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A recordist discusses his career path to a life in sound, his tastes and the wearing of many hats.



Sound has always been part of my life. My father used to be a music album collector and music was continuously on in my house and I used to listen to it without paying too much attention until the day, when I was 8, when he put Very 'eavy... Very Humble on by Uriah Heep and I was struck by its sound. My family set up a business in industrial electronic engineering from scratch and as a teenager there was while when I was interested in building stereo amplifiers and speakers so I could enjoy the experience of listening to music more. This was followed by playing guitar and singing in pop and rock bands in my hometown area.

During school time I used to work in the afternoons doing various jobs and helping out my parents and friends with their businesses and eventually I found it all quite stressful. I wanted to find a direction in my life in which I

could merge all my interests and skills in just one job. I decided that being a sound engineer was the solution; in my naivety I thought it would be less stressful...

I spent all my weekends assisting and watching engineers working in local recording studios around my city of Florence. Once I was out of school, I was pretty much ready to move to LA with the band I was in at the time but I got a call from Italian independent record label Sonica and joined it instead to work with the bands they were producing. It turned to be a good choice and it was where the foundation of my career was laid. I worked in studios as an assistant and toured around Europe as a sound recordist getting my hands on the dying 2-inch analogue and digital tapes and the new DAWs. There was even a period when I worked in the family business as a cabling engineer wiring medical equipment during the day and worked in the studio during the night.

I had to change and due to the collapse of the independent music industry in Italy I moved to Rome to join the film industry. My first job was in video production as a camera and editor assistant where sound wasn't considered at all and the images were the centre of the universe. I learnt the basics of film editing and all the requests that an editor of images needs to satisfy but then one day the production was desperate for a sound recordist on location. Knowing my background the manager told me I had the chance to demonstrate if I was a capable sound guy. Subsequently I left the editing rooms to become part of the sound department. My move from Italy to England was my way of increasing my chances of succeeding in sound.

I got interested in location sound after the first time I used a 1/4-inch Nagra recorder in around 2000. Coming from my experiences with DAT portable recorders, I wasn't afraid of handling reels and it sounded much better than DAT and was without the hassle of the incompatibility between different brands of DAT player. My first experiments and mic placements focused on natural sounds and atmos and were on Nagra reels and by contrast I found using DAT so frustrating that I thought I'd much rather use a computer instead. In fact I started bringing my computer with me on every job — it was the first version of Nuendo running on a PC and I never had any big issues on location and I used it for film and location recordings and for long concert multitrack recordings.

I tried Pro Tools a few times for the same applications with the view to using a 'standard' system but I never found it as reliable.

I did a few jobs where I was given complete freedom to get the best descriptive sounds for documentaries and films and I focused on experimenting and using 'non standard' mics to get the results. I bought a pair of DPA4060, which seemed like complete madness at the



I worked as one of the sound supervisors on the last Derren Brown show -- Hero at 30000ft -- which was broadcast in the UK on Channel 4 in September. The approach was documentary-like with just a few things set as a rough guide to drive the story and where anything could be changed or modified while filming.

We first filmed a scene where the 'contributor' had to run away from an incoming train while he was chained to the rails and it just got more challenging, particularly in the last sequence which involved the contributor trying to land a plane. This was filmed in a flight simulator at CTC aviation group in Southampton and the main challenge here was that the flight simulator doesn't communicate with the external world. It is a £7bn self-contained box completely isolated, electrically and mechanically, and suspended on moving hydraulic suspensions to simulate the flight.

The radio transmission option wasn't possible because it was impossible to get the signal out -- surrounded by computers it's electrically screened and earthed. My only way to get signal out was on cable and with the help of the simulator's engineers we spent the whole morning finding a hole for the wires and the only existing one was for power cables and that meant electromagnetic buzz. I did manage to use radio mics inside the flight simulator for dialogues, dialogues with backup plant mics, atmos sound, and alarm sounds coming from several areas inside.

time, and they are still with me. I use them for pretty much everything, from dialogues as a lavalier mic, to atmos tracks to drums overheads as a stereo configuration, and I'm glad they are now so fashionable that clients specifically request them.

The release of the first hard disk portable recorders put me back on track with more standard jobs as I could finally get decent sound with my kind of approach on a portable version. I got interested in multichannel recordings when I got my first version of Nuendo and that gave me the chance to get away from boring mono and 'not complete stimulus' stereo and I think multichannel is the present tense for sound. The mic set ups were pretty unsuitable for location film/documentary recording, where you need to be fast and ready to record with no-time to setup huge arrays. The Ambisonic option was too expensive for me at that time and I always preferred wider arrays to single spot mic stereo techniques, so I adopted that approach to face multichannel mic placement. For several years now I'm using my own multichannel mic technique called Bluround. It's a small, easy to set up stereo and mono compatible mic array that I've used on documentaries (which it was developed for), films atmos tracks, and classical music.

My arsenal for field and location recording is a blend of several mics and recorders and for me it's all about having things to help me out to get the results I want. I've got several Oktava MK012s to use on dialogues and atmos tracks, DPA4060 as a lapel and atmos tracks, Sennheiser MKH4, Sanken COS11 and Tram TR50. My main mic set up for dialogues is an Oktava MK012 with supercardioid capsule mounted on K-tek boom poles. It was a bit painful at the beginning because the internal preamp circuitry had a very old design and wasn't designed for location recordings. I wrote to them describing my modifications and giving suggestions for use in critical environments and after few emails they came out with new circuitry and the new mic line has been on the market for a couple of years now. I replaced all the mics I have with the new boards and bought new mics as well, and they are very usable for field recording.

I've got a pair of AKG414 that I use mainly for music recordings, a Rode shotgun mic, four contact mics that I've made myself, a couple of telephone pickups and a couple of Acquarian hydrophones.

A vital thing, in my opinion, is having good windshields, like Rycotes, and being prepared to invest in them -- then you can think about the mic. Initially I bought cheap windshields to save some money but I got so frustrated with them ruining the sound quality and still not providing good wind protection that a good windshield is now at the top of my equipment priority list.



For recorders I've got an Edirol R4-Pro. My dream machine is the Sound Devices 788T, which I used on a job and loved, but I still cannot afford it. I've also got a Zoom H4n that I use for stealth recordings and just to always have something with me. My laptop based



The next scene was filmed outside in the same hangar where Derren Brown and the contributor talked about the experience in a 'dreamy' setting. The hangar houses three flight simulators that are active continuously and can't be switched off. The ambient noise level is approximately 80dB and not very conducive to dialogues. I told production that if the actors were to whisper, then the dialogue audio would be completely lost.

There was also a third location in an empty attached hangar where friends and family watched the scene projected on a wall and I had to capture their reactions. Production had already planned to get two assistants in to help me out but I was pretty sure I wouldn't have the time on the day to follow around and instruct people so I asked instead for two proper sound recordists: Joao Valle and Rob Branch. We formed a team where we could work independently to speed things up and to be able to face and sort out changes that were planned to happen continuously.

On the day everything was pretty smooth and relaxed, despite the pressure. We had to set up a proper TV studio in one of the adjacent rooms where my main recording device was also set up. The main device was a software-based 12-track Boom recorder from Vosgames backed up on Edirol R4Pro. Both were slaved and timecode synced with the camera dept. Signal coming down cables from the simulator were two radio mics (Audio Ltd 2020 with Sanken COS11 capsule), two plant mics as

recording software is Nuendo (for postproduction, sound library management and sound design) and Boom Recorder, which I find brilliant for sound for video applications. I use Propellerheads Reason for sound design when I need samplers and synths to play with and modify my recorded sounds. I use Focusrite Octopre preamp strips and an M-Audio Profire Lightbridge. I have never bought a premade cable and make them all myself using golden pin connectors. My background means my soldering is many times better than any commercially available cable out there.

I usually get work by word of mouth. Sending CVs or calling around doesn't work too well for a 'non-English first language' guy in an area where being English is vital as a first approach. I have to thank amazing sound recordist George McMillan for his help in pushing me into the UK sound business. He also introduced me to my diary service (Stella's Diary) that I'm very happy with. She's doing an amazing job and since I joined her I've been received so well by the other guys that I've made friends and the interchange between us is amazing because we can talk about jobs, clients, fees, and technicalities without any feeling of competition.

The thing I love about my work is that I can make images come to life by introducing the sound dimension and it's a feeling that cannot be achieved by using descriptive images alone. Sound can create stimulating images in everyone's head and give new emotional experiences. That's what I try to accomplish with my recordings, sound design and soundscapes.



I don't use much postprocessing on my sounds. I'm convinced that every sound I need is somewhere out there in the world and no matter how weird it is, it's just a matter of finding it and recording it properly. Once it is recorded it will be there forever for me and everyone, archived and catalogued. I try to record as much as I can because every sound is part of the actual environment and it won't be the same in an hour's time or tomorrow. I'm never completely happy with anything I've done but that keeps me trying harder to get better results and it also means that I continue to learn. It's another reason why I'm not really specialised in just one field and try to wear different hats.

However, I believe we are living in a world where human beings are losing the sense and the pleasure of listening -- what we are often getting today is a loud flat line of noise. This is mirrored in the professional world where is pretty common today to think that there's no need for good 'descriptive' sound, and to regard sound engineers just as button pushers who don't understand the script or have no intention of adding something that the audience might be able to get.

It is more and more common today to deal with young producers who don't get why a sound guy asks for the money he does when there's no budget for sound. They don't get that the equipment we bring is more expensive than today's camera equipment, raising production insurances; they don't get that the equipment we carry on our shoulder is heavier than a

backup, and various plant mics to get the other non-dialogue sounds, using a blend of Sanken COS11 and DPA4060. I recorded Derren Brown with another radio mic and the crowd reaction came from a couple of Sennheiser 416s.



Filming hadn't planned to have a break between scenes, so we needed a proper crew to follow the actors moving between the locations. Joao was involved in giving sound to the camera following the action out of the simulator, recording straight into it through an SQN mixer and separate into a timecode locked 4-track Sound Devices recorder. Rob was involved in backing me and Joao during the filming and was a key part during the set up. Preamps were SQN and a Sound device 788T was used as a spare backup.

The 'dream' sequence was changed several times on the day due to the very noisy environment that caused huge issues. It was decided to film just outside of the simulator after waiting for the contributor to come out. In this way the loud background noise was put into context and was justified with the shot allowing the story to be told properly.

The biggest issue we had was the internal communication wiring in the simulator. This was a two-way system closed circuit headset to permit communicate between the crew in the simulator and the 'control tower', which

camera and that when they cut down on assistants we need to rest sometimes if only because the osteopath is so expensive. They don't get that the microphone is the most important thing in the sound chain yet they cut out boom operators from the budget. They don't get that we are an important part in helping them to sell their product to their paying customers.



was located in another room in the hangar. We needed to get into this in some way -- to split it and record it -- but it took us hours to sort it out. The two-way systems had headphones and a mic connected with two different types of connector. The headphone used a standard mono plug, while the mic had a bantam-like plug connector. None of the engineers knew the internal wiring and they also only had the old version of that connector, not the new, slightly different one. Time passed, we were about to start filming, everyone was waiting and the production people were continuously telling me that they couldn't hear the comms.

We dismantled the cables and re-wired to connect the 'bantam' plug to XLR but it didn't work. We tried all the wiring options with no luck. In the end I had a flash of inspiration and attached the 'bantam' directly to the XLR without detaching it and kept them in place and together by wrapping the two connectors with tight bare copper wires and soldering as best we could.

Everyone screamed 'got some sound!' and we rushed back to our places and pressed Record. There were no issues with this at all in the end and it's strange that the audio from this communication system, which I had thought was a secondary thing, eventually become the main sound of the scene.

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