

THE IMPORTANCE OF FOLEY IN FILMMAKING: A CASE  
STUDY OF BUSTER KEATON'S "THE ELECTRIC HOUSE"

by

CONNOR T. LOWERY-NORTH

A THESIS

Presented to the Department of Audio Production  
and the Robert D. Clark Honors College  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Bachelor of Science

May 2025

## **An Abstract of the Thesis of**

Connor T. Lowery-North for the degree of Bachelor of Science  
in the Department of Audio Production to be taken June 2025

Title: The Importance of Foley in Filmmaking: A Case Study of Buster Keaton's  
"The Electric House"

Approved: Brian McWhorter, Professor of Music  
Primary Thesis Advisor

Foley, the art of adding sound effects to film, is a vital but often overlooked part of what makes a movie come alive.

This thesis explores the process of creating Foley in film, specifically for Buster Keaton's silent comedy *The Electric House* (1922). This project allowed me to explore how sound can function as a primary storytelling tool (a task usually associated with music) and how vital Foley is to a film's success. Over the course of several months, I successfully planned, sourced, implemented, and mixed Foley for the complete 22-minute film.

As a creative thesis, the primary work is the film itself. This document serves as a supplemental reflection of that creative process, offering context and insights into the work that went into it.

The final project represents a new treatment of *The Electric House* with over 100 Foley elements chosen, edited, and mixed using digital sound manipulation. This film should give the audience a deeper understanding of Foley's place within an auditory landscape.

Beyond my own creative goals, the project serves as a portfolio piece, showing applied sound design and helping position me for future work in film production.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would love to thank Professor Brian McWhorter and Professor Jon Bellona, both of whom have pushed me out of my comfort zone in the audio world. Additionally, I would like to thank Lance Lecompte for giving me the opportunity to intern at *Surfing Giant Studios*.

At this internship, I was able to work in the entertainment industry doing sound for a to-be-released show produced by Disney Animation. As of this document's publication date, I am still bound by the terms of a non-disclosure agreement, so I cannot reveal the show's title. Without Lance, that would not have been possible. He has provided me with so much mentorship, and for that, I am extremely grateful.

Additionally, I would like to thank my father, Eric Lowery-North, and my girlfriend, Chelsea Kropp, for always supporting me in my visions of working in entertainment. They never wavered in their faith that I could shine in this incredibly competitive industry.

## Table of Contents

Why Foley?	5
What is Foley?	6
Foley is Art	8
Methodology	10
Case Studies	13
The Birds (1963)	13
No Country for Old Men (2007)	15
Foley Creation	17
Conclusion	19
Bibliography	20
Supplemental Material:	
<a href="#">The Electric House</a>	

## Why Foley?

For as long as I can remember, I have been captivated by the idea of working in the entertainment industry. I loved movies and TV shows, but had always expected to work in music. That was until I had an internship at Surfing Giant Studios in Santa Monica, CA. Surfing Giant Studios is a subsidiary of Alcon Entertainment that focuses primarily on animation. They have produced a wide variety of shows, from the dystopian *Blade Runner: Black Lotus* to the comical *Pete the Cat*. During this internship, I had the opportunity to do sound design for an animated Disney show releasing later this year (2025). Immediately, I was fascinated by the idea of Foley, and I couldn't believe I hadn't noticed it before. However, as I began my research, I quickly realized that was intentional: the nature of Foley is to be invisible.

So, what is Foley? Foley are sound effects used to enhance a scene's realism. A few prime examples of Foley are footsteps, background ambiance, and movement rustles. It can highlight a car door closing in the foreground, a raging thunderstorm in the background, or even the rustle of clothing from our main character. Foley not only situates the viewer in the space but also provides a sense of intimacy with the action. While these sounds are not technically "music", they are used in similar ways. Foley, much like music, is used to help establish the setting, give more context to the viewer, and support the emotional tone of the film.

This supplemental document is split into a few parts:

1. an overview of the history of Foley;
2. my process and methodology as a Foley artist as applied to *The Electric House*;
3. two important case studies; and, finally,
4. a personal account of what I learned throughout this project.

## What is Foley?

Foley may seem niche, but its use in film is universal. At its core, Foley are sounds added in post-production used to enhance the realism of a scene, from something as minor as footsteps to as explosive as gunshots.



JACK DONOVAN FOLEY

Foley's history begins with Jack Foley, a notable film director in the 1930s. Jack was alive during a pivotal point in film production: the release of "talkies" (or movies with dialogue) to the public. Suddenly there was a gap in the market. These new films had dialogue and music but were missing a vital aspect - sound effects! These films might have recorded the vocals, but missed the doors being slammed or the sounds of galloping hooves. Without sound effects, the soundscapes of these films felt bare and incomplete.

Jack Foley pushed the boundaries of film by pioneering 'Foley sessions', the first of which was for the movie *Showboat* (1929). This early Foley session primarily consisted of footsteps, rustling clothing, and sounds for other props within the film. His method involved mimicking the characters, attempting to capture similar clothing rustles and footsteps. At the time, this was revolutionary for the film industry, and as a result, studios everywhere began calling upon him to do sound effects for their films as well.

“Jack's technique was to record all the effects for a reel at one time,' explained George Pal, who used Jack's talent on some of his pictures. 'Jack added the footsteps, the movement, the sound of various props-all in one track. He used a cane as an adjunct to his own footsteps. With that cane, he could make the footsteps of two to three people. He kept a large cloth in his pocket which could be used to simulate movement” (Mixonline, 2001).

As Foley continued to develop, we also saw innovation of 'diegetic' and 'non-diegetic' sounds. Diegetic sounds refer to the sound originating from within the story, sounds that the characters can hear. Non-diegetic sounds refer to sounds that originate outside of the story world, such as narration or background music, that the characters cannot hear. For example, the score is the typically non-diegetic music we hear in the film; and in a way, Foley is the diegetic 'music' of the actions choreographed on screen. It is important to distinguish the two, as although all Foley are sound effects, but not all sound effects are Foley.

Mickey Mousing, or MM, is using a musical gesture or sound effect to mirror or exaggerate an on-screen action. They are typically used in comedy. For example, a slide whistle to accompany someone falling. While they are sound effects, they are not considered Foley.

Spot, or hard, effects are the diegetic sounds that many think of when Foley comes to mind (footsteps, clothing rustling, etc.). This creative project focuses on spot effects. As my goal was to create a realistic soundscape, pursuing hard effects was more logical. Although they were not the focus, I did include some MM sound effects, which are listed below:

**Diegetic Sound Effect Examples:**

Footsteps (53 seconds)

Splash (5 minutes, 17 seconds)

Car starting and driving (2 minutes, 56 seconds)

Switch flicking (4 minutes, 6 seconds)

**Non-diegetic Sound Effect Examples:**

Boing (4 minutes, 26 seconds)

## **Foley is Art**

Foley should be viewed as an art form similar to music, as its purpose and creativity are closely related to that of musical composition and live performance art.

This connection is deeply rooted in film history. Even during the silent film era, movies were hardly ever experienced in complete silence. Typically, silent film theaters had their own musical ensembles. These groups, known as ragtime orchestras, would perform the music to whatever film was playing. At one point, there were hundreds, if not thousands, of ragtime orchestras in the United States, with one being located right here in Eugene, Oregon (Anderson). These orchestras typically had a trap set player (or percussionist) performing both Foley and MM sound effects in real-time. In this context, Foley became another instrument to the backing track of the film, except their instruments were shoes, clothing, and slide whistles.

Foley reinforces its status as an art form by providing emotional and narrative depth to films. Like music, the way sounds are played can relay a great deal about the story to the audience. If someone falls and the impact is somewhat soft, the audience automatically interprets that fall as less severe. If, instead, there were a gigantic crash, the audience would intuitively believe that the fall was worse. Foley artists expertly craft sound, making deliberate choices in noise, timing, and texture. Their work plays a huge role in enhancing the audience's interpretation of a film, even if it is meant to be undetectable.

Foley also has the power to redirect the viewer's focus to specific points in a scene. When you hear a car horn in the background, instinctively, your eyes flicker to the source of the sound. Using this, Foley artists can subtly guide the viewer's attention to certain moments on screen.

Foley is an art form due to its ability to express emotion and influence the audience's perceptions of the film. Foley artists shape the viewer's attention and interpretation of the film through sound choice, timing, and creative use of ordinary objects. Despite often being overlooked, Foley requires an immense amount of skill and creative practice, and for these reasons, it should be more widely recognized as an art form.



## Methodology

INTERVIEWER: What inspired you to choose *The Electric House* for your thesis project?

CONNOR: I chose *The Electric House* for a couple of reasons. A silent film was particularly attractive to me because most of them do not have any recorded backing tracks. Being able to enter this project with a blank slate gave me many more opportunities to experiment. Experimentation was a key factor here, which is why I ended up on a film with numerous different machines and contraptions. Ultimately, Buster Keaton is a legend in the silent film era. His comedy is so physical and exaggerated that a Foley project would not only work well with it but would still be hilarious. So, that is why I chose *The Electric House*.

INTERVIEWER: What's your process for developing the sound design for a silent film like this?

CONNOR: I started by watching the film a few times and deciding which effects I wanted to focus on. I decided to focus on hard effects (footsteps, clothing rustling, impacts), and then split the movie down into six-minute sections to begin applying Foley to them. I first recorded a voiceover for the film, which provided me with a reference for timing as well as a general idea of the kind of sound I was envisioning. I then had to actually find the sounds, which was the most labor-intensive part, and integrate them into my digital audio workstation (or DAW). Once all the Foley was integrated, I went through the entire film, mixing as I went and adjusting specific sounds and frequencies until I was happy with the result.

INTERVIEWER: Did you focus on creating Foley sounds yourself, or did you use existing sound libraries?

CONNOR: Based on the scope of this project, I chose to use existing sound libraries. I had access to Splice specifically at the start of this project, and I decided to continue using it. Using Splice was somewhat limiting, as it is primarily used for music. They do have Foley sounds on the platform, but the choice is smaller. However, Foley teams usually consist of multiple people, and working towards creating new sound effects may have been too large of a workload for me. Using Splice, even if it was not an ideal tool, still allowed me to capture the feeling I was attempting to create.

INTERVIEWER: Did you include any music? Why or why not?

CONNOR: I did! I included *Pomp and Circumstance* by Edward Elgar and *Ain't Misbehavin'* by Fats Waller. I used these songs contextually: *Pomp and Circumstance* for the graduation scene and *Ain't Misbehavin'* for the first dinner party scene. These two songs actually act as a diegetic score, as they are songs that one might have heard at a 1920s dinner party or a graduation ceremony. Although they are music, they almost act as ambiance, which is ultimately the reason I decided to include them.

INTERVIEWER: Did you find any particular scenes challenging to match sound effects to?

CONNOR: One of the most challenging scenes in the film is the one where Buster Keaton continuously runs up the stairs while they are moving in the opposite direction. This scene initially gave me trouble. His feet move incredibly fast, and it was sometimes hard to determine whether they are hitting at the right time. I had to go through and place each one into the timeline in a row, stopping and checking each time that the footsteps sounded correct. Although I was eventually able to resolve this issue, the scene did require a lot of effort.

INTERVIEWER: Are there any other scenes that you're particularly proud of in terms of sound design?

CONNOR: One scene I am particularly proud of is the second scene in the film, where they first arrive outside the house. There were a few parts in particular that I was proud of. Firstly, as the millionaire steps out of his car, you can hear a slight groan under his weight. The idea of weight was particularly fascinating to me in this project. Additionally, when Buster Keaton sits on the curb, he flips through the book, and you can hear the individual pages turning. This was another labor-intensive sound, but one that I was pleased with the outcome of.

INTERVIEWER: What tools did you rely on most for your sound design process?

CONNOR: For this project, I used Ableton Live 11 to put all the sound effects in the video. Many professionals use Pro Tools, but Pro Tools just doesn't run quite as well on my computer. I wanted to make sure that I didn't have any issues with it crashing and potentially losing my progress. So, I chose Ableton because it has historically been a more reliable tool for me. I also used Splice, an ample online sound library, to source my sounds. The other tools I used were headphones, a microphone, and my audio interface, which is an Apollo Twin.

INTERVIEWER: Were there any specific techniques you used in Ableton Live to blend the sounds seamlessly?

CONNOR: As far as mixing goes, my process was relatively simple. I relied heavily on automation: specifically panning, volume automation, EQ, and reverb. To mix Foley effectively, you need to be aware of the space that the sound is in. For example, when a character walks away from the camera, you would turn down the volume, turn up the reverb, and pan the audio depending on which way they go.

INTERVIEWER: How did you account for the time period in which the film was created?

CONNOR: To account for the period in which the film was released, I ultimately used the BBC Sound Library as a reference for how items of that era might have sounded. This became particularly useful when I was researching cars from the 1920s and the 1930s. I was able to address the clicking sound of the vehicles, which contributed to the 'old' feeling of the film. Initially, I also wanted to distress all the audio on the video, but I ultimately decided not to do that. I was planning to take an EQ and cut out the super-low and high frequencies, followed by adding some general distortion to the track. The reason I decided not to do this was due to the project's purpose. This project is supposed to introduce people to the various levels of Foley who may not be familiar with them otherwise. By cutting frequencies, the viewer loses a lot of the Foley immediately, which was counterintuitive to my project.

INTERVIEWER: What other challenges did you face while doing this project?

CONNOR: One of the main challenges I faced was not being able to access some of the tools I wanted to use. I ended up using samples for the footsteps, but there are MIDI plugins available that can make footsteps that sound extremely realistic. When I attempt similar projects in the future, I would love to be able to invest in one of these pieces of software, as they drastically improve the workflow, and would have made this project much more efficient.

## Case Studies

It is undeniable the impact a high-quality score can have on a movie, (*Star Wars*, *Harry Potter*, *Dune*), but strong Foley can have a great impact as well, and sometimes you need to remove the music to really hear that. These case studies identify two films that rely almost solely on Foley (*The Birds*, *No Country for Old Men*).

### *The Birds* (1963)



Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds* (1963) is a horror staple that challenges the genre's musical expectations by abandoning a traditional score. *The Birds* is a horror movie about a series of vicious bird attacks in a small town. While this film uses ambient sounds (wind, room tone, etc.) to establish the setting, there is little musical score. The film mainly consists of Foley, sound effects, and dialogue.

A major part of any horror film is the music. Music builds tension with the viewer, and directors typically use it, or rather the lack of it, to create feelings of anxiety or dread. While *The*

*Birds* was in production, Hitchcock insisted there be no traditional music score in key parts of the film. With music and film being intertwined, here is an expectation that a film will have some sort of music. By excluding music from the production, Hitchcock removed the audience's safety net, causing intense anxiety.

When other directors viewed the film, it became clear that having no background score could be just as, if not more, unsettling as using tense music. Canadian director Kyle Edward Ball, who directed 2022's *Skinamarink*, said, "The lack of background score in *The Birds* was part of the inspiration for not using a score in my movie. *The Birds* has had a huge impact on me as a filmmaker. It's just this constant creeping of something being wrong. Something out of place. Long stretches of silence followed by cacophonies of sound" (Schonfeld 2024).

Music can also provide resolution when a film is complete. Since the musical aspect is notably missing in *The Birds*, Hitchcock ensures the audience is not granted any safety even after leaving the theatre. This is one reason why *The Birds* has remained so prominent in pop culture. Hitchcock was able to increase fear of a very real and everyday thing that the viewers see. By removing the music, he drew an even thinner line between real-life and the horror of the film.

The fear in horror films comes equally from Foley as it does from music. We are left with near silence when the music cuts out to create the jump scare. However, the environmental sounds are still present. Foley can be utilized to increase the realism of a scene, making it feel more real and impactful to the audience. Hitchcock immerses the viewer in silence. By doing this, he single-handedly rewrote how typical horror sounds.

*No Country for Old Men (2007)*



Another genre that typically relies on music is the Western, or in this case, Neo-Western. *No Country for Old Men* is a Neo-Western crime thriller directed by the Coen Brothers. The film was released in 2007 to critical acclaim. This film includes just 16 minutes of music, including the credits, composed by Carter Burwell. However, because of the genre, silence and Foley are used differently than in *The Birds*.

The gas station scene in this film is a prime example of how to use silence or Foley to create tension in the viewer.

In this scene, the villain (Anton Chigurh) threatens a gas station clerk with a coin toss. This is a tense moment in the film, and there is no music accentuating it. We do see some ambiance, a hum set to 60hz, meant to mimic the sound of a refrigerator. That hum, although quite quiet, makes the scene incredibly personal, and moves the viewer 'into the gas station'.

Additionally, the Coen Brothers use Foley to foreshadow what will happen to the gas station clerk at the end of this scene. The sight and sound of the coin become vital here. Chigurh is known to kill seemingly randomly, relying heavily on the coin toss to decide their fate. That sound becomes a motif. This, although it is meant to be diegetic, could be considered “Mickey Mousing”. It is a short audio cue, accentuates an action, and translates into a theme: tension. As soon as we hear the coin toss, we subliminally know what could happen next, which creates deep anxiety within the viewer, especially watching Chigurh interact with who we think is an innocent bystander.

Both *The Birds* and *No Country for Old Men* demonstrate how the absence of a traditional score can influence the tension felt in audiences. While Hitchcock weaponizes Foley to instill immediate fear and anticipation, the Coen Brothers use it to reflect the inescapable dread of the universe. In each case, the sound design, whether ambient noise, Foley, or moments of silence, does the narrative work typically assigned to music. These films both show that silence is not simply an absence of sound, but rather a tool for shaping narrative meaning.

## Foley Creation



The process of creating Foley is a crucial element of the filmmaking process. Although Foley's creation wasn't the focus of this project, I drew some influence from some of the creative and unique techniques used by Foley artists.

Since I chose *The Electric House* as my film, I wasn't influenced by any previous sound design as I wasn't alive for its performance. That being said, Foley artists are often entrusted with designing sounds for something that might not exist. This is especially true when working with fiction. What sound does an alien make? What sound might a galactic starship, or a futuristic pool table make?

I had to be imaginative in the ways I used Foley because, ultimately, the perception of the movie would depend on the sort of sounds I chose. I decided on a steampunk aesthetic, using sounds with gears or clicks. Although the movie is supposed to be futuristic, the time in which the movie was released allowed me to create a different kind of soundscape. In some of the

machines, you can see them move from the inside out, and by seeing that, I applied those same general mechanics to other machines in the film.

I also was able to influence attributes like the character's weight or the way they move. Although I used samples for my footsteps, I noted how professional Foley artists do their footsteps.

"More than 50 pairs of shoes are aligned on shelves in Hecker's studio. Some are sturdy and produce thick thuds, while others create the sharp, click-clack of high heels. There's even a set of spurs crafted by a blacksmith in the 1800s that Hecker used in Tarantino's 'Django Unchained.'

'The true art of Foley is to master the sound,' Hecker said. 'I'm a 200-pound guy, so if I'm doing Arnold Schwarzenegger, I've got to dig deep, but if I'm doing a little geisha girl from 'Memoirs of a Geisha,' a 90-pound girl in those little wooden shoes, I have to match that performance.'"

This quote from Gary Hecker, the sound designer behind Zack Snyder's *Justice League* and Quentin Tarantino's *Django: Unchained*, gave me context into how creating footsteps in a live space differs from a digital one. However, they share the idea that weight is important; something that impacted my project significantly.

While choosing types of sounds, I did my best to pick sounds that would make sense for the characters they were accompanying. That was easier said than done, but there are ways of manipulating sounds to match the screen. One of the ones I used is EQ. I would either roll off or increase certain frequencies depending on what I was looking for. Are you wearing a sharp heel? Bump the highs and roll off the lows. Are you a 200-pound security guard? Bump up those lows to make it feel deeper. However, EQ isn't the only way Foley artists manipulate sounds. I personally used panning (placing a sound in the stereo field), reverb, delay, and volume to situate my characters within *The Electric House*. Overall, even though I didn't create new Foley, I used techniques used by professionals to achieve the same effect.

## Conclusion

The process of implementing Foley for *The Electric House*, alongside the analysis of *The Birds* and *No Country for Old Men* gave me several understandings:

I now understand more than ever that Foley is the invisible glue that binds a film together. Even when it goes unnoticed, Foley influences how we perceive the actions, environments, and emotions on screen. It adds realism and narrative depth and can shape how an audience perceives specific scenes.

With that being said, one of the most surprising technical aspects of Foley was the level of precision it required. Though Foley often goes unnoticed by the viewer, any imprecision makes it stand out dramatically. This project taught me how critical it is to intentionally match the sounds to the frame it accompanies.

This project has permanently changed how I view films. I now find myself focusing on details I previously overlooked and hearing things that other people might not. People are constantly innovating and finding new ways to convey sounds. When I hear those sounds, I think about what their process might have been and how I would make a similar sound.

The biggest takeaway from this project, both technically and personally, was learning how to manage a creative production from start to finish. As I came into this project with minimal experience, I did not know the challenges I would encounter. After completing this project, I am confident I can combat issues regarding resources, time management, and finding quality Foley sounds. This project put into perspective the level of work and dedication it takes to do this as a career and gave me a new understanding of what skillset I need to be successful going forward.

## Bibliography

- Anderson, Gillian B. “A warming flame—the musical presentation of silent films: Articles and essays: Silent film scores and arrangements: Digital collections: Library of Congress.” *The Library of Congress*, [www.loc.gov/collections/silent-film-scores-and-arrangements/articles-and-essays/a-warming-flame/#\\_edn20](http://www.loc.gov/collections/silent-film-scores-and-arrangements/articles-and-essays/a-warming-flame/#_edn20). Accessed 7 May 2025.
- “Foley Recording.” *Mixonline*, 1 July 2001, <https://www.mixonline.com/recording/foley-recording-365547>.
- The Electric House*. Directed by Buster Keaton and Edward F. Cline, Associated First National Pictures, 1922.
- No Country for Old Men*. Directed by Joel Coen and Ethan Coen, Miramax Films, 2007.
- The Birds*. Directed by Alfred Hitchcock, Universal Pictures, 1963.
- Schonfeld, Zach. “The Birds: Hitchcock’s secret music trick changed film sound forever.” *Inverse*, 29 Mar. 2023, [www.inverse.com/entertainment/the-birds-hitchcock-music-in-movies](http://www.inverse.com/entertainment/the-birds-hitchcock-music-in-movies).
- Whitten, Sarah. “Foley artists bring a human touch to moviemaking even with rise of AI.” *CNBC*, 29 Mar. 2025, [www.cnbc.com/2025/03/29/foley-artists-movies-hollywood.html](http://www.cnbc.com/2025/03/29/foley-artists-movies-hollywood.html).
- Messitte, Nick. “10 tips for mixing short films.” *iZotope*, 19 May 2020, [www.izotope.com/en/learn/tips-for-mixing-short-films.html](http://www.izotope.com/en/learn/tips-for-mixing-short-films.html).
- Score: A Film Music Documentary*. Directed by Matt Schrader, Gravitas Ventures, 2016.
- Holmes, Kenny, and Robert Kraft, hosts. *Score: The Podcast*. Epicleff Media, 2018–present.