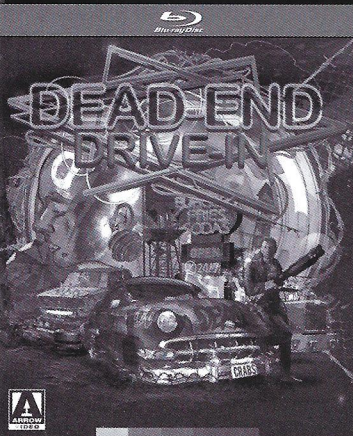


DEAD END DRIVE-IN

Directed by Brian Trenchard-Smith
(1986) Arrow Films Blu-ray / DVD combo



In the far-flung future Australia of 1995, things have taken a turn for the worse. A series of global catastrophes has rendered the world effectively bankrupt, and law and order is strictly on a limited basis. Taking his girlfriend Carmen (Natalie McCurry) to the Star Drive-In for a quick one, unemployed lay-about "Crabs" (Ned Manning) has his lovemaking rudely interrupted when armed policemen steal two wheels from his '56 Chevy. The next morning, the true purpose of the Star Drive-In is revealed to him; it is a concentration camp for undesirables, chiefly the young and jobless. In exchange, the inmates are allowed all the junk food they can eat and a

steady stream of no-budget action pictures screened nightly. Making friends with their fellow inmates, Crabs and his girlfriend discover that everyone there has more or less accepted their fate. Things get sketchier still when the drive-in is given a sudden influx of Asian inmates. In response, the white Australians band together—not to confront their captors, but to discriminate and harass the minorities. Confronting the kindly, if insidious drive-in manager (Peter Whitford), Crabs vows to escape from the dismal drive-in—or die trying.

Director Brian Trenchard-Smith one-upped the likes of Quentin Tarrantino with this ironic, self-reflexive film, which has yet to be equaled—low-budget action car crash movies are part of a greater social malaise, this message being tucked neatly into a low-budget action car crash movie! *Dead End Drive-In* looks great, with artfully composed shots of a dirty, dystopian backdrop comprised of spray-painted junked cars and wild colored lighting. The drive-in's denizens are a smash-up of the then current punk rock hairstyles and fashions, coupled with Mad Max-inspired remnant attire.

Dead End Drive-In is also defiantly Australian. A nation composed of people banned from Great Britain for sundry crimes and misdeeds, Australians grew up with little need of social systems and snobby class structures. Antipodeans take a certain snotty pride in their plain-spoken, unvarnished view of the world and their approach to life . . . but this approach definitely has a darker side.

It is here that *Drive-In* shares a similarity with the 1971 Aussie epic, *Wake in Fright*. In that film, a young, uppity school teacher (played by Gary Bond) finds himself stranded in an outback town. He makes swift friends with all the locals, but all these Crocodile Dundees see to it that he never leaves the town or has anything more to look forward to other than generous servings of lager. Friends, they say, are like a crab bucket: The bucket of crabs is lively to a certain extent, but should you try to climb to the top to get out, the other crabs will be sure to pull you down.

It must be noted that *Dead End Drive-In* remains overly facile. The evil plan behind the drive-in is revealed too quickly, and has little wiggle room to go story-wise. In addition, the only real action to be had in the feature is at the beginning, showing the lawless Australia from outside of the drive-in, a fistfight here and there in the middle part, and Crabs' escape from the drive-in. At a tight 84 minutes, the film is s-l-o-w. Furthermore, the audience attracted to see a film like this had to go to scary grindhouses and drive-ins that not far removed from the titular theater!

Extras on the 2016 Arrow Blu-ray disc include director Brian Trenchard-Smith's commentary track, where he shares the fact that one of the inspirations behind the film is Luis Bunuel's *The Exterminating Angel* (1962). Trenchard-Smith's 48-minute TV documentary from 1973, *The Stuntmen*, lavishes praise on Australia's noted movie stuntmen is offered as an extra, as well as his 24-minute public service film from 1978, *Hospitals Don't Burn Down!* It's all an elaborate story on the danger of smoking . . .

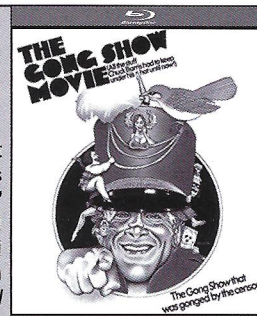
The film's theatrical trailer and a photo gallery on Australia's graffiti writers, influential in helping to depict the gritty, urban environment in the film is also included.

Dead End Drive-In trades heavily on the irony that it was an exploitation film on how such films keep a sensation-starved populace complacent. Overall, the biggest irony today is that while the future world as predicted in this film came true to a certain extent, there is one very notable exception: there are no more drive-ins.

Greg Goodsell

THE GONG SHOW MOVIE

Directed by Chuck Barris
(1980) Shout! Factory Blu-ray



The legendary Chuck Barris (whose first professional success was the hit song 'Palisades Park,' which he wrote for Freddy 'Boom-Boom' Cannon) may very well have felt on top of the world by the early 70's after creating such popular (and naughty) convention-bending daytime television shows as *The Dating Game* and *The Newlywed Game*, in which emcees and contestants alike were encouraged to let the innuendos fly (Bob Eubanks practically made the practice into an art form in the latter). Encouraged by the flood of attention—not to mention the realization that people were more than willing to embarrass themselves in public if it meant a moment in the spotlight—Chuckie Baby himself stepped out from behind the producer's chair to host *The Gong Show* in 1976.

The Gong Show seemed a harmless variation on Ted Mack's classic *Amateur Hour* on the surface: aspiring talent would present a brief act on stage and be judged on a scale of 0-10 by a panel of three celebrity guests (the most popular included Jamie Farr, Pat McCormick and "Juicy" Jaye P. Morgan). But any judge who found any act insufferable after a minimum of thirty seconds was entitled to strike a large gong suspended behind the panel and immediately kill it. However, the Barris rendition would never settle for being a mere talent show. Sure, there were any number of relatively straight-laced singers, dancers and musicians competing for the daily prize of \$516.32, but it was the flood of 'novelty' acts that soon had the censors on high alert (and frequently inspired the judges to get in on the action), much to the delight of the studio audience, which also found itself regularly regaled by the antics of such non-contestant talent as the Unknown Comic and Gene-Gene the Dancing Machine. The ratings were high, and the backlash was inevitable—Barris was frequently and publicly accused of lowering the bar of entertainment standards and profiting from the public humiliation of others. None of this, of course, stopped the flood of fame-seeking hopefuls from besieging the producer both at the studio and in his 'private' life. Barris eventually caved in to personal and professional pressure and, in his own words, 'got out of the kitchen' when he should have remained. But before he left *The Gong Show* completely behind, he created the first of his bizarre confessionals...

As originally conceived, *The Gong Show Movie* was to be a semi-documentary directed by Robert Downey (of *Putney Swope*) fame, though in reality, creative control issues caused Barris to fire Downey and take over as (uncredited) director halfway through the production (another decision Barris eventually came to regret). While the publicity suggested that the film would consist mainly of uncensored "too hot for television" *Gong Show* acts, the actual offering provides a surreal amalgam of authentic backstage footage, clips from the actual show and blatantly staged incidents purporting to give us the day-to-day life of Chuck Barris (playing himself, of course) as his patience and even his very sanity steadily erode under an endless onslaught of critics, corporate authorities, contestants and aspirants alike. Chuck's on-screen significant other, Red, is played by her true-life counterpart Robin Altman, but the highly amusing James B. Douglas certainly wasn't the hovering network executive he plays in the film. Chuck's rare moments of peace as he happily plays guitar and sings with his friends (Barris himself performs two songs on the soundtrack) are legitimate, the impromptu dust-up he instigates with an insulting 'fan' is anything but. The auditions for acts that would never make it to the air (one involving a jubilant Kitten Natividad) seem to be for real, but the various and sundry *Gong Show* cronies seen throughout (the entire film is a smorgasbord of cameos) are either playing fanciful versions of themselves or different characters altogether (Rip Taylor, for example). However, there's one notorious moment which undeniably took place in reality—during one particularly raucous Gene-Gene performance taped for television, Jaye P. Morgan got caught up in a frenzy of jacket-tossing and deliberately flashed the studio audience. The footage was censored for broadcast but survives for posterity (in freeze-frame, yet) here. That bit of business got Morgan permanently booted from the show, but the spunky singer/actress was a good enough sport to stick around for the movie.

It's not always easy to separate fact from fancy here (Barris would go on to blur the line even further, but more on that later), but the grand finale of *The Gong Show Movie* gives up any pretense of documentary realism as our beleaguered hero seeks extreme isolation in the Moroccan desert, only for the entire cast to arrive on the scene and provide him with the morale-boosting, show-stopping musical number "Don't Get Up For Me." Of course we've been watching an entertainment this entire time, but we've also been successfully placed inside the head of its true-life protagonist. This, however, wasn't quite what the public was expecting. *The Gong Show* was already off the air by the time *The Gong Show Movie* was released in 1980, and the Downey/Barris concoction, being neither fish nor fowl, proved a difficult sell and was met with conical contempt and audience apathy. Distributor Universal never bothered to release the film on home video in any format, though it did play on HBO before