

DEADBEAT AT DAWN

Directed by Jim Van Bebber
(1988) Arrow Video Blu-ray

Deadbeat at Dawn is an enduring testament to the cinematic stick-to-itiveness of Jim Van Bebber. Filmed mostly on weekends over the course of several years, using monies the film school dropout redirected from his Wright State student loans, Van Bebber produced, wrote, directed, edited, provided makeup effects, and, yes, even starred in the film. That *Deadbeat at Dawn* is altogether hilarious, endlessly quotable, relentlessly nihilistic, and yet disarmingly endearing remains a tribute to the unadulterated talent Van Bebber possesses in spades.

You couldn't really call *Deadbeat* a horror movie, even though Van Bebber does sprinkle some supernatural elements throughout the film: Lovecraft's *Necronomicon*, psychics delivering portentous prognostications, and even that bane of 1980s polite society, a Ouija board, all make an appearance. What *Deadbeat* really is, is a colossal pop cultural Cuisinart into which Van Bebber has tossed every trope from every action film he's ever seen, from *The Born Losers* to *Good Guys Wear Black*, with enough left over for a hysterically gratuitous nod to *A Clockwork Orange*, wherein the gang members sport some pretty conspicuous jockstraps on the outside of their street clothes.

The storyline of *Deadbeat* breaks down into several more-or-less discrete chunks. The opening scenes establish the gang rivalry between the Spiders, led by mustachioed loon Danny (Paul Harper), and the Ravens, presided over by our loveable antihero, Goose (Van Bebber). Goose's gal, Christy (Megan Murphy), begs him to quit the scene, which he finally agrees to do, but only after one last big score. While Goose is away on his fool's errand, Danny's henchman, Bonecrusher (a truly gonzo Marc Pitman), comes around to play. And he more than lives up to his nickname, as far as poor Christy is concerned.

Deadbeat's next arc finds Goose, after engaging in some particularly crushing funerary rites for Christy, plummeting toward his own personal bottom: hitting the bottle, slumming with his Vietnam vet/junkie father (Charlie Goetz, who chews up every last piece of the dank scenery), and ultimately contemplating self-extinction. None too soon, newly promoted Raven leader Keith (Ric Walker) recruits Goose back into the gang, mostly so he can add his rappelling expertise to the film's next big set piece, an armored car heist perpetrated in broad daylight—although Robert Siodmak's *Criss Cross*, this certainly isn't.

The climactic confrontation between Goose and the Spiders features some ridiculous action bits (finger chomping, vehicular decapitation) as well as some pretty impressive car-based stunt work, made all the more remarkable when you consider that the word "stunt" doesn't really even begin to cover the action: They simply slung Van Bebber from the driver's side window and took off down the alleyway, caroming off buildings and taking out trashcans hither and yon. *Deadbeat* bows out with an absolutely archetypal ending for this sort of film, with Goose face down in a pool of his own blood, yet it's ambiguous enough that, from that day to this, Van Bebber has been assiduously plotting his follow-up.

Considering the vicissitudes of its resolutely lo-fi production, *Deadbeat at Dawn* looks pretty terrific in Arrow's new 2K scan of the 16mm camera negatives. Particularly impressive are those scenes that involve some of the more adventurous gel-lighting schemes, with neon-bright washes of green, purple, and orange. The LPCM mono track comes across well.

Arrow has gone all-out in their presentation of *Deadbeat at Dawn*, assembling what you would have to call the definitive edition of Van Bebber's freshman feature. First off, there's a rollicking commentary track with Van Bebber (the most vocal contributor by a long shot), cast member Paul Harper, actor Cody Lee Hardin, and documentarian Victor Bonacore that thoroughly covers the protracted production saga, and includes plenty of amusing anecdotes about the shooting locations as well as some colorful background about various cast and crew members. Bonacore's career retrospective doc "Deadbeat Forever" runs as long as the film itself, and it's packed with interview footage from Van Bebber's friends, fans, and frequent collaborators. Then, too, there are some hilarious glimpses of early Van Bebber short films.

Arrow offer four Van Bebber's short films in fresh HD transfers from the original elements, with optional commentary tracks. "Into the Black" is the film that won Van Bebber a film scholarship, and it's a hilariously primitivist blend of *The Road Warrior* and assorted Bruce Lee movies (albeit with some impressive car and motorbike stunts in the finale). "My Sweet Satan" offers a slight fictional gloss on the sordid true crime saga of Ricky Kasso (here called Kasslin and played by Van Bebber), a disaffected acidhead who slaughtered another member of his stoner circle in a quasi-satanic ritual because of a beef over some pilfered pills.

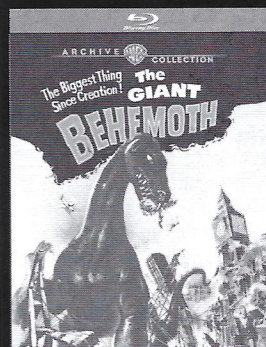
Closer to a promo reel than a finished film, "Roadkill: The Last Days of John Martin" constitutes a nauseating plunge into the disordered brainpan of its titular serial killer, cannibal, and all-around bad Samaritan. Finally, the shot-on-digital "Gator Green" (previously available, sans commentary, on Severin's Blu-ray of Van Bebber's *The Manson Family*) leans heavily on Tobe Hooper's *Eaten Alive*, with some Vietnam War-era "social commentary" layered in for good measure.

And still the disc keeps on giving: There's archival behind-the-scenes footage of the train station finale, as well as a few minutes of silent outtakes (more fight scenes), a promo trailer with optional commentary for the never-made *Chunk Blower*, and a whopping six image galleries that cover *Deadbeat* and several of the short films. Rounding out Arrow's bonus-laden Blu-ray are a quartet of heavy metal videos—really, three videos for Superjoint and Pantera (including a director's cut of "Revolution is My Name") and a nearly 30-minute video album for Damien Storm.

Budd Wilkins

THE GIANT BEHEMOTH

Directed by Douglas Hickox & Eugene Lourie
(1959) Warner Archives Blu-ray



The Giant Behemoth (1959) opens with storm clouds brewing above some not so gently rolling ocean swells, accompanied by a forbidding film score, and followed quickly by stock footage of various marine atomic tests. The storm clouds are portentous indeed, as marine biologist Steve Karnes (Gene Evans, *Donovan's Brain*, 1953; *Cattle Queen of Montana*, 1954) warns a group of British scientists in a rather protracted opening scene where he explains the "perfect storm" that is allowing the ocean food chain of irradiated creatures from atomic testing to possibly lead to unbelievable mutations.

Following a very reserved British debate of the realities of what Karnes has told the group, he finishes with the cryptic "Who can tell when this, whatever it is, will rise to the surface and strike back at us!" Unfortunately, for a small fishing village on the Cornwall coast, that "whatever it is," claims its first victim soon thereafter—an old fisherman who looks skyward and is obscured by blinding white light and a telltale 1950's style "radiation sound." Not returning home to his daughter Jean (Leigh Madison) by nightfall, she searches for him at the local pub, where it is assumed her father will be boasting of his catch of the day. Having not appeared at the pub, a local fisherman, John, (John Turner) and Jean find the old man barely alive on the beach and covered with welts and burns. He succumbs to his wounds soon, but when asked what happened, all he can say is, "From the sea. Burning. Like Fire. BEHEMOTH!"

After the old man's death, the local fish population floats to the surface dead, and decimates the village's livelihood. News of this reaches Karnes (Evans) and soon he and Prof. Bickford (Andre Morrell, *The Plague of the Zombies*, 1966; *The Mummy's Shroud*, 1967) are on the scene with all attendant radiation testing gear. A glum looking lot of fisherman, including John (Turner), informs the pair of scientists about the mass death of the fish and their incomes.

The film lingers so long on these initial scenes of John and Jean and her deceased father (even showing the pair in full mourning at his funeral), that it is surprising the two disappear from the story at this point altogether. But, from here on out, the film belongs to Karnes (Evans) and Prof. Bickford (Morrell) as they search for answers to the dead fish and burned victims (John was also burned after touching a pulsating lump of dough-like substance near where Jean's father perished).

Karnes eventually charts a boat to search for answers on the water, where a large glowing spot is noticed beneath the surface. Our first glimpse of the monster comes as Karnes and the old salt of a sea captain spot some very Loch Ness serpent-like curves dipping beneath the surface. Karnes' reaction is so understated here that one wonders if it was an acting choice, or that the director hadn't informed Gene Evans how huge and terrifying the behemoth was supposed to look.

Eventually, the behemoth sticks its head above water and capsizes a ferry, before beginning to rampage full tilt on London. Once the monster appears on land, the viewer witnesses some rather primitive modeling for the creature, as the seams on its legs and elsewhere are clearly visible. Nonetheless, there are plenty of requisite scenes of terrified Londoners screaming and running for their lives, while a few of them fall victim to the radioactive flashes of the behemoth and get cooked to a crisp. Eventually Karnes destroys the beast, but an ominous radio bulletin leaves the audience wondering if another atomic mutation is about to wreak havoc on the East Coast of the U.S.

Gene Evans and Andre Morrell are fine actors with a long list of worthy credits, but the pacing of the film leaves much to be desired for today's audience. Many of the scenes have far too much scientific explanation, and far too little action. But for fans of giant atomic monster sci-fi, *The Giant Behemoth* a winner—if only to see an atomic charged beast running amok on London for a change, rather than the usual stomping of Tokyo to a pulp by a more famous giant lizard.

David A. Kryniak