



## Glenn Freemantle

Unlike writers and directors, sound editors cannot afford to confine themselves to one or two film genres if they want to keep busy. Glenn Freemantle talks to **KEVIN HILTON** about the changes he has seen in technology, what he feels it takes to be a good sound editor and how to turn insects into helicopters.

**E**VEN WITH THE IMPERATIVE to bring in different work, Glenn Freemantle's filmography is impressively diverse. Since moving into film as assistant dubbing editor on *Yentl* in 1983, Freemantle has worked on films such as *FX — Murder by Illusion*, *Hear My Song*, *Spice World*, *Bridget Jones' Diary* and its sequel, *Iris* and *Thunderbirds*.

Even an ongoing working relationship with director Danny Boyle has resulted in such different films and soundtracks as *The Beach* and *28 Days Later*. Now a supervising sound editor responsible for the sound design of many big budget films, Freemantle has his own company, Reel Sound, founded in 1994, operating out of offices at Pinewood and Shepperton studios. Starting out in the days of analogue soundtracks, Freemantle is only in his forties but has seen many changes in how the business works and uses technology.

**What do you think the main technology changes have been during your time in the business and how have they influenced your work?**

When I started, everything was on magnetic film stock, which helped in learning what film was about because it was such a tactile medium. It was also a time when people starting out in the business had a chance to work on every element of the process, so you got experience of Foley and ADR before you eventually become a supervising sound editor. Nowadays people seem to jump straight in, which is due partly to the power of modern technology and its general availability.

The technology is wonderful and I wouldn't want to go back to how we used to work but it was great to come through that whole process, which should be part of the cut and thrust of the job. It's not just

about the technology, there is being able to feel things as well, knowing when something works. If you can please yourself and meet the standards that have been set for you, you're half-way there. Terry Rawlings, who is better known now as a film editor but who used to work in sound, said to me that if something bothers you in the cutting room and you leave it, it will hit you in the face in the theatre.

As a sound designer you start to develop an instinct for sounds. It's as though you begin building a library of effects in your head, which you add to as you walk down the street or hear things on holiday. I was in Lanzarote once and heard an insect, which, due to the Doppler effect, came and went and was difficult to pin down in terms of location. I've since used that sound to create tension. Sound is a tool that can create suspense and different moods — it's not just about crashes and bangs. Some of the most difficult films to work on are those where it seems that I've done the least amount of work — but, in reality, I've done the most work to create the different layers, which all convey an atmosphere.

**How does a sound design come about?**

It's got to come naturally. I talk about the job with the director and most of those I've worked with will have ideas but they won't put a reign on any of my proposals. I'll run through thousands of things but you've got to be able to sort out what works and what should be there. I don't like to go for the obvious and a scene will always be made up of different sounds, not just one.

The cinema chains are now partly selling themselves on sound systems, with Dolby Digital and THX. These are standards and the public knows what to expect from theatres that have those systems. We've moved on a great deal from 20 years ago and the days of Dolby A, through Dolby SR. Directors want their films to sound great and there is general expectation for scenes where there are things flying over the heads of the audience.

**Why did you form your own company?**

It was an opportunity to build a permanent facility with the kind of equipment that was being used throughout the industry. I had been working on DAR [workstations] at places like Twickenham and then began moving towards Avid. *Wild West* [1992] was among the first films with an all-digitally postproduced soundtrack and we did that on DAR. Everything has moved on a great deal since then but I wasn't sure at the time if we were actually moving forward. That was only because I had got so used to doing things one way and then had to get used to a new way of working.

Among the different things we had to get used to was the increase in the amount of material and the different sources we could work with. Mixes are more complicated than they've ever been, partly because everything in the mix is discreet. Now we have a wealth of material, with hundreds of thousands of tracks available to us. At Reel Sound now we have Pro Tools, predominately the Nubus but still with a few PCI units.

I love mixing in big rooms and I like it when the sound editors work with the dubbing mixers as a team because I want the mixers to be involved with what we are doing. The mixing process creates an atmosphere and an energy. Working for what is on that silver screen has to be good for anyone's ego. I think it's also good if the director sees that everyone is working for a single purpose. It also helps in

producing a great end result, which goes towards getting the next job, not just from that director but if word gets around.

Even though I've created a situation where I am the leader, I still need a great team around me. I may come up with the concept for a sound design but the team helps create it. I've trained people up and everyone knows what they're doing and now quite a few have gone off on their own and made a name for themselves.

**You've developed a working relationship with director Danny Boyle. How does a close relationship with a director help in the creation of a sound design?**

Danny is an absolute pleasure to work with. For *The Beach* he encouraged me to produce temporary mixes that had as much going on in them as possible, which he said was because there was a good chance they would contain something he hadn't thought of. Danny likes people to go that little bit further for him. *The Beach* is a film that starts light and goes dark as the story progresses, so we had to make the sound go dark. We travelled around the world to record sounds for *The Beach* and on one scene had the sound of thousands of insects, which changed into helicopters and then back again, which we did using Emulators.

The trick is not to over-design something. Being able to recognise good natural sounds and pick the best of what is available is something you learn over the years. If you've got lots of great sounds and then start tampering with them, you can lose the weight they offer a scene.

On *Bridget Jones' Diary* [directed by Sharon Maguire] I went into the offices of a publishing house with Tom Sayers, who was then my assistant and is now a sound designer in his own right, and recorded the environments that the people in the film would be working in. We also recorded the trains and streets around where *Bridget Jones* lived. We just recorded hours and hours of London itself. We didn't want to use library tracks so we actually went into places like the dealing room of the *Lloyds Building* and *Underground stations*. Because *Bridget* has a different job in the second film we had to go out and shoot other sounds and not rely on what we already had.



For the film *Welcome to Woop Woop* [1997, directed by Stephen Elliott], which was filmed mainly in a shanty town in the Australian desert, we shot hundreds of creaking sounds for the doors and wood walls. I also asked a recordist to record a whole 24-hour cycle of the *Outback*, with all the wind and insect noise. Insect noises are useful for something like a psychological thriller because you can de-pitch them to add menace and resonance — but it remains a natural sound. But one of the best tools available to a sound editor is silence, which we used to good effect on *28 Days Later*. Coming in and out of silence adds an eerie quality.

Danny loves sound and music, especially weird music. On *28 Days Later* the music and the sound design became part of each other, forming a complete, crafted soundtrack. I worked with John Murphy, the composer, to achieve something that isn't like a normal horror soundtrack. There are a lot of tonal sounds in both, which complement the emptiness of the opening sequences. Whatever the film, the sound design has to work with the dialogue and the music. If the two don't work together, the soundtrack will never be right. For *Thunderbirds* we were giving Hans Zimmer [the composer] the temp effects mixes so that he could see where the highlights were and

he composed in and out of the effects accordingly. On *Backbeat* [directed by Iain Softley] a lot of the sound was very abrasive, with harsh cuts, but that underpinned the spirit of the story and helped keep up the energy level. In particular we tried to make the film sound as dirty as possible during the German scenes to create a mood surrounding the characters. The audience has to believe where the characters are and why they are there and the sound helps, rather than just glossing over it with the score.

**Does the amount of sound design depend on the type of film or is it now being influenced by the technology?**

Every kind of film demands a detailed sound design, even if it's not as obvious as exotic locations in *The Beach* or action in *28 Days Later*. The romantic comedies like *Love Actually* and *Bridget Jones* are very different but they have levels and depth as well, particularly with the emotional silences.

I embrace technology and recently we've been doing a lot more mixing ourselves in the virtual environment, which is a new direction for us. With *Pro Tools* you can play a thousand tracks in a room but a lot of mixing and editing still comes down to intuition. ■