

Halloween's spooky soundscapes: A sound-effects artist at work

By Atlas Obscura, adapted by Newsela staff on 10.30.17

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Third-graders at North Pembroke Elementary School in Massachusetts wear Halloween masks and dance to "The Monster Mash." Scary songs and sound effects are popular at Halloween. Photo by: John Tlumacki/The Boston Globe via Getty Images.

It's Halloween. You knock on a neighbor's door. Inside, a chain rattles. A skeleton's bones clatter and a woman shrieks. A wolf growls and a ghost whispers in the darkness. Should you yell "Trick-or-treat"? Or should you run for your life?

No need to run. Those blood-chilling sounds don't mean this house is really haunted! They were made by a sound-effects artist.

Sounds Scary!

The history of modern sound effects goes back to the live radio plays of the 1920s. Sound-effects creators had to be right there in the studio. If the script called for a breaking window, they broke light bulbs. If it called for a slamming door, they clapped wooden boards together. Thunder growled across the airwaves when these creators shook metal sheets.

When plays moved from the radio to the movie screen, sound effects went with them. Sound-effects creators called foley artists used the same real-life objects to create sounds for the movies. In 1931, America got its first full-time sound effects department, at CBS.



In the late 1950s, vinyl records let people bring spooky sound effects home. Novelty records with funny monster songs and scary stories set to eerie effects became popular. The first record with a track of just spooky sounds seems to have been released by Disney in 1964. It was called "Chilling, Thrilling Sounds of the Haunted House." You can still listen to it today. The album features effects that are now Halloween staples: moaning ghosts, barking dogs, clattering chains and screaming victims.

Not That Different From The 1920s

Leigh Haggerwood is a modern master of creepy sounds. But Haggerwood doesn't haunt graveyards. He is a polite English musician and record producer. Haggerwood has created six Halloween albums of his own. He's produced many more for other people and companies.

What does making a Halloween sounds album look like today? Surprisingly, it's not that different from how spooky sounds were made in the 1920s. New technology hasn't changed the way Haggerwood creates scary soundscapes. He still sticks to the basics.

"The main elements are shock factor and creepiness," he says. He balances eerie drones with "fast, loud and shocking sounds like snarls, bangs and screams." Haggerwood picks sounds to fit the theme he's working on. For a graveyard he brings in sounds of crickets chirping, owls hooting and a gentle wind as a background. He adds gravestone sliding sounds, zombie moans, shrieks and footsteps to bring the scenario to life.

How To Capture A Zombie

Haggerwood creates the effects for his soundscapes from scratch. After all, he can't exactly go out and record a zombie's moan! Instead, he spends a lot of time recording in his studio.

He records himself breathing, laughing, moaning and rattling chains. He captures the sound of creaking doors and floorboards. He asks friends to scream for the microphone. Sometimes he even hires actors and actresses to cry or scream in his studio.

Haggerwood also records sounds in nature. He walks through forests recording his shoes crunching leaves. He follows circling crows to record their caws. He records dripping water and growling dogs.

Chillers And Thrillers

Haggerwood released an album called "Halloween Horror" in 2008. At the time, it was one of only a handful of horror albums on sale. The next year, he released his most popular album,

"Halloween Horror – Scary Sounds and Music." The album sold more than 50,000 copies in one week.

Today, an Amazon search for "Halloween sounds" pulls up more than 65,000 options. Why so many?

For one thing, people still love sounds that make them shiver. "Halloween sounds are timeless, I think," Haggerwood says. He points out that the Disney Halloween album is still very popular today, even though it is more than 50 years old.

For another thing, cheap recording devices make it easier to produce sound-effects albums. And online stores such as iTunes have made it easier than ever to sell them. In the past five years, copycat albums have flooded the market.

Copycats don't stop Haggerwood. These days, he's doing more and more sound effects for Halloween apps. He is also hoping to add short, scary videos to his soundscapes. It's a whole new area for the British musician, but he doesn't sound the least bit scared.

Quiz

1 Based on the information in the article, which of the following is TRUE?

- (A) Sound effects were first used in movies.
- (B) Sound effects can be made using real objects.
- (C) Sound effects were invented by Leigh Haggerwood.
- (D) Sound effects can be used to capture zombies.

2 Which selection BEST supports the idea that Haggerwood is successful?

- (A) Leigh Haggerwood is a modern master of creepy sounds.
- (B) He is a polite English musician and record producer.
- (C) Haggerwood has created six Halloween albums of his own.
- (D) Haggerwood picks sounds to fit the theme he's working on.

3 Which of the following are two MAIN ideas of the article?

1. *Sound effects can be created using everyday sounds and real life objects.*
2. *Leigh Haggerwood is the most famous sound-effects artist in history.*
3. *Amazon holds over 65,000 options for "Halloween sounds."*
4. *The process for creating sound effects albums has not changed much over the years.*

- (A) 1 and 2
- (B) 2 and 3
- (C) 2 and 4
- (D) 1 and 4

4 What is the MAIN goal of the article?

- (A) to describe how difficult it is to create sound effect albums, especially for Halloween
- (B) to help the reader understand the history of sound effects and how they are made
- (C) to describe how Leigh Haggerwood makes sound effects for his popular albums
- (D) to raise awareness about copycat albums on the internet and how to stop them