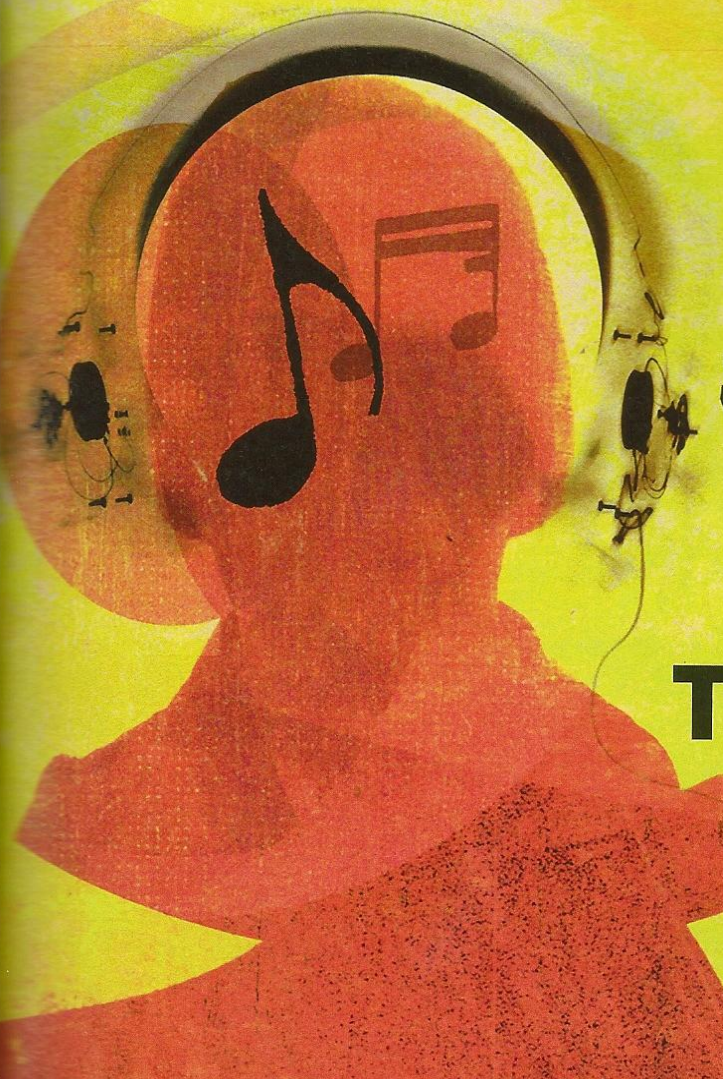
Sound Investments

With the major studios sparing no expense on technological upgrades, cost-conscious independent production facilities are struggling to compete

By Todd Longwell



The scene this past summer was said to resemble the classic 1939 feature "Gone With the Wind" after the siege of Atlanta, and the casualties were not soldiers but mixing boards, noise-reduction units, audio interfaces, components of Pro Tools suites and other high-end audio hardware.

The Saul Zaentz Film Center, an independent postproduction facility in Berkeley, Calif., that had hosted about 350 films — including best-sound Oscar winners "The Right Stuff" (a 1983 theatrical release), "Amadeus" (1984) and "The English Patient" (1996) — was being closed and stripped of its assets. For sound editor Nathan Gunn, the sight was not pretty.

"You walked in, and there was all of this equipment strewn all over the place — set aside, numbered and being photographed," says Gunn, then an assistant to director Terry Zwigoff on MGM's planned 2006 release "Art School Confidential," the final project to undergo postproduction at the SZFC.

The photos were posted on the Internet last month, and the equipment was auctioned off, eBay-style.

"It all went very cheaply, I think, and I remember how painful it was to acquire each and every piece," says former SZFC general manager Steve Shurtz, who worked at the facility for 20 years.

Meanwhile, 367 miles to the south in Burbank, vp postproduction services Kim Waugh proudly gives a tour of Warner Bros. Studio Facilities' new 52,000-square-foot, mission-style postproduction building, which boasts two feature rerecording stages with million-dollar AMS Neve DFC Gemini consoles, an ADR stage with a large talent green room, 12 sound-editorial/design suites and 12 DVD audio-mastering suites (each of the 24 suites features Pro Tools HD) and amenities including a lounge with a fully equipped kitchen, an outdoor patio with a Spanish-style fountain and a fireplace, bathroom and shower for each rerecording stage. Clients also are granted access to a concierge service.

"We've always had talent, and now we're the last major studio to have upgraded their facilities," Waugh says. "We've gone the extra mile, particularly in catering to clients' needs."

Such contrasting boom and bust scenarios are playing out throughout the industry. The major studios are making hefty investments in sound-technology upgrades, and therefore they are more eager than ever before to keep their film and TV projects on-lot and to attract outside projects that will keep their stages booked year-round. Simultaneously, though, the majors largely have been eschewing midbudget productions that once were the economic backbone of indie and boutique sound-post outfits, concentrating instead on big tentpole releases.

Secondarily, the majors are dabbling in the production and acquisition of low-budget films through such specialty divisions as Fox Searchlight and Paramount Classics, leaving the sound industry's "little guys" to battle over stray projects with nonstudio conglomerates such as Technicolor and Ascent Media, the latter of which boasts more sound-post facilities than several studios combined.

The trend has been especially cruel to the San Francisco Bay Area, which also saw the closure of Francis Ford Coppola's American Zoetrope postproduction facilities in December. The Bay Area film scene rose to prominence during the 1970s when Zaentz, Coppola and George Lucas constructed facilities to help carry out their independent visions, and many of the resulting films — including Coppola's 1979 classic "Apocalypse Now" and Lucas' "Star Wars" movies — were sonically innovative and breathtaking at the time of their release, earning the community cachet and mystique within cinema circles.

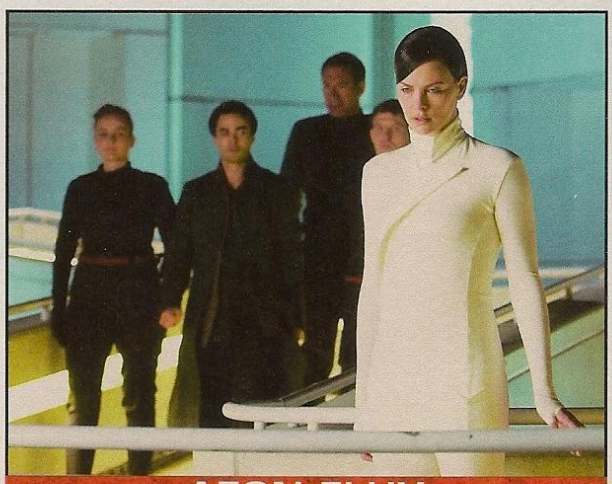
Lucasfilm's Skywalker Sound has hung around in the Bay Area, but even a facility with 18 sound and sound-editing Academy Awards to its credit is not immune to economic shifts.

"There are a number of projects that have finished in the U.K. in recent years that I reasonably expect we would have had a good shot at doing here at Skywalker, if they hadn't been forced to stay in the U.K. for the sale/leaseback tax break," Skywalker Sound vp and general manager Glenn Kiser says. "I

SOUNDING BOARD

Hollywood's leading sound designers weigh in on the challenges of breathing life into minotaurs, aliens, ghosts and Deatheaters

By Todd Longwell



AEON FLUX

Facility: Danetracks

Audio Rating: Sonic Evolution

Tune-in Notice: Four hundred years in the future, disease has wiped human life from Earth, save for several million persons who reside in a walled, repressive city-state.

How They Did It: "The technology of this future civilization is fluid-based rather than electronic, so we've taken water sounds and produced textures that suggest liquids but also have a nanotechnology component to them," says sound designer Dane A. Davis, who won an Oscar for his work on 1999's "The Matrix."

Animals thrive outside the city's walls, but it is not life as we know it.

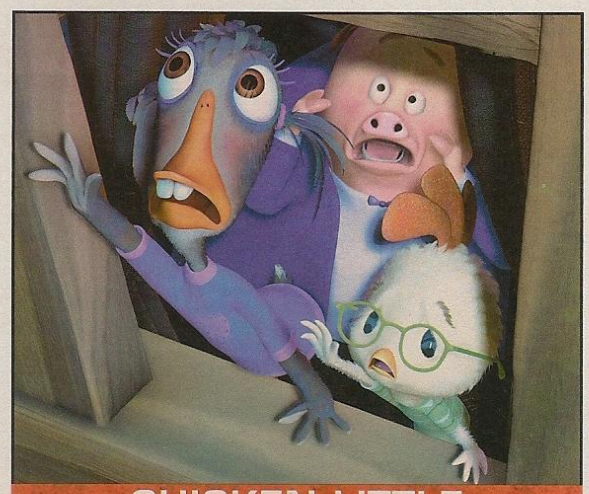
"It's like the families of creatures are familiar, but the specific species aren't recognizable," Davis says. "I had to approach it as if there were 50,000-200,000 years that had passed, instead of 400. Theoretically, evolution has accelerated because there is this huge imbalance out there."

To convey that, Davis and sound designer/supervising sound editor Richard Adrian reedited insect and animal chirps and calls and pitched them up and down.

"With a lot of the insect sounds, I'd take the space out between the chirps or repeat a little bleep at the end of a call five times, instead of what you'd hear in nature, which might be two repetitions," Davis says. "We were creating a whole new aural fauna."

Adds Adrian: "The crickets (and) the birds are less threatening inside the city than they are outside the wall. These people have created an environment that is comfortable to them, and they sort of force out anything that reminds them of the past."

Distributor/Release Date: Paramount/Dec. 2



CHICKEN LITTLE

Facility: Walt Disney Studios

Audio Rating: Cluckin' Otherworldly

Tune-in Notice: A self-camouflaging alien spacecraft reveals itself and descends upon Chicken Little and his friends, fish and fowl.

How They Did It: "I had a tonal quality for the spaceship as it's beginning to decloak," sound designer/supervising sound editor Robert L. Sephton says. "I used reverse humpback-whale cries and singing glass, where you (run) your finger (along) a wine glass and get these pure pitches. It almost becomes tornadolike, with the winds whipping up. Chicken Little and his buds don't really know what's going on: They see this light in the sky starting to spin."

Sephton was determined to use newly recorded ambiences when possible, but he dipped into his library for the occasional jet engine or hurricane wind.

"But I went in and changed the pitch, did some convoluted (reverberations) and folded it back within itself, so it never sounded quite like you heard it anywhere else before," Sephton says.

Sephton added a low-end rumble to the scene in which the aliens land and begin to disintegrate animals left and right.

"We just took some low-end thuds and added some (synthesizer) stuff to it, but a very light synth in the sense that I didn't go for a synthetic sound," he says. "You feel it more than you actually hear it. One of the things the director, Mark Dindal, loves when he goes to movies is that low-end sound that hits you right in the gut. It was our own little 'War of the Worlds' — it was so much fun."

Distributor/Release Date: Buena Vista/Nov. 4

conservatively estimated that over the last five years, we've lost over $20 million. That's a huge hit for us."

Skywalker has dealt with such realities by rethinking its work flow: The facility recently installed nine premix rooms in which sound designers and editors can adjust equalization, panning and 6.1-channel placement within a Pro Tools workstation environment that eliminates traditional predubs. Films thus are kept away from large, expensive stages until their final mixes, keeping costs down for big-budget movies and making Skywalker more affordable for low-budget indie productions.

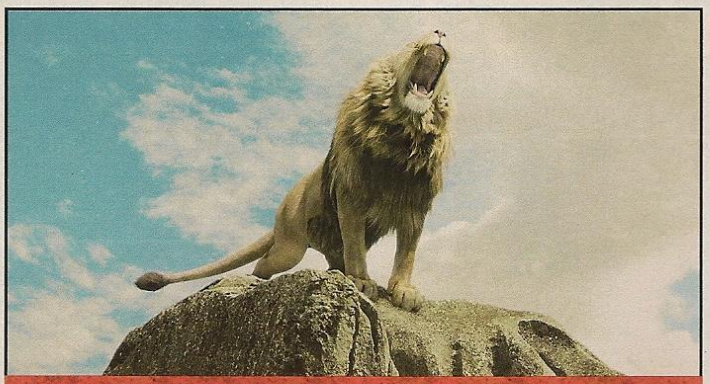
Kiser notes that Skywalker is dedicated to keeping its facilities several revolutions ahead of the state of the art, and the facility's reputation for excellence, as well as its beautiful location — on Lucas' Skywalker Ranch in rural San Rafael, Calif. — has kept it a favored destination for top filmmakers.

Not all studio filmmakers are allowed off the lot, though, and Gil Gagnon, vp postproduction services at the Walt Disney Studios, believes that keeping sound post in-house is good for creativity and efficiency.

"Our cutting rooms, sound editorial, screening rooms, dub stages and ADR are tied into the vaults in our media-asset management through a high-speed fiber network, all linked together and connected to a central machine room with a big 45-megabit pipe coming in from the outside," he says. "It is just flat-out easier to make your film in that kind of environment because it's a one-stop shop, as opposed to if you're disconnected and you're cutting in one area of town and dubbing in another area, and maybe sound editorial might be split off to yet a third location."

Fortunately for indie facilities, the major studios cannot afford to service all of their own projects. Film and TV production is a seasonal business fraught with peaks and valleys, so if a studio were to build enough stages to accommodate its peak output, then those stages would be dark for much of the year.

The major studios typically handle sound post on 50%-60% of their release slates. That figure has as much to do with artistic temperament as economics: A director wants to work with persons he or she trusts, and even a modicum



THE CHRONICLES OF NARNIA: THE LION, THE WITCH & THE WARDROBE

Facility: Walt Disney Studios

Audio Rating: Animals Personified

Tune-in Notice: The mythical wild kingdom of Narnia comes together en masse for an epic battle between combined armies of humans and talking animals.

How They Did It: "We used hundreds and hundreds of animal tracks to convey the impression of an army of 15,000," says sound designer/supervising sound editor Richard Beggs, who won an Oscar for his pioneering work on 1979's "Apocalypse Now."

"Narnia's" menagerie of growls, whinnies, purrs and padding paws is not necessarily 100% faithful to the creatures depicted onscreen.

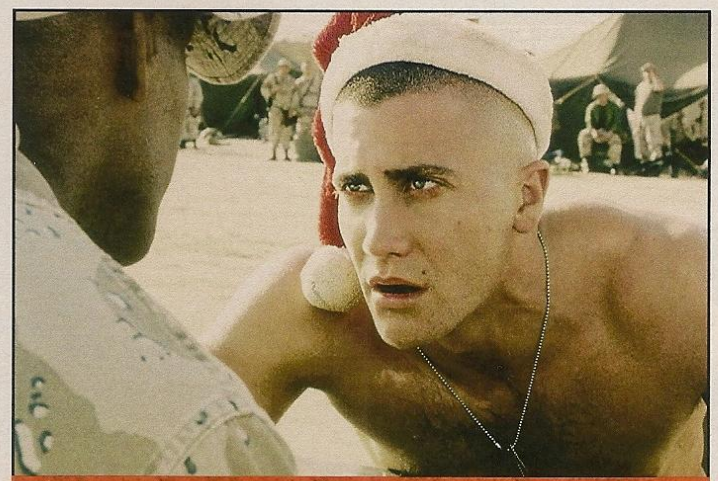
"Often, the real sound of the animal just doesn't live up to expectations in a dramatic sense, so you begin to cast about to find something else that conveys the intent so that the audience accepts it as believable," Beggs says.

For the film's minotaur — a ferocious bull-like creature that stands upright — real bull sounds proved inadequate ("The sad fact is that bulls often sound like very large cows," Beggs says), so those of jaguars, leopards and bears were added to the mix.

Beggs was determined to give the titular lion Aslan (voiced by Liam Neeson) an authentic roar and purr, and that meant getting up-close-and-personal with a real lion.

"It was on a leash that you'd have on a Chihuahua," Beggs says. "I was standing maybe 12 feet from this thing, and the trainer was waving half a chicken in his face and tweaking his whiskers to make him growl. I said to the trainer: 'I have another 25-foot extension for my microphone. I could sit in the truck where it would be easier to handle the recorder.' He said, 'No, you're fine right where you are.'"

Distributor/Release Date: Buena Vista/Dec. 9



JARHEAD

Facility: Skywalker Sound

Audio Rating: Blistering-Hot Destruction

Tune-in Notice: After the Iraqi army is annihilated during 1991's Operation Desert Storm, U.S. Marines travel the infamous "Highway of Death" leading out of Kuwait, surrounded by smoldering corpses and the hissing, twisted hulks of burned-out vehicles.

How They Did It: "We used everything from cookie sheets heated in an oven to a vintage (Harley-Davidson motorcycle) engine cooling down," sound designer Kyrsten Mate says. "I simulated tiny smoldering fires by manipulating tin foil. I was out in the desert recording ambiences, and it was very, very hot: I had some metal cans out there, and those were popping in the heat."

During the second half of the film, the sonic landscape is dominated by oil wells set afire by retreating Iraqi forces.

"(Director) Sam (Mendes) described the fires as sounding like dinosaurs moving under the earth, so we came up with distant grumbling, roaring sounds that suggested the intensity of the force of all those gallons of oil spewing into the air," Mate says. "Layered in the fire sounds are less-obvious elements such as leopard hisses, lava flows and industrial machinery — all things to express the force and heat."

To re-create the sound of raining oil, Mate recorded viscous materials (including vegetable oil, Karo syrup and chocolate syrup) dripping into tubs of dirt and sand, then layered multiple tracks of plops on Pro Tools and blended them with recordings of a heavy mist and sparse rainfall on mud.

"Rather than being a wash of elements, the sound design was driven by picking out distinct moments to play up," Mate says. "(It's) something Sam seems to do so well in his films: He is a master of utilizing the perfect sound over a wall of noise."

Distributor/Release Date: Universal/Nov. 4

THE FOG

Facility: Soundelux

Audio Rating: Death Plays Misty

Tune-in Notice: A quiet seaside town is engulfed by a deadly fog that carries the homicidal spirits of long-dead mariners.

How They Did It: Exactly what does fog sound like?

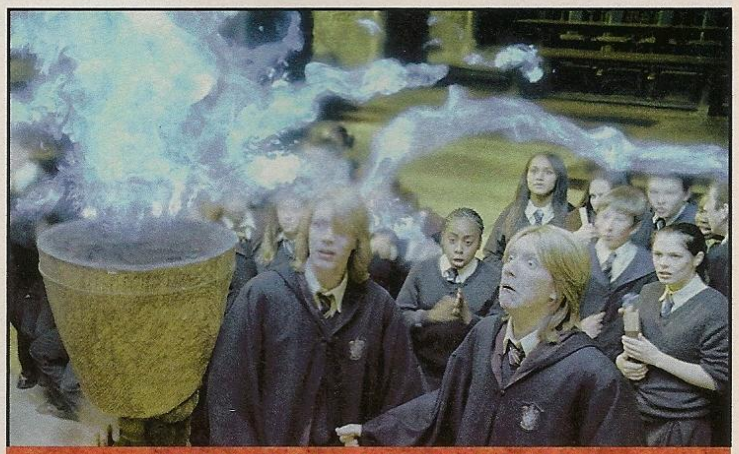
"It sounds like impending doom," says supervising sound editor Bruce Stambler, an Oscar winner for 1996's "The Ghost and the Darkness." "Something bad is going to happen."

The fog's signature sound in the film is a mix of wind, slowed-down rattlesnakes, whispers, screams, light rainfall and other elements orchestrated to give the floating mist character and a sense of movement. "There are a lot of voices in the fog, and it's a combination of the people who were killed (in the story)," Stambler says.

The primary challenge for rerecording mixer Jon Taylor was to balance the fog's sound with the film's musical theme. "If you heard that theme in (1975's) 'Jaws,' you knew that shark was coming, that somebody was going to get hurt," he says. "That's exactly the same thing they did with this (film). The actual theme of the fog is pretty low-end — almost like a heartbeat — so most of the sound design was a higher register so we could keep the two separated."

The fog's evil deeds are preceded by loud knocking. "We used a sledgehammer on the side of a house," Stambler says. "But that was just one element because it's a huge sound: It means the head ghost is here to kick your ass!"

Distributor/Release Date: Sony/Oct. 14



HARRY POTTER AND THE GOBLET OF FIRE

Facility: Skywalker Sound

Audio Rating: Organic Abracadabra

Tune-in Notice: Fireball-throwing Deatheaters descend upon an encampment of good wizards and wreak havoc.

How They Did It: To materialize Deatheaters, the film's sound team — led by supervising sound editor Dennis Leonard and sound designer/supervising sound editor Randy Thom — used a collage of wind sounds. Terrified screams, Latin chants and other crowd noises were recorded on a decommissioned Royal Air Force base north of London.

Other sounds were more mundane but equally challenging to derive. "Coming up with atmospheres is difficult," says Leonard, who also worked with Thom on 2002's "Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets." "The Scottish Highlands, where (the wizard school) Hogwarts is, is pretty devoid of insect life. What we typically would cut for a night scene would include crickets and cicadas, and they don't exist there."

For geographically correct background bird sounds, the sound team turned to Cornell University's library in Ithaca, N.Y. "They make recordings for scientists who are studying birds, so they are incredibly meticulous," says Thom, a two-time Oscar winner (for 1983's "The Right Stuff" and 2004's "The Incredibles"). "You can call them and say, 'I need a songbird that would live in Wales that would sing early in the morning whose voice will make you feel better,' and they will scurry around and find you half a dozen candidates for that."

Distributor/Release Date: Warner Bros. Pictures/Nov. 18

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of power will allow him or her to get their way. A given studio, therefore, is nearly as likely to be hosting a competitor's film on one of its mix stages as it is one of its own.

"It's not the equipment; it's the people, the talent," says supervising sound editor Michael Kirchberger, who works in six rooms boasting a combined eight Pro Tools workstations at the former Zoetrope facility. "Thank God some directors still know that."

There exists an argument — controversial to some, blasphemous to others — that given today's advanced PC-based digital sound recording and editing equipment, a film's design, edit and final mix can be handled in a small-room or workstation environment. Kirchberger believes in the abstract that a movie's final mix should be done on a large stage that simulates the exhibition environment, "but my experience tells me something else," he says. "With enough aural experience, you don't need that."

In the music arena, the proliferation of affordable PC-based multitrack recording programs has led to the demise of many top recording studios, including the February closure of New York's Hit Factory.

It is conceivable that coming technological advances in cinema sound will have a similar paradigm-shifting effect — placing independent contractors on top and expensive new studio facilities in mothballs — but don't cry for the major studios just yet. The sound divisions at Universal and Warners derive a big chunk of their business from restoring and remastering films and TV shows from their vast catalogs, as well as those of third parties, for the DVD market. They also have emerging divisions dedicated to video games (as does Skywalker).

"The traditional 1950s legacy studio operation, which was sound mixing and then maybe packaging and some sound editorial, is probably a quarter of our business," Universal senior vp sound services Chris Jenkins says. "We do more in digital mastering and soundtrack restoration than we do in feature filmmaking now."

Coppola and Zaentz no longer lord over personal production empires, but their maverick spirit lives on in younger directors such as M. Night Shyamalan and Robert Rodriguez, who have built private state-of-the-art sound editing and mixing facilities in their respective home states of Pennsylvania and Texas.

"Even though right now a larger percentage of work has gone back to the studios, it's much easier to compete with them, compared to when you used to need a 35mm projector and dubbers," Kirchberger says. "Now, you can have a good video projector and Pro Tools, and it's what they've got. The studios will have good stuff that I can't afford, but we can give more bang for the buck than ever before." ■