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DEATH BY VHS

By CHRIS ALEXANDER

KILLING ON VIDEO

Indie moviemaker Walter Ruether delves into horror like mom (and pop) used to make.



Death by VHS pulls together stories to mess with your head.

Following in the footsteps of such '80s shot-on-video DIY ditties as *Sledgehammer* and *Redneck Zombies* comes the bloody little cheapie *Death by VHS*, from microbudget filmmaker and ardent horror obsessive Walter Ruether, a.k.a. Scarlet Fry. What this cheerfully im-

poverished shock anthology, recently released by World Wide Multi Media, lacks in polish, it more than makes up for with guerrilla-filmmaking bravado...and globs of homemade splatter. GOREZONE spent some time in the backyard with Ruether/Fry and asked the questions that matter...

GOREZONE: *Death by VHS* was obviously low-budget...but how low was the budget?

WALTER RUETHER: The budget was roughly around \$4-\$5,000. I will always remember one night when I was watching Chris Rock poke fun at *The Blair Witch Project*, and he mentioned that the film cost \$50,000 to make, and his punchline was, "I wonder what they did with the other \$49,000." I suppose you can say the same about *Death by VHS*; if I told you it cost \$10,000, people might wonder what happened to the other \$9,000 [laughs]. Most of our costs went to technical things, such as paying our sound engineer Joseph Newfield and our cameraman and editor David Sabal, both of whom did fantastic jobs for us at a great price.

GZ: Given that both *V/H/S* and *V/H/S/2* were such VOD and disc successes, was *Death by VHS* your bid to capitalize on some of that?

RUETHER: That's a great question, and I'm glad you asked. Originally, the movie was called *Scream Machine*, and we had a whole different wraparound story planned that had to do with the government performing mind-control experiments on soldiers. Each time a test subject was hooked up to the machine, they would hallucinate, and the hallucinations were going to be the movie segments. But due to budget constraints, we had to change it to the current wraparound.

The interesting thing is, we actually wrote it before *V/H/S* came out, but due to scheduling issues—everyone on the crew had regular 9-to-5 jobs and we could only shoot on Sundays, and not every Sunday, either; sometimes there were months between shoots—it took us a long time to make this movie. A piece of the original wraparound can be seen in the special features as a deleted scene.

V/H/S came out while we were in production, and when I saw it, I knew we were onto something. The distributor actually came up with the title; it was still called *Scream Machine* when we submitted it. I'm actually hoping to do a limited VHS run at some point, since those tapes are making such a comeback that I want to capitalize on that aspect. I'm a VHS collector myself first and foremost, and would love to see my movie come out on cassette.

GZ: Who are some of your influences as a filmmaker?

RUETHER: My biggest one would have to be Herschell Gordon Lewis. When I was a teenager growing up in California, my parents moved to a really boring town called Salinas. There was absolutely nothing to do there for teenagers—no concerts, no clubs and hardly any movie theaters. The only thing kids did was get into fights, and not really being a fighter myself, I would go to the local mom-and-pop video stores, rent five or six horror movies at a time, invite people over and we'd watch these videos all day and night. I discovered so many great B-movies this way, and when I saw films like *Microwave Massacre* and

Photos: Courtesy Walter Ruether

Here's one for rabbit fans of DIY horror.



22 GOREZONE #28



thing is sacred when the budget is this low.

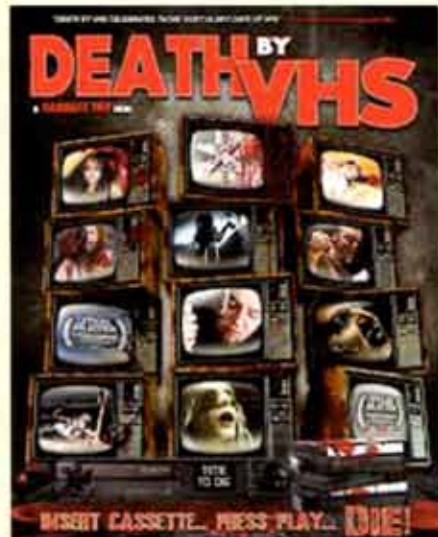
"I'm a VHS collector myself first and foremost, and would love to see my movie come out on cassette."

Boardinghouse, it hit me that even I could make stuff like that. Little did I know at the time that it was a lot harder than I anticipated.

I loved anything shot on video, because I knew it was going to be so bad it was good, which to me is the main ingredient for pure entertainment. I enjoyed all the Herschell Gordon Lewis films, because they were gory and also very funny at the same time. I realized then that I wanted to make horror movies that would gross people out but make them laugh as well. Lloyd Kaufman is a genius at that, and



Red is what you'll shed when he puts on his Santa suit.



was another huge influence on me.
GZ: Who handled *Death by VHS*'s gore FX? What were some of the challenges?
RUETHER: Originally, Laurence Holloway from Scare FX Studios, who did all the effects for and also co-produced my prior movie *Nightmare Alley*, was set to do

Death by VHS. He actually did work on the project with me briefly, but had to leave for a movie called *Voices from the Grave*—another anthology. I was stuck having to do the effects myself, so I had to get really creative; I didn't have the funding to hire a real artist, and I also couldn't afford to buy professional, high-end props. A lot of the challenges were in coming up with ways to pull the gags off cost-effectively and still have them look good. A perfect example was the zombie gut-munching scene: I made the intestines with bread dough that I rolled into long tubular shapes, coated with Vaseline and soaked in stage blood. They looked great, and were also safe for the zombie actors to munch on. It was too bad Laurence had to leave the project, as he is a brilliant artist. I did end up crediting Scare FX in the movie, because he worked on it a little bit and I'm not that big on having a zillion credits. Call me humble.

GZ: What's next for you?

RUETHER: It's kind of funny, because every time I finish a project, I tell myself I'm going to take a two-year break from filmmaking, but after about a month or so I start going crazy and need to get the cre-

ative process going again. Right now I'm working on a short called *Love's a Loaded Gun*, which is going to be part of another anthology similar to *The ABC's of Death* that will showcase new, up-and-coming directors. I can't say too much about it right now; all I know is that I was given the opportunity, and jumped at it. I'm also going to be in a new documentary called *Plastic Movies Rewound*, the ultimate, definitive exploration of the '80s video boom. I will be sharing my experiences of when I was employed at Camp Video at that time, as well as the video stores I worked in. I have some great stories to share.

When that's all finished, I'll start writing my next movie, which will most likely be another anthology. I plan to stick with that formula until I get the budget to do a full-length feature, which is my ultimate goal. I don't think I will ever stop; the great Gene Simmons of KISS once said, "Once you get a taste of it, you just want more," and I couldn't have said it better myself.

To purchase *Death by VHS*, go to www.worldwidemultimedia.net.