwax Productions  
*Business Address:* 916 Kearny Street  
*Zoning:* CCB (Chinatown-Community Business) Zoning District  
Group Housing Special Use District  
65-N Height and Bulk District  
*Cultural District:* Not Applicable  
*Block/Lot:* 0176/013  
*Applicant:* James McKee  
916 Kearny Street  
*Nominated By:* Supervisor Aaron Peskin  
*Located In:* District 3  
*Staff Contact:* Elizabeth Mau – (628) 652-7583  
Elizabeth.Mau@sfgov.org

**Recommendation:** Adopt a Resolution to Recommend Approval

## Business Description

Earwax Productions was founded in 1983 by a group of composers, electronic musicians, and journalists: James (Jim) McKee, Barney Jones, Bob Davis, Markos Kounalakis, and Jean-François Denis. The group found a niche providing sound design to local Bay Area theater companies and was one of the first businesses to cater specifically to sound design for theater. Their first facility was housed in a converted mic closet at Hyde Street Studios on 245 Hyde Street.

Earwax Productions' expansive approach has included innovation in the craft of storytelling through sound, music, and interview. Earwax Productions helped create some of the first audio tours with the Antenna Theater, beginning with the Liberty Ship S.S. Jeremiah O'Brien, the Aquarium at the California Academy of Sciences, and the de Young Museum. Alcatraz is probably the best-known tour still in operation with the National Park Service. In the later



1980s, Earwax Productions with Apple Computer worked to create some of the first interactive media products, including The Visual Almanac with Apple's Multimedia Group, GTV with National Geographic/Lucas Learning, Internet sound design, and cutting-edge digital technology providing some of the first digital audio post for film.

Today, Earwax Productions designs sound for theater, film, television, the Internet, and radio, as well as audio for tours, installations, toys, and electronics. Their projects range from major Hollywood features to mobile apps, and from animation to interactive museum installations. Earwax Productions is dedicated to creating the most engaging audio experience possible, across all media.

The business's primary location at 916 Kearny Street is a Category A (Historic Resource Present, Article 10 Designated Historic Landmark No. 33) structure at the intersection of Kearny Street and Columbus Avenue in the Financial District neighborhood. It is within the Chinatown-Community Business Zoning District, the Group Housing Special Use District, and a 65-N Height and Bulk District. Columbus Tower (Sentinel Building) at 916 Kearny Street became an Article 10 Historic Landmark on March 12, 1970.

## Staff Analysis

### Review Criteria

#### 1. **When was business founded?**

The business was founded in 1983.

#### 2. **Does the business qualify for listing on the Legacy Business Registry? If so, how?**

Yes. Earwax Productions qualifies for listing on the Legacy Business Registry because it meets all of the eligibility Criteria:

- a. Earwax Productions has operated continuously in San Francisco for 40 years.
- b. Earwax Productions has contributed to the history and identity of the Financial District neighborhood and San Francisco.
- c. Earwax Productions is committed to maintaining the physical features and traditions that define the organization.

#### 3. **Is the business associated with a culturally significant art / craft / cuisine / tradition?**

Yes. Earwax Productions was one of the first businesses to cater specifically to sound design for theater. Sound design for theater goes back to early Chinese theater and Greek tragedies. The great American playwrights Eugene O'Neil, John Houseman, and Orson Wells of Mercury Theater all included sound descriptive notes in their screenplays. The tradition goes back to early theater when sounds effects were produced off stage by thunder machines and "aeoliphones" wind machines. As recording technologies got cheaper in the early 1980s and theaters started including sound reinforcement, Earwax Productions used their skills as composers and recording artists to work with playwrights to create sound cues for their productions.

#### 4. **Is the business or its building associated with significant events, persons, and / or architecture?**

Yes, Earwax Productions has worked with, and provided audio services for, American Zoetrope, Lucas Film, the Kitchen Sisters, and Erik Bauersfeld of Bay Area Radio Drama. They began recording Lawrence Ferlinghetti in 1998 for radio plays and have over 100 hours of recording from his selected collection of poetry.

Earwax Productions operates out of the historic Columbus Tower (originally known as the Sentinel Building) at 916 Kearny Street, which became an Article 10 Historic Landmark No. 33 in 1970. The building is one of the City's early skyscrapers and marks the transition between downtown on the south and Jackson Square, Chinatown, and the Italian Quarter. The structure was built for Abraham Ruef, one-time political "Boss" of San Francisco. Designed by architects Herman Kahlberg and Sol Field in the "Flatiron" style, it is one of the last of the style to be constructed in San Francisco. The building was under construction at the time of the 1906 Earthquake and completed in 1907. That it was as advanced structurally as any of its time is evidenced by the fact that it was not materially damaged by the Fire and Earthquake. In the 1930s and 1940s it became an adjunct of the bohemian artists' and writers' colony centered in the late Montgomery block and Telegraph Hill. In 1958, the building was renovated by Henrik Bull.

**5. Is the property associated with the business listed on a local, state, or federal historic resource registry?**

Yes, the site is listed as an Article 10 Landmark No. 33, Columbus Tower (Sentinel Building).

**6. Is the business mentioned in a local historic context statement?**

Yes, the site is called out in the draft *Architecture, Planning, And Preservation Professionals: A Collection Of Biographies Historic Context Statement* for its association with Henrik Bull as the architect.

**7. Has the business been cited in published literature, newspapers, journals, etc.?**

Yes. Earwax Productions has been featured in the San Francisco Examiner, SF Weekly, and Bay Crossing. They have received numerous awards and accolades, including honors in the Bay Area Critics Circle awards, Northern California Broadcasters, Association of Independents in Radio, as well as contributing to an Academy Award for Francis Ford Coppola's production of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*.

**Racial and Social Equity Analysis**

On July 15<sup>th</sup>, 2020 the San Francisco Historic Preservation Commission adopted [Resolution No. 1127](#) centering Preservation Planning on racial and social equity. Understanding the benefits, burdens, and opportunities to advance racial and social equity that proposed Preservation Planning documents provide is part of the Department's Racial and Social Equity Initiative. This is also consistent with the Mayor's Citywide Strategic Initiatives for equity and accountability and with the Office of Racial Equity, which required all Departments to conduct this analysis.

The Legacy Business Program is deeply intertwined with these goals. One of the primary purposes of the Legacy Business Program is to maintain San Francisco's cultural fabric and to foster civic engagement and pride by assisting long-operating businesses remain in the city. The Legacy Business Registry was established to recognize longstanding, community-serving businesses that are valuable cultural assets of the city. These businesses, ranging from restaurants to art galleries to tire shops to community shelters, are key to sustaining the racial and social diversity in San Francisco and adding to the identity and character of our city and the many communities within it.

## Physical Features or Traditions that Define the Business

### Location(s) associated with the business:

Current Locations:

- 916 Kearny Street (2003 – Present)

Previous (No Longer Extant) Locations:

- 245 Hyde Street (1983 – 1996)
- 615 Battery Street (1996 – 2000)
- 935 Natoma Street (2001 – 2003)

### Recommended by Applicant

- Sound design studio
- Highest quality and innovation in audio and audio technologies

### Additional Recommended by Staff

- None

## Basis for Recommendation

The Department recommends the Historic Preservation Commission adopt a resolution recommending the business listed above be adopted by the Small Business Commission to the Legacy Business Registry.

## ATTACHMENTS

Draft Resolution

Legacy Business Registry Application:

- Application Review Sheet
- Section 1 – Business / Applicant Information
- Section 2 – Business Location(s)
- Section 3 – Disclosure Statement
- Section 4 – Written Historical Narrative
  - Criterion 1 – History and Description of Business
  - Criterion 2 – Contribution to Local History
  - Criterion 3 – Business Characteristics
- Contextual Photographs and Background Documentation



# HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION RESOLUTION NO. 1352

**HEARING DATE: OCTOBER 18, 2023**

*Case No.:* 2023-008839LBR  
*Business Name:* Earwax Productions  
*Business Address:* 916 Kearny Street  
*Zoning:* CCB (Chinatown-Community Business) Zoning District  
 Group Housing Special Use District  
 65-N Height and Bulk District  
*Cultural District:* Not Applicable  
*Block/Lot:* 0176/013  
*Applicant:* James McKee  
 916 Kearny Street  
*Nominated By:* Supervisor Aaron Peskin  
*Located In:* District 3  
*Staff Contact:* Elizabeth Mau – (628) 652-7583  
 Elizabeth.Mau@sfgov.org

ADOPTING FINDINGS RECOMMENDING TO THE SMALL BUSINESS COMMISSION APPROVAL OF THE LEGACY BUSINESS REGISTRY NOMINATION FOR EARWAX PRODUCTIONS CURRENTLY LOCATED AT 916 KEARNY ST, BLOCK/LOT 0176/013.

WHEREAS, in accordance with Administrative Code Section 2A.242, the Office of Small Business maintains a registry of Legacy Businesses in San Francisco (the "Registry") to recognize that longstanding, community-serving businesses can be valuable cultural assets of the City and to be a tool for providing educational and promotional assistance to Legacy Businesses to encourage their continued viability and success; and

WHEREAS, the subject business has operated in San Francisco for 30 or more years, with no break in San Francisco operations exceeding two years; and

WHEREAS, the subject business has contributed to the City's history and identity; and

WHEREAS, the subject business is committed to maintaining the traditions that define the business; and



WHEREAS, at a duly noticed public hearing held on October 18, 2023, the Historic Preservation Commission reviewed documents, correspondence and heard oral testimony on the Legacy Business Registry nomination.

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the Historic Preservation Commission hereby recommends that Earwax Productions qualifies for the Legacy Business Registry under Administrative Code Section 2A.242(b)(2) as it has operated for 30 or more years and has continued to contribute to the community.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Historic Preservation Commission hereby recommends safeguarding of the below listed physical features and traditions for Earwax Productions.

*Location(s):*

Current Locations:

- 916 Kearny Street (2003 – Present)

Previous (No Longer Extant) Locations:

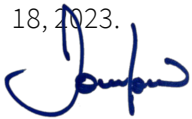
- 245 Hyde Street (1983 – 1996)
- 615 Battery Street (1996 – 2000)
- 935 Natoma Street (2001 – 2003)

*Physical Features or Traditions that Define the Business:*

- Sound design studio
- Highest quality and innovation in audio and audio technologies

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Historic Preservation Commission's findings and recommendations are made solely for the purpose of evaluating the subject business's eligibility for the Legacy Business Registry, and the Historic Preservation Commission makes no finding that the subject property or any of its features constitutes a historical resource pursuant to CEQA Guidelines Section 15064.5(a).

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Historic Preservation Commission hereby directs its Commission Secretary to transmit this Resolution and other pertinent materials in the case file to the Office of Small Business on October 18, 2023.



Jonas P. Ionin  
Commission Secretary

AYES: Vergara, Wright, Foley, Nageswaran, Matsuda

NOES: None

ABSENT: None

ADOPTED: October 18, 2023