

I'M THE SOUND EFFECTS MAN

HOW I WEARY AND PLAN

The above title is actually the first two lines of a song I used to hear on the radio as a kid.

It was quite a sad tale of the trials and tribulations of the person responsible for inventing and making sound effects, in this particular case for radio. At the time I hadn't quite realised that not so many years before it could also have applied to the cinema, and even before that, the theatre. The following article could be considered as a part of the history of today's sound designer.

PRE CINEMA SOUND EFFECTS

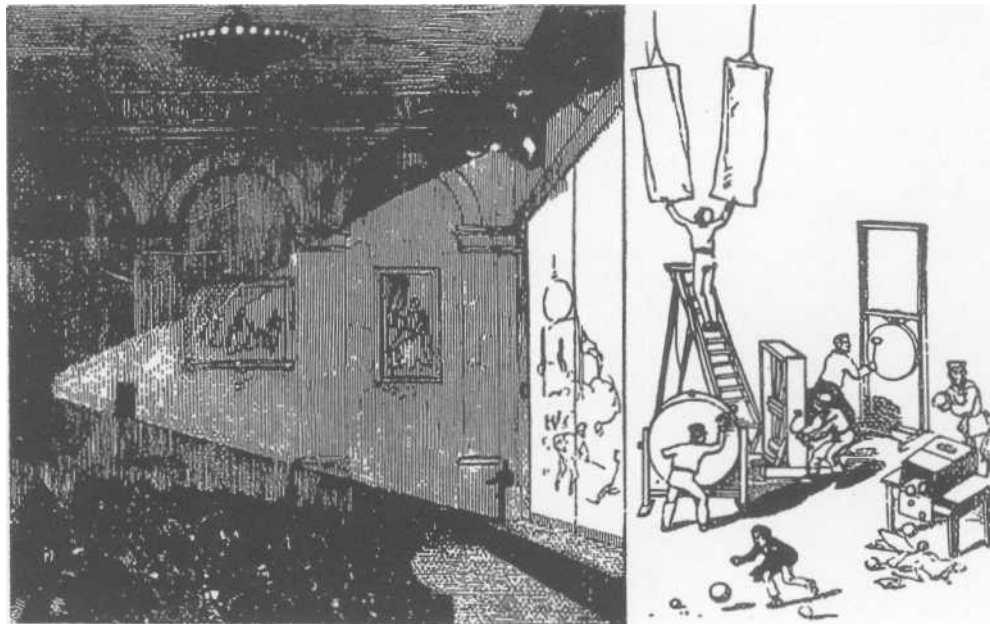
'Noises Off' had been used in theatrical production since the Middle Ages. The sounds of animals, battle noises, rain and especially thunder, were provided by a dedicated effects man.

ARRIVAL OF THE CINEMATOGRAF

The first moving picture shows were without sound accompaniment, except, perhaps occasionally with music or a lecturer. The Lumiere films were described by a critic as a soundless spectre and found street scenes disturbing, as there was no rumbling of wheels or sound of footsteps, not a single note of the symphony that always accompanies the movement of people.

When the Corbett-Fitzsimmons fight films were shown in Sydney (Australia) in 1897, the lack of sound effects was noted by a critic who commented that the two phantom pluggers plug each other without making a sound, and suggested if the management hung up a piece of beef somewhere and smote it with a bat every time a hit was made, it might make things more

realistic always provided that the beef was smite



Magic lantern shows, panoramas and dioramas of the early 1800s were also accompanied by sound effects such as wind, eerie voices, and the ever popular thunder. A cyclorama at the London Colosseum in 1840 presented a panorama of the Lisbon earthquake, depicting the ground heaving, the sea rising and buildings toppling. According to one observer it 'was accompanied by frightful rumblings, apparently from under your feet, which increased the horror and never was better value in fright given for money'.

The Siege Of Delhi at the London Royal Polytechnic was the 'blockbuster' of the 1850s. Up to six dissolving slide lanterns were used, projecting coloured slides on to a giant screen. A team of sound effects men working behind the screen provided what was said to be a symphony of terrific sounds that persons of a nervous temperament said were really stunning.

at the right moment.

In 1899, an American showman, Lyman Howe, was using sound making devices to accompany his film shows. *The Showman*, a British trade paper suggested in 1901 that sound effects, such as gunfire, would do much to improve a show. By 1905, Alfred West's *Our Navy* film showings were accompanied by sound effects. A reporter wrote of his look backstage, seeing the effects man who was perspiring with the incessant labour of making the sound effects.

When the Australian production *The Story Of The Kelly Gang* (credited as the first feature length story film) was premiered in Melbourne on December 26, 1906, live sound effects were added that included blank cartridge gunshots, pebbles shaken for rain, metal sheets wobbled for thunder and wind, and coconut shells for hoof beats.

By this time, film shows throughout the world were using sound

effects, as well as musical accompaniment. In October 1907, Kinematograph & Lantern Weekly, reported on the level of professionalism - 'wonderfully realistic sound effects are introduced. Two men are behind the screen doing nothing but producing noises corresponding with events happening on the screen. These sounds absolutely synchronise with the movement, so that it is difficult to believe that actual events are not occurring.'

A person skilled at making sound effects soon became an established staff member of cinemas. In Britain they were known as 'effects workers' or 'effects boys'; in the US a 'trap drummer'; in Germany a 'schlagwerker'; and in France a 'bruiteur'. A New York newspaper in 1910, described what a sound effects worker did - 'The trap drummer sits in the centre of an assortment of junk that would make an old curiosity shop look



An America Effects set-up using individual noise making devices (from 'The Lure (1/ The .1 loving Picture Shows'. New York Herald, 17 April 1910)

like an orderly proceeding. He is hemmed in by wedding bells, fire bells, sirens, whistles, tambourines, squawkers, cymbals, sandpaper, and a dozen other soundmakers.'

FIRST CUE SHEETS

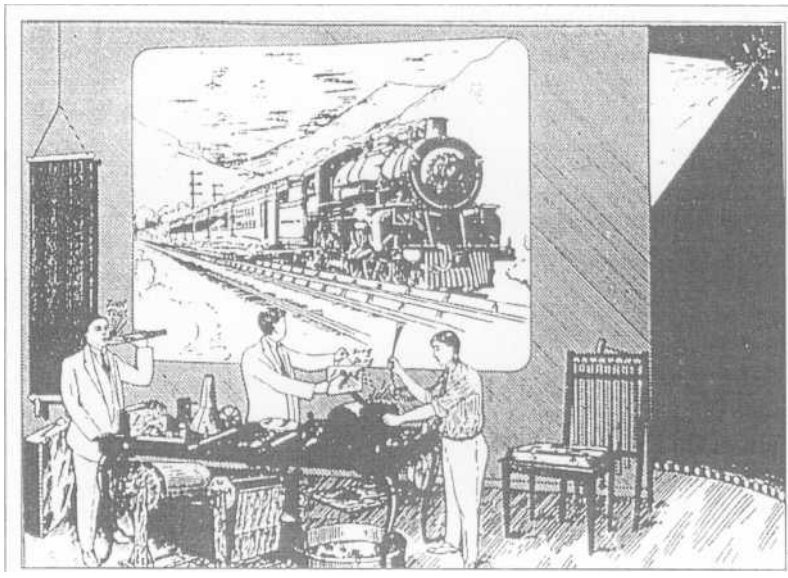
Showman Walter Jeffs made up a 'working plot' to guide his musicians and sound effects men for a 1902 film presentation of an

ocean voyage. In 1908 the Kinematograph & Lantern Weekly published a complete sound effects script for Charles Urban's film His Daughter's Voice.

NOISE MAKERS

In 1905, the Optical Lantern & Cinematograph Journal published an article on how to make devices to produce noises such as waves, thunder and marching noise, stating that such sound effects added much force to living pictures. A 1914 publication, Playing To Pictures, had a section describing how various sounds could be made using such things as sandpaper and a tin of dried peas for simulating rain or a train in motion.

Manufacturers very soon started to



Sound effects made from behind the screen in the United States, circa 1912 rising individual devices (from Paolo Cherchi Usai, Curator of [Olin, George Eastman House, Rochester, New York

make sound effects devices for those not prepared to make their own. They could be bought off-the-shelf fairly reasonably priced. In the USA, a 'baby cry' could be had for 75 cents, a 'cow imitation' for two dollars, and for much the same price a combination 'duck quacks - horse whinnie and snort'. The Film Index listed 30 sound effects devices that it considered essential for a small town show. By 1912 Besson & Co in Britain were marketing a whole range of sound effects, a full set of 19 cost .£4, and Hawkes & Son sold a couple of dozen individual effects for about two shillings (20p) each.

continued

SOUND EFFECTS MACHINES

Enter the French and the down grading of the sound effects man.

A French patent filed by Jean-Charles-Scipion Rousselot in April 1906, for a Meuble a Bruits de Coulisses (sound effects cabinet). Rousselot noted that using separate sound devices sometimes required up to ten operators, and the sounds were very often mediocre. He claimed that his invention would provide all required noises from one compact cabinet. including cars, bangs of Guns, anvils, saws, birds, bells, thunder, and horses hooves. Rousselot's machine, the 'Multiphone' was available in Britain in 1909. About the size of an upright piano and power driven, it offered 53 separate sound effects.

Rousselot's Multiphone was soon followed by another French machine manufactured by Pathe Freres which could imitate 50 sounds. This machine wasn't power driven and required the operator to manipulate handles and pedals, and cost £22. The British made 'Alleflex', very similar to the Rousselot cabinet in its functions, also appeared at this time.

Although the initial investment for any of the various sound effects machines that now began to come on to the market was quite high, between £ 20 and £100, they could be operated by one person with no great experience, even a lad just starting work. Thus a showman didn't have to be a genius to work out that he could do away with experienced sound effects men and employ a boy at 10 shillings (^) a week. He could pay off the machine's cost with the saved wages and so soon be making extra profit. How history repeats itself. For Alleflex at the beginning of the 20th century, substitute Avid at the end of the 20th century.

DEMISE OF LIVE SOUND EFFECTS

During the early 1920s, live sound effects Gradually disappeared. Audiences began to complain of inappropriate effects and the lack of operating skill. Cinema audiences had become more sophisticated as had the art of movie story telling. Feature films had specially written musical scores, to be performed by live orchestras. Sound effects would have been an intrusion and, without amplification, struggled to be heard over the sound of the orchestra.

However, live cinema orchestras were not all that long lived. Warner Bros 1926 production *Don Juan* with its synchronised sound-on-disc music score, put an end to them. But in that same film, the sound effects man snuck in, not live but recorded, making clashing noises for the sword fight thus proving that sound effects bring reality to an otherwise 'soundless spectre'.

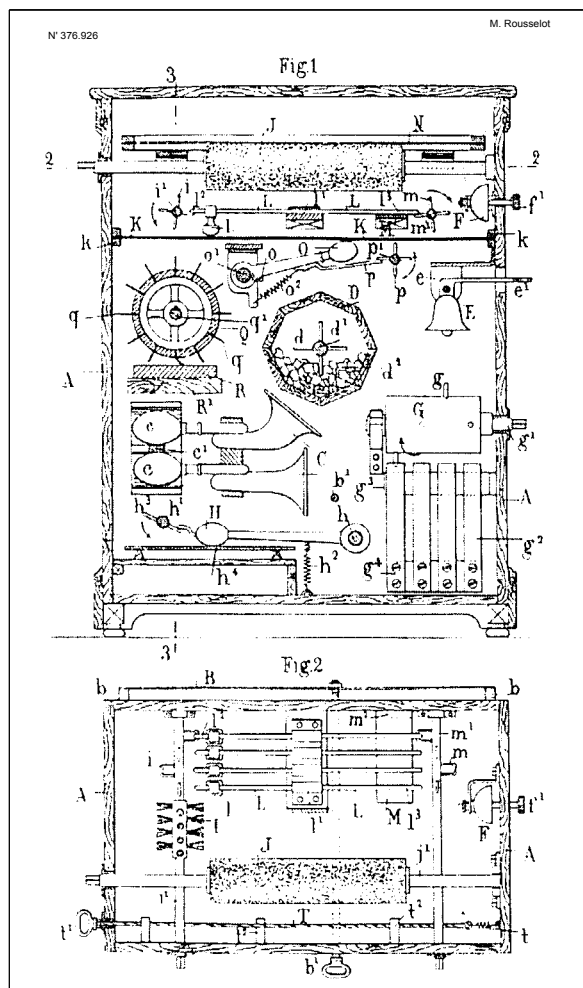


Diagram of the sound effects cabinet invented by Jean-Charles-Scipion Rousselot, from the French patent No 376,926 of 2 September 1907

Footnote: The words of the first verse of the song quoted at the start.

*I'm the sound effects man
How I weary and plan
I shut like a window
And slam like a door
I toot like an engine
And creak like a floor
For I'm the sound effects man*

The second verse starts with:

*I'm the villain that snorts
When the overdraft's due*

but I can't remember any other lines. I wonder whether anyone reading this has ever heard the song. If so I would like to hear from them. It would be great to trace the recording and hear it again

BOB ALLEN

(Based on an article by Stephen Bottomore published in the *Film History Journal* Vol II No 4)