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## ***That Boom Guy - Questions***

*Perhaps that sound guy, or... 'the dead-cat-on-a-stick...what is it?...'*

**For the purpose of the following questions, the designations - Boom Operator and sound recordist could be interchangeable.**

### **1. Background (including study, interests and what projects you've worked on)?**

I'm a Freelance Boom Operator, and low-budget Sound Recordist.

I've also spent time working as an instructor of both alpine skiing, and in-line skating, done the Production Assistant thing overseas, worked on the docks of David Jones, spent time assembling audio accessories, and repairing/selling film equipment.

### **2. How did you get your start in the film industry?**

I won a scholarship to the QLD School of Film and TV, straight out of high school - with the intention of becoming a d.o.p. By the end of the course I knew that I wasn't cut out for the creative lighting part; and was just helping out a class-mate on a short-film where they had a sound recordist, but no boomie. This was almost 6 years ago - Funnily enough I still boom for that same sound recordist from time to time.

It's weird. I know that other people can pinpoint exactly which production it was when they considered themselves a part of the local-industry. I don't really have one, infact I didn't consider my self a part of the industry until fairly recently, when I was starting to feel comfortable on set.

### **3. What attracted you to the profession of Sound Recordist?**

Originally... NOTHING!

There was nothing that jumped out at me as interesting about being the sound recordist - poor buggers, sitting down all day pushing buttons and getting very little respect for it... However, through my work as a boomie (which I've always enjoyed), I've come to understand a bit better, and actually enjoy the challenges that are involved in the collection of on-set dialog and effects.

It's really all about the positioning of the microphone anyway. A good Boom op is worth their weight in platinum. The Soundos are there as the highly-skilled-knowledge bearers, and equipment owners/operators. They know what to do, and how to do it, but they do need a competent person to move that microphone. I guess that's why you get so many sound teams that work together for years upon years. Boom op and sound recording are 2 facets of the same job, and as such, the decisions on particular solutions are shared.

### **3. Could you give us a rundown on what a Sound Recordist/Boom Operator actually does?**

In a best case scenario, they are there to provide the advice and technical know-how to collect on-set dialog and effects, *so that the sounds help to tell the story*, not just so you can hear it. But sometimes all we can do is get a useable guide track for re-recording.

Each set up, the sound recordist, in conjunction with their boom operator and (depending on the size of the crew) assistant, execute the microphone placement that best suits the scene. This can be a combination of; overhead (boom) microphone/s, body mics attached to radio transmitters, and even microphones hidden on the set. All the mics are connected to a mixer where the sound recordist continually evaluates the technical quality, and continuity of the sound, switching/blending the mics where appropriate, and recording it to whichever format the production needs (used to be DAT, but now slowly moving into the non-linear world of Hard disks, and DVD's).

They are always looking for ways to keep the dialog separated from unwanted 'noises', giving the most room for post-production sound to work. It could be as simple as putting a piece of carpet under an

actor's feet during a close up to remove their footsteps, or making sure that the air-conditioning units are off, keeping the set quiet... whatever it takes.

The Boom Operator is responsible for positioning the microphone DURING the take. They constantly move the microphone on their extendable poles, so that it is in the best spot whenever the actors speak. With multiple cast and moving camera/s it can get quite tricky.

#### **4. What attributes do you believe make a great Sound Recordist, especially Location Sound?**

First and foremost is a good sense of humor. Just because you can do the job technically... hey, anyone can learn that stuff. Being a productive member of the crew, who understands the process involved in shooting a film, that's the stuff that you can't learn in school.

Good ears, obviously. You *do* need to know whether the sounds you are recording will work. This will only come from experience, the more you do it, the better you get.

#### **5. What is the first question you ask when you are first approached to do a job?**

It's schedule - the most important factor for a freelancer in this hectic-grab-any-job-world, is when you're needed, so you can see if you can do it or not.

Particularly at the level where I'm working, I don't have the luxury of sifting through scripts, to pick the right project.

#### **6. And other questions?**

Who else is involved? Knowing if you're going to be working with familiar crew helps me make my decisions. All the boring stuff (money/format/equipment) comes later,

Honestly the biggest decision-breakers for me are the crew, and schedule. What can I say? I enjoy being on set. If it's with a crew that I KNOW I have fun with, then, all-the better.

Having said that, it IS a job - and you do need to pay the bills. Plus I'm always up for meeting new people, so I keep the door open for work on the small stuff. Some of the best experiences I've ever had on-set, were no-budget shockers. You never know when someone will hit it big time and be able to give you that well-paid job.

#### **7. How important is reading the script prior to undertaking a job? What do you look out for when you read a script?**

The first thing I do when accepting a project as sound recordist, or boom operator, is to read the script. Not for audio, not looking for problems, but just as a story.

You can get quite a lot of information from a well-written script for the "feel" of a scene, and this can help when discussing with the director how it should be recorded.

Next step is to look for any obvious potential problems, locations in the story that might make things rough on the audio collection, big set-ups with lots of characters talking over one-another, that type of stuff. It's important to check the script for any additional equipment I may need during the shoot. Being a low-budget kind of guy, I don't have a truck of gear available to me, and equipment may need to be rented.

I then Hi-light all the things that make noise (non-dialog) and try to get a list of things that may not be possible to collect on-set during the picture take. Obviously the priority during the shoot is not to get the sound of a car-door, when the sun is setting and we still need 3-shots, so it helps to have all the sounds set-out in a list for collection later if needed.

This is where things get a little murky. Allot of times, especially if there's a sound-designer on board, I'm not required to collect anything beyond the dialog, as the post-sound-guys will be doing that. But if I'm happy with the dialog, and can do it, then I always like to knock off sounds from the list during the shoot.

## **8. Are you involved in pre-production? Do you go and check out the locations or sets prior to the shoot?**

On the level of projects that I get to record, it's rare that people are thinking about the sound when they're scouting locations. It's all about the "look" and sometimes that's the way it's got to be. If your location looks perfect, but sounds shit, and you only have the amount of money to pick that place... then so be it.

As regrettable as it may be, sound is the easiest thing to replace in post. However, with the right script, any potential sound problem can be overcome. There ARE solutions, and the earlier in the process that the right people are brought in, then the easier and better the outcome is.

## **9. What is the essential criteria for successful shoot for a Location Sound Recordist?**

A quiet location/set. At the very least, one that sounds like the place the scene is set. If it's set in the middle of the countryside, and you are shooting next to a big industrial factory, then there's little you can do to make it work well.

One of the better analogies I've heard for recording sound is that of baking a cake. Starting with the freshest ingredients (most isolated sounds), you blend them together, until you have a tasty treat, I guess the cooking part is the final mix of dialog/music/effects/and picture.

You can't easily **REMOVE** sounds, just like you can't remove an egg from a cake mixture, but you can **ADD** sounds. If people have that just floating in the back of their minds while selecting locations and building sets - I think that a lot of the sound tracks will get a good shot at sounding great. If the space is quiet, and the dialog can be collected well, then the post production phase will add the appropriate sounds to make the location shine.

If you do it right during the shoot, then you can spend more time and money in post expanding (creatively designing) your sound, not just fixing it!

## **10. Who on set do you mostly work with? What questions do you ask or advice do you give to those production personnel. How do you go about building a strong working relationship with them?**

Put simply, we work with... EVERYONE.

I recently read a round-table discussion with some pro-boom-ops in Hollywood, and one of them gave an excellent response about needing to know everything on-set.

Boomies (and obviously Soundos) need to know as much about the lighting of a scene, as how the actors are changing their performance between takes. From what the costumes are made of, to how the set sounds, to what the shot is called, to whether the AD's and locations department have control over "noise-makers",

Essentially - every department affects the sound of the set during a take. And without knowledge of what's going on, then you won't be getting your job done.

## **11. How much pressure is on the Sound Recordist to get it right on the first take? In your opinion, is this fair judgment?**

So long as there have been sufficient rehearsals, then it shouldn't be a problem. Actors that miss their mark, and change the loudness of their delivery between rehearsals and take... well that's another issue. This is where a really good boom operator will save your tracks.

I believe that there are 3 people who are vitally important to every shot being technically well made. The Camera Operator, Focus Puller, and Boom Operator. They need to be "in-tune" with the actors' performance. If any one of these three, stuff-up; or don't adjust to an ad-libbed move/line, then there will be the need for a re-take. Unfortunately the boomie is given the least chance for making a mistake.

If the shot is soft, or ill-composed, then it's an automatic re-take, because people are fixated on the pictures. But if there's ever a request from sound to go again because they missed a line, then look out!

## **12. Your role is to weed out sounds that should not be there? How do you go about training your ear?**

It's tough, especially when tempers are flared, or the set is really noisy, and you haven't heard a real rehearsal. But the more you do it, the better you get at distinguishing the crap from the good stuff. Training the ear, also comes into play when miking the coverage of the scene, so it doesn't sound wildly different when edited together.

## **13. What is a location Sound Recordist worst nightmare? And how could that be avoided?**

Off-camera noises that ruin the dialog can come from many unexpected places. But generally it's locations that are noisy when the scene is supposed to be quiet.

Shooting period pieces in a modern-day industrial area sucks... but if it's the best location for other reasons (price/picture) then you make do. The beach is pretty bad for editing together (wave continuity) and directly under a landing zone of an airport is always fun... but again there are ways of working around these things - if the proper planning is undertaken.

Often a GOOD set is made BAD, by the equipment needed to get the pictures (video monitors/computers/HD cameras). That'll really make a Soundo break-down and cry.

## **14. Any funny anecdotes that you've encountered on a shoot (names to be withheld to protect the innocent or guilty).**

I'm going to hotlink a page from my website (*beware; self-promotion alert!*) called *the top ten sins of the boom operator*, pretty much self explanatory.

Its a few years old now. But there's still some good stuff in there.

[http://www.thompsound.com/Articles/ten\\_sins/](http://www.thompsound.com/Articles/ten_sins/)

## **15. What is your preferred sound kit?**

Whatever gets the job done.

Seriously, if it's a small film shooting on video and they're looking to edit on a home computer, then keeping it simple is a benefit.

If it's scripted well and allowances are made for close-up coverage, and the boomie isn't lit out of the picture, then a single mic fed to the camera might be all that's needed.

If there are multiple scenes involving 360-degree-wide-angled-steadicam-moves with 8 speaking parts at once, then I can recommend some REALLY good guys with the right equipment and experience. There's no point in hiring someone at my level if you need to do the sound for LORD OF THE RINGS.

## **16. If you could spare no expense, what would be your ultimate sound-kit?**

Wireless Boom, Multi-track Location Hard-disk recorder, 2 boomies, good coffee.

## **17. Are you aware of any new developments in sound technology that may be coming onto the market in the near future? What can we look forward to?**

Hopefully there'll be more knowledge of the symbiotic relationship between picture and sound recording on set. NO wide + tight shots without coverage. More sound treatment for locations and sets. (Even if it's just some blankets nailed up on an off-screen wall to help control echo...)

Fewer requirements for radio mics. Getting the natural sound of a good location on a well-placed boom-microphone will still sound better than any "new-technology" that comes onto the market.

Very little has changed in almost 100 years of sound-for-film. If it sounds good on set, then there's a chance for the final product to sound good. Using sound recorded at the same time as the picture helps present the performances that everyone sweated to get in the first place.

**18. As a freelance professional, what are benefits of having your own website? How do you go about sustaining your business?**

Making good contacts while working is the hardest things to learn, and yet the most important. I could be the BEST boomie, or the most proficient at recording sound. But it doesn't matter if people don't want to hire me. I try to have fun. It's one of the BEST jobs on the planet. So enjoy it while you can! (I guess that's my motto)

The website helps too, it's a place people can go to get a lot of information about me, and it's open 24/7

**19. For Emerging filmmakers who are about to embark on making their low budget short made, what are your tips with regards to sound?**

Write using your ears. The great sound designer **Randy Thom** has much more to say on the subject (try googling him, there are heaps of his articles online). If the script has room for sound to affect what happens on screen, then the movie will involve its audience more completely.

Try hard to allow better sound (less about the equipment, more about quiet sets.)

Schedule double the amount of time you think you'll need.

Prepare, Prepare, Prepare - there's nothing better than a confident film-maker. If you know *how* it's going to fit together later, then you'll be able to play around more during the shoot, when it's important to be flexible for your performances.

Never underestimate the value a good d.o.p. has on the sound of your film.

Good d.o.p.'s know how to light for a boom operator, and will help find interesting visuals that allow for relevant sounds to "fill-out" the final sound track

**20. What are the pitfalls that many Emerging filmmakers tend to fall into with regards sound?**

Pretty much the opposite of the last question.

Badly-scheduled days, uncertain directors, lighting/camera set-ups from hell, no coverage... these are things that make me cringe every time I hear about them.

**21. Are there any professionals within the industry that you admire or who you think are doing really good work?**

Everyone that I continue to work with.

All the major Soundos in Australia do good work, usually under trying conditions.

More specifically, any boomie who's done 14 takes on the 15<sup>th</sup> hour with no meal-breaks and a low-wide-angle shot of a complicated conversation... and kept the boom out-of-shot, while getting great dialog.

**22. And finally, what is the most misconceived perception on set about "that boom guy".**

...that he/she's a quirky loner with strong arms... We tend to be quirky with a strong back.

Thanks for the questions.

Ian Thomson