The Sampler

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Frank Serafine: SFX Master Rides the Next Wave

Frank Serafine holds a unique place in the sound effects library industry as one of the first major sound designers to lend his name to commercial SFX discs. Previously, most collections were either released uncredited or with a simple designation of a film studio, when applicable.

Serafine managed to parlay a brilliant career creating SFX (primarily using electronic keyboards such as Moogs, Yamaha CS-80s, and Prophet 5s) for early '80s films such as Star Trek, The Fog, and Tron into a highly successful business enterprise.

Serafine first partnered with Sound Ideas on its wide-ranging 6000 Series (which also included contributions by Hollywood sound designer Alan Howarth) and later started his own eponymous library company, which has put out scores of discs covering everything from his top-selling Platinum Sounds for the 21st Century to Sci-Fi (natch), Comic Sonic Relief, Guns of Cinema, and SFX: The General Series.

Serafine continues to be an in-demand effects creator, sound supervisor/designer, and composer for feature films, games, television, commercials, and even location-based rides and exhibits. But he acknowledges that libraries have become a lucrative part of his business.

Serafine recently used a Holophone microphone to record police car sirens and tire squeals for the upcoming movie Taking Charge. The recordings were taken at a Sand Canyon Ranch area north of L.A., where Serafine said his crew had access to “hundreds of dead-quiet acres surrounded by mountains.”

We caught up with Serafine by phone recently at his Malibu studio to chat about his work and the evolution of the SFX library biz in recent years.
"I'm really a composer, so I look at a lot of what I do with effects as sound architecture or sound composition," Serafine says. "I've always liked working on electronic music keyboards of various kinds. Through the years I've used so many different ones to help construct sound effects in what I hope is an almost musical way."

Serafine recalls how he proceeded after deciding to make some of his FX available in library form. "I gathered all the material from a lot of DATs, PCM F-1 Beta, and 1/4-inch analog tapes. I had used a Stellavox and a Nagra, and it was all non-Dolby, but man, some of that material just sounded incredible. It was right at the peak of the analog age, really."

An early adapter of digital recording (from the PCM F-1 forward), Serafine was enthralled by the creative flexibility offered by the early Fairlight.

"That was really the first great sampler," he recalls. "It was an 8-bit system and I had that on Tron for about a year. After that I jumped on with Emu Systems and went through every one of their series, all the way to the E4, which I still use. Through the years, I and the many people who worked under me spent a lot of time developing unique sounds for the various keyboards so we could watch a scene and instantly perform to picture, which is so different than the way most people do it today. I've been getting back to that because IK Multimedia, Chicken Systems, Apple's Emagic, and companies like that are allowing me to bring all of my original Emu E4 files through Sample Tank and Logic's Pro 7 [sound module plug-in] systems, and I'm able to manipulate them like I used to but with even greater control. Sample Tank is like the new Emulator. What we want to be able to do is warp the sound—pitch it, expand it, do all the things you can do in a sampler and sequencer that's a little more difficult to do in the Pro Tools format.

"For instance, the way I would make a sound effect for a film project, say for the destruction of the Enterprise [from Star Trek] or something like that, is I'd sit there and map all the selective sound elements up and down the entire keyboard. I'd have an explosion, a slowed down lion roar, bending, twisting, and crashing metal, combine them in interesting ways while improvising on the keyboard directly to picture. I like to take 10 explosions, because I have 10 fingers, and just play a chord of explosions—you kind of offset them the way you play them and it creates this incredible mega-explosion," he laughs. "And with all this nice new, high-powered sampling stuff, the resolution is incredible, too. There is no digital aliasing at extremely fast or slowed down speed manipulations. Then, once you have creatively edited and placed the effect into the Pro Tools timeline, you can also throw on the plug-ins or whatever else you want to do with it."

Other technological changes have affected how Serafine works. "Now, every movie I do I'm recording fresh 5.1 sound effects. I go out into the field with an Apple G4 laptop and Logic Pro 7, a hard drive with an inverted car battery rigged onto a Rock 'n' Roller cart and an Edirol FA-101 [FireWire audio interface]. The Edirol interface allows six channels of [24-bit] and 192 [kHz sampling rate], and then I use a Holophone microphone, which has full panoramic 7.1 surround, providing an additional rear center, top, and the low frequency subwoofer element capable of supporting the IMAX 7.1 surround format. The Edirol has eight channels altogether, six at 192, and then I take two mini-discs out with two Technics AT-822 stereo microphones and have the recording crew swarm whatever we're doing [making multiple audio shots]."

"Last week, for the movie I'm currently supervising called Taking Charge, we recorded all the cars for the film, including cop cars and ambulances out at a Sand Canyon Ranch property [near Palmdale, north of L.A.] where we had access to hundreds of dead-quiet acres surrounded by mountains exclusively to ourselves. We were able to record police sirens
approaching from miles away, rip-roaring tire squeals, peel-outs, and skids on asphalt and gravel— that sort of thing.

“We switched the Holophone on the outside as the sirens pulled up, then reversed it where we put the Holophone on the inside of all the cars and then recorded with the mini-discs on the outside. Then we slate all the various recorders and locations with a megaphone and radios and sync them all back up in the studio so we get a multiplicity of amazing surround images with matching stereo perspectives. We’ve also been using the Holophone for our surround ambiances, so when we were out at the ranch property we also got some great light winds and country backgrounds we’ll be using in the film.

Not surprisingly, surround is the next frontier for Serafine’s libraries, too. “My next big collection is called Ambience 5.1,” he says. “It will be a comprehensive DVD collection; 30 discs of 5.1 surround background ambience recordings. That should be out by the end of the year. I’ve been recording some incredible stuff. For this movie I just finished called The Aryan Couple, we recorded all the exteriors in 5.1, such as birds, wind, distant dogs, and also interior locations like fireplaces, along with various different room tones. It’s really going to be a fantastic surround collection.”

Serafine is also putting his main 16 CD SFX General Series library on DVD. “And, along with Chicken Systems,” he says, “I’m developing a search engine that, when you put the seat of the DVD in, it’s immediately compatible with all the other media. Like it’ll go right into Final Cut Pro, Logic Pro 7, Pro Tools, Digital Performer, whatever. It’ll instantly cross-search from the sounds on all 16 discs, which will be set up on just two DVDs.”

But wait... there’s more! “With IK Multimedia I’m developing a plug-in. It will be a high-powered sound effects sampling system that will incorporate all the sampling libraries that I’ve developed and also include a bunch of new ones. We’re hoping it will become the sound effects portal for Final Cut, Logic Pro, Pro Tools, everybody, but in the sample format so you can play it on a keyboard.”

And on the eighth day, Frank rested.

For more info go to frankserafine.com.