

## MEMORIAM:

# Charles A. Steinberg, 1934-2024

BY PETER HAMMAR, AMPEX HISTORIAN AND SMPTE FELLOW

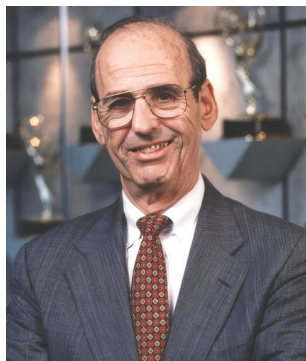
With the death of Charles A. Steinberg in March of 2024, the professional video industry lost one of its legendary pioneers. Charlie Steinberg was born in 1934 in South Brooklyn, New York, earning an MSEE degree from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). In 1955, he joined Ampex Corporation in Redwood City, California, as a design engineer. In 1956, after Ampex unveiled the world's first practical videotape recorder, the VR-1000, Steinberg became interested in video, beginning his life's work designing and managing the development of a wide range of television-related technologies.

In 1972, he was named Ampex executive vice president, a position he held until 1986 when he was appointed president and CEO of Ampex. In 1988, after a leveraged buyout, he left Ampex to join Sony Electronics Broadcast and Professional Co. as president, where he oversaw the development and sales of devices for capturing, recording, editing, storing, and displaying high-definition video. After his retirement in 1999, he served as a consultant to several venture capital companies.

Steinberg's close working relationship with American and international television network executives played an important role in technical advances at Ampex and later at Sony, notably in improved sports coverage. Along with handheld color cameras, the Ampex HS-100 disc-based slow-motion/stop-action device, ready in time for the 1968 Mexico City Summer Olympic Games, significantly improved the sports viewing experience. Steinberg also helped promote the development of Ampex digital video effects, first used at the 1980 Lake Placid Winter Olympic Games.

At home, Steinberg maintained a friendly working relationship with a wide variety of Ampex colleagues. Bob Wilson, who worked with Steinberg, said, "Charlie was a mentor to me and so many others of us at Ampex, in a friendly way always challenging us to reach for 'excellence,' reminding us of the 'EX' in the Ampex name. He was naturally curious about new ideas, technologies, and cultures. He was one of the most positive influences in my business and personal life and remained a friend even years after I left Ampex, always keenly interested in how his old Ampex friends were doing."

As a corporate manager, Steinberg was known for coping well with higher-level strategic decisions with which he disagreed but was compelled to execute. In 1973, facing a serious financial crisis, the Ampex Board ordered the shutdown of all development and production of the



company's industrial one-inch helical-scan videotape recorders, a decision with which Steinberg initially agreed. However, a small video team in Redwood City quietly ignored the shut-down order after they found the one-inch industrial helical format, "Ampex Type A," could, in fact, record excellent-quality, high-band video and do perfect slo-mo/stop-action playback, and with seamless tape interchange—the problems with the format mostly centered around a serious playback tracking problem and a poor tape transport.

Without permission, the small team created what became Ampex Automatic Scan Tracking or AST, along with improved electronics and a more stable, robust transport. After finally being told about his engineers' secret skunkworks project, Steinberg recognized the many benefits of this new "disruptive" technology. Despite the threat to the company's longstanding quad VTR and slo-mo "cash cows," he joined the group in ignoring the board's order. He encouraged their work on what became the pioneering Ampex VPR-1 one-inch helical-scan VTR, introduced at the 1976 National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) Convention. The "Ampex Type A" format, combined with "Sony Type S," became the "SMPTE Type C" industry VTR standard.

Steinberg's many contributions to the state of the video art were recognized by a number of organizations. SMPTE named him a Fellow and presented him with the SMPTE Presidential Proclamation Award while making him a SMPTE Honorary Member, the society's highest accolade. In 1999, he received the Charles F. Jenkins Lifetime Achievement Emmy® Award, presented in recognition of his contributions to electronic technology during his career at Ampex and Sony. He received a second Emmy for his work in producing and broadcasting the first four National Football League (NFL) games in high-definition television and a third Emmy for his work at the 27th Olympic Games in Australia.

The NAB presented Steinberg with its Lifetime Achievement Award in 1999, and he received another from the Association of Imaging Technology and Sound (ITS). He served on the American Film Institute's Board of Trustees and on the board of the Vision Fund, a charitable organization dedicated to improving the lives of the visually impaired.

Steinberg died at 89 at his home in Woodside, CA.

DOI: 10.5594/JMI.2024/FONH8426  
Date of publication: 1 October 2024