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# The Audience is Talking: DVD Featurette & Commentary Producer Gary Leva

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September 20,  
2004





When it came time for the long-awaited DVD production of the *Star Wars* trilogy, the set not only had to live up to the high standards set by *The Phantom Menace* and *Attack of the Clones* DVDs, but also carried the added expectations that come with it being the most anticipated, most requested DVD set ever.

Enter, or re-enter, Gary Leva, the producer who orchestrated the audio commentaries for the prequel DVD sets. For the original trilogy set Leva produced not only the audio commentaries for the films, but also the three features on the bonus disk: *Birth of the Lightsaber*, *Characters of Star Wars*, and *The Legacy of Star Wars*.

While the films themselves are always the focus of a quality DVD set, fans of the medium take keen interest in the depth and scope of bonus material. Good features and audio commentaries add richness, insight, and often humor to a film viewing experience. Leva set out to produce the best.

We've all tried to listen to confusing audio commentaries that feature cast and crew members interrupting each other, rambling, and giggling over inside jokes. Leva takes a much more precision approach, encouraging the commentators to share the best of their knowledge and interesting insights, and delivering an entertaining, informative, and accessible experience for the listeners.

"I think people believe that a director goes into a room, watches a movie and begins to talk," says Leva. "While that is certainly the case with some films, that's not the case for the *Star Wars* movies."

Leva says that as many as six people

participate in the audio commentaries on the *Star Wars* Trilogy DVDs, but he typically records them separately. With so many commentaries about the same scenes, the decision who to cut and who to leave in can be agonizing.

"I have to eliminate a great deal of the content because people will be talking about the same scene," he recounts. "It's an agonizing decision when we're in the editing room because we have to decide who we're going to favor when talking about that scene."

Leva says he enjoys working with George Lucas on the audio commentaries, focusing primarily on the story when he talks with the director during the session. There are scenes and ideas in the films that have always struck Leva or touched a chord in him, and he likes questioning Lucas about them.

"It's a huge treat because it's just me and George sitting in a room talking about his movies for three or four hours," says Leva. "I can ask George to tell about a certain scene, or ask if it reminds him of something. That's one of the pleasures of audio commentary in general: it's fun to probe and see if George has something to say that he may not say otherwise, confirming my suspicions about what a scene might mean to him personally."

Leva notes Lucas' increasing comfort with the audio commentary process over the course of several DVD productions.

"When we first started [on Episode I], it was a very foreign process to him -- it's a foreign process for anyone," Leva says. "When we did the commentary for *THX 1138*, it was a one-take audio commentary. We sat down to watch the 90-minute movie and he never stopped. It was an amazing thing to do."

Leva describes Lucas as forthcoming and candid, sometimes describing alternatives he created to deal with dead ends he discovered in his storytelling process. An example Leva

shares is a portion from the *A New Hope* commentary in which Lucas talks about his decision to have Obi-Wan Kenobi die in order to advance the story at that point.

"He came up with Kenobi getting killed," recalls Leva, "even though he knew he would need him in the later story. He figured he'd just bring him back as a ghost. If you really listen to the audio commentaries, it takes a lot of the mystique out of the process. He (Lucas) is not afraid to blow holes in that mystique."

Leva plans for all the commentaries by preparing questions on topics that interest him about the films, and that he thinks will interest a broad range of listeners. He seeks a balance between what the commentators want to talk about and additional points that Leva thinks will be interesting for all. He occasionally finds the discussions from the technical commentators more challenging for his intended audience.

"They are used to dealing in a world that's very technical to us, to the laymen," says Leva. "One of the challenges is to keep them from speaking in computer-ese, or to get them to explain things in a way that is accessible to a mainstream audience."

According to Leva, Rob Coleman, Animation Director at Industrial Light & Magic (ILM), helped make the technical commentaries on the Episode I and II DVDs more understandable. "Rob becomes a moderator, serving the same role I would play were I able to speak during an audio commentary," he says. "Rob is very good at being able to explain things in laymen terms."

While Leva would often produce the technical commentaries with more than one person in the session, he prefers in most circumstances to work with lone commentators.

"If I record everyone separately, once we get to the editing room we have more flexibility with who we use and how much we use," he

says. Yet the commentaries sound well-connected and conversational. "I try as much as I can when we make the audio commentary to make it sound like everyone's in the same room commenting and talking together," he says.



In addition to the audio commentaries, Leva produced the three short featurettes for the *Star Wars* trilogy boxed set bonus disk. One, called *Birth of the Lightsaber* focuses on the how the weapon of the Jedi Knights evolved from the sorcery and swashbuckling pirate films that Lucas loved as a kid. The second, *Characters of Star Wars* examines the roots of several iconic *Star Wars* characters. Discussion and many frames of original production art reveal personal histories that are not widely known. "Han Solo was supposed to be a green-skinned monster with gills," says Leva.

The third short feature, *The Legacy of Star Wars* touches on how the films have influenced an entire generation of filmmakers to look at science fiction as a possibility in their careers.

"*Star Wars* showed them that science fiction could be more than they ever imagined

because no one had ever tried to tell these stories in this way," explains Leva.

To produce *The Legacy of Star Wars* Leva interviewed some of the most respected and notable filmmakers in the industry. The feature describes their reactions to the films, how they influenced their careers and the culture in general.

"When you interview people about *Star Wars*, even filmmakers like Ridley Scott, Dean Devlin, John Singleton, and certainly Peter Jackson, you take them back to a time in their lives when they were just discovering cinema," says Leva. "You're not only reminding them about a movie they liked, but you're also reminding them of seminal experience in their lives."

For some, like *The Lord of the Rings* filmmaker Jackson, the influence of the *Star Wars* films on his work is not surprising. For others it is less predictable, as Leva points out using John Singleton's films as an example. "You wouldn't think John Singleton's work as akin to George's in any way," says Leva. "It's the kind of inspiration that George gave him that propelled him into cinema. John was inspired to tell the kinds of stories he wanted to tell."

Leva points out that several filmmakers in the documentary say that they decided to become a filmmaker the day they saw *Star Wars* for the first time.

"That's an amazing achievement," states Leva. "And that's one of the things that's so powerful about the film itself. The original *Star Wars* is so well made in so many ways; it's brilliantly edited; the storytelling is brilliant. The way in which George wove these myths into the modern genre -- this much more accessible genre -- it spoke to people in ways that nothing in cinema ever has."

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