

“WE’RE ALIVE”—Are You?

Written by Amanda Story
Thursday, 01 March 2012 15:06



Before zombies truly took mainstream television by storm with the unquestionable success of THE WALKING DEAD, Kc Wayland (pictured left) saw a void in undead culture that could only be filled by “a serial show involving a group of survivors.” Thus, the audio-drama podcast WE’RE ALIVE was born.

Having launched WE’RE ALIVE in May 2009, Wayland has functioned as the writer and director of the podcast. Each hour-long episode is broken down into three parts and released monthly—functioning as, essentially, a movie you can listen to (go to www.zombiepodcast.com to do so). The 25 installments thus far have posed one question: “Who can survive in a world overrun by zombies?” Wayland took the time to discuss the podcast’s origins, the overall creative process and what the future holds; “Zombies seem to stick in people’s brains,” he says, and pun intended or not, they do indeed.



FANGORIA: Could you give us a brief summary of WE’RE ALIVE’s storyline?

KC WAYLAND: On a quiet Wednesday morning in May, Army reservist Michael Cross is settling into his World Cultures class at Santa Roja College near Los Angeles when he hears an explosion in the distance. He rushes out to discover on television that riots have broken out across the county. When the Army recalls them to active duty, Michael and fellow reservists Angel Tenudo and Saul Tink believe their job will be to put down the uprising and restore peace to the city. But while heading to their base, what they find sends them reeling in shock and struggling for survival: These rioters aren’t looting or setting fires, they’re ripping people apart.

Armed with only what they can carry, the three set out to secure “The Tower,” an apartment

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building where they hope to rescue and shelter the survivors scattered amongst the remains of the concrete jungle. Those who take refuge in “The Tower” find out that there is no real safe haven, and every day brings a new threat. Who can survive in a world overrun by zombies?

FANG: Briefly walk us through your creative process. How does each episode develop from merely an idea to the finished product?

WAYLAND: Writing the series required me to do a lot of outlining of the story before the first episode could be produced. I thoroughly plotted the details of the first two seasons, and then roughly sketched the third and possibly fourth season. The intention was to figure out the path from the beginning to the end, so that there wouldn’t be much straying from the path and that important details for the fourth season would be planted early.

Since the main outline only covers big events, more detailed outlines are then required to block out six chapters at a time, which is half a season. After that, the script for each chapter is written, and this is done progressively along with the audio production. This allows more flexibility and to be adaptive to whomever might be cast in a role.

The actors then record two chapters, roughly an eight-hour session for 120 pages. They all gather in a soundstage and interact with each other, going through the scenes. If we were to record them separately, we wouldn’t get the kind of energy needed for some of the intense scenes that take place. From there, the producers do a voice cut of the recordings to choose the best performances and edit down only the lines intended for use. The cut is then divided into three parts per chapter and sent to our first-line sound editors, who do a pass at the audio design, and then forwarded to a supervising sound editor for the last cut and polish. From there it gets released for everyone to listen in podcast form, each episode being anywhere from 15 to 25 minutes.

FANG: How do you create the sound FX?

WAYLAND: Those come from a variety of sources. Some of them are from purchased sound effects libraries; others, individually from on-line databases; and lastly, from our own foley work. Typically, the best sound would be from the foley sessions because they are so specific to the scenes, but recording those take more time. For things like gunshots and explosions, we have

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little choice but to use sound effects libraries.

FANG: Do you find voice casting particularly difficult, especially in comparison to face casting? Do you pre-imagine voices for characters as they are developed?

WAYLAND: Voice casting can be very tricky, because most actors don’t have a voice reel to reference when trying to narrow down choices on casting sites. Sometimes the voice will match the face you’re looking at, and sometimes it’s very different. Even if they have a distinct voice, you never know if they can pull off the emotional peaks our series requires until you meet them face to face in the auditions. The worst that happens is when we find someone with a great voice who gives an amazing performance, but they are too close vocally to someone already cast in the series. Typically, once a character is cast, I can spend time with them and then go back and make small changes in the script so the character matches the voice. Other times, a pre-imagined voice completely changes.

FANG: What inspired you to start the podcast?

WAYLAND: It was the ambition to be the first zombie television show. When the podcast began in 2009, there was no WALKING DEAD on TV. I looked around and saw this particular void could be filled by a serial show involving a group of survivors. All the movies I had seen were short-form structurally, and never established characters with the emotional attachment like that which was possible with a TV series.

The idea of creating an audio drama came from two areas. When I was 16, I worked at a books-on-tape store, and someone saw me and cast me as a kid in a short radio play. I had little experience acting, but learned all about the process along the way. My second and more recent exposure was the audio-only recording session I did for my animation thesis in college. I arranged a large group of actors gathered around in a circle and let them read the script and engage each other. The results were amazing. The accompanying animation, unfortunately, was not as good. It lacked the realism that was attained by just using voices and sound. I quickly learned that there was no limit to what could be done without picture.

FANG: What can you tell us regarding the future of WE’RE ALIVE?

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WAYLAND: The future of WE’RE ALIVE is limitless. Good stories leap mediums and open up doors of possibility, and we have that potential. Whether it’s video games, film, books—there are endless possibilities. Some of those could come about soon, but I have a feeling most of the attention will happen once the series comes to a close at the end of the fourth season and the story is complete. The ending of a story is often more important than the journey.

FANG: What are some of your personal favorite horror films?

WAYLAND: Growing up, I loved the PREDATOR and ALIEN series, often acting them out with my neighbor. As for all time, the early HALLOWEEN series, THE MIST, THE RING scared the crap out of me, THE DESCENT, SIGNS, just to name a few. I could go on all day.

FANG: Lastly, why zombies? The undead have developed from a simple horror staple to pop-culture icons in and of themselves. Why do you feel zombies have found a new home in mainstream media?

WAYLAND: People always ask, “Why tell a story about zombies?” but really, WE’RE ALIVE isn’t just about zombies, it’s more about the people trying to survive, hence the second line of the title, A STORY OF SURVIVAL. But zombies in whatever variation—fast, shufflers, enhanced, etc.—are still big because the potential threats to humans are other humans. Given the right circumstances, people can become very real monsters. Vampires, dragons, swamp things, werewolves; the possibilities of those antagonists are minimal, but zombies seem to stick in people’s brains as being the most plausible. The number of people in this world alone is scary enough. Can you imagine if they all turned against you?