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## Listening for the Story: Inside the DVD Commentary

September 27, 2005



### Translating the Creative Process

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By Bonnie Burton



#### Skywalker, Anakin

A child born of prophecy, he has left a mark on the history of the galaxy...

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For every emotional acting scene or magnificent digital effect there's a side story, and *Revenge of the Sith* DVD Commentary **Producer Gary Leva** is there to capture it for fans wanting to know more. Leva not only offered his expertise to record and edit the audio commentary tracks for *Revenge of the Sith* (due to be released Nov. 1 on DVD), but for the entire *Star Wars* saga. He has also

produced a number of featurettes on previous *Star Wars* DVDs, such as *Birth of a Lightsaber*, *Characters of Star Wars* and *The Legacy of Star Wars* in the *Star Wars* Trilogy set, the Deleted Scenes Documentary on Episode I, and *State of the Art: The Previsualization of Episode II* documentary on *Attack of the Clones*.

"This was my seventh commentary with George [Lucas], including all six *Star Wars* films and *THX 1138*," Leva says. "We have fun together and, since I've also produced documentaries for all the previous DVD sets, I know the ground we're covering pretty well by now. So I can ask intelligent questions and sort of guide him into areas I think would be interesting for fans. George has gotten increasingly skilled at doing commentaries. It's been fun for me to work with him over the years and watch the progression."

For the *Revenge of the Sith* DVD, Leva interviewed not only writer and director [George Lucas](#), but also Producer [Rick McCallum](#), and [Industrial Light & Magic](#) Visual Effects Supervisors [John Knoll](#) and [Roger Guyett](#), and Animation Director [Rob Coleman](#).

To prepare for the commentary recording sessions Leva says he watches the film multiple times so that his questions will help guide the participants with their train of thought.

"I don't do pre-interviews or anything like that," Leva says. "The participants say exactly what they want when they arrive. As we're going along, if I feel something they've said is unclear or perhaps too technical, I'll ask them to do another take, sometimes suggesting a more understandable way of approaching it. If they're running out of things to say, I might suggest areas of interest to discuss, things I think audiences and fans would be curious about. This is where it pays to be intimately familiar with the film."

For Leva, audio commentary among a group of two or more people together in a room is more exciting than one-on-one sessions. He edits together all the sessions as one cohesive track.

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"I try to record commentaries with two or more together people whenever I can," Leva says. "For me, the interplay between participants makes it worth the unavoidable messiness of voices occasionally talking over each other. But scheduling makes it difficult. On this film, I was only able to record Rick McCallum and Roger Guyett together, and that was fun. Rick is hilarious -- he kept us in stitches the whole time. And that, balanced with Roger's erudite personality, made for a nice interplay."

The remainder of the audio commentators -- Lucas, Knoll and Coleman -- recorded their sessions with Leva individually -- often revealing rather technical information on everything from [Yoda's](#) distinct facial expressions to digital hidden gags such as the floating kitchen sink in the opening battle sequence.

"Rob Coleman has always been great at translating his creative process into layman terms," Leva says. "For some of the Visual Effects Supervisors, I think it's been a little more of a challenge. They live in a world of technology with its own language, even its own culture. But one of the things I try to bring out in the commentaries is that even though these guys work with these cutting-edge CGI tools, they're using these tools to do what filmmakers have always done -- tell stories."

Even with all the technical information and behind-the-scenes stories detailing the development of various scenes, Leva says he also likes to draw out the emotional side of the participants who tend to reveal their true appreciation for the saga as *fans* themselves.

"I want the commentaries to be as informative as possible -- to give fans a sense of the creative work that went into these films," Leva says. "But I also try to get past the minutiae and the 'how-to' stuff and uncover the way these guys *feel* about working on this particular *Star Wars* movie. In the case of some of the visual effects guys, they're finally getting to work on the film series they've loved since childhood -- maybe even the film series that made them want to be in the movie business in the first place. I always want to get to that emotion, that human element, beyond just the work itself."

Many of those very personal sentiments regarding the last *Star Wars* film came out in the commentary as Leva made certain that the participants, especially Lucas, waxed nostalgic over the many years of hard work that went into creating such an epic saga.

"On Episode III, I asked people to give me a look back at their experience on this, the final *Star Wars* feature," Leva says. "In the case of George, it was fun to hear his perspective on this mammoth adventure which basically took over his life for close to 30 years. George had no idea when he made *A New Hope* in the mid-'70s that this would happen. He was just satisfying his own desire to update the adventure films he loved as a kid to a galaxy far, far away using current technology. I think continuing to serve that childlike sense of wonder in the subsequent films has been his greatest challenge."

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While the structure of gathering the best commentaries may be casual, Leva actively listens during their discussions for topics and themes from his participants and guides the direction of the information from there.

"The way it works is, George and I just sit in the theater together and we watch the film and he just talks about what interests him," Leva explains. "I'm always listening carefully, so if something's unclear, I'll get him to start a section over. If he runs dry, I'll ask questions about things that interest me. I know George's history well -- not just in terms of *Star Wars* -- but the films that preceded *Star Wars* and even further back than that. So I can tie in his history to the film on screen."

"For example, in Episode I, there's a sequence where young [Anakin](#) has his Podracer broken down and basically up on blocks in his yard," Leva continues. "His friends are kidding him about racing that heap. Now I know that when George was a teenager, he was always building his own hot rods and racing them around his home town of Modesto. So I guessed that this history was the basis for that scene -- and I asked him to talk about it. Sure enough, he did a very fun little story about it. That's one way in which knowing your subject can be very valuable to an audio commentary producer."

One of Leva's biggest challenges producing the audio commentary this time around had less to do with getting the most out of the participants, but more with agonizing task of determining which quotes to cut from the final track during the editing process.

"There is often as much stuff on the cutting room floor as there is in the final commentary," Leva confesses. "Remember, my commentaries for the *Star Wars* discs include 5 or 6 people cut into a single track, so we're always having to make difficult choices. It's often an embarrassment of riches, with great stories going by the wayside. [Sound Designer] [Ben Burtt](#), in particular, has given me some fascinating stories over the years that were too long or too tangential to include. With his encyclopedic knowledge of film history, he could fill a track of his own very easily."

In some cases, editing the comments had less to do with fitting it in the allotted time, and more to do with keeping the film PG-13.

"Rick has funny, irreverent, sometimes *unrepeatable* comments, that keep us all laughing," Leva smiles. "Those end up on the cutting room floor, I'm afraid. After all, these

movies are made for all ages, including young children!"

In previous audio commentary tracks for the *Star Wars* trilogy DVDs, Lucas, Burt, director [Irvin Kershner](#), actress [Carrie Fisher](#), and [Industrial Light & Magic's Dennis Muren](#) offered their thoughts, stories and trivia to the film experience. Yet it's one particular chatty [protocol droid](#) that Leva has his sights set on interviewing if the opportunity were to ever arise.

"I'd love to include [Anthony Daniels](#) in an audio commentary," Leva says. "He's the only actor to span all six films, and he's a delightfully funny, talented performer. I think fans would appreciate hearing his perspective."

With the evolution of DVD interactive menus, as well as the need to include value-added material such as making-of documentaries, behind-the-scenes interviews and music soundtrack videos, it's no surprise that audio commentaries are just in demand by fans wanting to know more about their favorite films. But Leva stresses that there's more to commentaries than a group of people sitting in a room chatting about how they miss the catering, or which actor was the most difficult to cast.

"At their best, audio commentaries can be like a day in film school with a group of accomplished film artists," Leva explains. "They bring you into the creative process and demystify the way filmmakers do their jobs. My favorite commentaries are always focused on the ways in which various film artists apply their skills to the cinematic storytelling process. I hope we've achieved that on this film."

"Working with George again, building on the experience of doing this six times before, has been my biggest reward," Leva adds. "There's nothing like working with people you like and respect. Producing documentaries and featurettes, and being the audio commentary producer for the *Star Wars* series has been an experience -- and a privilege -- I will cherish."

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