

# What I learned working on a Hollywood movie.

—Jay Rose, C.A.S. 10/10/05

I spent the summer of 2005 as sound designer on *Two Weeks*, a comedy / drama starring two-time Oscar winner Sally Field<sup>1</sup>. Since I normally do audio post for spots and TV documentaries, this was a learning experience... not only because theatrical film tracks are bigger, but also because they do things *differently* in Hollywood.

This is a companion to my *Audio Solutions* column for January, 2006, available at DV.com. Read that first, to get the big picture. Then you can add these bullet points... they're tips and important concepts I couldn't fit in a 2 1/2 page column.

## Before, and early into, the shoot

- Define the audio workflow before they start shooting. Ideally, editorial should be ingesting production sound as files, not redigitizing, and passing the project to you as OMF or AAF with media. If they do it this way, you should be able to use that material instead of having to conform. Have them send you test files early in the game.
- Have the production mixer send you copies of a few takes during the first couple of days of shooting. And seriously listen to them. If there are noise problems—there were, on this film, because of multiple fans in the Sony CineAlta camera—try to convince the producer and director to be very careful with sound. They probably won't, so at least warn them that the dialog will be compromised.

While you're at it, find out what equipment they're using,—particularly the mics and radios. A different mic choice might cost a few bucks extra now, but make solving problems a lot cheaper later.

- Don't buy expensive new gear or software for an important project, unless you've got time to learn it—and work out any bugs—before the gig.
- Do buy a pair of big FireWire hard drives for the movie. They're cheap. Use one as a daily backup while you're working. When you're ready to mix, turn the backup into a clone of your main drive: bring one to the mix, and keep the other in your office for safety.

## Early in the editing process

- Have a good relationship with the director, and get a few progressive versions of the edit before picture is nominally finished. Discuss characters and story

flow, as well as what the sound is going to be like. You'll understand the scenes better.

- Make sure the director understands that you know this movie isn't about the soundtrack, no matter how good a track you deliver. But never be afraid to suggest ideas for the track that might help make the movie. Understand the difference between a cute or interesting sound trick, and one that advances the story or characters.
- Try to have a good relationship with the producer. Set budget parameters early, even before you agree to take on the picture. Make sure you can live with the budget.
- Don't ever assume just because two systems use the same file format, that they can actually talk to each other. Test compatibility between programs or facilities long before you'll need to use them, using actual picture and interchange files. Make sure they open *and sync properly*. 'Seamless interchange' often means 'seems less than interchange'.
- If you're mixing at another facility—which is a foregone conclusion, in most cases—ask the re-recording mixer to evaluate your track layouts and editing style during one of the early compatibility tests.

## As you're building the track

- Avoid doing any real work until the picture lock. Okay, stop laughing. You'll invariably have to do temp mixes before the lock, and "lock" is a subjective term, anyway: the director isn't going to want to stop editing, ever.
- Since you can't count on a picture lock, work so that sections can be easily slid or lifted when scenes move... and make sure they're telling you which scenes are likely to go away or have major changes, so you don't waste time on them.
- The camera log is your best friend, if you're doing anything other than adhering strictly to the tracks in the NLE cut. In fact, assume you're going to be modifying those tracks—that's one of the reasons you're on the picture. It isn't until after the picture is mostly in shape that the director will be concentrating on nuances of dialog, asking for alternative readings, or relying on you to use alternate takes to minimize ADR.

- The sound log is your even better friend, particularly if there are multiple tracks. The assistant editor is *really*

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<sup>1</sup> Other credits at the end of this piece.

your best friend: this person knows or can find out every detail of the cut.

- Document everything. Note sources, save effects settings. Keep track of any music used that isn't part of the original score: timecode start, duration, details of writer and publisher; you'll need this for the cue sheet. Make sure all the necessary rights can be cleared... not just for the music, but also for anything that's ever been a part of other media, including radio and TV clips, or pieces of existing soundtracks.
- Don't ignore foley and other small effects. This is where low-budget film tracks frequently fail. You need more than a few stock background tracks to fill a movie.
- Learn your software's keyboard shortcuts, or even better, use software that lets you define your own shortcuts and macros for frequent operations. Hitting a key instead of pulling down a menu item might only save a few seconds... but multiply that by the thousands of repetitive things you'll have to do in a 90-minute film.

In other words, your fingers can save you time. That's why we call it digital editing... (joke).

### When you mix

- If you're mixing the film yourself, get the dialog premix out of the way, then Stop! Give yourself a couple of days to get perspective on the overall track, before trying to mix it together.
- If you're mixing by yourself, keep a sense of perspective. That foley sequence you carefully built, and are so proud of, isn't as important as dialog. Neither is the music, in almost every case.
- If you're going to another facility, prepare a hard drive with *everything*: source tracks, work parts, preliminary mixes, notes, sound logs if they were supplied as files, contact information. Then make a clone of that drive to leave in your office as safety.
- If you're mixing at a facility in another city, and schedule allows, ship the drive instead of carrying it on an airplane. Do not pack the drive in checked luggage: x-rays used on luggage can destroy your data. As of this writing, expert opinion is that the belt scanners at airport security lines are benign and won't affect a hard drive, and screeners don't object to you hand-carrying a drive... but you might want to check anyway.
- If your backup drive is more than an hour or so away from the mix facility, make a backup of the tracks you'll be mixing on data DVDs, and bring them

as well. Hard drives can fail or get mysteriously zapped. DVDs are more robust.

### A general note

You can learn a lot by working on a movie, particularly if you're working with others. And they might learn some things from you. It's always good karma—and usually excellent politics—to acknowledge when you've learned something, and thank the teacher.

### About the movie

*Two Weeks* is a comedy/drama starring two-time Academy Award winner Sally Field (*Mrs. Doubtfire*, *Steel Magnolias*), Ben Chaplin (*Murder by Numbers*, *The Truth About Cats and Dogs*), Clea DuVall (*The Grudge*, HBO's *Carnivale*), Julianne Nicholson (*Little Black Book*, *Kinsey*), and Tom Cavanaugh (NBC's *Ed*). Writer-director Steve Stockman is a transplanted Bostonian; we continued working together after he moved to L.A. fifteen years ago. This was his first theatrical feature. Mine, too.

The picture was shot in Nashville as high-definition video on a Sony Cine Alta, for release on 35mm film. Production mixer Thomas Morrison recorded a mix plus isolated microphone channels on a Metacorder. The mixed channel was ingested to Avid and sunk against down-converted letterboxed SD video, which Stockman edited in Los Angeles; the edits were sent to me in Boston as BetaSP tape and OMF files.

Stockman and I had one meeting in my studio, early in the process, to listen to tests and coordinate our thinking. After that, our cross-country collaboration was mostly by telephone ftp'd QuickTime movies; as things got more interesting I'd overnight DVDs for review. I flew to L.A. and spent nine days in a THX room on the final 5.1 mix—six days of premixing without Stockman, then he came for two days of adding music and tweaking the overall balances. We spent one more day in final review and fine-tuning. I flew home the next day, while Dolby technicians were compiling the final print master.

Tools? I edited and did stereo mixes for test screenings using Steinberg Nuendo 3 software, MOTU audio and sync hardware, and a Doremi VI video server. Production tracks were cleaned, as needed, in Bias SoundSoap Pro. Surround and special effects used my own software in an Eventide H8000. Check the studio section of my website to see the other gear. Mix was at The Dub Stage in Burbank with Marti Humphrey, C.A.S., as re-recording engineer, on Digidesign Pro-Tools HD 6.9. We both use Mac dual G5s.