



## Trends in Location Sound

By: Jethro Senger

**G**ood location sound is not complicated. Good location sound is a series of smart, simple decisions by people who have experience, and is created by a crew that works together in respect to ALL departments. Every department needs support from the others in order to progress to a final product, and the production department begins this channel of support.

There are some trends in location recording that are emerging, and many times it is not creating a better sounding product. This distinct style of recording dialogue is especially prevalent in the fast paced world of episodic television, super budget insanity features, and reality television. It is what I call the *Wide and Tight Phenomenon*, and refers to the practice of putting wireless body mics on the actors. Major technology advances have brought wireless into the limelight, and also for the ability to record many actors at once, directly to discreet isolated tracks for post to organize, edit, mix and remix later. The *Wide and Tight Phenomenon* is named from shooting two cameras at once, one with a wide lens, and one with a tight lens.

*"Just put a wire on them and let's shoot."*

This is a very prevalent comment these days and is heard where production expediency is more important than making a good film. The problem for sound here is that everything recorded like this takes on a feeling of closeness and lost perspective with regards to what you see and what you hear. Much programming today has this inherent quality in it. The next time you watch a dramatic television show, pay attention to the way

the actors sound, especially during wider shots. The actors will sound like they are in very close proximity to the camera, even if there has been some ambience mixed in to make it sound more open. The scenes begin to take on a more "taped" performance, like a reality television show, where body mics really are a necessary way to capture the moments.

Here's what happens: During a scene, instead of covering the wide master shot with a long boom, and then getting the hero sound in closer coverage with a boom that matches the perspective of that shot, everything for the scene gets tracked with body mics... Since one camera is wide, and one is tight, sound cannot use the boom for the closer coverage (the meat of the scene).

Trying to tell the director something about this, he/she says "oh I heard them fine." Sure, you heard them fine. We are using very expensive wireless systems, with high quality lavaliers (relatively- see side comments). But how does this stuff sound in relation to your shots? Is your film supposed to sound like a reality tv show? You may want that, and maybe this point is moot here, because we all know what is making money on television.

When the sound team is forced to use only body mics, you end up with the beautiful close ups of your actors having audio that is inferior to what could be had if the sound team was allowed to use the boom mic. The tight intimate close up shot of your lead actress will now have sync sound coming from a \$300 microphone under her wardrobe. And the nice wide shot where you see everything, and the whole set is light up all nice, and you are establishing geography with the lens, her audio will sound, well, close up and under her wardrobe.

*PERSPECTIVE: how the shot is supposed to sound to the ear, with reference to what the picture looks like.*

I think that it's important to have a discussion with the director and see what they like to hear (get it?). Apparently, Steven Soderbergh had the entire cast of *Ocean's 12* wired for the duration of shooting. Maybe he wanted a "close" sound on this project or maybe there was improvising amongst the actors and no room for rehearsals. His latest film, *The Good German*, he and the sound mixer, Paul Ledford, decided to use the boom mic only. So, there are choices to be made regarding what is available to us today in the sound arena. Some of these choices are made on a creative front and some are made because of money and time constraints.

I like my wireless. They are Lectrosonics 411 digital hybrids, the top dogs on the scene, and are amazing tools to be used at the right moments, to fix problems and allow flexibility in getting killer dialogue so ADR can be minimized. Wireless can be a great savior, but it is being over used as of late, and it is changing the way we hear television and film. There are other problems with body mics that we haven't even touched on: clothing rustle, adjustments to the mic on an already annoyed actor, a wireless frequency spectrum that is loaded with radio interference more and more each day because of cell phones, HD television broadcasting, bluetooth and communications radios.

It's very rare that I am totally happy with the sound from a scene with only radio mics. There's always some little bit of clothing noise or a finicky adjustment that had to be forgone for one reason or another.

When getting ready for a scene, I always try to find a way to have the boom as the primary mic, and use a 2nd boom (do you have a 3rd person/cable/utility on your sound crew?), plant mic, or body mics to help solve the problems. *A professional boom person, armed with an expensive shotgun mic mounted on a boom pole, recorded to ONE track, is STILL the best way to get full, rich, natural, dialogue for film.* Hire a sound team with a professional boom operator! Do not hire a sound mixer and give him a PA, or a friend of the producers to boom. If there is one tip to take away from this article, that is to get a very good boom operator. Hire a better one even if it means getting a lesser sound mixer.

Today's technology is made to make our lives easier but it can be a downfall if an about face is done and all the faith is moved to a new sector. There are many great sounding films that were done with 1 track and 1 boom mic! (remember who's holding that mic!) With that said, I'll be going over some more of the latest changes in equipment and other techniques of location sound in a future installment of Up to Speed.

[Jethro Senger runs Firelabs, an entertainment company based in Florida. He has been doing location sound mixing and video assist since 1995 on 10+ feature films and over 1000 national commercials. He has recently directed a documentary feature film "Headspace" which will debut at Chicago's Underground Film Festival in August. You can check out Mr. Senger's work at: <http://www.firelabs.com> or <http://www.headspacemovie.com>]