

BACKSTAGE

What Voice Actors Should Know About Looping, ADR + Walla

By Kelley Buttrick



The dynamic duo of Jessica Gee George and Grant George are pioneering the art of looping, ADR, and walla in Atlanta, Georgia, aka “Y’allywood.” While the husband and wife team came to voiceover on two vastly different journeys, they’ve combined their award-winning talent and experience to not only voice commercials, animated series, videos games, and films together, but also cast and direct award-winning projects.

Spitting their time between L.A. and Atlanta, the couple formed Looping Atlanta to serve the exploding film industry in the Southeast, casting looping, ADR, and walla. I wasn’t entirely sure what looping, ADR, and walla were until I met Jessica and Grant. Recording it is vastly different from any other VO project I’ve ever done, and it was a total blast.

Want to learn more? Here’s what Jessica and Grant told me about looping, ADR, and walla, and how you can enter this side of the industry.

What is looping, ADR, and walla?

Without knowing it, you’ve been watching shows and movies that have had all of these things in it. In films and on TV, only the principal actors are mic’d. The background actors are not. This is so that sound can stay clean for each scene and the actors can be heard. For example, two principal actors are having lunch at a busy restaurant. As a group, we create the ambiance for the entire restaurant scene; wait staff, patrons, bartenders, kids, chefs, you name it. Through the use of various techniques on a sound stage, we create a customized background “walla” to enhance the authenticity of each scene. The sound engineer then layers that sound to give it a fullness and realism in the room.

Looping is also referred to as Group ADR (Automated Dialogue Replacement) and walla. During filming, a production sound mixer records dialogue. When the film goes into post-production, a supervising sound editor, also known as an ADR supervisor, reviews all of the dialogue and decides what must be re-recorded. The principal actors almost always come in to recreate some of their original lines. However, during a loop group session, Looping Atlanta will often replace sound for specific people in the background that are very present onscreen. You may see two background actors as crime scene investigators

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discussing their findings front and center. They are clearly moving their mouths. If we can hear it in the original production, we will replace what they are saying. However, often we cannot hear it, so it is up to us as a group to watch what they are saying and stick words into their mouths that fit naturally. We have to be pretty masterful at lip-synching.

Walla got its name back in the golden days of radio, when the sound of a crowd was needed in the background. Sound designers discovered that if several people simply repeated the words “walla, walla, walla,” it created the ambiance of people talking. The audience couldn’t understand what they were saying, but felt the presence of a chattering crowd through the buzz of voices. Although we try to replace with real conversation, we do use techniques that create a walla-esque vibe.

What skills must a voice actor have to perform looping, ADR, and walla?

Looping Atlanta hires actors with a strong improvisational background. It’s not easy to get up onstage and banter. It takes a lot of listening and responding with “yes and…” You have to be comfortable thinking on your feet in a second’s notice and trust your instincts, especially when what’s on-screen may be a different era or culture that you have little knowledge of. We prep the actors before each recording session, explaining what scenes we will be covering and what they need to research. They come in fully prepared with research on their tablets that allow them to speak with authenticity. You can’t just throw people into a group when the scene takes place at a town market in Egypt sometime in history. You have to know what is sold, what the money system is, birth names, and so much more. We also love our voiceover actors who have learned how to use their voices on scripts. Group sound isn’t scripted and must be very realistic, so anyone with a booming voice or a voice that “knifes” out has to be very aware [of] how to use their voice. Voiceover actors are extremely keyed into this.

What is the casting process like for looping, ADR, and walla?

A post supervisor reaches out to us when they are ready to do the loop group. We are told the specifics and the number of people that they have budgeted for group. We are sent the project to review with all of the group scenes and specific cues. They are time-stamped onscreen and on the cue sheet. We go through the project for hours looking at each cue. Each cue has different needs. It could be two specific actors that need words or a huge stadium. Each project also has different flavors and requires specific types of actors with various skills. It is up to us to hire with creative integrity. If the show goes to Italy for a few scenes, we find Italian actors that can loop in Italian. If the show is military-based but then goes back to internal government offices, we have to find actors that are knowledgeable in military tactics and weapons and governmental offices and procedures. Younger voices work on our high school shows. We give the sound team exactly what they need.

Walk us through a looping, ADR, and walla session.

All hired actors come to the stage ready to go with their research in tow. They have not previously viewed the scene, so the engineer will play it down for us. Because we have pre-assigned every cue, we will explain the scene to the actors and let them know how we have to do the cue. Each cue has a specific plan. The amount, type, language, environment, and more will determine how we have to do each cue. Some cues may take one or two takes, while others may need to be triple or quadruple tracked if it is a large group scene. The engineer and sound supervisor have specific ways they want to hear the sound. Each one is very different in its approach. We are guided by three beeps that have been pre-cued to help us match what is onscreen. After we hear the third beep, we begin speaking. During the session, we keep working from cue to cue until we are finished.

How physical is looping, ADR, and walla?

Looping is very physical. There is no such thing as sitting. You get up to do a cue and then after the guided beeps, you move. Big stages require a ton of movement, whereas in smaller stages you are limited to how much movement you can have. If you see a couple walking down the street onscreen, you want to create their movement as they pass-by. We may have a scene where a jogger is running down a path at dusk, he hears a loud moan, and a zombie pops out from behind a tree. The jogger trips and falls, gets up, punches the zombie three times, and the zombie bites him. In this scene, we would need to create the efforts of the jogger running, falling, breathing, and getting bit as well as the zombie moaning, fighting, biting, and any and all of the fighting efforts that ensue thereafter. Films that are martial arts-oriented require a ton of efforts. Both of the looping actors work independently and typically, multiple takes are recorded to ensure full coverage of every moment in that scene with options to choose from.

Efforts are incredibly fun, but they take skill and the ability to move exactly like what’s onscreen! Many well-known principal actors do not like performing efforts of their own scenes or are simply not good at it. A lot of our day on the looping stage is spent creating efforts for them. This is where voice matching becomes an important part of the process. If you are in the range of the principal actor in the film or TV series, you will likely be called upon to do that actor’s efforts. If you sound enough like a specific actor, you may actually be called upon to replace lines that were missing or added for an actor who is not available to record them. We are frequently being asked to cast voice matches for celebrities for TV or airline versions of films to take out the swear words, or to fill-in for actors who are not available to do some of the ADR. It’s a great gig!

How are looping, ADR, and walla sessions different from traditional VO recording sessions?

All of these require looking at picture to create the environment. With the exception of ADR, which has scripted lines, walla is improvised on the spot. When we work, we face the screen, even while having conversations with people next to us. Many actors in Atlanta do their own ADR for the projects they are in. They understand the concept of “trusting the beeps” to get their own voice into their onscreen mouths. They also often have the luxury of hearing what they did in production, so it helps them place their voices on their lips accurately. However, it’s an entirely different game when we are synching for another actor. ADR is typically recorded in a smaller sized booth unless it’s part of the loop group day. Loop groups typically work on a larger sound stage since the groups are made up of anywhere from six to 25 people all working together with a lot of movement. We have worked on enormous stages with up to 50 people as part of big stadium or battleground scenes, and we’ve worked with small groups in tiny sound booths. The size of the stage will also determine how cues need to be recorded.

Voiceover sessions are intimate. It’s you and the microphone. Other than using your hands, you cannot move or you will come off-axis from the mic. You are not watching a screen. You read a script, process it in your mind, make it your own story, add your own spice of life through your voice, and deliver.

Loop group days are collaborative and filled with both laughter and hard work. We have to be creative on the spot and support each other in the process. We feed off of one another as a “group brain.” The chemistry on the stage is crucial. The actors that we’ve had the pleasure of hiring in Atlanta are sharp and passionate about their craft. As loop group leaders, we have always been committed to running a dynamic, supportive, and professional group. This combined energy makes for great results.

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Any big no-no's for looping, ADR, and walla?

This is not a job that just any Joe Schmo can do. People hear that this is a great way to make money. It is. But, you must have training. We can't tell you the number of times our jobs have been interrupted by friends of friends. We have been told that we have to hire the cousin or girlfriend of an editor or someone else from production. We must oblige. The term used for these guests are "political hires." It's not a nice name and they are not usually well-received onstage by many other groups unless they are trained and can walk the walk. We don't subscribe to this. We always welcome anyone new onstage, but not all loopers feel the same way.

Group walla is not comprised of a bunch of people standing around on a sound stage improvising. Solid improvisational skills are a prerequisite for what we do, but there is a long list of specialized techniques and terms that we use in order to create a very specific sound that will work best in the audio mix. We have seen groups pop up with little to no experience and make the sound engineer's life a living nightmare. Actors have to be solid and be able to take direction. We could have anywhere from 35 cues in a show and up to 300 plus in a movie. Contingent upon how the cues must be executed, both may take the same amount of time. As a group, we need to stay on top of it. As group leaders, we need to be able to give direction and have our actors get it the first time. It's certainly not rocket science, but it is definitely a specialized knowledge that cannot be learned on the fly.

The conversations in scenes have to be very natural, conversational, and even bland. Newer people have a propensity to want to start at the beginning of a sentence and as a result, the word "so" is heard a lot. But if you go sit somewhere outside and listen to people in real life, you are hearing snippets of their conversations that are mid-sentence. That's a great place to start and any good improviser is going to be able to go with the flow and deliver accordingly.

Being too clever distracts from the sound and the dialogue of the principal actors. If the scene is at a restaurant, speak about something in your character's life, the meeting you had with Mooresville Corp or how Aunt Rose was sick at the family reunion. Whatever you would talk about naturally. Don't talk about food. Mentioning product names like Coke, Chevy, Kleenex, or Costco is a big no-no. Keep everything generic like soda, truck, tissue, or that big warehouse store. Naming specific brands can conflict with sponsors of shows or require clearances if it's audible. When this happens, cues are broken and the group has to usually start over again. Be cognizant of clothing, jewelry, and perfumes. We generally ask that everyone is dressed in soft clothing and shoes without noise and little to no perfume that causes headaches.

There is a definite etiquette onstage. The group leaders are in charge of communicating with the sound engineer and sound supervisors. They have been collaboratively working since the initial call. Overly zealous actors who have conversations outside of this protocol are remembered and not favorably. We watched an incredibly talented actor lose years of work for handing his voice matching résumé to a sound supervisor. We've seen actors go around the group leaders and talk to the clients. We don't like this either. On a recent movie that we did not lead, we watched an actor get up to [the] mic to do a character. As he was rehearsing to tape, trying to get the voice into the mouth of his character, two other actors sitting on the sidelines kept saying the lines in character too, in an effort to show that they could do it. The actor up at the microphone lost focus and simply sat down. He said, "Sounds like one of you got it. Why don't you just come up and do it." This shuts the room down and as actors, we can lose our creative focus in a matter of seconds. It's important to really have respect for our fellow actors. It's easy to think, "I can do that. I can do that better." But, it's not your job to make this known.

Any tips or suggestions for voice actors looking to enter into the world of looping, ADR, and walla?

Study your craft. Train with great people. We don't have anyone onstage working who hasn't studied. Stay curious. Observe the activities of daily life. Learn about new things with the wonder of a child. Understand what all the gauges on a fire truck are for, what gear you need for spelunking, what countries border the Mediterranean, or how to create a make-shift generator in a post-apocalyptic world. You never know when you will be called upon to talk about this while looping. The more you know about the world we live in, the more interesting your work will be in an imaginary one. Acting and improvisation training should be on-going to keep you in peak form.

Just like acting and voiceover training, if you are serious about pursuing work in looping, learn the techniques from people who have tons of credits and have worked for years and years in this craft. We are L.A. transplants who live in Atlanta and teach a looping workshop here because our goal is to keep local actors working and local studios thriving. There are other workshops that pass through that are taught by some very qualified leaders who are usually from L.A. or New York. They do not work here in Atlanta, so they are not as informed about the Georgia market and usually would not hire you to work on their stage.

Although production has grown exponentially in the last years in Atlanta, post-production is just now beginning to get some real traction. We are proud to be working on the first show that is being shot and finished entirely in Georgia. We have beautiful sound stages, we have amazingly talented sound engineers and now, we have a wonderful group of skilled and trained looping actors assembled and ready to go to work. We are strongly advocating a start-to-finish movement and doing everything we can to keep work right here in our own backyard.