

DO YOU DARE VENTURE INTO... THE VIDEO VAULT

By Lane Van Ham
Staff Reporter

I've mostly analyzed older movies in this space, so I thought it was time to look at something a little bit more recent. There aren't a lot of

really neat Video Vault type features coming out these days, for a variety of reasons, but one guy has done a brilliant job of consistently making incredible (though not well known) movies in this decade.

Geoff Gones started making movies in 1978 with "The Gore Hookers" and continued on into the '80s with such titles as "Blonde Nazi Goes Hawaiian" and the incredible "Teeth" (advertised as: "Ripping! Biting! Gripping! This

film is so exciting it cannot be described without combusting this poster!").

The movie I want to talk about, however, is his 1983 classic "The Switchblade Van Band." The basic idea behind "Switchblade Van Band" is as follows: 12 kids, just out of high school, decide to buy a van and drive around until all of them are arrested and put in jail. What's interesting is that little or no reason is given for this rash decision-making.

The closest we come to an explanation is when the group leaves a gas station and a woman there exclaims, "Crazy kids... But why go to college anyway?"

Gones came out of what might be called "The Ray Dennis Steckler School of Moviemaking." Steckler made "The Incredibly Strange Creatures Who Stopped Living and Became Mixed Up Zombies," and held the philosophy of improvising set and script as the movie shooting progressed.

"I never saw a complete script for 'Switchblade Van Band,'" said cast member Katherine Slam in "Film Zone."

"Geoff just had us make it up in places where he couldn't think of anything to do, and sometimes it worked and sometimes it didn't."

Slam played "Gorilla," the leader of the van group. As the movie opens, Gorilla is getting stoned with her friends while the rest of their high school class is graduating. She suggests they all hop into her dad's van and drive around until they all get thrown in jail for one reason or another. Everyone piles in, and our adventure begins.

Before long we're introduced to an amazing cast of characters which Gones later claimed to be representative of the twelve disciples. There's Monte, a calm but moderately insane guy who hasn't washed his hair for five months because he's "mad at the world" and insists on playing the same tape (The Greatest Hits of 1963) over and over again in the van.

Then there's Carlos, who goes pleasantly insane as the movie progresses laughing for increasingly long periods of time without being able to stop.

Gorilla is a sort of musical philosopher revolutionary, munching on cucumbers throughout the movie and muttering lines like "Off the pigs," and "I hate ballads, especially when they're by Joan Jett."

It takes a while, but after a little effort, the gang finds half of their members arrested in Wyoming for

attempted bank robbery. What's interesting is that while it would seem easy enough to get arrested if you're trying to do so, the van band seems entirely inept.

Monte, for example, declares that he's going to get arrested for assault and attempted robbery and then proceeds to hurl frozen burritos at customers in a 7-11 store. Nothing happens. At one point the gang members who haven't been arrested become excited because the state patrol pulls them over -- only to find it's because their tail lights aren't working.

One of the most mysterious developments in the movie is the sudden appearance of a narrator when the movie is three fourths over. Presumably this was done to bridge gaps where Gones' script and the actor's improvisation failed.

The narrator explains "Unable to get arrested, the group made their way to the lonely town of Potato Hope, knowing that it was their destiny to form a rock 'n' roll combo that would shake the world."

All but two of the group get arrested in Potato Hope for stealing musical equipment, and low on gas, the remaining two (Gorilla and Barney) drive out of town. The closing moments of the movie are dedicated to a conversation between the two.

Gorilla: "Well... I think I'll certainly remember this."

Barney: "Yeah, like I remember a toothache... do you have a knife I can borrow?"

Gorilla: "Sure." (pulls out a knife)

Barney: "Thanks, sister, you'll get it back," (stabs himself in the heart).

Without a doubt, "The Switchblade Van Band" is a poorly made movie. At two points the camera suddenly tilts in mid-scene, and remains so for the rest of the cut, at several points characters seem to have forgotten lines, and there is no discernible reason why the characters behave as they do.

But it is a great example of spontaneity captured on film, and what I guess could be considered the punk rock equivalent of movies, which is to say, someone could see it and say "I could do that!" and go out and make a movie.

"The Switchblade Van Band" and other Geoff Gones features can be investigated by curious parties by writing to CCBB Productions, P.O. Box 143, Mesa, Arizona, 84011.



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