



SAFE, SOUND, AND IN THE CAN

A veteran mixer sounds off about what directors and producers should be doing for their film's best audio

BY IRIN STRAUSS

ONCE UPON A time, it was customary to hire a sound director for your project. Yes, there was a time when—before anyone started to budget for their film—a sound director oversaw spending and scheduling for anything sound-related on a film. This person would work with a producer on a consultation basis. It would save an enormous amount of time and energy down the line.

These days, most film productions don't hire a sound director. This creates more work for producers, who ultimately have to delegate to a wider array of staff—line producers, production managers, etc.—to address the needs of the sound department. This leaves a lot of room for things to get lost down the line. Yet directors should collaborate intimately with sound mixers, instead of just assuming that their teams are getting good sound. I'm here to explain what you need to know to facilitate the smoothest operation possible for your sound department.

Who is Your Sound Department?

Production mixers record sound on location or in a studio in synchronization with the camera to achieve the highest quality of sound at the time of filming. They work closely with the **boom operator**, who handles the mic placement on set and acts as the voice of the sound team. Boom operators relay the mixers' needs and anticipate any challenges posed by last-minute changes—for example, in lighting or dialogue—which can affect the mixers. They also determine when someone needs to come and act as a second boom.



This is typically the **utility person**, who helps maintain and facilitate the flow of the department by running cable, mic-ing actors, distributing monitors and performing overall upkeep.

These days the criterion for hiring sound teams seems to be: "If I can hear dialogue OK, that's good enough for me." Most features and TV shows sound like broadcast news programs because everyone relies solely on wireless mics. My point: Hiring a skilled sound mixer can be challenging.

Arrange an initial interview to decide whether a sound mixer is right for your team. Perhaps you're aware of his or her reputation and previous work. How does this person work? Can he or she handle the rigors of working on set and still produce sound of a reliable quality? At the very least, how does the resume look? Has he or she read the script and thought about the challenges of that particular project? It's always a good sign when your mixer asks questions, even though you may not have the answers yet. And vice versa.

Questions to Ask Your Sound Mixer

CAN YOU VISIT EVERY LOCATION AHEAD OF TIME? It is essential to take the mixer to each location. If the mixer can't make it, take along another member of the sound team. They are trained to hear each location in a way that most people don't. The mixer should be able to notice, anticipate, and analyze the unique sonic state of each environment. For instance, you should be able to take them to a shoot location at 8 p.m. and have them anticipate its sonic atmosphere for rush hour traffic at 8 a.m. (And if your mixer is a firm no on a location: Are you willing to change the location to a quieter side street? Do you have the budget for Automated Dialogue Replacement—ADR—which, considering

equipment, studio time, and actors, can cost hundreds of dollars per hour?)

WE HAVE \$X FOR YOUR RATE AND GEAR. IS THAT OK?

Rates for the personnel in the sound department are usually to scale, based on the budget and size of the project. Fortunately most mixers come with their own gear—which means familiarity, which ultimately delivers better-quality audio. Another advantage: Your mixer will most likely cut you a better deal than most vendors. Be sure your mixer has all the proper gear for the project and understands your deliverable needs. I have heard of mixers who just show up with some gear, assuming they know what to bring, and are way underprepared.

DO YOU HAVE A CREW IN PLACE? Meaning a boom op and utility ready to go. The mixer may not always have a team in place by the time of the interview. In some cases, you might require the mixer to have someone on standby, or search for someone to come in on days he or she can't make it. Your mixer should get some references and speak with other mixers who have worked with the potential sub.

ARE YOU OK WORKING NIGHTS? An actual question I've received on several occasions. It can be a dealbreaker for some mixers.

Questions Your Sound Mixer Should Ask You

DID YOU BUDGET FOR EXTRA CREW ON CERTAIN DAYS? For example: There may be a huge dinner scene that requires two boom ops, because there's a big chandelier to navigate around and 12 characters. Fine, you say—use your utility as the second boom. However, the grips and lighting are rigging a process trailer in the meantime and the schedule is to shoot the car scene right after the dinner scene. Who's



▲ THE SOUND TEAM MUST COOPERATE WITH OTHER DEPARTMENTS ON SET

◀ ACROSS: MIXER IRIN STRAUSS AT THE SOUND CART

going to pre-rig the car for sound? You will definitely need an extra hand.

ARE THERE SCENES INVOLVING MUSIC OR VOCAL PERFORMANCE?

With singing or musicians performing, nine times out of 10 it's best to have those tracks made in advance with a music supervisor and link them up with your sound team. This means having to hire a playback mixer to come in on those days. A "live" performance is fine, provided there isn't dialogue throughout the scene. Make that decision early on, for you will need extra hands to mic the instruments and time to sound check. If there's singing involved, be prepared to budget for ADR, as it is rare that an actor is happy with his or her singing performance. All said, lip-syncing is tried and true and can ultimately save you a lot of money (and headaches) in post.

DO YOU HAVE A BUDGET FOR SPECIAL EQUIPMENT? There may be scenes where authenticity is crucial. Do you have working story-appropriate microphones to create that sense of realism? Most likely, no. A sound mixer may have to rent those mics, or even purchase them. Or you may come across a sound-savvy actor who wants a specific brand of wireless mic not included in your mixer's kit. This is not normal, but it happens, and may require production to flip the bill.

On the Day

Last-minute creative changes can make or break the quality of sound right before a take. So give the sound department as much of a heads up as you can, and allow for that extra minute on set to make an adjustment—it'll save you hours in the long run. Often you will be outside under an airplane flight pattern, or in a major city with helicopters buzzing around. Wait for that vehicle to trail off before rolling sound. Yes, it will be annoying, especially for the assistant director, but looping is expensive and waiting will save you hundreds of dollars. Step in, and make sure your sound department is—no pun intended—heard. Check in with them throughout the day, and help them fight for the best sound possible.

Sometimes you may have to record a wild track. A wild track is a piece of sound effects or dialogue recorded non-sync, that is, without the camera rolling. One example: On my 2010 film *The Romantics*, there was a night exterior for which everyone disrobed and jumped into the water—so no lavaliers, and only a shotgun mic to record the dialogue in a wide shot. I made a point to get all of the dialogue clean by recording the dialogue of each actor on location once the scene was finished. This helped the editor and saved the production having to bring the actors in to loop.

Cross-Departmental Cooperation

All departments contribute to making good sound. It is always to your advantage to connect the production mixer with the editor in pre-production. Establishing that rapport with the editor will eliminate a mixer's need to go through certain channels to get technical information, and save time and energy. Editors and mixers usually both have a particular way of working—for instance, the sound editor may want to have the mixer label all the takes a certain way, so they'll need to discuss a filing system.

Another example: The camera dept usually likes to save time by shooting wides and tights simultaneously. While that looks good on paper, it can seriously hurt the sound of the film. The sound is compromised when all the talents have to be wired, as the boom mic can't get close enough to the tight camera. In this case, wait to use the second camera for wide shots only, or use it to match the first camera for coverage. I cannot tell you how many times I've fought this battle. Boom mics always sound better than wireless mics.

To accommodate booms, grips and gaffers could avoid using xenon lights, and flag extreme sources that may be creating boom shadow. The camera department could also minimize dolly noise, soundproof ballasts with baffles, and distance generators from the set.

Use the sound mixer to add to your vision. I worked on a scene once for which the director asked me to close-mic the sound of peas dropping into a wooden bowl, and exaggerate the effect in a surrealistic way. What a challenge! I subrented a few piezo contact mics (which pick up audio vibrations via contact with objects) and placed them around the bowl. Production made a point to budget for the added equipment, and what we recorded was exactly what we wanted to achieve. (I've since added piezos to my kit!) Starting a dialogue and getting engaged with your sound department will make your film sound like a dream. **MM**

Irin Strauss has worked in the sound department on films from Welcome to the Dollhouse to Tangerine, and series such as Madam Secretary, The Leftovers, and Blue's Clues. soundmindpictures.com