

## Spice Up a Song With Sound Effects

By Mark Bendig

Most songs we write and record have instruments and/or vocals, but nothing else. Let's face it - the most exotic sound on most of our recordings is a tambourine. This is not necessarily a Bad Thing. After all, "instruments and/or vocals" takes in a pretty wide range, from Gregorian Chant to Smooth R&B and everything in between! But every now and then, just for the sheer novelty value, you ought to consider using some kind of sound effects in one of your songs.

Some songs, like "Yellow Submarine" by the Beatles, are positively filled with scene-setting sound effects. Birds twitter throughout "Blackbird" by the same band. More recently, digital mixmeister Beck and others have combined "found sounds" and other effects with musical samples to create audio collages in their songs. Of course, this is a technique where a little bit can go a long way. There's no need to overdo it!

As a songwriter, you can specify what sound effects will be heard when by adding notations like (alarm clock here) to your lyrics sheet, or at least having a firm idea of what specific effects will be used where as you write the song. In this case, the effects would be considered part of the song. Alternatively, you can wait until you have your Producer hat on and decide whether and where to add sound effects when you mix the song. Here, the effects would be considered part of the arrangement.

There are three main sources for sound effects: (1) Sound effects CDs or websites; (2) TV shows, DVD movies, etc.; (3) Personal recordings.

With sound effects CDs or websites, you get pre-recorded sounds of all kinds, with many variations, labelled as to subject and duration. You need the sound of a car starting up and driving off? There were a dozen variations of this sound on one CD I found. Need birds, or crickets, or elephants? Again, labelled samples by the dozen can be found on sound effects CDs. And there are whole CDs of rainstorms, jungle sounds, etc., ready for use!

Sound effects CDs can be found by the score at your local library - mine, a medium-sized branch, has drawer after drawer full of the things! For me, this beats the websites, which can be awkward to use and usually make you pay for your samples. If you're in a real hurry, maybe try online, but otherwise just head on down to the library!

Another really neat (and cheap) source of sound effects is to record a movie or TV show as you watch it and then lift some of the effects you hear (or dialogue - talking is a sound effect too!) by copying them over onto a digital recorder or whatever you use to import outside audio into your studio.

Finally, one of my favourite sources of sound effects is to record my own. With portable, battery-operated recording devices like the Zoom H4 and others becoming available, it is a simple matter to get CD-quality recordings "on the fly" of anything from your very own rainstorm or your cute pet kitty to the crowd at a football game. A warning, though. Once you start thinking this way, it's hard to stop.

(I could record an oncoming train! I could record a volcano!)

There are sounds all around you. Why not try incorporating some of them into one of your songs? It works!

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