

**CONVERSATIONS
WITH A SOUND MAN**

- By Andrew Zielinski -

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Conversations With A Sound Man

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Appendix I: Filmography

Appendix II: Awards

Appendix III: Morris, John

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Back Cover: *Portrait of James by Peter Coad*

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DEDICATION

*This book is dedicated to Regina and Marie Zielinski,
to Nicholas and Peter Zielony, and to all who follow the film credits.*

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FOREWORD

For most of us the cinema experience of sound is taken for granted. Immersed in plot and characterisation, it is only at significant moments that an average audience member may become aware of one or other of the separate film sound track components of music, voice, effects or silence.

Without doubt the best-known film sound element is music. Within the Hollywood studio system the history of sound movies is replete with recognisable themes and popular songs. During the 1930s serious composers such as Max Steiner, Alfred Newman and Erich Korngold added a symphonic level to film music. These were the pre-eminent contributors to the cinematic repertoire of their day. To the musically aware the more individual styles of later film music composers such as John Barry, John Williams, Henry Mancini and Michel Legrand became better known, as did the work of Elmer Bernstein, Jerry Fielding and Quincy Jones. Today it is the idiosyncratic music of Philip Glass that is instantly recognisable.

Directors often use music to great effect to highlight dramatic moments in their films: Sergio Leone's use of Ennio Morricone's themes in his spaghetti westerns and Alfred Hitchcock's uncanny affinity with the music of Bernard Herrmann in *North by Northwest*, *Rear Window* and *Psycho* are possibly the most famous. Morricone's outstanding, and some would argue unsurpassed, score for *The Mission* won not only film industry awards but also public acclaim. Some directors prefer already existing music. Woody Allen often uses his favourite songs from the '20s, '30s and '40s as a catchy counterpoint to his snappy dialogue while Martin Scorsese goes even further to demonstrate his mastery of all aspects of the filmmaker's craft by editing whole sequences to the rhythm of the music. Stanley Kubrick's use of Richard Strauss's '*Thus Spake Zarathustra*' and Johann Strauss's floating '*Blue Danube Waltz*' in *2001: A Space Odyssey*

is unforgettable, and no-one can think of Peter Weir's *Picnic at Hanging Rock* without recalling Zamfir's pan pipes. Weir's use of two contrasting styles of music, Albinoni's 'Adagio' and Jean-Michel Jarre's electronic score in *Gallipoli*, is equally memorable.

Examples of outstanding dialogue in film are plentiful, especially in the hands of such gifted writers as the brothers Joseph (*All About Eve*) and Herman (*Citizen Kane*) Mankiewicz. Harold Pinter, Tom Stoppard, David Mamet and Arthur Miller have all moved easily from the stage to screen writing, and there are countless others whose incisive dialogue both communicates and entertains. William Shakespeare is an almost perennial favourite in all cinema languages and cultures.

Sound effects are often among the earliest memories we associate with cinema, from being blasted out of our seats in battle or action sequences to the subtlest nuanced effects. American big budget movies are the exemplars of these skills and occasionally, during British or American Academy Award presentations for sound and sound editing, audiences are reminded of the craft needed in those areas when the top examples for the year are shown.

Interestingly, silence can also be an extremely potent creative element in the soundscape of a film. Akira Kurosawa used silence to great dramatic effect in the chaotic battle scenes in *Ran*, Jules Dassin's *Rififi* won critical acclaim for its 30-minute completely silent jewel heist sequence and Alfred Hitchcock removed all sound from several sequences of *The Birds* and replaced them with an electronic score of bird screeches and wing-flapping that were electronically created by Bernard Herrmann.

The craft of sound recording itself has sometimes been crucial to a film's plot: in *The Shout*, John Hurt scratches around recording sounds; in *The Conversation*, Gene Hackman lives in angst because his life is spent eavesdropping on the lives of others, and in *Blow Out* – Brian de Palma's remake of Antonioni's *Blow-Up* – David Hemming's photographer has become John Travolta's soundman.

The sound designer James Currie has worked in the Australian film industry for over 35 years. His work not only encompasses the skills necessary for the craft of cinematic sound, it demonstrates how craft can become art. Following music and film studies at the Elder Conservatorium and Flinders University, in 1973 he joined the newly established South Australian Film Corporation, first as a boom operator for telefeatures and then as a sound recordist, sound editor and re-recordist (mixer) for

documentaries. This led inevitably to the recording and mixing of some of the major feature films of the 1970s Australia film industry renaissance.

James made two extraordinarily fortunate career moves to what would become lifelong associations with Paul Cox and Rolf de Heer. He achieved such a high level of sound design while working with both directors that his work became a vital part of their own filmic creative process. It was during those close working relationships that he developed his craft into the highly respected art form for which he is so well known today.

It is easy to understand why James Currie commands the status of sound designer. He creates and records a unique sound environment, believing firmly that sound needs to be recorded and mixed using the actual environment in which the film is shot. From this philosophy has come his practice of recording on site, seeking the truth, integrity and fidelity of each location. For him post-synching, or using sound effects libraries or any sounds related to other films and locations, belong in the past.

This book is designed for all those who are interested in sound on film or would like to work in the world of film sound creation. It was inspired by my long friendship with James from the time our paths crossed as students at Flinders University, when he rescued my Master of Arts film with a dynamic sound component. As Director of the SA Film and Video Centre, a division of the SA Film Corporation, I previewed all of their documentaries acquired by the Centre. It was interesting to watch James's creative development through these films, followed by his later association with feature films.

Andrew Zielinski

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