



The evolution of the outdoor speaker

By Leslie Stevens

Plain and simple, outdoor music for the residential market started when people began hauling their indoor speakers out onto their patios. Homeowners cut holes in their window screens or left sliding doors ajar just to enjoy their favorite music while cooking on the barbecue or swimming in the pool. And regretfully, I must confess, I'm completely guilty of this charge.

Needless to say, this Einstein of an idea had several inherent problems of its own. Aside from the tiresome hassle of shuffling speakers from house to yard and back again and the disastrous threat of tripping over frivolously strung wires, indoor speakers were barely resistant to the nasty elements of the great outdoors. So it was only a matter of time before manufacturers wised up and began developing speakers specifically designed for outdoor applications.

EARLY OUTDOOR SPEAKERS

The first outdoor speakers were manufactured in the form of traditional cabinets, which were usually placed under the eaves of a home or somewhere on the patio. These speakers were designed to weather graciously (no pun intended) in the rain, sleet, snow and extreme sun.

Needless to say, the sound quality, compared to today's standards, basically was no better than Roseanne Barr assaulting the national anthem.

Speakerscraft was one manufacturer to examine the weaknesses of existing outdoor speakers.

"We approached the market completely differently," said Jeff Francisco, vice president of product development for Speakers-Craft. "Our [research and development] department did extensive listening tests and determined that the dynamics of the outdoor environment was severely different than that of the indoor environment. We found that this variable existed for several critical reasons, which was partially due to the forces of nature and partially due to the design of the speaker."

In regards to nature, the outdoor environment did not have room boundaries (e.g. walls and ceilings) like you find in enclosed rooms. In addition, the space outdoors was much greater than that contained in a single room. And as it pertained to the audio equipment, existing cabinets offered a limited amount of base.

"Now that our engineers were armed with this knowledge, we began to address the boundary issue by developing a larger

cabinet, which was designed to house two 5.25-inch woofers," Francisco said. "After extensive testing, we then announced our outdoor speaker WeatherCraft, which was created to radically improve the sound quality of outdoor music."

As you might expect, many homeowners were worried that these high-performance speakers would not hold up in harsh weather conditions.

"We were so confident that our speakers could survive the coldest Dakota winters and the hottest Arizona summers, that we were one of the first companies to offer a lifetime warranty," Francisco said. "This guarantee is still enforced today."

THE GROWTH OF THE BACKYARD

But just as outdoor speakers began to evolve to an acceptable level of performance, people began using their backyards differently. Early on, most people simply had a barbecue located on a small patio and maybe a swing set in the yard, so mounting the speakers underneath the eaves of their home fulfilled their needs.

As we fast forward to today, people have tennis courts, basketball courts, gazebos, spas and benches in the far yonder of their yards. In today's yards, placing a pair

of speakers underneath the eaves presents some technical difficulties. In order to get sound to cover all areas of the yard, homeowners had to blast the volume. Needless to say, this was not good for the people sitting next to the speakers, nor did it do any favors for the "noise police" neighbors common to every neighborhood.

Manufacturers soon recognized a need for increased functionality in outdoor speakers.

"We saw the change in lifestyle coming on, and we knew we needed to design a speaker that provided a solution," Francisco

Outdoor speakers need not be obtrusive: they can be designed to blend in with the yard, like these speakers designed as rocks.



said, "It was obvious that the speakers had to be placed throughout the yard, but many homeowners didn't want unsightly boxes ruining the aesthetics, nor did they always have a place to mount the speakers. So after extensive review with our industrial designers, we developed a cabinet that looked like landscaping rocks. This enabled the homeowner to place the speakers next to the area of activity while still preserving, and even enhancing, the beauty of the yard."

OUTDOOR INSTALLATION

Nick Tamburri of Aggressive Home Automation & Design agrees. "Rock speakers provided us a new opportunity to design elaborate audio systems for our customers," he said. "We start out by placing several pairs of speakers throughout the yard. Each pair is wired for its own zone and control, enabling different levels of sound within the various parts of the yard. The speakers are directed to fire toward the house, unlike the cabinets that were mounted underneath the eaves."

"Then we establish programmed commands, such as when the phone or doorbell rings, the amplifier automatically adjusts the volume to almost a muted level. We enhance the system with an outdoor remote for infrared control or keypads located in protected areas."

The process of wiring and installing these outdoor speakers is much more advanced compared to the days of cutting holes in window screens.

"We utilize several techniques for pulling wire into and throughout the yard," Tamburri said. "We install a pipe, which runs from the media center to the yard. Then, depending on the yard, we have the irrigation crew lay sprinkler pipe so that we can run the wires through it."

"This design helps prevent damage in case the gardener hits it with his shovel. In the event that cement or stone is located where we need to pull the wires, we'll either run the wires underneath the cement or simply go around it. Sometimes we may run the wire in-between slabs, embedding it with silicon jell that hardens once it is exposed to the environment."

ADDITIONAL CHALLENGES

As manufacturers continued their research of the outdoor market, they found that single-channel speakers did not always provide a realistic solution.

"Often times there wasn't an ideal place to put a left and right cabinet," Francisco said.

To address this problem, manufacturers have begun putting more into one cabinet. SpeakerCraft recently added a new generation of WeatherCraft products designed to provide left and right information from a single cabinet, each containing two 5.25-inch speakers and two tweeters. Dealers can now determine if using one dual-channel speaker or two single-channel



To accommodate the large, elaborate yards of today, speakers must be placed throughout the area—not just under the eaves as was once sufficient.

speakers provides the best audio performance for a particular yard.

Even after determining what type of speaker to use in a particular yard, any speaker will have to produce big sound in order to cover today's large outdoor areas.

"People have become more elaborate with their backyards than ever before," said John Gilmore, of Elite Custom Audio/Video, based in Riverside, Calif. "Ten to 15 years ago, most people's pools were simply round or rectangular. Today, their pools feature elaborate waterfalls, several fountains and a wet bar to boot. And not only that, our customers are hosting even more extravagant parties. They feel that outdoor music significantly adds to the ambiance of the event."

So to accommodate the growth of the yard, like other manufacturers, SpeakerCraft expanded its Rox line to include a wide-coverage speaker, which essentially contains two woofer/tweeter pairs that fire in opposite directions.

"Many of our installations are completed in very large yards," said Chris Henry, of Theater & Electrical Solutions, based in Ann Arbor, Mich. "Not long ago, we had a job where we installed several outdoor speakers so that enough audio filled an entire basketball court, a fancy pool, a hot tub and an elongated patio. We rely on our manufacturers to provide us with innovative solutions to meet these needs."

Keith Marshall, vice president of Proficient Audio, said, "With an ordinary pair of speakers, if you move anywhere left or right of center or further away from the speakers, you'll lose critical information because you abandoned that sweet-spot listening zone. The answer as we saw it was to combine the left and right channels into a single speaker. No longer must stereo sound suffer in the outdoor environment, which has been as much a problem for the listener as the

installer. This new design is incredible."

WHOLE-HOUSE AUDIO

Outdoor music can be integrated into the whole-house audio system, enabling control from any room in the house.

"We usually install a control panel by the back and side doors, which leads into the yards," Henry said. "We do this because we get a lot of snow and ice during the winter. We use several multi-channel amplifiers to ensure enough power to the yard and home."

Another example is Gilmore's client, Tracy Murray, former professional basketball player.

"Tracy had a full-size basketball court in his backyard, which was 1,000 feet away from the home," Gilmore said. "We installed several speakers, a multi-channel and a control system that could be

operated from both indoors and out."

"Our challenge has always been to provide enough bass throughout large yards," Gilmore said. "Some of our clients, like Blink 182, are very discerning when it comes to high-quality music. For years now, dealers have been offering outdoor music to the retrofit market, and as trends go, many builders are now beginning to get into the act by offering outdoor music as an electronic upgrade."

"We offer homebuyers the option of outdoor music, along with an indoor distributed audio system and a home theater," said Rich Apgar, of AES2, based in San Diego. "We increase homebuyer awareness of electronic options by installing outdoor speakers into model homes. We have found that if we play music while homebuyers enter the courtyard and walk through the backyard, it heightens their level of enthusiasm for distributed audio. We were able to observe their excitement as we watched them walk through one of our premier model homes. ..."

With all of this said about the evolution of outdoor music, I have found one additional benefit. My neighbor and I continuously strive to outdo each other by hosting the best parties on the block. Now I'm not quite sure how it all started, nor do I really care, but the important thing is the last time he threw his hopeful shindig, I cranked-up my outdoor speakers, and all his guests came over to rock in my yard.

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That was then, this is now— The evolution of outdoor speakers

AT FIRST:

- Homeowners lugged their indoor speakers outdoors.
- Traditional cabinets were designed to survive harsh outdoor elements but offered poor sound quality.

LATER:

- Larger cabinets were designed to house two 5.25-inch woofers for better sound quality.
- Speakers were disguised as landscaping rocks to improve the aesthetics of the yard.
- Dual-channel cabinets were designed for yards that didn't offer ideal conditions for two speakers per area.

TODAY:

- Wide-coverage landscaping rock speakers for larger yards were developed.
- Outdoor sub woofers for a higher level of audio performance in any yard were developed.