Chris Munro

He's ushered in the use of new technology on blockbusters and remains passionate about the part it plays in defining workflow efficiency in the production process. ROB JAMES talks to Chris Munro about keeping ahead.

SOUND RECORDIST, FLOOR MIXER or production sound mixer, whatever job title you choose, Chris Munro has an IMDB entry that reads like a 'recommended film' list. Just a few examples from recent years; Van Helsing, Black Hawk Down, both Tomb Raiders, The Mummy, no less than three Bond movies and, moving away from the blockbuster theme, Kevin and Perry Go Large, Smilla's Sense of Snow and Chocolat.

You might think this would more than occupy his time, but Chris is also a director of Twickenham Sound Station, a rental company for film and television postproduction equipment. He is also deeply involved with design and support of the Fostex PD-6 DVD-RAM location recorder.

He recently finished the location recording for Sahara and is about to start work on Where the Truth Lies, directed by Atom Egoyan, in Toronto. Even in this short break Chris is far from idle. When I caught up with him he was in an ADR session at Twickenham Studios for his first short film as co-writer and director.

You're a very busy man, what's the secret?

I started in the late 1960s, so if I haven't got the hang of it by now, I never will. It's also a matter of keeping up and, more than keeping up, keeping ahead. Producers are looking for experienced people because they don't want to take risks but they also want to use the latest innovations. I was one of the first people in the UK to start shooting feature films on DAT and similarly early with non-linear.

Has location recording changed as quickly as post?

I think you go through revolutions. When I set up Sound Station with Gerry and Dean Humphreys back in 1989, sound editors mocked us saying DAWs would never catch on. When we changed over to DAT, people said, 'Oh it'll never work, it won't sync' and all sorts of nonsense. In the end, it was the producers who decided and they couldn't afford to stick with analogue methods. It became a matter not just of quality but efficiency.

The real advance is that we can do a lot more work for the editor. We are in multitrack, so we can provide a mix in mono or stereo, but the great thing is we can also provide separate components. I work in 6-track format on my PD-6 so track one is a mix and all the other tracks are either components of the mix or additional items. For example, we're shooting in a city apartment. I would put another mike on a separate track in another room so it's clean of dialogue but is getting the same background noise, synchronous with the dialogue. So, should a motorcycle go past on the selected master shot, you can take it across the cuts on the close-ups. Although multitrack means more work for the mixer there is a better chance that your work will be used to it's full potential.

Almost every editor and director I know hates ADR. Nonlinear multitrack recording is unquestionably helping to preserve more location sound.

Does the editor import all six tracks?

We usually give the editor the mixed track to work with and put the other tracks in a bin for each scene. When the sound editor starts work, because he's taken an OMF, a lot of the mixes in it will be used at the final mix.

Dialogue editors often have a thankless task. They're taken on at the last minute when a preview is needed by the end of the week, then asked to listen to the cutting copy and come up with a list of what ADR is required. In older workflows, the sound was often digitised from a Beta SP, so it sounded pretty bad. All the dialogue editor could do was mark up anything that sounded doubtful. This resulted in a lot of unnecessary ADR. With the multitrack production

sound in the picture Avid at full quality you can immediately judge how good your sound is and look for alternatives and 'fixes' early on. You don't have to run down the corridor looking for somebody who might have 'that DAT'.

How has the workflow altered?
We do a lot of 'mag-less' dailies. The workflow for Sahara is interesting because it's an HD one. The reason for going to HD is because the previews have become so important. On a big special effects film you don't want to preview with a lot of 'green screen'. They don't ever go to an answer print. They use 4k scanners and print back to film from that. But with HD dailies the DP isn't seeing what the film really looks like. So, a certain amount is printed on film. They usually do a rush print of the last take of every shot or maybe just the master shot and watch those on an Arriflex portable projector, which DPs like because they know what it should look like.

For editing, we down-res the HD directly to an Avid hard drive. The audio is imported from DVD-RAM and synced up within the Avid. No timecode, all clappers. Very, very fast and very accurate. There is no advantage to using TC as long as you have someone with an ounce of sense. Another good thing is this makes the editorial department responsible for sync, as they always were in the past.

Did you feel 16 bit was a limitation?
The quality of DAT versus Nagra was certainly an issue. What finally settled it was that DAT was far more efficient in post.

Nonlinear acquisition has moved us up a bit, a lot of people are using 24 bit now although most are sticking with 48kHz. I was prepared to stay with 16 bit while Avids could only cope with 16 bit. It was more important to keep the advantage of not having to conform the dialogue later. But now Adrenalin has 24-bit capability and even when the editor is still using a Film Composer, Gallery's Metaflow makes it trivial to substitute 24-bit media for 16-bit media in Pro Tools, Pyramix can do it too. There is now no reason not to shoot in 24-bit.

Do you feel secure working with nonlinear?
The first thing I wanted was removable media so that at the end of the day you handed something over to editorial and that was the master. I'm very confident with it now so I rarely do a copy. Having said that, the PD-6 now has an internal hard drive in addition to the DVD-RAM disk and there is also a docking station with a full size DVD-RAM disk and another 40Gb internal drive. This is most commonly used in mirror mode, which makes it easy to do a safety copy onto a second DVD-RAM. Although I don't believe real back-up is just another record medium. You need a second recorder and power source.

What about interchange?
AES 31, XML and all the other various flavours are great but, if Avid don't adopt them, they are meaningless as far as I'm concerned. I think MXF will eventually kill AES 31. It looks likely that Avid will take on MXF and that means Digidesign will too. Avid is moving rapidly towards the PC with Adrenalin and I'm seeing this a lot, because of Final Cut Pro and so on, I think we are seeing a teaming up with Microsoft and this will help the flow of metadata.

What's changed in the world of microphones?
The old 816 gun-mike is still a useful tool. Sadly, it seems noisy now. I use later Sennheisers, primarily because of their durability, sadly with phantom powering. We often record in environments where self-noise is immaterial and the older T-powered mikes are far more robust.

People often choose microphones for the wrong reasons. They may be beautifully rounded, but if they don't reject enough of the background they don't

work for me. The top and bottom is going to get chopped in post anyway so why record it? I'm not looking for reality, I'm looking for intelligibility and I'm looking for consistency. I use the 50 and 60 series primarily, with Neumanns as spot mics because they are easy to hide.

How about personals?
I tend to use Sankens although recently Sony ECM 88s. They are much more robust than the Sankens, and also very good at rejecting clothing rustles.

How do you judge what you are recording?
Something a lot of people don't understand is because something sounds a certain way on headphones

doesn't mean that's the way it sounds. Sadly I think a lot of sound mixers are rather insular, they are only thinking about the way it sounds in their headphones. That's why I like to spend a lot of time in the studio listening on speakers. It's easy to be misled by headphones.

Do you use EQ?
I've always struggled to find a mixer I like. I use a pretty much 'home-made' mixer. One of my crew, Jim McBride, did this one for me. I have almost no EQ on it. There's bass cut but very little EQ. I don't believe in the idea of EQing on location, especially through headphones. The rerecording guys have to chop off even more top and bottom just to make the whole
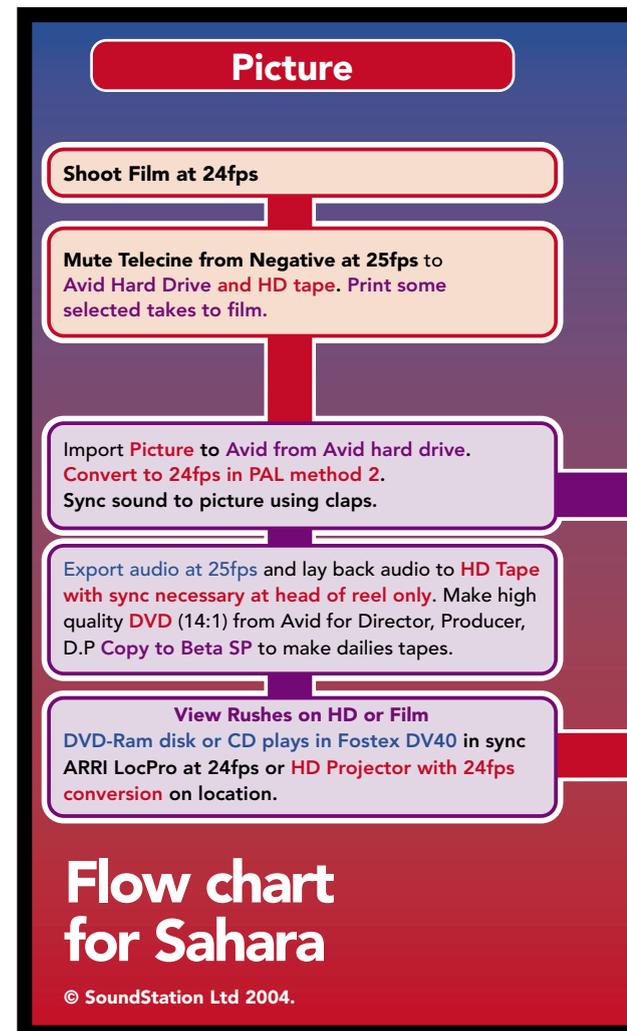
thing match. People who do it think they're being helpful but they are actually causing damage.

Have your effects recording methods changed?
For big crowd effects, I put some surrounds out, leaving the rerecording mixer to place them. A chatter track of a 100 crowd recorded with four or five microphones can sound vastly different to standard stereo.

On Sahara, there is a big boat chase. Using multitrack recording I could place six microphones on the boat. A Crown PZM in the engine compartment, 416s near the exhaust, the bow, astern, the side and I had one overall MKH50 up high. Then we recreated some of the manoeuvres. The beauty of this is that the sound editors can lay those tracks to match the pictures so much better. They can use the same take mixed in a different way across cuts. So you get continuity of sound but with a different perspective as the shot changes. I'm about to do a gunshot session for Sahara the same way.

A pretty insensitive microphone up near the gun to capture all the mechanical noise, I use a lot of 'disposable' microphones, the cheap Chinese dynamics. Having said that, I also have an old STC 'Ball and Biscuit', a very useful microphone because it's so insensitive. Another microphone gets the bang, another for the ballistic crack, another at the target and another a bit further away. Then, the only alteration I make is changing the target. We shoot at sand, steel and concrete. Within the 6-channel file, you can mix to give the effect of incoming fire, outgoing fire or crossfire.

Picture

Shoot Film at 24fps

Mute Telecine from Negative at 25fps to **Avid Hard Drive and HD tape**. **Print some selected takes to film.**

Import **Picture** to **Avid from Avid hard drive**. **Convert to 24fps in PAL method 2**. **Sync sound to picture using claps.**

Export audio at 25fps and lay back audio to **HD Tape with sync necessary at head of reel only**. Make high quality **DVD** (14:1) from Avid for Director, Producer, D.P **Copy to Beta SP** to make dailies tapes.

View Rushes on HD or Film
DVD-Ram disk or CD plays in Fostex DV40 in sync **ARRI LocPro at 24fps** or **HD Projector with 24fps conversion** on location.

Flow chart for Sahara
© SoundStation Ltd 2004.

Do you use hydrophones?

I tried one that's basically a loudspeaker that runs in reverse, but it hasn't worked for me. I use an old AKG D109 lavalier in a condom. I often put it in a bit of plastic tube as well. Getting a good underwater sound is something I've spent a lot of time on, especially with the Bond films and all their underwater sequences.

What is it like doing a Bond film?

Tomorrow Never Dies was the first one I did and the first done digitally. I was taken on because of that. They wanted to work digitally and to cut their postproduction time by half. They didn't want to print any film, although they did in the end, and they wanted to do a digital preview. Up until Goldeneye, on many British films they were happy to use a lot of ADR. In the 1960s and 70s some directors even thought they could improve an actors performance by using ADR. On this new series of Bond films, of which I've now done three, they want to preserve more and more original sound.

How does that work with the big set pieces?

It works well because it's a very good working relationship on the Bond films. The special effects department will say, 'We've got this effect and it's going to make a bit of noise, what if we did this or that, would it help?' On some films you turn up and you're told, 'Well it's noisy and that's the only way we could do it.'

How do the 'quieter' films differ?

There is a common perception that people don't worry about location sound on action films. This just isn't the case. The great thing about dialogue films is there is more time to focus on performance, sound and delivery. In action films everyone is focussing on so many things it makes the job harder.

Do you still have any unfulfilled ambitions?

I would actually like to spend a bit more time at home. I've spent over 30 years watching directors and I've always had an interest in writing. I have just written, directed and produced a short film. I don't necessarily think that is where my future lies though, it was just something I wanted to do. John Parr wrote and produced it with me. This film has some very original music by John. We've had a lot of interest in previous scripts, so we thought, let's produce something ourselves and see if that helps the writing side. But it's all done more for enjoyment than for a career thing.

But isn't that the secret of this entire industry?

It probably is. You do it because you want to do it. I started at 16 and there is a lot to be said for that. My intention was always to be more on the production side, but when I went for the interview they offered me a job in the sound department. I took that as a way in. They could send me off to repair a Moviola or something and the chances were I knew what was wrong with it. That was why I stayed. Because I guess I proved useful. ■

Sound

RECORD 4 TRACK or 2+4 TRACK AUDIO on FOSTEX PD6 to 8cm **DVD-Ram disc in BWF**. Track 1 is for cutting copy sound and dailies mix. Other tracks will have discrete elements of the mix recorded 'pre-fader'. This allows picture editor to cut with only 1 track of production sound and have access to all other tracks. Note that Film Composer can only import up to 4 tracks per file. For 6 track recording file is split into 2 files (2+4). Files names are slate numbers. In 2+4 mode the 4 track file is identified by + in the file name. E.g. 123A+001 while the 2 track file name would be 123A_001. Audio is recorded 48kHz/24 bit Film Composer will import at 16 bit only.

IMPORT AUDIO Files to AVID using firewire DVD-Ram Drive (LaCie drive recommended) 1 hour of audio takes about 6 minutes to import. **No logging required**. Each take is a separate file. Clips are automatically named with slate/take number. Track 1 used for editor and other tracks placed in separate bin for each slate. **Do NOT delete other tracks or non-select takes.** Copy files from DVD-Ram disc to additional FireWire Hard Drive at 24 bit directly from disc NOT from Avid which is only 16 bit.

Editorial dept blind sync to print. Having made an audio sequence export in BWF to DVD-Ram disc (full size type ll) or CD-R. Separate file for each reel TC starts at 01 Hrs on every reel with 12ft start.

Export audio to Sound Editors by OMFI. They are able to access edited picture and audio and commence sound editing having access to all 6 discrete tracks at digital quality without having to conform original audio. Spotting for ADR is possible without reverting to original recordings. Use METAFLOW to link to 24 bit files and multitrack files in Pro Tools working at 24 bit.