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## Behind the Art: Randy Thom

Welcome to “Behind the Art”, a new section of Designing Sound created with the goal of studying the **artistic and creative aspects of sound design**, featuring several interviews dedicated to explore the minds and creative approaches of professional sound designers out there, with the goal of expand our creative worlds and learn how others tell stories with sound.

There are a lot of fantastic articles and interviews dedicated to the technical side of sound design, but what about creativity? influences? collaboration? What make us unique in our jobs? How sound designers get ideas that help to create those fantastic sonic worlds from scratch? That’s what we’ll discover in this section.



For the first installment of the series, it’s a pleasure to share an interview I had with a man who needs no introduction in this site. **Director of sound design at [Skywalker Sound](#)** and one of the most brilliant minds of film sound: [Randy Thom](#).

### **Designing Sound: How is the balance between art and craft in your sound design job?**

**Randy Thom:** I sometimes think of the work as being about 33% art, 33% craft, and 33% human relations. I’m always disappointed when I see 95% of the energy in discussions about sound design being devoted to the craft part. It’s the easiest aspect to talk about, and the easiest to accomplish. The art and the human relations are hard to nail down conceptually, and difficult as hell to master in the day to day work. I see so many people who are ProTools wizards but don’t have a clue how to relate to clients and collaborators, and who seem lost when trying to make artistic decisions.

### **Designing Sound: How has your philosophy and approach to your work changed through the evolution of your career?**

**Randy Thom:** Honestly, I don’t think it’s changed much, except that I’m quite a bit better at what I do now. Everything is informed by having worked on Apocalypse Now, The Empire Strikes Back, and Never Cry Wolf very early in my career. I was incredibly lucky to be able to work with Walter Murch, Ben Burt, and Alan Splet when I was getting started. They all had very close and trusting relationships with their directors, and they all typically began working on each project very early, often before shooting even began. I think that early involvement is the single most important factor that allows you as a sound designer to do something interesting and truly useful in terms of storytelling on a film.

### **Designing Sound: When and how do you find inspiration/creativity? How does working at a wonderful place like Skywalker Ranch affect your creations?**

**Randy Thom:** Inspiration is everywhere if you’re lucky enough to tap into it. Unfortunately that luck isn’t something we have much control over. At the beginning of a project I often listen to lots of sounds at random, with the script hovering in the back of my mind. Often I’ll hear a sound that makes a connection with something in the story that I wouldn’t have

anticipated otherwise. George Lucas has certainly given us an amazingly beautiful place to work at Skywalker, and I think the beauty of the location and the buildings does facilitate the work. I tend to feel at ease there, my mind reasonably uncluttered, and that helps.

**Designing Sound: What are your biggest influences?**

**Randy Thom:** In terms of people who design sound and mix, the three gentlemen I've already mentioned are way up there. Gary Rydstrom is an amazing talent, awe inspiring. Ren Klyce is another unique talent. I'm influenced by other art forms too. I think painting has more in common with sound design than most people would imagine. The impressionists influence me, as do more modern painters and photographers. I tend to think that film sound design is more of an impressionist form than most people think. I'm writing an article about that now.

**Designing Sound: How do you deal with writer's block? What do you typically do in order to find the right sound or the right mix of several of them in a particular scene?**

**Randy Thom:** Imminent deadlines often help alleviate "sound designer's block." Listening to sounds at random usually helps. Thinking of the sounds in purely emotional terms, and trying to avoid thinking of them so literally often helps.

**Designing Sound: How do you analyze the material you work on? What elements do you think are the most important to analyze in a particular scene or film?**

**Randy Thom:** My main job is to serve my client. The client wants me to have ideas of my own, but sometimes my idea of what is best for a scene isn't what the director is likely to think is best. So, I pay very close attention to what the director says, what he or she implies, and what the previous choices they've made tell me about what they will probably want for a given moment or scene. So, I analyze everything I do through that filter. When I feel a potential conflict between what I want to do and what I think the director may want I will usually offer two alternatives, or at least prepare two alternatives.

**Designing Sound: What do you expect from a script? How do you start to build a sound map from the script, storyboard or any early description of the project?**

**Randy Thom:** I'm always hoping that a script will acknowledge that the characters in the story have ears. It's heaven for me when a writer knows that the way a character hears the world around him has huge storytelling potential. The writer will then design scenes in a way that opens the door for those possibilities. I don't try to build a sound map or a sound storyboard per se. I find that if I can make one of the crucial scenes work in terms of sound design early in the project that will inform the style of everything else I do for that project.

**Designing Sound: How do you prefer to work with directors? What kind of things do you do in order to give directors what they want and without losing your artistic style?**

**Randy Thom:** I like to start very early, before shooting begins, but I don't have to be on full time at that point. Sometimes just a few meetings and some email exchanges in pre production can make a huge difference in terms of the success of the sound design. That said, every director is different. I like to think I'm good at modifying my style to conform to what a wide variety of directors will need.

**Designing Sound:** You said in a SWC Profile that you have a philosophy in Skywalker about “editors thinking as mixers and vice versa”. Could you explain us what are the concepts behind that?

**Randy Thom:** That philosophy started with George, Walter, Francis, Ben and the rest of the Norcal bunch in the 1970s. When you are editing sounds I think you need to experiment with and be conscious of the way the sounds work together in terms of spectrum, dynamics, dramatic flow, etc. though those are all characteristics usually more associated with mixing than editing. When you’re mixing sounds I think you need to experiment with making editorial decisions, by which I mean sometimes eliminating sounds, truncating sounds, and even rearranging sounds, though those are all actions usually more associated with editing than mixing. We all know that the borders between the two disciplines are slowly disappearing. They haven’t disappeared yet, and clearly some people are better at editing than mixing, and visa versa, but the evolution toward one discipline is proceeding, facilitated by changes in technology.

**Designing Sound:** You talk about mistakes a lot, which you describe as something like “tools for the artist”. Could you tell us about some important mistakes that have changed the way you work with sound?

**Randy Thom:** Crazy though it sounds, I do think that accidents and mistakes are probably the main “technique” that drives innovation in every field. The trick is being able to recognize the potential benefits from events that are completely unanticipated. The history of art, science, and engineering is filled with instances of accidents and mistakes leading to great insights.

**Designing Sound:** In an article on Filmsound.org, you say “The best way to find unexpected storytelling elements is to experiment”. But... When we should experiment? How much and how far do you think sound designers should experiment in their projects?

**Randy Thom:** Experiment as early as possible and as often as possible. Try lots and lots of things, whatever time will allow. Make lots of mistakes early when they’re less expensive.

**Designing Sound:** You worked on the Scarface video game some time ago. Does gaming hold any interest for you today? Would you like to participate in another video game some day?

**Randy Thom:** Sure, I’m working on another one now. I think there is enormous potential for sound design as a storytelling tool in video games, though it’s still in its infancy.

**Designing Sound:** Finally, what would be your advice to any sound designer how wants to find/enhance his artistic vision and personal creative approach?

**Randy Thom:** Listen to the work of the masters, analyze it carefully, and then do lots and lots of wild experimentation on your own. There is no craft where you learn by doing more than in sound design.