



# Sound for HITCHHIKER'S THE GUIDE TO THE GALAXY

Kevin Hilton traces the post production work on the feature that Douglas Adams fans have been waiting for.



In another time and what seems like another galaxy, a highly intelligent, very tall life form called Douglas Adams created a story that became a cult hit on radio, television and in books. Adams always wanted to see a film version of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. It is only now, sadly four years after his death, that the story of an intergalactic search for the meaning of life and the perfect cup of tea has reached the cinema screen.

*Hitchhiker's* initially relied on sound to create the strange worlds visited by its reluctant hero, Arthur Dent. In his introduction to a collection of the radio scripts, Adams wrote: "I wanted the voices and the effects and the music to be so seamlessly orchestrated as to create a coherent sound picture of a whole other world."

The TV version did its best with the computer graphics and effects technology of the time but the

new film comes at a point when computer-generated effects are catching up to Adams' imagination. Director Garth Jennings and producer Nick Goldsmith, who constitute the music video team 'Hammer and Tongs', listened to the original radio series in the knowledge that sound would play a significant role in the film. To give voice and sound to the various characters and worlds that Arthur and his friend Ford Prefect, who disconcertingly turns out to be an alien, encounter along the way, Ian Wilson was brought in as supervising sound editor. He went back and listened to the radio shows and an interview with Douglas Adams talking about his fascination for technology and gadgets. "I wanted to emulate some of the beep sounds from the original series," says Wilson, "such as the Book Motif, but Garth wasn't too bothered about that as those sequences are carried more by the animation."

## BBC Radiophonic Workshop

A more pressing reason not to use the original Book Motif sound, which signifies the opening of pages from the Guide itself, was copyright. Many of the sound effects and the original music for the radio series were created in the BBC Radiophonic Workshop, with its distinctive use of early synthesizers and assorted noise generators. In addition to his efforts to have *Hitchhiker's* become a film, Adams had also made two attempts to continue the radio saga from the first two series in 1978 and 1980 respectively. This finally happened in September 2004, with the concluding part of the radio adventure scheduled to air on BBC Radio 4 around the time this article goes to press. The director and co-producer of the new radio episodes, Dirk Maggs, made a conscious effort to move away from the synthesized, 'photo lab' approach of the Radiophonic Workshop – adding effects and voice treatments in the studio rather than sending clean tracks away for processing. Similarly, Wilson and his team approached their task with a new technology attitude, while keeping Adams' ideas and his desire for a seamless soundtrack in mind.

Work on the soundtrack began at Goldcrest Post Production, Soho (London), in September 2004, with Wilson as supervisor, sharing sound design responsibilities with Sound Effects Editor Alastair Sirkett. Dialogue Editor Andy Shelley, ADR Editor Bjorn Schroeder, Foley Editor Mike Redfern and assistant Robin Knapp completed the team. Wilson and Sirkett have teamed up before and formed a working arrangement by which they split the film in half by reel and concentrate on specific sequences, albeit with some overlap. Sirkett found the production interesting to work on as it was Jennings' and Goldsmith's first feature film and the source material differs in each of its versions.

Sirkett worked on the sounds for what he sees as the most obvious sequences, those involving the starship Heart of Gold, on which Arthur, Ford, fugitive Galactic President Zaphod Beeblebrox, Trillian the astrophysicist, and Marvin the Paranoid Android travel the universe. Because the ship is powered by the



Improbability Drive there is no visual means of propulsion, as with the light strip at the back of the Millennium Falcon in the first *Star Wars* trilogy, for example. As Adams mentioned Bach's *Piano Concerto in C Minor* in some of his writings Sirkett used C minor as his starting point. By adding a long sustain and "fiddling around with it", he created a "smooth and tonal" effect, as opposed to the "whooshy" sound usually associated with cinema space travel. On a more base comedic level, each time the Heart of Gold begins to materialise it initially appears as other, incongruous objects, including a hat stand and a plastic duck (an in-joke for all fans). Sirkett allowed himself to be literal and added a duck call during this sequence.

The other main spacecraft in the story is the flagship of the Vogon fleet, which comes to destroy earth at the beginning of the film. The Vogons are brutish, bureaucratic creatures and their ships are old and clunky. Wilson used big metallic sounds to contrast with the smooth, almost fragrant aural appearance of the Heart of Gold. While the majority of the sounds have been created specially, library tracks were used and altered. For the exterior atmosphere of the Vogon ships Wilson took a recording of a New York street at Christmas featuring a hand bell, slowed it down and created a low musical chime.

The sound editing team worked on ProTools, with Wilson and Sirkett using Native Instruments' Kontakt sampler for original sounds and adapting library

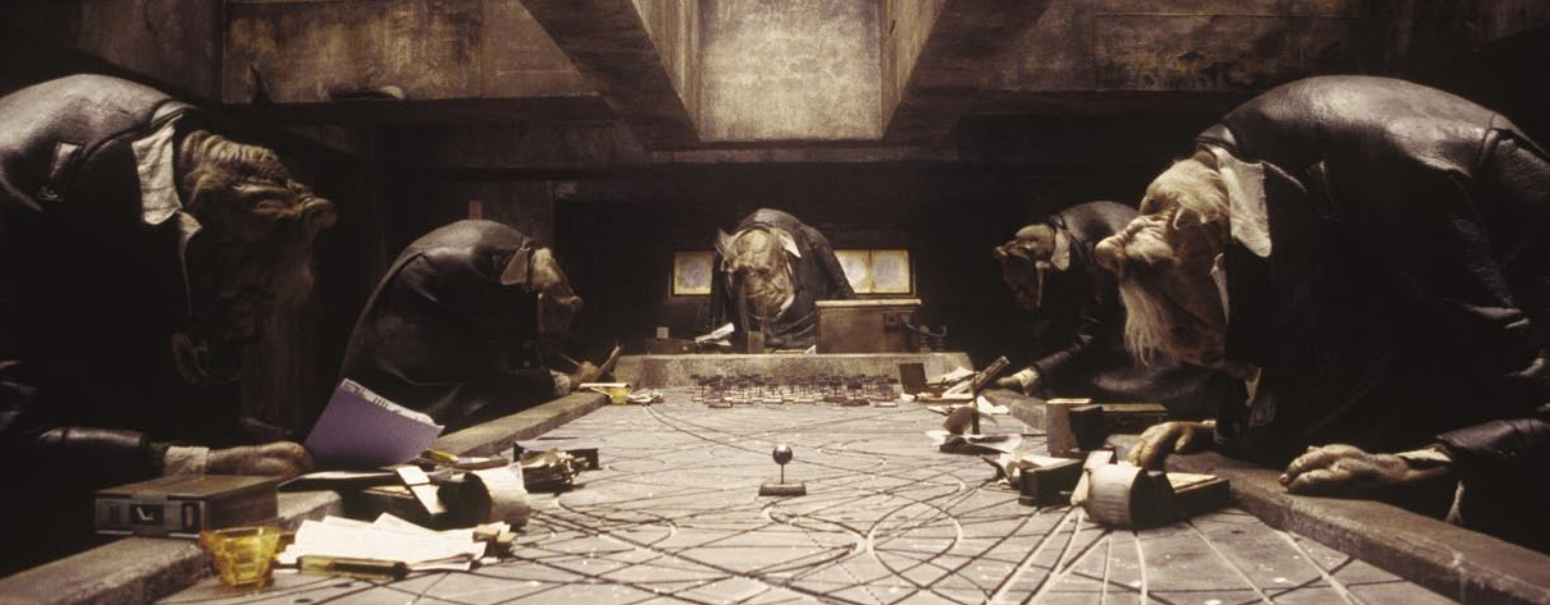
effects. Both worked in what Wilson describes as a "minimal way", with sound elements mixed, bounced or mapped across a keyboard using Midi to create single new sound. This was done rather than setting up the same sounds to be combined later in the mix. "The more decisions we made back in our rooms, the more efficient the process was going to be in the mix," explains Wilson.

### **This to Say About ADR**

On radio, *Hitchhiker* relied on the voices of the actors as much as the writing to create character. For the film version there is the benefit of having the characters realised physically by human actors, mechanical models, puppets, and the inevitable CGI. Even so, the voice casting and recording has still been a crucial element in creating the various personalities.

In the film the world-weary planet builder Slartibartfast is portrayed by the ubiquitous Bill Nighy. On radio the part was played originally by the late Richard Vernon, with Richard Griffiths taking the role for the new radio series. Griffiths participates in the film by voicing the Captain of the Vogon ship. He and his troops are represented by creations from the Jim Henson Creature Shop and some re-voicing was required for them during the ADR stage.

ADR was necessary either to give more clarity to plot points or remove a woody sound that the sets occasionally gave the floor recordings. Dialogue was



prepared by Andy Shelley in what Ian Wilson describes as a “robust way”. As much sync effects material was removed from between the lines, with the sync treated as ADR. Other re-recording was necessary for characters such as the ill-fated whale, voiced by comedian Bill Bailey, and Marvin the Paranoid Android.

### Paranoid Android

The mechanical robot suit was occupied by three feet, six inch-tall actor Warwick Davis, famous for being an Ewok and for the title role of Willow, who spoke the manically depressed robot’s lines on set. These were re-voiced by Alan Rickman, who has a tough job on his hands taking on a role played so well in the radio and TV series by Stephen Moore.

Both Rickman and Moore used their slightly lugubrious voices to convey the inner misery of Marvin but Moore’s performances were enhanced by audio processing as radio dictates that the character’s robot status should be underlined. On the original series an Eventide Harmonizer was used; the new shows rely on a Yamaha SPX 990 with some pitch shifting and delay. As cinema goers can see that Marvin is a robot, it was decided to let Rickman’s ‘down’ performance carry the bulk of the characterisation, with a TC Electronic flange and chorus program added to give it a metallic quality.

### Mixing – Three Head Better than Two

Wilson laid his effects over 18 stereo and 15 mono tracks for the reels he worked on. He also laid up discreet tracks for the surrounds, which complemented what was happening in the front loudspeakers rather than panning forward information to the rears. Marvin and the sounds accompanying the Book animations took eight mono tracks each and were fed to single faders respectively on the mixing console.

The voices and ADR were recorded at various facilities, including Twickenham, some in the US and a number of studios in Soho. The Foley was captured at Twickenham, where the final mix also took place. In the cutting rooms at Goldcrest, Wilson and Sirkett

created 5.1 mixes on ProTools, working with Genelec 1031 monitors. “There were no surprises when we got into the dubbing theatre,” says Wilson.

Most of the film was mixed in Theatre 1 at Twickenham on a Harrison MPC with its digital engine and work surface. The dub included three weeks of pre-mixing, including one week involving both of Twickenham’s stages. Tim Cavagin pre-mixed the effects, while Steve Single handled the Foley and atmospheres. For the final mix Cavagin took the dialogue and Foley, and Single the effects and atmospheres. Unusually, a third mixer, David Fluhr, was brought in to deal with the music, which was composed by Joby Talbot and recorded mostly at Abbey Road. Fans of the original series were no doubt pleased to see that a re-worked version of The Eagles’ Journey of the Sorcerer continues to work its magic as the signature tune.

### Whizzing Around

During the mix, the Harrison desk was fed live with ProTools sessions and stems, 40 channels from each of two DAWs, thereby obviating the need for an effects pre-mix. “If any last minute changes were needed it meant that we didn’t have to unpick a pre-mix,” explains Wilson. “The changes could be made at the source.” The mixers ended up with 240 channels on the Harrison (three layers of 80 faders).

A science fiction film is a gift to surround sound and Tim Cavagin comments that it is a mixer’s dream to “whiz things around”. Surround stand-outs include the destruction of the Earth and the missile attack as the Heart of Gold approaches the supposedly dead planet of Magrathea. “From beginning to end there is always an atmosphere or sound in the surrounds,” says Cavagin, “but we can’t have anything too distracting otherwise the audience wouldn’t know which way to look.” The subs get a good workout with engine hums, explosions and even Marvin’s doom-laden footsteps.

*Hitchhiker’s* fans have waited a long time to see Arthur, Ford and co. on screen. They heard them originally and while they can now see them, hearing their adventures in a different setting will be a bonus. 