

LOCATION SYNC SOUND RECORDING

DECODED: THE SUBTLE ART OF CAPTURING SOUND IN THE DESERT

By **Cheerag Cama**, *Freelance Audio Engineer*

In PALM Magazine's March-April 2023 Issue, Cheerag Cama, Freelance Audio Engineer, expounded on key tips and tricks to follow when capturing sound during a shoot in the desert. But he's not done yet. In this issue, with Part II of his previous guest column, Cama takes his readers through some more significant insights for sound engineers attempting to capture sound in a dry location, basis his own experience and learnings.

Recently, I went abroad to shoot a feature film in the desert and spent close to 60 days out there. As the shoot progressed, I kept making notes about the shoot - especially of things that were not going as expected, and what I would do, if given a similar chance again.

Below are some tips / suggestions / observations that I thought of sharing.

Always carry a backup multitrack recorder: I try to keep a backup or secondary recorder with me and use it to record ambiences with a MS mic. The secondary recorder can also act as your backup recorder, in case your primary recorder has a failure.

As far as recording ambience in the desert goes, it can be deathly silent if there is no wind, and howling wind if it gets windy. Wind hitting on the headphones can also create a noise, which can be disturbing, as you cannot judge properly what you are recording. Try and sit inside a car with your recorder when it gets too windy outside.

When travelling to a foreign country, always carry international power adapters. Croma has some good ones. They can be a real lifesaver.

Always carry a dynamic mic like the **Shure SM58**. You never know when you will need it.

Ask for earpieces on all walkies: Nowadays, a film crew has 50 to 100 walkies. Ask for earpieces on all walkies. Open walkies just add to the noise on the set. Sometimes, the walkie can cause a lot of EMI / RF interference on condenser mics, like the older Neumann KMR81, 82. Try and carry extra shotgun mics if you can, and preferably of a different brand...like Sennheiser

or Schoeps. You never know when you may need to switch over to another shotgun.

Carry an EMI RFI clip choke, as it can help cut hiss on the KMR81 or 82 when used with an A10 digital transmitter as a plug on.

We associate deserts with extreme heat. So, **a big cap and sunglasses are a must.**

But deserts can get extremely cold too! So, **pack stuff for cold nights too...** sweaters, jackets, woollen head caps that cover the ears.

Carry a big head scarf. In the hot desert afternoons, it can keep the sun off your face and even sand out of your ears when it gets windy. In the evenings, when it gets cold, you will appreciate the warmth around your ears.

When we walk in the sand, we leave behind footprints. When shooting in the desert, the crew has to be very mindful of where they can move about, as footprints in the sand can spoil a shot.

Trying to see the screen of your recorder properly in the harsh desert sunlight will be very difficult. **Keep some black cloth with you** to help you shield the screen from ambient light.

On outdoor shoots, especially when going to a foreign country, carry all possible medicines that you may need. Simple medicines that we can buy over the counter here in India may not be available out there without a doctor's prescription. Be prepared with general purpose lubricating eye drops, clove oil for toothaches, painkillers, sunscreen....

Below is a list of items I recommend every audio engineer carries with him/her:

- A Spanner
- Multi-purpose tool - Leatherman type of tool
- Carry Decathlon rain covers
- If you can, a Megaphone - to keep the crew quiet by shouting

SILENCE ON SET!

- Plenty of general-purpose lubricating eye drops, and an eye cup, to clean eyes of sand.
- Goggles - the type used by swimmers underwater, or by skiers - this is for those days when it gets very windy and you will not be able to keep your eyes open wearing regular shades.
- Glares to protect the eyes from harsh sunlight.
- Make a transparent cover for the recorder, so that you can see the screen of your recorder and also have it covered.
- Try and carry a voltage stabiliser and a UPS, to use with your battery chargers.
- A soldering kit.
- Small USB powered lights, torches, head lamps.
- Small folding Decathlon stools.
- Carry umbrellas...it can even rain in the desert!
- Wear ankle length shoes - regular ones will get filled up with sand and keep you uncomfortable all day.
- You will need a lot of wind protection for lapels, shotguns - keep all windjammers handy.

Better to also carry Tuneable Dipole antennas, as paddle antennas keep turning around in the wind.

Carry a small inexpensive tripod. You can mount your zoom recorders or even your cell phone camera for some great stills, videos etc....

If working with camels and goats (that is with animals), it is very difficult to get good sound on a shoot during takes. They may overlap on dialogue. Or the animals may need to be forced to make sounds, for which, a keeper may make some noise. Best to keep a few hours of dedicated time just to record animal sounds, without the crew being present. On our shoot in the desert, we did

not have any vanity vans. The actors used to sit in their cars when not required on set. And because it would be hot in the daytime, the car engines would keep running to keep the air-conditioning working. So it is a good idea to prepare for this, by having the actors' cars parked as far away as possible from the actual location.

We had around 20 cars on location. Keeping the crew quiet on set when rolling sound can be a daunting task, when you have to factor in local drivers who are not versed in film shoot etiquette and don't understand the importance of maintaining silence on set, especially when you are rolling!!! Suddenly, they will start to repair their cars, or fill air in their tires using a compressor, or clean the car using a compressor, or play loud music, or watch some video on their mobile with the sound turned up, or make a phone call to someone! Exasperating!

Generators are a source of noise on a film set. In the desert, if you are on flattish terrain, the generator will be heard even from a long distance. Sometimes, just parking it behind a sand dune will kill most of the noise. Use the terrain to your advantage and plan the position of the generator judiciously.

Always carry extra CF and SD cards and also extra HDD to back up your data. Also carry card readers. The DIT may not have a CF or SD card reader as they normally are more concerned with copying the camera cards. Also, with USB C and USB 2 still in use, carry enough assorted USB cables.

Production will always want to save money and ask the sound department to work with a three-person crew. I personally feel that the Sound team should always be a four-person crew. I nowadays prefer to use two booms on most



of my shoots, so a three-man team is fully stretched in that case. Also, any member of the Sound team can fall ill, or get injured on set. The PSM will be in a soup if that happens. If the unit is shooting overseas, production will try very hard to cut

manpower. If that does happen, try and get a helper or an intern from the local crew. And make sure you have that extra person from day one of shoot.

Keep yourself hydrated! Take care of yourself and your team members!

As I said earlier, plan....anticipate....

prepare!

Cheerag's Go-To Equipment

- **Wireless Transmitter**
A-10 Digital Transmitter
- **Condenser Microphones**
Neumann KMR81

Neumann KMR82

- **Dynamic Microphones**
Shure SM58
- **Shotgun Microphones**
Sennheiser or Schoeps
EMI RFI clip choke