

MICHAEL CLARK: PROTECTING THE PERFORMANCE

Michael Clark started making mix tapes from the airwaves as a kid, which led to him editing 1/4-inch tape at his college radio station to cut swear words, and eventually to the *Full Sail*, where he was able to fully immerse himself into the recording world. During his studies, he had a switch in passion from music recording to film post production, and it's worked out pretty well for him since. Today, he is one of the top production sound mixers in the business, with credits such as *The Walking Dead*, and the uber-popular Netflix series, *Stranger Things*, to his name. We chat to the man behind the mics to find out more.

IT WAS WHEN MICHAEL CLARK CAME TO ATLANTA and managed to get an internship at a small boutique, commercial production company called Whoa! Films that he really began his Production Sound recording journey. On his very first job there, he was introduced to Michael Filosa, and he started learning about the art a deeper level.

"This is when I started my career on small ENG jobs," Clark explains. "During my time with Michael [Filosa], I was able to work on many styles of projects from commercials, corporate internals, music videos, indie films, and my first episodic mixing gig for the TV show *Good Eats*, on Food Network. While on *Good Eats*, I fell in love with scripted filmmaking, and started honing my skills as a production sound mixer."

There is no such thing as a typical day for a guy like Clark, however, we ask him to do his best at setting out his day in the life to us in layman's terms.

"Being a production sound mixer means that I am recording the dialogue for the production, which sounds pretty straightforward, but as with all jobs on a film set, we have to take on factors and variables provided by other departments," he says. "As in music recording, we wish to capture the dialogue in as clean an environment that is possible. In a music

studio situation, we have great abilities to manage these variables, but in the film world, we have exterior variables that most of the time are uncontrollable."

Each department on a film set is there to support camera, Clark says, so the focus is on the image, at this stage of production, and on tracking the dialogue:

"We work with the electric department on placement of generators and ballast systems for powering the set; with the props department on any handling concerns we have with props in the scene; with our camera department to work out frame lines and shadows for our boom microphones to work on a scene; and with the costume department to place body mics on our actors to capture dialogue that can't be picked up by an overhead boom microphone."

Furthermore, Clark and co. are also the keepers of sync on a film set, maintaining sync with the cameras being used to keep the workflow consistent throughout post production, with sync boxes and/or with a timecode slate (clapper).

"We are also responsible for delivering a mix feed of the production tracks to our video village full of directors, script supervisors, and executive producers," Clark explains. "Maintaining radio frequencies is also a major concern, as we live in a wireless world, and we at times employ





“DPA mics offer outstanding sonic characteristics...”

25-30 wireless devices on our set, between microphones, audio feeds, camera focus devices, and camera video transmissions. As we have the most at stake, and we are usually the only ones licensed, we tend to manage these frequencies on set to minimise interference.”

The Walking Dead

Conversation turns to the epic US TV series, *The Walking Dead*, on which Clark has worked for the past seven seasons.

“I’ve been able to witness how a TV show affects people, and their passions towards the art of filmmaking,” Clark reflects, adding that the team are preparing to make season nine. “We are routinely having fans camped out on our perimeter road blocks, all day and night, just to catch a glimpse of our stars. I’ve seen over 200 people stand in blazing Georgia sun, on asphalt, with no shade, for 12 hours, watching us work inside a building they could see into!”

Every day on *The Walking Dead* is usually in a location in the woods, or on a permanent set piece. At times, the team are driving deep into rural Georgia, an hour or more south of Atlanta, depending on the location for the day. Clark’s day usually starts with him refreshing himself with the script.

“After seeing rehearsals, and understanding camera placement to cover the scene, my boom operator, Kevin Cerchiai, and myself breakdown the scene and decide how we can *attack* the scene, and capture the dialogue consistently; and my second boom operator, Dennis Sanborn, starts the lavalier [mic] wiring process of the actors that speak,” Clark reveals. “We will always use one or two boom microphones as our preference, and utilise the body mics as backups for wide angle setups. The toughest part of *The Walking Dead* is that we shoot three camera

setups often; these pairings can drive the headroom too high to cover with booms, and we either work to get matching headrooms on all cameras between discussions with our episode director and our director of photography (DOP), or we rely on our wireless body mics.”

Box of Tricks

We ask Clark what kind of microphones and wireless kit he is choosing to deploy for these epic audio productions.

“I discovered Lectrosonics wireless when I first started working in Atlanta, with Michael Filosa, as Lectrosonics was the industry leader for TV sound,” Clark says. “It was a time when not many companies invested into the TV side of sound, and Lectrosonics continuously listened to sound mixers, and adjusted their devices to handle the RF interference inherent with ENG style location sound gathering. We have many manufacturers with high quality wireless devices in the game now, and Lectrosonics still holds strong as the standard in our industry.”

Clark’s go-to Lectrosonics pieces are his 16-SM, SMOV, and SSM transmitters:

“They are the workhorses in constant use, day in, day out; their robust design has proven long term, as I rarely have to return a transmitter to the service department for repair. And in the fast-paced world of TV sound production, I can’t afford a failure in gear. Having consistently working gear and sound quality ensures that I always capture the best wireless audio possible.”

For body mics, Clark is a DPA man, for what he describes as ‘outstanding sonic characteristics compared to the old standards available’.

“My kit consists of DPA models 4060, 4061, 4061 Core, 4071, 4098, and 4080; each microphone has its own characteristics, and I use each dependent to the voice and/or action of

the actor,” he says. “I will use the 4060 on soft talking actors, as the microphone has a higher sensitivity than the other models, and picks up these lower volume voices without adding Tx noise floors into the signal.

“When we bury the microphones under costumes, we are changing the sonic footprint of our actors’ voices; I find that for men, most sound best on the 4071 when buried under costumes, and I usually get away with using 4061s on female actors when buried, as their vocal signature tends to have higher frequencies that cut through the costumes well.

“I enjoy using the 4061/4071 and Core series for most of our work, as we tend to have dynamic dialogue, and these DPA microphones handle way higher SPLs than what I used prior. These are great additions to this style of TV production. I use the 4098/4080s strictly as plant mics in vehicles; they are compact, and attach directly to the Tx’s as quick plant tools, and are great tools for small spaces.

Along with a selection of boom mics, all of this kit is connected to Clark wirelessly via Lectrosonics Tx’s paired with the Sound Devices MM-1.

“It’s for the higher quality mic preamp, with a proper gain staging, so we can avoid the limiters in the transmitters,” he explains.

Mixing it Up

This year, Clark transitioned into the world of control surfaces, after holding on strong for many years to his Cooper Sound Systems 106+1 analogue mixer as his workhorse.

“I gave consideration to digital mixing options that were geared towards the music industry, and have been having great success with other production sound mixers, but ultimately, I wasn’t willing to sacrifice tactile



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responses to the analogue layouts I grew accustomed to,” he explains.

“Having direct access to the channel strip functionality for every channel was key to my mixing style; and the digital offerings always had to be a workaround. A lack of instant control was not for my style.

“The demand of TV production sound keeps increasing, and actor count is always on the rise, so as these demands increase, the recorder and mixer demands also increase. For the past six seasons, I have used my Cooper seven-channel mixer, and added a Mix-8 control surface for additional inputs and control; this year, I added the Zaxcom Deva 24 and Mix-16 control surface. This combination eliminated my need to have a second package available for extra wireless, and I can now meet the demands of production with 16 analogue inputs and control available.”

Is it even worth asking what the biggest challenges in this job are..?!

“[smiles] Our biggest concern on film productions is with noise: environmental noise, costume noise, crew noise, equipment noise,” comes Clark’s response. “With large productions comes more people, logistics, equipment, and potential noise concerns. However, it also brings experienced crew.

“The tools we can use to address these concerns comes with personal relationships we build with our crew members, and keeping an open dialogue between departments. An experienced crew helps us so much, as many of us understand the concerns of each department, and are able to consider each other, and work accordingly to minimise cross-department impacts. From placing generators at a reasonable distance for everyone, to props and costumes, and special FX placement.

“Even with a strong crew, and open dialogue, there will still be concerns that are uncontrollable: environmental concerns like airplanes, traffic, trains, lawn maintenance, air conditioning units, and other everyday noises that we take as second nature.

“For these, we have to rely on the sonic qualities of our microphones to reject as much of the noises we can’t control. With super-cardioid pickup patterns on our boom microphones to using body mics, that although are omni-directional, have a shorter signal reach, and we can get a stronger signal to noise ratio at the sacrifice of tone, and a more open sound of an overhead boom microphone.

“When noises occur that are actor-driven with props, we work it out with the actors to avoid as much overlapping with the dialogue as possible. And as stated above, with experienced actors, we find they tend to correct themselves before we ever have to say anything.”

Keeping it Real

Every show holds memories that will last a lifetime, Clark tells *Headliner*. The fact he gets to help create performances that touch the heart, and stir emotions almost every day, is something he is clearly humbled by.

“The greatest part is being able to experience these moments twice: once as we shoot them, and again months later with the rest of the world,” he says. “And the most memorable moments were actually before I ended up on *The Walking Dead* and *Stranger Things* - on a documentary called *Feasting on Asphalt*. While working with Alton Brown on this new travel food show, we traversed the United States laterally from Savannah, Georgia, to Los Angeles, California, experiencing the food available in every region, with down to earth, everyday people this country has to offer.

“I was able to see the landscape of America like I never have before, via the backroads, and no major interstate highways. We developed bonds with our long-lasting crew that we will hold together, forever. And, it ignited my passion for landscape photography that still grows inside of me, today.”

Although there’s something very special in store for us in October, Clark is unable to divulge information just yet. Before we leave him, however, we ask what the most satisfying part of his job is.

“It’s a few things, actually: first, my location changes almost every day; I’m not stuck in a cubicle processing numbers looking at the same three walls day in and day out. Second, we are creating stories that will be told for generations to come - and that impact is powerful. My children’s children will get an opportunity to see something that I helped create; it will create a generational connection that can’t be broken.

“Third, we capture performances that someone pours their energy and hearts into; and when they come back to us, thanking us for not forcing them to recreate their performances in a studio, because of onset problems or equipment failure, is by far the most rewarding aspect of my job, as it tells me, I’m doing the job to its highest level. And that’s the real core of our job... protect the performance!”

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