

Not all
the
playing
was on
the
football
field!

They
live
their
fantasies
on & off
the
field!



The Swinging Cheerleaders



The Swinging Cheerleaders

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CAST AND CREW

A Jack Hill Film
Starring **Jo Johnston**

also starring
Rainbeaux Smith • Colleen Camp • Rosanne Katon
Ron Hajek • Ric Carrott • Jason Sommers • Ian Sander

with **Mae Mercer**

Jack Denton • John Quade • Bob Minor

And **George Wallace**

director of photography
Alfred Taylor, A.R.P.S.

edited by **Mort Tubor**

music by
William Castleman & Willam Loose

production designed by
Robinson Boyce & B.B. Neel

written by
Jane Witherspoon & Betty Conkey

produced by
John Prizer

directed by
Jack Hill





POM POMS AND POLITICS

by Cullen Gallagher

Romancing – and romanticising – the modern girl has been a preoccupation with American cinema from its inception. The first two decades of cinema saw numerous butterfly and serpentine dancers wiggling across the screen (and often these short films were hand-coloured to accentuate their alluring, scintillating, and fantastic qualities). The 1910s saw hordes of bathing beauties invading the screen (thank you, Mack Sennett); the 1920s had their flappers and vamps, while the 1930s had chorus girls and gold diggers; Betty Grable and other pin-ups inspired troops during the 1940s; beat girls, bombshells and *femme fatales* were the 'it' girls of the 1950s; and the 1960s began with beach babes and ended with *The Stewardesses* (1969). While inspired by real-life social and gender trends, these screen-types overemphasised the glamour and sexuality of the characters as part of their tantalising fictionalisation of modern life.

The 1970s gave birth to a new fad – the cheerleader film. Just as *Night Nurse* (1931) and *Ladies They Talk About* (1933) purportedly pulled back the veils on all-female domains (nursing and prisons, respectively), the cheerleader films were far more fantasy than reality. Roughly a dozen unrelated films, the genre nicely straddled the decade, beginning in 1970 and seemingly running out of pep by 1980. *The Swinging Cheerleaders* (1974) is the apex of the series. Not only is it the best-made (in terms of overall production, casting, script and direction), but also one of the only ones to bear an authorial stamp (Hill's aesthetic is clearly present throughout). Furthermore, it is also the most overtly socio-political of the bunch, a film calling attention to – and criticising – the voyeuristic eroticism in which the other films revel. Throughout Hill's career, he proved to be the thinking man's exploitation director, one who managed to deliver the visceral pleasures audiences desired while also creating a timely, thought-provoking, and culturally progressive movies.

The Swinging Cheerleaders is a movie that is very much in dialogue with its time, and as such it helps to understand the cinematic and cultural context that gave birth to the film. Cheerleaders were the Ziegfeld girls of the '70s – all-American icons of glamour, national pride, and gender perfection. Sidelines had become the chorus line for a new generation of performers. While it is hard to definitively explain the phenomenon at this particular moment in time, there were certainly a couple of cultural shifts that certainly influenced it.



Foremost was the rise in the visibility of the sport, itself. Cheerleading in the United States began in the late nineteenth century as an all-male sport. Women athletes weren't allowed until the 1920s, and it wasn't until the 1940s that they began to dominate it (with the men away in World War II, it was up to the women to take over not only on the field but on the sidelines, too). While the first professional cheering squad in the National Football League was in 1948 (the Philadelphia Eagles), only two more teams joined in the 1950s (Indianapolis Colts and Green Bay Packers), and it wasn't until the 1960s that the majority of NFL teams had official cheerleaders. A 1965 profile in *Life* of WWII vet-turned-cheering coach Bill Horan brought the sport into living rooms all across the country. ABC's *Wide World of Sports* first aired in 1961 and, under the tutelage of director Andy Sidaris, the camera frequently turned from the game to the girls on the sidelines. In *Seconds to Play* (1976), a documentary that goes behind the program, Sidaris can be heard over the radio ordering his cameraman for "front shots of those broads". Mary Ellen Hanson's *Go! Fight! Win! Cheerleading in American Culture* (1995) cites a *Los Angeles Magazine* article that says, "[Sidaris] is to cheerleaders what Hugh Hefner has been to centrefolds". Sidaris would soon leave sports and focus on making bosom-centric independent action spoofs.

Off the field, another industry was also going through massive changes. While the Production Code had been strangling Hollywood since 1934 (even though it started in 1930, no-one heeded it too seriously until '34), its dominance began to wane in the 1950s. In 1952, Roberto Rossellini's *The Miracle (L'amore, 1948)* was granted freedom of speech rights by the Supreme Court, opening the doors for filmmakers to begin pushing the bounds, and slowly but surely they did. Language, violence, and sexuality blossomed, bloomed, and boomed on-screen, until finally, in 1968, the Motion Picture Association of America adopted a letter rating system started to categorise movies: G (general audiences), M (parental guidance suggested, later changed to GP and, ultimately, PG), R (restricted), and X (no one under 17). Meanwhile, the rise of drive-ins, as well as more lurid, urban cinemas (such as those on New York City's famed 42nd Street), engendered an audience looking for more sensational forms of cinema.

And therein lies the birth of the cheerleader film.

Kicking off the cycle was a 1970 West German sex farce called *Mir hat es immer Spaß gemacht (How Did a Nice Girl Like You Get Into This Business?)* or, as it was released in the US, *The Naughty Cheerleader* – the fact that Barbi Benton's globetrotting, bed-hopping factotum is only a cheerleader for a brief minute in the beginning only goes to highlight the sort of zeitgeist that surrounded the sport at that moment. (In real life, Benton was a four-time *Playboy* cover girl and romantic partner to Hugh Hefner.) In *The Abductors* (1972) cheerleaders are abducted and saved by a female secret agent. Cementing the

genre and its narrative and stylistic touchstones was *The Cheerleaders* (1973), a racy rah-rah-rah in which the big game is sabotaged when the girls jump the other team's bones, zapping them of all their spirit. *Revenge of the Cheerleaders* (1976), a satire on an already satirical genre, takes things to the point of lunacy – two students rob their classroom (teacher included) of their drugs (teacher included), there's a chase through a gigantic iron dinosaur, and David Hasselhoff plays a basketball player named 'Boner' – but in between getting laid the cheerleaders do manage to thwart a plot to steal their high school's land. (Also of note, the film was co-written, co-produced, and photographed by future experimental auteur Nathaniel Dorsky.) *The Pom Pom Girls* (1976) is the neo-realist cheerleading film, stylistically somewhere between Roberto Rossellini and Richard Linklater's *Dazed and Confused* (1993), refreshingly less of a saucy spoof than it is a haze of high school horniness, pranks, and hijinks. Cult auteur Greydon Clark followed up *Black Shampoo* (1976) with *Satan's Cheerleaders* (1977), a very funny lampoon of two trends obviously referenced in the title. *Cheering Section* (1977) was a winner-takes-all-the-girls plot, while *Cheerleaders Beach Party* (1978) was a throwback to *The Cheerleaders'* seduce-the-other-team scheme. In *Cheerleaders' Wild Weekend* (1979, aka *The Great American Girl Robbery*), three cheer teams on their way to a competition are kidnapped by terrorists and held for ransom. And there was *Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders* (1979), a TV movie in which Jane Seymour goes undercover to report on the titular team (borrowing the central plot from *The Swinging Cheerleaders*). Hardcore pornography also jumped on the cheerleader bandwagon, as evinced by *Pro-Ball Cheerleaders* (1979, aka *Football Cheerleader*) – the premise is self-explanatory – and *Debbie Does Dallas* (1978), among the most famous and financially successfully adult films of all time.

Despite its suggestive title, *The Swinging Cheerleaders* actually bears very little in common with these other movies. Whereas most of them use the sport as a pretext for sleazy shenanigans, Hill's interest is less prurient and more political. The film began as an idea from producer John Prizer, who had the title, and recruited Hill, who just had back-to-back hits with *Coffy* (1973) and *Foxy Brown* (1974), to direct. Inspired by the Watergate investigation, the plot revolves around Kate (Jo Johnston), a student at Mesa State University, who is writing her journalism term paper on cheerleading, which she views as "the most exploitive, demeaning activity on campus." Going undercover, she auditions for the squad and joins the three head girls, Andrea (Rainbeaux Smith), Lisa (Rosanne Katon), and Mary Ann (Colleen Camp). As part of her research, she must move out of the apartment she shares with her politically radical boyfriend, Ron (Ian Sander), and move into a dorm with the other girls. In the course of her investigation, she becomes involved in a rivalry over Mary Ann's boyfriend, Buck (Ron Hajak), and uncovers Coach Turner's (Jack Denton) point-spread scheme to rig the big football game.



For an exploitation movie, the plot lacks much of the bombast that defines the genre and rings truer as a coming-of-age comedy-drama that still resonates 42 years later. A more sympathetic precursor to Hill's film is Stephanie Rothman's *The Student Nurses* (1970), in which four nurses-in-training (yes – they're sexy nurses) come face-to-face with the political issues of the day, including economic inequality, abortion rights, radicalism and the Vietnam War. (Coincidentally, Rothman and Hill both got their start shooting segments of the 1966 movie *Blood Bath*, produced by Roger Corman).

Strong women are integral to Hill's cinematic world. Independent, unconventional and frequently fierce, Hill's female characters defied on-screen gender barriers, allowing actresses to play the sorts of characters they weren't typically offered – roles of action and agency. Examples include Ellen Burstyn's mechanic in *Pit Stop* (1969); the down-and-dirty, tough-as-nails women in prison in *The Big Doll House* (1971) and *The Big Doll Cage* (1972), who prove to be just as macho and resilient than any of their male prisoner counterparts in *The Great Escape* (1963); Pam Grier's urban avenging angels in *Coffy* and *Foxy Brown*; and the girl gang in *The Jezebels* (1975, aka *Switchblade Sisters*). Unlike most of Hill's heroines, Kate in *The Swinging Cheerleaders* doesn't wield a gun or a knife – she has a pen. Presumably inspired by Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward, she titles her report 'The Mesa State Watergate' after switching her topic to expose the coach's corruption. (Coincidentally, both *The Swinging Cheerleaders* and Bernstein and Woodward's book, *All the President's Men*, were released in June 1974.) Furthermore, unlike other cheerleader movies where the girls are quick to jump into bed, Kate sets boundaries. She won't capitulate her own work to the whim of her boyfriend's hormones, and she lambasts football star Buck when he comes on to her. "You want me, just whistle? You thought that just because you rang the doorbell you could walk right in and make yourself at home, did you? Typical puerile, pigskin jock. Look, I choose my own sex partners!" Kate breathed a much-needed air of progressivism and feminism to the cheerleader genre.

Sex is never about voyeurism in Hill's movies – it is empowering. Hill's women are action heroines, not objects to be looked at. In the beginning of *Coffy*, a junkie just wants to sit and watch Grier have sex with a dope pusher – little does he know she has a shotgun and a thirst for revenge. Grier kills not only the pusher, but also the junkie. Watching is not innocent, and bearing witness to a crime – whether it be watching the pusher take advantage of women, or sell the drugs to young people like Grier's sister – makes you just as guilty. The women in Hill's films may be beautiful, but they frequently resist objectification. Hill aligns his camera not with the voyeur or the exploiter, but with the exploited – a politically aware perspective.

Consider in *The Swinging Cheerleaders* how the camera adopts a first-person perspective as Coach Turner uses binoculars to stare at the cheerleaders' derrieres. On-screen we see

the outline of the binoculars, when suddenly the coach is caught in the act. "Looking 'em over good, Fred?" asks Mr Putnam (George Wallace), the head of the alumni association (and game-rigging co-conspirator). In doing so, Hill calls attention to the audience's own lecherous gaze. Maybe it's a stretch, but I like to think that Hill anticipates Laura Mulvey's landmark essay, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', which would be published one year later in 1975. Her theory "takes as starting point the way film reflects, reveals, and even plays on the straight, socially established interpretation of sexual difference which controls images, erotic ways of looking and spectacle," writes Mulvey. "Psychoanalytic theory is thus appropriated here as a political weapon, demonstrating the way the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form." Instead of psychoanalysis, Hill uses satire as his weapon, subverting gender and genre norms.

The result is an unusual and intelligent mix of sex farce and critical insight. Though the cheerleaders have stunning figures, Hill's direction is tasteful and lacks the gratuitous nudity typically associated in the genre. Partly due to Hill's dedication to storytelling, there is also a practical reason. As he explained in a commentary track, "I did not want theatre owners cutting pieces out of the movie, as they used to do in those days, because they wouldn't put those pieces back in after they finished running the film, so we tried to find a balance that would make a sexy but tasteful movie, and have nothing in there that would offend anyone so badly that they would want to chop up the prints."

Though Kate is the lead, the character with the most heart in the film belongs to Andrea. While *The Cheerleaders* had earlier lampooned the quest to lose one's virginity, *The Swinging Cheerleaders* handles the issue far more sensitively. "I just never found the right guy, yet. I'm willing, I think." Unlike other movies where it is a stigma, here Andrea is vocal about her insecurity and uncertainty. While her boyfriend, Ross, chastises her – "I just can't take this anymore. It's not realistic. It's killing me. It's just not natural. You're almost 20 years old, what are you saving it for? Maybe you can live like this, but I can't. I've had it. Goodbye." – Andrea sits on the edge of the bed, holding herself and staring at the floor. Rainbeaux Smith's performance is tender, exposing without dialogue an interior quality that is deeply moving. Later, after the other girls (Kate included) peer pressure her into having sex with the first stranger she meets, Andrea is coerced with alcohol and drugs and raped by a group of campus radicals. Carried home by Ross, Andrea's face is swollen and cut. Appallingly, Kate giddily wants details – "You owe it to us!" But Andrea is too shaken – "It was so horrible I don't think I can talk about it." While Kate's reaction is cringingly dated, Andrea's hurt still rings true, a victim of sexual assault confused by her trauma, and embarrassed in a world that wants to derive pleasure from her pain.

Whereas the other cheerleader films revel in carefree quickies, *The Swinging Cheerleaders* is the only film to show real consequences to sexual activity. Lisa's affair with Professor Thorpe (another of Coach Turner's co-conspirators) begins as a typical teacher-student fantasy (she has to see him privately about keeping her grades up), it quickly becomes clear that Lisa has genuine feelings for Thorpe, but he is only manipulating her for sex. Later, Thorpe's wife confronts Lisa. "Listen, I said, or I'll cut your face up like a tomato, and it won't be the first time, you understand?" she says, flicking open a switchblade. "I worked hard to keep that man in school, I spent my best years yes ma'am-ing and no ma'am-ing and yes sir, and washing shit off of white people's babies, and now that he's about to strike it rich you little tramps come around and swish your black ass and your tits and you think you can take my man away from me?" Beneath the pulp hysteria is the idea that a relationship is more than just a few seconds of pleasure, and that blood, sweat, and tears go into its maintenance.

Despite these serious overtones, *The Swinging Cheerleaders* is, ultimately, a comedy. As if to re-emphasise the entertainment over the message, Hill concludes the film with a slapstick fight between students and corrupt cops set to a Scott Joplin rag, music recently re-popularised by *The Sting* (1973). Football players cram into a Beetle like a clown car joke in reverse (going in instead of falling out), and cheerleaders scream, "Fight, team, fight! Go, go, go!" while human battering rams break up crowds, basketballs crash into crotches, and trashcans land on heads.

Though it was shot in 12 days, and written in a rush (from inception to exhibition was less than six months), *The Swinging Cheerleaders* enjoyed a hugely successful theatrical run. A "financial bonanza" (as Manohla Dargis called it in *L.A. Weekly*), the film was still playing the drive-in circuit in the 1980s, frequently partnered with one or two other cheerleader films from the '70s. Unfortunately, it would be the last of Hill's successes. His next film, *The Jezebels*, did not fare quite so well at the box office (it took a re-release in the 1990s for it to find its audience). Hill would direct only one more movie, *The Sorcerers* (1982), but he did not even want it to bear his name. Hill's legacy, however, continues to grow. As *The Swinging Cheerleaders* shows, Hill's unique vision, intelligence, and humor has given his films both distinction and long-lasting interest to viewers. Four decades after its initial release, *The Swinging Cheerleaders* is still full of spirit.

Cullen Gallagher is writer, musician and film curator living in Brooklyn, NY. His writings have appeared in the Los Angeles Review of Books, The Paris Review, Bright Lights Film Journal and Not Coming to a Theater Near You. He is currently working on a series of western novels, The Scumbag Western Trilogy.





ABOUT THE RESTORATION

The Swinging Cheerleaders has been exclusively restored in 2K resolution for this release by Arrow Films and is presented in its original theatrical aspect ratio of 1.66:1 with mono sound.

The original 35mm camera negative was scanned in 2K resolution on a pin-registered 4K Lasergraphics Director Scanner at Deluxe Burbank. Picture grading was completed on a DaVinci Resolve at Pinewood Studios. Thousands of instances of dirt, debris and light scratches were removed using PFClean software. Overall image stability and instances of density fluctuation were also improved. All restoration work was completed at Pinewood Studios.

The original mono soundtrack was transferred from the original 35mm magnetic track master reels by Deluxe Audio Services, Los Angeles, and was conformed and restored at Pinewood Studios.

Restoration supervised by James White, Arrow Films

This restoration was completed in collaboration with director Jack Hill

Materials made available by Academy Film Archive
May Haduong

Deluxe Burbank Film Scanning services
Cheryl Frohlich, Jeff Gaetano

Deluxe Audio services
Jordan Perry

Restoration services by Pinewood Studios

Colour Grading Carl Thompson

Restoration Technicians Lucie Hancock, Rob Langridge, Jake Chapman

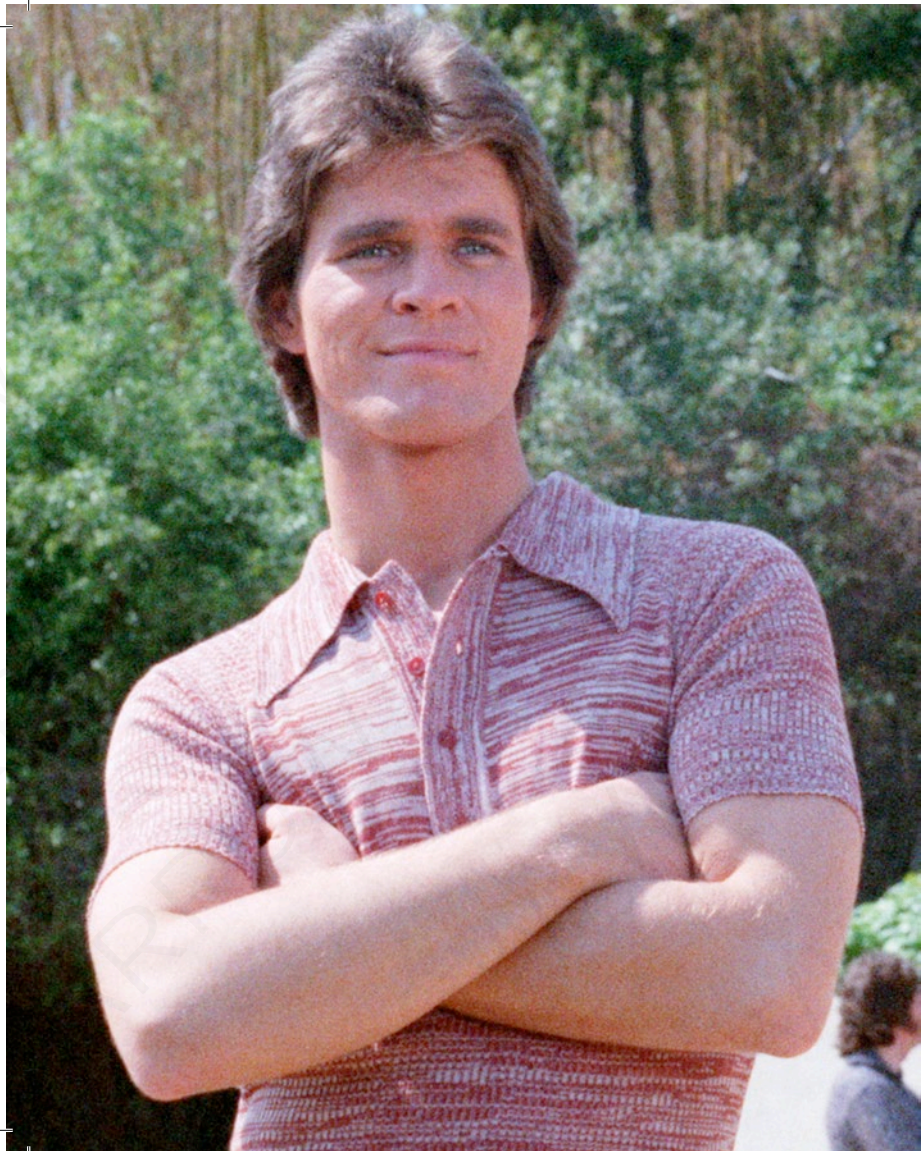
Audio Conform Jason Stevens

Conform & Deliverables Leigh Reid

Restoration Department Management Jon Mann, Philip Lee

Special thanks to Jack Hill





PRODUCTION CREDITS

Discs and Booklet Produced by Anthony Nield

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Production Assistant Liane Cunje

Technical Producer James White

QC Manager Nora Mehenni

Blu-ray and DVD Mastering David Mackenzie

Subtitling dayfornight*

Artist Graham Humphreys

Design Jack Pemberton

SPECIAL THANKS

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