

FEATURE

SOUND FOR

# TRANSFORMERS

Oscar-winning sound designer Ethan Van der Ryn reveals the aural secrets behind his sound design in disguise.

**Text:** Strother Bullins



► Robots from outer space interacting with human beings on Earth? It's a difficult one to get people to suspend their disbelief, but thanks to director Michael Bay's ingenuity and the sound design of Ethan Van der Ryn, *Transformers* makes the impossible plausible.

"Part of the key is keeping everything as real and believable as possible," Van der Ryn explains. "Visually the film is photo-realistic, so in terms of the sound, it's important to make it all believable. It has to be real, but more than real: hyper-real, you might say. That's the important part about getting all of these real hardware sounds. We must believe it and not question 60-foot robots transforming at 120 miles-per-hour. Because it looks real and sounds right, you don't question it when you see it. From there, you can just 'go' with the movie."

Especially in *Transformers'* multiple and cacophonous battle scenes, believable audio is important, explains Van der Ryn. "The movie is filled with them in nearly 12 huge set pieces," he says. "There are big battle sequences where you have full-on warfare happening between guys shooting guns, missiles, and grenades – real military technology that everyone knows how it should sound – and futuristic, sci-fi robots with all their own made-up technology that, of course, had to be designed from scratch. But that unreal technology had to fit into this realistic world while feeling different enough that, when there's so much stuff going on at once, the sound will help the audience know who is firing what weapon and who's doing what to whom."

#### FROM MIDDLE EARTH TO CYBERTRON

Van der Ryn, who's credited as the film's Supervising Sound Co-designer and Editor, became involved with *Transformers* following his involvement with two other notable Michael Bay films – *Armageddon* and *Pearl Harbor* – in which he served as Sound Designer and Sound Editor, respectively. Much of his previous audio work was done while on staff at Skywalker Sound – the idyllic audio production enclave in the rolling hills of Marin County, California – before he ventured off to New Zealand for what could be called the gig of a lifetime.

"I was in New Zealand for a few years [working with director Peter Jackson as the Supervising Sound Co-Designer on the *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy] and my name came up as a possible candidate to work on *Transformers*," Van der Ryn recalls. "Mike Babcock – a guy I knew through working on films in New Zealand – and I met with Michael Bay and producer Ian Bryce. [Van der Ryn and Babcock won the Oscar for Best Sound Design for their work on *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* in 2003, and again for *King Kong* in 2006.] Mike [Babcock] and I worked together as a team, where he handles all the dialogue and I supervise all the effects and sound design work. Michael [Bay] played us a bunch of animatics and we thought, 'Wow – this will be really cool.'"

#### GATHERING THE ELEMENTS

For a healthy portion of his own design work in *Transformers*, Van der Ryn returned to

Skywalker Sound and also headed for the field to record some crucial, unique audio elements. "I started working part-time on this project last August, going out and recording various elements that we knew we wanted 'fresh' for the film," he explains. "We had a unique opportunity because the US military had a special cooperation agreement with us. I was able to go to a couple of different Air Force bases to record some brand new military hardware – like US Air Force F-22 Raptor jets – which are pretty amazing. We were out on the flight line and recording them doing pass-bys at 50 feet. We went down to Kirkland Air Force Base in Arizona and recorded all the helicopters they have there over a span of five days. So, yes – we spent a lot of time in the field recording elements."

Next, Van der Ryn and his team addressed robot transformation and movement sounds. "We also worked on other sounds that could bring personality to the characters – less literal, more 'emotive' robot sounds," he explains. "After spending a few months just pulling our library and palette of sounds together, we started getting some rough animatics [soundtrack-synchronised pictures of the storyboard] through and pieced some key sequences together. We got those over to Michael to listen to and he got very excited about it."

By having such a collection of sounds ready to work with, Van der Ryn then hit the ground running. "On these visual effects films, I always think it's very exciting to get the sounds together; things start popping and coming to life. That was a key moment on this film; it allowed the soundtrack and the picture to really start developing together in a very organic way."

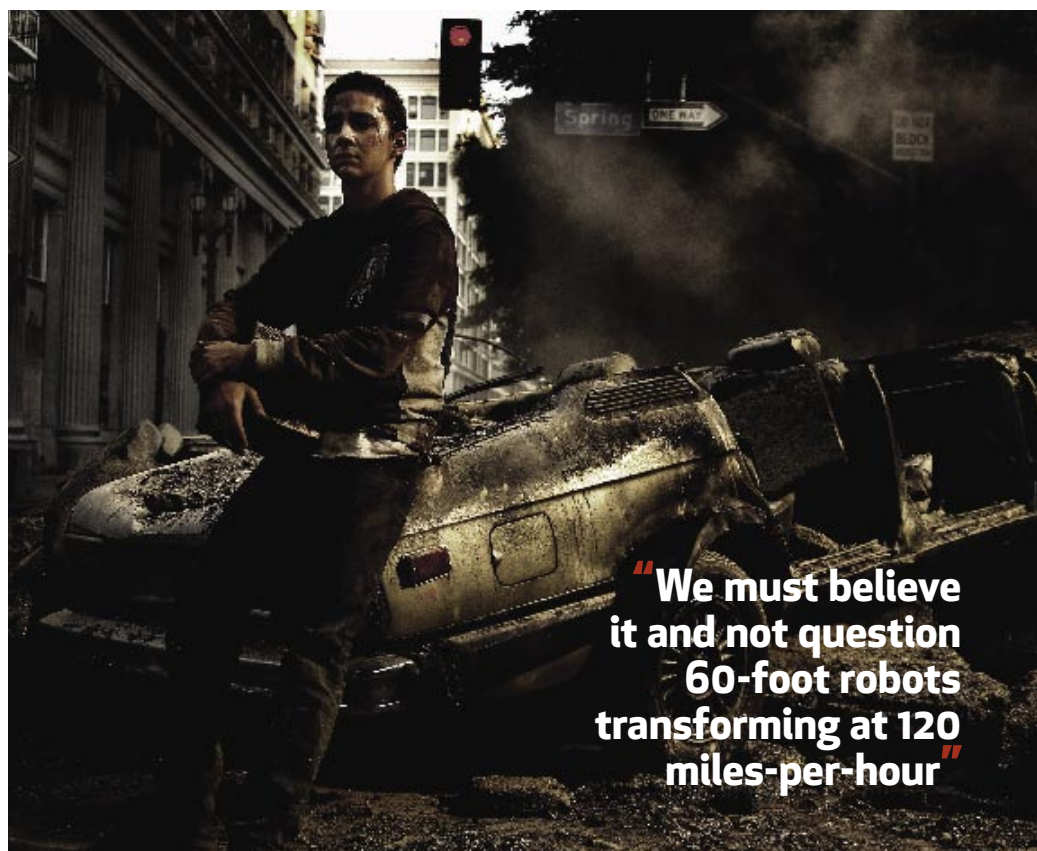
#### NOT A FANBOY BUT A QUICK STUDY

Van der Ryn confirms that he was never a *Transformers* 'fanboy' – a term generally used to describe a nearly obsessive devotee to a specific pop culture subject. However, he fully realises that there are more than a few *Transformers* fans that could be classified as such. In serving both those important viewers as well as the 'Cybertronically uninitiated', a bit of *Transformers* historical research and reasoned evaluation was in order upon beginning his job.

"No, I wasn't familiar with the whole *Transformers* world," he admits. "I went in with a totally open mind in terms of not having a lot of preconceived notions about what everything should sound like. But since I became involved, I've learned more about the history of it all and have really tried to incorporate as many details from the animated series [mainly 'Generation One' from 1984 to 1992] and the animated movie [1986's *Transformers: The Movie*] as possible into this soundtrack. We did find clever ways to incorporate bits of dialogue and songs into the track."

Utilising an updated transformation sound from the original animated series is a great example of a crucial audio element in *Transformers*. "One thing that all the fanboys would remember strongly from the cartoon series is the three-beat transformation sound," Van der Ryn explains.

"It was important for us to find a way to pay tribute to it. We actually found a way to incorporate it into two specific transformations in the film. The first is a big transformation that happens right up front. The sound from the cartoon is really small, so the challenge was to take this sound that feels too small for what's happening and use it in a way that's meaningful



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and works for the scene. Then there’s another scene where a cell phone is transforming; it was perfect for that sound and feels like the right size.”

An Autobot named Bumblebee also served as a particularly useful tool to incorporate other familiar sounds for close-listening fans, reveals Van der Ryn. “One of the characters – Bumblebee, who is a Camaro in this film – doesn’t have a speaking voice as such until the end of the film. For most of the film he speaks through his car radio. That provided all kinds of fun opportunities to incorporate different voices and familiar music into his non-speaking ‘voice’. The fanboy community will recognise a bit of a song that we’re using. They’re going to get a real kick out of that one... a little ‘Easter egg’ for them.”

#### **DEALING WITH DIALOGUE**

On the subject of dialogue for *Transformers*, two main issues were very important to Van der Ryn – character and clarity, both for the live actors as well as the voices of the various Transformer characters. “From the beginning, it has been important to me that these robots don’t sound like actors speaking into microphones,” he says. “However, it’s not always been possible to do that much to the voices. Some of the voices don’t really need that much anyway. Peter Cullen – the voice of [Autobot leader] Optimus Prime – has this incredible bass voice that we don’t want to do that much to.”

As is true in many big action films, the creation of extra aural space for dialogue in *Transformers* was often a necessity. “Yes, it meant carving other sounds away, whether it’s music or effects, so we can understand what people are saying,” Van der Ryn confirms. “There are some cases in big

battle scenes where dialogue is treated more like effects. If they aren’t saying anything that affects plot, we may just let it be part of the scene and the atmosphere. If it matters to the story, it means that we pull things away until the dialogue is clear.”

On the sound design side of dialogue, Van der Ryn balanced intelligibility and ‘coolness’ regarding robot voices, which regularly switch between speaking English and some sort of ‘Cybertronese’, if you will. “The bigger challenge dealt with the robots speaking English and how to make it feel cool, processed, and effected – like a big robot speaking – but also have it be intelligible,” he confirms. “By the same token, some of the robots will speak English, and then speak in an alien language that we have invented. I wanted to have a vocally-based alien language, but I found that if we keep it too vocal, you struggle to understand what they’re saying. I then started steering it away from vocal-based language to let it be clearly an alien/machine language.”

To differentiate between the Autobot and Decepticon voices, Van der Ryn pitted ‘good’, emotive voices versus an ‘evil’ machine-like energy. “In terms of their speaking voices, we’re being a lot simpler with the Autobots in an attempt to keep them more ‘human’ – it’s a subtle sort of thing,” he says. “We’ve come up with a set of sounds for each character that feel happier. The Decepticons have their sets too, which sound more ‘evil’. We wanted the Decepticons to have their own distinctive sound. What we went towards is a vibrating metal sound with a very evil, internal energy.”

### **CREATING AURAL IDS**

Van der Ryn was regularly faced with clarifying the individual identities of each robot character through signature sounds. After all, each of the robots can look quite similar while in robot form, he explains. “One of the continual challenges was how to make each character feel unique and different from all the others. That could be especially hard when you have them all together in one scene. What I said to Eric was: when people leave the theatre, I want them to be able to hear a sound from the film and know who it is – ‘Oh, that’s [Decepticon leader] Megatron!’ The idea of coming up with a palette of sounds to identify each character was important. We wanted the sounds to make clear who’s who. On the screen, it might be a little confusing because there’s all these big robots and it might not always be so clear who’s who from a visual standpoint. The sound helps tell the story.”

For both Autobots and Decepticons, many individual characteristics were determined by what one may be in vehicle form – a jet plane, a helicopter, and so on. However, casting soon helped further define the characters’ sonic signature. “Initially we sat down and tried to come up with different sounds based on what it was,” Van der Ryn recalls. “Then after the actors were cast, the voice roles brought a whole new dimension to the characters. We could play off of whatever vocal elements were brought to the character. Hugo Weaving was cast as Megatron, one of the leaders of the Decepticons. He has a distinctive voice, which becomes such a real part of the character. We could do so much with that character. Again, with the Autobots, it was based on their vehicle shape but also more of their personality. Bumblebee has a lot of little buzzy, cute sounds. It was all about examining the emotional centre of each character.”

### **MORE INTO MUSIC**

For *Transformers*, Van der Ryn had “a little bit more involvement with the music” than he normally does. “The fact that, for instance, Bumblebee speaks through his radio meant needing to incorporate little musical snatches into his voice. Beyond that, the music has sort of been a separate deal developing along a parallel track [of music composed by Steve Jablonsky].” Van der Ryn also regularly assisted Bay with music/no music issues. “When we’re looking at scenes with Michael [Bay], I may say, ‘let’s try playing this scene without any music for more intensity, then bring the music back here for more emotion.’”

### **MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE**

While sensitive to the desires of *Transformers* fans worldwide, Van der Ryn’s first priority throughout the project was to assist the film in standing on its own – regardless of the toy, comic and cartoon history behind the *Transformers* moniker. “I had a similar experience working on *Lord of the Rings*,” he remembers. “*LOTR* has this very intense fan base with a vision of what it should be. I think there is a strong sense of not wanting to let them down and staying true to the original work. But it had to work on its own terms. This is not a remake; it’s not a straight translation. You want it to stand on its own.” ■