



FM Directed by John A. Alonzo (1978) Arrow Video Blu-ray

FM reached cinemas in the spring of 1978 and was gone from most of them within a few weeks, but it left a platinum-selling soundtrack album in its wake. In the decades since, despite being hard to see for several years due to complicated music clearances, *FM* gathered a small but ardent cult following. It's a movie with both glaring shortcomings and surprising strengths, and it may hold a nostalgic appeal for viewers who came of age during the halcyon era of FM radio.

When fictional QSKY becomes the top-rated rock radio station in Los Angeles, corporate sleaze ball Regis Lamar (Tom Tarpey) arrives on a mission to translate high ratings into bigger profits. He's opposed by program director Jeff Dugan (Michael Brandon), who understands the station's success rests on its music-oriented approach and the personalities of its quirky disc jockeys (played by Martin Mull, Eileen Brennan, Cleavon Little, Cassie Yates, and Alex Karras). When Dugan gets fired for refusing to play a series of obnoxious commercials for the U.S. Army, his loyal DJs rebel, taking over QSKY and threatening to play music commercial free until their boss is re-hired.

The story includes some patently absurd interludes. For instance, Dugan schemes to broadcast a Linda Ronstadt concert sponsored by a rival radio station; DJ Eric Swan (Mull) has sex with a groupie in the broadcast booth, with his mic accidentally left on. But these shenanigans are given a veneer of verisimilitude by the presence of actual recording artists including Ronstadt (who performs three songs), Jimmy Buffet (supposedly playing a save-the-whales benefit), Tom Petty (present for an in-studio interview), and REO Speedwagon (signing albums at Tower Records in L.A.) Music, naturally, plays wall to wall throughout.

Mull, making his big-screen debut, steals the film with his portrayal of the preening, egotistical Swan, who suffers an on-air emotional breakdown after blowing his chance at a job on television. Brennan also shines as "Mother," an aging record-spinner contemplating retirement. Ezra Sacks' screenplay gives us caricatures, not fully developed characters. That wouldn't be problem if *FM* were as frenetic and zany as, say, *Airplane!*, but the methodical style of first-time director John Alonzo prevents the film from operating in that register. Alonzo, an acclaimed cinematographer (he shot *The Magnificent Seven* and *Chinatown*, among other classics), never helmed another theatrical feature, although he directed four subsequent TV movies. *FM* looks great; Alonzo had the radio station set custom built with lots of glass so he could achieve imaginative effects with reflections and double images. But he and Sacks were on different pages, and as a result the picture's amusing passages and inventive visuals never fully congeal. In its day, critics drubbed *FM* for using the too-easy target of the Army as Dugan's nemesis sponsor, but if the rest of the movie were as funny as its fake Army commercials, *FM* would have been a smash.

The movie drew flak from the rock press because it prominently features the work of artists formerly managed by Irving Azoff, the talent agent-turned record mogul-turned movie producer behind *FM*. "Free form" stations (which QSKY purports to be), where DJs compiled their own playlists, featured a much wider variety of music than what's heard here. QSKY plays standard Album Oriented Rock, leaning heavily on the mellow California sound of bands like Steely Dan, Fleetwood Mac, Eagles, Boz Scaggs, etc. You would never know punk rock was happening by listening to QSKY or watching *FM*. TV's *WKRP in Cincinnati* did a better job of portraying a free form station. Although many viewers assumed that the *WKRP* was inspired by *FM*, both projects were in development simultaneously. The similarities arise because both *FM*'s Jeff Dugan and *WKRP*'s Andy Travis (Gary Sandy) were based loosely on KMET Los Angeles program director Mikel Hunter. Despite its skewed music selections, *FM* captures something of the renegade spirit of FM radio in the days before corporate homogenization destroyed the medium in the 1980s.

Previously, *FM* was available in only in a dicey, bare-bones, manufactured-on-demand DVD-R from Universal's Vault Series. Arrow's new Blu-ray special edition offers the film in an eye-popping 1.85:1 hi-def transfer so sharp that you can sometimes read the spines of the albums in the DJ booth. Colors are vivid. Perhaps more importantly for this film, the sound is also excellent. *FM* was one of the first films released in Dolby Stereo, an experience re-created here with a 2-channel PCM presentation. An optional 5.1 DTS Master Audio track provides even more kick. Finally, there's an isolated music and effects track for those who just want to put on the movie and rock out.

Bonus features abound. These include an extremely entertaining 25-minute interview with star Michael Brandon, who shares juicy stories about the making of the film and his private life in the 1970s, when he was married to *Bionic Woman* star Lindsay Wagner; an informative 23-minute interview with screenwriter Sacks, who was inspired to write this script by his experiences working at KMET as a film critic; and rock critic Glenn Kenny, who offers sneering assessments of all the artists and songs featured in the movie. Also on tap: the original theatrical trailer and three galleries (one for stills, one for promotional materials, and one devoted to various editions of the hit soundtrack album). It would have been ideal if the soundtrack album could have been included here as well, but it's still in print elsewhere.

Brandon suggests that Azoff was more interested in producing a best-selling album than in making a good film. (Movie soundtracks were big business in 1978. The two top-selling LPs of the year were *Saturday Night Fever* and *Grease*; *FM* and *Thank God it's Friday* finished in the Top 60. Those numbers are even more impressive considering that all four were expensive double albums.) Neither Brandon nor anyone else interviewed here attempts to defend *FM* as a movie. That's too bad because, while it's neither as funny nor as authentic as it could have been, *FM* remains an enjoyable ride.

Mark Clark

THE BEAST IN HEAT Directed by Luigi Batzella (1977) Severin Films Blu-ray / DVD



Not for the faint of heart, a decrepit little number also known as *Horrifying Experiments of the S.S. Last Days*. By combining this title and the more commonly known moniker, you can wager a guess as to the contents of this Italian-produced former video nasty.

Luigi Batzella—perhaps best known for *The Devil's Wedding Night* (1973) and billed as Ivan Kathansky here—takes out all of the stops from his previous less-affecting work, reveling in the Naziplotation genre of the late 1970s. The story goes that

Batzella took a lot of the nazi-centered footage from an earlier release (*When The Bell Tolls*), utilizing its story of partisans from a small village fighting against the S.S., and combined it with this unsavory tale set in an experimental lab. Its chief exploit is a horny, hairy Neanderthal beast (Salvatore Baccaro, billed as Sal Boris).

Dr. Ellen Kratsch, a lieutenant in the S.S., is the female Ilsa-esque character, clad in dark clothes and presenting a general kinky demeanor. The Beast is her prize subject, and she's fond of tossing nubile young women into his cage to breed a new race. These sex scenes—all soft-core—become a bit too much to take, as the virile Beast grabs and rips out pubic hair, grunting and groveling to satiate himself. Baccaro throws himself into the role, and that's to be commended, but by the end of its running time, it's almost too much to stomach any longer.

Mismatched footage from Batzella's previous effort, *When The Bell Tolls*, is interspersed with the filthier material, creating a whiplash effect for the viewer. There are interminable dialogue scenes and rote material with gunplay, as the partisans plan their attack. These will be interrupted with scenes featuring Dr. Kratsch in sexy attire, and then its main draw promised on the art of the one-sheet: the beast horrifically raping women in his dank lab-set lair.

SS Experiment Camp was released on VHS back in the day, and was quickly pulled in England—one of the video nasties of the 1980s. It's a film that's almost much more interesting to talk about than to witness; the actual results are cheap, nasty, exploitative. It's not scary, but tacky in its display—a geek or freak show where rats eating a naked woman are its main attraction. Over-the-top in its performances but tepid in its padded running time (again, with its *When The Bell Tolls* footage).

It's an explicit and nasty piece of work, renowned in the already disreputable genre of Naziplotation. You almost want someone to put this work in context. And that's exactly what Severin does in its featurette "Nazi Nasty," a 30-minute interview with film historian Stephen Thrower. Thrower, an expert on the work of Lucio Fulci and Jess Franco, discusses the origins of Naziplotation, through the Ilsa films and how *The Beast in Heat* fits in with all of it. Thrower rhapsodizes about the history of the work while offering the caveat that it is indeed sick, sick stuff.

"Fascism on a Thread: The Strange Story of Naziplotation" is feature-length at 90 minutes, directed by Naomi Holwill and produced by Calum Waddell. The doc traces the scope of the Nazi-related film, from classier efforts like Luchino Visconti's *The Damned* (1969) and Liliana Cavani's *The Night Porter* (1974) (released by Criterion!) to how the genre ended up putting out such disreputable outfits like *The Beast in Heat*. The sub-genre would run its course by 1980, only briefly rearing its head since—Rob Zombie famously parodied it in his faux trailer for 2007's *Grindhouse—Werewolf Women of the SS*, featuring Nicolas Cage and Sybil Danning. Of course Zombie was kidding around, but the actual extravagant results are not very far from the real thing as evidenced in *The Beast in Heat*.

A theatrical trailer rounds out the disc on a release from Severin that is disreputable but fascinating all the same. Thankfully, with a doc and Stephen Thrower on the disc, it becomes an investigative case into a forgotten and distasteful sub-genre of grind house sleaze. It feels more foreign every passing day.

Aaron Graham