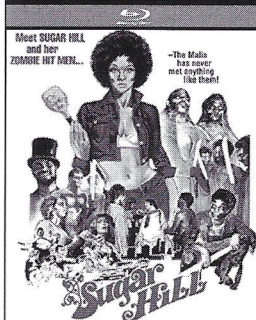


SUGAR HILL

Directed by Paul Maslansky

(1974) Scorpion Releasing/ Kino Lorber Blu-ray / DVD



The first and last film directed by prolific producer Paul Maslansky (of *Police Academy* fame), *Sugar Hill* is probably the most obscure entry in American International Pictures' brief run of blaxploitation horror films (*Blacula*, *Scream Blacula Scream*, *Abby*, *J.D.'s Revenge*). It was an attempt to dress up a Pam Grier-style revenge plot with horror trappings, and the resulting film is quite unlike anything else released in either genre during the period.

Although an American, Maslansky began his film career working in Europe with Gary Sherman (*Raw Meat*) and cult director Michael Reeves. He

returned to the U.S. in the early 1970s, and *Sugar Hill* was his very first project. Having been out of the U.S. film market for years, Maslansky brought a unique perspective to the film, directing with no apparent influence from either George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* or other blaxploitation films.

Marki Bey is Diana "Sugar" Hill, a fashion photographer whose boyfriend Langston (Larry Johnson) owns a voodoo-themed night club. After he refuses to sell the club to local gangster Morgan (Robert Quarry), Langston is stomped to death by Morgan's goons. Grief-stricken and vengeful, Sugar Hill turns to local voodoo priestess Mama Maitresse (future "Jeffersons" regular Zara Cully) for help. Together they approach powerful Loa of the dead Baron Samedi (an actual voodoo deity, here played by Don Pedro Colley). He raises an army of undead slaves that Hill uses to take down Morgan's men one by one in a variety of creative ways (one is even fed to a pen full of starving pigs).

Sugar Hill is an odd, quirky film that benefits from a script (by Tim Kelly) steeped in voodoo lore, bizarre looking pop-eyed zombies, and an engaging performance by Marki Bey. Charles P. Robinson (who would go on to later fame on "Night Court") also stands out as Morgan's right-hand man Fabulous, who gets to don a series of outrageous suits before finally meeting his end at the hands (and fingernails) of a gaggle of zombie massage therapists. Quarry, as the sneering, waspish southern mobster, walks away with every scene, whether he's trying to charm the nightclub away from Bey or delivering withering insults to his dimwitted, racist girlfriend (Betty Ann Rees).

And then there are the zombies, who spend a surprising amount of time menacing their victims in full daylight, which doesn't do the minimalist make-up any favors. But there is still something unsettling about those zombies, with their gleaming ping-pong ball eyes and sinister, toothy smiles. Voodoo-style zombies have never had as much traction in films as their shambling, flesh-eating cousins, but *Sugar Hill* gives us a glimpse of a tantalizing strain of zombie cinema that deserves further exploration.

Sugar Hill was MIA on home video for years, not even receiving a VHS release until the mid-1990s through Orion. MGM offered the film as an on-demand disc in 2011, but Kino Lorber has given it a fairly lavish package of bonus features. Bill Olsen moderates an entertaining commentary with director Maslansky, who provides a lot of background on his own film career as well the production of *Sugar Hill*. There are also four new on-camera interviews with Maslansky, Richard Lawson, Don Pedro Colley, and Charles Robinson. The latter is probably the most interesting of the lot. Robinson discusses Colley's insistence on having his own trailer (which culminated in the imposing actor renting his own camper for the length of the shoot), his role as the local casting director for the Texas actors, working the other cast members. He also reveals that it was Quarry who helped get him his first Hollywood agency representation. A few years after appearing in *Sugar Hill*, Robinson headed to L.A. and interviewed with Quarry's agent. When they didn't pick him up, Quarry threatened to fire the agency unless they gave Robinson a shot.

The only major omission from this surprisingly thorough release is an interview with Bey, a gorgeous actress who should have had a longer screen career. A stage veteran, Bey made her film debut in Hal Ashby's *The Landlord* (1970), and followed that up with two Arthur Marks films and Henry Hathaway's *Hang Up* (1974). She appeared regularly on television throughout the 1970s but has since retired from acting. She is still in Los Angeles (where she organizes theme cruises with her husband, actor Don Fenwick), and still owns her white jumpsuit from *Sugar Hill*.

The film is presented in 1080 HD at its original 1.85:1 aspect ratio, and while parts of the film look soft because of the original cinematography, the transfer is otherwise sharp and clean.

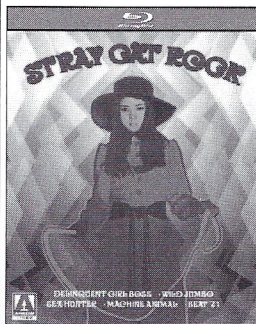
It's a treat to finally have this eccentric film on a disc laden with bonus features. For the full *Sugar Hill* experience, however, I encourage viewers to check out the *Starsky & Hutch* Season 3 two-part episode "Murder on Voodoo Island," which features Colley reprising his role as Baron Samedi.

Brian Albright

STRAY CAT ROCK COLLECTION

Directed by Yasuharu Hasebe & Toshiya Fujita

(1970/1971) Arrow Video Blu-ray/DVD Combo



One of the most indelible aspects of cinema as an art form, far beyond mere escapist entertainment or a (largely First World) collectors' hobby, has always been its ability to soak up and mirror the pop culture and social climates of its eras. As much as it seems intrinsic to the modern age, filmmakers have long harbored an uncanny knack to tap into the youth market and produce features aimed exclusively at a teenage/young adult demographic. As early as the fifties Hollywood (and others) captured a hitherto unexploited market with films such as *The Wild One* (1953), *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) and *The Blackboard Jungle* (1955)

before shifting towards much lighter fare in the sixties with film featuring pop idols such as Elvis Presley, Frankie Avalon, Cliff Richard, etc . . .

It was a cinematic movement that few producers around the world could afford to let the opportunity pass as the potential revenue generated from supplementary merchandising was virtually limitless. Everything from spin-off records to fashion suddenly became captive to the cinema-going youth market. Seeing the tide that was rising in the West, Asian markets were quick to adapt; Chinese filmmaking Mecca Hong Kong saw the Shaw Brothers studios capitalise on their younger audience with a glut of pastel pop musicals, romantic comedies and rebellious youth dramas. By the late 1960s, the counter-culture movement made an indent on studios and global audiences, with Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider* (1969) arguably having the biggest impact.

In Japan during this period, one of the oldest film studios of the region, Nikkatsu (est. 1912), had found its fortunes beginning to wane. Once at the forefront of the local market throughout the sixties with a reliable mix of youth dramas, comedies, action and Yakuza films (such as *Branded to Kill*, 1967), Nikkatsu struggled to hold its place against newer studios such as Toei (est. 1950) who had wisely jumped on the burgeoning counter-culture bandwagon with *Delinquent Girl Boss* (1970). Bringing the exploits of rebellious teenagers to domestic audiences, Toei had an instant hit on its hands and Nikkatsu was quick to commission a competing production of its own, with *Stray Cat Rock: Delinquent Girl Boss* (aka: *Alley Cat Rock: Female Boss*) hitting cinemas in May of 1970. For a twelve month stretch thereafter it was a gamble that paid dividends for Nikkatsu and gave birth to a film series that still remains much admired to this day.

Exploding on the scene like New Year's fireworks *Stray Cat Rock: Delinquent Girl Boss* (1970) dazzles with the exploits of biker girl Ako (Akiko Wada) who aligns herself with a hardened gang of street girls led by Mei (Meiko Kaji). Mei's boyfriend, Michio (Koji Wada), attempts to ingratiate himself into the ranks of the Seiyu Group but over-confidence and inexperience mark his undoing, in turn prompting brutal retribution against not only himself but also Mei and her associates.

Second series entry, *Stray Cat Rock: Wild Jumbo* (1970), channels the influence of Sam Peckinpah with the story of five friends who form a low-key street gang. Led by Taki (Takeo Chii) and C-Ko (Kaji) they run across the path of the sultry Asako (Bunjaku Han), a cunning number of the powerful Seikyo Society. When Asako proposes that the gang steal the society's annual cash haul the group leap over themselves at the opportunity, completely unaware of the devastating consequences their plan might incur.

Hiding behind the rather lurid title *Stray Cat Rock: Sex Hunter* (1970), is the relatively innocuous tale of lonely drifter Kazuma (Rikiya Yasuoka) and his search for his missing sister. Once in Tokyo, Kazuma falls in with Mako (Kaji) and her Alleycat gang as well as all-male gang The Eagles and their leader, Baron (Tatsuya Fuji). Expectantly, simmering tensions and barely contained rivalries rise to the surface, triggered by the broken relationship between two members of the fragile alliance, and the resultant conflict threatens to leave of trail of destruction in its wake.

After the previous entry's harder edge, *Stray Cat Rock: Machine Animal* (1970) moves the series into a slightly more comical, light-hearted tone. Nobo (Fuji) and Sabu (Jiro Okazaki), along with their American GI deserter friend, are looking to flee Japan for a new life in Europe and decide the quick sale of a large cache of LSD their swiftest escape route. But when Maya (Kaji) and her gang pilfer their golden goose, Nobo sees the chance to speed things up. However, Maya's allies The Dragons see an ever greater opportunity for themselves with such a hefty supply of illicit narcotics.

Furthering the lighter tone, final outing *Stray Cat Rock: Beat '71* (1971) transitions bikers, street gangs and sordid vice for a group of free-wheeling hippies and what happens when one of their number is framed for murder. Furiko (Kaji) escapes prison and heads after the fugitive Ryumei (Takeo Chii) who, unbeknownst to any of her group, is actually the son of a formidable Yakuza. With hope of circumventing the potential for violence, Furiko's fellow commune pal Mappo (Fuji) takes all of their party on a punishing cycle hike after her. Once in Ryumei's hometown, Furiko and friends' desire for answers and a peaceful resolution aren't quite as easy as they hope.

As much created as a launching pad for popular singer Akiko Wada's film career as competition for Toei's *Delinquent Girl Boss* films, Nikkatsu's *Stray Cat Rock: Delinquent Girl Boss* succeeded on two counts whilst failing its primary purpose. Although an immediate success under the guiding hand of director Yasuharu Hasebe (*Black Tight Killers*, 1966) and screenwriter Shuichi Nagahara (*A Colt is My Passport*, 1967), Wada's conflicting recording and touring schedule meant earliest designs to have her headline successive sequels were almost instantly scuttled. As luck would have it, audiences more than warmed to supporting actress Meiko Kaji (*Blind Woman's Curse*, 1970) and it was decided thereafter to push her to the forefront as the series leading star.

Within *Girl Boss* Hasebe and Nagahara set out the formula that of all the successive films in the series that would follow, with a three act narrative comprising character introduction in the first, plot point(s) and/or conflict in the second, and resolution in the third. It's a fairly simplistic structure but one that worked in the series favour since all were produced extremely quickly (with 21 day shooting schedules) and on low budgets. Whilst the surprisingly statuesque Wada dominates the screen when she's on it, her character feels much the outsider over her co-stars. However, her presence lends additional flair to the film with some catchy rock songs alongside other hit musicians of the era such as The Mops (misspelt "The Mobbs" in Arrow's subtitles). Watch out also for a hair-raising dune buggy and motorcycle chase through Tokyo's pedestrian thoroughfares and underground.

The second film in the series, *Wild Jumbo*, grafts a fairly conventional heist scenario onto the youth gang narrative giving encoring Kaji and Tatsuya Fuji (*In the Realm of the Senses*, 1976) more screen time than previously as well as introducing Japanese-speaking Taiwanese actress Bunjaku Han. It also marked the directorial debut of Toshiya Fujita (*Lady Snowblood*, 1973) in the series, who immediately differentiated himself from Hasebe with the notable use of an improvisational style and addition of light humor to proceedings. There is a genuine sense of playfulness about the second outing that carries the film through to its predictably grim, blood-soaked, finale. As already noted, there's a definite Peckinpah influence permeating *Jumbo's* final act and the conclusion unfolds akin to a mini-*Wild Bunch* (1969).

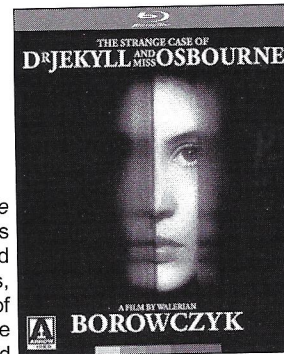
Hasebe returned for the third film, the salaciously titled *Sex Hunter*, which from its title readers familiar with the director's later *roman-porno* titles such as *Assault! Jack the Ripper* (1976) might expect to occupy the same cinematic page as those far more sexually violent works. However, since the film as scripted remained *Manhunt* right up until its release, that misguided notion is best dismissed at once. There are hints of the graphic sexual violence that would typify much of Hasebe's later adult fare, such as an implied "rape party" (that never really eventuates, unlike the sequence in *Girl Boss* where a female captive has her bust scorched with a blowtorch), but the overall aesthetic is more a replication of American and Spaghetti Westerns. At one point, just to reinforce the point, Rikiya Yasuoka (*Tampopo*, 1985) remarks how he feels like he's living out a Western.

By the time the fourth film, *Machine Animal*, came around, the series had shifted its tone dramatically and, had the subplot about the sale of a bucket of LSD been ejected, would comfortably been more suited towards a younger audience than the teenagers it was aimed at prior. The villains herein, headed by Eiji Go (*Tokyo Drifter*, 1966), are much more comical than their predecessors, as well as far less mean-spirited. It almost feels like afterthought that the necessity to kill off one or more of the major characters in the final act, as is the formula, has been forgotten over having a bit of fun. Final entry in the series, *Beat '71* (aka: *Crazy Rider '71*), rounds things out with the lightest tone of all, swapping out motorbikes for pushbikes, street gangs for hippies and climaxes on the grounds of an abandoned mine that's been redressed as a frontier town for use as a freestanding set by movie studios. It's an oddball left-turn, but a logical one once you realise the formula had run dry.

Although a long way from the kind of material that would attract exploitation hounds to Japanese cinema later in the decade (there's maybe a glimpse of a nipple or two and a splash of blood here and there over the five films), Nikkatsu's *Stray Cat Rock* series may not have ultimately been the box office success they had been hoping for but as a neon-lit window to another age it's invaluable. Bristling with colorful performances and fashions, experimental camerawork and editing, and set to some fabulous Japanese rock of its time, there's literally oodles of escapist fun to be had visiting and revisiting Hasebe and Fujita's films as a modern-day film buff with an eye for retro value. It goes without saying that the *Stray Cat Rock* films are a fantastic time capsule of Japanese genre cinema and pop culture at the advent of the seventies, as well as gloriously boisterous entertainment that simply shouldn't be missed at any cost.

Michael Thomason

THE STRANGE CASE OF DR JEKYLL AND MISS OSBOURNE (AKA DR. JEKYLL ET LES FEMMES) Directed by Walerian Borowczyk (1981) Arrow Video Blu-ray/DVD combo



The origin of Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* is, in many ways, as uncanny as the novella itself. Inspired by a dream and written quickly during the course of a debilitating illness, Stevenson's first draft was met with a distinct lack of enthusiasm by his wife, Fanny Van de Grift Osbourne Stevenson, who complained that Stevenson had indulged in sensationalism rather than developing the allegory at the heart of the tale. After a violent argument, Stevenson finally conceded the point, burned the original manuscript, and, in another three days of feverish activity, produced the version we know today.

Director Walerian Borowczyk's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Miss Osbourne*, by incorporating Stevenson's wife (and thus the legend of the novella's creation) into the narrative proper, announces itself first and foremost as an exercise in intertextuality—that is, a text that can only be understood in reference to other texts. As the film unfolds, *Miss Osbourne* consistently radiates a self-reflexive awareness that it must not only contend with, but also account for, the myriad of literary, cinematic, pop-cultural, psychological, and philosophical texts that have been grafted onto Stevenson's slim novella, and that, to one degree or another, influence the viewer's reception of any new adaptation. But the film also operates as parody, pastiche, critique, and homage, not only in reference to Stevenson's novella and its numerous cinematic adaptations, but also with regard to the entire genre to which the story has long been consigned. Thus, *Miss Osbourne* more accurately proves to be an exercise in *bidirectional* intertextuality—dependent on the texts that precede it, but also exerting its own influence on viewers' perceptions of those previous texts. This bidirectional intertextuality must be taken into account when approaching the film's narrative, subtext, and meta-narrative (its awareness of itself as a film).

Borowczyk's adaptation takes place over the course of a single night, during an engagement party for the esteemed Dr. Jekyll (Udo Kier) and his fiancée, Fanny Osbourne (Marina Pierro). In addition to their mothers and staff (whose ethnicities are reflective of British colonialism), the party is attended by representatives from the pillars of Victorian society: commerce, science, religion, the military, and the law. Following a heated debate between Jekyll and his former mentor Dr. Lanyon (Eurohorror icon Howard Vernon) concerning the former's treatise on "transcendental medicine," the party is interrupted by the appearance of Jekyll's attorney, who makes them aware of a vicious assault on a child in the vicinity. The situation turns dire when a young female guest is soon found raped and sexually mutilated in an upstairs bedroom. All semblance of order collapses as the guests ineffectually try to fend off the fiend in their midst, while Fanny searches for Jekyll, who seems to vanish during the most inopportune moments.

Consistent with its dependence on intertextuality, the plot of *Miss Osbourne* is likely to prove confusing to viewers unfamiliar with Jekyll & Hyde as a broad cultural phenomenon. In keeping with Borowczyk's visual use of frames within frames, the narrative of *Miss Osbourne* is both an amplification and conflation of the dinner-party scenes and aborted engagement-party climaxes featured in the 1932 and 1941 cinematic adaptations starring Fredric March and Spencer Tracy, respectively. Both of those films, in turn, are themselves adaptations of the 1887 theatrical version penned by Thomas Russell Sullivan, the first to incorporate a fiancée for Jekyll and a low-born female victim for Hyde into the story. Only those familiar with the previous adaptations, for example, will understand that Borowczyk's narrative takes place at the point at which Jekyll has completely lost control of the transformation process, with Hyde—even when dormant—now exerting a will of his own. Intertextuality also proves instrumental to understanding some of the film's most bizarre and puzzling scenes, such as the disturbingly surreal sequence in which party guest General Carew (played with manic comedic intensity by Patrick Magee) is forced to watch his daughter inexplicably offer herself sexually to Hyde despite his vicious attacks upon the other guests. In Stevenson's novella, Carew plays a small part as Hyde's one and only murder victim, whose death portends the Doctor's eventual downfall. In the Sullivan play, Carew is elevated to the status of Jekyll's future father-in-law, who in the Barrymore silent version first introduces him to the fleshpots of Soho, but who, in the March and Tracy versions, is the prudish instrument of Victorian repression, cruelly and capriciously prolonging Jekyll's engagement and, consequently, the sexual frustration that drives him to unleash Hyde. Magee's Carew, though no longer Jekyll's future father-in-law, is an amalgamation of all of these versions, and to the actor's credit, a uniquely loathsome creation unto himself. In keeping with the notion of bidirectional intertextuality, the scene only makes sense when one understands by virtue of familiarity with the previous adaptations that the daughter's sexual abandon, as well as Carew's subsequent sadomasochistic punishment of her, are perversions born of years of intense sexual repression. At the same time, the grotesquely farcical tone of the scene serves as a dark parody of Jekyll's fiancée's self-destructive devotion to him (despite her father's objections) in the March and Tracy versions.

Bidirectional intertextuality is also instrumental to decoding the film's subtextual content, as well as its allusions to, and commentary on, the subtexts of the versions that precede it. For example, Borowczyk's staging of a passionate sex scene paired