

You're listening to Imaginary Worlds, a show about how we create them and why we suspend our disbelief, I'm Eric Molinsky.

John Roesch retired this year. His name may not ring a bell, but you definitely know the movies he worked on – Raiders of the Lost Ark, E.T., Back to the Future, The Little Mermaid, Terminator 2, Independence Day, The Matrix, The Dark Knight, Inception, Frozen, and so many more movies, and TV show and video games.

John is a foley artist. He creates sound effects using everyday objects. And at the end of his career, he was the lead foley artist at Skywalker Sound. So, he worked on a lot of Star Wars, Pixar and Marvel projects.

The fact John is retired is a big deal. There aren't many people who do what he did full time.

JOHN: My saying is, uh, my mantra is there are more astronauts in their world than there are working professional foley artists. But the key is working professional foley artists. Then when I, and to my mind, that's somebody who's working five days a week, maybe four, eight weeks out of the year.

Custom sound effects are a bespoke art form. And they've become more and more important as blockbuster movies have become more fantastical. The more we see things on screen that don't exist in the real world – the more filmmakers need to figure out what those things are going to sound like.

And the funny thing is the special effects we may see on screen cost millions of dollars, but the sounds we hear that bring the effects to life might cost five dollars at a hardware store or a grocery store. Or it could be something they found at a junkyard. Like when John and his team figured out the sound of Thor's hammer.

JOHN: Thor, well, the grabbing, handling of Thor's hammer is something that Shelly, Shelly Scott, and I would sometimes go for on forays, for props. And there's a place in Petaluma called Miceli's, and it's this huge junk yard, if you will. And we went up there one day and she's walking around almost as she pulls somebody and goes, this is it. Door's hammer and boy, slide that thing in the ground. It sounded perfect, <laugh>. And now what it is, I couldn't even tell you. It looks like some type of shackle that's used on a ship, I'm guessing.

But the sound of Thor's hammer is a combination of several sound effects --

digital and practical sounds. Digital sounds are typically used for the more otherworldly elements -- you know, something that's alien or magical.

On blockbuster movies, a supervising sound editor or sound designer will oversee the foley and the digital sound effects departments, deciding which team takes care of which sounds. Like in The Avengers movies Infinity War and Endgame.

JOHN: They'll ride herd over the entire project and from that they'll understand like, okay, the Infinity stone is being put in here, it's in a closeup, let's have fully help with that. Versus, you know, the gauntlet's coming up, it's in a medium shot, maybe it's, you adjust a little bit, but there's, you know, so much else going on. We'll never hear that. You know, the budgets are only so much, so you have to triage in a sense, you know, what is going to be heard, what's important to, to focus on. Now if it turns out we finish early, ha ha, we might go back and revisit things, or if we're not sure, we might early on within the first day, do some testing and send it off to the various people, maybe just a supervisor, or it could be a supervisor and the director, et cetera, to get some feedback. Like, okay, how should these characters sound? Or how should this particular prop be? An excellent film, you know, has moments and an excellent sound job has peaks and valleys it breathes like wine versus something just, just all one note. But if something has peaks and valleys, so we, the audience, our ears can rest and we get involved in the storyline, et cetera. I, that's to me typically the best.

I've always been a fan of foley art, and not that I notice foley sounds. When they're doing their job right, you should just be wrapped up in the moment. What I do notice is when digital sound effects sound too fake. That breaks my suspension of disbelief, and I wish they had gone with foley sounds instead to make the special effects feel more grounded.

I wanted to talk with John about the skills you need to be a foley artist, and how he created some of his most memorable sounds. He said that a lot of it is just trial and error, playing with objects and going with their gut instincts. But there's also a performance aspect as well.

Several years ago, I did an episode about hand drawn animation. And there's an old saying that an animator is an actor with a pencil. So I asked John, are foley artists actors with props?

JOHN: Absolutely. foley artists are actors with props. Uh, and they're only limited by their imagination, frankly. You know, where foley arose from was kind of two areas. I

mean, you, you did have back in the days, we'll say a Legend of The Lone Ranger. You had what they called, uh, sound stylings. That sometimes the, the credit would be given, and it would be typically a, a gentleman, a man, or maybe two that would have, you know, some effects, if you will. And they would watch following the script and, you know, do their effects during that time. And in the '60s, foley was pretty much filling the holes in the dike to some degrees. It wasn't as important in a sense, uh, not taking anything away from anybody that did it back then, but it, it, it really didn't come into its own until somewhat in the seventies. Certainly, the '80s and the '90s. When I say come to its own foley artists are using props, you know, in a way that it's art, if I can say that. And again, as I say that, that really came into its own, um, oh gosh, with, uh, somewhat starting with E.T. but certainly Back to the Future, Who Framed Roger Rabbit, et cetera. because those films is, you know, we went hog wild <laugh>.

Tell me about working on Back to the Future. I read that you had a lot of fun coming up with the noises for the DeLorean. What was that like in terms of trial and error experimentation?

JOHN: Yeah, well, with the DeLorean, the head tech at the studio at the time, this guy named Ed Bannon with fabulous guy, he took an old car door mounted on wheels. And so we can move it around easy on the stage, and we kind of use that as the, as the touching, handling. I mean, if, of course, if you to see a picture of it, like it's this old ratty looking thing versus, you know, the DeLorean being typically clean stainless steel. But moreover, that too, you know, when you come back, evidently from the future, uh, it's very cold <laugh>. So, you know, the door opens and we see Einstein, you know, he's come back to the future, a couple things are happening, uh, there's ice kind of flying off, a little bit of steam maybe. So, okay, well how do we do that? So I thought, well, I'll take an old school manual ice tray, put that on the side of the door, and when the door starts coming up, just pull the lever in the ice tray. So, so we hear the cracking of the, of the ice. Then I take, um, uh, some type of air supply and put that inside the door for a little wish up. And then might take the air supply again and put it in my mouth a little bit too, to help with the dopple of the up. Again, putting all those things together just feels right.

Well, I mean, Steven Spielberg, you've worked on a lot of his movies, either him as a director or a producer, and I assume he's pretty hands on in picking the right sound effects. I know you worked on developing the sound of E.T., is that something you worked on with him directly?

JOHN: With me directly? No. And most foley artists, no. Uh, certainly though he was aware of sound and its importance, I suspect putting words in his mouth, he would just didn't really have the time to get that granular. So what he would do, he, Steven would tell Chuck Campbell supervising sound editor on, uh, let's say E.T. uh, I want to make sure that E.T. sounds funny, because we're afraid the first time you see him, it's going to scare the kids. They're going to, you know, hide underneath the seats. And that's the end of the picture. Seriously, that's, I'm boiling it down. But that's pretty much what,

what it came to. So he said to us, Chuck said, Joan Rowe, who's my partner at the time, and me, and said, well make him sound funny, <laugh>, okay. Or at least I, I thought when I saw him and when he was walking, he reminded me of a duck out of water. You know, it's kind of the ungainly kind of back and forth. So, I used my hands for his feet and then for his body movement moving back and forth, Joan said, let me go home and cook a huge bunch of jello up, which he didn't. And she brought it in and I took one of my T-shirts, took some gaffers tape, duct tape, taped up the neck opening and the arm openings, turned it upside down, held it open. She dumped all this jello in there. Then I gathered it up by the waist, and shook that in front of the mic. And she also then stopped at the, a deli and picked up some liver in a packaged liver. And she turned that upside down and moved it a certain way. And I had all these fun squishy sounds. So, so point being, to answer your question, you know, Steven had told to Chuck, this is what I want, and it filtered down to us. And that's typically what happens.

So, you're saying that's interesting that like around E.T. to Back to the Future, there was suddenly this kind of boom of, of interest in foley and an interest in, in doing foley sounds on much more stuff. What was going on behind the scenes that led to this newfound interest in foley among directors?

JOHN: I don't know. That was among directors per se. I think it was more along the lines of the, the films themselves were starting to open up more. It wasn't a lot of, there wasn't as much being done, you know, within the context of the studio, A system per se, you know, quiet on the set, were inside an interior, you know, there were shooting outside or whatever. Then the older generation sound editors, taking nothing away from them. They did incredible work, but to some degree there was a, I'll say malaise, but, that might not be the proper term. Maybe just, this is kind of the way we've done it, so let's continue to do that. Whereas there was a younger generation that was looking at that going, gee, I wonder if that's a way to do it. And of course the greatest example of that is Ben Burt on Star Wars. But getting back to what you're saying, specifically on the film, Jaws. Verna, I think it was, yeah, Verna Fields was the picture editor. Now this is, this is back in the day, done at Universal, and reels would be assigned to editors. So in other words, it, it, it wasn't like as happened later, whereas let's say Chuck Campbell was kind of supervising a whole thing. Gordon Ecker Jr. who is responsible for, I'm going to say reel six, uh, where the, the boat breaks down. And Bruce, the shark jumps on board, starts chopping everything, and Verna Fields said, look, I want this foley to sound great.

But it didn't. In fact, if you just listen to this scene from Jaws, based on the foley sounds alone, you wouldn't know this is a terrifying moment when the shark is attacking the boat.

JOHN: At that time, foley was within the context of the studio system. And again, they, not that they were complacent, but there was kind of a way that they did it. Gordon, who he, and I can say this because he's told me this was not necessarily happy with that thinking. I don't know that they're pushing hard enough if, if I could say that to really achieve what's possible. So, he said to himself after that picture, the next thing I do, I'm going to do it outside of the studio system, which he did. He actually, uh, got in touch with me and we went to a facility and the owner built a small foley stage there, and we started working there. And some of the techniques that were employed today to some degree are, were an outgrowth of that. And I'm not trying to take any, uh, credit per se, just, that's just the reality.

BREAK

You mentioned Ben Burtt earlier. He was a legendary sound designer who created some of the most iconic sounds in Star Wars -- the sound of the tie fighters, the lasers, the lightsabers, the droids. You've worked on Star Wars projects before, and of course everything has to sound a certain way in Star Wars, based on what he established. Is it a challenge to then add new sounds to that very specific kind of sonic universe?

JOHN: It's funny, there's a two-edged sword in that. So, I worked on Empire and yes, he, Ben and all the other people that work with him on that established certain sounds and things, as we all know, you know, the laser blast, blah, blah, blah. We see on screen. So there's not a lot of wiggle room with that. And now, all that being said, now you've got, let's say, Andor, which is within the Star Wars world, but really it's not Darth breathing heavy walking around. You know, it's, it's every man, every woman being oppressed. So funny. That world is much grittier, much more based in reality, if you will, you know, whereas Star Wars is more space fantasy, space opera, and not I love it, you know, but that, Andor, let's say, and or is really, uh, a, a commentary on, uh, fascism.

Let's talk about Andor. It's a show about the early days of the rebellion against The Empire. Is there an example of a specific sound where something happening where you thought, I'm going with this particular sound because it fits the darker themes of the show?

JOHN: Well, I guess two things. Um, you know, the armaments, they're at one point the, uh, the rebels, if you will. I mean, they had literally had rifles that you, you and I would associate today, almost like an AK 47. So that was something we thought, well, we'll try to do something along those lines versus, and or has a pistol, which is very modern, if you can, if I could say modernist. It has, it does certain things flips and all sorts of things that we try to make. And again, when I say we make really clean and really precise, because that's what it looked like when it, when it was pulled out, the world itself was

just so gritty and, and, and, uh, like, like the, the little robot that's, uh, says hi to Andor, you know.

Yeah, I was going to ask you about that. He's kind of a cool character. He is an interesting character.

JOHN: Yeah. Again, the world to me, us and I say us for sure, Shelly and Scott, uh, I can't overemphasize the importance of team, seem very, uh, dust blown and, and dirty. And, you know, this is a community that's blue collar, you know, and doing a lot of stuff. So the robot, when it rolled in Maarva's apartment, we made sure it was rolling over grit, because again, we wanted to, to associate that world with being gritty and, and funky.

So you've also worked on a bunch of Batman films, and you also worked on the Batman video games, the Arkham games. Those games are really cinematic. I've played them all. Do you approach those differently than the movies? Like the sound of Batman cape in a game, is it the same Foley sound you'd do for like a live action film?

JOHN: We would typically use the same cape sound every time, unless directed not to. And again, the marching orders we would get would be from the supervising sound editor, and that scenario would be Richard King. Uh, like, okay, how is this, how is this going to sound? Is this, uh, a Batman that's sounds the same, or is it, uh, unique or is it tattered? because he's been in combat? You know what? So that, that would, something would come down the line to us and we would, we'd perform it that way. Now, all things being equal, if in fact we weren't given any direction, I would tend to try to emulate what had been established typically. I mean, because you know, why, why reinvent the wheel?

I read that you've said working on an animated film is really challenging because, you know, nothing was actually filmed on location, you have to create sounds for everything. Are video games just as challenging or, or even more so?

JOHN: Video games are even more challenging only from the standpoint of, let's just say the cape. Okay, so the cape in the video game, Batman Arkham Asylum, we probably recorded, now when I say we back then was Allison Moore. She was my partner and Mary Jo Lang, at least 500 variations of the cape.

Wow.

JOHN: Now why is that? Well, the way the video game engine works is, and again, I'm a layman, so I can't really speak specifically. Once something's happening where the cape is starting to flap, it will pull randomly from a, you know, this whole bucket of cape sounds to try to give it life. That's what we would, we would do. We do variation upon variation upon variation. That's, you know, really taxing because typically, if we're doing even an animation, doing a scene, we'll do the footsteps first, then go back, do the props, and then if there's any unusual movement, do that. Whereas now we're doing movement, the cape, or we're doing it over and over and over again. You know, I mean, that's, that's really taxing and tiring on the body. Or let's say we're doing footsteps for

Batman, Batman's just landing on cement. We might do 50 lands or more. So, they would have that decides, okay, let's grab that one. That's within that context. And again, the whole point being to give it life.

What John is saying is so interesting to me because when I used to work in animation, one of the most important things we learned is to make a character feel believable, you have to give them a clear sense of weight. Like one of the first lessons that you learn in animation school is how to animate a bouncing ball, which is all about shifting weight and adjusting for gravity.

I think foley actually serves a similar purpose. Like in those Batman games, part of what sucked me into the games was that I felt the weight of Batman as I was moving him around – especially the weight of him in that suit. A lot of that comes from the foley sounds. Everything you see in the game is animated on a computer, but the sounds felt organic to that world. And it made it feel real to me.

So when you're watching a movie, does everything we see onscreen have to make a sound?

JOHN: No.

<laugh> Because I was going to ask you about that. I feel like every time I see a cat onscreen, it has to meow. Every bird has to chirp, every bicycle has a bell. Does it, do you ever feel like when you watch, maybe other people work, not you because you've got your own ideas yet about this, like you're talking about, there's a, there's a rhythm to it where you're like, something is just over overdone in terms of how many sound effects?

JOHN: Well, I think it's two part what you're asking me. One, as a professional, like anytime we're outside, we hear a hawk scream. That's the particular ubiquitous sound that might not have anything to do with the reality of where we are in the location. As a professional. I don't particularly care for that. As the moviegoer, if it's going to help enhance the storyline or keep me involved so I believe what I'm seeing, that's fine. But to, to really answer your question, uh, I'm kind of see a dog, hear a dog. Again, as I mentioned earlier, a good soundtrack. Both music, dialogue and effects have to breathe.

Well, it's funny, when I said, does everything need to make a sound? You immediately said no. What were you thinking in that moment?

JOHN: If it's, if it's going to take me out of the, what I'm seeing on camera or what I'm, if it take me out of the experience that's happened dramatically, I don't want to hear it. If it, you know, a character is, is just finished with a fight or something, you know, they're kind of breathing heavy for a second. Okay, great. But then we don't necessarily need to

add a lot of extra <heavy breathing> afterwards. It's like, wait, what is that? Where's that coming from? I mean, you know, in other words, just for me, keep it real <laugh>.

Well, it's funny because there's a bunch of other sound effects cliches that bother me. One is that, especially when you're watching some kind of Game of Thrones or sword and sandals type of epic, somebody, whenever they take a sword out, it always has to make this sssshhkh sound, even if it's coming from a leather holster, that always bugs me.

JOHN: I, I'm right there with you. But it's almost like, um, you know, if you've seen, uh, a revolver and the cylinder spins and you hear this, zzzzzz, right? That's not really how they work. <laugh>. You have to hold the hammer back, anyway, that's something we're used to hearing. Or another example is when a, a horse is galloping, especially from say, foley, typically we do a three beat gallop, da da dum da da dum. But of course, that's not what's actually happening gallop wise. It's actually da da da da da da four beats. That's actually what's happening in reality when a horse is running. So the question then is, what do we want to hear? Is the three beat going to create a level of excitement to where we don't really care? Or is it going to be something that's going to take us out of it thinking, wait a second, we're on a racetrack, this, then we're looking at the feet. This isn't right.

So you feel like there's, it's interesting that you feel like there are moments that even if this isn't that, in fact, that that obvious, a language of sound has been developed where because we've continually to expect to hear something, we need to kind of honor that because we'd be almost more confusing for the audience to hear what something really sounds like.

JOHN: Unfortunately, that is true. When I say unfortunately, it's just sometimes, but yes, that is, that is true.

Hmm. Are there sound effects cliches you try to avoid, uh, that you think are really hackneyed?

JOHN: Well, you hit one right on the head, which is a sword draw from a scabbard. Typically, if, if a foley artist is performing it, they'll take a, um, oh gosh, I not typically a real sword per se. It could be a machete. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>, because machete is very ringy and like you say, they, you know, jing, you know, just really overemphasize. But I mean, you know, that's not what a foil iss going to sound like if it's coming out of for the through musketeers, you know? And yet sometimes you hear that

We'll hear more from John in a moment.

BREAK

What makes a good foley artist? Like let's say you were hiring somebody to be your assistant and you had a couple people apply, what would make somebody stand out versus somebody saying, you know what, they're not up to the job?

JOHN: Somebody that has a background in, uh, dramatics, specifically an actor or actress. Certainly, if they're a student in of film, that would be important too. Because for me, let's say your scenario where somebody came to me, uh, uh, Sally, and she wants to be a foley artist, and I thought, this is great. Sally's got, you know, all the prerequisites, so to speak. Yeah. Great. As far as Sally's footsteps go, she probably wouldn't have them really be at a level that I would think is really excellent for maybe five years.

Really? It's like opera singers or something. <laugh>.

JOHN: Yeah. Well, I mean, you know, again, I mean, because we're talking nuance, you know, should it be a little scuff there, a weight shift, you know, or the surface should there be a little of, bit of coffee grinds down, et cetera.

Well, I was going to ask you, so let's say Sally comes back five years later and like you finally mastered it. How would that sound different than what you had done five years earlier?

JOHN: It would not be as mechanical. It would have more life to it. because that's the key to anything excellent foley wise. It has to live and breathe on its own. To capture that is like lightning in a bottle, you know? And, and that really mostly only comes from experience. Now some people are gifted, they have a lot of innate talent and can channel it pretty quickly. That's not typical. I think that takes, I think, a long time.

So, I mean, you've worked on a huge amount of sci-fi fantasy movies. You were talking about how like, you know, uh, let's say somebody's there, you're talking about like footsteps and things like that, and how you have to get so much better at just doing something that subtle. Are there extra skills too you need to develop when working on sci-fi, fantasy video games, animation, things that, that you know, don't exist in the real world? Are there just even more skills you really need to build up to be able to do those believably?

JOHN: Let's replace skills with experimentation.

Hmm.

JOHN: So like the Rocketeer fun film. Yeah. You know, which guy finds a rocket pack and, you know, puts it on and flies around.

I saw it as a kid. Yeah.

JOHN: Again, Chuck Campbell supervisor, sound editor, he said, let's have fun with us. And I was allowed to do all the jet pack flying as far as the, the, the sound of the rocket. So, I took a little mic, a special microphone, and I blew over it, listening to, to it with headphones so I could help get doppler, et cetera. Now, mind you, that wasn't the only effect, but that was the main effect.

I imagine too, with experience too. I mean, you know, you've had to experiment with so many things, given how many fantastical stuff you've had to create. You probably in your mind have a library of like, you get something, you know, you would get a, a new project the last few years, but you have all those decades of experience to be like, well, I know I've tried a million different things. And it's probably, you even have a quicker shortcut in your head as to, well, let's go in this direction first.

JOHN: I would say that's true. You know, drawing from experience going, hmm, gosh, looking at this. But then the proof's in the pudding. So, once we lay it down and play it back, go, okay, that's not quite right. But maybe that will then lead us to the next thing. Experimentation is key along with imagination, because the, the, the one rule of foley, there are no rules. It's whatever we perform that you, the audience believe. That's right.

Hmm. You worked at so many different projects. Was there ever any type of project that you thought, you know, I always wish I'd gotten to work on this?

JOHN: Well, I'll no Blade Runner, the original. I only did a section for the director's extended cut. I would love to work on the original.

So, like, let's say you were, you were able to work on Blade Runner and you got this plum position where you got to do a lot of sounds. Are there any particular kinds of sounds that you thought, oh, I'm almost envious of who got to do those sounds?

JOHN: Oh, definitely. Oh, I, no question. There was some great stuff in there. You know, the, uh, the scene where, um, I think it was James Hong says, uh, ice, I just do ice. One of the Replicants reaches into like absolute zero container of liquid. And just the sound of that was just incredible. Or the, the machine at the beginning of the picture that is trying to determine is a replicant or a real person. And we see this, this device kind of moving in and out, almost like a little bellows. I mean, there's so much really rich stuff in that film. Oh my gosh, it'd be great.

Blade Runner was based on a novel called Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? Lately, the studios have been dreaming of electronic writers and actors. AI was one of the main issues which caused the strikes in Hollywood. And John says the studios are also looking towards AI for sound effects – maybe even replacing foley artists with AI. John is a little worried about the future of the field.

JOHN: Is the job of foley, which is live sound effects, custom sound effects, it going to be supplanted? And, uh, the, it's, the answer's murky. I, you know, like, uh, if you get to pick up the magic eight ball, it just say, uh, you know, cloudy, <laugh>, unknown. because uh, unfortunately the producers, and I get it, it's a, it's a business. You know, you have to keep costs down. But it's been this terrible push to the bottom of less and less money available for post-production. It's just insane. The one thing I don't think a

machine will ever get, although I could be wrong, is at its very core, excellent. foley has soul, excellent foley has soul. I don't think a machine's ever going to achieve that.

And the soul isn't just the subtlety of the human being creating that movement, doing that acting,

JOHN: Absolutely no question about it. That, to me, is a difference between good foley and excellent foley.

That's it for this week. Thank you for listening. Special thanks to John Roesch.

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