

## Paul Brincat – sound recordist

From the tropical jungle to the desert wastelands of Tatooine, 30-year veteran and award-winning sound recordist Paul Brincat has enjoyed a career that has led him to all corners of the globe. Andy Stewart catches up with Paul during a break in the shooting of *Mask II* to discuss the ups and downs of recording sound for picture..



Location recording has taken Paul Brincat to exotic locations, from Tunisia (*Star Wars* – above and top) to Jordan (*The Red Planet* – top left)

“Please Mr Director sir, I want some more... more recording level, time, respect, space and QUIET!” That’s what most sound recordists I know would *like* to say to a director when they’re on set, but unfortunately the reality is quite different. Making waves as a sound recordist is like diving into shark infested waters with a gash on your leg – you just know you’re going to get eaten alive.

Despite the fact that film-makers and cinema-goers alike have become more and more ‘sound conscious’ in recent years, the movie-making fraternity still seems to regard the sound recordist in much the same way a bouncer regards an uninvited guest at an Oscars after-party. They are rarely afforded time or priority over others and the less they are heard from the better... If you’re the camera operator: “Sure take your time, we’ve got to get the shot perfect!” If you’re lighting director: “By all means, make your changes, we can wait.” But if you’re the sound recordist: “You’ve got to be kidding, what’s the hold up here?”

Movies are still a visual medium first and foremost, with sound thrown in for good measure...

But when you’re an Academy Award-nominated, Emmy Award-winning sound recordist like Paul Brincat, your job is a little less stressful in that regard. Paul, or ‘Salty’ as he is more affectionately known in the industry, is one of Australia’s most widely acclaimed and respected sound recordists. He has worked on countless movies and television shows in Australia and overseas for nearly three decades – from *Mission Impossible II*, *Star Wars Episodes II and III*, and *The Thin Red Line* all the way back to *The*

*Delinquents*, and even *The Young Doctors*. Paul’s list of credits spreads wider than Melbourne’s eastern suburbs, covering everything from elections, through documentaries and soaps to lawn bowls broadcasts. He’s as full of surprises as *The Cat in the Hat*, and as youthful and energised by his work as Steve Irwin. Paul’s career has taken him to all corners of the globe (for which he is eternally grateful) and talking to him proves there is never a dull moment when you’re working to capture sound for film.

### A Day in the Life...

**Andy Stewart:** *Would it be fair to say Paul that no two days are alike on a movie set for a sound recordist? You always seem to be off to some exotic location or devising some new way around a problem...*

**Paul Brincat:** It’s true, there’s always some problem to solve, some new scenario to ad-lib a solution for. But it’s not all fun and games: on some locations you’re working in mud and rain and the demands are great. I call those jobs ‘endurance shoots’. You’re out there in the thick of it, sometimes for months at a time working all night in the freezing cold, shooting away and trying to nab it. I’ve worked on square riggers in big seas with spray everywhere, trying to keep the gear working at all costs. I worked in Fiji once on *Blue Lagoon II* for four and a half months on an island that, to the naked eye, looked like paradise. But the day I flew out of there was the happiest day of my life. I, along with four other guys, had been sick for almost the whole shoot with excruciating cramps!

I worked for eight weeks like that, and when I flew back to Sydney I went straight to Prince Henry's Hospital tropical diseases unit for treatment.

So it varies, you know, one minute you're in the studio and the next you're out in the middle of a tropical rain-forest trying to preserve your health and equipment.

When you're on location you have to be incredibly self-reliant: you carry a trailer and a pop up tent, because you've got to protect your gear from the elements and no-one else will look after it for you.

**AS: Does it become the case of 'every man for himself' in that situation?**

**PB:** It becomes 'each department for itself'. In all seriousness though, we all pitch in – we all know one other, and a lot of the crews have worked with each other for years on high profile films so there's a camaraderie there. But certainly you have to be able to look after yourself. You don't want to be bugging the grips for this and that all the time. I carry all sorts of bits and pieces, like stands and tarps to protect and hold up our transmitters, as well as Sonex and carpet to deaden things down. We have to cart that stuff from spot to spot like a travelling circus, and our little mini studio opens up like a magic show.

**AS: Is the circus getting bigger with every film?**

**PB:** It is. But there's a limit to it because you've got to be able to move it around. You can set up a rig on location, then without warning you're up and moving down the road or up that track. For instance, next week I'll be shooting on a beach in Guatemala, and to get ourselves and our gear to the location, we have to go on a punt, then hike ourselves into the area. I've done that several times – sometimes hiking for miles. When you have to carry your own gear into a remote location like that you soon learn what's necessary and what to leave behind.

## **To ADR or not to ADR**

**AS: I notice that more and more films these days opt for dialogue replacement. Does that breed complacency in your line of work?**

**PB:** No it doesn't. You can't afford to be complacent. When you're on set you do everything you can to lower the noise level. You have Assistant Directors running around to close everything off and shut certain things down: air conditioners and fans, that sort of thing.

**AS: But in the back of your mind is there a little birdy saying "Oh, don't worry about it, you can replace the dialogue later"?**

**PB:** Well it depends on what's happening with the direction: some directors like to talk over pieces as they're happening. Most directors will tell you straight whether they intend to rely on ADR or not. But where it's unavoidable, sure. If we're creating a wind sequence and the characters are talking in a storm, then ADR is crucial because sometimes there's so much going on outside the frame of the shot we're battling to get a guide track, let alone a workable recording. You're not always going to

get it, and sometimes you're defeated, but it never stops you trying.

On *The Thin Red Line*, for example, Terence Malick really wanted to nail the production sound, and ADR was not even to be discussed let alone relied on. Some situations like that really call on you to go for it. *Star Wars* was a little different to that again.

**AS: Is George Lucas a 'go-for-it' guy in that regard or an analyse-it-to-death kind of guy?**

**PB:** Oh no, he knows what he wants. On the *Star Wars* set we were always going for it so the production sound was available as an option to him. In post they want to hear all the tracks of the production sound and compare it to ADR. They'll listen to whatever tracks you can give them, and sometimes they'll go with it even if there's something that isn't as clean as the ADR. Production sound isn't always easy to replicate later and some performances are hard to repeat. So I don't think you can afford to have the attitude that ADR will always save you – always be better. You shouldn't go in there thinking like that unless it's obviously a total write-off from the beginning... It's not like working in a recording studio, where you're in there solely for the purpose of capturing the sound.

**AS: Given George Lucas' background in the development of sound for film, he of all directors must have a real sense of the importance of the sound recordist's role?**

**PB:** Oh yeah, that's why it was such a privilege to get the call to do his sound. I mean, hey, I figured if I've been asked to do his sound I must be doing something right. I just tried to get the job done for him with a minimum of fuss and interruption.

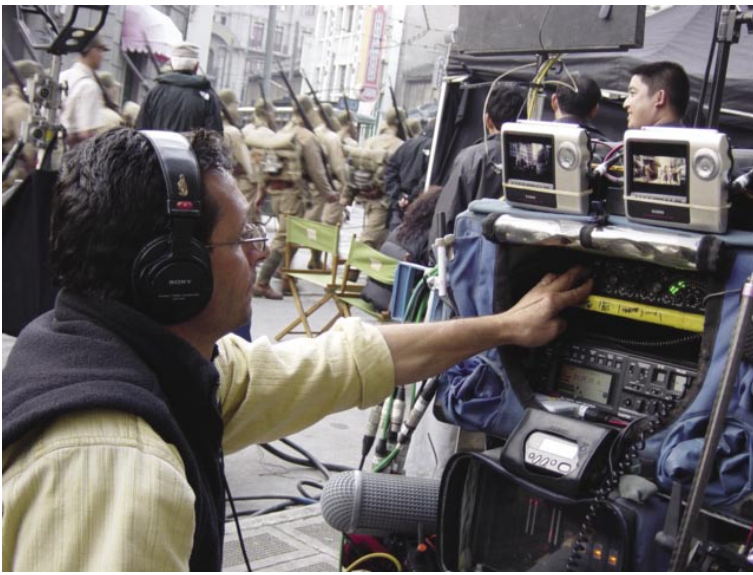
**AS: So is that your aim generally speaking: to capture the sound without bothering the director unless it's absolutely necessary?**

**PB:** They've got enough on their plate as it is. If I can take care of their sound and when they see rushes that evening, it's there ready to go and I haven't disturbed them, then I'm happy.

## **You Say You Want a Revolution**

**AS: Where has the revolution taken place for you in terms of gear in the last 10 or 15 years?**

**PB:** It changes all the time... remembering we started with a mono track Nagra – we had that in the field for years. Back then we mixed down from the three channels on the tape recorder, and that was all you had. But I was slightly unorthodox having come out of television; I was used to using desks for mixing drama so when I was offered my first feature film I thought, there's no way I want to mix that on a rotary pot. I still had a Nagra but I wanted to use Penny and Giles faders, so I got a little six-channel Audio Developments AD245 (Pico) console from England. Consequently I was regarded as a bit of a weirdo back then. It's very commonplace these days but 20 years ago guys were finding it highly amusing. Nagra did in fact provide little external



mixers but you very rarely saw them.

My interest from very early on was in capturing ambiences and effects – I was always crazy about all that. In fact I had a quarter-inch Stella Vox SP8, which had exchangeable mono and stereo heads, which allowed me to get stereo atmospheres by simply swapping the heads over. But quarter inch tape was a nightmare, so the transition to DAT was a bloody joy. When the Fostex PD2 DAT machine came out, that's when the revolution really started. DAT tapes were so much smaller and lighter, with vastly longer recording times. Now we've moved to digital hard disk recording with the Deva and the Fostex PD6. And there'll be more changes I'm sure.

**AS:** *You had a console all those years ago... What console are you running now?*

**PB:** I still use an Audio Developments console but now it's the AD149. It's an analogue desk with excellent signal to noise and good communication facilities, similar to a Studer, that sort of size. It runs on D-sized batteries if you want, or on 12 Volts. All my equipment runs on 12V because a lot of the time I'm in the middle of nowhere. I have a hefty car battery that drives the setup when we're in a situation where there's no 240V. I use 240 wherever possible but there are times when you arrive on location and the generators are still being set up, so to get started you can drive everything off the battery. And sometimes generators go down too

## Backup

**AS:** *Do you record to two machines and regard one as a backup?*

**PB:** *I do, I have a second non-timecode machine; I have a variety of straight two-track DAT players, Sonys and HHBs, nothing fancy. I don't have backup code unless I really think we need it. When they do need to use it I'll re-stripe the DAT with code and they'll have to use the old manual sync system: use the sticks. The sticks still go in there and they still clap, I insist on it and the reason for that is if we do require the backup tape, I know we'll have to sit there and find the sticks – do it like we did years ago.*

and in that event you can go straight back to the 12V.

## A Day 'At the Office'

**AS:** *Can you describe a typical 'day at the office' for me?*

**PB:** You arrive with your boom operator and your assistant, so there's typically three in your team, sometimes four if I have two boom operators and a cable person – when you've got a lot of cast I like to use two boom operators. There's a lot to do on set besides the audio capture: everyone needs headphones; your operators, the director and even producers sometimes want to hear what's going on while it's being filmed. I've had up to 15 or 20 of them happening sometimes. We've got timecode-transmitting systems sending code to the clapper boards – there's always two of those on a set. Then there's your radio mic systems, and typically there are five or six of them 'on air' at any given time. That's why having a reasonable desk with lots of outs is really important nowadays. There's a lot more to it than there used to be.

**AS:** *So given all the peripheral tasks you're required to perform, does your average day still stress you out despite your experience?*

**PB:** I try to limit that as much as possible. It happens but you've got to limit it. Being organised on the set is vital. I mean, if you're not organised you'll be stressed a lot.

**AS:** *Presumably your priority remains getting things on tape and not being distracted by all the extra paraphernalia?*

**PB:** Oh absolutely. That's why I have an assistant to run around and take care of that. Once I start mixing I don't want to be bothered by someone tapping me on the shoulder going, "my headset's not working" or "we're not getting timecode" or "the battery's gone flat in the transmitter" or "we've got some RF problem." There's so much RF coming from different transmitters and receivers you can easily get bogged down, but you've got to be careful not to. We do 14- and 15-hour days and we'll do a film for four months. I don't want to be stressed for four months. I wouldn't be here now doing this if it was like that. It's a matter of being organised and really trying to keep it simple. I've got to say, that is the biggest thing. – not over-complicating things. Keeping it reasonably simple.

**AS:** *Over-complicating it how?*

**PB:** I think just over-doing things with equipment. I only use what is necessary. I don't go and put a new piece of gear in my setup if it's a 'maybe' item – I add to the rack when I need things and I just keep it simple, like 20 years ago when I went in there with a Nagra. I can still bypass everything and plug straight into my tape recorder if worse comes to worst because the main thing is to get that dialogue on tape or get that atmosphere, I think that's the key thing. Then from there, sure, we can start compressing and all that, but I was always taught – let that happen in post where the studios have the control. I try to keep my levels up and hold them there with a little bit of limiting from the desk, but I keep compress-



*The sound team in silhouette during the shooting of The Great Raid: from left to right are the outlines of Gary Dixon, Nicole Miller, Rod Conder and Paul Brincat.*

sion to a minimum. When I'm recording I'm riding levels the whole time because dynamics can come out of nowhere. Actors will sometimes yell a piece of dialogue on a second take without letting you know so you get caught out sometimes, that's inevitable...

**AS:** *Given that you're monitoring exclusively through headphones, do you have a cans preference?*

**PB:** I use the Sony MDR 7506s. There are a lot of guys using them these days. I've actually got bigger pads in mine, which work really well and help to isolate me from your surroundings. I remember years ago I inserted some speaker cones and padding into some industrial earmuffs – I was working on a really noisy location where monitoring through conventional cans was almost impossible. Good headphones are a must in this game.

**AS:** *What's the thing that scares you most about a day on set?*

**PB:** People's moods mainly, and tape recorders failing, that sort of thing. It happened during *Star Wars* actually. We were about to go for a take and for some reason I lost the power supply that drives my whole rig. Everything went down, and luckily enough, I had an external 12-Volt battery power supply sitting around that we patched into before the take. You don't want to hold them up – they don't like you holding them up. That's your biggest sin, holding up the shoot.

**AS:** *Do they not like you holding them up because you're the lowly sound guy?*

**PB:** Basically, yeah. They only give you a fraction of the time they'll give the lighting team for instance. We're talking about a medium that is still primarily about looking at pictures so you've got to learn to work around that. And you do.

**AS:** *Is it frustrating that that attitude still endures after all this time?*

**PB:** It frustrates all of us. You try not to show it but you have a little bit of a bitch about it occasionally. It really comes down to your personality and how you handle it.

**AS:** *Does each time feel like the same battle starting again?*

**PB:** Oh yeah, of course it does. Definitely. But as I said, it's being patient with it and remembering that you're not in a sound studio, you're working with picture. Some days you get pissed off but they're the ones you've got to walk away from, and that's when ADR has to come into the equation.

## **Microphone Setups**

**AS:** *Can you tell me about your mic technique?*

**PB:** I try to match mics as much as I can. I use a dynamic occasionally, and I've even got an old Beyer ribbon that I've just resurrected to use on an actor whose performing levels are just all over the place. He's really hard to judge, and delivers everything from a whisper to a scream, so I'm trying to keep it tight with the ribbon

mic rather than compression. It's working really well and matches the Sennheiser MKH shotguns nicely. It's great for really high peaks. If I'm doing normal level dialogue I stick to a Sennheiser MKH50 or a 60, depending on what my acoustic surroundings are like. I try to stick with a particular mic throughout a shoot but sometimes you've got to swap if it's just not happening. So I do have a number of mics on fish poles ready to throw onto a set to see how they'll sound; again, ready to go so that no time is wasted. And hopefully if there's any matching required that's easily done in post. They're not going to be totally matched but with a bit of EQ you can get them pretty close. I think nowadays, miking as much of the action as possible is the key. Have the mics there, planted, even if you think you won't use them, that way you're prepared. If the actors are happy to let you place lapel mics on them, which isn't always the case, then they'll often get you out of trouble where a boom mic isn't working out.

**AS: Does that mean you have those sorts of mics recording willy-nilly? Are you recording extra mics all the time?**

**PB:** Absolutely. I give editors an option. I record a boom sound and a radio mic sound. Radios are good for tightening up the sound, but the problem is you've got to hide them. That of course causes problems with rustling noise. But if you're tactful enough, and with the help of the wardrobe department you can often place them more effectively. You've got to get on well with your standby wardrobe team... But despite all that effort, nothing beats a boom mic over the top, that's the sweetest. If the acoustics are right, there's nothing like having a shotgun mic over their heads.

I also run a whopping 100-metre cable that's on a drum away from the set whenever I can – provided no-one's using loud hailers or a PA – to record atmospheres with my Rode NT4 [stereo condenser] without anyone even knowing I'm doing it. And whenever I make films in the bush I'm always choofing off (or sometimes sending an assistant) to catch some atmospheres. I ran the Rode NT4 up on a nice long fish pole in Martin Place in Sydney while we were filming *Mask II* recently, to capture some clean stereo street atmosphere. Basically anything that's worth capturing, we capture.

**AS: Where did the impetus to buy the Rode NT4 come from?**

**PB:** I was reading an article in AudioTechnology actually, about the NT4, and on the strength of that I took pot-luck and bought one to record atmospheres. It wasn't an expensive mic and I liked the fact that it ran on a 9V battery, which allows it to work in the middle of nowhere – you can plug it straight into a portable DAT, power it up and away you go. The mic has great clarity too, and it's getting me what I want. I've been amazed by the mic's clarity in fact. Its spread could be a little wider, and it would have been nice if they'd put the capsules on a pivoting system so you could actually spread the image a little, but I love it. Actually I really wish Rode would do a shotgun mic – something along the lines of an MKH 60, because I tell you, there's a market out there for a mic like that.

### **And the Academy Award Goes to... Someone Else.**

**AS: In terms of your work, do you have a favourite film you've worked on?**

**PB:** *The Thin Red Line* in terms of the work. They gave me room and scope [and an Academy Award Nomination – AS]. If something wasn't right I was always given time to make the necessary changes, which doesn't happen often. We still had to work reasonably fast but there was time to make those little improvements to the setup. I was also given the chance to go and gather wild atmospheres in the Solomon Islands, which was a fascinating couple of days. We recorded a lot of native Melanesian choirs, which the director insisted we get. I went with one of Hans Zimmer's off-siders, Claude Letessier, two Melanesians and a few tape recorders. We traipsed into the jungles to do it and it really paid off. An amazing experience...

**AS: So does that mean you come back with miles of stuff you've got to wade through?**

**PB:** Oh yeah. But the editors love it.



*Effects recording on the back of a trailbike in South Australia. No helmet, no vision – no worries...*

**AS:** *So they're into quantity?*

**PB:** Definitely, the more you can give them the better, providing it's reasonable stuff: editors don't want to wade through a bunch of crap, but if it's decent they love it.

## **Recorders**

**AS:** *What is your rig based around these days?*

**PB:** My rig at the moment is based on either a Fostex PD4 two-track DAT – I own two that I often sync together with code so that I end up with a four-track – or a Fostex PD6. The Fostex PD4 is a pretty durable machine. I also have a portable DAT machine with a little waterproof housing that a mate of mine built for me. I've stuck it on airplanes and boats where it's impossible for me to go along for the ride – I hook up a mic, get a level and send it off like a little remote voyager. Then people come to you later and say; "How'd you get that sound?" And you say, "Oh, you know, just a couple of things we tried."

**AS:** *Did the *Star Wars* film require anything more extravagant, being an all-digital production?*

**PB:** About the same time as I was offered the second *Star Wars* film [Episode III] I read an article on the PD6, and because it was such a hot item at the time, I rang Matt Woods at Skywalker Sound and asked him how he felt about using it to record the sound for the film. He picked one up in The States and had a look at it and said, "It looks good, let's give it a shot." So we ended up using that machine for *Star Wars Episode III*.

On that shoot we were sending feeds everywhere because George [Lucas] shot it on HD video – Digital cameras with Panavision-based lenses on the back of the HD camera body – and the vision was recorded onto external HD machines. So I was sending four-track stems to each one of those machines as well. We had feeds to two of those machines, both getting four-track stems, the six-track was getting four-track feeds and tracks five and six were getting a two-track mix – there was digital signal routing all over the place through Digidesign converters. Everything was on disk apart from two-track timecoded DAT backups. I did my safeties for *Episode III* onto timecode DAT so we had a backup in case the PD6, being a new machine, had any problems.

**AS:** *So did you encounter any?*

**PB:** No, I have to tell you I was really impressed with the PD6. I don't want to sound biased against the Deva; I know guys who use the Deva and swear by it, but I think my preference – and I don't own either the PD6 or a Deva – is the Fostex machine. The *Star Wars* production team purchased the PD6 so that I could try it out and they were so happy with it they kept it... damn them.