



Have a Holly Jolly Soundstage!

IN AN AGE BEFORE TAX INCENTIVES, BURL IVES PUT THE WORD SOUND IN "SOUNDSTAGE"

In Hollywood, the term "soundstage" generally refers to a large multi-story building with a suspended light grid, catwalks, thick soundproof walls, sound-insulating roofs, and heavy sound-absorbing doors. Soundstages almost always have giant "elephant doors" designed to allow tall set pieces to be moved in and out with relative ease and often feature robust ventilation systems for quickly evacuating smoke and effects fog. The best part about working on a stage is that the environment is eminently controllable and not subject to the unpredictability of location work.

Until the implementation of its very successful Entertainment Industry Investment Act, Georgia had little to offer in the way of real, for-hire stages. The nicest ones were proprietary, like the facilities at Turner Broadcasting. The rest were small, soundproofed stages inside of other buildings, big enough for commercials but not set up for the logistical requirements of a feature film or a television series. In the late 1980s the Lombardi brothers built Riverwood Studios down in Senoia, but those were metal clad steel frame structures and were never billed as true soundstages.

The number of dedicated stages and real soundstages in Georgia has grown remarkably over the last 8 years. After a failed first attempt at converting the old Stageworks facility into a studio, Tyler Perry successfully launched his own soundstages near Greenbriar Mall back in 2008. The city of Atlanta worked out a long-term contract with EUE/Screen Gems for the old Lakewood Fairgrounds around that same time and that company has invested by building two column-free soundproofed stages with nearly 70,000 square feet of usable space, located 5 miles from downtown and 7 miles from Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport.

Paulding County has invested in a facility they call the Atlanta Film Studios, located about 28 miles northwest of downtown Atlanta, sited on 11 acres and featuring two 20,000 square foot soundstages. John Raulet, a real estate investor who has worked with Georgia's motion picture industry for several years, recently launched his own stage project named Mailing Avenue

Stageworks, located less than 3 miles from the Screen Gems facility. Nearly all of these facilities, along with many I haven't mentioned, have experienced good occupancy over the last two years and I hope that trend will continue.

Many of your favorite episodic television productions cannot afford to shoot on honest-to-goodness soundstages, however, so they frequently convert light-industrial warehouses into stage-like facilities by implementing sound-dampening renovations; from laying out rolls of industrial air conditioner filters on the roof (to dampen the sound of rain) to installing heavy double-door sound locks between sections of a warehouse (to allow for multiple shooting crews to work simultaneously). It's typical to see continual improvements made to a facility for every season a show gets picked up, as is evident for two of Georgia's most popular productions, "The Walking Dead" and "Vampire Diaries." Everyone aspires to a nicer work environment.

I can't deny that I'm envious about the influx of stages around the region - you guys have it good these days. Heck, back in the old days we were just happy to have a roof!!

I remember one show that we filmed in a drafty old 1970s-style lumber yard up in Lilburn, north of Atlanta. Our Production Designer, the late Charles Bennett, crammed the former retail space of that building with as many of the smaller standing sets as possible. He filled the adjoining high-ceilinged warehouse with the show's hero set, an audacious riverboat ballroom which one of the characters was scripted to swindle from another and convert into a floating casino.

It became apparent during the earliest phase of prep that the show's sets would fill nearly every corner of the old building and only a few lucky departments would be given office space inside. The rest of us (even the producers) were assigned to a group of small construction trailers tucked beneath a projecting roof on the back side of the riverboat stage. The novelty of having my own desk lasted all of 10 minutes. Once I'd gotten a good whiff of its Appalachian-style boiled possum aroma, I quietly abandoned my claim on the back room of our props trailer with its spacious picture window view of a beautiful warehouse wall.

As December rolled around somebody suggested that we should hold a "decorate your trailer for the holidays" contest and our prop master, Joe Connolly, must have shared my sense that the props trailer was haunted by the ghosts of a thousand

stinky possums because he suggested that our theme be "A Very Redneck Christmas". He began decorating by giving the construction crew a case of Budweiser on a Friday as thanks for providing us with some materials for a recent episode. His only request to them was that they save him all the empty cans.

The following Monday morning, Joe took the empty cans and cut them down into 48 little "half shells" and fitted them as a lamp shields on a string of outdoor Christmas lights, which he then strung haphazardly around the top edge of our trailer. Later in the day I spotted a large illuminated Frosty the Snowman (along with our stunt dummy) peering out from the big window of my possum-scented office. Frosty had a rubber shotgun duct-taped to his stubby little snowman arms and several work lights had been arranged to cast spooky shadows on his jolly little snowman face. It was *really* funny, but Joe had one final touch left to add.

While shopping for the next episode he had stopped by Radio Shack and bought a cassette full of holiday music and a special 2-minute continuous loop cassette tape. Back at the office, he dubbed that well known Burl Ives song "Have a Holly Jolly Christmas" onto the endless cassette, but as the reels of the original cassette were turning he would press his finger against the capstan to slow the speed of the tape, causing Burl Ives' voice to drop about 8 octaves and slow to a snail's pace. As he released pressure from the capstan, the tape would momentarily speed faster than normal, sending Burl's voice way into the chipmunk register. The finished product was a warbly octave-jumping masterpiece!

The next afternoon, Joe had to drive across town to look at some gambling machines for the riverboat set, so I took my lunch tray back to our trailer for some quiet time, reading the script for the next episode. Over on the boombox, Burl was wailing away, up and down the scale, on frequencies appreciated only by whales.

Over the radio, our 2nd AD, Jim Weis (future producer of "Ugly Betty"), called us back in from lunch, so I cranked the volume of the boombox up a bit and headed back to set. A few hours later I returned to the trailer to pick up a prop I'd left on Joe's desk and was surprised to see that I'd left the door to our trailer hanging wide open. I was more surprised by the volume of the music blasting out of the door and out into the empty lumber drying racks on the other side of the back lot. Burl Ives had never been louder or more terrifying.

**Have a
Holly Jolly
Christmuuuuuuu
uuussssssssssss...**

Jamming my fingertips into my ears and squinching my face up tight, I ran into the open trailer, straight toward the boombox, and whipped the volume knob to the left, down to 11, muttering the question "I wonder how long that's been playing???"

No sooner had I said that than I saw a wild-eyed guy from the construction department standing in the doorway, a hammer held threateningly in his right hand.

He gestured toward the boom box like a bewildered caveman and muttered something incomprehensible as Burl Ives continued crooning at 13 decibels in the key of Q minor.

I cautiously reached over and turned the volume the rest of the way down to see if the guy would lower his hammer. He was

really worked up about something and it took him several tries to stutteringly explain that he and the rest of the construction crew

had been working outside for the last 2 hours on the opposite corner of the lumber yard and had been bombarded by Burl Ives' endless 2-minute tribute to Christmas for that entire time. Because of the crazy acoustics between our trailers and the warehouse and the lumber yard structure, they'd been getting a reflection of the song from a completely different direction and had spent most of their time wandering off into the woods and toward the highway trying to pinpoint the source of their torture and kill it.

It was a Christmas miracle that I survived the carpenters' wrath. Poor Burl Ives never stood a chance. It's little coincidence that the award for best decorations went to the construction department that season.

