

Awhile back, I posted that I was going to be mixing a tv series called "Summerland", that shot primarily at the beach and at a beach backyard set on stage....here's the wrap up.

Basically, the show kicked my ass. I quit and although the boom operator and third person were asked to stay on to work with the next mixer (Darren Knight), they quit too. The conditions were hard and the hours were long, often 14 and 15 hour days, too many hours for me to miss my daughter growing up at this late time of my life.

I am writing this to discuss just how difficult it is to record beach shows and I will be adding my doomed experience as another chapter in "the letter".

In a nutshell, I would say that the beach is the hardest normal location to record dialogue on a regular basis because the elements of nature (wind, sand, sun, crashing waves and water) conflict with the ability to record with open overhead mics. All the while, not being able to use wireless because the actors ran around in bathing suits and wet suits all day.

We have all fought our way through beach days every now and again, but few have done it every day, day in and day out. Those recording a beach feature with 2 or 3 pages a day of dialogue can only imagine a tv show doing quadruple that page count per day. There aren't many of us who have lived to talk about it. David Yaffee went through this right now on a tv series in Hawaii called "North Shore" and later on "Lost". He and I commiserate often.

Not all beach have to be so hard if everyone is on the same page. Awhile back, there was "Baywatch", but they had a DP/producer (my pal Jimmy Pergola) who ran the show and made sure sound got a break and at least clean coverage.

The episodes of 'Summerland' had several directors who, while empathizing, basically ignored my sound problems. Many directors did not realize (or seem to care) how hard it was to record sound at the beach.

Every scene was an adventure because all of the directors shot wide and tight cameras at the same time! That would be fine, if we could get a wire on the shirtless actors. Almost every scene, I had to walk up to the director and explain why he shouldn't do that....if he wanted to hear them. They loved me for it too.

These directors were so well prepped and showed up with their little shot list and I would immediately explain to them why their shot list had to change. I would almost have to beg them not to use the tight camera at the same time they shot the wide camera. Once in awhile they would listen, until they fell behind in the days work...which was almost every day.

We were constantly moving up and down the beach and cliffs all day. (The good part is that I lost some weight.) Often there was no a/c power available. The camera set-ups were faster with available light, while we needed more time for creative miking and slogging our gear through the sand. We had to move fast all the time, often in near panic mode.

When we could sneak a wireless on, the afternoon winds would usually wipe them out. The kids also had a fun habit of playing in the waves while wearing their wireless, so we had a wary eye on the at all times.

There was dialogue between surfers in the water that required every trick in the world to mic. The sun played shadow havoc with my excellent boom operators (Tim Salmon & Jeff Erdman) when we could get a microphone overhead.

The producers were the nicest bunch I ever met, but they didn't make any mandates to directors to help out sound. I think they may have thought I was being overly dramatic about it all because the show was sounding pretty good because all my bitching would often pay off. I don't think they realized it was only because we were battling tooth and nail for every edge we could get. We would grab sound by the skin of our teeth for awhile, but the battles became tougher and I felt myself wearing down mentally for the effort it took.

Then we started having really ridiculous instances of sound being dumped on for no good reason. That made the situation intolerable. For instance, we had a 3 page scene where the star actress and her boyfriend are rigging a catamaran (in bathing suits of course) and then, they put on life jackets and push the boat into the sea, talking all the while. Now the director has one camera do a wide master shot and the B camera shoot a tight shot on the star. Of course, I patiently explain why that won't work for sound and the director disgustedly kills the B camera. I walk away, now pissed that he blames me for something he should know himself. I'm not a film school teacher! Then, just before we roll, he tells the B camera to roll after all. He looks at me and says they'll be wide too. Instead, I look at my monitor and see a medium tight shot, head to waist. I try to tell him that is just as bad, but he ignores me, just as the ever-helpful AD yells "Rolling". So, now guess what the next set-up is? Yep, one camera, tight on the star. The director doesn't even roll the B camera in this set-up! So why in hell couldn't he have done the medium shot at the same time as the tight shot rather than during the wide master?

This series was quickly becoming the exact opposite of my audio experience with the director of the original pilot, who really understood sound (Lev Spiro). That director allowed us to record audio by making sure we at least got clean coverage, among other obvious things such as insisting the set stay quiet during wildtracks

I finally wrote a letter to all the producers trying to explain and lay out the answers to "their" audio problems. I never heard a word about it. I suspect it just wound up in the trash...unread. I'll post it here so the work wasn't completely wasted. At least the post-supervisor was extremely understanding and always had our back, but it was just grueling to deal with all day, every day.

To boot, wardrobe was a stickler for things that bulged and the DP at first, was being rough on us by bitching loudly that we took too long wiring (when we could wire), in actual fact, my guys were laving the actors very quickly. After we had a "talk" the DP realized how good a job we were doing and became quite a helpful pal. Wardrobe never got easier, but she may have cracked a smile once when we brought in the smaller wireless packs. A nice person, but she could spot a needle in a haystack at 100 yards.

The worst part was actually trying to shoot stage days because Aaron Spelling kept asking for more wind to blow the grasses and trees in the back yard set and the curtains in the living room. Production actually installed 4 giant fans in the permanents that could have been used to fly the Spruce Goose. They were honestly 5 times louder than the stage air conditioning unit and wiped out the noise from the bank of e-fans running in conjunction on the stage floor in every scene. The benefit was that we never had to wait on helicopters or planes going overhead.

When we didn't record fan noise, they loved to shoot scenes in that set jacuzzi and the more bubbles the better. The actors had to use sign language to communicate on that set.

That's the easy stuff. I'll tell you about the hard problems later. I'm dying to do a show again someday where all I have to worry about is clothes rustle and overlaps.

I can't pinpoint when it happened, but after awhile, that show just wasn't fun to do any more. It was hit and miss sound, no matter how hard we tried.

p.s. To get a taste of what I've been talking about, I put up some photos and a video. Click on the 'Community' tab of the homepage at: <http://www.coffeysound.com> then click "Photos".

I know it sounds like I exaggerated, but honestly, it was way worse for sound than just what I mentioned. The logistics alone were difficult. For instance, we would be on a cliff. When high tide went down, they would throw up the longest ladders you ever saw to get down to caves below to shoot 5 people and 4 pages scenes with actors in wet suits or no shirts. The wireless mics, boom mics and comteks would not work from the cliff to inside the cave. You can imagine the chaos that all caused just breaking down gear and reassembling constantly.

On stage was worse for the wind machines and lights. In fact, Phil Palmer and Peter Devlin were mixing on the next stages over and they would just shake their heads at what we showed them.

If they would have allowed me to trade off episodes with another mixer, I'd still be doing that show! God knows I tried. First I tried to get them to do it by bumping up my worthy boom operator. When that didn't fly, I tried to sell another mixer who had more credits. No go there either. I just don't get it. Why not allow mixers to trade episodes? After I left, the next mixer had the same problems and finally made the same ultimatum to trade episodes with another mixer and this time, they relented.

The reason that unions won't support shorter work hours is that most grips, electric and back lot workers want them. The camera and sound unions are in the minority on this. So why not allowing alternating to keep those happy and fresh mixers?

In fact, alternating episodes should be a big topic here. Then those of us who hate the blood money hours could handle 75 hour weeks if we knew a break comes in between episodes.

Here's that letter:

Dear Producers:

I am making a request to trade off mixing episodes with Tim.

There are several reasons. These include personal needs that would allow me to spend more time with my baby daughter (at the important pre-school developmental time in her life) and keeping me from burning out from longer hours than anyone ever expected (I'm starting to feel my age).

Tim, Jeff and myself were hired to work with you this season was because the pilot never

looped a single syllable. I think you know that we are working just as hard to record good sound here too. Even so, sometimes, there are decisions made beyond our control which may mean we may eventually loop some scenes. We will never let that happen without exhausting all solutions. Different circumstances this season are making us sweat out almost every shot, but we know the sound is as good as we could get each set-up.

When Tim and I did the original pilot, it was with the understanding that Tim and I would share the sound mixing duties by trading episodes if the show went to series. Of course, you are under no obligation to agree to that now.

Between Tim, Jeff and myself, we have 85 years experience to continue to offer to making 'Summerland' sound as good as possible. Tim has a lot of previous mixing experience already mixed and boomed on many of the biggest films over the last few years including 'Perfect Storm', 'Waterworld', 'Air Force One', 'Thelma & Louise', 'Armageddon' and 'Runaway Bride'. Tim has since chosen to stay in town more and now hopes to do some mixing on 'Summerland'.

If Tim and I are allowed to trade mixing duties, I would mix every other episode, but Tim wants to work everyday, so he would rate-up to mixer and re-rate back to boom each episode.

For me, this is a civilized solution to having a real life not totally consumed by mixing 13 hour days.as I have done for so many years. We enjoy this show very much and hope you will allow us to trade off mixing every other episode.

Sincerely,

John Coffey

Talking about that famous beach show, 'Baywatch', it wasn't any easier physically, the beach is always tough. However, they were from the conventional old days of doing one wide master first and then punching in for close-ups. Usually one camera all day and when they used two cameras, they made sure it didn't blow out the sound by being on someone tight at he same time they were wide.

At least that the way it was for several seasons with Jimmy Pergola in charge as DP/producer. He was one of my favorite DPs on earth because he cared about everyone's problems in doing a good job, even the sound department. The mixer was Hal Widby and John Sheriden boomed. I know they both enjoyed the united team crew atmosphere on that show.

As I said, my pilot went great because of the director's high level of understanding sound problems at the beach, the series was the opposite.

I know some of you are wondering how I had the audacity to write these letters to the producers. Believe me when I say I've never done it before and hope to never do it again. It's just that in this case, desperate situations called for desperate measures. I couldn't stand by and see sound ruined without a good reason.

So here's the "beach memo" we wrote them:

Memo to production

Now that we are a month into shooting, we are seeing patterns inherent in a beach show that are consistently affecting your sound tracks. This is a heads up so that we can all be on the same page regarding your audio tracks on 'Summerland'. We just want to make sure you agree that all reasons for looping are always valid. This is not a bitch list and please don't construe it that way. Everyone else's job on the crew deals with your picture. We are taking the time over this Easter holiday to write this, because you pay us to care about your sound tracks.

Your sound crew (with over 75+ years combined experience), all agree that this is the toughest show for sound recording that we have ever done. Of course we all say that on every show, but this time we really mean it. We certainly know that sound is just another part of the crew and don't expect preferential treatment at all....just an understanding of your audio issues on your series. You are all so busy dealing with other important aspects and may not fully understand all the sound issues. Understand, we like recording your show. We just want to make sure we all share common ground here.

It's frustrating for the poor director when we continually have to point out their audio problems to them. These are extraordinary problems, only found on beach show. Though they often appear disgusted to hear that kind of news, in good conscience, we must always let them know. On normal tv series, we just point out the usual audio problems like overlaps, planes and noises to get good audio tracks. Here however, we often can't ask for a another take for simple problems like traffic, because we must save our favors just to get useable sound at all. We have to constantly explain why a wide shot won't work with a close-up shot due to lack of any wardrobe that can hide a wireless mic. That is maddening to everyone....including us. We hate to have a director feel handcuffed or feel pestered. That said, we also realize it's not our final decision to make. We also worry that the directors may make decisions based on false perception that shooting time will be slowed. Their needs are different that you, who must live with the results of their acts. The ultimate price will be paid later by you and your actors.

Inherent audio problems with our main sets:

1. The beach - The wave noise is what it is. We can deal with that. Rather, it's the lack of enough clothing wardrobe, which precludes putting wireless mics on actor's bare skin. The audio problems come into play when actors are wearing bathing suits or wet suits that won't allow for hiding wireless mics on their bodies. We have bulky water bags to put wireless mics on actors for water shots, but none of them are foolproof to leaking saltwater onto \$5K wireless units. We take that chance on features, but we don't recommend it on tv budgets. It's hard enough to keep the kids from splashing along the waveline, while wearing their wireless, between shots.

In this situation, sound is restricted to using an overhead boom. In that particular case, we simply can't record the tight shot, if it's filmed at the same time as the wide camera. Not all the time though, just on those occasions where we can't get a wireless mic on the actor. In those cases, this can easily be solved by simply using the wide camera alone.

Then, in the coverage, simply go back to using 2 cameras. Then, without a wide angle shot at the same time, we can drop a boom easily down over the actors in the tight coverage (then can shoot simultaneously, no problem). Sometimes our pleas are heard, sometimes they are not. Of course, we all know that certain scenes in the water will absolutely need to be looped, no matter how we cover them, but this situation has not happened yet. So far there has been no reasonable reason to loop anything other than "perceived" time restraints.

2. The backyard set on stage - This set is worse for sound than the beach. The wind is the type used for big MOS fx scenes. We know the man-made wind is necessary for the look, but the consequence is wreaking havoc with the sound. You know we have all done as much as possible to lessen the noise, but we can only reduce it from awful to bad. The only reason we haven't looped scenes shot there so far, is because we have been lucky enough to get actors wearing wardrobe that allows for them to be wired. We are usually getting the audio by the skin of our teeth. However, in the future, we will certainly have scenes that we will not be able to wire due to skimpy clothes. Then sound is dead because a master using only an open boom mic will not be good for sound and will have to be looped. Not only that, look at the plethora of lights overhead...we literally can not move an overhead boom without creating scores of shadows. Again, we suggest the prudent use of wide and tight shots at those particular times only, where wireless mics can not be used. The same goes for the dreaded jacuzzi, where tight cameras can save the sound. The water can then be hand swirled with judicious use of a little foam in water with low bubbles. As it is now, scenes with low dialogue will certainly be looped.

3. The main house interior set - On any other tv series, this would be considered the most difficult set for sound. Here, we call it audio heaven. At least the problems here won't cause looping. The cooking noise, lots of actors talking at once while walking on hardwood floors in flip-flops or clanging of the silverware and dishes during food scenes...all things we can deal with. It's the beach and backyard beach set that are the audio killers.

THE MAIN SOUND ISSUES:

Shooting wide masters and tight coverage simultaneously - We face a myriad of unusual sound problems every day. The worst, being, multiple cameras shooting a wide master at the same time as a mid-size or even a close-up shot. It's natural not to realize that a 2nd camera could be problematic until we mention it. All shows use multiple cameras, that's not any problem in general, in fact we encourage them 90% of the time. It's only on 10% of the wide shots, where we can't get wireless on the actors, that we suggest waiting until the next set-up to get multiple camera coverage.

The other problem that multiple cameras often cause is that they are sometimes added at the last second. Then the sound crew, who was prepared for one size shot, suddenly must scramble to wire all the actors or hide mics to accommodate the 2nd camera thrown in at the last minute as an afterthought on the fly. It makes the sound department look unprepared. Instead, with the time we spend talking about it, then wiring all the actors, it would be much faster to just shoot that 2nd camera separately in the very next set-up.

This all sounds simple on paper, but we deal with wide and tight indiscriminately to

sound, all the time. That's often fine because we will just wire the actors. However, here is a non-isolated example where it doesn't work: We had a scene with our star, Lori and C. Thomas Howell at the catamaran. The director wanted to use a wide camera master and another camera doing a mid-size tight tighter shot on Lori. Over our objections, it was done anyway because apparently I did not get our message across. Again, we understand there is a time and place to do that, but this wasn't it. The very next setup, the director did a close-up on Laurie, but did not even roll the B camera at all! Obviously, that would have been the time to get the mid-size shot with the B camera. So instead, we wind up with a shot that has to be looped, if they want to use the mid-size on Lori...for no reason.

-The big wind machines in the backyard are fine when we are inside looking out to the backyard background. However, when we shoot in the open back yard, wires could be used to pull the trees branches. We have tested it and all agree that it looks good because the tree has lacy leaves. Then, e-fans and more wires can move the other vegetation. We have proved it looks good, it's just a matter of mandating it.

SUMMARY:

Looping - The dubbing sessions and looping won't be happening until May. So we want to make everyone aware now, not after the carnage. Looping is not a panacea as it only doubles the problems on the back-end. Tired actors get more tired, we lose the kids for precious hours and it's bad for performance. More importantly, it's often more costly than just shooting that wide camera by itself in the first place and shooting the tight angles simultaneously with multiple cameras. Better to pay for a minute now than pay much more later. In fact, sometimes, the discussion about it is longer than just shooting the wide shot alone.

Postscript:

I received a call from dubbing stage. The mixer Benjamin called and was very effusive in his praise. He saw what we were up against and wanted me to know he understood and appreciated our efforts. That was really nice of him.

Also, many tv shows have a policy to not loop the star, whenever possible. We could always, at the very least, save our star, Lori Laughlin, from looping, by giving her clean tight shots when needed. Of course, that would take a mandate from above your sound department.

Since it's a foregone conclusion on many shows like this that there will be some actors looping, I suggest setting up a small looping room upstairs or near to the set. I know of compact, cheap, portable ADR units that will save considerable actor time and money over post houses. It's also nice to loop with director while the scene is fresh.

Directors made aware in pre-prep of these beach audio problems, could take it into consideration on their shot list to avoid wide and tights whenever the actors are wearing few clothes...or know the ramification is looping. That would avoid their frustration later, on the set, when we mention to them that we can't get the audio for their tight shot. Perhaps give them a handout of this note or an edited version.

We are a low key sound crew who try to accommodate every shot. We hate bringing up negatives. We just want you to know that, under these special circumstances of doing a beach show, sometimes we are powerless to prevent looping, even when solutions are available.

All sets are understandably geared toward picture and performance. Sound should only be heard from when there is something wrong with audio.

Ideally, we would like to see directors made aware of this inherent issue in prep. In a perfect world, we would see a mandate from above, that directors do not shoot wide and tight on the master, when actors are wearing bathing suits. If not a mandate, then, at least a mandate not to shoot Lori wide and tight to save her from looping. If not a mandate, maybe have directors get permission first from the producers? We do not have any power to dissuade most directors. If not any of those ideas, then at least maybe this will serve as a vehicle to open an awareness and understanding of the process of recording audio on a beach show.

The entire set is geared towards picture. We are the only one's doing sound for you. We may feel the pain if our remedies are not endorsed, but we will go along with every decision. Sound is only heard from when there is something wrong. Beach shows are tough for audio and it often causes unnecessary panic when we say something is no good. Solutions are not requested, as though it would take too much time to fix it. when the opposite is often true. It can be fixed quickly and we can't afford not to. The consequences will cost too much in time and money later. We proved on the pilot that this series could be done without looping. It wasn't costly. The difference between good sound and bad sound is usually less than 5 minutes a day.

The next guy will be getting it with both barrels too. It was a mixer's second worst nightmare, a close second to being out of work. It just becomes a matter of laughing it off on the set and all the way to the bank....easier said than done.

Mixers who have to go to the directors all the time, eventually get the blank stare. On this show, the directors had to be told something was wrong so much, that I often felt like a dead man walking as I approached them over and over for the hard sell routine. After awhile, they just didn't want to hear about it. They would usually just want to loop than fix it on set due their perception that it would take precious time to do right for sound.

Production cared, but they also seemed to believe that correcting the sound problems would cost too much time or stifle picture. I tried to convince them otherwise, but the directors wouldn't have any of it, as though sound was difference between a 12 hour day and the 14 hour days we were working.

- John Coffey