

## LIFF presents: Location Sound with The Sound Manifesto

For several days following Thursday, 15<sup>th</sup> April 2010, no UK film production suffered from aircraft noise. That stroke of luck was achieved by a volcanic cloud of ash, grounding literally all aircraft in the UK. There's a standing joke that Production Sound Mixers regularly bribe local airports with crates of beer to redirect air traffic. Never underestimate the power of sound!

On most no-budget productions, planning and preparing for sound is still in the Stone Age. Looking at the way no-budget productions plan for sound, you'd assume they were making *silent* films. There's some evidence to suggest this happens even on full-budget to low-budget films too, but let's stick with no-budget film productions for now.

Humans are nothing if not mimics. They copy, ape, mirror and plagiarize because that's a lot easier than actually having to think. So what do no-budget filmmakers do when they don't know what they're doing? They parrot Hollywood. But is the Hollywood model in any way relevant to no-budget filmmaking? In several ways it seems not: financing, development, preproduction, production, postproduction, marketing and distribution are all cases in point.

Now if you have megabucks then you can pretty much do what you like and fix your own mistakes. But if you're strapped for cash then your only resort is to plan, plan and blag. But the no-budget filmmaker's motto is "blag, blag and blag". Both planning and blagging are dirt cheap, but only *one* guarantees you'll finish your film successfully.

In my world the "new 50/50" means producers and directors who finally realise that half their film carries aural emotion as well as visual aesthetic. This marks the new wisdom – the awakening of new possibilities and higher levels of professionalism for no-budget films.

To get the best sound for any film, I proposed a new manifesto for sound several years ago - *The Sound Manifesto* – a set of principles that any film production can adopt to increase awareness of sound among its employees. It's a kind of promise to the sound department that your production will be better than before.

The key principle of the Manifesto is to promise your production that you'll start to think about sound very early in preproduction. To that end the Manifesto proposes a new role in film production called the *Director of Sound* (DoS). Budgets, locations, sound workflows and creative ideas become the immediate considerations of the new DoS, who also manages the entire sound process of your film from start to finish. This takes a great technical burden off the shoulders of your director – who probably hadn't realised it was there! To fill this role, you'll need to advertise for a Supervising Sound Editor who'll upgrade to a DoS for the duration of your production. You might also look out for *Directors of Audiography* (DoA) as these perform the same role as the DoS.

The Manifesto only really works if you tell your production crew that you've subscribed to it. You're effectively saying that every department is expected to cooperate with sound to achieve the best possible recordings and visuals – starting with the department heads.

The Sound Manifesto was inspired by John Coffey's "An Open Letter from you Sound Department", which is a more detailed account of how the sound department and other production departments can cooperate successfully when making films. Even professionals have problems it seems!

Whilst I leave you to ponder *The Sound Manifesto* ([www.thesoundmanifesto.co.uk](http://www.thesoundmanifesto.co.uk)) here's a handy list of common gaffes made by no-budget productions in relation to sound:

1. Not hiring a sound department head in preproduction to advise on technical and creative issues.
2. Not inviting an experienced sound department representative to scout locations. Don't trust any proxy to make these judgements.
3. Not hiring an experienced Boom Operator and Production Sound Mixer; expecting the Production Sound Mixer to do both jobs.
4. Not requiring Sound Reports from your Production Sound Mixer. The Picture Editor, Sound Editor and Rerecording Sound Mixer need these.
5. Telling the Production Sound Mixer what equipment they should use. Much better to ask them for their opinion first and blag the equipment *they* need.
6. Hiring sound equipment before speaking to your Production Sound Mixer. Ask them how much they'll charge to hire you their own equipment. It's always cheaper and they'll be grateful to get the cash instead of some hire house – which in turn increases their level of commitment to your project.
7. Using sub-standard equipment, including microphones, cables, mixers and recorders. We no longer use DAT or Nagra tape recorders and boom poles should be at least 12 feet or more for feature films.
8. Making the assumption that camera audio inputs are as good as a professional sound mixer and recorder. Many cameras have poor audio input electronics and only record 16-bit sound (as opposed to the 24-bit sound). 16-bit sound is fine for pre-recorded material but not for the unpredictable live sounds you find on film sets. For this you need at least 24-bit sound and good electronics to handle the wide dynamics and high input levels from your microphone.
9. Not understanding the limitations of wireless systems and the risks involved in overusing them. They can be a real time-waster on set when you get technical problems. The more wireless units you use, the more problems you'll get. It's impossible to monitor several wireless inputs properly and lavalier microphones, in addition to all that, suffer from clothing rustle.
10. Not planning for a rerecording mix of your sound at a postproduction facility.
11. Working your production sound crew over 12 hours per day. They need time to physically recover, recharge their batteries (literally) and to transfer data from the sound recorder to a backup device at the end of each day.