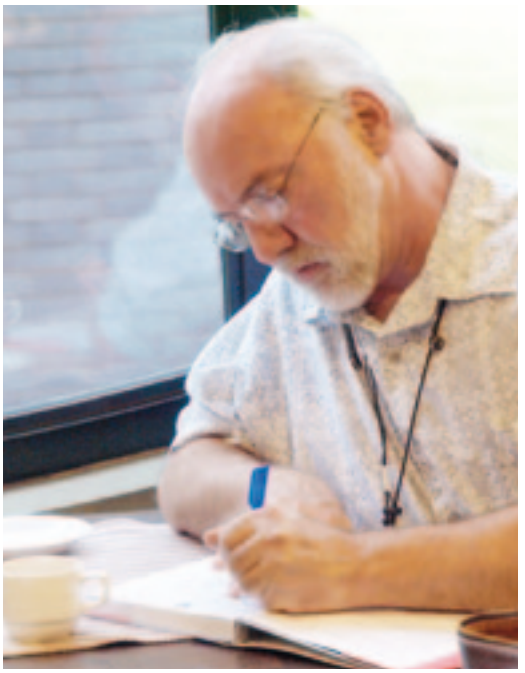
The devil in the black box

From its inception, the polyphonic keyboard sampler was the answer to the musician's quest for sonic purity. Some of his TV brothers would say it is the devil in the black box and that DENNIS BAXTER has sold his soul at the crossroads.



I encountered the first generation of analogue sampler called a Mellotron in a recording studio. This was a keyboard that played back spools of tape with prerecorded sounds as musical notes. You may remember the unforgettable flute solo in Stairway to Heaven … it was famously (and incorrectly) attributed to a Mellotron flute sample and it is one of the first times that real instrumentation was mistaken for sonic deception. Truthfully, John Paul Jones did use Mellotron flutes on the recording The Song Remains the Same later in 1973. One day, while working in the studio, I had a revelation when I loaded the sound effect loops on the Mellotron. It changed my perception of music, orchestral noise — and sound — but not about money. Recently I saw a Mellotron in a music store and they still want a bloody fortune for the damn thing.

Years later when I was new to Outside Broadcast audio work, I learnt quickly that microphones and wires have problems in the rain and television directors can be unforgiving. I admit I was from a recording studio and definitely in a new league, but pride drives one blindly.

Horse racing was my first cognizant experience of sound supplementation, but it was my experience with car racing that drove me back to my studio days. I first played with NAB continuous loop carts with mediocre results and, after a season of pouring rain, I vowed to never get caught in that situation again.

Just in the nick of time, the Japanese electronic manufacturer Akai introduced the first digital sampler that I could afford. It became so obvious to me: we add a little pit, gear shift and tyre squeal to enhance the excitement. We are here to entertain I thought. What's the problem? The North Americans are very anal about sound supplementation and I have been told that if I can't do it 'live' I should not be in an OB van.

I was told I was cheating. Well, after defending the practice for 20 years, I thought I would give an honest, practical and creative argument for samplers.

First, advanced cameras and optics put additional pressure on audio. I have often used a rule of thumb that for every lens power of 20 you have to add another microphone. A handheld camera would have an 18:1 lens and usually needs just a single (stereo) microphone. With a 100:1 lens, the camera can see hundreds and hundreds of meters and a good camera operator can keep the focus for the entire run which could require four or five or six microphones and even microphone operators.

I have used samples for rowing, sailing, cross country and biathlon skiing as well as motor sports and could easily see its use in many other applications but there is a broadcast bias against this.

Borrowing an old computer term, WYSIWYG (what you see is what you get) is the perfect description for televised sports playback. Perfect because that's all there is. No sound. Just dead air. Producers and directors need to think like sports fans and bring the whole experience back in replay, not just the visual action. The playback sequence screams for something besides dead air. Sound augmentation solves the silence during the replay sequence.

The broadcast bias against sample sound augmentation is short-sighted at best. Consider this: is the camera zoom cheating? A viewer could never be so close to the action in reality (And he certainly wouldn't see it the same with the distortion of the lens. Ed). Only through production technology can you experience the close-up of the outfielder climbing the wall to glove the ball or the filly blowing away the boys as she wins the Preakness. Like camera magnification, sound augmentation brings the experience to life for the viewer … and to me, it is a creative and production embellishment and should have merit.

Finally, the audience expectations are incredibly high because of the entertainment influence of video games, car stereos and movies. The audience standards for television are no different. Purist producers should not underestimate the need to entertain the audience. Just take a look at the wooshes and swooshes that accompany every graphic displaying the stats and scores — indicating that maybe something here is interesting.

So it's hats off to the Kentucky Derby. As a sound man, it's hard not to be critical when watching televised sports but I want to close this column by saluting the audio crew of the 2009 Kentucky Derby. Sitting in my favourite chair by the window with Otis (my sound hound), I watched (listened) to the Derby and must acknowledge that I think that the Derby sounded wonderful for the fastest sporting event in television — and no second chance. There was no broadcast bias in this race. They did it right.

I had recorded the Derby and replayed it in slow motion, counting what I believed to be the microphones. I factored in the number of days to set up the venue, the degree of difficulty, the animal factor, and of course, the weather. The sound was excellent. The production did not cut corners on the audio. Every whinny, every brush of the whip, every hoof beat, It was all there.

The result? For the fastest two minutes in television, the entertainment experience will last a long, long time.