



DO YOU DARE VENTURE INTO... THE VIDEO VAULT

By Lane Van Ham
Staff Reporter

"Hey, a big haunted hi-de-ho to all of you! It's the Old Flick Fiend once again with another selection from the Video Vault.

"I'm excited about this one -- my talons are sweaty with anticipation. After the birdbrain who writes this column crows about it for a while, I hope you all leave your nest and rent it. Just remember to dress for the occasion; you'll be in for nasty feather!"

I want to make up for last week's movie by presenting something that's actually very worthwhile, Alfred Hitchcock's "The Birds."

"The Birds" was made in 1963 and was Hitchcock's first work since "Psycho" in 1960. The story centers around Melanie Daniels (Tippi Hedren), a wealthy young woman from San Francisco who has become attracted to lawyer Mitch Brenner (Rod Taylor). She tracks down Brenner in a small California town and finds him living with his young sister and possessive mother, Lydia. It's an interesting cast, when you throw in a local schoolteacher who used to love Brenner, and it looks like an intense and engaging romance is underway.

But gradually all hell breaks loose. We are presented, at various times, with the ominous symbol of birds: a gull attacks Melanie, Mitch observes a large group of them outside his house, and one flies into the schoolteacher's house door (where Melanie, coincidentally, is living). Eventually this leads to an all out bird attack on the children at a birthday party for Mitch's sister. Everyone flees inside the house, but in an amazing scene, dozens of birds invade the house by coming down the chimney.

This sounds a little absurd, or even funny. But with the exception of a couple of instances, it's done remarkably well and is even frightening at times. But "The Birds" transcends the basic man vs. invaders theme for a number of reasons. First of all, it's evident that the birds are not just there to provide a cheap thrill for the audience. No explanation for their attacks is ever given, nor is one needed.

Essentially, the attacks themselves are not important. What is important is what they represent. The birds, I think, can be seen as anything unknown, anything out of the ordinary, that intrudes on our existence. Donald Spoto, in "The Art of Alfred Hitchcock" writes that the film displays Hitchcock's view of "the universe as a place in which we must always be on guard against imminent disaster."

How we interpret these intrusions is portrayed in a fantastic microcosmic scene when the cus-

tomers in a town restaurant turn their discussion to the recent invasion. One man says it's the end of the world. A bird-lover treats it scientifically and says it's impossible to fight them. Meanwhile, one guy argues we should go out and shoot all of them. When the birds attack the town, one woman even accuses Melanie of being a witch.

The action eventually switches to Mitch's house, where he, his mother, and Melanie have turned it into a boarded-window fortress against the invaders. At night, Melanie inexplicably goes upstairs to explore a room and finds that it has been penetrated by the birds. This leads to a scene that took a week to shoot, in which Melanie is attacked, repeatedly, by birds thrown at her from off camera. Hedren later called this "the worst week of her life," after which she took an additional week to recover psychologically from.

"The Birds' is highly recommended viewing whether you want to get philosophical with it or not.

Although Mitch rescues Melanie from the attack, she is badly hurt and in need of a hospital. Eventually, Mitch guides Melanie and the rest out to the car and they drive away without incident.

So what does it all mean? It's a ludicrous concept for invasion, for which no explanation is ever given, and there isn't much of a resolution either. Although conceptually similar, it is in every important way the antithesis of another movie I discussed here, "Earth vs. The Flying Saucers." Quite simply, the birds are not the most important part of this movie -- it's the intrusion they make.

The intrusion brings great ramifications on our interactions with each other and the way we view our lives. For instance, there are the characters in the restaurant I previously mentioned. It's also worthy to note the way in which the birds intensify their attacks as Mitch draws closer to Melanie -- and away from his mother, who fears being alone. Their escape may indicate Lydia's acceptance, as she nurtures the wounded Melanie in the car.

Some have observed, in fact, that "The Birds" should not be viewed as a story with a beginning, middle, and end, but as a poem, more concerned with theme and atmosphere.

"The Birds" is highly recommended viewing, whether you

want to get philosophical with it or not. It represents a unique crossroads in the Video Vault, where critical acceptance and popularity are not exclusive of the creative and bizarre.

"The Birds" should be available at most video rental outlets.

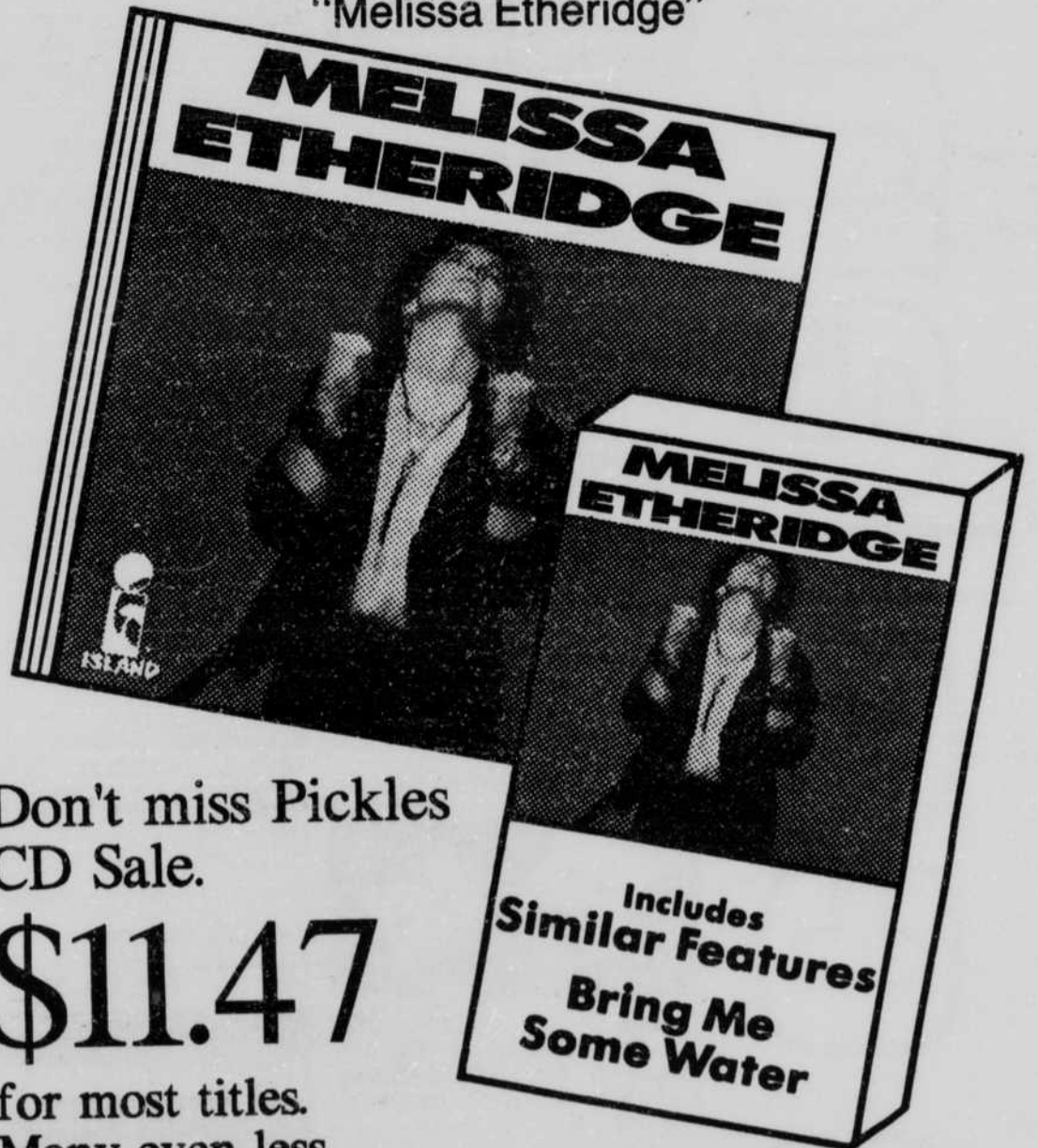
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