CHAPTER 13

Production FX and Guide Tracks

Production FX

Not everything on your tracks is dialogue. Amid the words are the odd door slam, plate break, chair squeak, and car start. Occasionally, you'll encounter entire scenes with no spoken words, just action. Events without words are called production effects, or **PFX**, and they get special treatment.

There are at least two reasons to care about PFX.

- Often you want to treat a sound effect differently than you treat the surrounding dialogue. A quietly spoken line immediately followed by a loud chair squeak is a hard scene to mix. Splitting off the squeak makes it easier to control—or to replace.
- To prepare a film for dubbing into another language, you must prepare an **M&E**—that is, a mix containing all elements of the film except the words. Splitting off nondialogue sounds helps the SFX editor and mixer create the international mix.

Splitting PFX Tracks

What do you do when you encounter something you want to split off from the dialogue? If it's an entire wordless scene you want to set aside, simply move the whole thing to your PFX tracks. As the scene is premixed, it will be recorded onto PFX record tracks to be ready for both the full mix and the international version. If this wordless scene covers too many tracks to move to your PFX tracks, leave the section on the dialogue tracks but tell the rere-cording mixer to bus the scene to the PFX record tracks when premixing. This way it will appear on the right fader when it's time for the international mix. Otherwise, the mixer would have to open up the dialogue **stem** to steal the scene for the M&E.

If you're splitting off a single door squeak, car start, body fall, or the like, place a cut on either side of the event, and move the event to one of your PFX
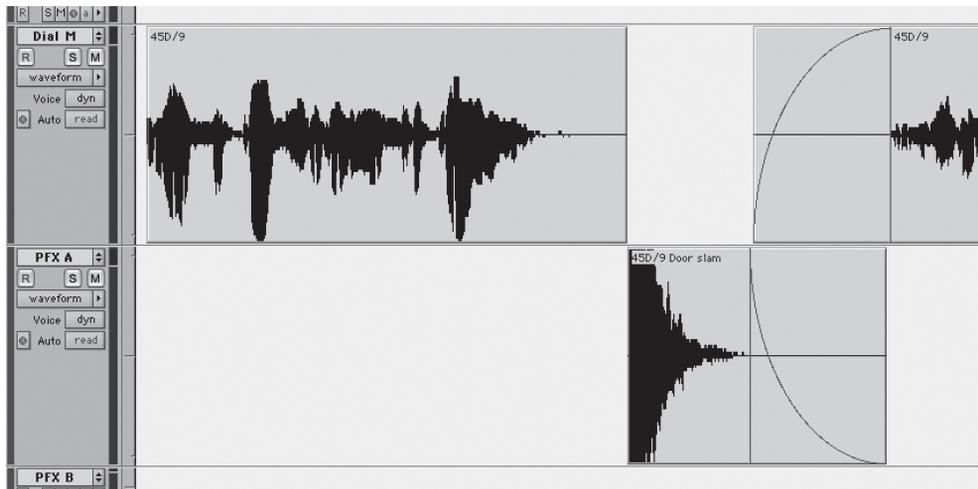
Figure 13-1 A door slam on the dialogue track was moved from Dial M to PFX A for better control in the mix. Note the −6 dB crossfade when returning from PFX A to Dial M. This construction won't allow complete elimination of the door slam because there's no replacement room tone, but it helps in managing level and color.

tracks. If the sound has a strong attack, place the beginning edit just before it starts. (See Figure 13-1.) Under such circumstances, no crossfade is necessary. If the event you're splitting off has a slow or soft attack, you'll need to find a good place to crossfade to PFX from dialogue.

Since the end of most events is harder to nail down, you'll likely need to crossfade from PFX back to dialogue. Dissolves like this must have a mid-fade attenuation of 6 dB ("Equal Gain" in Pro Tools lingo) because you're fading across identical, phase-coherent material. If you use a normal fade with a center attenuation of 3 dB, your edit will bump. (Crossfade types are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 11.)

Using Room Tone for Greater Flexibility

If the only reason you're moving the sound to a PFX track is to have it ready for the M&E mix, you're done. There are, however, things you can do with this PFX split that will give you more flexibility in the mix. You may want better control over the volume, EQ, or wetness of the PFX event. Or the SFX editor will be replacing the sound so you have to present the tracks in a way that allows the mixer to choose between the original PFX and the SFX editor's replacement.
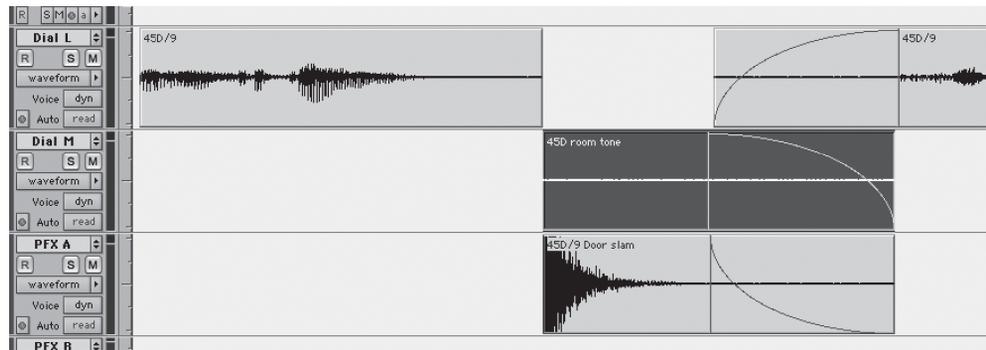
Figure 13-2 Adding a region of room tone parallel to the removed PFX provides complete flexibility. Compare the regular −3 dB fade from room tone to dialogue with the steeper −6 dB fade from PFX to dialogue.

In such cases you have to lay up a section of room tone that can be added to the mix as the level of the PFX diminishes. (See Figure 13-2.) This way the total room tone remains the same even as the level of the effect is lowered. The tone region must match the sound of the dialogue track and the dimensions of the PFX event. Only the fades need to be different: Since the room tone isn't precisely the same signal as the dialogue, you can use normal −3 dB fade linking ("Equal Power" for Pro Tools users).

Temporary Sound Effects from the Picture Edit

It's common for a picture editor to add temporary sound effects to the Avid edit for more convincing screenings, to direct the sound team, or simply to make editing easier. These effects aren't your problem, but there's a good chance that the effects editors will want to get their hands on the files. Whether merely for inspiration or actual use, the picture editor's files should provide a simple, communication-free means of transferring temporary sounds to the effects department.

One easy way to make temporary effects available to other editors is to prepare a few extra tracks in your session named something like "Temp SFX" or "For SFX." As you come to the picture editor sound effects, move them to these temp tracks. When you finish your first pass on a reel, send a note to the effects editor to indicate that your catch of temporary FX is available. The SFX editor can then import the relevant tracks, even over a network, and you can delete them from your session. Rarely is cooperation so cost-free.

Noisy PFX

Often a picture editor will add nonverbal sounds to a scene to enhance the action. From the production recordings she might glean a footstep here, a door slam there, or some extra clothing rustle. When background noise isn't a problem, these extra elements give you the tools you need to add finesse to a scene, so whenever possible use them. Because they're there for a reason, make use of them or come up with even better replacements.

Sometimes the ambient noise of a scene is so high that you can't afford the added room tone of these production effects. That subtle cloth rustle may be nice, but not at the cost of massive added noise. Likewise the sound of pouring nuts into a crystal bowl may be elegant, but that airplane in the background kills the mood.

How do you manage? Make the scene work without the added effects and write detailed Foley notes for the supervising sound editor. With good Foleys you can replicate the mood created by the picture editor without unnecessarily increasing noise. For example, door slams, gunshots, and the like are so high above the noise floor that you can often sneak them in without worry. You can also look for alternate takes or wild recordings of these effects.

Because there's no dialogue on these regions, only action, you might be able to clean the PFX with EQ and broadband noise reduction. These sections aren't carrying the room tone—that's being taken care of by the main elements of the scene—so it doesn't matter if you muck-up the underlying noise. Just remember to listen carefully to the results. The fact that there are no words is no excuse for weird equalization or noise reduction artifacts. And of course keep a copy of the original, unprocessed files.

Making Guide Tracks

When you're on a film, it's unlikely you're working alone. On the smallest of films you're joined by an effects editor, a Foley editor, a music editor, and your supervising sound editor (who often doubles as the effects editor). On a larger film, toss in more dialogue and effects editors, a background editor, more Foley people, and some assistants. No matter the number—you all have to communicate. Good paperwork from the supervising sound editor keeps everyone informed as to plans, schedules, and picture changes, but there's more to a film than paperwork. For you, the dialogue editor, this means occasionally making a mono or split-track guide track of your progress and handing (or posting if you're on the network) a copy of it to each editorial department.

Why is a guide track so important?

- Someone has to determine the sync of the film, and in most cases the dialogue editor is the best qualified to do this. As the team edits, everyone will use your sync decisions to decide precisely where to "double up" production effects, "amplify" footsteps, or replace door slams.
- It's easier to make choices when listening to a decent guide track. When an effects or backgrounds editor uses the OMF or the track from the videotape as an editing reference, the ugly and jarring shot transitions overpower subtle effects or elegant backgrounds. It's nearly impossible to make sensitive judgments, and "listening beyond" the bumps is exhausting. Even though your dialogue edit won't have EQ or other processing, the work you've done to smooth shot transitions and remove noises will greatly aid the other editors.
- As you add ADR and **group loop** lines to your edit, the effects and music editors will need to know their absolute placement. These extra bits of dialogue influence the rhythm and timing of a shot and so can alter decisions about other elements. Sometimes the opposite is true: You'll need a reference from the SFX editor to know where to place an off-screen line or vocalization.
- If time permits, a clean guide track can be prepared for the ADR recording session. This will make life easier for the actors since they'll also be hearing a "cleaner" version of the production sound.
- A guide track is a concise and transportable reference. You could give each department a copy of your entire dialogue session, but this would be an inefficient use of tracks, disk space, and DSP power.

Step-by-Step Guide for Making Tracks

The following paragraphs detail how to make a guide track that other editors will thank you for.

Step 1. Make sure you have a reference tone on the first track of your session. Don't play more than one channel of this tone while making a guide track bounce, or your reference level won't make any sense. Check that you have head and tail **sync pops** and that they're correctly placed.

If you've already edited some ADR and want to guide a track with dialogue on one track and ADR on the other (highly recommended), pan all dialogue tracks to the left and all ADR tracks right.

Step 2. Confirm that all tracks you *don't* want in your mix—work tracks, junk tracks, and the like—are muted. Make sure that all tracks you *do*

want are unmuted. Getting this wrong is the most common—and frustrating—way to ruin a guide track recording.

Step 3. On one track, select everything from the beginning of the reference tone to the tail plop. The reference tone must be part of the guide track so that the other editors know how to relate to your work.

Step 4. Determine what type of file to make based on the DAW and operating system the editors are using. If you're working on a Pro Tools, select *Bounce to Disk* from the file menu. Then select the correct input path, bit depth, sample rate, and type of file.

Step 5. If you're working at 48 kHz and the rest of team is working at 44.1 kHz, instruct the DAW to make a sample rate conversion after the bounce. Choose "Dual Mono" rather than "Stereo," since this will make life easier for the others.

Step 6. When you press *Bounce*, you'll be prompted for a target folder. Create one at the root level of the main drive called "Dialogue bounces for everyone." This keeps other editors from digging around in your affairs. If you're on a network, put the bounces in a public folder.

Step 7. Pay attention. Despite the strong temptation to leave the room while the real-time bounce is happening, don't. Sooner or later you'll make a mistake and leave a work track open or fail to unmute a dialogue track. If you're off flirting during the bounce, you won't know that the recording is flawed. The other editors will hear your bounce and wonder how you got your job.

Step 8. Give the bounced file the same name as that of the dialogue session being bounced. This way you'll always know which version of your edit the others are working with. The file will have a name like "*Title*-Dial R2, ver 3, edit 4." Some supervising sound editors have their own naming systems, often using the date. Use whatever system you're told to unless it's completely silly.

   In your naming scheme, think of the editors who are using your guide tracks as your proofing service. When they find some of your blunders, you'll want to know which version of your edit they're working on so that you can check the session.

Step 9. When you're finished with the bounces, tell the other editors or make a CD of the bounces for them, or put them on the server.