



AWAY FOUND

& MURDER

HITCH HIKE TO

HELL



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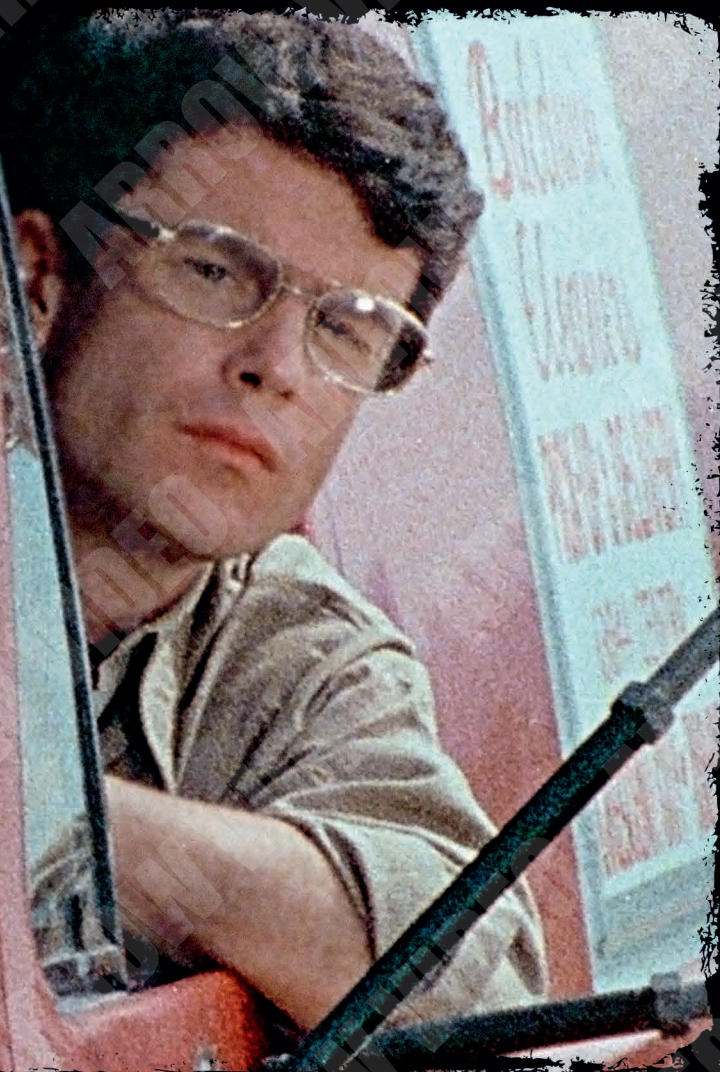
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CAST

Robert Gribbin Howard Martin
Russell Johnson Capt. J.W. Shaw
John Harmon Mr. Baldwin
Randy Echols Lt. Davis
Dorothy Bennett Mrs. Martin
Mary Ellen Christie Mrs. Burke
Kippi Bell Evelyn Davis
Sheryl Lynn Lisa
John Yates Mr. Burke (as John Grant)
Jacqueline Poseley Sharon
Beth Reis Pam
Jane Ratliff Gail

CREW

Produced and Directed by **Irvin Berwick**
Executive Producer **Frances Adair, Joseph Agnello**
Written by **John Buckley**
Editor **Dan Perry**
Director of Photography **William De Diego**
Music by **Perry Daniels**
Production Coordinator **Michael Frischer**
Set Decorator **Eduardo Cemanó**
Title Song 'Hitch Hike to Hell' Written by **Floyd Huddleston**
Performed by **Nancy Adams**





MURDER IN THE SUN & MOTHER IN THE MIND IRVIN BERWICK'S *HITCH HIKE TO HELL*

by Heather Drain

*"There's danger on the road when you go thumbing a ride. You can never tell when you hitchhike to Hell. There's danger, there's danger on the road."
'Hitch Hike to Hell' - Nancy Adams*

Horror is a genre that often plays with shadows and the dark unknown, whether it's a ghostly apparition, the rumbling of an unsettled grave, or a monster under the bed. But what if that monster under the bed is actually your friendly dry-cleaning delivery man unleashing his psycho-sexual murderous rage in the bright Californian sun upon teenage hitchhikers? Welcome to the one of a kind film experience that is Irvin Berwick's 1977 grim-gem, *Hitch Hike to Hell*.

Hitch Hike to Hell is a work that is utterly and unapologetically nihilistic. The first minute of the film sets the pace, with its opening frames of darkness as a woman screams off camera, to a blast of color as her bloodied and newly deceased face emerges on screen as we see the blood red title of the film. Never fear because the movie never loosens its grip or resolve to show us humanity's bleakest side, which while it's never going to be the most popular approach, it is a more honest one.

At the center of the movie is Howard, played to absolute perfection by Robert Gribbin. Howard is young, attractive in a sort of nebbish way, drinks his milk (no doubt fortified, pasteurized, and whole), and loves his mother more than anything. He often walks around with a little playful smile on his face, and from the outside, has all the hallmarks of an All-American poster boy. He always picks up a hitchhiker, but God help them if they are running away from home. Like a Pavlovian sex killer, the minute a hitchhiker, gender and age be damned, starts showing any signs of disrespect towards their family, especially their dear old mother, Howard snaps.



Unlike your typical slasher film, any sense of mystery is immediately eschewed, with the character of Howard being not only the closest thing we have to a main character, but also one with shades of depth and insight. He is not some automaton bringer of rape and death, but an obviously damaged soul living in a world where neglect is rife enough for people like Howard and his victims to exist. We're spared any overexposed reasons for why he molests and kills but are given a few clues. His mother is never shown as abusive but doting to a wholly unhealthy degree. In fact, Howard is mothered to the point of being smothered (excuse the rhyme, but it had to be done!), with her clinging to him too close for comfort whenever he starts screaming in his sleep.

While we're never shown any actual incest, given how Howard's murders always have a sexual element to them, it is a safe assumption that he is, best case scenario, highly physically repressed. Just soak in the mondo disturbing waters when Howard threatens "I'm gonna do momma a favor" before he rapes and murders one of the runaways. We also learn that Howard had a sister named Judy, who their mother "treated like gold," who ran away from home. (One wonders if she ran away due to the mother or due to Howard and his possible sexual fixation on his sister.) His mother even mentions the growing spate of murders, wondering if Judy had suffered a similar fate, with her son grumbling that the slain girl, "...had it coming..."

Children and adults paying for the sins of their family is a motif all throughout *Hitch Hike to Hell*. Howard is obviously a product that has emerged out of some kind of dysfunctional Oedipal-clingy swamp. The runaways featured are often misfits and teens running from an unloving and abusive home life. One sixteen-year-old runaway, Pam (Beth Reis) gets picked up by the police, led by the weary Captain Shaw (played by veteran TV actor Russell Johnson, who is a million miles away from *It Came from Outer Space* [1953] and *Gilligan's Island* [1964 – 1967]). Calling Pam's parents to pick her up results in the mother acting put out and the father yelling at Shaw to never call them again. Most kids who run away are running for a good reason and Pam is no exception. Even when she is warned about the killer on the loose, her response of "I'll take my chances" lets you know her death certificate is already written. (Given the dire glimpses of her home life, Pam's odds of having any kind of healthy and happy future were more than likely already doomed.)

The film's willingness to further explore the big ugly comes to a full head when Howard picks up an eleven-year-old hitchhiker, Lisa (Sheryl Lynn). She's a sweet kid who is

heading towards her grandmother's after getting weary of hearing her parents fight so much. Unlike poor Pam, Lisa's parents are not horrible people but just stressed about money and bills. In a more modern film, this is where the police would arrive just in time to spare Lisa from her predecessors' fate because surely to the moral film gods, this little lamb will not be sacrificed. Well, this is the 1970s, so when Lisa's distraught mother sees the naked body of her now dead little girl in a dumpster, you know that we are now in the living end.

Hitch Hike to Hell was originally distributed by Harry Novak via his company, Boxoffice International Pictures. Novak's work as a distributor, producer, and big-time personality has made his name one of the most notable ones in the realms of sexploitation and exploitation cinema. Taking a look at some of the titles attached to Novak's name, it is no small wonder why! Working as a press book and poster distributor for RKO Pictures in his teens, by the time the 1970s hit, Novak's company was releasing southern sleaze like *Sassy Sue* (1973), counter-cultural musical surrealism like *Roseland* (1971), controversial cult classics in the form of *The Sinful Dwarf* (1973) and even some of Jean Rollin's earlier films, like *The Nude Vampire* (1970) and *Requiem for a Vampire* (1971). It's a production pedigree that is as wild and varied as the films themselves. Like so many of Novak's productions, the ad art for *Hitch Hike to Hell* is glorious and golden in its luridness. The pulp-esque poster art features two hitchhiking lovelies sporting bikini tops, rolled up jean shorts and come-hither smiles with their thumbs out a-blasting. It's some beautiful and fantastically misleading artwork, with nary an allusion to the one-way-ticket to trauma town that the film truly is.

Director Berwick has a fascinating history, beginning with his work as a piano prodigy to making his film directing debut with the campy-nutzoid-Z-film classic, 1959's monster fun-schlock-film, *The Monster of Piedras Blancas*. Berwick would go on to work on a handful of films after that and would eventually end his directing career in 1979 with the bizarro-snotty-teen-crime-film, *Malibu High*. His direction here is tight and apt, with the film's darker and sleazier elements roping it in from feeling too much like one of the better TV movies of the week that riddled the American airwaves during the time period.

The real anchor of *Hitch Hike to Hell* though has to be Gribbin's utterly compelling performance as Howard. He goes from earnest Boy Scout leader-type one minute, to dark-eyed rapist murderer the next and then suddenly is weeping in the fetal





position over everything he has previously done. Given his mother-fixation and the psycho-sexual bent to the killings, it would be ridiculously easy to compare him to horror's most infamous momma's boy, Norman Bates, as played by Anthony Perkins in Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) and its subsequent sequels. (The less said about the fang-less 1998 Gus Van Sant remake, the better.) But *Hitch Hike to Hell* mercifully doesn't quite go that easy a route (as easy as a dark tale about a young man killing while dressing up and essentially being his dead and abusive mother can be!) and Gribbin very much makes Howard his own character. The actor pulls off Howard's duality splendidly and with that, creates one of the most underrated yet effective murderers in American drive-in horror cinema. Given his undeniable talent, it truly is a shame that he wasn't given more film acting work throughout his career.

Hitchhiking in 1960s and 70s American cinema tended to reflect the cultural attitudes going on in the country. There was the freewheeling and free-loving, pseudo-hippie-dippiness of films ranging from the failed Cher vehicle, *Chastity* (1969) to Chuck Vincent's gold-hearted coming-of-age flick, *Blue Summer* (1973). But in the wake of various high-profile murders, including the to this day still unsolved Santa Rosa hitchhiker murders that occurred between 1972 and 1973, about approximately 450 miles from the fictional killings at Howard's hands in Encino, as well as the Zodiac Killer, and Vaughn Greenwood, the Skid Row Slasher, it was only a matter of time before things would get cinematically a lot darker. While the Santa Rosa murders are not alluded to by Russell Johnson's tired Captain when he talks about real life incidents, the fact that the victims were mostly teenagers, some as young as twelve, and often sexually violated, makes it feel like a queasy but interesting connection.

One would be remiss to not mention the film's haunting, country-tinged theme song. The baleful croon of "...you can never tell when you hitchhike to Hell..." is arguably as memorable as the killings and familial angst that writhe within the film itself. In fact, the power of old-school country music should never ever be underestimated when utilized in horror movies in general. The theme to *Hitch Hike to Hell* is right there with other sonic-corn-pone tunes that would be used to great effect in titles like Tobe Hooper's *Eaten Alive* (1977) and *Motel Hell* (1980). Only the blues genre could come just as close to embodying the cruel universe residing inside *Hitch Hike to Hell*.

The titular song was sung by Nancy Adams, a pop-folk singer who had been previously featured on the soundtrack for Disney's *Robin Hood* (1973) as well as appearing on

the 1970 Neil Diamond album, *Tap Root Manuscript*. The music backing Nancy on this theme was provided by her husband, the intensely prolific songwriter, screenwriter, and television producer, Floyd Huddleston. Huddleston's songwriting résumé alone is sharp, working with such musical legends like Peggy Lee, Doris Day, Les Baxter, Sarah Vaughn, Cliff Richard, and even Sandie Shaw. Among that very respectable and illustrious roster is another Huddleston penned song, which is the title tune to *Hitch Hike to Hell*. This means we get to live in a world where both a Disney cartoon and Cliff "Poet to the People" Richard have a link to a film distributed by Harry Novak. This is clearly beautiful.

Hitch Hike to Hell is such a nasty and fascinating film with few brethren of its era. In some ways, it could be paired with the Nicholas Worth 1980 vehicle *Don't Answer the Phone*. The latter has similar TV movie pacing when the main character isn't on screen, though *Hitch Hike to Hell* fares better since Berwick's concise direction keeps all of the scenes at a good pace with interesting characters. With *Don't Answer the Phone*, everything kind of lapses to beige once Worth is out of frame. Instead, it would make a great double bill with the unfairly obscure 1973 cult horror oddity, *The Psychopath* aka *An Eye for an Eye*. Both titles feature an exceptional lead and uncomfortable peek into bad 1970s parenting.

While *Hitch Hike to Hell* is not the sleaziest or the most violent killer-on-the-road film by any stretch, forty plus years later, it still packs a strong-fisted punch and sports one of the most underrated lead performances and theme songs that came out of American Drive-In cinema in the 1970s.

Heather Drain is a fringe culture writer who currently writes for Art Decades as well as her own site, Mondo Heather. She is also the Music & Culture Editor at Diabolique Magazine.





ABOUT THE RESTORATION

Hitch Hike to Hell has been exclusively restored by Arrow Films and is presented in 1.33:1 and 1.78:1 with mono audio.

A 35mm blow-up print was scanned in 2K resolution, graded and restored at OCN Digital Labs. The presentation of the film is in keeping with the condition of the only available elements.

The soundtrack was sourced from the original optical negatives. Additional audio remastering was completed at Pinewood Studios.

All original materials used in this restoration were accessed from Valiant International Pictures.

Colorist: **Lannie Lorence**
OCN Digital: **Joe Rubin**
Pinewood Studios: **Rebecca Budds, Jashesh Jhaveri**

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Disc and Booklet Produced by **Ewan Cant**
Executive Producers **Kevin Lambert, Francesco Simeoni**
Technical Producer **James White**
QC **Nora Mehenni, Alan Simmons**
Production Assistant **Samuel Thiery**
Blu-ray Mastering and Subtitling **The Engine House Media Services**
Artwork by **The Twins of Evil**
Design **Obviously Creative**

SPECIAL THANKS

Alex Agran, Heather Drain, Michael Mackenzie, Marc Morris,
Alexandra Heller-Nicholas, Carmen Novak, Stephen Thrower





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