

HIGH DEF DISC NEWS

20 Q'S with Erik Aadahl

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

One of the world's premiere Sound Designers/Effects Editors sheds light on his beginnings, accomplishments and the possible futures of film sound.

Interview by: James Segars

In the world of film sound, dozens upon dozens of people work tirelessly behind the scenes to bring to life some of the most fantastic and realistic soundscapes imaginable. Erik Aadahl is one such person, a magic maker that has dedicated his life to seeking out, creating and directing some of the most unbelievably cool sound effects of our time. Whether he's recording sound effects out in the wild, or designing and polishing them behind the mixing board, one thing is clear: he's damn good at what he does.

Thankfully, we were able to catch up with him and ask him some questions about his past, present and future. Enjoy!

HDDN: Over the years, you've worked on countless demo-quality mixes (as either Sound Designer, or Sound Effects Editor) such as *Superman Returns*, *Transformers*, *Fantastic Four*, *I, Robot*, *X2*, *Valyrie*, and most recently *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen*. Now, with such a stunning body of work, where do you go from here? In other words, how do you continue to make perfection even more perfect, and what might we look forward to in the future?

ERIK: Hah, thanks, that's very nice of you. I approach every movie the same way: to have fun, take the sound as far as we can, and make it as "cool" as possible. Every movie calls for something different. Working for **Terrence Malick** might call for more realism in the design, where *Transformers* is complete unrealism--where anything goes if you can imagine it. I'm not supposed to talk about the movie I'm working on right now, but it will be an insane sound design opportunity. The bottom line is to have fun and keep pushing ourselves technically and creatively.

HDDN: When did you know you wanted to be a Sound Designer/Effects Editor?

ERIK: I had been playing with digital audio since I was about 10, composing music using an Audioblaster midi hookup between my Casio keyboard and clunky old 16 megahertz PC with a 5.25 inch floppy disc drive. I loved making my own films as a kid, super 8mm and video, but always assumed I'd follow a career in the sciences, medicine I thought. But I wound up taking a scholarship to USC film school, and got involved with the sound department there, scoring student films on the Spielberg Scoring Stage, and working the sound window renting gear out to student projects. That was in the mid-nineties when

the University still had 16mm magnetic dubbers--you may have seen these in vintage photos: big refrigerator-sized machines with tape-to-tape reels. Where we are now with technology is so different, but the basics are the same: storytelling. What I really love about sound editing is the storytelling part of it, how sound effects can make a scene come alive.

HDDN: How does one become a world-class Sound Designer/Effects Editor?

ERIK: Out of film school I got two job offers: one to be a "second second assistant" at a film production company, or to take a union assistant sound editor job doing TV shows like *"NYPD Blue"*. Getting into the Editors Guild can be hard, so I got lucky right out the gates with that, and after a year started editing. The rest was a lot of learning and experimenting. In television, I had to learn to work fast. Every show I learned something--how to make a "whoosh", how to make a beefy explosion, and over time how to "pre-visualize" a sound and then recreate it. I did these Disney channel movies where one week I'd be



making sounds for spaceships and the next monsters. It was a trial-by-fire learning experience where there was no time to fool around and doubt yourself--you just did it! I met a great mentor **Jay Wilkinson** on the *"Dune"* mini-series, and he got me started with **John Larsen** at Fox on *Daredevil* and *X2*. Films really can be demanding, but I've felt so lucky to be in the company of some really talented, generous world-class people and mentors.

HDDN: Do you choose your film jobs, or do they choose you? And if you choose them, what do you look for?

ERIK: I've been working freelance the past few years, and it's been really nice working with such a variety of different filmmakers. The offers I get come from people I've worked with, often fellow sound people. I've felt super lucky to work on a bunch of movies with my heroes in sound editing like **Craig Berkey**, who I met on *X2* and **Ethan van der Ryn** and **Mike Hopkins**, who did *the Lord of the Rings Trilogy* before we worked together on *Transformers* and *Kung Fu Panda*. Obviously I prefer to work on good films with good crews and good friends, so it's nice when all the stars align and that happens.

HDDN: What would you consider the three most influential and inspiring sound mixes of all time?

ERIK:

1. APOCALYPSE NOW - sound effects being treated like music; abstract, bold.

2. STAR WARS - **Ben Burtt** is a sound titan and a huge inspiration.

3. SAVING PRIVATE RYAN - **Gary Rydstrom's** (also a hero of mine) opening 20 minutes redefined expressive realism in film sound effects.

HDDN: Thus far you've worked on three of **Bryan Singer's** films (*Valkyrie*, *Superman Returns* and *X2*), do you anticipate working on more of his films in the future, and which was your favorite of the three?

ERIK: I love *X2* as a movie, but it's funny how often-times the best movies aren't always the most fun to work on. I think *Superman Returns* was the most fun to work on, because I had lots of "playtime" where I could experiment. Our crew was really tight and would rarely miss the weekly (at least) 5:00 cocktail hour. Composer/Editor **John Ottman** made things very pleasant for us. And Warner Bros was awesome at setting up elaborate sound recording sessions. We dropped a 1 ton piano off a forklift to create the sound of a grand piano thrown across a room on Lex Luther's yacht. Later, I managed to shatter my car windshield recording water splashes on glass from my 2nd floor balcony oops!

We'll see what's on the horizon for **Bryan Singer**. I am a huge *Battlestar Galactica* fan.

HDDN: Which role do you prefer when it comes to Sound -- Effects Editor or Designer?

ERIK: Those credits can sometimes seem a little confusing, and there's not always a lot of difference between them. On the movies I do, I try my hardest to create every sound from scratch, so there's always a ton to design. I spend the first few months of a movie recording all the time, making lists of more sounds I need to record. They might be cars, guns, planes, servos, bagpipes, it's up to me. Today some construction guys were drilling down the alley from my design room, so I ran over there with a recorder and got those sounds. Over time, I'll build up a library for the show, all recorded at 192 kHz, 24-bit. Some of the most fun I have on a movie is to build a kick-ass scene from scratch as an editor, and tear it apart as a designer.

Over-editing is a problem, so it's important that the track stays clean, defined and bold. During the final mix, I'm spending a lot of my time finding where we can find more clarity and punch up the dynamics to keep it "simple but bold".

HDDN: Do you lose sleep at night when you think about the percentage of people out there that rely on their built-in TV speakers instead of a dedicated surround system, thus missing out on all of the effort you and your team put into the effects, design, and mix?

ERIK: When I worked on TV, I thought about that a lot more. These days, a lot of people are still going to movie theaters which have improved a lot in quality over the years. But these days home theaters account for 70% or more of movie viewing, so that's where the work is being heard. We mixed both *Transformers* on the Cary Grant Stage at Sony Pictures Studios. The mix will never again sound that good anywhere, or at least not sound as "accurate". But some theaters will get close (like the Arclight chain in Los Angeles), and some home theaters too, though not as many. It's really expensive to get just the acoustics of a room right, let alone invest top-dollar in a calibrated, top-quality home theater. Thankfully, more and more people are realizing how big a difference just a little bit of investment can make in a home theater with surround sound and a discrete subwoofer.

HDDN: Did you enjoy your time working on the *Transformers* films and if so, are you eager to start work on the third film when it comes around?

ERIK: Working on the *Transformers* films was such a blast. We could play with such big weapons, military vehicles, robots. It's as fun as it gets. There's nothing like having a F22 stealth raptor fighter fly 50 feet over your head, or play matador with a stunt car recording skids. And the robots were so fun to create. We built a theremin musical instrument that could trigger weird sounds we performed in real time to make some of the new Decepticon sounds. Making the powerful sound of the Fallen was a really fun challenge. His teleporting energy sound was actually an accident. I was processing sounds, and had a bad edit that freaked out my software and made a huge ZAAANG type of sound. I went "WOAH! Cool!" and put bad edits all over the place to make more of that ZAAANG.

HDDN: Because you create many of the sound effects in-house, which sound effect is your favorite above

all others?

ERIK: I think in “*Transformers: ROTF*” my favorite sound effect was Reedman’s ball bearings “zipping” around. I made those electric sounding “zips” using “buzzing magnets” we found on the internet. Every movie yields new varieties of material, so there’s many fun sounds that have accumulated in our treasure chest of sounds over the years.

HDDN: The *Transformers* films are known the world over for their spectacular sound mix/design, even garnering two Academy Award nominations (Achievement in Sound, and Achievement in Sound Editing) back in 2008.

As fate would have it, both awards went to *The Bourne Ultimatum*, but do you think that come the 2010 awards, *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen* might finally take home the Oscar(s) it deserves?

ERIK: *Bourne Ultimatum* sounded great. Bay may not necessarily be the Academy’s favorite filmmaker, but there’s no question the entire world has embraced the movie, so we’ll see!

HDDN: When designing the film’s soundscape what is the most difficult part of the process? And when it comes to Sound Effects editing?

ERIK: I think the biggest challenge is creating clarity in the design. For *Transformers*, that would be making all the different robots have their own unique “character” sonically. Typically, the most challenging stuff to design are awesome vocals. And the biggest challenge for the sound effects editors is covering all the mayhem (or Bayhem, as we call it) without it become a wall of sound. You’ve got to pick your moments: when to feature that revving car engine, and when to duck it out completely to feature a transformation followed by robot gun shots. You’ve gotta make choices, “racking focus” with the sound. Speaking of cars, we spend a lot of time recording them and even more time editing them to make them seamless and dynamic. In these movies, you might notice they’re almost always in a state of constant acceleration.



HDDN: Of all of the films you’ve worked on in the past, which is your favorite and why?

ERIK: “*The New World*” by **Terrence Malick**. That was the most challenging film I’ve worked on so far, even though it’s not as action-packed as most of the films I do. It required such attention to realism--all 170 species of bird sounds in the movie were accurate for season, time of day and habitat. There is very little music, so the sounds and atmospheres had to be so engaging, realistic and hypnotic. For Malick, the song of a hermit thrush was 10 times better than an orchestra in the background. He is one of the greatest and most under-appreciated directors at work these days.

HDDN: What is your take-out meal of choice when faced with an all-nighter at the sound board?

ERIK: Mango salmon from “Bamboo” on Venice Blvd. Mmmmm mmmmm.

HDDN: I’ve heard that a lot of sound designers/mixers like to have a signature “easter egg” that they throw into their mix as an inside joke. Do you have such a sound, and if so would you be so kind as to give us a hint where to find it?



ERIK: I try to throw my dog “Freja” in every movie I do. I rescued her when she was a puppy. She was the voice of Superman’s dog on the farm. She was a distant Nazi dog making Stauffenberg paranoid in “*Valkyrie*”. She was a neighbor’s dog in “*Monsters vs. Aliens*”. She even was the source of some of Bumblebee’s vocals in

both *Transformers* movies.

Some people may recognize the world-famous “Will-helm” scream from the *Star Wars* movies. Boba Fett’s scream when he falls into the Pit of Sarlac and a tie fighter’s death scream are both exactly the same, and are actually from 20th Century Fox’s sound effects library that **Ben Burtt** excavated. We hid the scream in *Kung Fu Panda* (clue: the prison) and the first *Transformers* (clue: the power

plant).

HDDN: Where do you see the future of theatrical and home theater audio going? More channels, more clarity, more complexity -- is that even possible/necessary? And could the adoption and widespread expansion of digital 3D theaters mean further innovation in the sound design/effects arena?

ERIK: I'd like to see more improvements in theatrical sound. First off, we've been stuck at Dolby's 48 kHz playback standard for a while. We should see that going up soon. Last week I previewed a theater developed by "Ionosound" that gets very close to 3D placement of sound using 32 channels and enough speakers to ring the whole room. With advancements in 3D projection, this seems like the logical next step. Theaters typically play releases in Dolby 5.1. Many home theaters, though, are capable of 7.1 or more, but still only play the 5.1 for most movies. I think it's about time we start expanding out of the 5.1 world and into even more immersive standards.

HDDN: Where do you prefer to do the bulk of your movie watching, in theaters or in the comfort of your own home theater?

ERIK: For movies that I'm really looking forward to seeing, I see them in theaters. Here in Los Angeles, we have the world-class "Arclight" chain with black-box, reference accurate theaters that can't be beat by my home system. I can reserve seats online and show up 5 minutes before the film starts. I have a pretty good home setup, but my living room is not acoustically very good with reflective walls (making things sound slappy), a raised floor (which makes the sub go nuts) and a 52 inch screen that doesn't compare to a 40 footer in the theater.

HDDN: Are you thrilled with the unparalleled, lossless audio quality achieved by Blu-ray disc?

ERIK: Yes, finally we've got lossless quality with Blu-ray. You're hearing our work more accurately at home than

ever before!

HDDN: Do you ever read the audio portions of Blu-ray/DVD reviews and think, "Wow, these guys really missed the mark"?

ERIK: I find some reviews really interesting and always a learning experience. It's always good to see how your audience is reacting. It's funny how a lot of reviews I read comment on the "low-end", which is one of my favorite things to play with. I love making people's guts rumble. So it's fun to hear when the sub-woofer is shaking people around the world.



HDDN: Lastly, do you own a Blu-ray player, and if so, what's your favorite Blu-ray release, surround sound-wise?

ERIK: I've got a PS3 which I like for playing Blu-ray discs. One of my favorite sound jobs of all time is "*Master and Commander: Far Side of the World*" which sounds great on Blu-ray. It's got great naturalistic use of the surrounds, thanks to the stellar work of mixer **Doug Hemphill** and supervisor **Richard King**.

HDDN: (Bonus Question) Which is your clam chowder of choice, New England or Manhattan?

ERIK: Both are amazing, but I'd have to go New England ;)



A VERY SPECIAL THANKS GOES OUT TO ERIK AADAHN FOR PARTICIPATING IN THIS INTERVIEW, FROM EVERYONE HERE AT HIGHDEFDISCNEWS.COM