





# CONTENTS

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Cast and Crew 4

“Something Rather Dark and Bloody” 7  
by Stephen Thrower

About the Transfer 30



## CAST

**Sandra Cassell** as Mari Collingwood

**Lucy Grantham** as Phyllis Stone

**David A. Hess** as Fred 'Weasel' Padowski

**Fred Lincoln** as Fred 'Weasel' Padowski

**Jeramie Rain** as Sadie

**Marc Sheffler** as Junior Stillo

**Gaylord St. James** as Dr. John Collingwood

**Cynthia Carr** as Mrs. Estelle Collingwood

**Ada Washington** as Ada

**Marshall Anker** as Sheriff

**Martin Kove** as Deputy

**Ray Edwards** as Mail Man

## CREW

Written & Directed by **Wes Craven**

Produced by **Sean S. Cunningham**

Director of Cinematography **Victor Hurwitz**

Edited by **Wes Craven**

Assistant Editor **Stephen Miner**

Costume Design by **Susan E. Cunningham**

Assistant Director **Yvonne Hannemann**

Associate Producer **Katherine D'Amato**

Wardrobe & Make-up by **Anne Paul**

Special Effects by **Troy Roberts**

Original Music by **David Alexander Hess**

Additional Music by **Steve Chapin**







## “SOMETHING RATHER DARK AND BLOODY”

by Stephen Thrower

*The Last House on the Left* is no ordinary horror movie. The story of two teenage girls, Mari and Phyllis, who fall into the hands of a gang of merciless sadists, it's a relentless tale of torture, humiliation and violence that sickens and fascinates in equal measure. The film proved so distressing, to so many who saw it, that for years it was emblematic of the depths of depravity to which the horror genre could sink. Banned as a 'video nasty' in the UK in the early 1980s, it was finally passed uncut on DVD in 2008. Even when seen today, almost half a century after it was made, it can take a heavy toll on the unprepared viewer.

Wes Craven, who wrote, directed and edited the film, was one of a new generation of filmmakers emerging from the sixties counterculture, who rejected the prevailing traditions of the horror genre and carved a new style based on harsh realism and sidelong social critique. Instead of cloaking the horrors with historical distance, or abstracting themes through poetic metaphor, Craven adopted a more direct way of addressing the dark side of human behaviour. *Last House* depicted rape, mutilation, torture, grotesque acts of revenge, and the culprits were not monsters from the shadows of antiquity: they were people you might bump into on the street. Shot hand-held on grainy 16mm, then blown up to even grainier 35mm, the film resembled newsreel footage of a crime scene. It was as though a documentary crew had accompanied these characters on their one-way journey to oblivion. From the hand-held camera's 'you are there' perspective we find ourselves silent witnesses to sustained acts of cruelty and degradation. Populated with unknown actors, many of whom were terrifyingly believable, the film gave no indication that it would recognise any boundaries of taste or restraint. Watching it for the first time, one feels at the mercy of dangerous, unpredictable, possibly amoral artists, willing to ride roughshod over your sensibilities. As Craven told David Szulkin, in his definitive book on the film: "It was conceived as the be-all and end-all of outrageous films." [1]



To be 'outrageous' at the beginning of the 1970s meant, among other things, riding the crest of the sexual revolution. A Swedish art film *I Am Curious (Yellow)* (1967), which featured full frontal nudity and staged sexual intercourse, had been the twelfth highest grossing picture in America in 1969 (earning \$6,600,000), just behind the zeitgeist-defining *Easy Rider*. *Mona* (1970) brought unsimulated non-penetrative sex scenes to American movie theatres for the first time, and *Deep Throat* (1972) sealed the deal with full-on hardcore sex, receiving coverage in the mainstream press and giving birth to 'porno-chic'. Looking back at the early 1970s, it's hard to believe just how steep the transition was. A frontier anarchy was at play in low budget moviemaking, and long-standing legal impediments were being pushed back, or ignored. Jack Gennaro's 1971 film *D.O.G. (Deviations On Gratifications)* included a scene, mentioned casually by *Variety*, no less, in which, "a gay youth unsuccessfully attempts to arouse a German Shepherd." [2] This passing reference to bestiality in the leading trade paper of the American film industry gives some idea of the unimagined excesses towards which cinema was leaping as the 1970s dawned. In the age of 'anything goes', the rulebook was in tatters.

*Last House* was the inspiration of two men: writer-director Wes Craven and producer Sean Cunningham. The year before *Last House*, Cunningham had written, directed and produced a soft-core sex film called *Together* for a small independent company called Hallmark Pictures, and he'd invited Craven to help out on it, as associate producer and assistant editor. The two men got on well, and Cunningham was so impressed by Craven's abilities that he offered him a project as writer-director. As Craven recalled: "The people at Hallmark approached Sean with the idea of doing a very violent scary movie. Sean came to me and said, 'Look, if you want to write this film, I'll let you direct it.'" [3]

With *Together* fresh in his mind, it's not surprising that when Craven started working on his "very violent scary movie", sex was integral to his conception. And naturally, since the project was a horror film, the sex would have to be disturbing. The project was originally known as "Sex Crime of the Century", and although the title was changed before release, this provocative phrase survived in the dialogue, as child-molester and murderer Weasel Padowski muses, "I wonder what the meanest, foulest, rottenest, woodsiest sex crime ever was? Hey Sadie, what do you think the sex crime of the century was?" To answer that question, Craven took rape, molestation and mutilation, and added perversion and humiliation for good measure, with the film's lead psycho Krug forcing Phyllis to "piss your pants" in front of the gang, and Sadie snickering, "This is really erotic, man, I dig it!"

Craven's first draft featured even more gross and humiliating sexual situations, as David Szulkin outlined in his book: "One scene featured Krug and Weasel engaging in necrophilia with Phyllis's mutilated corpse; the sequence of Mari's rape and defilement was also rougher and more prolonged. Other incidental sex scenes included Mari masturbating in the shower at the opening of the film and fantasy sequences of Mari and Phyllis getting it on with the rock group Bloodlust." Fred Lincoln, who played Weasel, told Szulkin, "I read the script, and it was absolutely the most disgusting thing I'd ever seen... I mean, it was really hideous." [4] Ultimately, in a decision he must have cherished when his mainstream career took off in the 1980s, Craven decided that some of this material would have to be cut back for practical reasons. It was a close call: the film has a rawness that feels poised to take that extra step into pornography. It's not hard to imagine hardcore close-ups of Krug's rape of Mari, Mrs. Collingwood's homicidal act of fellatio, or Mari and Phyllis's enforced lesbianism (indeed, on-set photos show that the latter was actually shot). Such scenes, however, would have consigned the film to the twilight obscurity of the XXX 'roughies' alongside Alex de Renzy's *Femmes De Sade* (1976) or Tim McCoy and Zebedy Colt's *Sex Wish* (1976), movies which played the 42nd Street grindhouses but never stood a chance of crossing over into mainstream acceptance.

Craven may have dodged a bullet with the sexual content, but when it came to violence he was on firmer ground. Gore, after all, had been around since the early 1960s, unleashed on an unsuspecting world by Chicago provocateur Herschell Gordon Lewis in his groundbreaking shocker *Blood Feast* (1963). Before Lewis, death in the movies was swift and clean. One never saw the grisly details – the camera always flinched, the picture always faded to black. Lewis noted this taboo, and then broke it with a gleeful rambunctiousness. *Blood Feast*, the story of a maniac sacrificing the beehived beauties of Florida to an Egyptian goddess, showed every grisly detail in lurid colour, using ultra-cheap special effects. It was a sizeable hit, so he delivered more of the same: *Two Thousand Maniacs!* (1964), *Color Me Blood Red* (1964), *The Gruesome Twosome* (1966) and *The Wizard of Gore* (1970). To some, his films were pure barbarism. To others, with a black sense of humour, they were so knowingly absurd that laughter overcame the dry heaves.

All of which shows that while *Last House* was bold and new, its innovation was not merely the exposure of guts and gore. Allied to the viscera in Craven's film was a seriousness of intent totally alien to Lewis's work. Very few people laugh at *Last House*. Stunned audiences are taken on a trip into despair. When Sadie pulls loops of intestine from the dying Phyllis, it's a depressing confrontation with the utter emptiness of existence; all



that is human reduced to a bag of steaming offal. As the killers make squalid joyless play with the viscera, they reach a nihilistic endpoint which even they find disgusting.

A closer compadre to Craven in terms of tone and stylistic approach would be George Romero, whose *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) possessed a grim, harrowing quality and a grasp of *vérité* realism which in some ways foreshadowed the Craven film. Both films depict believable ordinary people, whose lives are shattered by violence beyond their comprehension. And in both there was a 'bringing it all back home' quality to the horrors. The most distressing and terrifying situations could take place in mundane everyday settings – just around the corner from your house.

A question often asked is why would anyone make such a shocking and repulsive film? The answer is complicated, and depends on a degree of immersion in the context of the times. On the one hand, *Last House* can be seen as a film made by people who wanted to use the horror genre to reflect the evils of the world around them. On the other hand, the gloating extremity of the project, and its semi-pornographic origins, suggest a desire to shock and outrage for the sheer hell of it. "At the time, we were all growing our hair long and saying 'screw you' to the government and everything else," Craven once remarked. [5] What emerges is an intriguing tangle of personal and cultural rebellion, furious social commentary, resurgent Christian moralism, and devil-may-care amorality, a tinderbox of opposing forces which had its roots in the director's religious upbringing.

He was raised in a strict fundamentalist Baptist household: "My mother literally thought the world was created in six days," he explained. "We weren't allowed to do much of anything – drinks, smoke, play cards, have sex or go to the movies." He described himself as "the quirky kid who read books all the time, painted, wrote poetry. So when I began to find my own way, I was very separated from the entire family." [6] By the time he left college and took up teaching he was immersed in the counter-culture, and the seismic social changes of the era wrought their magic on his previously shuttered and repressed character: he read Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, took a passionate interest in the anti-war movement, and while not precisely a hippie, grew his hair and found a place among the kaftaned and love-beaded. Yet he also admitted, "You wouldn't exactly call me a rebel, because I had a very strong religious streak." [7] This puts a curious spin on the violence of *Last House*, in particular when we consider Craven's statements about the infamous disemboweling scene: "My feeling was, as an academic [...] that until you disembowel a human and see the messiness of the inside, you haven't come to the essence of the matter, which is the complete mortality and the kind of unglamorousness of our bodies exempt from our minds and spirit, you know? So I felt it was important to

go to that level." [8] In other words, by descending to the lowest depths of carnality we are given a vision of humanity devoid of soul or spirit. This concept of the body without a soul is a defining characteristic of abjection: the reduction of the human to mere physical matter, or 'messiness' as Craven put it. In other words, while he may have been seeking to shock and outrage viewers, the particular form that Craven's journey into darkness took was influenced by a religious concept: the abjection of fleshly existence in the absence of soul.

This religious dimension accounts for the prevalence of animal references in *Last House*. We hear that the rock group Bloodlust, whom the girls are going to see, "dismember live chickens during their act." [9] When Mari's father says, "Don't you feel sorry for the chicken?" Mari responds sarcastically, "Oh daddy, I couldn't tell you the nights I cried myself to sleep over that chicken." Pointedly, when 'Weasel' first makes a move on the helpless girls, he licks Phyllis's breast and croons, "Chicken-breast!" There's a distinctly Old Testament quality to this, an element of 'whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap', given that Mari herself will soon understand what it feels like to have your life and death treated as nihilistic entertainment. (Likewise, it's a bitter irony that after musing on the subject with Phyllis, Mari will also find out, in a sense, "What it would be like to make it with Bloodlust.") Elsewhere, animal references come thick and fast, and the cumulative effect is to paint the world as a bestial place, with all the concomitant religious associations of lowliness and the absence of human spirit. Phyllis, we hear, "takes care of the horses down the Johnson place ... from what Nancy Springer tells me, that's not all she takes care of". Sadie, whom we've heard described in a radio bulletin as "young, strong and animal-like", calls Krug a "male chauvinist dog" before being corrected by Weasel: "Pig, Sadie. Male chauvinist pig". Krug tells the two girls, "We may be horny old pigs, but we ain't stupid"; Junior waxes lyrical about frogs and makes cartoon 'ribbit' sounds; when the girls say they want to buy some grass, Weasel smirks, "You guys ain't cows, is ya? Little cows, looking for some grass? Let me hear you moo!", to which Sadie adds, "Yeah, and they got these cute little udders on 'em!"; and during the torture of Mari, Weasel gloats, "Little piggy's all scared!" The cops have animal-themed dialogue too: after taking a call from Mari's distraught father, the Sheriff says "Hot damn, I wish I was something else sometimes", to which his dimwitted deputy responds, "You mean like a duck or somethin'?" Later, a car-full of rock fans yell "We hate pigs!" as the stranded policemen try to hitch a lift, and Ada the chicken farmer (the film's only black character) refuses to make room for the bumbling cops in her wagonful of caged chickens. These last two situations, with their finger pointed at those who hate or obstruct the police, would perhaps have been more at home in a script Sean Cunningham was working on in early 1972, while *Last House* was being edited, an unfinished project called "Man in the Middle" which Cunningham described



Peace





thus: "It takes a look at a big city cop – an upright guy, not a 'Joe' type – who tries to do his job honestly, tries to understand kids who call him 'pig', but finally becomes painfully frustrated in a society that doesn't seem to hold anything sacred." [10] Note too Cunningham's reference to the film *Joe* (1971), which was mentioned directly on the poster for *Last House*: "It's just across the street from 'Joe!'" [11] Evidently there was a desire on Cunningham's part to tell a less hostile story about cops, perhaps as a reaction against his immersion in Craven's anti-establishment world-view during the making of *Last House*.

Craven's hellish first draft of *Last House*, with its necrophilia and hardcore sex, makes more sense when viewed as the breaking of a dam following his rejection of a strict religious upbringing. There's a flailing, furious, smash-anything quality to its planned but never executed sequences. The death of Phyllis, for instance, was originally intended to be even worse. Sadie was supposed to gouge out Phyllis's eyes, cut out her tongue, sever her breasts, and mutilate her womb. In the end, none of these depredations were filmed. Strikingly, however, as the flood of obscene and shocking ideas burst forth, Craven's underlying moral principles came to light too, demonstrating that beneath the urge to outrage the audience was a considered and serious outlook on the world. *Last House* was written and directed by a man at a crossroads in his life: Craven's first marriage collapsed in 1969 and his swerve into filmmaking replaced a much safer career in academia. It was a time of contradiction and turbulence, of wild disgusted rage against the establishment, yet all the while Craven tempered these feelings with an academic's moral questioning. As Craven told Patrick Goldstein, "I don't just carve people up on screen ... You can't solve everything with violence and revenge. You can go as far back as the Greek philosophers to see that the chain of revenge has to be stopped or it'll go on forever. It's obvious that the old-fashioned, John Wayne philosophy – that violence can cure your ills – doesn't work anymore." [12]

This ethical point about revenge, which motivates and defines the second half of the film, is a vexatious issue indeed. *The Last house* stirs in the viewer the very bloodlust they've spent the first hour of the film recoiling from, as the 'Collingwood brood' fight back against their daughter's killers. The last moments however, with the Sheriff's futile plea to Mari's chainsaw-wielding father – "John, for God's sake don't!" – and the final shot of the father soaked in blood, his face etched with haggard despair, suggests that the righteous vengeance the film has so thrillingly set up, with ingenious booby-traps and much oddball inventiveness from the parents, must now be snatched from the audience's jaws with a chastising wag of the finger. Such is the conflicted, antagonistic war of ideas that the film strives to articulate.

The use of gory spectacle for artistic purposes was not unknown at the turn of the 1970s, in fact it had a serious - if *outré* - pedigree. It was an animating principle, for instance, in the performances of the Viennese 'actionist' Hermann Nitsch, who visited New York in October 1970 and staged one of his typically confrontational performance art spectacles at New Jersey's Douglass College, an event which hit the headlines after janitors complained about having to clear up the bloody mess afterwards. A local paper, *The Central New Jersey Home News*, described the event in detail the next day: "During the performance, the short, heavy-set Nitsch encouraged his audience of 150 to participate in kneading meat into pulpy masses. Then he began to cut open a skinned lamb on a cross at one end of the room, letting its blood drip on a blindfolded man lying beneath it. Nitsch and his assistants stuck their arms into the lamb, letting the organs fall next to the prone male's head, as the sounds of whistles, guitar strings, trumpets, flutes and drums blared. Some of the 150 students walked out of the performance. At least one girl was found crying outside. Some stood in the bleachers, not participating. Many at times wore an expression of distaste. But some appeared to enjoy it. 'This brings one back to the infantile level of tactile sensation,' said one grinning, curly-haired male student, covered with blood from punching and tearing brains and lungs apart." [13] A connection to events in Vietnam was inescapable, as far as the college's Dean was concerned: "My understanding is that it was a way of interpreting to students what war is like," she said, "To make them think (about the effects.)" [14] Did Craven, who was teaching college in New York State at the time, at the Clarkson College of Technology (later named Clarkson University), hear about the controversy? He would soon take precisely this approach to visceral confrontation in *Last House*.

What could make a liberal arts major, anti-war protestor and humanities professor so angry that he could direct a film like *Last House*? Craven provided the answer on several occasions, perhaps never more forcefully than in a radio interview with Fresh Air's Terry Gross in 1980: "It was during the height of the Vietnam War, and I felt like America as a whole country - myself was becoming immune to violence. We were watching it - I literally was watching people dying on my television screen while I was eating dinner, you know, and several times caught myself, you know, with mouthfuls of food and nausea coming over me with - what? You know, this is horrible. I mean, this is really horrible." [15]

Given that *The Last house* is not 'about' Vietnam, in any rigorous or literal sense, precisely how did Craven's exposure to coverage of the war influence the film? To answer, we must turn to the most infamous event of the Vietnam War, the My Lai Massacre, which took place on 16 March 1968. On that day, a hundred-strong unit of American infantry mounted a four-hour attack on an entire Vietnamese village: men,



women, the elderly, children: even babies. The death toll topped 500. "You didn't have to look for people to kill; they were just there. I cut their throats, cut off their hands, cut out their tongue, their hair, scalped them. I did it. A lot of people were doing it, and I just followed," stated one soldier, interviewed later for a documentary about the atrocities. [16] "The boys enjoyed it. When someone laughs and jokes about what they're doing, they have to be enjoying it," said another. Details of what happened that day remained secret for months, until the perpetrators came home to their loved ones, and confessed to the murder of dozens of innocents. In April 1969, eyewitness Ron Ridenhour, a helicopter door gunner, sent a registered letter detailing what he had seen to a number of government leaders, including President Nixon. A terrible thing had happened, he told them, "something rather dark and bloody." [18] The Army Inspector General's office opened an investigation, and in September '69 they charged the man who led the unit: Lieutenant William "Rusty" Calley. Even so, the story didn't gain traction in the national press until November 1969, when the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* ran photos of the massacre taken by army photographer Ron Haerber. *Life* magazine followed suit on 5 December. The pictures provided stomach-churning confirmation of Ridenhour's account: laid out in coffee-table magazine colour were the grubby details of mass murder: blood-soaked dead bodies, limbs twisted randomly, baby corpses sprawled in the mud, guts slipped from stomach cavities onto the ground, dirt and straw stuck to bloody flesh. The loss of human dignity was as powerfully repellent as the blood, revealing the appalling wantonness of the massacre and the total disrespect for the victims.

Rumours circulated, which turned out to be true, that the pictures barely scratched the surface of what had taken place that day. Sadistic acts had been committed: the men carved "C Company", or the ace of spades symbol, into the chests of some of their victims; they raped women and ripped open their vaginas with knives before killing them. [19] Some of these details are echoed precisely in *Last House*: for instance, when Krug carves his name into Mari's throat before raping her, or the intended scene of Sadie cutting out Phyllis's tongue and slicing up her womb. In the original script, Krug was to have told Mari: "You'll have plenty of time to feel the pain. Weasel was a specialist at that, back in Vietnam. He got so good at it that they transferred him out of the combat zone." [20] This would have laid it on the line, of course, but for unknown reasons Craven decided against it during the editing process, reducing the dialogue to "You'll have plenty of time to feel the pain" and then fading down the rest.

As if the atrocities themselves were not enough, the response from sizeable sections of the public was another depressing blow for an anti-war protestor's faith in human nature. In a survey conducted by *Time* magazine on the 12th January 1970, 65% of

those who responded said that "incidents such as this are bound to happen in war". 13% stated they had no opinion on My Lai; only 22% expressed moral misgivings. [21] One man quoted in *The Wall Street Journal* said: "What do they give soldiers bullets for—to put in their pockets? That's the way war is," while a woman responded in the same news article, "Oh, fiddle. Every war has that. War is war." [22] As *Time's* editorial mused, a substantial percentage of Americans seemed willing "to tolerate the intolerable, which is not always a virtue." [23] On 29 March 1971, a jury of six (five of whom had served in Vietnam) convicted William Calley of the premeditated murder of twenty-two Vietnamese civilians, and sentenced him to life imprisonment. The ruling was met with a barrage of resentful criticism: a significant number of people seemed to believe that Calley should be let off. Public reaction had swung in his favour, and Calley was treated as a martyr.

If one is a cynic regarding exploitation films, and therefore moved to doubt the credibility of Craven's assertions regarding the influence of the Vietnam war on *Last House*, it's worth remembering that he began work on the script just four months after Lieutenant Calley's conviction, when public protests in the soldier's favour were at their most vociferous. On 1st of April 1971 President Nixon ordered that Calley be released from military stockade and placed instead under house arrest, a decision that drew applause when announced in the House of Representatives. Subsequent news reports of Calley's life under house arrest included tales of him romping with a new puppy, building model aircraft, cooking dinners with his girlfriend, and planting a tomato patch in his back garden. [*The Orlando Sentinel*, 9 July 1971] In August, as Craven worked on the script, Calley's superior officer, Captain Ernest Medina, went on trial, charged with failing to prevent his underling's actions, and with personally shooting a Vietnamese boy and woman. He was acquitted of all charges. On the 20th of August, Calley's life sentence was commuted to twenty years; under military law this meant he would be eligible for parole as early as 1977. (He was in fact released on parole in 1974, having served less than four years, most of it under house arrest.) As the story played out across the news editorials and letters pages of the American press, it's no stretch at all to believe that these events coloured Craven's original script. The tendency for sections of the public to excuse the horror, even when faced with first hand testimony from the perpetrators, is particularly striking, and a likely spur to the film's confrontational approach to violence. Who could blame Craven for resolving that viewers of his film should have as hard a time as possible 'tolerating the intolerable'? There is in the film a desire to rub the audience's nose in the sheer squalid ugliness of killing, to force the viewer to confront a dreadful truth about mankind. We're barbaric, we are brutal, and when it suits us we will shrug off the most appalling acts of horror. After a moment's self-awareness of the depths to which they've sunk, conveyed to us by glimpses of the







killers' eyes as they evade each other's glances, Krug, Weasel and Sadie head for the lakeside to wash off the blood of the girls they've just butchered, cracking jokes as they do so. Minutes later they have dressed for dinner and inveigled their way into the Collingwood household, their fleeting self-disgust forgotten. As Craven put it in 1980: "Too much of American cinema dealt with reaffirming fantasies [...] And at the same time in the 'real world' [...] we were seeing more and more of the veils stripped away, you know? The myth of American supremacy and infallibility. The myth of, you know, bombs dropped to win wars and you don't see the people that they hit [...] that the American soldier was heroic in all cases and never did anything that was terribly disturbing." [24]

Vietnam's legacy of shame is written into the film, albeit by a neophyte filmmaker still working off the frantic energy of late-blooming rebellion. If you doubt it, look again at Ron Haerberle's photographs, and recall the violence in the film. Think of the blood oozing from the bodies of the girls. Think of the straw and grass sticking to the blood stains on Mari, and on Krug as he mounts her. The awkward sprawling posture of the disemboweled Phyllis, slumped beside a tree like a tossed aside dummy. The cutting of a killer's name into the flesh of a screaming girl. The flicker of remorse experienced by the killers, pushed back down into the pit of forgetfulness so that nothing need change. There is, in *Last House*, a boiling well of anger at the war, tangled up with a young director's aesthetic thrill at perpetrating a shock to the prevailing order. The result is explosive, ragged and conflicted, with competing forces pulling this way and that.

There is one more influence on *Last House*, namely the savage cluster of killings committed in 1969 by members of 'the Manson Family', a commune of drop-outs, runaways and delinquents whose crimes included the gruesome murder of heavily pregnant actress Sharon Tate, and four of her guests, at her home in Los Angeles. A total of eight murders (nine including Tate's unborn child) took place between May and August 1969; Manson and his followers were arrested at various times and locations between October and December that year. Their trials began on 15 June 1970, and Manson himself was found guilty on 25 January 1971. Craven wrote *Last House* in August 1971, when the aftershocks of the case were still echoing through American culture, and although the Manson aspects are less pivotal to the film than the Vietnam influences, they are resonant nonetheless. *Last House's* gang of killers may not be hippies, and leader Krug Stillo is in no way modeled on Manson, but together the killers form a travelling unit, a corrupt 'family', with Krug as father, Junior as son, Sadie as a kind of incestuous daughter, and Weasel as sidekick and sick 'uncle'. The Manson connection is most apparent in relation to Sadie; among the Manson girls was a 21 year-old called Susan Atkins, better known to the Manson family as 'Sadie Mae Glutz'. *Last*

*House's* inclusion of a female killer of that name, whose cruelty and lack of empathy is equal to the men's, can only have been influenced by Atkins and the other Manson girls, who spent their trial appearances laughing, snickering, singing songs, and generally disrupting the proceedings. During the trial, Atkins showed no remorse, and boasted of her callous words to Sharon Tate on the night of the murders, as the bound woman begged for her life and that of her baby: "Look, bitch, I don't care about you. I don't care if you're going to have a baby or not. You're going to die and I don't feel anything about it." Another parallel can be found in Sadie's bisexuality (love letters written by Atkins to Kitt Fletcher, her former cellmate at the Sybil Brand Institute for Women, came to light during the Manson trial), and the use of the words "Little piggy's all scared" by Weasel (Atkins used Tate's blood to paint the word 'PIG' on the victim's door.) Finally, given the preoccupation with bestial acts, the film's description of Sadie as "animal-like" brings to mind the revelation that after the LaBianca murders, Atkins and several others of the Family staked out yet another house, but abandoned their plans after finding no one at home. Before leaving, 'Sadie' defecated in the stairwell...

In the early 1970s, the question of who you could trust became a thorn in the side of the counter-culture. Instead of hip versus square, the problem became internalised. The Altamont Festival's descent into drugs-and-drink-fuelled violence, the horrendous Manson killings, and the increasing use of heroin among the 'turned-on' generation brought dark currents of negativity and violence into the scene. Hippies were now suspect not only for their louche orgiastic lifestyles and drug-fuelled excesses, but also because it seemed that their stoned philosophizing might morph at any moment into the bloodthirsty paranoid lunacy of Charles Manson and his followers. "All that blood and violence. I thought you were supposed to be the Love Generation?" says Mari Collingwood's mother, when her daughter announces she's going to a concert by the group Bloodlust. And fittingly it is music that conveys, perhaps more than any other element of the film, the paranoia of the period. It does this through casting doubt in the viewer's mind about where the film is truly 'coming from', 'where its head is at', because the lyrics and lilting melodies seem to mock and make light of the ghastly events we are seeing. Just as the Manson girls laughed and sniggered their way through their court testimony, while boastfully recounting their hideous crimes, so too does *Last House* seem to mock the severity of the actions it depicts. Throughout the film, the music is used provocatively, destabilising our sense of a moral authorial voice. Song lyrics comment on the action, but in a sarcastic, insinuating way. "Wheels turning/ Some of the leaves are turning brown/Coming to gather you/Gathering cherries off the ground," the singer warns, as Mari and Phyllis explore the woodland in which they will be tortured and murdered later. When Mari stumbles away from the sadists who have raped and mutilated her, and walks waist-deep into a nearby lake, a song snidely



accompanies her silent trauma: "Now you're all alone/And you're feeling that nobody wants you". The vocal performance is so unctuously emotional, so phonily sympathetic, the sentiments so droopily solicitous, and the sweet sadness of the musical arrangement so trivialising, that one wonders: *why?* Why this conveyance of syrup and insincerity, at a point when the victim is so totally broken? "You're asking for someone to show that they care/someone who's really there/someone who understands." We sense a callous kind of mirth, as if the mind-set of the killers has leaked out of the film into reality, as though *they* have scored the film: a feeling that creeps up on you even *before* you realise that this is actually almost true: the songs are written and performed by 'Krug Stillo' himself, actor and musician David Hess! The music works at a needling level: insinuating a mockery of the victims that treads the line of plausible deniability. Perhaps most shockingly of all, after Phyllis and Mari have been terrorised and molested at the apartment where they try to buy grass, the next shot shows the gang of psychopaths driving along a country road, the two girls stuffed in the trunk, the roof of their convertible down, enjoying themselves to the accompaniment of a jaunty country bluegrass number with a kazoo chirping away over the top. The lyrics, meanwhile, make light of the situation: "Weasel and Junior, Sadie and Krug/out for the day with the Collingwood brood/out for the day for some fresh air and sun/let's have some fun with those two lovely children/then off 'em as soon as we're done!". The freaked-out viewer is left wondering just whose side the filmmakers are on. It's all very well telling yourself "it's only a movie... it's only a movie...", but where to turn when it seems the movie is directed by people as crazy as the killers? This is where the mind wanders, trying to parse a film in which unspeakable acts of savagery are overlaid with music that seems so callous to the suffering it depicts.

As a testament to its power, and an indication of the darkness into which it taps, *Last House* was greeted on its release with almost universal critical loathing. Out of the handful of truly pivotal horror films of the 1970s it's the one that spent longest in the shadows: reviled, misunderstood and rejected. Its current rehabilitation as a genre masterpiece is truly remarkable. The recuperative process was triggered in the late 1970s by the critic Robin Wood, who identified in the film political themes he considered 'progressive'. Kim Newman in the UK wrote appreciatively about it in the pages of the British Film Institute's 'house magazine' *Monthly Film Bulletin*. Meanwhile, Craven rose to commercial prominence after making less extreme films, and in interviews he came across as serious, affable and thoughtful about his work. He cheerfully admitted stealing a key plot twist for *Last House* from an Ingmar Bergman picture, and showed all the signs of a progressive liberal education, thus assuring himself of future artistic redemption.

On its theatrical release in 1972/73, however, Craven was treated like a pariah. The film made money, but his friends and acquaintances were disgusted, and instead of studio bosses beating at his door, he was greeted with extreme wariness. "I think a lot of people thought I was Charles Manson," he told Patrick Goldstein in 1985, "I'd go meet people at the studios and you could see their faces get very strange. After they'd talked to me for a while, they'd admit that they'd expected to see a crazy man with wild eyes and long, straggly hair." [26] The impact on his personal life was even worse: "I was living on the Lower East Side in a group apartment, and it was a very rich amalgamation of people. Academics and hipsters and dope dealers and musicians, and they all went to see my movie when it came out, and almost all of them were appalled. I literally had people who would no longer leave their children alone with me. Or people that would, when they found out I had directed the film, say 'That was the most despicable thing I had ever seen,' and walk out of the room." [27]

If anyone leaving a screening of *Last House* back in 1972 had been accosted by a visitor from the future telling them that the director would be a big wheel in Hollywood one day, they'd have concluded either that time travel rots the brain, or that civilisation was doomed. Yet the impossible has been achieved: Craven's rehabilitation is complete. Commercially and artistically, he ended up one of the most respected and bankable horror directors of his generation. While *Deadly Blessing* (1981), *Swamp Thing* (1982), *Deadly Friend* (1986), and *Shocker* (1989) failed to hit the mark, Craven would demonstrate an amazing knack for pulling an occasional ace from the pack. *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977) was a solid, effectively scary exploitation flick that toned down the excesses of *Last House*, but the franchise-floating, culture-defining *A Nightmare On Elm Street* (1984) and the post-modern hit *Scream* (1996) clinched his reputation with both cinemagoers and studio heads. To give the world Freddy Krueger, and the studio a money-making franchise, then to hit the horror zeitgeist again with *Scream*, another multi- sequel hit, was evidence of Craven's rare talent to read and even anticipate the mood and desires of the mainstream teen market. Along the way he lived long enough to see film giants MGM release *Last House* on DVD, in an extras-laden package that contextualised the film and shored up its cultural reputation, in a cap-it-all flourish which helped him make peace with this cinematic demon from his past: "I have felt over the years a definite progression or arc from feeling guilty about what I had done with the first one, because certainly there was all that fundamentalist guilt that came pouring back in. Feeling like I'd done something horrible, 'I'm a despicable person and I'm perverse,' and all these things, to a sense of the power and the necessity, in a sense, of horror films and dealing with dark material." [28]







The vast majority of horror films before *Last House* involved monsters, ghosts, vampires, and things that go bump in the night. Wes Craven bucked that trend and dispensed with the notion of evil as something that preys on us from the outer darkness, from the afterlife or Hell. Evil was now the cruelty and savagery of humankind itself: no spirits and demons required. The stark realism of his debut film was not an indulgence or aesthetic offence: it was a moral imperative. In the era of My Lai and Manson, and then forever more, it was time to look the monster squarely in the eye – and admit that it was us all along.

*Stephen Thrower* is the author of *Nightmare USA: The Untold Story of the Exploitation Independents and Beyond Terror: The Films of Lucio Fulci*, both available from FAB Press.



1. David Szulkin, *Last House on the Left: The Making of a Cult Classic* (Published by FAB Press, 1997): p.36.
2. *Variety*, Gennaro film
3. Szulkin, op cit, p.32.
4. Szulkin, op cit, p.37.
5. Wes Craven, interviewed in the featurette "It's Only a Movie" on the MGM Region 1 DVD release, 2002.
6. "Slash: Flying High With A Sultan Of Slash": Wes Craven interviewed by Patrick Goldstein in the *Los Angeles Times*, 9 July 1985.
7. *ibid.*
8. Craven, op cit
9. This is a reference to the infamous incident at the Toronto Rock and Roll Revival concert in September 1969, when Alice Cooper allegedly killed a chicken on stage. The incident is disputed by Cooper himself. It's been alleged that Frank Zappa phoned Cooper the following day and asked if the story that he had bitten off the chicken's head and drunk its blood on stage was true. Cooper denied it, whereupon Zappa told him, "Well, whatever you do, don't tell anyone you didn't do it."
10. Sean Cunningham interviewed by the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, 9 February 1972.
11. *Joe* (1970), directed by John G. Avildsen, earned an Oscar nomination for writer Norman Wexler.
12. "Slash: Flying High With A Sultan Of Slash": Wes Craven interviewed by Patrick Goldstein in the *Los Angeles Times*, 9 July 1985.
13. "Douglass College Tried to Prevent 'Lamb Drama', Dean Says": *The Central New Jersey Home News*, 13 October 1970.
14. *Ibid.*
15. Transcript of an interview conducted on Fresh Air Radio (WHYY Philadelphia) in 1980, reproduced online at <https://www.npr.org/2015/09/04/437320291/fresh-air-remembers-nightmare-director-wes-craven>
16. Varnado Simpson, speaking in the Yorkshire TV documentary *Four Hours in My Lai* (1989).
17. Herbert Carter, speaking in the Yorkshire TV documentary *Four Hours in My Lai* (1989).
18. Ron Ridenhour's full letter can be read at [http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/active\\_learning/explorations/vietnam/ridenhour\\_letter.cfm](http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/active_learning/explorations/vietnam/ridenhour_letter.cfm)
19. From *An Intimate History of Killing* by Joanna Bourke.
20. Szulkin, op cit, p.16.
21. *Time* magazine, 12 January 1970.
22. *The Wall Street Journal* (1 December 1969), p.1, quoted in *The My Lai Massacre in American History and Memory* by Kendrick Oliver
23. *Time* magazine editorial, 12 January 1970.
24. Transcript of an interview conducted on Fresh Air Radio (WHYY Philadelphia) in 1980, reproduced online at <https://www.npr.org/2015/09/04/437320291/fresh-air-remembers-nightmare-director-wes-craven>
25. Quoted many times, including The New York Post article "It's Death Row-Mancing": <https://nypost.com/2008/08/24/its-death-row-mancing/>
26. "Slash : Flying High With A Sultan Of Slash": Wes Craven interviewed by Patrick Goldstein in the *L.A. Times*, 9 July 1985.
27. To Scott Tobias, AV Club, 3 November 2009
28. *Ibid.*







## ABOUT THE TRANSFER

*The Last House on the Left* was exclusively restored by Arrow Films and is presented in its original aspect ratio of 1.85:1 with mono audio.

An extensive international search for materials was undertaken to ensure that the best existing materials were sourced for this restoration. As the original 16mm AB negative for *The Last House on the Left* has been lost, the objective was to locate the first-generation 35mm intermediate elements struck from the 16mm negatives or the closest possible element in terms of lab generation. This was a daunting task, as the independent production and “grindhouse” distribution history of the film meant that proper detailed records were not kept and identifying original materials with any real certainty was often difficult. 35mm Interpositive, Internegative, dupe negative and multiple 35mm print materials were accessed from MGM’s film library and film producer Sean Cunningham’s film archives held at Film Lager in Germany. After a series of lengthy test comparisons, the 35mm dupe negative element held by Sean Cunningham was identified as the highest quality element, and likely the closest element in existence to the original 16mm negatives. This 35mm dupe negative element was scanned in 2K resolution at CinePostproduction GmbH.

The film was graded on Digital Vision’s Nucoda Film Master and restored at R3Store Studios in London. Thousands of instances of dirt, debris, scratches, picture instability, density fluctuation and other film wear were repaired or removed through a combination of digital restoration tools and techniques. Given the independent nature of the film’s production, some issues such as gate hairs and original negative damage remain, as do occasional instances of production mistakes, such as soft focus and loose synch against overdubbed dialogue. The original mono mixes were remastered by MGM.

Restoration supervised by **James White, Arrow Films**  
R3Store Studios: **Gerry Gedge, Jo Griffin, Andrew O’Hagan, Rich Watson**  
EFILM: **David Morales**  
MGM: **Scott Grossman, Darren Gross**  
CinePostproduction GmbH: **Robert Glöckner, Sabrina Reül**  
Filmlager Unterführung GmbH: **Caroline Jochner**

## PRODUCTION CREDITS

Disc and Booklet Produced by **Ewan Cant**  
Executive Producers **Kevin Lambert, Francesco Simeoni**  
Technical Producer **James White**  
QC Manager **Nora Mehenni**  
Production Assistant **Nick Mastrini**  
Blu-ray Mastering **David Mackenzie**  
Artist **Paul Shipper**  
Design **Obviously Creative**

## SPECIAL THANKS

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