

THE FINAL MIX: STRATEGIES & TIPS TO ACHIEVE GREAT MOVIE SOUND

Prepared by Cleve Landsberg, with Steve Maslow and Mark Mangini

Prep and Principal Photography

- **Calling “CUT” too soon:** Allow any sound event occurring during filming or wild track recording to finish completely before yelling cut. Most wild tracks are ruined because the beginnings and ends are talked over during their recording. The beginnings and ends of sounds are usually the defining characteristics of the sound and are the hardest to get clean.
- **Sound pre-production:** Arrange a meeting of the supervising sound editor, the production mixer and the film editor/first assistant and coordinate the proper technical adherence to post-production specs for sound recording and proper digitization of sound for editing. Compatibility is critical, and digital file format standards do not exist yet.
- **Periodic review:** If possible, listen to the production sound track after the first day of shooting so that potential problems may be caught early. Arrange for periodic sound dailies review in a controlled and aligned mix environment to check questionable material for possible on-set re-recording or ADR and for general quality control.
- **Get it right in production:** Make sound part of your priorities. Give the production sound team time to place microphones, participate in the scouting of locations where possible, and work with costumers and set dressers. You will never know how good the sound of a film could have been after you lost your first and best chance. ADR is a tool, not a panacea. Do not use it as a crutch. There is no substitute for great production sound in dialogue and sound effects.
- **Large crowds:** If your shoot involves large crowds, make arrangements to record them. These are, by far, the hardest sounds to cheat or duplicate in post. Twelve men and women in a walla group on the ADR stage cannot do justice to every situation. These sounds can become critical in unique cases such as political rallies, Romans in the coliseum, or places where foreign languages are spoken.
- **Unique sounds:** Coordinate with the sound department re. the use and release of hard to find or unusual sounding props, vehicles, and locations. If your production is spending thousands to rent a one of a kind Sherman tank, aircraft carrier, exotic car, musical instrument, etc., give your sound team an opportunity to record it as a wild sound effect. This will give your editors a proper recording of something that only a mediocre example of exists in the sound effects library. It is very common to re-rent

these things in post to get a proper recording that fits the specific film. Thusly, clean “room tone” is also important.

- **Music playback:** If music is to be played back on set, allocate time to create a technically correct playback master that adheres to some standard or playback reference (i.e. SMPTE time code, etc.).
- **Live music:** If live music is to be used on camera, preferably shoot the master with the band playing live in the location and use the select take as your sync playback master for all subsequent shots. The track will then have the acoustics of the location and the energy of the musicians interacting in a real performance.
- **ADR on set:** When the talent wraps their last shot and before they are excused from set, have a list of problematic dialog and missing expository material prepared for recording at location. First, the actor is still in character and more able to provide an accurate reproduction of their performance (something that is much more difficult with inexperienced actors in an ADR stage environment). Second, you have the opportunity to make these recordings in a better acoustic environment. This is much harder to approximate in post – digital reverbs and EQ notwithstanding. Third, they are still on payroll, which may save some money down the road.
- **Multi-channel production sound recording:** It is not necessarily better. In most cases, one person is talking at a time for obvious reasons. One microphone, properly boomed, can capture most of the dialog accurately. There are many exceptions, of course. For example, ensemble pieces shot with multiple cameras where critical dialogue is happening across a large geographic space precludes efficient booming. Sound recorded with a boom mic is generally preferable to using a body mic. Multiple source feeds for on-set TV, movie, live bands, etc. necessitate multi-channel recording for post synchronization.
- **Production sound gear & mixing:** Before starting photography, the production mixer should check his equipment with an (studio) engineer to be sure that it meets specs and any possibility of incorrect gain structure is rectified. No EQ should be used during filming, and mic roll-offs should be avoided (nothing over 90 cycles). Before previews, the picture editor and a projection engineer go over the theatre system with a fine tooth comb. The very least should be done for sound before shooting begins.

Post-Production

- **Communicate:** Sound has no codified language. Communicate in whatever vernacular works for you. There are no rules. To communicate the sound you hear in your minds ear, describe it with the things you know best. Speak musically, if need be, in terms of rhythm, tempo, or voicing. Speak graphically in terms of color, mood, form and shape. Speak emotionally and talk about how you want a scene to feel, or not feel. But most importantly, find ways to communicate effectively to your post-production sound team. Work on your sonic vocabulary.

- **Design and review sessions:** Build time into your schedules to work with the sound team. Sound design and mix review sessions can make a difference to the success of your sound track.
- **Sound design and music:** Create communication between your Sound Designer and Composer regarding placement, timbre, frequency, mood and feel of a sequence. Many a train wreck at the mix has been avoided when you interact this way and work in harmony to achieve the desired result. One often will cede dominance to the other based on passion for a given sequence or creative interpretation heretofore not considered.
- **Looping integration:** The process of replacing a production dialogue line at the ADR studio with an actor again speaking and recording a particular dialogue line is relatively simple, but also problematic. The actor is often “not into it,” can’t do it, and will even make up excuses. Also the ADR mixer works in an isolated environment, which does not represent the original. Occasionally, the director is “not into it,” and the guidance for actor and ADR mixer is not all it should be. Remember, at the final mix the re-recording mixer receives that particular ADR dialogue with no noise associated with what the original dialogue had. Digital reverbs and EQ can’t do it all.
- **Know the limits:** Be aware of your post production spending capacity. Use it wisely for your goals. Too much micromanagement can be very ineffective. Choose the emphasis for sound requirements carefully to get the most mileage in quality. Every movie has its own time and money limits. Protect against coming up short on results at the end of the road.
- **Be decisive in post sound:** If you don’t know what you want, allow your sound team to help find it for you.
- **Genres:** Sound is perceived emotionally, as well as intellectually. Each genre, such as comedy, action or drama, demands its own approach and sound sensibilities. Tap into the re-recording mixer’s well of experience as a vital resource; and, then, give clarity to the director guidance.
- **Digital elixir:** Digital technology is not a substitute for common sense quality in every phase of the production and post process. It is a tool that enhances what we can do, but is not the answer to every problem. Incorrectly used, digital can lead to disaster like anything else. Good decisions in a timely manner will always help you get the best sound.

Cleve Landsberg is a Producer and Unit Production Manager. Steve Maslow is a Re-recording Mixer and 3-time Oscar winner. Mark Mangini is a Supervising Sound Editor and 3-time Oscar nominee.