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An Interview with Sean Weathers, Indie Director

by *Mike Haberfelner*

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First of all, why don't you introduce yourself to those of us who don't already know you?

My name is Sean Weathers and I'm an independent/guerrilla filmmaker from Brooklyn, New York. My films represent my upbringing, my experiences, my environment and myself: Bleak, gritty, harsh and raw.

What is it like to be an indie filmmaker in New York, and what can you tell us about the local film scene?

It can be rough at times. Shooting guerrilla-style, you always have to keep an eye out for people mugging for the camera and ruining your takes. You also have to keep an eye out for the cops trying to shut you down. You're usually good for 1 or 2 takes before you start attracting a crowd. Shooting in the outer boroughs (meaning anything outside of Manhattan) can be dangerous. You gotta worry about gangs and thugs wanting to either steal your equipment or cause trouble. With the type of films I do, there are a lot of scantily-clad, attractive women. It's tough to even get to the location without feeling a sense of danger because in NY, even the cops are horndogs.

As for the film scene, it's slim pickings depending on what you're trying to accomplish. Most trained actors in NY are theatre actors and most indie filmmakers tend to be film students. I've been doing this since '96 and found most people that do what I do don't last very long and usually go back to their day jobs when the going gets tough.



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What got you into filmmaking in the first place, and did you receive any formal education on the subject?

When I was still in gangs in junior high school, I stole a camera and videotaped my friends doing typical, petty crimes that troubled kids do. As I matured, I started getting into sports and realizing that lifestyle wasn't for me, I still kept the camera and enjoyed recording different activities from the people around me. I worked on a few documentary-type projects before high school when I realized that I wanted to get movies. After high school, I bypassed college and went the self-taught, out-of-pocket route.



Your first feature was I think *House of the Damned*. Now how did that project come into being? And what were your inspirations when writing it?

I wanted to make something that showed my dark sense of humor. So, I chose a campy horror comedy. Inspirations for the film was my favorite television series, *The Twilight Zone*, along with classic horror comedies such as the *Evil Dead*-series, *Return of the Living Dead*, and *Dead-Alive*.



Looking back at *House of the Damned* - is there anything you would do differently nowadays?

It's Murphy's law on set, "what can go wrong will go wrong." So I would've definitely spent more time in pre-production planning scenes and shots out better and rehearsed more with the actors. During production, I would have done less takes. Part of my trademark as a director today is minimal takes. Also in post-production for this film, I spent months searching for editors and working with editors that didn't pay off for me at all. To date, I've edited all of my films.

***They All Must Die* is a very bleak film, even for a rape movie. What were your inspirations for that one?**

They All Must Die is based on real events that I saw growing up in the late 80s and early 90s in the East Flatbush and Bedstuy areas of Brooklyn, NY. All of the characters on screen are based on real people I knew growing up; real situations that happened, real feelings and emotions. Back then, black people in the inner city felt that whites had taken everything from them and all they had left was the ghetto. It didn't matter if the white people who entered the ghetto were interracial dating, coming to buy drugs, or even teachers that taught in local schools. They all got it in

- Lesbian Seduction 1 2005
- House of Shame 1 2008
- Half Moon 2011
- Dead Hooker in a Trunk 2009
- Deep Above 1994
- Star Crash 1979
- Gladiator Eroticus 2001
- Strangler of the Swamp 1946

the end if they overstayed their welcome or said or did something to the wrong person. The attitude back then could be summed up by lyrics from the *Naughty By Nature* song *Ghetto Bastard*, "If you ain't never been to the ghetto. Don't ever come to the ghetto. 'Cause you wouldn't understand the ghetto. So stay the fuck out of the ghetto." The only white people that made it out safe were the cops... The only reason for that was because they were heavily armed and stayed in groups.



They All Must Die must have been a tense experience to shoot, especially for the actors. What can you tell us about the on-set atmosphere?

I deliberately kept the actress away from the actors during rehearsals and the first time they met was during the rape scene to increase the tension. I didn't want them to even know each other's names because I felt anything they knew about each other could take away from the tension in the scene. There were many takes in which the actors got overzealous with the actress and blurred the line between acting and reality; from going too far with the ad-libbed racial slurs to getting much too physical with her. I would end up using a lot of these takes in the film, which is why her character doesn't come off as likeable as she was written in the script. She ad-libbed some racial slurs of her own and a lot of very real punches and kicks in retaliation that made it to the final cut. During the exterior scenes, there were a lot of people being both offended by the racial slurs being yelled to the lead actress and there were also people adding their own racial slurs. During the interior rape scene, neighbors called the cops because it sounded like a real rape was taking place.

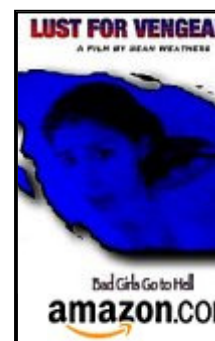


Was They All Must Die ever screened back in the day, and what was the audience reaction like?

It was screened at a local bar in Manhattan to a mixed crowd of white blacks, men and women. People were offended before the rape scene even took place. At the end of the film, when the thugs got away with the rape, it was like the reading of the OJ Simpson verdict. Some of black people started applauding and this led to several fights break out, the cops coming on the scene and multiple arrests.

Not only compared to They All Must Die, Lust for Vengeance is a very refined film. What can you tell us about that movie and especially its non-linear structure?

Lust for Vengeance came together very quickly. It was written, cast, and shot within a 2 month span. There were some positives and negatives of this. One of the positives is that I finished it. After this movie, I would go on to make 4 films that I would not finish. One of the negatives, is that I shot the first draft of the script and because of structural flaws, all of the action happened in the last third of the film. In order to spread things around, I decided to adapt the "sequence approach". All sequences serve as their own *mini-movies* with their own compressed three-act structure. This film is told in 5 sequences that follow the main characters rather than the timeline.



You liken Lust for Vengeance to the Italian giallo-genre. Would you like to elaborate?

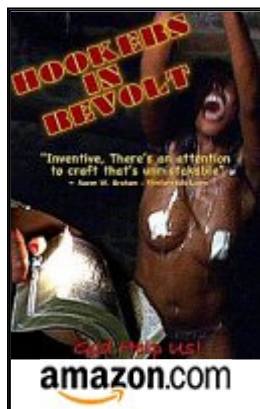


Lust for Vengeance, much like Gialli, combines murder, eroticism, nudity, mystery & whodunit with stylish visuals. I locked myself in a room for over a month watching over 100 Italian thrillers for inspiration for film. The predominant themes are complex murder mysteries that emphasized stylish visuals, techno scores, the whodunit element, violence, gore, and large amounts of melodrama via Italy's long-standing tradition of opera drama. They also generally include liberal amounts of nudity and sex. This is the first & only true Giallo film ever made in the U.S. to date.

Hookers in Revolt is probably your most accomplished film so far. A few words about that one?

Hookers in Revolt, originally titled "Women on Top," is a retro-blaxploitation in which a group of hookers revolt against their greedy pimps. There were over 50 actors, including principal cast and extras, showing up on set throughout the course of the 1st day of shooting. At the start of the day, I was busy shooting 2 of the more complex scenes

in the film at a secondary location with my "cell phone off" policy as to not disturb the shooting. Unfortunately, unforeseen delays left a lot of those actors unsupervised and to their own devices longer than I planned. This would lead to alcohol and drug use on the set, people having group sex, fights and 3 arrests. I would have to deal with separate cast & crew revolts & spend 5 hours trying to talk everyone out of quitting the film. However, not everyone was willing to continue. This incident would effectively end my professional relationship with actor Jeff Roches and in addition to writing the 3 antagonists that were arrested out of the script, I would have to write Roches out as well. This would force me into extending my on-screen time to compensate and lead me to rename the film.



You have based *Hookers in Revolt* on George Orwell's classic *Animal Farm*. a word, why, and what do you think George Orwell would think about your reinterpretation?

I did it because I love the book. We're talking about a man who turned the Russia Revolution into a bunch of animals squabbling on a farm. I think he would have a sense of humor about me turning animals on a farm into hookers arguing for free rights... I would hope.

Footage of three of your unfinished films, *The Erotic Adventures of Samson and Delilah*, *Gangz vs Cults* and *Escape from Bloodbath Island*, were recently released on the DVD *The Unfinished Works of Sean Weathers*. Would you like to talk about these films for a bit, and what was it like seeing the footage once again?



Looking at the footage as I was doing the commentary for the DVD as well as talking about it was incredibly difficult. It was tough to relive all the heartbreaking memories of my biggest failures. Even though I know this is more so a DVD for a diehard fan or a film student than a mainstream audience, I felt releasing this was important for all the people that worked so hard on those projects and myself to have some sort of closure.



As far as I know, quite a few of your unreleased films will see the light of day (or rather the inside of a DVD-player) in 2012. Want to talk about some of those?

I have 4 unfinished films, 3 of them were released on the *The Unfinished Works of Sean Weathers* DVD in 2011 and the 4th was unfinished because of legal reasons. It was an unauthorized sequel for the 1980 movie *Maniac!* - *Maniac Too!*. However, I plan on editing that as a 50 minute short film and releasing it a 2012 DVD of short films called *Something Strange*. In addition to that DVD, which will put a can on what I feel was the first phase of my journey as a filmmaker which lasted from 1996 to 2006, I have 4 HD softcore films coming in 2012. They're titled *The Trade Off*, *Tortured by Regret*, *Scumbag Hustle* and *Ace Jackson is a Dead Man*.

Any future projects you'd like to talk about?

In addition to the previously mentioned films. I have 3 scripts that I have written *Deadly Affair*, which is a murder mystery I plan on shooting later this year. All film noir called *Death Quest*, and an urban gang film called *Code of the Stre*

which are projects I would like to shoot within the next 2 years.

Your films seem to have a 1970's grindhouse feel to them almost invariably. A comment you can at all live with, and would you like to elaborate?

In my opinion I view grindhouse films as being sensational in their advertising and leaving viewers disappointed in the actual product. I feel I deliver all the things that my movies say they will.

A few words about your frequent collaborator Aswad Issa, and how did you first hook up? And what is your collaboration like?



We first started working together when he agreed to be my cinematographer for **House of the Damned**. Because of his previous experience in film and that being my first movie, I looked to him for a lot of advice. eventually led to us collaborating on each other's films, creatively. Our relationship can be stormy at times because we are two different, creative minds. However, our mutual respect and love of film has kept our working relationship and friendship going through the last 15 years.

There are actors that pop up in film after film of yours. Would you like to talk about a few of your favorites from your stable of actors?



Sure. The 3 actors that I've worked with the most are Glenn "Illa" Skeete, Jeff Roches and Waliek Crandall. Illa was a great asset to me because he did the sound for my movies for 10 years and contributed songs to several of my DVD including the **Hookers in Revolt** soundtrack. He was the lead actor in my first and played a supporting role in countless others. Roches was the actor that I've worked with the most; he had a role in all of my early films and also played roles in a lot of Issa's films. He was someone that would eagerly take on any character you gave him. Crandall is someone who has played my sidekick in the last 4 films I've done. I feel a very strong bond with him, not just as a director but also as an actor.

How would you describe your personal approach to directing?

I cast actors who fit the characters I've written and have them play themselves. You see how much potential the actor has based on their previous body of work what they do at the audition and what they do in rehearsal. Then, squeeze everything you possibly can out of them. In regards to other aspects of directing try to blur the line between make-believe and reality as much as possible. I want viewers to look at my films and feel everything they see on screen is really

happening.

Directors who inspire you?

There are so many directors I love. However, if I did have to single a few out, they would be Stanley Kubrick Orson Welles, Andrei Tarkovsky, and Sergei Eisenstein.

Your favourite movies?

Honestly, I've seen so many movies that it's hard for me to say my favorites. But I do know that my favorite one of all is **2001: A Space Odyssey**.

... and of course, films you really deplore?

It's hard to just flat out say I hate a movie. As a filmmaker, I understand that behind the scenes politics play a big part in how a movie comes out. However, I will say that the films that I like the least are films that rely on their budget to tell the story or films that have too many cliches. I don't care how much money you spend on telling me a story, just tell me a good one and I'm fine.

Your website, Facebook, whatever else?

My websites are **FullCircleFilmWorks.com**, **Twitter.com/SeanWeathers**, **Facebook.com/FilmMakerSeanWeathers**.

Anything else you are dying to mention and I have merely forgotten to ask?

I have an hour long weekly podcast called *Full Circle Movie Talk*. More information on it can be found on my website **FullCircleFilmWorks.com**.

Thanks for the interview!

No, thank you. You have an awesome website, I had an awesome time doing this, and hopefully we can do this again in the future.

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