

### Experimental films (Continued)

Nin, nothing made by Jonas Mekas. It is ironic, too, that the collection should wind down so drably, since it was subsequently, in the Eighties, that experimental film first achieved its greatest commercial successes (unless you count **2001: A Space Odyssey**), not just with the theatrical release of **Koyaanisqatsi**, but with the creation, in 1981, of MTV.

Although there are hints that society is changing, the Sixties finally burst forth in Tom Palazzolo's colorful 1970 *Love It/Leave It*, which opens on a nudist beauty pageant—the only major sequence of human nakedness in the anthology—and then proceeds to other events of the times, using overlapping sound so that, for example, presentations at a car show are heard while the unclothed women are parading in front of the judges. The audio track then segues into repeated voicings of the film's title, followed by repeated sung lines from *Okie From Muskogee*, as the images, much of them shot in Chicago for a change, depict young adults having a good time while authority figures prepare for riots, and a variety of other events and images. The irony of the mismatched audio and picture never becomes heavyhanded and the film is an invigorating introduction to the changing of generations that the era signified.

A rather lengthy random animation piece, Lawrence Janiak's 1970 *DL2* presents a constantly changing mass of speckles, dots, squiggles and blotches. Once in a while you think you might see a recognizable shape, like a Lucky Charm marshmallow amid the oats, but it is fleeting. Although the designs are random, however, the color combinations are carefully balanced and measured, and the musical score, which has a Southeast Asian feel, reinforces a sense of organized cacophony. It is sufficiently bright and varied to carry you through the piece despite its length.

The 1971 *Transport*, by Amy Greenfield, has a very annoying soundtrack that is pretty much like an ear test. A piercing tone begins softly and gets louder and louder, and then stops. And then a different piercing noise starts again, following the same pattern. It has absolutely nothing to do with the images, which depict several young adults in a sandlot or gravel pit or something, picking up a person and carrying the person up a ridge after that person has leapt down from above and is lying in the dirt. There are lots of close ups and the basic choreography is promising—Norman Jewison would kind of do something similar a couple of years later in **Jesus Christ Superstar**—but that soundtrack has got to go.

The collection also has an addendum of sorts, a collection of shorts perhaps deemed not worthy enough to be included in the general collection, although they still pop up after the others if you are using the 'Play All' option. The first is a 1978 piece by the collection's curator, Bruce Posner, entitled *Sappho and Jerry Paris 1-3* about television, breaking images apart onto four different quadrants and mashing together sights and sounds from many different sources, **Gilligan's Island** being about the most recognizable. The creator of *1941*, Francis Lee, made another artistically oriented film in 1983, *Ch'an*. A montage of what appears to be water color landscapes, although it is difficult to tell since the film is in black and white, the piece once again examines the violence that seems inherent in the clashing brushstrokes, how the edges of the different strokes merge or repel what is next to them, accentuated by the movement of the camera over the images. The piece also has an elegantly witty punchline. Acknowledging an artist otherwise missing from the collection proper, a work by Stan Brakhage is manipulated by Phil Solomon in the 2002 *Seasons...*, a colorful but silent work that essentially comes across as a quickly changing presentation of crystallized patterns with no other discernible scheme of organization. The collection concludes entirely with a reprise of *Manhatta* featuring the same transfer but a different musical score, more oriented toward guitar and keyboard, but still subtle and effective. It would be difficult to say which we preferred. The first one worked best for the start of our day, while this one was ideal for wrapping it up so many hours and movies later.

### Japanese girl power

Unlike every other country in the world, Japanese action movies in the Seventies had a healthy respect for teenage girls. There were a number of lower budgeted exploitation films where the girls were proactive, or were as involved in the crimes and gang wars as their male counterparts. Imagine **West Side Story**, except it's the girls who go to the rumble.

Arrow Entertainment has released a series of five such films in a five platter set containing two Blu-rays and three DVDs, **Stray Cat Rock** (UPC#760137753193, \$70). Produced by the famed Nikkatsu Studio, the films, all produced in 1970, have different stories and characters, but many of same cast members, locations, sets and even props. None of the films is exceptionally good, or all that well designed, and the movies do not have the eroticism or gore that Nikkatsu would later become famous for, but the music is a wonderful mix of idiosyncratic pop (every film has a couple of song sequences) and esoteric jazz, the stories embrace the alienation of youth, and the female characters are the central focus of the films. The fact that all five films were made in the same year prevents any of them from being given the attention that would tidy up loose ends, but there are specific progressions to them so far as the development of themes and styles, as the filmmakers and Nikkatsu get a handle on what works in the movies and what doesn't.

All of the films are presented in letterboxed format, with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1. The color transfers look decent, with no more than a scattered speckle or two, and the monophonic sound is fairly strong. The

films are in Japanese with optional English subtitles. Trailers are included for all but the first film.

After a fixed prizefight goes awry, a gang of girls protects the guy who blew the fix, as gangsters and bikers search for him in *Stray Cat Rock: Delinquent Girl Boss*. The girls also bond among themselves. Akiko Wada is an independently minded motorcyclist who helps the other girls out in tough situations, although a key plot turn hinges on her extremely stupid choice of letting one of the girls go out to get groceries without a partner. Meiko Kaji, who goes on to be the central star of the other films, is one of the primary girls in the gang. Running 81 minutes, there is a great motorcycle and dune buggy chase up and down pedestrian stairs and overpasses. The film makes use of Godardian strobe titles and other aggressive editing techniques, but the cinematography is just so-so, with quite a few sequences overly blackened in shadows or blandly composed.

Running 84 minutes, there are a lot of pranks and fooling around in the first half of *Stray Cat Rock: Wild Jumbo*, but the second half is a passable heist film, as the heroes devise a plan to grab cash as it is being transported from a religious festival. On the whole, the movie has some momentum and works adequately once the plot is established. Wada is seen only briefly in a couple of sequences, and while Kaji's character plans the heist, the film really has a more traditional balance of male and female dynamics, where the men do most of the dirty work in the robbery and the women have to deal with the aftermath.

A young man wanders into town looking for his long lost sister in *Stray Cat Rock: Sex Hunter*, an event that sparks the underlying tension between a gang of older teenaged girls and a group of twentyish male gangsters. Running 85 minutes, the film has the best music in the entire series and more dramatic depth than the first two films, along with more conscious attempts at stylistic flourishes. Again, it is not a great movie, and the ending is a little dumb, but it is something of a culmination of the themes and concepts in the previous features, as the girls dress and act in a more unified fashion even as their individual personalities are more developed and differentiated. Although the film is in widescreen, some random sequences appear as a square in the center, for no apparent reason. It can't be that they ran out of widescreen film stock, since Japan seemed to be overflowing with it at the time.

An even more developed story, in *Stray Cat Rock: Machine Animal*, three AWOL servicemen want to get passage on a boat to Sweden by selling a tin full of LSD capsules. The girls try to help them, while gangsters try to hone in on the scheme. At one point, one of the servicemen is abducted by the gangsters, so the girls run into a Honda dealership and come out riding scooters, which they use to take shortcuts to catch up to the bad guys and rescue the serviceman. When they're done, they bring the bikes back to the dealership. They may be delinquents, but they're not thieves. Running 82 minutes, the film has the best developed narrative in the group, and another grandly melodramatic conclusion.

A young man and a young woman who are living with a group of hippie-like drifters have a run-in with a few gangsters in *Stray Cat Rock: Beat '71*. The boy, who turns out to be the son of a gangster, kills one of the men, but is then taken away, and the girl is framed for the crime. She escapes from prison and returns to hook up with the boy again, staying with the drifters in an abandoned western movie set, where there is a final battle with the gangsters. The heroes make use of dynamite they retrieve from a nearby mine, leading to some reasonably impressive explosions. The 87-minute film abandons the 'girl gang' premise that fueled the previous films, although it is still the actions and decisions of the heroine that move the plot forward. The soundtrack has a little more background noise than the soundtracks on the other features.

Also included is an excellent 29-minute interview with Yasuharu Hasebe, the director of the three most thematically similar films, *Female Delinquent Boss*, *Sex Hunter* and *Machine Animal*. He explains how the movies came to fruition, but also looks back at how he could have encouraged better performances in places, as well as how a conclusion was changed, for the better, by adding some looped dialog after the film was in the can. He admits, "I'm not so keen on composing shots. I prefer to see what interesting things will occur within the setting." Additionally, there is a 30-minute interview with actor Tatsuy Fuji, who talks about working in all five films and his relationships with the directors and other cast members, and a 33-minute interview with actor Yoshio Harada, who talks about his entire career and about how *Beat '71* tried to change the format of the series. Unfortunately, there are no interviews with any of the actresses.

Because of their generally drab look and somewhat garbled narratives, we were in a bit of funk by the end of the **Stray Cat Rock** collection, but we pulled ourselves out of it by turning immediately to a much more satisfying selection of four Japanese teenage (and twentyish) female action films produced by Toei, gathered on four platters in a gorgeous pink book jacket by Panik House, **The Pinky Violence Collection** (UPC#6549-30310595, \$100). Essentially, the collection is a sampling of four different series, but since there were no continuing narratives within the series, each of the four films is completely accessible on its own. Again, all four films are letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1 and an accommodation for enhanced 16:9 playback. The color transfers are terrific, the source material has almost no wear, and the monophonic sound is solid. The films are in