Transcript for Interview with Fred Greenhalgh

stories2music Podcast #5 - March 24, 2023

Kathy

Hello. Welcome to the stories2music podcast. I'm your host, Kathy Matthes.

I connected with Fred Greenhalgh via email after the passing of William Dufris when I sent Fred the link to the interview I did with Dufris in 2019. I was taking Multimedia Writing and Reporting at Palomar College for professional development, and we had to do some interviews for the feature article assignment. Mine was on full-cast audiobooks. After my interview with Michele Cobb, Executive Director of the Audiobook Publishers Association, she suggested that I contact Dufris for my next interview, and he was kind enough to do it. After his passing, I didn't know if Fred knew about the interview, which was probably one of the last ones Bill did.

In 2023, I took a Creative Non-Fiction Writing class, and one project was a narrative journalism research paper. I decided to research more about how radio/audio dramas create immersion in the listener's imagination. I had to do some interviews for the paper, too, so I contacted Fred to see if he would do an interview about the use of sound in radio dramas, and this is what he had to say!

Hi Fred. Why don't you tell us a bit about yourself.

Fred

Hi, this is Fred Greenhalgh, head of audio at Realm. Realm is one of the world's only fiction podcast studios and networks dedicated just to audio fiction. What once upon a time we would call radio dramas, audio dramas, Realm embraces all those types of materials with a single voice things and other kinds of storytelling, podcasts, and other audio versions of getting things out into the world.

I joined Realm after, boy, more than 10 years of running my own podcast things. I cofounded Dagaz media with Bill Dufris. I founded my own Final Rune productions in 2007, thereabouts, ran the anthology podcast Reader on Revival for a couple 100 years. On the journey of doing this, recorded Stephen King saying the F bomb in *Locke and Key*. I've done *X-Files* alongside Bill Dufris with Gillian Anderson, David Duchovny. Made other sorts of things. Made *Elf Quest* working with the original creators *Dark Tome*, *The Cleansed* and now with Realm making dozens of shows a year for ourselves and creative partners. I was one of the producers on *Harley Quinn and the Joker: Sound Mind* which just came out on Spotify, was a number one show. Unseated Joe Rogan for five days--kind of fun--and also am a podcast host for Undertow, which is an anthologized dark fiction podcast that Realm has and directed/produced several known shows on the Undertow feed, including *Blood Force* this past fall.

So anyways, I love this stuff. I've been making it for a while, and it is my pleasure to help you out with this.

Kathy

Great! Thanks, Fred. So let's get started. How do audio dramas tell the story through sound?

Fred

So what I really love about the art form is the ability to sort of hack the brain and project images onto your mind through the ears. And so what you do, I mean, obviously, being told a story by a parent or person who loves you is something that I hope you've had this experience of having it being really deeply ingrained on you through your life and certainly through oral tradition. You know, we know that people have been telling stories for perhaps 100,000 years, certainly 10s of thousands of years, and telling stories is like the superpower that humans possess. It is our ability to pass information, literal information like this plant will kill you. This animal will kill you. This thing happens at this time of year, so you should do this. All that that happens through stories is quite important.

And then, of course, the sense of meaning and existence in the universe is really an important part of what stories do for people, so audio dramas are just sort of *that* invented for a modern era. So I'm sure early people, you know, made sound effects and they banged sticks, banged rocks, projected their voices around campfires and did things to sort of help conjure and experience through sound. And so in audio drama, we're just doing the same thing we, you know, there's many different ways of doing it.

For example, with Realm, I directed a show last year, which is primarily a single actor, but it's built out with this immersive sound design and music. So it, again, it feels like a "movie in your mind." OK. And yeah, and that could be a storyteller sort of telling you first person the story. Something happened to them, or it can be a full audio drama along the lines of like, a more film experience where you're hearing dialogue that should feel very naturalistic and very much like and this happened, this happened and we're just with people, experiencing a thing and going through a story. That's, that's really it.

It can be devilishly difficult because, especially if people are coming from a visual background, realize how much, particularly in film. For example, you're relying on the camera to sell images to you, or to like establish subtext, or to sort of tell you how you should feel about a thing in visual, and so conveying that on audio is a challenge and that's sort of what the art is all about, is sort of like how do you sound design in a way that actually adds to it?

How do you come up with stories that are well suited for sound like is it really important that there's like a flying pterodactyl with seven limbs, or is there some other way we can imagine this monster that works? Or do does the audience need to know what color that pterodactyl is? I don't know.

Kathy

Since audio dramas are "theater of the mind," how do sound effects help immerse the listener in the story? Are they necessary?

Fred

There's like a strict definition of this, which is like what is an audio drama and to me there's there is a slight thing where when people say, what's the difference in audio drama and audio book? To me, the difference is the actual underlying text, whereas in an audio book, if you read the text that is an experience. If you read an audio drama script, it is the script, and if you read it, it's like the blueprints to the building, not the actual building, so that is all the way to say that is a person reading a thing without sound effects truly an audio drama? I don't know that it is, but that can be a hot take.

Do sound effects help? Again, there's a good and bad versions of this, okay, like I've seen scripts where it sort of is a very didactic like them to the sound designer, like this happens clop, clop, clop. This happens plop, plop, plop, and it's like sort of like an instruction paint-by-numbers to the sound designer and better scripts in my mind typically give the sound designer enough that they can help kind of build that world and understand what's happening and then are trusted to kind of build a lived in world.

And so certainly there's like sort of bad things where it's like a single person telling your story. And then Jane walked up the stairs and knocked on the door, and there was a gun went off, and you would be like clop, clop, clop. [Knocking.] Pow! Aaaah! That would be bad, but there are ways where either we can do that same moment of, oh, I don't know. Is Jim still here? [Knocking.] Jim? [Knocking.] Jim? Kapew! Oh my God! Jim! Door, door open! Door open! And we get the same thing without the voice over element, but if we're do the voice over element, maybe we don't need all these like extremely literal sound effects. Think about sound effects in a more non literal composition type arrangement where they're underscoring the emotional direction of the story as opposed to the literal kinetic energy of a moment. So I hope that it's helpful.

Kathy

Is there a process for sound design for audio, such as what sounds are used, when they used, where they were placed?

Fred

I will say this when I talk to/interviewing sound designers, I think there's at least three different schools of thought on this.

So there's a kind of people who are very good at field recording, or and perhaps a close cousin to that as the traditional like Foley for films, and so people who are really good at capturing sounds in the world or making sounds that they capture and putting them into worlds. That's one kind of school, and that's like sort of can adhere very closely to film. We've got something that takes place in the Old West, we're going to get sounds of like wind and tumbleweed and stuff that's going to be that kind of thing.

There's a kind of sound design that's like the invention of sounds using in-the-box post-production software taking, and it could often start with like actual organic real sounds and then like manipulate them in all sorts of weird ways. Krotos software, for example, has this thing called a reformer, where you can say, I'm just going to make a weird, I'm going to go with my mouth, and I can run that through a plug in and add like, but I actually want to make that same sort of like wave form but with like the sound of it beating an onion to death with a Jaguar growl mixed with like the waves slapping, and somehow you've now ended up with a completely new sound. So that kind of like invention of new sounds through other underlying elements using technology as sort of a different school of sound design.

And then there's a sound design which is like scoring, where it's sort of using sonic elements, drones, beds, ambiences in a music like way, and all three of them can be used and can be used together and intertwined in various ways, but those are at least three different philosophies, and I've met sound designers who are good at all three or one, or some combination thereof.

The best sound designers for this field are able to think in sound, and you can don't have to tell them. Like you say, "OK, this is seen in the kitchen and this thing happens" and they read that scene and think: What kind of house is it? Is it got creaky floorboard? Is it a modern house? Does it have a clock? And if there's a clock, what is that clock saying? Did someone put a kettle on and forget to turn it off? And what are all these little minor elements to help drive the story is there like sort of actual story-based use of those elements, and that's the good stuff. When you're using sound, and not just for like literally what you need to communicate to the audience, so they can follow point A to point B, but so you can actually both make them feel like this is a lived in world and is scuffed up and real and also is dramatically serving a purpose in the story to help the listener understand that characterization tone, that sort of thing.

Kathy

Are there good and bad practices for sound effects in audio dramas?

Fred

Yes, bad is when they're there because it's in the script, and script told you to put it there, and you're not really thinking about why it's there. It's not really mixed in the environment. There isn't really an environment to mix it in. It's just sort of like sound, but it's not affecting you. Technically, it's a sound effect, but it's not a sound *affect*.

I mean, good sound design, like you shouldn't notice it. This is the devilish part of a good sound design is like any good design in general. Like you shouldn't notice it. If you notice it, it means you're not following the story. You're not riveted. You're not in it. So good sound effects, you say: I listened to this. I turned it on, hit play, and I couldn't put it down. And then we've succeeded.

Kathy

What are three pieces of advice would you give about using sound effects in audio dramas?

Fred

Make your own stuff. People go out and they like, I mean, I love freesound.org, fine. Everybody uses it. If you just want your stuff to not sound like everybody else's, make your own stuff and it's just get outside your house. Like go into . . . OK, I don't condone any potentially dangerous behavior, but I do find myself in, like, sort of like abandoned areas on the edges of places at weird times of day, hearing sounds without humans around.

I also collect sounds with humans around, and you may find me, if you see me in New York City, I'll probably have a handheld recorder in my pocket. That's, you know, about the size of an iPhone, sitting quietly in a train station, you know, recording those sounds, so I think it actually it starts with good listening.

I think you you've got to listen to the world, and I think if you do this a lot and you get the bug, you really start to like, hear the world and really work on active listening as a skill. And once you get that skill of active listening, then it becomes easier to sort of walk about the world and be like, oh, you know, that's a sound that's unique. And I do have two terabytes of hard drive of sound effects on my hard drive back at. But I've never heard this.

[making sound] sound from this thing right now, so I'm going to record that, and you get more and more creative ideas because they're just out there experiencing the world, collecting things, hearing things, engaging with things and have fun.

A really fun exercise if you are sort of new this want to try it out is just try telling a story just with sound effects. I did a course just after the pandemic started in 2020, and one of my favorite and I and I took students. Was free. It was online 5 weeks. And everyone in that course was asked to make a thing, and one of my favorite pieces from that was someone who had--it was rather dark--but it was a piece where a story was told no sounds, no dialogue, only sound effects.

And that's like, how do you do that? And it was done really quite compellingly. It was like a footstep sounds. It was a creepy small house, that sort of thing, so try doing that. Try listening to sounds and see what stories emerge just from the nature of the sounds alone, without even needing to use words.

Kathy

Anything else you want to add?

Fred

Well, you would also ask me about writing, and I think this is where writing and sound design if the script doesn't work, sound design can't save it. And one of the things at work that I'm experiencing personally as I'm in a position where I'm seeing kind of like screenplays that are trying to become audio dramas is there's a lot of emphasis on trying to say, well, how do we take the screenplay and make it work in audio and lot of emphasis on the like visual set pieces and turning them into audio set pieces, kind of like fundamentally rethinking the idea of, it's not that we like, can't sound design almost anything can imagine, it's just certain things like the sound design isn't going to like help the story problem something was doing, so I think, good sound design comes out of good writing because the writing will inherently be sort of sound design friendly in the first place, which is to say--boy, it's like a whole new lecture--but it's like if you're going to have a monster, what kind of monster has a lot of sounds? Like, that's why I chose werewolves for *Blood Force* because first off, I mean, they're good werewolf movies out there, but there's a risk that they are going to be really cheesy looking, and it's expensive. And it's hard. Once you see the monster to really like, still believe that they're as scary as you want as you as you as a filmmaker want the audience believe they are; whereas, if you can keep it in sound, there's still that like sense of like this creature in my bed always, so you know, so, so werewolves were like, well, they howl. They snarl. They can be stalking you, and when they bite, it's very, very quick, so what a great monster for sound for audio drama,

What would it be a not good audio drama monster? I mean, vampires work too. I mean, vampires talk and flap around when they're in bat form, I suppose. But like a, you know, 20 foot tall, tentacled monster--probably not. And you're like [monster sound] and I'm going to eat you, and people are running from it, and it's just not going to be any good. And if you like, or if you have like, say, like a scream type movie and like someone's running from a serial killer be like, oh, I fell over. Oh, they're gonna get me. Climb up, get up, get up, get up, run, run, and you're just, it's not going be very believable, and you're not gonna be entertained for very long. It's just gonna be kind of kind of boring wall of sound, as opposed to actually scary. So, good sound starts with good script. That's my parting words.

Go make stuff. That's what I encourage you to do. If all you have is an iPhone, you can record stuff on your voice memo app. Figure how to get on your computer, play around with it, have fun, and make stuff. Bye.

Kathy

Bye, Fred. Thanks for taking the time to share your knowledge and experience about audio dramas. Talk to you later!

This interview with Fred Greenhalgh provided some great information for my research paper: "The Immersive Power of Radio Dramas." If you're interested in reading it, you can find it in the research section of my stories2music website at www.stories2music.com.

See ya next time!

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