

by Jeanne Rawlings

A POWERFUL CHOICE

DIRECTING AS A SOUND RECORDIST

You make videos because you love the freedom to tell a story in a new way. Choose to be a Director Sound Recordist and explore greater possibilities than ever.

Where To Take Your Stand: Behind The Camera or Beside It?

It starts with the best news you could have heard: you got the job. You're up for a wedding video or maybe that high school football highlight reel that you've been anxious to make – and now you have 450 of them pre-sold. But there's a little catch in the back of your throat when you say, "I will." There are crucial interviews and tough run-and-gun location shoots ahead, and the footage needs to be captured right the first time. Trouble is, there's only one you.

Small and beginning video producers are often pushed to choose which double-role is the best to take. If the budget allows for only one additional crew member, remember your priority of roles. You are a producer first, and your decision as to where to shift your power is an enormous one. Don't make the mistake of delegating an amateur to grab the sound, while you handle the camera. You have more control of your movie and more freedom for new directorial insights if you step

away from the viewfinder and slip on the headphones.

Two Bold Choices

This answer is controversial. A case can certainly be made for the Director Cameraperson role. After all, it's a movie, right? Isn't it all about what's on the screen? As a Director Sound Recordist, you do not forfeit directing the camera operator. You simply shift into a role that is hardly secondary to capturing the image. In a very real sense, if you can initially commit to two choices, your focus on your story will be sharper, fresher and more rewarding.

First, choose to trust your videographer. As a Director Sound Recordist, you listen to the videographer's input and are free of the distractions of operating the camera. Once you begin relying on the process, be glad to give over the exposure, lighting and composition concerns to someone else. Now you are in the catbird seat. Concentrate on the priorities of the moment, knowing that audio is anything but boring. Opportunities come fast and furious, wheth-

er they are intimate interviews or capturing effects within a huge arena of action. A sound person has the advantage of freedom from the overwhelming influence of the image. This is where your directing will benefit.

Second, chose to put audio over image – in other words, listen as a director. It is a recognized fact that people will tolerate bad video if the track is good, but they won't be as forgiving if the quality is poor. Sound is especially important when it comes to interviews. Remember what you are saving by manning the headphones: costly time, which would otherwise be spent cleaning up badly-acquired tracks – or worse. How can you measure the impact of losing your audience's attention? You can't measure the nuances of great sound effects – we all remember those scenes in our favorite films that reached us on a gut level because the tracks were spectacular.

But that is not all that the Director Sound Recordist gets for that commitment to let go of the tripod handle.

The Hidden Factor

On the set, few people can see the real advantage of this role, because it is an invisible one. Simply speaking, you are building a relationship with your subjects, because your ear is literally close to their hearts. Trusting and using that one factor is the sign of quality videos.

“Just talk to me for a few minutes while I set the level. You don’t have to raise your voice. Remember, I am right here.” I have said this many times, touching my chest but indicating where the client’s mic. It’s as if there is a mystery connection – unseen because sound is invisible.

Most everyone gets nervous in front of a camera, and this one-on-one audio practice session breaks the ice. Get seated on the subject’s level. Let your voice calm the atmosphere and your words focus attention on you. Listening – really listening and letting the subject know it – is the most underestimated dynamic for getting interviews that come from the heart.

Lavalier mics, attached to that spot in the middle of the chest

beneath the voice path, should point close to the source. What about boomed microphones – how can an odd-looking object stuck into someone’s face increase a sense of trust? Arrange yourself comfortably and balance that boom pole as easily as if you were holding a wine glass or your favorite walking stick. Show you are at home with it, and keep it sincere: “This is a beautiful mic, and the sound is perfect. Remember I’m only a few inches away.” Reassurance. Repetition that you are listening. Guaranteed, your subject will soon look into your face, and the microphone will seem almost to disappear.

The View from the Microphone

Why the microphone never disappears for you, however, is obvious. Close your eyes and listen through any microphone with a good pair of headphones, and you’ll recognize the value of a laugh, the nostalgic feeling of a ballgame cheer, the importance of a quiet room where you can truly hear a person sigh. You may

also realize the significance of why we suggest that you detach your mic from the camera body. It is not hard to recognize that every location is full of extraneous noises that obscure the clarity, such as the camera motor itself.

Good microphones, properly stored and handled, last decades. If you’re looking into upgrading your microphone, rent a few and test them out for a week. So often, new videographers wish they had gone the extra mile, when they find themselves stuck with a microphone they don’t like. Renting is an educational investment that will guarantee you’re satisfied with your purchase and are comfortable with different kinds of mics. Remember that you will not regret purchasing that workhorse microphone that will outlive dozens of cameras over the years. Quality sound makes superior movies.

As a Director Sound Recordist, you have a technical advantage over everyone in the room. Like the camera with its different focal lengths, you hear selectively. Remember that the gateway to this viewpoint opens through your

headphones, so find a pair that fits comfortably and properly. Aim at isolating the incoming signal and walling yourself away from everything outside the lens. As a director, you may slip your phones off one ear to hear your cameraperson, but that comes later. Initially, use them as the keystone for making your microphone choices, beginning with your decision between a wide pick-up pattern microphone and a narrow one.

Understanding what's in your kit increases the time you have for directing, so use tricks to help you make quick choices. For example, how does a shotgun mic like the one on your camera compare

with the weapon with the smoking barrel? You do need to be a short distance away for maximum efficiency. However, it *doesn't* have a wide pattern.

Is a shotgun very sensitive to wind noise? The sound kind is highly sensitive to it – and maybe that's why the windscreens make these mics look more like small cannons! In noisy settings, pick a shotgun microphone to capture narrow fields and to avoid unwanted ambience. On the other hand, choose a mic with a broad pattern for a wider field, such as an orchestra.

The kit is about being prepared. Among other things, have

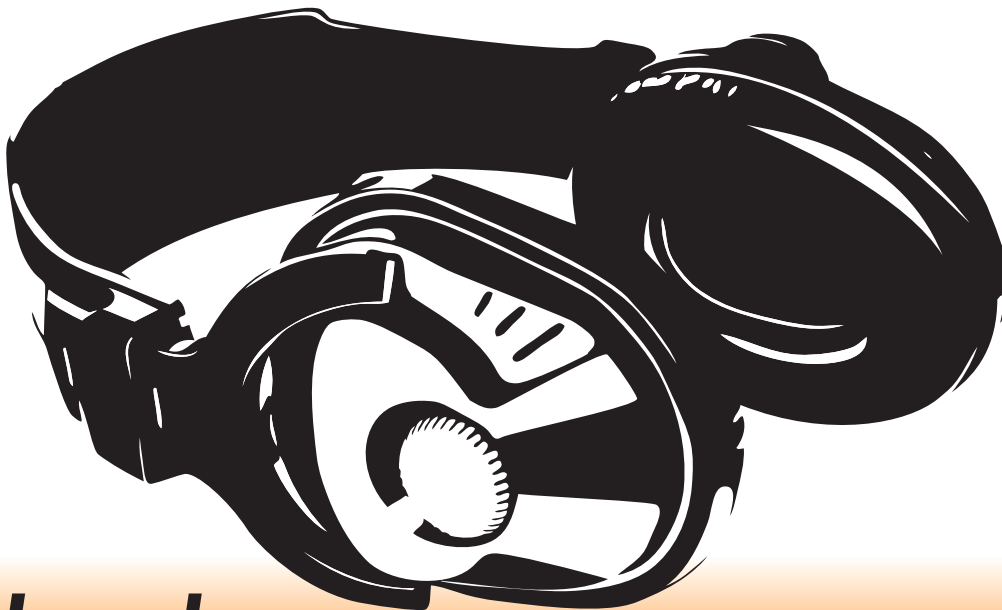
a cable long enough that your subject can move without a short leash. Have a back-up microphone system in case you run into problems with your first choice. Pack a short roll of black cloth camera tape; it's great for hiding lines or a lavalier mic or for closing gaps in your windscreen. Buy those extra batteries *fresh*. Have a pocket voltmeter on hand to test them. All these points will secure your goal – to bag the sound and nothing but the best sound.

Why Boom When You Can Pin 'Em?

Why choose a lavalier over a microphone mounted on a boom pole? Why a hard-wire lavalier? Why a wireless one, which sends a signal to a receiver attached to the camera?

Lavaliers are great for locking down the parameters of the field where you want them. Oftentimes the lav is less imposing than the boomed mic, because there are no cables to wrangle and no boom pole shadows to monitor.

Lavaliers free up your hands for other things. You're directing, remember! You can tweak audio



levels, indicate cues or check your notes during seated interviews. They allow you to walk alongside the subject, where you can pace the rhythm and smooth the cameraperson's job considerably.

But as lavs have their strengths, they also create challenges.

They are tricky to place, and you need to shield them from wind, clothing rustle and body movement. Getting on the set and finding your client has on a stiff nylon jacket can cause a minor panic, indeed. Lavaliers can go off-axis as the interviewee turns from one side to the other. Lavaliers should be treated as respectfully as jewelry, but it's easy to forget that unless you are manning the headphones. For lavaliers in general, you always run the risk of clients mishandling the tiny gear, because they simply forget they are wearing them.

Are there any more downsides to using these powerful little gems? For some wireless transmitters, the mic cable itself can act as an antenna, and you need coil and tuck it properly. Low batteries can throw out a good track in the

middle of an interview. Electronic and/or radio interference is a wild card, even when shooting in locations you've scouted ahead of time. Remember that one bad circuit in an old apartment can put a *tick, tick, tick* in your track, and you need to be ready to switch to another mic system.

Adapting and Setting Levels

You are a one-man or -woman band: director, cable wrangler, maybe mixer, recordist. So the trick is to set the proper levels, and then get on to directing. Preparation is key now.

The best audio comes from using an external microphone. Thanks to the modern age of supply and demand, there are now adapters that allow any mic output to conform to any camera that has a mic jack. Adapters act as transformers and bring a balanced and clean signal to your track. Many of these little boxes, which are not much bigger than a cigarette pack, allow you to adjust the level of the incoming signal – freeing you from the tiny buttons on the camera.

You will want to check your manual for the specs on how your camera allows you to override its *automatic level gain*. Automatic is like putting a governor on your car; it cuts in to maintain a certain level. But unlike an accelerator pedal, which maintains a consistent speed no matter how hard you floor it, some cameras' auto systems adversely ride a swath of sound. As the audio recovers to proper levels, it affects important signals on either side of the weak or loud signals – causing dips and rolls between low-level noise and lost tracks. Granted, in some cameras, the Auto Level Gain is a limiter that is perfectly designed for the camera and is a necessary feature. However, in all cases, you must play with this feature to learn how it affects your sound, and don't be afraid to turn it off. Control, control, control is what you're looking for – so either buy that mic adapter or invest in a mixer for the ultimate control.

Audio mixers are a separate box, which is an advantage in itself, because you are not only free from the tiny buttons on the cam-

era, but also nicely removed from the camera. Good mixers provide filters for problematic frequencies, and their transformer-balanced inputs and output meters allow you to adjust thresholds. You can mix more than one mic or send the signals onto different tracks. By plugging your headphones into the mixer's preamplifier, you can monitor both the sound coming in and the actual recording.

Start by adjusting the levels at the microphone, and, on wireless systems, set both the transmitter and the receiver, using their peak meters. If you have a mixer or adapter with gain levels, crank it while watching the meters in the

camera viewfinder. Digital audio that peaks can be completely lost, so set your levels where there will be ample headroom, so that a change in volume won't distort your track.

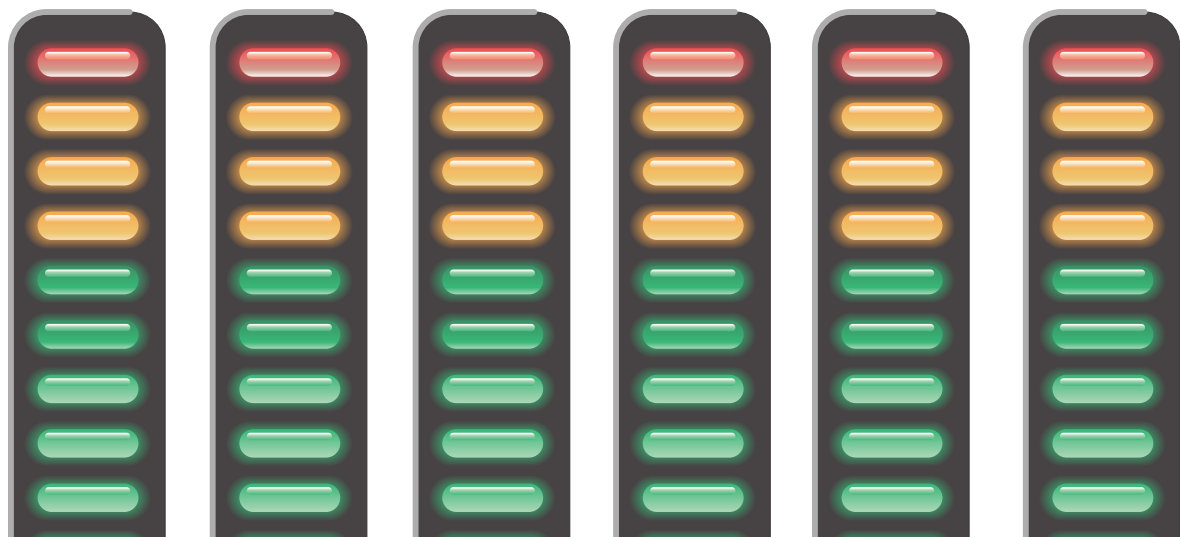
Anticipate the volume range of your subject. If you've got a whisperer, get the mic closer. This is about keeping the signal-to-noise ratio high, which means increasing the volume of the subject. If you still hear the noise of a background power buzz, you need to direct your client to speak more loudly or change the environment.

If you've got a vocal jumper, try to explain your need for consistent volume. Remember that people

talk loud when they become excited, and, although they try to comply, their levels will jump. Be prepared to adjust according to the content of the interview questions – and remember that emotions play out differently in every voice. As a director, you will ultimately have to choose to concentrate on the interview and not on the level knobs. So create headroom, and then put your efforts into directing the interview.

Placement Is Everything

The Director Sound Recordist knows the overall look of the movie. Make that call about hidden versus shown microphones: is that lavalier on the lapel expected by the audience? In a news situation, would it matter? How about in a dramatic documentary? Keep in mind that the impact of seeing the microphone far outweighs the trouble it took to hide it properly. The key to great filmmaking is suspension of disbelief – and if anything takes the viewer away from the movie and into the crew's world, be aware that you have a choice.



Now, let's say you invested in a simple but efficient little mic shock mount – the kind with the rubber band suspension. Handling noise with the boom pole is a fixed. And say you figured the most comfortable way to turn the mic, which allows you to pivot as the subject moves and pull back as the volume escalates. You're ready to monitor any changes, like that radio in the apartment down the hallway that nobody hears but you. After awhile, microphones on boom poles get mighty heavy.

Consider handling noise that might be creeping in, and always have a visual signal planned beforehand. Don't be afraid to stop the interview, because bad sound means bad picture.

For moving shots, a recordist operating the boom needs to know where the shot is going and what the camera composition will be. As the Director Sound Recordist, honor the cameraperson's needs (exposure, composition). For interviews, find your best spot and let everyone work around you. Good camera operators know audio is king in these situations and

will honor your choice, especially if they trust that you know quality sound. And with practice, you will.

Solutions Before The Problem

Like a dusty car that looks fine until somebody traces “wash me” on the windshield, equipment troubleshooting is all about checking the obvious.

Don't assume anything between headphone jack and microphone. Wring cables inch by inch with your fingers to isolate faulty cords. Electronics, especially microphones, are susceptible to condensation. Pack them in Ziplocs and avoid moving your gear between extremes, such as from air conditioning to humid field locations. You should try to wear batteries next to your body in cold weather. This includes the spare set.

Running down a problem takes time, and that can easily throw the schedule. Therefore, have several plans. As part of a small crew, you cannot be in two places at once, so give your talent a work-break while you troubleshoot. You can shorten the process by entirely

switching out components with spare cables, batteries and microphone. This methodical, systematic approach to problem solving will keep stress low and assure a great interview later.

You will hear good audio, and it will follow you all through the edit and post-production session. Ironically, sound that is true, clear and undistorted works its magic without notice. It's the seamless connection between storyteller on the screen and the audience in front of it. It is always possible, if you are prepared for the unexpected.

The Director's Ear

Guide your cameraperson, then let go. For interviews, the truth is that you are moving into a one-on-one relationship with your subject and into an intimate dialogue. You can divert attention from the camera – something the subject needs right about now. It's a powerful place to be.

Prioritize your goals. After you've set up the equipment, focus on the content of the conversation. Direct by listening first – what does your client feel most comfort-

able saying? What do you want to hear, and can you inspire the subject to address the issues?

Know where you want your subject to look, and explain the power of direct eye contact with viewers. There's a comfortable balance that works well – a glance to the camera and back to you – and most interviewees will find it, if you explain what you want. Sit close to that lens to shorten the glance.

Gently remind subjects to include the question in the answer – a guidance that's a relief for most folks. After you've let them go, don't fear getting them back on track. Direct them to pause between thoughts for later edit-

ing – if they're running sentences together, get them to slow down. Some folks appreciate a literal hand motion, like a thumb and finger A-OK, to remind them to stop at the completion of a point. Explain that it's best if their voices are not *stepped on*, meaning that their track is free of your voice.

Remember that tape is cheap at this point, but also consider that time is precious when dealing with people. How you treat your interviewee has a cumulative effect. Monitor the energy levels, and don't let your subject burn out. Unlike in general events coverage, people have emotional rises and falls during an inter-

view. Be aware of both the impact of the questions and the impact of the equipment on the subject. Take breaks. Remember that you are establishing a trust. You can come back, but not if you're not welcome. Don't burn your bridges while you're crossing them.

Keep the camera rolling. Some believe that the best takes are the first and the last. You never know, but it's important to honor those times in particular. Psychologists speak of everyone's need for twenty minutes of fame. Endings are, for many, the last shot at telling their story. One of the most important moments in an interview is the question, "Is there any more

How is the Dirt Blowing?

Wind, background ambience and crew noise are a constant concern, so control what you can. Mean it when you announce, "sound speed!" Turn off music and televisions, blanket the refrigerator, change locations – and in the worst cases, try a simple turn in the direction of your mic, and get closer to your signal when that factory machine is roaring in another room.

Listen, point and listen again. You should walk into a room with headphones and microphone like an explorer with a Geiger counter. Try putting your own body between the wind and the subject, acting as a baffle. In some situations, it helps to turn your mic away from and parallel to the wind. There are times when you can place the mic behind a rock, low to the ground. Watch the terrain: where is the dirt not blowing? Put the mic there.

Use foam and blimp windscreens, or make your own using layers of socks. Always close gaps with tape or hair bands. Listen to how the screens alter the sound quality. If your mic has high-low filter switches, use them to roll off the low-end, if need be, or bring it back to counter the windscreens. The key is to practice – so take your equipment out in all kinds of weather to learn what works.

you'd like to add?" Loosen the reins, and you will notice a softening of the speech. Grab it – and make sure your cameraperson is right there with you.

Before You Go

Last of all – is the footage there? Is the cameraperson happy? What are the visual details that will enable you to cut a line apart without a jump-cut that you weren't planning?

Make sure you've got video coverage of things spoken about in the interview and reaction shots of listeners. Always remember to get room tone: 10 seconds of uninterrupted sound of the ambience in the room, with the mic in the exact position as the interview. Slate it as Room Tone.

Get the B-roll of the object talked about, the gurgling stream outside the window, the angle shot that doesn't show movement of the mouth. Why record now?

Remember that you're gathering the elements that make the picture real. There are no effects you may not use, and you honor your story – and your client – by

capturing them. After Director, you are a Sound Recordist, and every chance you get to flex your skills is another opportunity to hear the nuance of your subject's world.

Tapped In: A Summary

There are few roles in making video that don't require risk, and letting go of the camera is one of them. However, delegating responsibility builds trust and is the key to every great leader. Your reward for the choice to be a Director Sound Recordist is the new perspectives it brings, including the intimate trust you build with your subjects.

Congratulations on bravely stepping across the visual threshold to directing through a sound world. The layers within this double-role will enhance your movie more than you know.

Jeanne Rawlings is an Emmy Award-winning sound recordist and documentary producer. Her former clients include the National Geographic Society, ABC and Discover Pictures.

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