

A Moment Behind the Scenes with Sound Designer CJ Drumeller

JENNY CURTIS: The sound design of *SOLAR* is almost like a character in and of itself. And today we're talking about it with more excerpts from our behind the scenes. I'm Jenny Curtis, director and producer, and we're getting into a conversation here where creator Chris Porter, executive producer Bill Curtis and I are chatting with *SOLAR*'s sound designer, mixer and masterer C.J. Drumeller about some of our favorite world building moments in the sound design of this show.

CHRIS PORTER: Speaking of episode eight, I would like to talk about one moment in particular in episode eight that actually ties back to episode one and the communication that we had with C.J. during this project. I had a line, a throwaway line in the first episode where Jamal says:

(SOLAR PLAYBACK BEGINS)

JAMAL: I miss the sound of the ocean.

ALI: I have 52 unique recordings of the Ocean

JAMAL: ALI, please...

(SOLAR PLAYBACK ENDS)

CHRIS PORTER: And I always knew that later on in episode eight, when Jamal was at a dark point, he was going to retreat into that sound as a way of comforting himself. And that was that particular moment, which a) shows how important and how much thought was put into the sound even before we were able to give it to C.J. to do his magic. But when C.J. was reading the script, he was like, I wonder if ALI could just play a whole bunch of different ocean sounds on top of each other when she says she has 52 unique recordings. And I was like, I actually love that. That's actually a really cool moment.

(SOLAR PLAYBACK BEGINS)

JAMAL: I appreciate you mentioning it, but every wave is different. There aren't 52 different sounds.

ALI: I have 52 unique recordings.

JAMAL: I get it, ALI. Thank you. Please just let me get through this. I'm trying to figure out how I want to say it.

ALI: Okay, Jamal.

(SOLAR PLAYBACK ENDS)

CHRIS PORTER: And I just thought that was a really cool moment of the sound design being a part of the script and storytelling.

CJ DRUMELLER: When we first talked and we first agreed that we were going to do this thing, I just went on to see what was going on with space sound or like sound for astronauts and different things and what they'll use. And a lot of people don't know that actually audio is used a lot in space for, not only just communication and stuff like that, but also for comfort and to add soundscapes that are familiar so that you're not like if you're on the space station or whatever, you can hear the sound of a park or so like the idea of having those ocean sounds was actually something that came up in some of the talks with actual astronauts and different people that we were talking to. But it was also, I know with episode one we were like, let's define the rules of the game. What can we do here to make sure that the sound design things are going to happen? And we know that from the sound design level of episode one, we want it to be something that grabbed the attention to where like, hey, we're not going to go full out here, but we want you to know that things are going to happen. And so, wear headphones and get into this space....that's a pun.

CHRIS PORTER: But it's a good pun.

CJ DRUMELLER: I don't know. It's probably the most used pun ever on our project, but we wanted to get into that space early and even talks with Bill, and we were talking about the mapping of the spaceship itself, everything having its own sound and the idea that each capsule has its own identifiable thing. And so we literally went to the drawing board, even in 3D mapping on where's the door, where's Wren's door, and where's the ants – the nest habitat. Yeah, yeah. And so we knew that from the beginning and kind of since we're kind of jumping around in time and stuff, I think it's another layer of like just keeping the listener engaged in identifying different without having to say, hey, you're in this capsule, like on the nose. We could just play the sound and they would kind of know that it was there. So we knew that this coming from the other side of that idea. I knew it was going to be more discourse or more dialogue than I think I've done before. And just knowing that, like, even the subtleties and and the details of what we could do with a more dialogue heavy show was something that we're going to be bringing a personality to the show that people will know, you know, whether they're flipping through shows like when they get to *SOLAR*, like, Oh, I'm listening to *SOLAR* now. Part of the reason that we really encourage listeners to use headphones is because of that perspective. If you picture yourself watching a movie at home and you're sitting on the sofa, the TV's all the way across the room, so that no matter how much the sound designer wants to be close to you, they are still going to be across the room. So when you wear headphones, it opens up a whole new world to where now I can bring that perspective super close and I can also control what position you are in relation to everything else that's happening. And so the mindset from the beginning on *SOLAR* was almost like a VR mindset to where we're in virtual reality. We're going to have all these different things that are happening that can actually be placed spatially around you because we're taking it from mono dialogue to this interactive immersive experience for Inside the Home. I just got out all my junk that I have. I have this big I think it used to be like a cheeseball container. We could go for

sponsorship on the cheese balls probably without even having to eat them. And I have this smaller size binaural microphone and also just this little tiny little speaker that has a little line input. And so I would put some of the sounds in through and I would place that little tiny speaker and the binaural microphone and then cover it up with this plastic jug and play some of those sounds through there. And you can hear like literally you can hear some of these sounds coming through that speaker and then the different voices.

(SOLAR PLAYBACK BEGINS)

ELI: Specialist Azi, you may begin payload bay arm extension for orbital placement.

TAAJ: All right payload bay arm extending for orbital placement. Hang on tight you guys.

ELI: You alright there Margaret?

MARGARET: I was caught off guard. The arm extension began moving us faster than I anticipated. Please continue.

(SOLAR PLAYBACK ENDS)

CJ DRUMELLER: I'll tell you, the other secret was I used my dryer a ton. So I have a big circular dryer that I would just put the mic in there and I'd close the door, and a lot of the sounds was like I would do the actual foley, like on some of the spacewalks, like to where they're attaching their tethers or whatever.

(SOLAR PLAYBACK BEGINS)

ELI: I'm confirming visual and physical lock and tether, failsafe safe. Chief Scientist Cohen, can you confirm the same?

MARGARET: I confirm.

(SOLAR PLAYBACK ENDS)

JENNY CURTIS: Oh, my God. I can hear it.

CHRIS PORTER: Yeah.

CJ DRUMELLER: That's my dryer.

JENNY CURTIS: Yeah.

CHRIS PORTER: Well, what I love is that C.J. is actually fairly active on his social media, in particular on Instagram. And he when he wasn't allowed to talk about the show, but he was

working on it, I would sometimes see these photos that you would post of like the microphones in these weird places. And I was like, I know what show he's working on.

BILL CURTIS: Creating ALI, obviously incredible talent on the part of the actor. Yes. But you also did a lot of work and I'm not sure how many different renditions of how ALI would finally sound you went through, but I know it was more than two or three.

CJ DRUMELLER: The ones that actually got submitted to Chris and Jenny was around 60 different options probably. It came down to like, what is ALI and where is ALI and how does ALI interact? And I think from the get go, I know that we had this idea of ALI was going to continually become more and more relatable and almost more human as the show progressed, which was, you know, obviously a challenge in itself. And looking at the different, you know, ideas of like what AI might sound like, I mean, this is my tie into also like was the idea of we had this printer that was like super old, this came into also creating the personality of the ship itself because ALI is a super caring and understanding AI, but she's not something she's not a robot that walks around. She's part of the ship. She's a part of these locations to where like, she would be coming from either the ALI speakers from above you or beside you and through these playback speakers. And I think the identity of what ALI is as we get to the end of the series really comes in and hits a home run at the end. And I'm not going to give any spoilers. It's really great. I think it's the acting that with Jenny, what you did with it was amazing, and knowing that we were going to try and find something subtle enough that they would know that it's in the ship, but it had room to grow and it had room to go places to where we had a good par for the course. We're going to have other things that happen with ALI that are going to bring this out. And I loved placing ALI in the room, especially, I think in episode one to where you'll if you listen to the distance of where ALI is, like some of the times, ALI's really close and sometimes she's far away, almost too far, like now listening to them. Like I should've turned ALI up more.

JENNY CURTIS: There are so many more sonic moments to discuss. Make sure you check out the full conversation with C.J. on the SOLAR Panel, available exclusively on our Apple Podcasts Premium Channel.