

The Gift of Sound



Photo by Elizabeth Weinberg

In Los Angeles' thriving music industry, one company stands out.

Words by Jenna Gottlieb

Music is the lifeblood of Los Angeles. The entertainment capital of the world, the sprawling, sunshine-filled city is filled with record labels, historic studios, and emerging talent. It's also home to an impressive number of socially conscious entrepreneurs who have goals beyond spitting out the next Kendrick Lamar.

A leader of this movement is Bridget Hilton, whose company combines her passion for music and social change. Changing the world through music may sound like a lofty goal, but Hilton and her team are doing just that.

After a career in the music industry, Hilton started LSTN, an LA-based company that produces high-quality, design-forward headphones. In collaboration with the Starkey Hearing Foundation, LSTN provides a hearing aid to a person in need for every pair of headphones sold.

There are an estimated 360 million people around the world with hearing loss, and many live in developing countries without resources to treat it. LSTN has given the gift of sound to more than 20,000 people in countries like Kenya, China, Sri Lanka, Uganda, Peru, and the United States.

I recently caught up with Hilton to talk about the development of LSTN, her partnership with Starkey, and what it's like to be a socially conscious entrepreneur in LA.

Why did you create this company, and why headphones?

I started working in the music business as a teenager, and I knew from a young age that music would be my path in life. At 16, I got my first job at a music venue in Detroit, and I eventually worked for Universal Music Group. I spent nine years there and worked with some of my favorite musicians. But I wanted to do something on my own. I didn't want to work for "the man."

I hated that in the typical corporate setting there are only two weeks a year to get out of town—I wanted to travel more. Music has been my biggest passion and I thought that music and charity was a natural combination. We started the company to change the world through the power of music. We chose headphones because there was nothing fashionable or cool on the market at the time. Our saying is: Our product sounds good, looks good, does good.

What makes your headphones different?

We wanted to focus on wood products from reclaimed wood. It makes the headphones look vintage and super unique. That's actually one of my favorite parts of the company. Each pair of headphones and earbuds is unique and provides a complex tonal signature to ensure that music is heard the way it was meant to be heard—with full bass, crisp highs, and everything in between. We use bamboo, cherry, zebra, ebony, and walnut wood for the products.

What was the trigger for starting LSTN?

I saw a video on YouTube of a woman hearing for the first time. She was around the same age as me, and it really

inspired me. I couldn't imagine my life without music, and here was this woman who had never heard a single song. I did a ton of research and found that the Starkey Hearing Foundation was doing some great work. It's been such an incredible experience to be able to give the gift of hearing and play music for thousands of people who are experiencing it for the first time. Music is so important, and it shouldn't be something that's dependent on age, status, or location. I had to do something to help. My business partner, Joe Huff, and I would not have started the company without the hearing cause.

Tell us more about your work with the Starkey Hearing Foundation.

They travel around the world and help people hear. Since 1984, the foundation has given more than 1.8 million hearing aids to people around the world. When we started, I didn't have money to give them or anything to give them. I wanted a vehicle to help them help more people. We started in 2013 and have been working with Starkey ever since, traveling to Uganda, Sri Lanka, Peru, Mexico, Indonesia, Kenya, and all over the U.S. Based on the missions we have gone on, it's amazing to get to play music for kids who have never heard it before. It's really the best feeling in the world.

What was your first trip with Starkey like?

The travel part of this has definitely changed my life. The first trip we went on was in the summer of 2013, when we went to Peru. It's one thing to donate money, and that's great, but we wanted to be part of the experience, to see the look on people's faces when they hear for the first time.

What was the greatest challenge in starting LSTN?

Headphones is a pretty crowded market. Before we launched, we did our research and made a list of the top magazines, blogs, and newspapers, and we sent them the product to test. It was important that the sound quality was great and that the cause was the cherry on top. We needed to get it right and get people excited by the product first, then learn more about the cause.

What's it like to work in LA compared to other cities?

I was born and raised in Flint, Michigan, and I've been living in LA since 2007. This is a great city to work in, and not just because of the weather. There are so many people working on the social entrepreneurship side of business here. I'd say the majority of socially conscious businesses are located on the West Coast.

It's really hard to start a company and to maintain it; it can be pretty lonely. So it's great to have people who



have gone through similar experiences. We could not have done any of this without others helping us out. Our network is everything to us, and LA does not disappoint.

What's the biggest challenge of working in LA?

There's a lot of traffic. And it's an expensive place to live. We could have done this in a cheaper location where we wouldn't have to pay super-high rents with a high cost of living. But it's all worth it to work in this community.

What's the LA entrepreneur scene like?

In LA, it's a little different. Cities can be pretty divided. San Francisco is very tech-based, New York is known for finance and media, and so on. In LA, we have the entertainment industry in our backyard. If we wanted to meet with Universal or Warner Bros., they're in the neighborhood.

And it's not only the music industry, but movies, television, comedy, art, and fashion. LA is such a creative city. When you meet someone new, it's typically, "I work in movies or music, art, I'm a writer..." There are so many interesting people here whom we get to meet. I see a certain motivation for creative aspirations and causes that I haven't seen in other cities.

Is it important to be involved in local community-building initiatives?

We have done LA-based events at USC, for example, where we give local kids hearing aids. It's important to give back locally. We have also hosted events for friends and colleagues who are local entrepreneurs. During those events, it's really a time to reflect on what's working and what isn't working. We're pretty involved in the local entrepreneur scene. It's important to talk and network with other LA-based businesses.

What advice do you have for people looking to start a business in LA?

Start small and test before you go big. That's what we did. A lot of people want to start something but never do because they think it's too hard. People always get held up in the beginning. But there's something to seeing your idea grow and getting excited every day working on something that you're passionate about. I've learned more in the last three years than I learned since I started working.

Also, don't be afraid to fail. Just get started. And be authentic. Having a cause you believe in is good for business, good for company morale, and good for personal reasons. □



All photos courtesy of LSTN.

Alex Olson



C. Conversations

On being a Los Angeles expat in New York.

Interview by Sachin Bhola
Photography by Noah Kalina