

COVER STORY

Hidden voices

Home of the original Siri and the voices of MARTA and Delta, Atlanta is a hotbed for voice-over actors.

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Georgia is now a top location for film and television production, and aspiring film workers are flocking to Atlanta for a chance to get in on the action. But long before Georgia film started making headlines, an under-the-radar group of actors were working steadily in the Big Peach. You wouldn't recognize their faces, but you probably hear their voices everywhere.

Voice-over acting is a lucrative niche in show business that can give actors an entrée into several different industries, from entertainment to technology and advertising. Georgia is home to a handful of prominent voice-over actors, like **Apple's** original Siri, the voice of **MARTA** trains and busses and the voice at **Delta Air Lines** boarding gates, and the number of voice-over actors here is growing daily.

"It encompasses a lot of different things," said **Susan Bennett**, who has spent 40 years in the industry in Atlanta and was the original Siri and Tillie the All-Time Teller. "Radio and TV commercials, promos, narrations, animation. It's a lot of fun, but very competitive, and the nice thing is every day is different."

Bennett moved to Atlanta about 40 years ago as a musician who sometimes sang jingles for television commercials. One day, the voice-over actor for a project didn't show up, and the studio owner asked her to read the copy.

"I thought to myself, 'Ooh, I can do this,'" Bennett said.

Since then, Bennett has gone on to record for more than 1,000 projects, including Tillie for First National Bank of Atlanta (now **Wells Fargo**) in the late 1970s. ATMs were brand new at the time, and Tillie commercials helped customers understand and begin to trust the machines with their money.

Bennett actually didn't audition for Siri or for Apple Inc. She recorded thousands of sentences for **Nuance Communications**, now a partner of Apple, back in 2005 without knowing what project it was for. She only found out she was the voice of Siri the day the personal assistant was introduced to the public in 2011.

"A fellow voice-over actor called me and

said, 'We're playing around with this new iPhone app; isn't this you?'" she said. "On one hand I thought it was cool to basically be the new voice of Apple. But the fact I didn't know about it or actually work with Apple was kind of a strange thing."

Bennett hasn't been the voice of Siri for the past several years; the company is now on its third Siri voice. Bennett thinks the company switched because it never made her sign a non-disclosure agreement, and it would prefer for Siri's identity to remain anonymous. But Bennett looks back on the role fondly, because it's enabled her to start speaking at events and doing Siri appearances.

"I knew it was going to impact my career in some way, but I wasn't sure how," said Bennett, who waited two years to reveal herself publicly as Siri. "It really has been good."

Another voice-over veteran in Atlanta is **Liz Helgesen**, who was working in the telecommunications industry when she landed a huge voice-over project for the **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's** international information line. She landed one of her biggest roles to date in 1995, when she was reading Atlanta Business Chronicle ahead of the 1996 Olympic Games.

She read that MARTA planned to implement a new automatic system that would tell passengers what the next stop would be, but the voice for the system hadn't been chosen yet.

"I said, 'Oh my goodness, the world is coming to Atlanta, I have to be the voice to help people get from A to B,'" Helgesen said. "I told them I wanted to represent this city, that people from other countries would need to understand a clear, professional voice to get around and it had to be me."

The bulk of Helgesen's work these days is in text-to-speech and automobile systems. She's the voice of many GPS navigational systems for different types of car brands, including **Toyota** and **Lexus**. Her son recently purchased a vehicle with her voice on the navigation system.

"So wherever he goes, I'm still right there with him," she said. "That is my favorite love, to just be able to be with people and guide them. Even though it's



Atlanta voice actress **Susan Bennett** is the original Siri.



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pre-recorded, it's like I'm sitting next to you helping navigate your travels or getting your bank balance."

Tony Messano has been the voice of video games, a cold sore for a TV commercial and the narrator of a show called "American Muscle Car." He's also the voice you hear every time you fly Delta.

"I'm that weird guy in the ceiling who tells you when to get on or off the plane," he said. "I've gotten nasty messages from people who recognize my voice blaming me when their plane is late."

Some actors have found sub-specialties within the voice-over world, like **Cecelia Maza**, a South American native who uses her fluency in both English and Spanish to book jobs recording and editing bilingual work. She started her career in the early 1990s, working for CNN, back when it had no Spanish division and had a contract

► CLOSER LOOK

V/O FACTS

- Voice-over artists are often up against 500-1,000 others when they audition
- 4 hours is the maximum recommended amount of time for a recording session

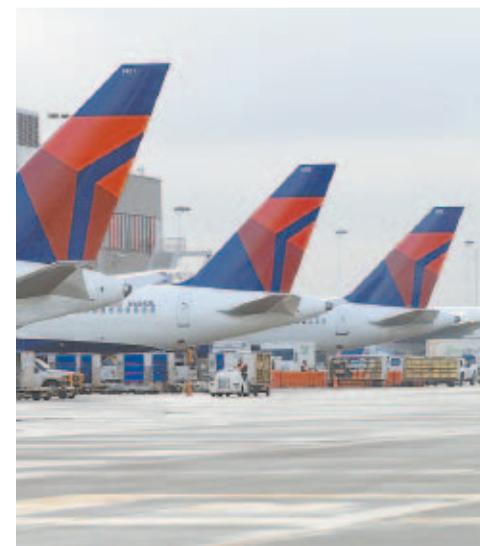
V/O ATLANTA CONFERENCE

- founded in 2013
- will be held March 1-4, 2018
- this year, more than 600 people will attend from more than 40 states and 15 countries.

with **Telemundo**. She has translated live for shows such as the Grammy Awards, the Emmy Awards, the Kids Choice Awards and the **Screen Actors Guild** Awards. Her



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FILE

Tony Messano, the voice of Delta Air Lines as well as the voice of video games and the narrator of a show called "American Muscle Car," at his home studio.

expensive," said Messano. "Now you can work anywhere."

Although the ability to record at home makes it easier to get work done, it can be a very lonely experience.

"Technology is making it easier for people to create something like this and call themselves a talent," Helgesen said. "But at the same time, it has kept us more isolated."

It's also hard work, and even professionals shouldn't work more than four hours at a time.

"It's a very scientific process, and my performance and stamina and attention to every minute detail is critical," Helgesen said. "After four hours, even if my voice is fine, I'm exhausted."

Modern technology has enabled a lot of amateurs to enter the business, and now actors can be up against 1,000 or more others for every role.

"Basically all you need now is a smartphone, a mixer, a decent microphone and a closet, and you've got a studio," Bennett said. "I think a lot of people aspire to be a voice-over person at this point in time."

Many newbies think they'll quickly land a lucrative project like a national commercial, but they shouldn't count on that, Bennett said.

"Like anything else, you have to learn your craft," she said. "There are some skills involved, reading in particular. It's actually acting for the voice."

A smooth, mellifluous voice is a plus for the job – or on the flip side, a very quirky voice like Kristen Schaal's ("Toy Story 3," "Despicable Me 2") can also help you land roles. Bennett said it's best to have a neutral accent, but the ability to put on accents is also a plus.

"I did an audiobook where there were a lot of Cajun secondary characters," said **Brian Troxell**, voice of more than 130 audio books as well as the Wall Street Journal daily Audible recording. "I eventually got it to where it needed to be. I like playing in the accent world, but there's a fine line between putting on an accent and sounding like a stereotype."

The interest in voice-over careers in Atlanta has increased so much that one couple in the business, **Mike Stoudt** and **Heidi Rew**, recently opened a studio in West Midtown to offer space and training to aspiring actors.



Mike Stoudt

"The voice-over community here is very strong," said Stoudt, one of whose clients is Atlanta-based **Cox Enterprises'** Kelley Blue Book. "We wanted to open it up to people, because as voice-over talent, we get questions all

the time... We offer classes, and we also produce demos. It's not fully built out yet, but we're looking to expand."

Atlanta is now home to one of the largest voice-over conferences in the United States.

The Voice-Over Atlanta Conference, which will be held March 1 through 4 at the **Renaissance Concourse Atlanta Airport Hotel**, will bring together more than 600 actors, directors and agents from all over the world for networking, conferences and workshops. This year the keynote speaker is **Townsend Coleman**, the voice of NBC's "Must See TV" promos as well as Michaelangelo on the original "Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles" cartoon.

"Most people describe it as feeling like a class reunion," said **Gerald Griffith**, founder of VO Atlanta. "It's become something people just put on their schedule. It's grown every year."

Messano said Atlanta is now seen as a "serious" production hub for voice-over actors, and they were working here long before the film industry took off.

"Atlanta is such a conference center city, and there's so much corporate work here," Bennett said. "There's a lot of work to be had; it's just not the bling work. It's sort of the journeyman work, but it pays pretty well."

Like on-camera roles, voice-over acting for Hollywood projects is often still cast in Los Angeles. But it's time Hollywood took notice of the wealth of talent in the Atlanta area, which has "tremendous untapped talent," according to Maza.

"Atlanta is a brilliant market with enough voice-over talent that no company or film production has to go outside the walls of this amazing city to access the talent they need for any project," Helgesen said.

other work includes recording for automated phone systems of various financial institutions and Spanish-language recordings for MARTA.

"Many of the scripts I get are taken from Spanish and translated to English, and sometimes they don't jibe," Maza said.

For instance, a "bank branch" doesn't translate easily to Spanish, because it has nothing to do with a branch of a tree. There are also many false cognates – "embarazada" might sound like the Spanish word

for "embarrassed," but it actually means pregnant.

"I'm the last line of defense when I get in front of the microphone, and I have to make sure my scripts are on point," Maza said. "I'm able to correct scripts on the fly."

Maza prefers to record in studios outside her home, but many full-time voice-over actors now have in-home studios.

"The barriers to entry were once a lot higher, and the equipment was more