

You're a what?

Foley artist

For almost 30 years, Alyson Moore has happily kept her work imperceptible. She creates sounds that meld so seamlessly with onscreen images that they go unnoticed, as though they were there from the start.

Alyson is part of a small occupation of sound reproduction specialists known as foley artists. Foley artists work behind the scenes in filmmaking and television, using props to recreate all the physical sounds that are integrated into a movie or TV show. These sounds need to be recreated because the microphones used on a set or on location are designed to capture dialogue. As a result, sounds other than dialogue seem quiet or are lost.

Foley artists create almost all sounds in a studio, far removed from the crews and crowds associated with a filming set. “We are the ghosts of the post-production world,” Alyson says.

Alyson teams with a partner to share the workload on every project. They divide up the film’s or TV show’s characters and assume responsibility for their assigned characters’ sounds. Each character has his or her own track, which foley artists produce in a series of 15-minute reels. Foley artists also delegate responsibility for the different sounds in a scene. For example, to recreate the sound of rainfall on an umbrella, one foley artist might flap a plastic sheet while the other pours water.

A typical workday begins with Alyson reviewing cue sheets: documents that specify the timing of movements in a particular scene. For example, in a scene that depicts someone getting into a car, the cue sheet might direct Alyson to record and properly time five sounds: the footsteps toward the car door, a hand lifting the door handle, the rustle of clothes as the person gets in the car, the jingling of keys, and the sound the key makes entering the car’s ignition switch.

Every sound the foley artist creates is custom made to match the scene. Furthermore, Alyson says, “it’s important to get into character and properly capture the character’s mood.” For example, the footsteps of a calm person are light and steady, whereas an angry person stomps. To accurately recreate footsteps in a scene, foley artists must walk in their character’s shoes—literally. That might mean wearing ballet shoes for a ballerina’s graceful movements or combat boots for a soldier’s disciplined steps.

To create most sounds, foley artists use props they have accumulated over the course of their careers. They don’t have a cache of stock sounds, but the techniques for making some sounds—such as using gloves to simulate the sound of wings flapping—have become standard in the trade. Alyson chooses the best props and methods for creating sounds by asking herself: “What would that sound like?”

To help them think creatively, Alyson and her partner usually put all their props on display as they work. “The studio looks like the messiest garage you’ve ever seen,” she says, “but we know where everything is.” Displaying props forces them to consider many options and to play around, says Alyson.

But creating custom sounds sometimes requires that the foley artist invent ones that aren’t obvious. To recreate the stitching of a wound in one scene, for example, Alyson slowly unraveled an old pair of jeans.

After deciding how to create the sounds in the cue sheet, the foley artist team practices matching the sounds to the action onscreen. Recording begins when the team feels ready. Sound designers tweak the completed reel, and sound mixers add these edited tracks to the voice and sound effects tracks.

In the end, the director approves the work or asks for another take of particular sounds. Although a director’s involvement in

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foley work is usually limited, he or she may have distinct preferences that differ from the foley artist's interpretation. "What matters is not what I think something sounds like, but what the director thinks it sounds like," says Alyson.

There is no school or apprenticeship program for foley artists, and education requirements are minimal. As is the case throughout the film industry, connections are important. The best way to break into foley work is to find an established foley artist who is willing to mentor.

Working with a mentor is how Alyson got her start. Her father, an actor, introduced her to his friend, who was a sound editor. "I became his personal assistant and eventually started filling in as a backup foley artist," she says. "There weren't many of us back then."

Today, most foley artists still stumble into the occupation; many trained as dancers or actors. A film or sound production background is especially helpful to those who get into foley work.

Foley artists must have a good feel for rhythm, coordination, and timing to do their job. To master these skills, they often practice in front of a TV at home by mimicking movements, timing footsteps, and playing with sounds.

Entry-level foley artists work primarily in TV and independent films. Additionally, foley artists must live in the areas in which films and TV shows are produced. Most work in the Los Angeles area, but some work in smaller film-producing cities, such as New York, San Francisco, Toronto, and Vancouver.

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics does not collect employment or wage data for foley artists. But according to the Motion Picture Editors Guild, the guaranteed wage for guild member foley artists is \$2,000 per week, \$340 per day, or \$42 per hour. Additional anecdotal information suggests that the typical wage for an experienced foley artist is between \$400 and \$450 a day; non-union foley artists who have less experience can make \$200 a day for uncredited work.



Foley artists, especially those who are just starting out, must often supplement their wages with a part-time job because work is usually sporadic; steady income is not the norm. A typical film schedule is 10 to 15 days. Complex, sound-heavy films might take 30 days to complete. For TV, however, foley artists usually spend 1 day per 1 hour of show.

Shorter production schedules allow for limited practice time, which contributes to stress. In addition, foley work is physically demanding. Foley artists stand or kneel to produce most sounds, maneuvering props near recording equipment for optimal effect. "It can cause lots of wear and tear on your feet and knees," Alyson says.

But foley work also challenges the artist to be creative. For this reason, Alyson considers the job rewarding and "a dream come true." Her work has reverberated in award-winning films and sleepers alike, yet she remains largely anonymous. "If we do our job right," says Alyson, "no one knows we were there." And that sounds just right to her.

Matching her movements to the action onscreen, foley artist Alyson Moore uses props to recreate the sound of footsteps on grass.

