Jay Rose Produces Great Sound

by Chris Kriofske

Jay Rose does not have a current demo reel, and does minimal advertising — only to support local directories. In fact, apart from his website, his singular promotional device is a balloon he had made up a few years ago to give out to clients. Printed on it is a sentence which sums up his philosophy towards his profession: "Never forget: You got into this business because it's fun."

Rose is a nationally known, Clio and Emmy award-winning digital audio engineer (he prefers the term "sound designer") who works out of his home studio, the Digital Playroom, in Brookline. In January, Miller Freeman published his first book, *Producing Great Sound for Digital Video*, a comprehensive, 350-page guide designed for both professional and amateur producers, videographers and editors. It has already garnered rave reviews and consistently lands in Amazon.com's top 3000 best sellers ("Unheard of for a niche book," Rose remarks).

Jay Rose and his Digital Playroom may be one of the best kept secrets tucked away in Brookline. Rose got into the business when it was fun, and for him it still is! He won Clios like this one as well as Emmys and countless other awards.

Producing Great Sound opens with a brief FAQ section that concisely addresses the most serious emergencies one may stumble across in the studio. From there, the structure resembles your basic textbook, exploring intricately and in-depth everything sound-related for DV, from microphones and interior acoustics to recording voice-overs and implementing sound effects. The book's style, however, varies from most textbooks. Rose has created an easy-to-approach text that feels less like a prepared, staid lecture and more like a one-to-one tutorial between a teacher and his student.

Fortunately, *Producing Great Sound* is not quite *DV Sound For Dummies*. Rose's effervescent sense of humor may permeate every page with relatable anecdotes from his own life and professional career, but it never seriously obscures the book's principles and technical information. Throughout, he preserves a notion he singles out on the first page: "Good soundtracks aren't just a question of art. You also have to understand the science."

Rose has written a monthly column for Digital Video Magazine for the past five years. Highly popular and translated into multiple languages, the column attracted Miller Freeman's attention and they soon asked Rose to write a book about what he does. With this book, Rose says he set out to explain basically "how to do good sound" and show how the techniques are "not brain surgery, but based on the math and science you learned in grade school."

Rose's approach to writing *Producing Great Sound* came out of his experiences at Emerson and Berklee, where he taught, respectively, writing for broadcasting and sound design for film. Rose says that while preparing classes, he had a "seriously wonderful" time, spending four or five hours a night going over material, asking himself, "How do I want to explain this?" or "Why do we accept certain things as real?"

Rose quit teaching because he grew tired of presenting the same material over and over again, but found himself using the same technique of simply asking real and rhetorical questions while writing his book. He offers one of them: "In a physical universe, sound travels at a 1,000 feet a second. It doesn't travel in a vacuum, so why is it essential that when the Deathstar blows up fifty miles away, we hear the boom instantly?"

Once upon a time, a young Rose armed with a serious background in classical music moved from New York to Boston to attend Emerson in hopes of becoming a disc jockey. "I wasn't very good at it," he says, "but then I discovered I was into making tracks, producing things, and editing." At Emerson he earned a BS in Speech and his writing there won a few awards. This caught the attention of a university in Ohio, who contacted Rose and asked him to come run their radio station and earn a Master's degree in the Psychology of Communication. This was during the Vietnam War, so to avoid the draft Rose ended up taking courses there in everything from the social sciences to electrical engineering.

Rose returned to Boston and found work as a sound engineer at various radio stations and film companies. In 1971, he started his own humble studio out of his bedroom, which gradually expanded to an office in a Newbury Street brownstone and later, to a larger facility downtown. Finding a niche in designing sound for television and radio commercials, Rose says, "I saw the need for a creative broadcast studio and ad agencies took to me very quickly. The 'Creative Review' in the trade jounral AdEast called me a genius!"

A decade later, Rose became principal sound designer at Century III (which then became Editel/Boston). During his tenure there he won a flurry of prestigious awards, including an Emmy for "Locally Produced Advertising" for a HMO spot — one of the first commercials to use a synclavier on its soundtrack, according to Rose — and a Clio for "Best Radio Humor" for a Museum of Science ad.

In 1988, he left Century III to work entirely on his own and out of his home studio, a.k.a. the Digital Playroom. When asked about the advantages of being your own boss while working as a sound designer, Rose can think of many. "The biggest advantage is not having a staff or being part of an organization. I don't have to look busy or keep morale up or generate work to keep everybody's edge sharp," he says. "I can take the projects I want, and spend time experimenting with new art forms and equipment. It's better for clients, as well as being a lot easier on me."

As for building up an impressive clientele for the Digital Playroom (such as AT&T, CBS, PBS, and Buena Vista Television, among many others), Rose says he was lucky... but also notes, "My wife has a saying: 'Be kind to the people you meet on the way up; they're on the way up too.'"

With a wide range of clients comes an almost virtuosic range of work. During our interview, Rose played for me two of his recent projects. He noted that although they were by no means quintessential samples of his work, their highly contrasting styles were indicative of the spectrum of projects he takes on.

The first example was a soundtrack for a video called "Bill of Rights, Bill of Wrongs." Produced for Hewlett-Packard, the film visually resembled (and satirized) classroom educational films of the 1950s. For the track, Rose created all the (unintentional) quirks of those old films: the warped, hokey music, lots of vibration, distortion, and an accentuated splatt! when someone gets hit with a cream pie.

The radically different second example was a television promo for a classic rock radio station in San Diego. To accompany a tightly, furiously edited collage of images and icons of the 1960s, Rose constructed an equally multilayered melange of sounds, starting with bars of The Beatles' "The Long and Winding Road" and ending with the final, reverberating note of the same band's "A Day in the Life". In between lay a masterful assortment of excerpts of everything from Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech to Neil Armstrong's first words as he took his first steps on the moon.

Recently, Rose has turned his attention toward tracks for documentaries for The History Channel. For one about rogue Russian submarines blowing up German refugee boats during World War II, he created a score that exclusively used authentic recordings from the era, woven into a continuous piece of music that constantly complements the picture.

Last month, one of Rose's latest projects premiered at the Omni Theater at the Museum of Science, but it's not a track for an IMAX film. It's the intro music you hear as you walk into the theater before the film starts. Rose says he prepared the tracks at the Digital Playroom and concentrated on fine tuning the mix in the Omni at the actual speaker locations. He was shocked at the resulting "absolute consistency. What I heard here at home had the exact timbre and quality of what we heard at the theater," he says.

Rose wrote this definitive book. It's a best seller, but not for dummies!

New computer programs are making it easier for more people to call themselves sound designers, but Rose isn't worried about losing business. "Aside from having the experience and libraries, I can work many times faster with my high-end equipment than someone with a mouse and computer," he says. "None of the high end professional systems have mice. Besides, when more people start doing serious sound, it raises the level of the art. It gives me more interesting things to work on."

Next, Rose will be tearing down the Digital Playroom to build a larger playspace in the same house. It will have indulgences he's never had in a home studio before: perfect acoustics for surround mixing, client amenities, and a separate machine room to isolate VTR and computer noises. He also plans to become more HDTV compatible: "The government says that in three to four years, the country will be totally HDTV. Ain't gonna happen that quickly, but it is coming. I want to be on the edge of that."

Due to the success of *Producing Great Sound* (he remarks that while browsing on Amazon.com, "It's rewarding to see all the readers' reviews"), Rose is discussing another book with Miller Freeman. He says that it will cover sound for the internet and will be more technical, written at a programmer's level instead of a film or video producer's. However technical it ends up, it probably won't lack the mixture of diligence and fun that defines his work. "You have to be passionate about a job, " he says. "Even in a basic corporate sales meeting, you'll find something interesting and memorable to do with it."