

## Dr. Vornoff's Corner #001

**“One is always considered MAD, if one discovers something others cannot grasp!”**

This column is dedicated to a vastly overlooked and greatly neglected aspect of film production and cinema history: the low-budget independently produced films made between the early 30s and the mid-70s. These shoddy, lurid, and generally weird films have been variously classified as ‘B’ movies, ‘Z’ movies, Exploitation/ Sexploitation films, drive-in fodder, the Paracinema, Sleazoid cinema, Incredibly Strange Films, and guilty pleasures. Regardless of their classifications, these cheap independent films have occupied the netherworld of respectable cinema for decades (late-night movies, drive-ins, grindhouses, etc.). But over the last few years, hundreds of these low-budget gems have been released on DVD, and are readily available in rental and retail stores. MGM Home Entertainment, Image Entertainment, the exalted Criterion Collection, and the eponymous Something Weird Video have issued hundreds of these ‘B’ Movies, drive-in fodder films, Exploitation/ Sexploitation films, and other really strange obscurities. Now with so many films widely available on DVD, it’s opportune to take a serious look at these overlooked and frequently ridiculed works. Usually, low-budget cinematic wonders of this kind are written-off as ‘Camp’ or ‘so BAD they’re GOOD,’ but these less-than-flattering terms only serve to negate the importance of this form of cinema. As a film scholar, I feel it’s time to give these films some much-needed attention. The world of low-budget films has produced thousands and thousands of outlandish, exotic, and downright unusual films, but to date, only a handful of critical and historical texts have taken them seriously.

This column, in my view, is therefore a step in the right direction, expanding the discourse surrounding the netherworld of lowbudget independent film production and serving as a guide to the plethora of recently released DVD’s.

Officially, the works to which I refer carry the name of Exploitation films, a category that can include various forms of low-budget film making, but the undeniable truth is that they encompass one of the largest aspects of film production. A truly transnational phenomenon, the ‘monetarily-challenged’ Exploitation film has been a staple of all national cinemas. Despite their low production values, their amateur (and sometimes drunken) performances, as well as numerous other unforeseen circumstances that have hampered the final product and tainted critical reception, this often-disreputable mode of film production has established its own unique aesthetic code. When the final products are compared with those of more recognizable modes, they’re written-off simply as ‘bad filmmaking,’ but it’s my sense that it’s more valuable to examine these films within this relatively unfamiliar aesthetic code. There is more happening in a low-budget Exploitation film than shoddy production values and overacting, for example. When encountering them, it’s therefore the responsibility of the viewer to forgo his/ her acquired understanding of the cinema. The cinéphile must become as a blank slate, must avoid been thrown off by implausibility or incomprehension, and simply relax, sit back, and enjoy the ride.

To inaugurate this column, we begin with a truly exceptional piece: Ray Dennis Steckler’s *Wild Guitar*

(1962). It stars Arch Hall, Jr. and is available courtesy of Something Weird Video on a double feature DVD along with Arch's first film, *The Choppers* (Leigh Jason, 1961). Taken together, they offer the cinéophile an unflinching vision of the life of an American teenager in the early 60s. I need not remind you that this was a very strange period in American history, when Nixon and cigarettes were good, Elvis and seatbelts were bad, and the whole country was living under a halcyon ideology that had yet to be shattered by later events. These two films present typified teen-orientated narratives, except here they're ripped wide open by the astounding, awkward, and jaw-dropping presence of Arch Hall, Jr. "Arch who?" you may ask. Well, Arch Hall, Jr. was a wannabe teen idol who was the star of five films produced by his father's company, Fairway International Pictures. He was also responsible for a number of L.A. pop/rock novelty hits. Does any one remember the songs "Konga Joe" or "Monkey in my Hatband"? I didn't think so. Nonetheless, the two Arches (senior and junior) left an indelible mark on the history of cinema. If you get a chance and can find an old video copy of Arch, Jr.'s *The Sadist* (James Landis, 1963), you are in for a terror treat. This ultra-cheap masterpiece, which sees Arch, Jr. play a psychopath who goes on a pre-*Badlands* murder-spreed, is a triumph in unsettling filmmaking. He gleefully torments and murders a group of teachers in an unprecedented level of sadism that would not be outdone for nearly a decade. Unfortunately, the Arches are also responsible for one of the worst films ever made: the horrendous (and aptly titled) *Eegah!* (Arch Hall, Sr., 1962).

Fortunately for us, we are looking at the first two films produced by the father and son team. Both are generically typical teenpix: a juvenile delinquency film and a Rock n' Roll fantasy. However, *Wild Guitar* and *The Choppers* are, in their presentation of a duplicitous world of bourgeois facades and seedy realities (an image not often presented in the Camelot days of the early 60s), more interesting than their lowly origins would lead you to believe.

In *The Choppers*, Arch and his friends are clean-cut good lookin' all-American teenagers. They drive cool hot rods and like pretty girls. On the surface, they're your typical teens, but underneath, they're living a distorted adolescent fantasy of violence and criminality. Jack (Arch, Jr.) and his buddies, Flip, Torch, and Snooper, are eponymous adolescents, driving around in a poultry delivery truck (complete with chickens) equipped with its own portable chop-shop. Arch scouts potential four-wheeled victims in his customized Bucket T. When

he finds a vehicle along the side of the highway, they chop it up for parts. If you know anything about cars of this period, you will get a kick out of seeing brand new models about to go under the torch, then, quickly masked with an edit, the new car is switched for an old 1953 Kaiser Manhattan ripe for sacrifice to the blazing licks of the blowtorch. The gang sells the hot parts to Moose, a crooked auto parts dealer, played by the human behemoth, Bruno VeSota, who is supported by his sidekick, Cowboy, perennial B-Western extra Britt Woods. Arch and his gang appear as normal American teenagers: clean-cut, pimple-free, and well dressed. And like all good American teens, the gang spends their loot on really cool cars and chasing girls at the "Chick-a-dilly." But each of these all-American teens is a truly fucked up kid beneath the surface, harbouring deep, seething, anti-social behaviour, often bordering on the psychotic. Eventually, the police catch up with them and the film ends with a really great and shockingly brutal shoot-out at Moose's auto wreckers. As the remaining members of the Choppers are carted off to jail, Arch Hall, Sr. drops in to make a cameo as a TV reporter exploiting the sensationalism of this rupture in the all-American ideal.

Visually, *The Choppers* is bleak, shot in a stark realist black and white. The harsh lighting of Clark Ramsey intensifies the endless and desolate landscape and helps the film create an equally desolate look at teen-life in southern California. There's no "Surfin' Safari" in this film; these are profoundly messed-up kids who really believe that they're modern romantic figures living out some great adventure. Throughout the film they speak in their own unique dialect, a cross between Beat poetry and Hard-boiled banter, trapped between art and crime. At first, the dialogue may sound silly, but as the film progresses, it becomes apparent that it's symptomatic of the mythology of the American dream and the distorted reality embodied by the gang.

The bleak and empty world depicted in *The Choppers* is countered by the over-exuberant cinematic vision of *Wild Guitar*, the second of Fairway International's films and the first film directed by novice Ray Dennis Steckler. *Wild Guitar* is an unexpected and unprecedented celebration of film, yet the director's over-enthusiasm has often left audiences and critics out in the cold. Despite the fact that the film has frequently turned up on lists of the worst films ever made, Steckler's uninhibited style marks it as a (cinematic) labour of love, refuting those who hastily dismiss it as the incoherent cinematic ramblings of an amateur. Trained as a cinematographer and on a set for the first time as a director, he holds

nothing back. The film runs the gamut, from film noir chiaroscuro to Hollywood musical, from the Bowery Boys comedies to Surrealist masterworks, and all at the pace of a runaway train. When Vickie (Nancy Czar) does her go-go dance, don't fret the shifting lighting—just sit back and enjoy the shimmying, shapely figure it illuminates.

*Wild Guitar* tells the story of Bud Eagle (Arch, Jr.) and his rise to pop/ rock teen idol fame. The film begins with Bud arriving out of nowhere—he is literally introduced to us riding his motorcycle along a single dirt track emerging from the weeds and the sand dunes. Presented as naïve and bucolic, he is a modern innocent in the tradition of Capra's greatest heroes (Mr. Deeds, Mr. Smith and John Doe). And like Mr. Smith and John Doe, Bud lands in the middle of a money-grubbing and corrupt America, where he is subject to a number of very predictable coincidences: he meets the girl of his dreams, the bug-eyed Vickie Wells; he gets a spot on a local teen-talent show; and he's signed to a record contract. All this in one night! Unfortunately for Bud, the head of his new recording company is the ultimate 'Payola' slime-ball Mike MacCauley, played by his dad, Arch, Sr., and aided by his henchman, Steak, played by Cash Flagg (Steckler's stage persona). While the script is certainly formulaic, *Wild Guitar* is undeniably strange, perhaps requiring several viewings to sort out what exactly is going on. Poor old Bud just wants to play his guitar and sing songs about Vickie. But MacCauley and Steak have other plans. Although they've signed him to a recording contract, they spend most of their time trying to corrupt Bud with booze and strippers and to destroy his relationship with his odd-faced girlfriend. MacCauley and Steak gave the same treatment to their previous singing sensation, Don Proctor, who, in a great film noir-like sequence, ends up dead at the bottom of a staircase. Along with the murder of Proctor, there's the kidnapping of Bud's girlfriend, a great fistfight between Steak and Bud, and several other inexplicably weird things. Eventually, Bud frees himself from the Svengalilike grasp of MacCauley and the film ends with Bud shooting his own TV promo-video at the beach, dressed in a white dinner jacket and singing and playing his guitar. Vickie joins him and dances around. There are a bunch of surf kids dancing in the sand. At the center is Bud's motorcycle, sporting an eagle feather, the symbol of his fan club. Then, with a jump cut, everyone disappears. The beach is empty, except for the motorcycle. The surf crashes against the tires and the eagle feather blows in the wind.

*Wild Guitar* is one of the all-time great masterpieces

of schlock cinema, not because the film is 'bad,' which it has often been called, but because it is utterly out of control. Stylistically it careens like a broken roller coaster, thrashing itself all over the place. Steckler had a penchant for mixing genres and styles in his films, his most famous exercise being the horror/ musical *The Incredibly Strange Creatures Who Stopped Living And Became Mixed-Up Zombies!!!* (1967). For his debut, he bounces from a flat realist style to the chiaroscuro shadows of film noir to 30s avant-garde to French New Wave reflexivity with out batting an eye or considering whether or not the audience can follow. The strangest moments come when Steckler presents his homage to the slapstick comedies of the Bowery Boys. If you have never seen a Bowery Boys film, you are in for a treat, or possibly a great disgust. "The Boys" made a series of films from the early 40s to the mid-50s, which ran their "Punch and Judy show" homoerotic relationship through a bevy of formulaic comedy plots. Initially these films were kinda cute and silly, but as "the Boys" grew older and maintained the same personas, the films grew increasingly perverse.

Perhaps the most remarkable moment in *Wild Guitar* is the final shot of Bud's motorbike alone in the surf. The isolated, iconographic image of the motorcycle with the waves splashing the tires raises the film into an entirely different realm. Where did every one go? Has this been just a dream? Or could this be a tribute to the final shot of Jean-Pierre Melville's 1955 masterpiece *Bob Le Flambeur*?

While the DVD release of *Wild Guitar/ The Choppers*, like all SWV releases, is digitally remastered, this doesn't mean that it's a flawless reproduction. Many of these films are taken from the only surviving prints, some of which are irrevocably damaged with scratches, splices or faded color. Nonetheless, these problems are small distractions and don't detract from the pleasure of watching these remarkable anomalies. At times the damage can actually enhance the strange experience.

The DVD is also loaded with great extra features, carefully chosen in order to keep with the themes of the feature films. Included are a mitt-full of related trailers, several short subjects, and a slideshow, "Gallery of Trash-O-Rama Exploitation Art with Radio-Spot Rarities." At times, the extras for these DVD's are more desirable than the features themselves, but with this particular one, it's a win-win deal.

Keeping with the dance fervour incited by *Wild Guitar*, we're offered two of producer/ director Bill Rebane's

Twist-ploitation shorts, *Twist Craze!* and *Dance Craze!*, both made sometime in the early 60s. Shot in Chicago, both feature glimpses of Chicago's 'Café' society enjoying the new dance sensation, "The Twist"—but the 60s have never been seen quite like this! Before the popular imagination was completely usurped by teenage bodies, there was a time when the entertainment world still catered to the middle-aged. The early 60s was a transitional period, a time when the middle-aged and middle-classed began to consume the image of teenagers as novelty—a highly sexualized novelty. And that's what these films are all about: the middle-aged gaze and the youthful spectacle. The more I watch these two films, the more 'twisted' they become. Both feature big fat middle-aged men and women leering at teenagers (mostly alluring teenage girls but there is the occasional sexualized boy, too) gyrating to The Twist as part of cabaret shows and present the middle class as a vision of bloated and bathetic polyester and rayon-clad slime-balls. It's hard to describe these pictures without using words like 'sleazy,' 'lurid' and 'disgusting,' but at a deeper level, these quizzical oddities beg the questions: Who are these people? Why were these films made? And who the hell watched them? Though these questions can hardly be answered, the films can still be enjoyed as really weird leftovers from a really weird period in our not-so-distant past.

To accompany these Twist films, SWV has also included a stolen car flick, *Hot Car*, made in '57 or '58. Another cinematic wonder from the past, HOT CAR is not the story of wayward teens on a joyride but rather a police instructional (read: propaganda) film about the modern techniques of spotting stolen cars and catching car thieves red-handed. This film moves from dull procedure to generation confrontation, and concludes with a great car chase as two old Chevys boot it down a dirt road and then tear up a farmer's field. The best sequence is when a highway patrol officer pulls over a nervous beatnik in a stolen car. "What's in the trunk?" asks the cop. The beatnik panics and runs! *Hot Car* becomes an interesting counterpart to *THE Choppers*, not only because both films deal with car theft, but because *Hot Car* actually supports the bleak vision of middle class America presented in the fictional film. Taken together, they present the average Americans as "babes-in-the-woods," oblivious to the inevitable malfeasance, innocent and unaware of the criminal underworld that surrounds them. In one scene, a woman naively parks her car at the mall, and just like that, the criminal element arises out of the ether to snatch it away. Is it Arch Hall, Jr? Is it a group of professional car thieves? Or is it the disintegration of

the American mythos? I think the latter.

If you're itching for a different cinematic experience and are tired of watching actors strung up with wires in front of blue screens, check out the double feature of teen angst and societal disintegration that is *Wild Guitar/ The Choppers*. However, be forewarned: the world of low-budget films can be very enticing and highly addictive. They're a form of unpolluted, uncut cinematic expression. There is no pretension, no brain-sucking self-indulgence, no directorial masturbation, and no bullshit. They are, in a word, the manifestation of a pure love of cinema.

Until next time,

**Dr. Eric Vornoff**