

# Sound for **Catwoman**

Fur will fly this September, with the cinema release of *Catwoman*. Strother Bullins talks to supervising sound editor Richard Hymns, sound designer and mixer Chris Boyes, and Foley artist Dennie Thorpe about how they got the sound purring.





Most of the challenges involved in audio work for the modern blockbuster film lie within two distinct areas: creation and co-ordination. As always, a film's soundtrack is judged on the inventiveness of its audio, its sonic quality and the detailed, story-enabling mix.

But with constantly improving technology increasingly allowing last-minute alterations to a sound mix, superior audio-for-film creation must, more than ever, be meticulously coordinated. The process of progressing through location sound, tracklay, editing, sound effects, Foley, ADR, and eventually to the final mix, has never been without its challenges. But today, when millions and millions of dollars have been spent — and are at stake — on a potential summer blockbuster, you can bet the director will make more than a handful of twilight alterations if it gives the film a distinct edge. Besides, if the available technology makes such changes possible, why not?

This year's blockbuster buzz has now focused on *Catwoman*, starring Halle Berry and other mega-celebrity actors such as Sharon Stone and Benjamin Bratt. Helmed by the innovative action director Pitof Vidocq, *Catwoman* is a big-screen adaptation of the comic book story about Patience Philips (Halle Berry), a graphic designer for Headare Beauty, a major cosmetics company that is developing an anti-aging product. Philips discovers a dark company secret, gets involved in a corporate conspiracy and is inadvertently transformed into a woman with the sensibilities of a cat. From here, as the plot unfolds and Philips walks a fine line between being good and bad, she gets involved in some dazzling action sequences with equally incredible sounds.

### Supervising the Sounds

If anyone has a first-hand knowledge of the challenges involved in completing the audio for a major blockbuster, it's Richard Hymns, Supervising Sound Editor for *Catwoman*. Almost entirely done at Marin County, California's Skywalker Sound, the audio post-production for *Catwoman* went at a breakneck pace towards completion. Although the film's scoring, sound, ADR, picture cutting, and visual effects were all happening at Skywalker, the crew moved to the Warner Bros mixing stage in Los Angeles when it was time to start the temp mix. In such a hectic environment, energy, enthusiasm, and additional adrenaline are necessary, especially for the man coordinating the ever-evolving picture.

"First and foremost, I stay connected with [sound designer/mixer] Chris Boyes," explains Hymns. "We need to work hand in hand, and closely communicate about everything. Pitof closely communicates with us, giving us all of his requirements, and in turn I stay very closely connected with Skywalker's Post-Production Manager, Glenn Kaiser. I also have a team of editors at Skywalker who are supplying material over FTP and through the new DigiDesign DigiDelivery network, and I'm always communicating with them to learn what stage they're at. I also have a team of editors in LA who I communicate with to make sure that everything is coming together every day."

Hymns likens his role to a dance, keeping everyone less than an arm's length away. "I'm just dancing in between all of those people, trying to make sure that nothing falls through the cracks," he muses.

### Condensed Schedules

Because of a late start for shooting, *Catwoman* was operating on a tight schedule to make the necessary July 2004 US debut deadline — thus the film's multitude of goings-on at Skywalker. Coupled with the condensed post-production schedule, Hymns claims that there have been many picture changes at this late stage in the game: "At this stage, most films are much closer to the final, just changing this and that. But because it's all going on at once, it can be difficult for us. A picture editor can make two splices in a scene, and they have

one track to do it on their Avid, maybe two. We have 150 tracks! So every time they make a 'quick cut' it's very labour intensive for us."

These last-minute changes aren't anything new for the Skywalker crew, though. "We've been experiencing this kind of thing for a while," says Hymns. "Because of this, we haven't for a long time – in dialogue, effects,



**Above: Richard Hymns, Supervising Sound Editor 'at the office'.**



**Left: Academy Award winner, Chris Boyes, the Sound Designer/Mixer for Catwoman, in the portrait studio...**

Foley, or ADR – put stuff on to Tascam MMR eight-tracks or the like. We literally cut to ProTools, make temp sessions and temp mixes, and keep cutting, expanding, and broadening everything. It's just a continuous stream of improvements rather than doing a pre-mix and declaring it done."

According to Hymns, such an approach is absolutely necessary for *Catwoman*. "As I said, on this film, it's never going to be done," he laughs. "The picture editing will be going on well into the final; ADR will be edited way into the final; visual effects are going to be arriving all the way through the final."

*Catwoman* will benefit from these methods, but simultaneously, expectations for creative scheduling will continue to climb. "That's the way the business is now," reasons Hymns. "People have very high expectations. In sympathy with the picture editors, it's the same thing, though. Their Avids can do anything and directors know that. As a result, they expect them to try everything, different cuts, in no time. It's a different world from the 35mm splicer days where you could only do so much. Now, there are no limits."

### **Foley Dress Code: Leather & High Heels**

For Foley artist Dennie Thorpe, working within a tight schedule is just a sign of the times. "There is almost no

such thing as a locked picture until it actually comes out in the theatre," she notes. "Because of the technology, you can make the changes. You wish they wouldn't keep throwing changes at you, but if they have the ability to do it, they're going to keep trying until the last minute."

Because of this, Thorpe – alongside *Catwoman* Foley partners Jana Vance and Ellen Heuer – takes meticulous notes. "I have always done that since the first time I did Foley," Thorpe explains. "If I'm working on a movie, a month goes by and they have made changes, I need to know what I used, where I did the sound effect, what someone was wearing, and so on, so it can match. That's how we solve our problems with last-minute changes. In the heat of the moment and because you're always racing the clock, you're going to go to where you know the best clicks and switches are, the best creaky metal, the slimy stuff, all those different worlds that exist. It's never a few things, it's hundreds of things. If you picked one of the hundred but don't remember which one, or the ones you combined, you're in trouble."

For *Catwoman*, Thorpe and her Foley team are in leather and high-heels daily – to recreate the sounds of *Catwoman* in motion, of course. "In this movie, there's a lot of leather," understates Thorpe. "We like to vary all the different types of leather; we have a buttery, sexier leather sound for *Catwoman*, then her love interest is wearing more of a standard leather. It all adds up to be really subliminal, but really important, details.

"When Patience turns into *Catwoman*, Ellen uses these really hot, sexy high-heels," Thorpe continues. "She's wearing these knee-high, high-heeled boots that are really hysterical. That's part of the fun with Foley; we decided long ago that there's just no dignity in it!"

Because of the physicality required to create realistic sounds through Foley, Thorpe reasons that no matter how advanced the rest of the audio post process gets, there will always be a need for artists such as her. "You can't do all of this without physically being in the studio, so I don't think we'll ever go away. People always ask me if it can be cut within the computer, and if it already exists somewhere. They're always surprised to hear that, no, it doesn't. It would take an editor probably five times longer to find all the sound effects even if they did exist in a library, and then they would have to cut each footstep, for instance, in sync and to get the nuances of each footstep. As a person walks, or runs, the emotional content of their bodies exists in how they hit the ground. Really, only we can recreate that."

### **Defining Feline Fidelity**

Chris Boyes – a seven-time Oscar nominee for his work in sound design and the Sound Designer/Mixer on *Catwoman* – has gone to great lengths to create unique sounds for this film. By following the defined stylistic direction of Pitof and acknowledging standout aspects of *Catwoman*'s character, Boyes is sure to perk more

than a few ears with his sonic approach.

The impetus for Boyes' sound search was the desire to place the audience between the ears of a human-turned-feline. In doing so, small things have seemingly grown larger than life. "There's a scene where Patience is in what you would call a re-birth," recalls Boyes. "She hears these seagulls far away, and because everything is enhanced in such a way, her brain doesn't know how to process these sounds because they seem to be right in front of her face. In reality, they're 800 metres away. In another instance, the same thing happens when she sees a spider. The spider's walking in the sand, and to her, it sounds more like it's a horse walking through the sand. Her brain doesn't know how to process who she's suddenly become.

"She hears things that a normal human being wouldn't hear, but the idea is that, as we all know, cats are incredibly perceptive creatures. She suddenly hears sounds that are very much 'real world'; we're not trying to put any bizarre sounds in the film, but we are treating real sounds in a bizarre fashion. It's an interesting situation as a sound designer because it allows me to pick various elements that are appropriate to an environment, but *play* them in a certain way that is inappropriate to the environment yet appropriate to this story. The challenge is coming up with what types of sounds these are; they can't just be sounds that live in an ambience. They have to be discrete sounds that I treat in such a way that explain the story of this woman who's re-birthed with these incredible senses."

Taking the audience inside Patience/Catwoman's head is also enhanced through Pitof's penchant to mix lots of discrete sounds to the surround channels. Also wearing his mixer hat on *Catwoman*, Boyes uses this to create a highly detailed soundtrack. "Pitof loves organised chaos," explains Boyes. "He loves to fill the world around you. He loves to show that the characters are in this scene, but beyond that, what exactly is this scene? If the characters are downtown, what are the myriad sounds of life downtown? Probably more than any other director I've ever worked with, he really likes to get those surrounds up and be very active in establishing environments and establishing emotional threads for the film."

According to Boyes, using the surrounds in such a comprehensive manner can be tricky. If it's done well, it can perfectly pull the audience into the scene's environment. If done poorly, it can be very distracting. "As a mixer, I love to use the surrounds," says Boyes cheerfully. "It's often a challenge to make sure that everything's heard though. Part of the argument in being very conservative with the surrounds is that you don't want to pull the audience's attention away from the screen. As a mixer, I have to be very careful not to do that and to deal with the surrounds in such a way that they complement the environment or help tell the story. At the same time, I have to keep the audience focused on the screen."

## **Whipping & Butt-Kicking**

When it came time to create the ideal sounds for *Catwoman*'s ever-present leather whip, Boyes went directly to an expert: a whip-wielding Australian stockman by the name of Colin Danguard. "As every good Catwoman should, she carries a whip," jovially explains Boyes. "And Halle is a mean and accurate whip master; she really learnt how to whip. For the sounds, a saddle shop here in West Marin hooked me up with an Australian who has a ranch out in Malibu. My assistant Beau Borders and I went up to his ranch to record him cracking this whip. He's a true master and he's been doing it since he was a kid living on a station in Australia. Only a few people know how to whip like that."

Boyes secured an analogue Nagra recorder to record the whip master, which he says is the only way to get the essence of the crack. "Part of the crack is a subsonic boom," he explains, "and I wasn't able to record the boom on DAT tape. What I would hear, and what I could record, were two different things. That particular sound seems to be one of those that digital tape just can't capture in the same way that we human beings hear it. Digital technology has brought us so far in sound post production for film, but there are still instances where analogue sounds better, and that's one of them."

Creating original impact sounds was also crucial to conveying the sonic nature of Catwoman. "Not unlike the accuracy of a whip, she's got to have very fast and accurate

kicks, hits and movements,” says Boyes. “I’ve come up with a varied library for all of those elements, sounds that are really fast. We don’t want it to sound like a kung-fu fight; we want it to have its own character and play off the fact that Catwoman is faster than lightning.”

According to Boyes, the hits are far from classic Hollywood-style punches. “She’s wearing high-heels, she’s dressed in leather, and she’s fast, so the hits need to feel sharp and focused. I’ve created a whole variety-pack of punches, and for some I’ve used high-heels on various different surfaces: stone, wood, pieces of meat, and punching bags. I took all of those elements, brought them into my Synclavier, and juxtaposed them with little vocal elements and little elements of breath, just to give them that ‘puhhh’, explosive nature with a sharp, focused sound.”

### The Evolving Voices of Catwoman

As production for Catwoman progressed, Halle Berry’s character evolved, especially with regard to her voice. Originally the idea was to have Catwoman speak in a very ‘cat-like’ way, but Boyes says the ultra-feline voice didn’t fit in quite the way they had originally envisaged. “At the beginning, she was going to have a lot of cat qualities to her voice,” he explains. “To some extent it was successful, but it didn’t really fit the character.”

As a result, quite a bit of ADR was in store for Berry, but that was no problem; Hymns is adamant that the cast of *Catwoman* has some of the best ADR actors in the business. “We’ve been really lucky. Halle Berry, Sharon Stone, and Benjamin Bratt are all awesome with dialogue replacement. They can do performance changes, they’re in sync, and we’ve been really blessed in that way. Not everyone is really good at ADR. It’s not really something you can learn; you either have it or you don’t.”

According to Boyes, his biggest challenge as sound designer was the creation of what he refers to as the

‘cat chorus’. “You can liken it to the dog telegraph in the original *101 Dalmatians*,” he says. “There’s a scene where a particular cat must call out to all the cats all around the city, and there is this incredible visual effect of a cat doing this three-part yell out to the city. I’ve done eight or nine versions of that to date.”

Boyes’ favourite ‘cat chorus’ was created using a nine-week-old kitten named Aretha, rescued from the Sierra Nevada area. “Aretha loves attention,” explains Boyes, “and if you don’t give her attention, she starts to howl. Because she’s a kitten, her voice has a sort of undeveloped, raw quality to it. When you slightly work with it in terms of pitch and frequency, it’s still very much a cat, but it’s very distinctive. I’ve blended that howl with various other cats such as a lynx to give it a guttural, deep, throbbing, in-the-chest quality. The director wants this call to be the equivalent of a mother calling out for a child that’s drowning. Not fear or anger, but like passion with a yearning. It’s very high-concept sound and I think that I’ve finally nailed it.”

### A Two-Part Job

Boyes is clear that when it comes time to mix, he hangs up his sound designer hat. Regardless of how much time he took to make each distinct sound – and he can certainly remember – it doesn’t matter anymore. He is attached to nothing but the big picture. “I mix from ProTools, and I don’t use cue sheets anymore,” Boyes explains. “They’re just in my way. While we’re pre-mixing or temp-mixing, I have the guys turn the names off in the files. At that point, I don’t want to know what the sound is – I just want it to be there and to work with it. I don’t become partial to anything.

“For me, it’s really a two-part job,” he continues. “As a sound designer, I bring something to the mixing world that’s unique. I know my tracks inside out. I know every sound, I know the theory behind each one and why we cut them, why we developed them in a certain way. By the same token, I have to be very judicious in how I use them. At the final mix, it becomes about how we are going to tell the story, and how these sounds play or don’t play a role. At that point in the final mix, the magic happens.”

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