



Interview with Sound Designer and Composer Jamie Robertson.

Jamie how did you first get involved with 'The Casebook of Eddie Brewer'?

"The producers contacted me back in 2011 when the film had just entered post production stage. It was Ian Brooker and Sean Connolly who got in touch because of our connection with Big Finish Productions, who produce the Audio Adventures of Doctor Who. Sean and Ian had previously acted in many audio dramas for them and I am regularly involved in scoring their music and providing sound design."

You've worked a lot for Big Finish, composing original music, how do you approach scoring for audio?

"Pretty much the same as TV and film, but you have to visualise the scene in your head, allowing for beats and stings in the music where you feel the character will say jump a cliff, or a monster attacks, all this is done via listening carefully to what the actors have already put in with their own timing etc..."

What differences are there with film scoring as opposed to audio?

"Of course with film scoring, it's not only audio stabs, you get to visually stab and sting the film with the soundtrack. The dialogue as well can be more spaced out with a film or any visual production; whereas audio drama is pretty much mostly dialogue."

What do you enjoy most about the process?

"I always get excited when I have the first run through of a film. Like when you see a film but you're seeing it in its completed form, I'm however seeing it in the editing stage, and most of the time this means just dialogue. I then visualise in my head and get excited with the route the score or sound design could take. If we're in a creepy old house on our own, it doesn't mean the audio can be saying you're on your own. You can add in some really eerie fx to help drive your senses, like the odd creak or upstairs footsteps."

What is the hardest part of the process?

"I'd say making sure you don't lose your audience. Many films fail with poor sound design and foley (the reproduction of everyday sound effects which are added in post-production to enhance the quality of audio for films, television, video, video games). This is also the same with music scoring. You don't want to over use music and also the wrong fx. So this in fact could be the hardest thing about the whole process. Keeping your audience captivate without going stale. Films can also fail with poor use of music and incorrect instrumentation; I'm not keen on much of American sci-fi music where the horns and strings are layered. It's just wrong; it's also lazy of the composer to be doing that. Droning strings when there was an opportunity for a nice little sting or change in the music. The action has started but the composer is still in a state of: 'I'm composing beautiful music over the top of this chase sequence where I should have changed, but it's so droopy I can't'."

So yeah, rather than a particular sound fx or music cue, I'm going for the whole thing in general, the polished finish. With regards to The Casebook of Eddie Brewer, many people think the music is quite minimal, this is misleading. Embedded in the sound design, there is quite a bit of music throughout. It was important to keep the music nice and subtle at certain stages and almost drones because we're constantly moving between documentary and objective mode.

I've seen many films recently failing in the "found footage" genre as they are copying other films. One in particular was wrecking its entire production because while they wanted it to look real, the composer had written some cheesy piano lines over the top of some pointless footage, when we could already see the characters were attracted to each other. With Eddie Brewer, I could have done the same thing; I could have had really mournful music in one scene when Eddie is talking to the director on camera about his wife. But no, I put my foot down, because I know that in order to maximise the effect later in the film, we couldn't do the normal route of composing here."



You've written a special piece of music for the film 'Eddie's Theme'; tell us a little bit about that?

"Eddie's Theme was sort of just a minimal orchestral piece for the start of the film. The minimal music here is where my own rule has restricted this piece. Normally with character themes you hear them a lot, but in this case it's sparingly used in the opening as the titles role on the documentary. You do hear it again later but I think you should see the film to find out where."

There are a few other little themes throughout; one with a choir that you hear later, when we are in an objective perspective. Also listen out to a very subtle eerie theme that reoccurs when odd things are happening, again it's there but not too intrusive, hopefully you should still be in a state of thinking it's a real documentary."

You also also created the fabulous sound design for the film. How did you come up with the sound-scape for the film? How collaborative was it?

"Well sound design wise, I had done short films before. I was pretty much on my own for this apart from near the end when a colleague got involved to do the final mix, always nice to have fresh ears. When the film first came to me it had a very basic sound design, some temporary droning music I'd previously done created. The director Andy had put it on to get the editing nice and smooth. It also had the occasional spot sound effects pre-done by the editing. Most of these were removed and replaced in studio with foley and suitably sound designed fx. In fact I'd say that ninety per cent of the sound design you hear on the film came from my studio, it's only the ADR (Additional Dialogue Recording - the process whereby an actor re-records lines spoken during filming in order to improve audio quality or reflect dialogue changes) and breathes etc, that remained."

The spinning coin fx, Andy brought in the original tin and coin he'd used on set to the studio. So it is the actual coins and tin sounds your hearing, but rerecorded in studio, a sort of ADR for special objects I guess."

With the overall sound-scape, I felt the film needed a lot of sound content to help the narrative along. So at first, we had the sound design in stereo for the documentary elements in the film and Dolby 5.1 for the objective viewpoint, to help us separate the two."

As the film goes on, gradually you'll notice the sound is more intense. Pretty much most of the sound design by the end is full surround sound-scapes. It's a common area that many indie films fall down on. I was very keen to deliver a proper movie experience for Andy, based on my own experience of film industry for 12 years. For instance, the dialogue was mixed at normal levels with music and background fx, but when you want the audience to leap out their seats, I could push those fx by nearly 20db. This might seem quite a lot but it's the normal mixing situation for most blockbuster movies, it's how we give a film that punch."

There are a lot of other sound design hidden elements in there. Subfrequencies to make your body feel the tension etc... I think it opened the producer's eyes, or rather ears, when they first heard it in its new 5.1 form. Andy, who had never had a film previously mixed in 5.1, wasn't sure at first. I could understand him being cautious; I explained that when most independent film producers make their movies in stereo, they don't have the same sound levels as to mixing in Dolby. Needless to say, as soon as the big scares came along, a few smiles came on the faces of the producers and Andy, as they nearly leapt out of their seats in the first sound run through."

Did director/writer Andy Spencer have some strong ideas how he wanted his film to sound?

"Andy was keen to show the difference between the objective side and the documentary, it also needed to look natural. We both agreed that we didn't want to produce an over the top score. In fact even during post-sound phase, a few new scenes were dropped in, after a few ideas came about after reviewing the sound design. We all worked very closely on this film's polished effect."

Was it a case of long sessions in a darkened room?

"It took about 2 months to do the sound design, as I was working on another production as well. I guess if I added it all up, it would be about 3 weeks, full time hours of say 9 till 8 every day."



How much foley work was involved?

“Lots, in fact most of the footsteps in the film were replaced with foley design. Many films have the foley done and the only audio that survives from the shoot is the dialogue. This is another under recognised area that sound designers should get credit for. I was doing most of this myself with help on a few days from Ian Brooker and Andy for the coins etc. We had to re-record all the footsteps and stairs on the original sound design, to get the sound nice and polished. Rookery House, one of the main locations of the film, the walls are cold and stone damp, this wreaks havoc with the sound design when walking around. It reverbed too much and didn't sound right.

So footsteps, mobile phones, doors, walkie talkies are all new sound-scapes. With regards to the dialogue most of the shot footage was fine for the film. Sometimes if its exteriors, maybe a lot of wind on the microphones etc. . . we'd normally need to ADR in the studio. But I think we were pretty lucky on this film because the majority of scenes were interiors. Because we're dealing with a full surround-sound set up here, the centre channel was sounding too mono, so I have special processes to treat the dialogue and actually get a natural reverb of say the cellar, or an office to use the surrounds.”

Any interesting ways of creating sound effects for the sound design?

“There's a scene where lights are flickering, it took ages to do this one scene which only lasts five seconds on screen. Each light needed to flicker, so I recorded the sound of a tube light switching on. I then put it through a sequencer and played it on the keyboard, rather in the style of Morse code I guess. I had to do this several times, in different stereo positions.”

What are you most proud of in the film?

“The last ten minutes took a week to do with the amount of sound involved and foley. I'm proud of the whole thing really, the fact that we don't go over the top with the music and sound, but it still feels just right. When you watch a cinema audience of 300 jumping on your every bang or crash means its working. Every single noise and music cue in this film has a meaning; it's not just pointless crashes or footsteps. We do try and catch you out on a few occasions, but each one has a logical reason for its existence.”

Thank you for your time Jamie.

Jamie Robertson's website can be found at www.jamierobertson.me.uk/HOME.html