

Media Case Study

The Sweeney gets a digital makeover

Home entertainment label Network Distributing calls on BBC Studios and Post Production to remaster *The Sweeney*

When UK coppers Regan and Carter first appeared in an Armchair Cinema production pilot for *The Sweeney* aptly named *Regan*, they completely altered TV police drama in the 1970s. Out went the village bobby of *Dixon of Dock Green* and in came realism, grit and the infamous “Shut it!” shout.

With Ray “The Daddy” Winstone taking on John Thaw’s Regan role for the upcoming *Sweeney* film, Network decided it was time to bring the original into the 21st century. And the only way to do the series justice was a painstaking frame-by-frame digital HD restoration. Sadly, Network realised the show’s negatives had worn as badly as a 70s white shagpile rug and needed a digital reboot. So they tasked BBC Studios and Post Production’s (BBC S&PP) Digital Media Services team with the job.

BBC S&PP’s Digital Media Services team had already collaborated with Network, digitally restoring *The Persuaders!* to celebrate its 40th anniversary with a Blu-ray box-set release. The result was a Focal award-nominated remaster of that 1970s hit TV show and another job in Network and the BBC S&PP’s decade long professional relationship. From quality digital artistry and production skills to bringing the job in on time and on budget, both companies have enjoyed an on-going fruitful partnership thanks to the quality of their work.

For *The Sweeney*, Network managing director Tim Beddows recalls that both teams had tried to restore the cop series a decade ago: ‘We engaged BBC S&PP on a standard definition restoration of *The Sweeney* ten years ago but, as the original negatives weren’t located at that time, it didn’t do the series justice. Locating the original negatives enabled BBC S&PP to restore the footage to the highest-quality high definition.’

Many masters and negatives of early TV classics are unavailable because there wasn’t a culture within production companies of preserving content for future generations. In fact, it can be the case that some negatives deteriorate due to poor storage conditions that they are not usable as a source for restoration. Fortunately, Network was able to source as many original negatives as they could for *The Sweeney* and BBC S&PP’s Digital Media Services team rose to the challenge of the restoration. But there was no simple workflow solution to achieve the digital restoration.

BBC S&PP’s Digital Media Services colourist Jonathan Wood picks up the story: ‘The supplied 16mm film elements varied in quality and condition. The first episode of the series had no known master picture and, therefore, three faded prints had to be

Media Case Study

used as best we could. The remaining 12 episodes of Series One came from the original cut negative, but there was a variable amount of wear and a fair degree of scratching, scuffing, dupe sections of lower quality and in one case, completely missing sprocket holes.'

As it happened, Wood was best placed to head up the HD restoration team, having been involved in the standard definition digital conversion ten years ago. Beddows remembers being impressed with his work. 'Part of the high definition brief was to preserve the filmic, documentary quality that is the hallmark of the series. Jonathan is very sympathetic to this approach – if 16mm is being upgraded to HD, it's worth doing properly and Jonathan and his team easily achieve this.'

The brief received by Wood and the team was to produce the right balance between clarity and colour, while attempting to be faithful to the style of the show and maintaining the 16mm film feel of the groundbreaking 1970s police series. The team estimated it would take 72 hours to restore one 50-minute episode of *The Sweeney*, and with each of the four series comprising 13 episodes, a feat of 53 episodes lay ahead.

The workflow Wood set up comprised a SCANITY film scanner, Nucoda Film Master and a HS-ART DustBuster. The team generated a 2K scan of the original 16mm A/B negative rolls on the SCANITY and conformed it on the Nucoda Film Master, removing any residual picture movement caused by the physical film edit.

After this, a full shot-by-shot grade with grain reduction and automated dust removal was carried out using the Nucoda. But the team still decided to bias the digital clean-up process towards old-fashioned manual work utilising the HS-ART DustBuster, ensuring each of the episodes had a consistent look and feel. The master mono tracks were cloned across and the timecode of these new HD masters made to match the old so that the previously created 5.1 tracks remained in sync.

The team also had to do an extra clean-up job for *The Sweeney's* original title sequence. 'All title sections have been left as running film as opposed to using digital still frames as I believe that is important to maintain the life of the original film optical work, even if it means more work for us to remove dirt and other defects,' added Wood.

Network entrusted BBC S&PP's Digital Media Services team to deliver the best results in the right timeframe and bang on budget. 'We left them to get on with it, and having worked with Jonathan on previous versions, we knew he has an eye for archive material that we've not seen in anyone else in the industry,' said Beddows.

Media Case Study

'We placed our trust in him. He knew what we were looking for and we've been mightily impressed with what he and the team have achieved and delivered,' he added.

The result? BBC S&PP's Digital Media Services team turned *The Sweeney* from a collection of variable quality 16mm negatives into beautifully restored digital remasters, putting the visual and audio HD punch back in with its state-of-the-art technology and restoration expertise. The final episodes were formatted to HDCAM SR masters and released on Blu-ray in September.

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