



Today's top-rating TV programming surely warrants top quality sound, right? Fountain Television thinks so, as evidenced by impressive viewing figures for *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?* — the game show with a difference. Sound Supervisor Kevin Duff lets JONATHAN MILLER into a few trade secrets.

Any self-respecting connoisseur of British comedy should be able to place the intrepid line, "This time next year we'll be millionaires!" As we career towards a new millennium, millions tune into the Beeb's twice-weekly National Lottery Draw, enthralled by the million-to-one chance of winning millions. "It could be you," they tell us. In launching their Autumn schedule with Celador Productions' *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?*, ITV's joining 'millionaire's row' was perhaps inevitable, if belated. First broadcast in Britain last September, the show's premise is simple: any contestant who answers 15 questions correctly walks off stage with a jackpot prize of £1 million. Make no mistake, this is addictive prime-time viewing — the show broadcast on January 3, 1999 netted 17.1 million viewers — and it's easy to see why...

Millionaire Rules

Following a preliminary round in the studio, one lucky contestant gets the chance to pit their knowledge head-to-head with host Chris Tarrant in front of millions of TV viewers, knowing that a further 15 correct answers will land The Big One. Contestants are shown each question and four possible answers before deciding whether to walk away with whatever cash they have accumulated, or to trust their knowledge in pursuit of a greater prize. After every five correct questions, contestants bank whatever amount they have won so far

— £1000 for five; £32,000 for ten — knowing that one wrong answer at any stage will have devastating consequences. By question 15, the lucky contestant will be playing with a massive £500,000; a correct answer will double that sum to £1 million, but a wrong one will knock them out of the game, though still taking home £32,000. Alternatively, having seen the question, the contestant could opt to not answer and still walk away £500,000 better off. In an effort to ease their journey to glory, contestants are entitled to play three so-called lifelines: putting the troublesome question to vote with the studio audience; halving the multiple choice options from four to two, or calling a relative or friend for advice.

Whilst filmmakers have long been aware of the inherent flexibility of sound — or even silence — as a useful tool for intensifying or relaxing the pace, emotion and atmosphere of a motion picture, incorporating elements of this thinking into the cut-throat live TV game-show arena was, until recently, relatively uncharted territory. It is, however, particularly evident on *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?*, where rising tensions are understandably paramount to the show's appeal and success. Unlike its rivals, a veritable plethora of carefully researched and immaculately crafted musical stings and beds underpin the potentially life-altering stakes in a slick fashion. Putting this into practice is no easy task.

No Self Control

At the time of writing, a new series of *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?* is airing for 12 consecutive nights. Recording takes place 24 hours before broadcast, at Fountain Television's Wembley Studios in Middlesex — a former film studio complex, rich in broadcasting history. Kevin Duff, Head of Sound for Fountain Television: "Previously owned by Limehouse Television, Fountain bought the studios in '93, despite already having a studio at

(L to R) John Galbraith, Rob Wahl, Chris Tarrant, Barry Mizen and Kevin Duff in the studio.



New Malden, which we still have." Kevin, who mastered his craft at London Weekend Television, co-ordinates the impressive audio action that adds so much to *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?* from Studio B Sound, high above television Studio B, where the equally impressive sound stage is erected for the duration of the series. The television studio itself dwarves the set, hinting at its film studio heritage. The original film studio can now be divided into two distinct television studios, courtesy of a gargantuan, sound-proofed partition — hence the Studio B classification. (BBC1's *Celebrity Ready, Steady, Cook* currently occupies Studio A.)

Meanwhile, back in Studio B Sound, Kevin reveals: "The sound side of this place was originally set up by Peter Ball, who was Head of Sound back in the Limehouse days. He left about nine months ago and I took over as Head of Sound at both sites — here and New Malden — so I'm continuing the process. We're just about to upgrade the other control room. Both control rooms, picture-wise, are now digital; sound-wise, we're still analogue, and we're going to stay analogue with a Calrec S2 desk in here, and we're about to tear out the Raindirk from our other control room and put another Calrec in there. So the plan is that, by the end of this year, we'll have two identical

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Millionaire?

sound control rooms, which makes sense. Calrecs are good because our work can involve anything from a talking heads situation, with four people chatting around a table, to a huge rock show, and those desks are wonderful — so flexible; so many ways of getting things in and out of them."

Not that Mr. Duff is an analogue Luddite: "If we had the money, we probably would go digital, but if you go down that digital route you need to have constant sound back-up to make sure everything runs properly. On this show, it's [Grams Op] Barry [Mizen] and myself; we need something that is going to be absolutely rock solid because, these days, you get very little time to do these shows."

It'll Be Alright On The Night

On the day of my visit, *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?* was midway through its second series. The working pace for all concerned was frantic, yet evidently well practised.

From Director Paul Kirrage (unlike the first series, there are two directors, working alternate nights directing, then overseeing post-production in readiness for the following evening's broadcast) to Sound Supervisor Kevin Duff, everyone knows their place. Kevin runs a tight ship from Studio B Sound with confidence: "The procedure is: we shoot tonight; take that show away; edit it tomorrow, and it goes out tomorrow night," he clarifies. "There's no time for dubbing; we have to get it right and we haven't time to muck around with the sound at all. So there's an awful lot of grams cues — something like 80 or 90 in every half-hour show. I can't remember working on any show with so many grams cues."

Barry elaborates, this playing in of audio effects being his forte: "Because it's a game show you can go down several routes. Certain modules require certain cues." Kevin: "Here we're using three Akai DD1000s and they're chocka, all MIDI-linked together and triggered from the computer that generates the game." And herein lies the technical crux of *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?* — its distinguishing piece de résistance.

Barry continues: "Basically, the questions come up on screen as a graphic, and every time a graphic appears there's a related MIDI cue for music beds, stings, or whatever. On top of those, there are 20-odd manual cues on the play code and also VTs segueing in and out of the programme. Rather than sitting there with a script we've had to learn the game."

Kevin agrees: "It's a very difficult thing to set up. When we started the first series, none of us knew the game and, with the computer triggering off MIDI cues all over the place, getting that bolted down was quite difficult. Once you've done that, it's just a case of learning the game and where to ride the faders. The stings are very atmospheric, so the way you ride them in the show increases the tension. It's nicely written music; well constructed." Top marks to composers Keith and Matthew Strachan.

It's More Fun To Compute

When asked to summate the distinguishing features of *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?*, music again comes to the fore: "From the

beginning to the end of the show there's music, which is quite unusual," proffers Kevin. "Usually, there's the odd sting here or there, but this is all built around music, and it's all played live in-house." (Well, live from that all-important computer.) This all-singing, all-dancing set-up is the brainchild of Chris Goss, whose previous credits include *Catchphrase*. Undoubtedly the show's unsung hero, his machine in question is surprisingly meagre — an aging Acorn system. Kevin: "He pioneered the use of computers in television and is used to doing this sort of thing. He custom-wrote the program for this show, so it's very stable. He's locked away in a room next to us, but it's all very high security. Only two people have access to that room; Goss himself and Paul Smith, Managing Director of Celador Productions."

Goss cannot be blamed for not wanting to give the game away. Perhaps he might treat himself to a new computer one day — if he becomes a millionaire! □



Sound Supervisor Kevin Duff and Grams Op Barry Mizen.

Project
*Who Wants To Be
A Millionaire?*

Sound Supervisor
Kevin Duff

Studio
Fountain TV, London

Report
Jonathan Miller