

21st Century Storyteller

*Voice-Over Actor Jeffrey Hedquist Launches
A Thousand Voices from his Rural Studio*

BY CHRISTINE SCHRUM

Urgent words thunder across Jeffrey Hedquist's recording booth, sounding like a growling, Rambo-sized detective has seized the microphone: "Tonight on *America's Most Wanted*, America fights back!" This guy comes across as someone who could rip out your pharynx with his pinkie. Instead, a slim fellow wearing a Hawaiian-print shirt peeks out of the booth and grins. Meet Jeffrey Hedquist—voice-over actor extraordinaire. In smooth, easy tones he tells the sound engineer, "We need to make this cut seamless."

With over 200 different characters at his throat's beck and call, Jeffrey is the king of voice-over acting. His tonsils can be heard on commercials for Hardee's, Goodyear, HBO/Cinemax, and many of the world's largest consumer advertisers. He's also the friendly guy whose voice you'll hear when you boot up many Internet or interactive training sessions—Windows 2000, IBM, and Netscape Navigator, to name a few.

It all started in elementary school. Jeffrey claims he was "the bane of many teachers' existence" in Bristol, Connecticut, constantly making mouth noises and hamming it up for the other kids. In high school, he channeled his creative energy into performing in folk music groups, school plays, and talent shows. At 16, Jeffrey had his first rock and roll radio show. By the time he graduated from Union College in Schenectady, New York, he had worked at over nine different radio stations. "From news to disk jockeying to reading the farm report—you name it, I did it," he says.

These days, Jeffrey launches his audio innovations all across the nation from Libertyville, Iowa. His launching pad is



Jeffrey Hedquist (second from right) and fellow audio maniacs (Andy MacKenzie, JoBeth Pinkel, and Jay Mattsson) display some of their company's many awards.

Hedquist Productions, a state-of-the-art digital recording studio, which he runs from the comfort of his own home. The company employs four self-proclaimed "audio maniacs" and they offer an incredible range of creative audio services.

Want to hear the list? Okay, take a deep



Jeffrey Hedquist says only a small part of his job is voice work.

breath. Hedquist Productions writes and produces radio spots and soundtracks for TV, video, interactive media, and animation. They record original music, audio newsletters, cassette programs, demos and auditions, and audiobooks. They do voice casting from their nationwide voice talent database of over 6,000 actors. They have been creating, casting, and producing award-winning audio for clients, agencies, and producers in 44 states for over 15 years. Whew. And all this from a studio in the sticks—pretty impressive.

It's enough to make your head spin, but Jeffrey says he thrives on the variety. "I think I'd probably be bored if it was just one thing," he says with a shrug and a smile.

You'd never guess Hedquist Productions is a recording studio from the outside. Nestled in amongst oak and hickory trees beside a pond surrounded with daylilies,

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the studio looks like, well, a large and gorgeous country home. But go inside, head down the spiral staircase, and you'll enter a whole different world.

The walls of the first two rooms are plastered with awards. Trophies, plaques, certificates, and silver microphones cover literally every surface, save for a desk occupied by Jay Mattsson, Hedquist's Casting Director. Over the years, Jeffrey's talent has won him more than 600 local and national awards for creativity, from New York and London International Festivals and IBAs, to Clios, the "Oscars of the advertising world."

But success doesn't seem to have spoiled Jeffrey. He laughs and cracks jokes with his employees all day long.

"This is the toughest part of what I have to do," he sighs in mock exhaustion when his office manager hands him a check to sign. "I don't know where these things go. JoBeth, where do they go?" When she responds mischievously, "They go to people," Jeffrey feigns helpless confusion: "She always says that!"

The recording area is where all the audio magic is created. First, there's Jeffrey's soundproof studio, which he ducks in and out of between takes. The gray, wall-to-wall foam lends the room a slightly cave-like feeling, but it's cozy all the same. Furnished with only a wooden chair, a few lights, microphones, and a stand with a script on it, there's plenty of room left for Jeffrey's imagination to squeeze in. Next door is the control room. Crammed with special effects and music CDs, blinking lights, computers, and high-tech recording equipment, this room is an audio maniac's paradise. Spend a few minutes here and you'll see audio pros in action.

During a live telephone audition with a director in Washington, D.C., Tommy Brower, back-up sound editor, zips back

and forth between the computer, control panels, and multiple recording devices on an office chair with wheels. He feeds Jeffrey's voice into the computer for later precision editing. Meanwhile, Jeffrey patiently runs through take after take of a post-production script for *America's Most Wanted*. Eagerly, and without losing stamina, he fine-tunes his voice to meet the director's exact specifications—"A little more ominous, a little meaner"—and refines subtleties like breathiness, speed, rhythm, cadence, and emphasis on words or syllables.

When a summer storm knocks out the power and lights, Jeffrey keeps his cool. He jokes easily with the director, intoning with an incredulous child's voice: "It got dark here and then it got light again!" In under a minute, Tommy has everything under control.

Although the company has generated an enormous number of recordings for soundtracks, radio, and TV commercials, Jeffrey says in recent years he spends a lot less time at the microphone.

"These days, only a small part of what I actually do is voice work," says Jeffrey. The last few years, in particular, have found him focusing more on casting, writing, and working with companies to design audio for their direct marketing efforts.

"What we're doing is taking all the skills that we've learned to use in 30- and 60-second commercials to touch people's emotions and imaginations, and we're applying them to other media," he says. Audiobooks are a big focus these days, as the team records publications like the *Chicken Soup for the Soul* series.

According to Jeffrey, "Any good radio or television commercial is really a story, and essentially we're storytellers using electronic media to tell stories instead of sitting

around an analog campfire. It's the same thing."

Jeffrey feels that storytelling is an innately human tradition and one which can nourish audiences on an instinctive, primordial level. "It's really in our DNA," he says. Moreover, stories spark the imagination and allow listeners to create their own reality. "Say to an audience: 'Picture the room of your dreams.' If you have a thousand different listeners, you've got a thousand different pictures that have been created," he says. "It's the ultimate interactive medium."

Hedquist Productions also uses storytelling skills to liven up typically boring things like on-hold messages and store-casting. They're even creating audio newsletters for companies so employees can listen to entertaining business updates while driving home. "We try to create something that's funny or interesting, catch people off guard and tickle them, even create contests," he says.

Despite what seems like a million different responsibilities and a whirlwind schedule, Jeffrey moves through the day's work with ease and humor. Before recording a radio commercial for Brigham's Ice Cream, he calls out to imaginary lackeys, "Props! Makeup! More ice cream!" And while Jeffrey admits that some projects are more fun than others, when the day is over, he wouldn't trade his job for anything.

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