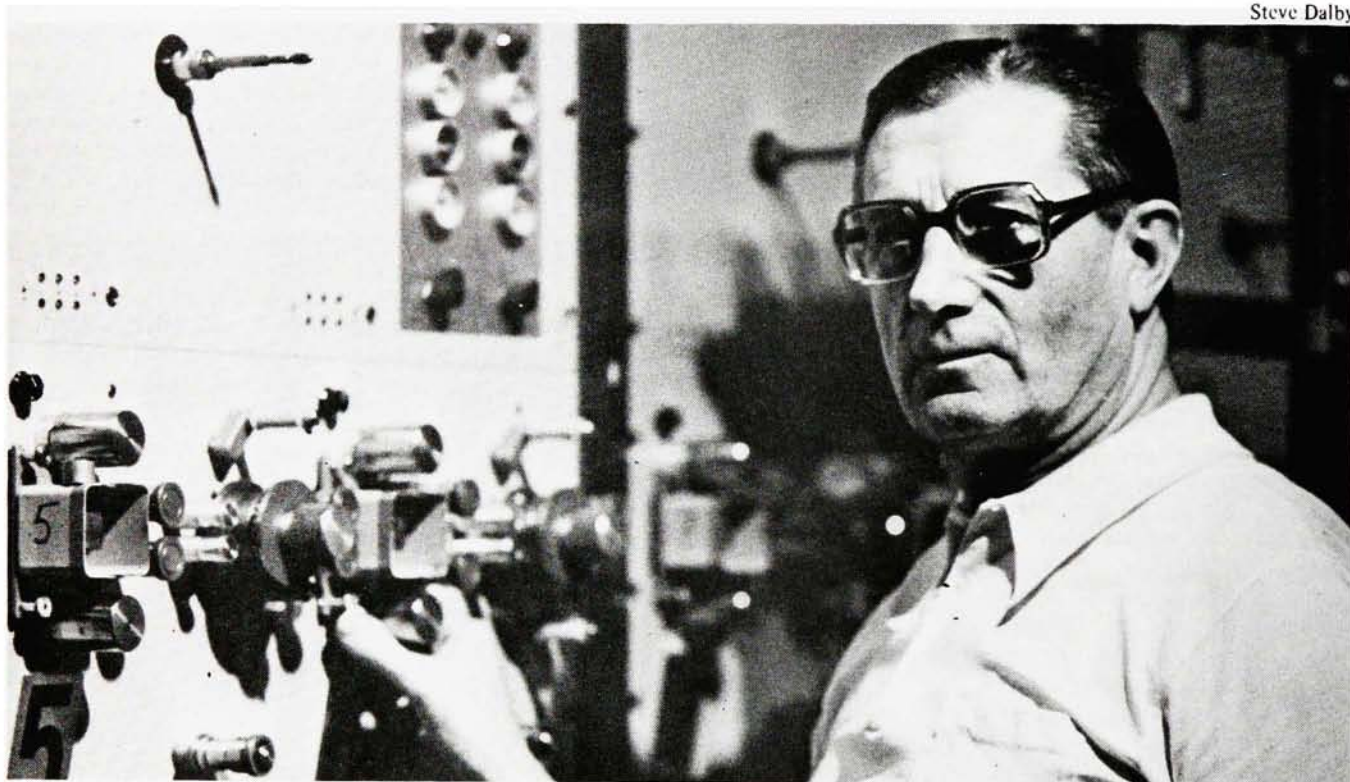

dalby sound

Although we think of film as being primarily a visual experience, sound is essential. Here Steve Dalby, the man behind the scenes, speaks about his work as a professional sound mixer and film teacher.

by Lois Siegel

Steve Dalby



When Steve Dalby was 18, an old lady friend of the family told him, "If you want to get on in this world, you've got to get into radio."

So Steve got a job with His Master's Voice, the Gramophone company in England now called EMI (Electrical and Musical Industries).

Then the old lady said, "Get in anywhere, and then make a nuisance of yourself."

Steve got into the recording department, examining the matrixes (record masters) that records are pressed from, and then he made a nuisance of himself. Eventually he was transferred from one section to another, and each time his job became more interesting.

Steve Dalby has been working with sound ever since. In Canada he is best known for his work as a sound mixer and head of the Sound Department for Bellevue Pathé Quebec Inc., 1973-1977.

Steve has worked with some of the film industry's best known directors: Roman Polanski, Richard Lester, Tony Richardson, Joseph Losey, Ted Kotcheff, Jan Kadar and Jean-Pierre Lefevbre... on some of the best known films: *The Loneliness of a Long Distance Runner*, *Tom Jones*, *The Loved One*, *A Hard Day's Night*, *Repulsion*, *The Knack*, *Help*, *Cul de Sac*, *Alfie*, *Accident*, *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, *Lies My Father Told Me*, *Les Dernières Fiançailles*.

In England when radio first began, His Master's Voice was also involved with a film company. His Master's Voice wanted to put their Gramophone recording artists into films, but opera singers at that time were as broad as they were long and couldn't act and the film company of course didn't like

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the idea one bit. They tried one film about the life of Robert Burns which was a ghastly failure.

As a result, the two companies split up – but Steve had been inflamed by the glamour of the film industry.

In 1930 he became a sound camera operator and maintenance engineer at British International Pictures. At that time there was no Nagra for recording and sound was recorded onto a separate photographic film.

Afterwards he moved to Ealing Studios-Associated Talking Pictures Ltd. to record sound on location. "In those days people didn't teach you. I worked on my own observing what other people did."

Steve now teaches at Concordia University, lecturing on the technical aspects of film production, especially sound.

"The main problem with teaching sound is that one can't get enough practical work. You can't really teach sound by talking about it. Concordia is well equipped, if not the best equipped school in Canada. But much more time should be spent with the students actually doing recording, which means shooting with a camera. It's no good just recording sound because you haven't got the problems of camera/sound recording: the microphone has to be in a certain position because the camera is showing a certain amount of the set and the actors are moving around. It comes back to the old problem of finance.

"But some arrangements should be made to have the students shoot films while the sound lecturer is there with them, which means the school should employ the instructor for much more than one lecture a week.

"In this way the lecturer wouldn't always have to say, 'Well, what did you do there? That sound isn't very good.' And the student wouldn't be stuck with bad sound.

"Students seem very keen to learn, but time is a problem. Students often miss lectures to shoot films. The whole course method should be restructured.

"Although I learned sound in the industry, I think now I would suggest that someone start in a school. You must know how to operate the equipment. Companies are loath to spend too much time teaching. They feel they are paying people to do a job, not to teach them to do a job. Logically, clients won't accept people experimenting on their expensive productions. A client wants the best, and the amount he's paying warrants having good people."

Steve values a good memory. "A sound mixer has to know what one did at the beginning of the roll. With the advent of the rock and roll method in 1956, the mixer, through electrical circuits in the recording amplifier, could punch in and out of a roll to make a slight alteration without hearing changes in the sound. Therefore, he had to know the sound level where he left off or a change would be heard between sounds.

"I never believe in taking a lot of notes. I always try to remember things, and this is probably how one acquires a good memory – by making the brain work.

"In the early days of magnetic recording one could record an entire roll and if it wasn't good, it could be erased and used again, but before magnetic recording we would record directly onto an optical sound track, and it was very difficult to learn how to mix. We used to rehearse a 35mm, 10 minute reel of film for two hours and then either take notes or remember everything at various points along the reel. Then we would start recording. If the recording took three takes, the producer started looking for a new mixer."

Dalby on Directors:

Polanski: "He was the most difficult to work with. He's one of those people who never makes up his mind. On *Repulsion* he was constantly sending the reel back to the sound editor to have changes made. Then he'd eventually have the changes replaced with what was there in the first place. But Polanski is very meticulous about the direction of his actors. He knows what he wants visually and the way he wants the dialogue spoken; but from the point of view of building up the sound track, he seems to do it in a rather experimental way."

Lester: "He knows exactly what he wants from the moment he starts the film until the final mix."

Richardson: "He tends to give the impression of accepting other people's ideas, but in the end it's his own conception which comes forth."

Losey: "He has very cut and dried ideas about what he wants. He works a great deal with his sound editor before the mix."

Lefebvre: "He is very sound conscious. His soundman, Jacques Blain, is one of the best location sound recorders in Canada."

Kadar: "He knows exactly what he wants. He's a very experienced and professional filmmaker. People told me he would be difficult. I didn't find him difficult at all."

Although Steve has worked in many countries, he explains that he has mixed in many languages he didn't know, including Hindi.

"One goes by the sound rather than by the language. A mixer must have a good ear and be able to distinguish between sounds. With dialogue you have to assess the difference between recordings of different lots and to equalize the results. Mixing is not just mixing sounds together. The art of the mixer is to make the sound acceptable – one can't always turn bad sound into good sound, but one can make the sound seem as if there were no changes in quality.

"The problem with a novice filmmaker is that he tries to put too many elements on one track. A beginner often says, 'This mix won't be difficult, there are only two tracks.' But a mixer must have space between various sounds to allow fading in and out.

"One thing Canada does lack are professional sound editors.

"Sometimes directors bring me poor sound and expect miracles. I often have to tell them 'I'm a mixer not a miracle worker.'

"They don't understand what I can and can't do with their sound. One can't always eliminate a noisy background. If one does, it sometimes gives a bad quality to the voice mixed with it." □