

OSCAR'S FAVORITE SOUND EDITORS

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Oscar's Favorite Sound Editors The Nominees for 2009

by Michael Kunkes

Though the movies they worked on were all unconventional, the 2009 Academy Award nominees for Best Sound Editing are all veteran names with long lists of impressive credits. Only two—*Star Trek's* Alan Rankin, MPSE and *Avatar's* Gwendolyn Yates Whittle, MPSE—are first-time nominees. However, in a far more unique situation, a pair of Guild members are up for Best Sound Editing *and* Best Sound Mixing Oscars—Paul J. Ottosson, MPSE, for *The Hurt Locker*, and Christopher Boyes for *Avatar*—two films at opposite ends of the budget spectrum. We talked to a group of nominees to get their takes on what made their projects special, how their teams worked and, well, how it feels to be invited to the party.



Alan Rankin.

When co-supervising sound editors Mark P. Stoeckinger and Alan Rankin get together, they usually get a lot of action, especially on their high-octane collaborations for John Woo, such as *Windtalkers* (2002) and *Mission: Impossible 2* (2000), and Stoeckinger earned his first Oscar nomination for Woo's *Face/Off* in 1997 (This is Rankin's first.). When it came to J.J. Abrams' reboot of *Star Trek*, their job was nothing less than preserving a sacred trust. "J.J.'s mission was to pay homage to the original series, but also to bring something more modern to the brand. That was a little difficult to pull off sometimes, because trekkies are used to hearing certain sounds. But that tradition needed to be carried through—especially given how different everything looked visually," Rankin says, adding, "Mark and I could be very interchangeable. Some days I would do creatures, other days he would do ambiences or engine room sounds. A lot of our job was corralling all this together and making it work as a cohesive whole."

Although he was not nominated as part of the team, both Rankin and Stoeckinger enthusiastically acknowledged the contributions of legendary sound designer/mixer/editor Ben Burtt, who was brought onto the project to lend some of the authentic *Star Trek* feel. “Ben added a layer on a lot of the actual elements that glued everything together really nicely,” Rankin says. “He brought in some fresh ideas that allowed us all to see the forest for the trees.” To which Stoeckinger adds, “Ben focused on the things that were iconic and original, while Alan and I focused more on the things that were making their first appearance with the *Star Trek* brand. We worked hard to pay homage, yet modernize at the same time.”



Mark Stoeckinger.

Rankin and Stoeckinger worked on the film for more than a year, delivering hundreds of tracks and thousands of sound effects. But in the end, Rankin says, simpler ended up being better. “The film was mixed three times,” he recalls. “The first mix felt a little cluttered and it was hard to pick out certain elements that you wanted to speak for each scene. But as we went along, we began to peel back layers to find out what was important. It was never the case that we thought all these great effects had to play. It was all about being of service to the picture.”

That picture wasn’t always easy to see, Stoeckinger adds. “Because the film had so much secrecy and security, we couldn’t get picture to look at,” he recalls. “Alan and I would sit and look at sequences with the picture editors (Mary Jo Markey, A.C.E., and

Maryann Brandon A.C.E.), take notes and talk about ideas, then come back with sounds that they could put into Avid Media Composer and change along the way. It was a little frustrating at first, but the ultimate benefit of that in the end was that we were purely thinking about sound for its own sake, and not so much how it exactly related to the picture. *Star Trek* was a challenge because the visual effects would change radically as time went on in terms of what they looked like and what their function was.”

“*Star Trek* boldly announced that sound could be very, very manipulative,” Stoeckinger declares. “It could be bold and dynamic or go to complete silence; it could be mono or very wide. It wasn’t about just adding sound because some areas needed it; it was about what sound can do to become a visceral, emotional or even a technological experience.”



Michael Silvers. Courtesy of Skywalker Sound.

UP is Skywalker Sound’s Michael Silvers’ fifth Oscar nomination, all for Pixar films, and he shared the 2004 [Best Sound Editing](#) Oscar for *The Incredibles* with Randy Thom. His co-supervising sound editor on *UP*, Tom Myers (who mixed sound effects on the film), was previously nominated in 2008 for *Wall-E*. Silvers credits a great deal of the success of *UP* to a time-tested successful Pixar formula. “They put together an amazing talent pool for every film,” he says. “Writers will work on stories for three or four years, then go beat each other up and dissect everything, and everyone has to check their egos at the door. They cast great voices—whoever thought that Ed Asner would become the lead in a major motion picture, playing opposite a kid who had never acted before?”

“They also record voices for several years in order to hand the animators all the material they can work with, and when I come on, I get a couple of weeks to go through the dialogue and make notes, fix things if they aren’t working quite right from an editorial or technological standpoint, and then work with the director, editor and script supervisor to spot the film, make notes and decide what we need to loop or fix,” Silvers adds.

From a dialogue standpoint, Silvers says there were three main challenges on *UP*. First, there was the overall task of making sure that all the bits and pieces and cuts from several years of sessions all flowed together seamlessly. “A lot of time had to be spent re-synching and tweaking things so that dialogue mixer Michael Semanick could smooth things out and properly EQ everything,” he says. Next came the job of building the performances of the two leads, playing characters at opposite ends of the age spectrum—Ed Asner’s irascible, lonely, Howard Hughes-type Carl Fredericksen and Jordan Nagai’s Russell. In the case of the former, Silvers had to speed up the 80 year-old actor’s lines to inject more energy into the performance, and for the latter, “I was constructing a performance six ways to Sunday.”

Third, according to Silvers, were the voices of the three dog characters—Alpha, Beta and Gamma—who wore collars that translated their dog-thoughts into human speech with hilarious results. “It was hysterical,” Silvers says. “But when I first got the tracks, about 20 percent of his words were not quite understandable—the combination of the pitch and the way his language was written made him sound like someone out of 16th-century England. I would take a problem line, drop it down and play it for director Pete Docter and he’d say, ‘Not as funny.’ So I had to go back and find individual syllables, or words and just back those off. I just bent them and bent them until it became more understandable without losing the funny, and finally, Pete bought it.” Silvers is currently working on the long-awaited *Toy Story 3*, slated for a June 2010 release in 3-D and IMAX. “I just tag along with all these really talented sound designers, especially Tom Myers, who did most of the heavy lifting on *UP*, and I get to go to the Oscars. It’s pretty great.”



Gwendolyn Yates Whittle. Courtesy of Skywalker Sound

“This is my first time being even near anything like this,” says Gwendolyn Yates Whittle, MPSE, co-supervising sound editor on *Avatar*, about her first Oscar nomination. It’s very surreal, but in the best possible way you could imagine. To even be a member of this group is pretty phenomenal.” With respect to sound editing, that group predominantly refers to co-supervising sound editor Christopher Boyes, a four-time Oscar winner (Sound Effects Editing, *Titanic*, 1998; Sound Editing, *Pearl Harbor*, 2001; Sound Mixing, *Lord of the Rings: Return of the King*, 2003; and Sound Mixing, *King Kong*, 2005).

“Chris is one of the most inspiring people I’ve ever worked with,” says Whittle, a veteran ADR and dialogue editor whose recent credits include *The Simpsons Movie*, *Iron Man*, *Cloverfield* and *Zodiac*. He puts his heart into every job, has a remarkable ear, and he puts the quality of the end result ahead of reliance on any one technology.” Whittle also credited Addison Teague, the third co-supervising sound editor on *Avatar*. “Chris would do sound design and send the tracks to Addison, who was in Los Angeles working with the picture department. He would cut sound effects and feed the picture department effects as needed to fill out their tracks while they were cutting,” she says.

Whittle says that 1,700 ADR lines were recorded for *Avatar*, the most she’s ever seen. “A lot of directors are so afraid of using ADR, but the cool thing about Jim Cameron is that he believes in using all the tools available to him, including ADR,” she explains. “Even with the film’s FPR [Facial Performance Replacement] proprietary process, he used ADR whenever it was needed. He did more than I originally cued. The actors were phenomenal at looping and getting back to their original performances. That made my job so much easier because we didn’t have to struggle with production sound. We were able to provide a much more pleasing-to-the-ear dialogue track as a result, and one that didn’t have to fight with the visual effects.”

The Na’vi language of over 1,000 words, created for the film by USC Linguist Paul Frommer, was another dialogue task wrangled by Whittle. “Carla Meyer was a dialect coach who came to the set and any sessions where anybody spoke Na’vi,” she says. “Even though it was a made-up language that no one speaks, it was treated by Jim as a real language, so the loop groupers had to learn it. I would sit with our loop coordinator, look at the scene, then send the words in English to Paul who would ‘translate’ into Na’vi; he’d send back phonetic MP3 files of how to say the lines. Not only the loop groups, but the stunt people had to learn it as well!”



Wylie Stateman.

Quentin Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds* is the fifth Oscar nomination for supervising sound editor Wylie Stateman, previously nominated for such diverse fare as *Wanted* (2006), *Memoirs of a Geisha* (2005), *Cliffhanger* (1993), and *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989). The two have been working together since 2003's *Kill Bill, Vol. 1*. Stateman was unavailable for comment for this article, but in an interview with Debra Kaufman in *Editors Guild Magazine* SEP-OCT 09 issue, he recalled, "Working with a filmmaker like Quentin Tarantino is really about working with someone who knows exactly what he wants to accomplish and has the desire to involve himself in all aspects of the filmmaking process. He understands, in detail, the story as a writer would. He understands, in detail, the goal and the intention of the film, as a producer would. And he is every bit the visionary director that people have come to know him as. [He's] essentially a member of the audience; he's able to see things fresh. That's a very unique quality for someone who brings to the table as many departments as he commands."



Paul Ottosson.

Paul N.J. Ottosson, MPSE, was previously Oscar-nominated for Best Sound Editing in 2004 for *Spider-Man 2*, but it was his stint in the Swedish military that went a long way in landing him the job on Kathryn Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker*. "That was a big bonus for them, because Kathryn wanted this to be a very realistic movie in all aspects," says Ottosson, who has the rare distinction this year of being nominated for both Sound Editing and Best Sound Mixing for his work on the indie film about a U.S. IED disposal team in Iraq.

Because *The Hurt Locker* is a film without a traditional score, heavy importance was placed on accurate, organic sound effects. "Sound had tremendous importance, because it had to carry everything, especially for the things you don't see," Ottosson says. "With all the hand-held shooting, we used sound to build all the tension happening around the actors. I built an entire war going on off-screen—firefights, explosions, helicopters, jet flybys—that had to be organic, and every sound had to be justified by the environment we were in. In a traditional action movie, you will have a huge palette of sounds you can pick from to give you the sound of a missile going by, but in *The Hurt Locker*, you had to be true to the scene you were in. Each scene was a constant building of tension without relief. I had to think about every single shot."

Ottosson relied heavily on production dialogue with a minimum of looping, in addition to "recording an immense amount of Foley," he says. "We did use about 300-400 ADR lines, but for the most part, the ADR just wasn't cutting it, so we had to make the dialogue work. Fortunately, Ray Beckett, our production sound recordist, give me what

was by far the best production dialogue I have ever received in over 130 films. There were eight separate mics on every take, so if we couldn't find exactly the line we were going for, we'd go into other parts of the movie and look for a word, or even a couple of vowels, that would match. We also used a lot of real Iraqis in the loop group, and though they didn't have much Walla experience, we were able to get the authentic dialects. So much weight was put on the sound in this movie, it felt almost like being a writer and composer at times."

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