

Foley artists: Expendable or indispensable?

The role of the Foley artist has been around since the beginning of cinema itself, creating sound effects for film is both a precise and creative process. However has the role of the Foley artist expanded over the past 50 years or has it become yet another dying art? The process of producing sound effects to film is complex, time consuming and not as simple as you would imagine. Most of the time the Foley artist can't simply record the object they are observing through expense or simple logistics they have to create a sound more vivid and complex to fit into what the listener is expecting rather than what the sound source would actually produce.

It is my intention to investigate this mysterious art form in the hope of finding out how the role has change, how modern microphones, desks and recording techniques have affected the industry, how the role of the Foley artist came about and the importance of the role, what techniques are most commonly used in the recording and production of sound effects to film and finally what I feel the future holds for Foley recording.

To find the answers to all the questions we must first look at the history of Foley, where did it start, why it started and how it has changed over its lifetime. Most people aren't aware that Foley is actually named after a person called 'Jack Foley' who was born in New York in 1891. He first began as a director of silent films before the advancement in recording technology gave him the ability to add sound to his films in the 1930's.

So what is Foley? It is the replacement of sound on film; for example when someone is walking on screen the sound of them walking will have been recorded at a later point in the studio. "A Foley artist 'recreates' sound effects for film, television and radio productions" (Rodrigues, P. 1995). Contrary to what most people believe a lot of sounds you hear in the cinema have been recorded in a studio and this is for two different reason the first being the location where the film recording takes place is often very loud containing noises such as traffic,

overhead planes and trains, these are all objects that would appear too loud to most cinema goers. The second reason Foley is added at a later stage is because on location they only want to pick up dialogue and attempting to pick up both would result in an undesirable mix.

Another myth is that Foley artists create all the sound effects for a movie however “we don’t do birds, Laser blasts, dog barks or rainstorms. They are FX department” (Rodrigues, P. 1995). A Foley artist just deals with recording sound not creating or editing it.

Since its creation Foley has been a massive part of films, television and radio productions helping set the dramatic mood. Over the past 80 years Foley’s role has grown dramatically, with films now containing 100’s of effects that have been added in the studio. Two of the biggest roles Foley plays in film are the recreation of footsteps and cloth sound effects. The attention to detail in film now is remarkable with many Foley artists reproducing the slightest sound of a silk garment brushing a wall something Jack Foley would have been delighted at.

Much has changed since the 1930’s but has Foley moved along with the times and with the explosion of the film industry? Since the invention of the computer the music industry has changed in every aspect from the recording and production of tracks to construction and operation of high-end instruments. Timing still plays a massive role in Foley, you have to be able to get the sound effects to match the visuals otherwise it takes a long time in the editing process something which can add up when you consider how many effects are in one film.

There are also a lot more artists these days because the film and television industries have both exploded, in part, to the advancement of technology. This advancement of technology also means a lot of sound engineers have taken up Foley projects in their home studios, eliminating the need for expensive studio time or equipment.

The role of the Foley artist like many others in the music industry has changed just like sound engineers also acting like producers and artists leasing on many projects the Foley artist has to act as an engineer setting up microphone placement and as a creator/ editor of sounds. This change is partly to do with the cost of projects; a lot of money is saved if one man can do the job of three.

Alongside the evolution of technology in music, techniques and the way sound has been generated has also changed. The synthesizer and the ability to generate sounds digitally have been two massive developments in music and the role of the Foley artist has responded to this. The recording process with the advancement in microphones has also meant recordings can be done in higher quality. The creation of advanced D.A.W’s have meant that once a sound is recorded it can be manipulated and altered beyond recognition. Also having an advanced D.A.W’s means that you can slightly

alter the timing of a sample meaning you can move the sound ever so slightly to click to the action on film.

There are thousands of techniques that are adopted by Foley artists all over the globe, however many of them are kept secret as the creation of Foley effects is considered an art form. There is however one very famous Foley artist called Gary Hecker who has worked on over 200 different films and has been listed in a list of '100 most creative people in music'. The best place to start is to "Create all the footsteps in the film first" (Hecker, G. 2012) this gives you a bases to the canvas of sound effects you are going to add and it often means you have all the equipment required for each footstep already set up. After this Gary advises doing another pass of the film filling in all the distant footsteps, which simply involves moving the microphone further away, it's as simple as that. Then finally end with what he calls a "prop pass" which contains everything else in the film such as chains, swords and doors opening. Some other famous examples he uses are coconuts as horses hooves, which is a Foley effect made famous by Monty Python in their film Search for the Holy Grail. The rumor was that they didn't have the budget for actual horses so used the standard Foley effect of coconuts, which proved effective, as when most people hear them they will think of a horse galloping. Secondly he uses a spatula on the blade of a sword when it is being taken out of its sheaf because when a sword is removed from its sheaf normally it doesn't make much sound at all which wouldn't sound 'realistic' to the listener. The art of making something sound more vibrant and spectacular than it does in real life is another challenge of the Foley artist.

Foley can be done at any level in any environment and there is no formal education in Foley itself, it is something that has to be learnt your own way. It is mainly importation, meaning that often the sound you have to create can't be found for example a plane crashing, which is something that can't be recorded without a large expense. It is in these situations you have to imagine the sound and all the parts contained within it. "Watch your favorite movie and switch off the picture, listening to the sound only- aside from dialogue, most of what you hear will have been replaced" (Jones, C. 2012) this quote encourages the idea that simply listening can help your understanding of Foley and the massive role it plays in everything visual. Also you have to imagine the sounds, as loads of different smaller sounds, as most of the effects you hear on television and in film are a mixture of what sounds the artist feels would be happening at that moment. After all even the best Foley artist uses laying "100's of sound effects for one scene like tiny Brushstrokes" (Hecker, G. 2012).

Gary Hecker like many other professional Foley artists has a massive arsenal of objects that he uses to produce his Foley effects however he believes the biggest and best object you can use is your own voice. He uses his voice for most natural sounds such as wind and animals believing that knowing the audio spectrum and what layering sounds can do results in the most effective sounds. “Its an art form, you have to have the timing, huge creative mind and a mass of props” (Hecker, G. 2012).

There are many famous examples of Foley being used in films; they are a wild mix of strange objects being used and bizarre recording techniques. However the example I feel is most fitting is the “Wilhelm scream” this sample has been used

hundreds of times in as many films in the past 40 years and is still being used to this day. The scream was first created in 1951 as part of a scream set made for the film “Distant drums”. Since then it can be heard in every star wars and Indiana Jones film and has become somewhat of a must have in films for Foley artists. Quentin Tarantino uses the scream throughout his films and most recently “the man with the iron fists” thus enforcing its use as somewhat of a gimmick in the Foley artist industry. “The Wilhelm scream continues to be heard in new films every year” (Lee, S. 2005) and once you have heard the scream you will recognize it whenever you hear it. A mass of videos exists on Youtube showing examples of the scream being used in all of its films.

I have discussed in length the role of modern technology in the generation and recording of Foley but it is the technology being used as a replacement for artists or have these cunning engineers integrated technology into their art? With the addition of cheaper and better audio equipment many more artists have been produced but there are a few pieces of technology every Foley artist must have. The first of these is a good quality computer based audio replacement software, which will allow easy recording and editing. The second is a good quality microphone and of course a quiet room to record in, this is imperative because you want to pick up the perfect sound without any background noise. Finally what you need is “A reverberation control, Reverberation adds space to audio effects” (Stinson, J. 1999) this is key because it allows you to distance your sound effects correctly without having to distance the microphone which can be time consuming and requires a large amount of space. In my opinion Foley artists have very much adapted technology in their favour giving them the ability to record more tracks, create more sounds and edit them in an easier way.

In these uncertain times and with the giant expansion of technology it is difficult to say what is going to happen to the recording industry let alone the humble role of the Foley artist. However in my opinion I feel the role of the Foley artist has lasted and will last on into the future with the role being more integrated with technology. The future may mean that the artists will have

quicker access to sounds and the editing process may be shortened with advancement in software meaning a film can be pre clipped with makers at the precise point they need to be added. With the expansion of the film industry and the demand for high quality audio effects it is difficult to see a future without the need for a Foley artist and although there are large library's out there ,such as the BBC's ,with the introduction of new special effects giving the rise to futuristic surfaces, materials and gadgets there will always be a need to match the futuristic look with the futuristic sound.

Copyright also plays a large role in the future of the Foley artist, as with many musical art forms there used to be a lot of freedom when it came to copyright in the industry. However since the explosion of the film industry and copyright law people have become very protective over their recordings. This can be somewhat linked to the fact the Foley artist has to provide a lot of their own props which can be very costly at times and they are simply protecting their art. This is why often it is difficult to find good quality sound effects for a specific desired effect. The copyright is often protected for the sake of the film also, for example the recent release of the Avengers Assembled film was a nightmare for the Foley engineers as the sound effects from all the other films were the property of the previous films only and they were key signature sounds for each of the characters. Luckily they were contracted to provide all the character effects for the film, but this shows that the sound effects contribute a large amount to produce the correct character on the screen.

I have referred to the role of a Foley artist as an art form and I believe through my research that it is. The need to improvise throughout the recording process and having to be inventive with props and space is something that not everyone can do. Foley requires a feeling of timing, a keen eye, and patience and practice all skills that are required for learning an instrument or any other talent. "The better the sound the better the video" (Murch, W. 2003) this quote is from an award winning Foley artist who believes it is an unsung art form which is often overlooked but I would have to say I agree that the sum of the video and audio

are far better than each individual element on their own. “Like a big canvas of sound and we create the textures and Brushstrokes” (Hecker, G. 2012) it is apparent that the Foley artist themselves believe it to be an art form and something that requires a lot of skills to execute.

In this discussion I have looked at many different areas of Foley from its history to the technology used throughout the modern Foley process. The expansion of the role and the desired techniques that have been adopted over time have lead me to the conclusion that the role of the Foley artist is alive and as strong as it has ever been. The reasons I have come to this conclusion are the fact that the role isn’t simply about recording any old sound it requires precision timing and a massive amount of creativity. Secondly over time the role has evolved and the creation of new microphones and large library’s of sound haven’t made the task of sound replacement obsolete they have meant more is now expected of the artist and with the expansion of film special effects Foley artists have had the same push to expand their creativity. A Foley artist will always remain as a person because “The Foley artist is a master of improvisation” (Huard, L. 2007)

It would be simple to say that in a few years everything that can be recorded will have been and will be in one massive library which would eliminate the role of the Foley artist, however through my investigation I have found that the actual recording of the sound effect is just the beginning and timing, creativity and layering take president over any recording process. Also licensing which means the film company whom would only use them on their productions owns them often protects the sound effects recorded. Finally there are no limit to the amount of combinations of fabrics, materials and soundscapes which all require to be recorded at different intensities and over different periods of time depending on the film or television project. Its always key to remember, “Audiences often forgive poor Quality picture, but very rarely forgive poor sound” (Jones, C. 2012). This statement alone secures the future of Foley, the techniques used and the technology involved.

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