

# Sounds Good: by Colin Frizell an Intro

**Daniel Pellerin** -- you may not have heard his name, but you have certainly heard his work. He's the director of Mixing Services for Independent Features at Deluxe Laboratories. Daniel has worked on Canadian films from Peter Lynch's *Project Grizzly* to Atom Egoyan's *The Sweet Hereafter*, which won him a Genie for Best Overall Sound. In fact, Daniel has worked on all of Egoyan's films including *Felicia's Journey*, which, alongside Istvan Szabo's *Sunshine*, saw him competing against himself for another Genie. Daniel is part of a team that is helping Canadian films to be heard clearly around the Globe.

It is obvious when talking to Daniel that he has a great passion for his work, along with a great knowledge of it and concern for it. That is why he took time off from Mary Harron's *American Psycho* to talk to me about the importance of sound in film.

**Colin Frizell:** How can you get the most out of your soundtrack on an independent's budget?

**Daniel Pellerin:** To maximize your sound budget, begin by investing properly on the recording of your production. Every experienced director would agree that it is essential to obtain the services of a dependable sound recordist. This

assures that you are able to faithfully capture the performances on the day without fear of it being unusable at the point of post-production. Even if you are paying \$100, \$200 or even more on the day, it is well worth the assurance of knowing that the sound you are capturing with the images will not have to be replaced because the recordings are too poor in quality. This is money well spent because if you have a solid dialogue track, it becomes the backbone of your film.

What happens with bad sound in independent film, is that you end up trying to fix a lot of the dialogue which could and should have easily been picked up on the set while you are shooting the picture. Why save \$200, \$300, even \$400 dollars a day,

when you end up paying \$3000, \$4000, per character for dialogue replacement down the road? The experienced directors that we work with record alternates while the camera is rolling or between takes at the same location, so if there is something wrong with the chosen take, the sound can easily be replaced at the dialogue edit stage. Sound done properly on the set on the day of shooting will save you time, money and frustration.

Essential elements to your post-production and its budgetary requirements are the music and effects. Clearly, music and effects have a crucial role to play in movie making. Not music over effects or effects over music -- they should go hand in hand. When your track is well designed, music shouldn't need to push your effects to really do something effectively and vice versa. Both music and effects should weave and mesh in layers that complement each other as well as the story being told or the emotions being explored. Be it from the mind or the heart/soul, these elements in sound can add such rich texture to the picture they are complementing, exposing internal complex elements within a story impossible for the image alone to divulge.

[The soundscape] can even go

# with **Daniel Pellerin**

## **view**

against the visuals and narrative, since you might want to express something counter to them at the time. This is where sound becomes very interesting. It is not imperative for sound to follow the picture and the words within the narrative blindly, automatically. If this moment is representing something that's uncomfortable or that's not clear in the narrative or dialogue it can be interesting if the sound is doing something exactly to the contrary of what is being shown and said. For example, there is a scene between two people who are laughing and seem very friendly and open on a sunny day. The birds are very chirpy, children [can be heard] playing in the background, but there is another element, like a pile driver...or perhaps something in the soundtrack that is even more sinister, to prelude something that is about to happen or remind us of something that might have been in a previous part of the story. This can be interesting because you become slightly unsettled, though everything seems to be very clean cut and clear in the visuals, the sound design renders something quite different. Much of the effect of this juxtaposition depends on how it is handled at the time of the mix. It can add energy to the flow of your film or take away ener-

gy. Sound becomes a very, very effective tool to this end. It is no longer an adjunct to the picture and to the narrative, it becomes something that works against it, yet very much integral to those two elements.

Or, if you integrate sound elements to the images, in conjunction with the ideas being projected on the screen, it can bring poetic focus to the material, lifting it off the screen and infusing it with deeper meaning. The overall effect is very liberating. It can add so much to the telling of the story, enrich the psychological profile of the characters within that story, and engage the audience on a level that would be impossible without the use of sound. Sound does not necessarily have to reflect what is in front of us on the screen. When it is supporting the narrative it does this, and it does it well, without drawing attention to itself. It can be what is in your mind, as well as what you are feeling. If you remove the dialogue and just listen to the soundtrack with the visuals, you could tell very, very clearly what's going on in the story, as well as what occurs "inside" the story, "beyond" the story line. It has to be so complementary in certain ways that you can get immersed in the mood/atmosphere of the scene without ever hearing the words or

understanding the meaning of what they're saying.

The superb Hungarian director Istvan Szabó once told me while we were in the middle of mixing his intimate epic *Sunshine* that there is one thing that separates filmmaking from all the other art forms that it so eagerly borrows from (i.e. photography, painting, theatre, music, etc.). It is the human face in close-up on the screen, continuously changing. You are always compelled to look at the face, because that is what the art of film making embraces, unique and vital: the human face in flux, expressing inner emotions and thoughts. A successful soundtrack will only add to the value of this experience, in emotional depth and in helping us understand the unseen details of the narrative/story, without drawing any unnecessary attention to itself. Like a clear glass cool clean water offered to the audience, you see right through it and it refreshes you when you drink it in.

**CF:** What is the best, cost effective way for a small independent filmmaker to get good sound?

**DP:** Get a really good recordist who's used to working on smaller budgets. Pay them like you would pay a cinematographer, like you'd pay an actor. Not the same amount,

## an Interview with **Daniel Pellerin** cont.

but you have to consider what it costs to get the sound on the set properly. If you get a great documentary sound recordist who is trying to get into feature film or episodic that doesn't have a portfolio of drama, that would be the ideal person because they're great at taking sound right off the cuff on virtually everything they shoot. They're used to smaller budgets and there are a lot of them out in the field who do that really well.

Everyone wants to shoot on film and finish on film. But digital video is coming to fill a void that 16mm film can no longer cover. A lot of young filmmakers, especially in Europe, are shooting drama and documentaries on digital video. When High Definition comes in, they're going to be able to transfer that wholesale. Within the next couple of years you'll be able to project that digital picture onto the screen and it'll be very difficult to justify having a mono degraded sound track. A digital soundtrack is the same quality as the highest American film release. I don't mean it will have the same amount of sound effects or production values, but it will have the same playback quality in a large theatre.

**CF:** What about cost effective post sound?

**DP:** Get someone who's sympathetic to the project and very creative. Someone who will make good creative decisions on the limited budget that you have... You have to have a soundtrack that's layered and that's good quality, regardless of what format you're going to finish it on. Plan it out so you know what you want as a soundtrack. Have it visualized in your mind so you can let the person who's working on it know where you stand on the soundtrack. Participate in that whole process. Be present for everything in that process and always be prepared when you get to the next stage of your post-production. Don't go to a mixing theatre not knowing exactly what you're going in with -- always be making the decision before you arrive at the next stage of post-production. The best directors do that. They're the most organized. Once you get to that stage you can change your mind, but it costs you money to change your mind. Always have options in mind if you're not sure. Have the option well in hand at the time you get to the final stage. You can try one thing very quickly, try the other and make your mind up at that point. That's not a sin, it's done even by the best directors, but be prepared with it. Don't stop the process or delay the process and come back and do something that you could have done at that point. Mixing is very immediate, it has to be right off the cuff all the time.

If your sound is unusable when you get to the mixing stage, it's too late. If it's not too late then it's going

to be costing you more. Make sure the performance is what you want. Make sure that your music, story points and effects are all in the right position. That everything feels right. That everything is at the quality you want it to be. Get as much advice as you can before jumping into a stage you are not sure about. Advice is usually free of charge, mistakes are costly in post-production.

Deluxe offers special student rates and young filmmaker rates, where we will do things off hours, in our own time with the junior mixers. You mix with them and we (the senior mixers) supervise. For a very low rate you end up getting the highest quality for the budget that you have. We work with independents all the time and make deals according to their needs. You can talk to any of the salesmen there. They'll set something up for you in a reasonable amount of time.

**CF:** What advice would you offer to a young filmmaker?

**DP:** Don't follow anyone else when it comes to your vision. Follow everything that you truly believe. Defiantly do it your own way. Don't ever think that because you're doing it differently that it won't be accepted. The more individualistic, the more it has vision, the more people want to see it. Follow it all the way through and you'll never be dissatisfied, you'll always be happy in the end. And take everyone else's advice with a grain of salt. Do what you think you should be doing. If someone's trying to get you to change your mind don't, or you'll be very unhappy and you'll never be satisfied.