

# Bill Welch (sound effects, props)

by [admin](#) — last modified Jul 31, 2008 10:46 AM

**BIOGRAPHY:** Bill Welch worked from the mid 1950s to the mid 1970s as the props man at the Gate Sound recording studios at Elstree. He worked on a number of the highest profile British productions of the period, including Lawrence of Arabia and several early Bond films.

**SUMMARY:** In this interview with Jim Shields he talks about his career creating sound effects for films such as Lawrence of Arabia (1962), Bridge on the River Kwai (1957) and Thunderball (1965). Welch discusses working with Maurice Askew (dubbing mixer) and discusses the difficulties of working with directors, and the importance of not letting them see how the sounds are produced! Welch compares the production of sound effects at the Gate Studios involving improvisation with what he calls “my rubbish” with more cumbersome techniques in studios with large props departments, using the actual object displayed on the screen - a method which Welch suggests often results in a less convincing sound fit.

## BECTU History Project - Interview No. 294

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Transcription Date: 2004-03-18

Interview Date: 1972-05

Interviewers: Jim Shields

Interviewee: Bill Welch

**Jim Shields:** We're at The Gate Recording Theatre at Elstree with Bill Welch who was the props man there - it may be of interest.

**Bill Welch:** I came down from the Gate Studio, you know the old Gate Studio, from down the far end...

**Jim Shields:** Yes

**Bill Welch:** Then they closed up and I came down...

**Jim Shields:** That was 1950...

**Bill Welch:** Yeah in 1956...

**Jim Shields:** '56?

**Bill Welch:** As late as that. I think it was 1956. And of course at that time they weren't - it was more like religious films as I understood it, you know, and the fellow that I took over from, he said, "It's a bit of a job to find what to do sort of caper you know..."

**Jim Shields:** Yeah.

**Bill Welch:** ...and so on and so on and so on. But the strange part about it, like work always follows! [chuckles] We then started getting busy, and I don't think we stopped really. I mean it was not as busy as ordinary business but it was busy in the sense that we went from one picture to the other and so on and so on.

**Jim Shields:** There was always something happening, yeah.

**Bill Welch:** Well of course I mean as far as I was concerned, as you know, it was my job more-or-less to look after everybody and so on and so on, but without any defined jobs or what have you. But I sort of - it was my job to sort of lay out the effects stuff and get conjuring tricks together and so on, you know. But as far as I'm concerned one of the greatest things I think that was ever said was said by Laddie.

**Jim Shields:** Yes.

**Bill Welch:** And he said to me - of course as you know he'd been here lots of times and so on. He said to me that he enjoyed coming here to do effects because he never knew what bloody thing I was going to give him to make a noise with. And therefore, even with all the skills and knowledge of his himself, because we all know how good he was and so on, I mean the point is that this to him he said was a 'challenge'. In other words, I mean if I was to give it to somebody else they'd be bloody - although in my mind this thing would make the noise required, if I was to give it to anybody else probably they would have thought, "Well this bloke is crazy," you know!

**Jim Shields:** Yeah.

**Bill Welch:** But the point was, I found that er - that like him, the junk that we used over all the years, I mean it wasn't like having a props department to go to and to get this from and that from and that from and this from. It was a question of just conjuring tricks with rubbish. And, as you well know, the conjuring tricks worked! [Laughs]

**Jim Shields:** Oh yes. We were only saying this morning about the waggon actually on Man in the Wilderness, it works so well.

**Bill Welch:** I mean and er...then again the other thing that I always used to enjoy, and that was when everybody weighed in and done a bit, like it was when I first started playing about with these things. And it was a joy in the sense that the two main bods were doing whatever they were doing and the rest of us were doing whatever was left. Whereas today, I mean it's knocked it out. Because with one person doing one set of footsteps first, then doing some other set of footsteps next, and then it being mixed onto the final third track, that to my mind it took a certain element of joy out of it. You know, I mean there was not - I don't feel that there was the sort of spirit of mucking in any more.

**Jim Shields:** No it became a technical...

**Bill Welch:** Yeah you know it became...

**Jim Shields:** Highly technical...

**Bill Welch:** Yes, all these sort of capers. But mind you the same thing prevailed as regards the conjuring tricks as I call them, with the bits of this and the bits of that. But er, I still enjoyed effects but I never enjoyed 'em so much as I did in the beginning. [Chuckles] You agree with that really I suppose?

**Jim Shields:** I do. Well I think, unfortunately, it's like everything else, that the conjuring trick you had to dream up when you first came here, you used again and it wasn't as much fun when you used it the next time.

**Bill Welch:** Well this has been part of it, yeah.

**Jim Shields:** ...unfortunately part of it. But I agree that it's become too technical, I know myself. But what - the sort of pressures you're under these days, from our point of view, there's always somebody barking at you down the other end to get finished. You haven't got long, you're getting less time. And therefore by shooting three track, shooting one and then the other and then the other, you've got it. And people can't make their minds up. If you put everything together, I mean that's fine for me, and then it'll get to dubbing and they'll say, "Well can't we have that a bit lower, and that a bit lower, and this a bit higher?" Then you've got problems - you're saddled. The trouble is I'm afraid it's the people that make that make these decisions, who can't make their minds up.

**Bill Welch:** Yeah, I mean it's er - Also I will say another thing is that er, I don't know, I suppose when you get older you sort of like to stick with the same old set-up in the same old routines which you've known to be and proved to be...

**Jim Shields:** Right...

**Bill Welch:** ...very, very good and so on, and satisfactory. You feel that with the latest set-up it's not the same feeling about it, I don't think. You know. there isn't er...

**Jim Shields:** There isn't any humour now.

**Bill Welch:** I mean - I don't for example, this is what I'm trying to say - you take the rock and roll business. Now as long as I bloody live I should never think and never be - They'll never prove to my mind that it's a saving. Because, what I'm trying to say is that with rock and roll, the business of going backwards and forwards, backwards and forwards, the editor bod and all concerned, the dubbing people and all the rest of it - to my mind they get sick of the thing going backwards and forwards. It's not like it used to be whereby they'd run through a reel of film, spot the errors and put them right - then they've got the flow of the thing. Well this is as a - you know - non-technical person.

**Jim Shields:** No, you're absolutely right.

**Bill Welch:** This is what struck me. It struck me that there was no further - there was no further sense of following the thing.

**Jim Shields:** You're absolutely right and I couldn't agree with you more.

**Bill Welch:** Because if the ruddy thing is backwards and forwards, you've only got to stop and create that stop in your mind and you've lost the flow immediately, and back you go. And I don't think you can get that flow quite as nice.

**Jim Shields:** I think that for free mixes, dub and pre-mixes especially, for smoothing out dialogue, it's a help.

**Bill Welch:** Yes, yeah...

**Jim Shields:** But when you actually start 'taking' on a reel I don't think you should rock and roll. I agree with you, absolutely.

**Bill Welch:** You know to me. And another thing is, I mean as a complete person outside of the dubbing theatre, I feel that - and I've always felt - that having lost the flow, plus the fact that you're... you create a position whereby any Tom, Dick and Harry that wants to, suddenly wakes up in the middle of something and says, "Well I don't like that!" Probably not knowing what he likes or what he doesn't like! But the fact that you can stop and start gives him a position or puts anybody in a position of being able to sort of say, "I think we ought to change that," not knowing quite how much change the work constitutes. I think it's crazy really, I don't think there's - well taking the time factor I don't think there's been any saving at all.

**Jim Shields:** I have proved, on a picture I worked on recently that the dubbing took somewhere in the region of twenty-four hours longer because of rock and roll.

**Bill Welch:** I think so...yeah.

**Jim Shields:** Were there any interesting pictures you worked on, Bill? You particularly liked doing?

**Bill Welch:** Well I think for example, we've worked, to my knowledge we've worked on most of 'em. Because from an effects point of view I mean numerous films we've gone from dubbing, dubbing, dubbing, dubbing and so on, probably we'd go on ad lib the number of films dubbed. But from the effects point of view which was mainly my side of it, there have been many times when you've had to conjure up peculiar types of noises and so on and so on. Well I'd say they're peculiar noises. I mean we've done some good films, the big ones such as Lawrence of Arabia effects we did, I think, er Bridge Over the River Kwai, the effects for that, the greater amount of them, if not all of them you know. And the thing which struck me most I think was - mind you we've made, as you know, we've made some wonderful bloody noises you know, of cars crashing down hills and conjuring tricks as I call 'em you know. But I think one of the things that I remember most was in Thunderball the James Bond set-up, and that was um - Pat and the men - you know, different people - had said, "Well it's a lot of ice skating and skiing and all the rest of it." And I well remember that he said to me, "Well we want to get in some blocks of ice." So I thought to myself, "Well how bloody silly can you get!" I mean where do you go with blocks of ice you know? But they insisted on having these blocks of ice which they had in, a couple of blocks like the old ice cream, you know on butcher's carts and that sort of thing. And er, anyway they played about with these things for Gawd knows how long, trying to get various skiing noises on them! And I well remember saying to Freddie who was on it at the time, "We'll be here for a month with this caper!" It was ridiculous you know. And I think it was the one thing that did stand out, and that was, I said to him, "Well what's wrong with sitting and doing it simply on a table with a bit of sort of plastic macing or something like this, and a couple of small scrubbing brushes?" And I think I took him aback on that you know. Because afterwards it proved very, very successful - I don't know if you remember it? But all this skiing down the hills and chasing each other and [BW makes a sharp 'swish' noise] you know...

**Jim Shields:** It was OHMS? [NB On Her Majesty's Secret Service]

**Bill Welch:** Yeah - no, no...was it OHMS or was it Thunderball?

**Jim Shields:** It may have been Thunderball, it was one of the two anyway.

**Bill Welch:** Well anyway it's a James Bond film.

**Jim Shields:** Yeah, I know the one, yeah.

**Bill Welch:** And er - and Freddie at the time, he said, well after they'd done this and he sat there nice and comfortable [chuckles] doing this instead of doing a lot of hard work. And he said to Pat Heath when he came in the theatre this day, he said, "I think you ought to give Bill a bonus for this." But of course er, you know, it was a pat on...

**Jim Shields:** You got nothing! [Laughs]

**Bill Welch:** ...a pat on the shoulder and get back to your chores! [both laugh] But the point was that the editor chaps that see the film afterwards, two or three of them that I know anyway, without my saying anything at all about it, they did say that they thought the skiing noises were

bloody marvellous! And you know, that's an example of the conjuring tricks as I call 'em!  
[Chuckling]

**Jim Shields:** That's it. When I remember on Twist of Sand when we had the avalanche, he said - I was very worried about it - but he said, "Oh that's all right, a bit of polythene sheeting and run a bit of sand down." Cause I think I asked for about four tons of...

**Bill Welch:** Salt.

**Jim Shields:** ...I think I asked for about four tons of sand!

**Bill Welch:** Well this was the point.

**Jim Shields:** That was the way Freddie and Eddie did it...

**Bill Welch:** Yeah. If you remember the old sacks of salt in the tube - on the polythene.

**Jim Shields:** Yes, that's right, yes, yes...

**Bill Welch:** Amazing really.

**Jim Shields:** And I remember we were doing one where it all caved in, and you were standing there with a piece of metal and I was secretly going at the back, "Get away Bill, get away Bill!" And when you did your bit of wiggle with everything else it er - it worked!

**Bill Welch:** It worked! [Laughs]

**Jim Shields:** That's right!

**Bill Welch:** [Chuckling] I think it was more an act of God than...

**Jim Shields:** No it was very good, yeah.

**Bill Welch:** But still, these things do, funnily enough, don't they?

**Jim Shields:** Any others you remember?

**Bill Welch:** I also remember on one occasion when Baker came in and he was doing some effects, and it was funny that day. [break in recording] So as I say, Roy said - of course, as you know, after lunch sort of business, and he said - there was a scene, it was a sort of noise of - these people were up on rocks sort of thing and consequently two or three times they tripped and kicked a bit of stonework, or what have you, down. And of course it was me that was doing the odd piece of noise of stone hitting the ground. And er, I was judging it from the distance it falls. [Chuckles] But he kept on about, "I don't want it from up there," he said, "I want it from down there." So I said, "Well that's probably true, you want it from down there. But the point is, it's a different distance. It's a question of timing, as is always, but it's a question of - I mean if I drop it

or make the noise from down there onto the stone where it's falling, it doesn't give you that feeling of dropping from the correct height you might say." Well anyway he agreed with it afterwards but er... I was pleased about it because it proved the point [chuckles] that once in a while I'm right again, you know!

**Jim Shields:** That's right.

**Bill Welch:** But as I say, all in all I've - over the years, I mean I don't think there's anybody else in the world that could have enjoyed doing effects as much, you know...

**Jim Shields:** It shows in the finished article, Bill.

**Bill Welch:** It does, I think so.

**Jim Shields:** Because in actual fact, when - you can get a bit uptight, you know in the theatre, not getting the noise you want, then the channel goes and...

**Bill Welch:** All sorts!

**Jim Shields:** ...the bloody props aren't there and everything else, you know, you can get really uptight. But you never had that feeling in there, you always felt relaxed when you...

**Bill Welch:** Well I mean you felt as though - I don't doubt that for a moment because as I say, it wasn't a question of waiting for a vase to be brought from the props or some other item to be brought. I mean there was some rubbish there which was...

**Jim Shields:** Was workable...

**Bill Welch:** ...was workable. And, strangely enough, I feel that - I don't care what anybody says, that the product at the finish was much better than what I term the 'proper thing'.

**Jim Shields:** Yes.

**Bill Welch:** And this was...

**Jim Shields:** Of course, another thing too I've found with Maurice [Askew] that when you were post-synching and you could accept that it was a live - you were halfway there because it didn't sound flat and horrible. And with effects too, you say - well you didn't have to mention anything, I mean, he would give it it's maximum, you were helped there by...

**Bill Welch:** Yeah, yeah.

**Jim Shields:** I mean to me - to me he's the best all-round mixer the business has ever had.

**Bill Welch:** I think so.

**Jim Shields:** And I don't think he'll ever be replaced. I think - I think, you know it's rather when you feel that um - I mean Red Law, who used to be here years ago, when Red Law retired you felt, "Well there was somebody that recorded music and would never be replaced."

**Bill Welch:** Not with the same touch.

**Jim Shields:** No. I remember when John Cox retired, you'd say, "Well there's a chief of sound who can do the lot you know, he can dub and mix, record the music, post synch, maintenance - that man will never be replaced." And it's the same with Maurice, I don't think Maurice will ever be replaced.

**Bill Welch:** I don't think so, no.

**Jim Shields:** You know you get the young whiz kids who've got so much chat these days. I'm straightaway put off, when I walk into a theatre and the dubbing mixer talks a lot.

**Bill Welch:** Yes, because you're feeling so he's talking his way out of it! [Chuckles]

**Jim Shields:** All the best ones I've found have been the quite ones!

**Bill Welch:** Yeah. Well it's er - the way that I see it is that from the word go, always, and it rather surprised me and sometimes it annoyed me, and I'll tell you the reason why it annoyed me - but mostly it surprised me. Because Maurice had done, to my mind, practically every bloody noise that could be dreamed of in a film, you know, right from all peculiar things to normal type of things. I mean at one stage we spent hours doing stuff, underwater business for Thunderball, I think it was anyway, a James Bond set-up.

**Jim Shields:** It was Thunderball.

**Bill Welch:** Yeah. And er, those noises, without any question or doubt - I mean I'm no technician, not in the same sense as yourself and the other people - but those noises were marvellous noises, they sounded underwater, although we know very well you don't get a sound underwater, I mean this is so. But, the invention of the thing was that it sounded true, you know what I mean? It seemed to sound true. Now then, most of that stuff was cut out for some unknown reason, and I don't know why, but er...

**Jim Shields:** Well I think it was too long, it was too long underwater, the sequence was too long.

**Bill Welch:** But what I was going to say was, the thing to my mind that amazed me more than anything else, and that was where Maurice was concerned, and that was this; that whatever person we had come in to do effects, and whatever set-up he told me to try and get for what was required, it annoyed me and surprised me - it annoyed me one way but surprised me in another way, one would think that we'd never, ever done effects before, and this was our first run-in of doing anything of this kind. And this, without any question of doubt, prevailed right up to this very day you might say. You understand what I mean? Every time anybody came in, it was as if though they'd never, ever done it before.

**Jim Shields:** I'll tell you what the problem is...

**Bill Welch:** It was peculiar really, I could never understand this.

**Jim Shields:** Well I think what it is Bill, it's the difference between being on a picture and responsible for it, and doing the effects for it. You worry about it, your only concern is that when you get there, that what you've got - your main worry is that you've guided people correctly. It's like me saying to you, "Such and such a thing happens Bill and such and such and such and the shots are this, that and the other." You make a visual thing of the scene, you visualise the scene. If you can see it on the screen, it's no good arguing, you can't hear what you visualise.

**Bill Welch:** No, no.

**Jim Shields:** And this is one of the problems. I've always maintained, and unfortunately - well twice, I think twice I've been able to do it, is run the picture for the person that's going to do the effects about a fortnight before we do them.

**Bill Welch:** This I think is a wonderful thing really.

**Jim Shields:** It's a terrific idea, it's a terrific help. Because they can see themselves the situation - I mean you picture yourself something happening on the screen. If it's in a comedy, you say a car crash, in a comedy it's rather different from a dramatic scene.

**Bill Welch:** Exactly, yeah, yeah.

**Jim Shields:** And so on.

**Bill Welch:** I mean this is true. Well this, strangely enough, as you know it was very, very rare, if at all, certainly in your own case and perhaps in another one case, I can't remember many of them, where you'd have the reel run before you actually start doing effects. And then of course you got a true picture of what was required. But ninety per cent of the time, over all the years, the question was always, "We've never seen the loop that was coming up until we'd see the loop". And then, strangely enough, if you had the wrong type of editor, he'd expect you to put your hand up in the air and pull down from the clouds the right type of thing to do this, that or the other. And this was where I feel you scored with my rubbish as compared with running to the props department to get something that was nearly the thing which was required.

**Jim Shields:** Well I tell you what Bill, with your rubbish being round the corner there were far, far less hold-ups than somebody who had a vast prop department at their disposal.

**Bill Welch:** This is true.

**Jim Shields:** Because one of the disadvantages of having a vast props department at your disposal, you get a little lapse...

**Bill Welch:** Yeah.

**Jim Shields:** And you go for the right thing, which is wrong.

**Bill Welch:** This is true.

**Jim Shields:** In other words, through having to improvise, and you always being there, instead of you going to the effects theatre, one day you had Fred, another day you had Tom, another day you had Dick - you'd been there all the time...

**Bill Welch:** You knew where...

**Jim Shields:** ...you had the experience...

**Bill Welch:** You see this I've noticed, more so the latter times that we've done effects, that in the case of Laddie, as I told you before, the rubbish was a challenge. And he probably felt, "Well if he's got it in his mind he can do it, he'll do it, and he'll produce a marvellous bloody noise from it." What I feel today is that, like you're saying, its become a thing of - if there was a vase or if there were some things other than that, and the girl said, "It's got to be a vase." And if you gave them, like I've done over the last latter end, a certain thing and I've said, "Well that'll do that," it's not the same. Now this is strange really. I sometimes feel that it's because if you can convince yourself that this will do such and such a thing, the battle is won. But if you...

**Jim Shields:** Oh yes, if put in your mind it's not going to work, it won't.

**Bill Welch:** It won't, because you don't handle it right.

**Jim Shields:** I remember that, I remember actually when we were on Man in the Wilderness we had Joan in, you know Joan Bakeman[?].

**Bill Welch:** Hmm.

**Jim Shields:** And I had known Joan for years. And we were all looking around for props and she did it. I said, "That sounded good, let's check it Maurice." And we checked it and it was great.

**Bill Welch:** Perfect, yeah.

**Jim Shields:** And when I said to her, "What were you doing it with?" I said, "Ohhh well it sounded fine, so lets move onto the next loop!" And this is it, it's just er...

**Bill Welch:** You see I was always of the opinion, and I - well of course it's too late now! [Chuckles] I was always of the opinion, so long as the editor didn't see what was being used - if he'd seen what was being used, he'd immediately go back to what I just said. If he'd seen what was being used, he'd immediately turn round and say, "Oh that's no bloody good!" And he'd convicted, in his own mind, that it was no good. So consequently whatever happened, it would be no good. But if he didn't see what was being done to produce the noise, you'd just get the reverse. It might be the same thing as what he'd rejected in the first place, but if he didn't see what was being used and he heard the noise played back, his attitude would be, "Well that's a

marvellous bloody noise!" Purely because he hadn't instilled into his own mind that this can't be right. I mean I felt another thing was, when a picture we done with er - we were doing some effects and they did have a lot of stuff from next-door, such as the proper things, right? And on this occasion it was a sort of a railway miner's truck type of thing on a railway line. And the idea was the thing was supposed to run back on the railway line and run back into some oil-cans, you know these big drums. So Lionel said to me, "I think perhaps we could do with a couple of those big drums that are kept outside." So I looked at him and I thought to myself, "That's what I mean, that's what they are so it must be all right." Well when I brought it in, and I said to Lionel, "Well we'll do the same old thing as what we always do," you know, do it and see what happens. I said, "I'll bosh this and you do whatever you're going to do with that. And [chuckles] let Pauline"...I think it was Pauline... "do whatever she wants to do" as though I was running it, you know. And she kept saying to me, "I shouldn't do that. No, don't do that, don't do that." I thought to myself, it's bloody ridiculous. I mean there are the things up there and I've got it! And lo and behold, the noise of that trolley track coming down along the lines, plus the weight, plus the bang of the drums, on that occasion and on another occasion where a car knocked a lot of these drums all over the place, although we were only using one big drum with little small ones, she was still insistent on that occasion that, "I shouldn't do that, Bill. Don't do that" as though I was going to balls it up! [Laughs]

**Jim Shields:** Yeah!

**Bill Welch:** But strangely enough, it worked! It worked better - like a lot of things sometimes do, it worked better than what you see on the screen, and that's all there is to it. I mean it er...

**Jim Shields:** It brings the scene to life.

**Bill Welch:** You know it, sort of, is alive. You know there's some life there, it's not just like I've seen on television many, many times. You'll see people sitting at the table and there's a cup of tea pouring out, and the kettle boils, the teapot goes down and it's... [BW bangs fist down on table]. And the jug is picked up, milk poured in...[BW bangs fist down on table]...down goes the jug. It's the same bloody noise from, "Bom, bom, bom!" After they've finished picking these different items up on the table, even to my stupid ears, and I'm pretty fast bloody deaf, you know! [Chuckles] It got on my nerves! Because it was that same [BW bangs fist down on table] "bomp," each time for various items, there was no variation in it at all. I mean no need to have been the right things but the variation should have been different. And I felt that, you know, it was wrong. I mean it wasn't the same polish that we'd get from the rubbish once again, you know.

[End of Interview]