



what does it sound like?

Creating voices for otherworldly robots, villains and foodie rodents is a real-world problem for sound editors and designers

Above left, the sound department for "I Am Legend" faced the challenge of creating a voice for a zombie; above right, the "Transformers" sound crew was tasked with making robots speak and creak.

By Todd Longwell

GIVING VOICE TO A ZOMBIE isn't easy. Just ask Skip Lievsay, the supervising sound editor/sound rerecording mixer on Warner Bros.' "I Am Legend." It wasn't just a matter of him coming up with some cool noises. He also had to determine how human their sound could be, as well as how to communicate a wealth of emotions and ideas without using words — a challenge compounded by the fact that the filmmakers had yet to finalize a look for the CG creatures when he embarked on the process during the film's production.

At first, Lievsay tried actors. An open casting call was held in New York, and 20-30 people showed up to put their best interpretations of the undead mutants on videotape.

"That helped us understand how far you can go with actors and led us to singers," Lievsay says. "So we did a number of sessions with death-metal-type singers. We called them 'pirate rock.'"

Eventually, they used the vocalizations of Mike Patton, former lead singer of the (non-death-metal) rock band Faith No More, combined with a variety of animals sounds, including those from elephants, lions, bears, pigs and dogs.

"We blended the sounds together in Pro Tools using a bunch of different software so it still carried the human aspect, but it was amped up a notch and more creature-y and believable," Lievsay explains.

Buttressing believability with sound in this manner is becoming increasingly important as films put otherworldly CG characters at the center of their plots, from the granular mutant Sandman in Sony's "Spider-Man 3" to the mythical medieval monster Grendel in Paramount's "Beowulf."

In DreamWorks/Paramount's "Transformers," supervising sound editor and Oscar nominee Ethan Van der Ryn and his crew had to find a way to give sonic character to the titular giant shape-shifting machines from outer space.

"They have to both be believable as huge, computer-driven machines, but also as soulful, living, breathing beings," says Van der Ryn, who has previously won Oscars for 2005's "King Kong" and 2002's "The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers." "What we did early on was sit down and create a sonic palette for each character that included physical movements that would sound different for every robot, as well as more internal sounds that would represent some sort of life force inside."

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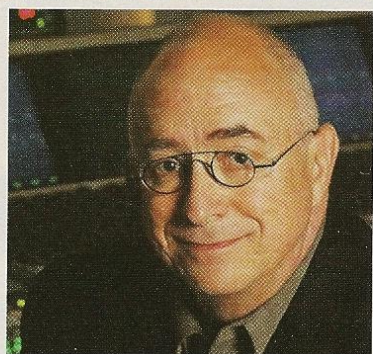
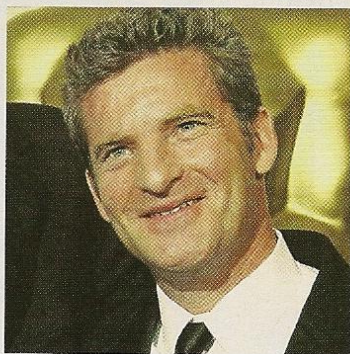
For the playful black-and-yellow Bumblebee, which initially takes the form of a Camaro, Van der Ryn's team used pitched-down recordings of car window servos along with the sound of a garden hose being stepped on, digitally manipulated to sound like data chatter. For the imperious Optimus Prime, who starts out as a semitruck, they built a sonic palette around big truck sounds, such as hydraulic break hisses and squeaks that were processed to resemble animalistic sighs and groans.

"We used a whole variety of sounds that we collected out in the world," Van der Ryn explains, "because a great way to make these machines sound organic and alive is to use actual organic sounds, but then to process them in a way that they begin to take on more machine-like characteristics."

In Disney/Pixar's animated "Ratatouille," Skywalker Sound sound designer/sound rerecording mixer Randy Thom's challenge was not to give animal soul to machines, but to put the audience into the animal world of a rat named Remy with a talent for the culinary arts. When Remy is scrambling through the restaurant, dodging giant human feet and soaring flames from the ovens, Thom gave the human footsteps earthquake-level bass, while stripping away the low frequencies and pumping up the highs on the rat footsteps to make them seem tiny by comparison.

The film establishes that the French rats speak English, but when an elderly woman discovers them raiding her farmhouse for food, the audience hears them from her perspective, speaking high-pitched gobbledygook: "rat talk." Thom and his Oscar-nominated crew created this sound by taking dialogue from the voice actors, chopping it up in Pro Tools, pitching it higher and rearranging it so it had the same pattern and flow as English, but was completely unintelligible.

"One of the great things about sound is that it's very malleable," says Thom, who won Oscars for 2004's "The Incredibles" and 1983's "The Right Stuff." "A sound designer's ear is always open in a way, no matter what the source, to a sound that might be usable or changeable in some way. It's a pretty intuitive thing. The main thing you need is to not think literally about sounds, just think about how sounds affect you emotionally." ■



Clockwise from top, Remy the rat speaks (and screams!) in "Ratatouille"; "Ratatouille's" "rat-talk" guru Randy Thom; "Transformers" sound guy Ethan Van der Ryn



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"Transformers" director Michael Bay will be honored at the MPSE's Golden Reel Awards.

raise the volume

Standouts in sound will be honored this month at the CAS and MPSE awards ceremonies

THE SOUND TEAMS are "the ears of the project, much as the cinematographer is the eyes of the project," says Cinema Audio Society president Ed Moskowitz. "This is truly a collaborative art form."

This year, the CAS Awards for Outstanding Achievement in Sound Mixing — which recognize rerecording mixers and production sound mixers — will be presented Saturday at the Millennium Biltmore Hotel.

Then on Feb. 23, the Motion Picture Sound Editors will present its Golden Reel Awards — recognizing sound editors — at the Wilshire Grand hotel.

Dennis Sands will receive the CAS Career Achievement Award. Sands' resume includes Oscar nominations for 2004's "The Polar Express," 2000's "Cast Away," 1997's "Contact" and 1994's "Forrest Gump."

Bill Wistrom — who's won six Primetime Emmys, including four in a row for his work on "Star Trek: The Next Generation" — will receive the MPSE's Career Achievement Award.

"Transformers" director Michael Bay also will be honored with the MPSE Filmmaker's Award during the ceremony.

— Carolyn Giardina