

INSTALLATION

HEARTBREAK HOME THEATER

Trying to create a great movie room gave *Dumb & Dumber* director Peter Farrelly a lot more than he bargained for

Brothers Peter and Bobby Farrelly are the legendary duo behind some of the most raucous, outrageous, original — and successful — comedies ever, including *Dumb & Dumber*, *There's Something About Mary*, and most recently, *The Heartbreak Kid*. But when Pete started planning a home theater for his Santa Barbara, California house, he found himself dealing not with a comedy but with a particularly fiendish detective story. Call it "The Mystery of the Green Screen." • He originally envisioned a simple room. "I had an image of a little screen and a couple of chairs and some nice speakers," says Pete. "But as my wife Melinda and I looked into it and found out more about the different components, and really started comparing, we went up several notches from what we had first entertained." • What they

BY MICHAEL GAUGHN

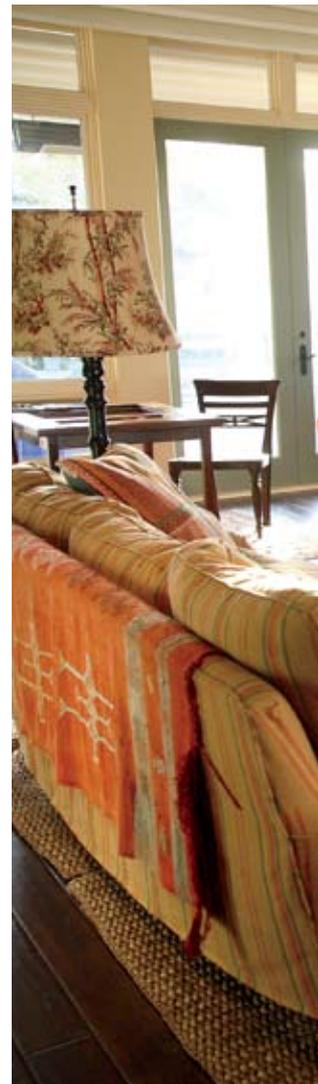
PHOTOS BY JOHN SKALICKY



PETER FARRELLY (above) has found a lot to like about his home theater (left). "It's amazing," he says, "when it's working." The room features a 123-inch screen by Stewart Filmscreen and CinemaTech acoustic treatment and seating. Pete says the CinemaTech chairs are "phenomenal — nicer than any other chair in our house, that's for sure."



GEAR-WISE, the Farrellys' home theater approaches the *ne plus ultra*. Meridian DSP8000 digital speakers (left) handle the front left and right channels, while a Meridian/Faroudja D-ILA1080MF1 projector (above) provides the images. The rack (right) includes a Meridian G98 DVD player, G61 surround processor, and DVP1080MF video processor, as well as a Toshiba HD-A1 HD DVD player, a DirecTV HR10-250 high-def DVR, and a Furman Elite 15 power conditioner.



ended up with couldn't be much more high-end: Meridian DSP8000 (front left/right), DSP5000HC (center), and DSP3100 (surround) digital speakers with a Meridian-modified Faroudja D-ILA1080MF1 1080p projector and a screen by Stewart Filmscreen. The electronics are from Meridian, Toshiba, and Furman; the room treatment and chairs are from CinemaTech.

And Pete loves the result. "The home theater is phenomenal. People come in, and it blows their minds. It's the best part of the house by far."

But there's a problem — a *lot* of problems, actually. The *biggest* one is that the screen image has a bad habit of turning green. "Bright green," emphasizes Melinda. And it will stay that way for hours or days — even weeks. It will then return to normal, only to revert to that lurid shade whenever the spirit moves it.

One theory was that the outboard video processor was overheating due to a lack of ventilation in the equipment closet. But Meridian said its processors don't overheat that easily, and the installer insisted that the closet didn't need ventilation. Another theory blamed the projector. "The installer came out and checked everything," remembers Melinda, "and said, 'It's all fine.' But he brought in a brand-new projector because he thought maybe something was

jarred loose in the old one during shipping. Two or three weeks later, the picture with the new projector started turning green." Yet another theory blamed the projector's DVI cable. But swapping that out — a job Melinda took on herself, perched atop a tall ladder — didn't solve the mystery.

We usually profile installations where things have gone really, really well. But things *can* go wrong, and it's not always easy to figure out why. Low-end, mid-level, or high-end, any installation can become a lemon, bedeviled by problems that nobody can quite put their finger on. And solutions aren't always easy to find.

It's important to note that Pete and Melinda aren't a couple of complainers. "I hope we don't come across like the whining family," says Pete. In fact, they're two of the nicest, most decent people you could meet. But sometimes, bad home theaters happen to good people.

CURSES

If the problems with the image are "The Mystery of the Green Screen," you could call Pete and Melinda's struggles with an equally vexing 8½-inch touchpanel "The Curse of the Wireless Controller." Explains Melinda: "You'll be sitting there watching a movie, and you'll want to change the volume or something, and the controller's screen will say,



THE FARRELLYS rely on their family-room system for movie watching whenever the home theater takes a dive. The 50-inch JVC HD-ILA rear-projection HDTV is aided by Polk LS/9 and LS/C bookshelf and TC80i and TC60i ceiling speakers, a Rotel RDV-1050 DVD player and RSX-1067 7.1-channel receiver, and a DirecTV HR10-250 HD DVR.

‘Network connection is lost. Searching for connection.’ So you have to sit and wait until it finally makes the connection.”

But this wouldn’t be much of a curse if that were the only problem. “Since the controller’s battery life is just under 2 hours, you can barely make it through a movie,” she says. “To combat that, we had the controller programmed so it shuts off when it’s not in use. But if you’re sitting there watching something, and you want to change the volume or pause it or whatever, you have to power the controller back on. And when it does, the connection is lost. It’s a terrible, terrible thing.”

To avoid the “power-up” dilemma, they tried keeping the controller in its charging cradle — but that created its own problems. “The charger is next to the wireless router,” notes Pete. “So we’re always having to walk over to the charger to use the controller. But it’s dark and you can’t see, so to find the thing, you have to turn the lights on.”

Since he doesn’t have as much experience with the system, and its troubles, as Melinda does — *and* because he’s a self-confessed technophobe — Pete finds he has to rely on her to get it up and running. “Sometimes I watch movies later at night, and Melinda’ll be in bed, and I have to go wake her up: ‘You’ve got to come down and help me. I can’t get the thing to work.’ And it shouldn’t be like that. It seems that it should be a lot simpler.”

But he’s quick to point out that the home theater is still outstanding. “It’s amazing — when it’s working. I’m sitting there watching movies, and I cannot believe I have a little movie theater in my house and it sounds as good as a big movie theater. It’s such a great luxury that it’s the equivalent for us of having a private jet. We don’t have a private jet, by the way.”

I could mention the bizarre problems with the speaker positioning, or the miscommunication that led to a valance covering 3 inches of the top of the Stewart screen, or some of the many other things that went wrong with the theater. But cluing you in on everything would make even the most jaded reader feel a little ill after a while.

OUT OF CONTROL

Unfortunately, Pete and Melinda weren’t able to keep their gremlins confined to the home theater. The little devils appear to wander freely from room to room, making the Farrelllys’ whole-house control system equally torturous to use.

The problems with the multiroom audio are this tale’s most tangled skein, and there’s no space to unravel all the many troubling details. Suffice it to say that the installer’s attempts to integrate the music server from the control system that Pete and Melinda were



THE ORIGINAL multiroom audio setup was so difficult to use that the Farrellys added a Sonos system to it. Here, Sonos's Bobby Oster installs controllers and ZonePlayer modules. "The Rhapsody concept of a jukebox in the sky was new to Pete and Melinda," says Bobby. "The experience of accessing it through Sonos was really empowering for them."

originally going to go with into their current setup led to some awkward programming that made the interface hard to use. Accessing a familiar music track meant repeatedly punching commands into the in-wall touchscreens and cycling through page after page of menus. And then there were the programming glitches.

"After going through a number of songs," says Melinda, "you'd end up with a little collection of letters on the right side of the screen that were just leftover data that didn't clear. It was really ridiculous. I felt like if we'd put our full music library in that system, there would have been no good way to access any of it."

The labyrinthine control system was particularly troubling for Pete. "You had to go down 50 pages into the interface to get to what you wanted. But I like simplicity. I like to walk into a room, for instance, and just turn on a light. I don't want to have to hold my finger on the control and wait for it to go up or down. I just want the light to go on and off. The controls for the touchpanel seemed to have been written by techno-geeks, for techno-geeks."

"Peter couldn't figure out the control system," Melinda says. "And I was too frustrated by it to even use it. I would just end up going back to the same few songs."

SONOS TO THE RESCUE

Searching for that elusive ease of use, the Farrellys felt they'd found their salvation with Sonos. Melinda wanted an interface like the one she was used to from her iPods, so she was thrilled when she first checked out the Sonos Controller. And the Sonos ZonePlayers gave her and Pete an easy way to piggyback the new control system onto the existing one — or at least it *should* have been easy.

But the installer was reluctant to give up the source code that would've allowed them to add the new gear. Melinda tells the tale: "I didn't want the installer to come in and do anything else, because he'd been just so defensive about everything and difficult to deal with. So he said, 'No, you can't have the source code.' That's

one thing your readers should know. Buyer beware: Negotiate for the source code before you start the job. Otherwise, you're beholden to these guys. If you don't have the code and you want to add something to your system — and the installer goes out of business or moves away or whatever — you can't do it without somebody else having to rewrite the entire system."

It ended up being cheaper to pay the installer to come in and add Sonos as a source to the system than it would have to buy the code.

The multiroom audio system has gone from being a living nightmare to simplicity itself. A Sonos ZonePlayer 80 in the main gear stack allows the Farrellys to listen to any of their 50,000 songs (stored on a 1-terabyte G-Technology G-Raid drive) through any of the existing audio zones. ZonePlayer 100 modules in Pete's office and one of their children's bedrooms, hooked up to Sonos desktop speakers, bring those spaces into the network as well.

"I'm happy I didn't get the server that the installer wanted us to buy, because I love the Sonos," says Melinda. "It gives me everything in one piece, and it integrates well with the existing system. It's a two-step process now: When I go to the touchscreen, I select my room and select Sonos as my source, and then I go to my Sonos controller. It's way better than what we had."

Pete agrees: "Sonos is fantastic. It's very simple — you just push a button. And the company has extremely good customer service. I would definitely go to them again."

Adds Melinda: "I love the idea that you have this little wireless controller that you can take wherever you want, and it gives you your whole music library plus Rhapsody and Pandora. I've never had any problem turning it on, getting it to work, turning it off. And it's got amazing scrolling capabilities." (FYI: Sonos has since started streaming Sirius satellite radio as well.)

If these comments read like testimonials, it's because the Sonos system was the one thing that went absolutely right after everything that had gone wrong, and Pete and Melinda's relief and gratitude are apparent.

WHODUNIT?

Deciding to abandon the twin albatrosses of their massive house and its troublesome entertainment system, the Farrellys recently



POLK ATRIUM speakers provide music out on the Farrelllys' rambling property.

moved into a much more modest home, which will have a much more modest A/V setup.

"We're selling the house with all the TVs and the theater and everything still in it just because our broker said that's what you do now," explains Melinda, "which is kind of weird to me. But I'm taking the Sonos. So in our new house, I want to just have that system for the music and get great speakers in all the walls. There's a separate building that's like a little barn, which we're going to convert into the home theater."

The one thing that Pete wants to repeat in the new theater is the chairs. "CinemaTech chairs are phenomenal, unbelievable. They're as good as you get — better than advertised. They're nicer than any other chair in our house, that's for sure."

Since he's not in a position to pony up for another round of digital speakers, Pete is going to miss the Meridians. "I thought they were spectacular. It was all better than I thought it would be, ultimately. It was all better than I *intended* for it to be."

Believe it or not, this tale of many tribulations actually has a pretty happy ending, thanks to James Budow of Performance Audio (featured in "Oliver Stone's Radical Cinema," April and online at soundandvisionmag.com). James, who had done all the installation work before another installer was called in to do the home theater and the control system, returned to set things right before the Farrelllys handed over the house to the new owners. And he seems to have succeeded, even managing to tame the wily controller. (Pete and Melinda wish they'd stuck with James for the duration — but therein lies *another* twisted tale.)

James even appears to have banished the green screen by putting in a new cable run. But that fix was done just before we went to press — and the green monster has been known to lay in wait for days or weeks before springing back to life. So we can only hope that he finally tamed it.

Pete and Melinda now realize that most of their problems had less to do with the quality of the gear than with the installation process. And even after having had time to think about it, they're still not sure why so much went so wrong.

One explanation is that there were too many cooks. "I never felt like one person was the boss," says Pete. "I never knew who to go to."

"Nobody was in charge," agrees Melinda.

"It seemed like they looked to us, like *we* were in charge," says Pete. "And what do we know about making a home theater? Everybody always blamed someone else. Like when the green screen came on, somebody would blame the company that made the thing or the way they wired it. It was very frustrating — for Melinda particularly, since she dealt with it. When you told them something's broke, nobody ever said, 'Here, I'll come over; I'll take care of it.' Never got that. You had to push, push, push people. And we're not good at that. We're not pushers."

Pete and Melinda still aren't entirely sure what hit them. Their installation sort of played out like a bunch of people trying to make a movie without a director. "There were some problems where I can specifically say something went wrong because somebody didn't do something right," says Pete. "But with a lot of it, I feel like, well, whose fault really was it? I couldn't tell you. You'd need CSI to figure this out. There are fingerprints all over the place. But I couldn't tell you what the hell happened." **S&V**

A REALLY QUICK Q&A WITH PETE FARRELLY

Q. Do your soundtracks come from casual listening, or do you go through lots of songs to see what works best with a scene?

A. We do try a lot of different songs — six or seven per scene. But ultimately it's from me driving along in the summer listening, and a song will come on the radio, and I'll think, "We should put this in the movie." On the other hand, there's a company called Aperture that sends me CDs of new bands constantly. Putting the music in is my favorite part of making the movie. It really is.

Q. Using the Susanna Hoffs/Matthew Sweet cover of Michael Nesmith's "Different Drum" in *The Heartbreak Kid* was inspired.

A. I wish for once we'd get a hit out of one of our movies. You'll hear certain older songs more on the radio after they're in one of our films, but I've never had a new song pop. There's a song at the beginning and the end by Buva that's incredible — it makes the movie for me.

Q. Do you and your brother Bobby ever butt heads when it comes to the music tracks?

A. That's the only thing we don't do together, but I do try to pick stuff that I know he'll like. I pretty much put the music in and Bobby stays out of it, and I hope it will always be that way. [*laughs*]

Q. Rattle off a few favorite filmmakers.

A. Judd Apatow. I love Quentin Tarantino. I always look forward to his stuff. I like Wes Anderson a lot. I was a huge fan of *Magnolia* — that's the other Anderson. [*Paul Thomas, that is — Ed.*]

Q. How about influences? Preston Sturges?

A. You know, I never saw a Sturges movie in my life until people kept comparing me to him. My influences are more from TV, because Bobby and I didn't go to a lot of movies growing up. But I remember watching reruns of *The Andy Griffith Show*, and that's the type of thing we like. There's always something a little heartfelt in that show that we aspire to get. We try to make you have some laughs, but you've also got to feel something for our movies to work.

For a lot more with Pete, go to soundandvisionmag.com/petef