

Patrick has had extensive experience with dramatic voice recording, notably on a handful of Canadian feature films. "The **Rainbow Boys** was the most fun. My very first feature at Crawley's was Genevieve Bujold's first film called **Amanita Pestilens**. I recorded the guide track for René Bonnière, who thought I was an awful twit, and indeed I was. Didn't do another feature until I worked for Ivan Reitman on **Foxy Lady**, which was a bit of a disaster. Then I worked with Don Haldane on **The Reincarnate** up in Kleinburg, and that was a very special experience. Don is a particularly wonderful man. Then Paul Almond's **Journey**, an absolutely wild experience. I'm still convinced that Paul is a madman, and I think we were all pretty mad by the time we left that location. But a marvelous opportunity and nice people to work with."

One of the frustrations of being a soundman on a feature film is sometimes seeing most of your work scrapped and post-produced sound substituted. "On **Journey** most of it was used, on **The Reincarnate** all of it was, there was no post-synching on that. On **Foxy Lady** there was quite a lot of it, since Ivan changed much of the dialogue after he shot the film, re-wrote entire scenes, and used cut-aways to get away from lip-synch. Then on **The Rainbow Boys** we got away with using 100% of the location sound, and I was as proud of that as anything I've done. That was a very special film and Donald Pleasence, who's still very much a star in my eyes, was very flattering to me. (He called Patrick the best soundman he ever worked with.) There was only one line from a Chinese shop keeper that we had to post synch in the studio, because it was just a shocking performance."

It's a remarkable thing when 100% of the location sound is used on a feature, especially when it's shot outdoors, under difficult conditions. "Mind you, I had Billy Nobles as a boom man, and that was very special. We worked very hard and covered ourselves from every angle, room tone, everything. We were shooting on a mountain one day, so we recorded mountain tone: we recorded it with the mike pointing toward the valley and the river, then toward the mountain, then toward the ground, to cover all possible camera angles. In fact, it proved very valuable in the mix. Then the last feature I did was Peter Pearson's **Only God Knows**, and that was a complete disaster for me in sound, they used only five minutes of my actual location recording."

The day I visited the set of that film, director Pearson was shouting all throughout the shoot, so I wasn't surprised. "Peter came in on the film extremely late and we had no time to look at locations. He was about three hours ahead of himself at any given time re-writing the script, and to have created any delays at all in recording sound would have been terrible. Difficult locations, as well, shooting at the end of a runway at Malton with planes coming in just overhead and that abandoned prison farm, it would have cost a fortune to deaden the echo in that place. The tradition is that the soundman is one of the few people on set with the right to say 'Cut,' at any given time. Peter came to me right off the top, saying, 'I don't like location sound, I don't want location sound, and you'll never shout "Cut" on my set.' So I said, 'Peter, I don't think I'm your man, I wouldn't enjoy recording sound under these conditions.' He said he would like me to do it very much, so I did it for the money. In retrospect, I think Peter was absolutely right, for that particular film, and I learned quite a lesson from him. But when a filmmaker doesn't even like location sound, it makes you feel pretty useless, indeed."

"I think to make a film, you have to have a lot of fun. It shows if the actors are having fun, if the crew's having fun, if you really enjoy making it. Working under an uptight situation is no way. That's why **The Rainbow Boys** to me was magic. It's coming up again, by the way, in England. It's sold 35 prints and is going to be touring with Monty Python. Again, it's a weak plot, but a charming film."

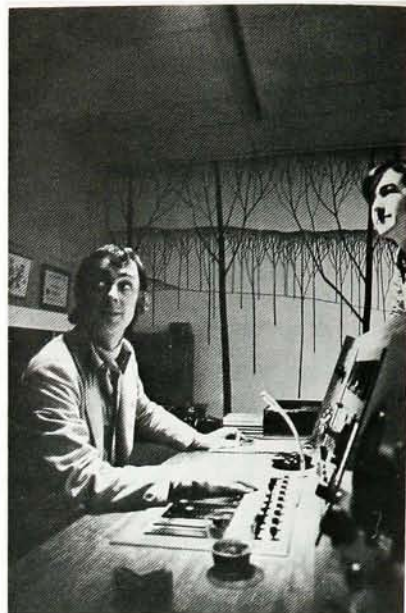
Patrick himself is an easygoing chap with a British accent and a keen mind. He got involved with film fifteen years ago at Crawley Films in Ottawa, where he combined an interest in theatre and electronics to launch his career. He still considers Crawley's one of the best places in the industry to learn, even though he himself left after only two years, since, as he so candidly puts it: "I was 30, just got married and was earning only 80 bucks a week so it was time to move on." He came to Toronto, free-lancing, and teamed up with Bob Dutru to make documentaries for CBC **Newsmagazine**. That took him to Vietnam and to Oslo with Martin Luther King accepting the Nobel Peace Prize, thus he found it an interesting job. It also gave him enough good credits to get his name well established as an expert soundman.

He's been free-lancing ever since. "Seven years ago I realized that I was burning up a bit on the documentary route and I wasn't heavily into feature work, so it seemed like a good time to open a studio." This idea was born out of his frustrations as a soundman, not having access to a transfer machine, which would enable him to carry the recording process one step further. "All tapes that you record in the field are inadequate, and nobody is capable of fixing those inadequacies, unless they know the actual situation. Somebody crunching on gravel might be established in the shot or it might not be. In order to eliminate some of that gravel in transfer, you have to have the man who knows that you don't actually see somebody crunching on gravel. So I was frustrated that I wasn't able to follow through with that one extra stage."

"I was working for Jim Mercer on contract, so I rushed out and bought all sorts of second hand equipment and built a pretty junky studio on Jarvis Street in his building. It was a start, and it proved remarkably satisfactory." He had to borrow \$15,000 from the bank for this first venture, and only when that was paid back did he borrow the next \$35,000 to finance the present studio. It's located in the basement purely for sound reasons and "practically every soundman drops in from time to time, it's become somewhat of a soundmen's club. Where people discuss problems or play tapes, saying, my God, what can I do about this or that? Some people come to do their own transfers. I'd like to carry on with that tradition. And of course it gets increasingly difficult to get out of the studio, people look on you as more or less a permanent fixture, and you're unreliable if you're not here all the time."

In order to enable him to spend more time in his studio, Patrick Spence-Thomas has made it a practice to train a whole line of fine young people in location sound recording. Billy Nobles, Aerlyn Weissman, Douglas Ganton, Larry Johnson and many others have at one time worked for him, though he modestly disclaims most master/apprentice relationships. He also recognizes the inevitability of most of his students moving on to better paying jobs as soon as they've acquired enough practical knowledge. "Theoretical training be damned, you pick that up as you go along. I don't think there's any way that I would *trust* anybody out of a film school right off the top, unless they came into the studio in a junior capacity and worked for a couple of months to a year. Then I would feel happy that they've hit all the problems that they were going to hit, and learned how to deal with them."

"As a soundman, the most difficult thing to learn is your compromises. If Trudeau is in a light aircraft circling Toronto and the plane's about to crash, the soundman doesn't say, hold on mate, I want to use a different microphone or I haven't got the best mike position, or hell, the synch chord's broken, you just record the damned thing. And it boils down to compromise the whole time on a feature film. Let's say it's getting late in the afternoon and the sun's going down, there's only enough light to do one more take, the actors are getting uptight because they've been working too hard, and



Patrick Spence-Thomas and friends in his sound studio





the best performance of the day goes through. The soundman's not terribly happy with his mike placement, he has a better position or he's got a puff of wind in the mike during the take, and the big moment comes when the director looks at him and the cameraman and asks: "How was it?" Implicit in the soundman's reply: "O.K. for sound," is a terrific amount of experience and total knowledge of the business. His experience of whether something can be done later about that slightly poor quality or how much asking for a re-take might prejudice the shoot. Would it be worth it any way, since he must be sensitive enough to the performance to know that it has come to a peak. Then, how much a re-take would prejudice the budget of the film."

"You can teach anybody in an hour to operate a Nagra and to select a microphone, to get it out of the wind and in close, that's the easiest thing in the world. There's too much mumbo-jumbo about the technical side of things. But to operate sound intelligently ... the ability to operate as well with the bums on Jarvis Street as walking into the Prime Minister's office. It's important not to wear a filthy pair of jeans into the Prime Minister's office, nor a clean shirt and tie when talking to bums on the street. A man might come in and he might blanket a complete set to get rid of sound reflections, but prejudice the day's work to such a degree by causing a delay that he won't work again. Sure, he's going to get better sound but he's not going to work the next day."

Because of the portability of new documentary sound equipment and the kind of working conditions where everyone contributed creatively to the shoot, the industry is attracting many more intelligent people, according to Spence-Thomas. Gone are the days when the sound engineer shut himself into a corner with his push buttons and dials and said "don't ask me any questions, I'm just a technician." He sees the role of the good documentary soundman more in being where the action is than in pushing the on or off button. Good communication among the small crew is vital, everyone should be ready to accept the other people's help and ideas. "The industry is attracting more intelligent people also because it's a hell of a fine way of life, not because they necessarily want to be technicians."

Patrick deplores, however, the cropping up of some sound people with absolutely no knowledge of electronics beyond the operation of the tape recorder. "I wish that a lot of soundmen had more electronic knowledge. My background in that field I've found tremendously useful. When something goes wrong on top of a mountain in Vietnam, if you have some knowledge, even if you only know where to kick the recorder or where to bash the camera with a hammer to get it started. If you can get it going one way or another, you're going to help a lot of people out of a jam and save a lot of money. But the operation of the equipment should be second nature. Once that happens, then you can make some films."

"Every film that I've done, you get so emotionally involved, you really do, you give so much of yourself. Then to see the film maybe opening in a big theatre with no publicity and being killed at that level ... Frankly I'm fed up with working conditions on features. You're always asked to defer overtime work incredible hours. You end up at the end of the day completely exhausted, unable to do proper work, then you drag yourself out of bed the next morning. It just isn't worth it," sighed Patrick. "I get much more satisfaction now from a small, documentary film, which is properly financed, properly handled, properly budgeted. We have some good directors, but the organization on feature film sets is terrifying. What I would like to see more than anything else in Canada is for us to train some really good Assistant Directors, some really good Production Managers. So that if the sound department says, look I've got to have my own vehicle, they'd know what you're talking about. Or, say, for the scene coming up tomorrow I need two radio mikes. We really need them, so you won't be shouted down on that score. I'd love to do a feature under the proper conditions."

Technically, at least, what's the proper gear these days to record a feature track? "It would be awfully nice to have 2 Nagras, especially on a remote location. I'd always try for that. Then I would say 2 Sennheiser 415's, that's a small directional mike, an 815 which is even more highly directional, 2 Sony ECM lavaliers, an AKG D202 cardioid dynamic in its boom mount, the most useful mike ever made for film, excellent front to back ratio and yet a very wide pick up pattern, really the best mike to boom with, use it for almost everything; then a radio mike, a good set of tools and there you go ... that's the ideal set up, obviously."

And before the party starts, any last hints as to how to be a good location soundman? "Do a terribly careful check first of all of the script and see what's going to be needed, that you've got everything that you need. Every night clean the machines, degouse the heads, check frequency response, head alignment, recharge your batteries. Check the tape stock, make sure that it's consistent quality and have a very strict routine of looking after finished tapes. Always seal the boxes, always put little bits of tape on each reel with its number, so even if it gets mixed up in the box, it can be located later. Recorded tape is as precious as camera negative. A lot of people tend to forget that. And get instant feedback on problems during transfers at the lab. Leave instructions to have them call you collect at the hint of the slightest trouble."

Such precise care and expertise has earned Patrick Spence-Thomas the just reputation of being a cracker jack soundman and a hell of a nice guy to work with. Having taught numerous series of workshops for the Toronto Filmmakers Co-op, he's also known to lend a helping hand whenever a young filmmaker is just starting out and cannot afford to go to a big sound studio. He still offers a 50% discount to soundmen wishing to do their own transfers, just to prove a point, we suspect. He even has encouraging words for those contemplating the setting up of their own small studios, if they're willing to work hard and become just a little bit better than everyone else. In Patrick Spence-Thomas' case it's obviously teaching by example. So "become a soundman, and do it right away. With the new technical advances, it's a joy." □