



IN THE WEEKS BEFORE HIS DEATH, **HERSCHELL GORDON LEWIS** TALKED TO **RUE MORGUE** ABOUT HIS LEGENDARY CAREER AS THE CREATOR OF THE SPLATTER FILM

# GORE EVERMORE

BY PRESTON FASSEL

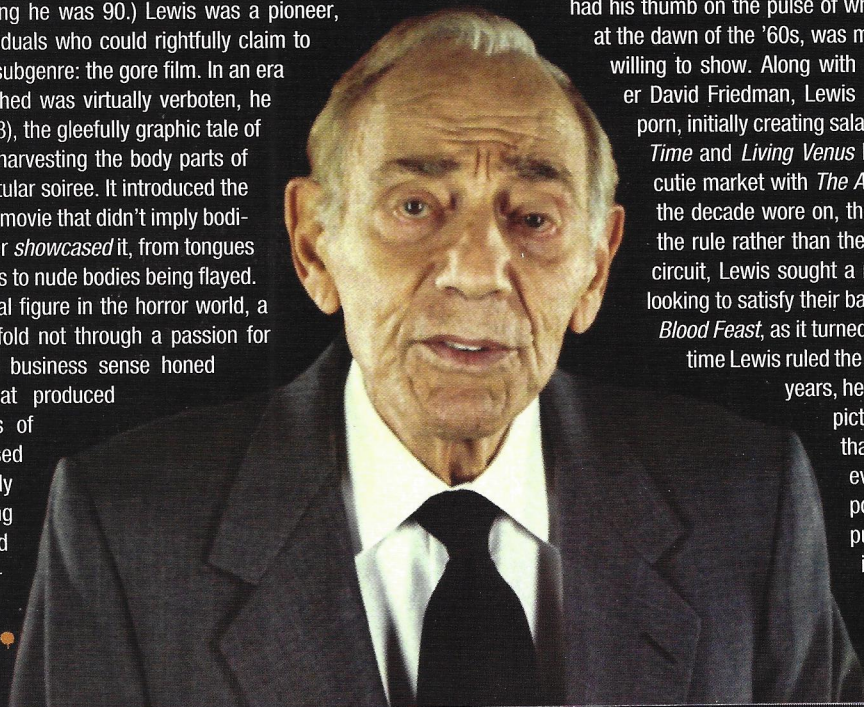
**ON SEPTEMBER 26, 2016, HORROR FANS LOST A LEGEND WHEN HERSCHELL GORDON LEWIS, KNOWN TO GENERATIONS OF FANS AS "THE GODFATHER OF GORE," DIED AT AGE 90.**

(Though most sources report that he was 87, the *New York Times* quoted his son as saying he was 90.) Lewis was a pioneer, one of those rare individuals who could rightfully claim to have invented his own subgenre: the gore film. In an era when cinematic bloodshed was virtually verboten, he made *Blood Feast* (1963), the gleefully graphic tale of a cannibalistic caterer harvesting the body parts of young women for the titular soiree. It introduced the splatter film — a type of movie that didn't imply bodily destruction, but rather *showcased* it, from tongues being torn out of mouths to nude bodies being flayed.

Lewis was an unusual figure in the horror world, a man brought into the fold not through a passion for the genre but a keen business sense honed by the same era that produced the mid-century titans of Madison Avenue. Raised in Chicago, his early years betrayed nothing of the mind that would shock moviegoers. After graduating from

Northwestern University with a master's degree in journalism, he taught communications at Mississippi State University before finding work as a copywriter for Morlock, an ad agency back in Chicago. That gig led to a job directing television commercials, setting the stage for a foray into exploitation cinema. A businessman first and a filmmaker second, Lewis had his thumb on the pulse of what the public wanted, which, at the dawn of the '60s, was more skin than Hollywood was willing to show. Along with his business partner/producer David Friedman, Lewis made the foray into softcore porn, initially creating salacious titles such as *The Prime Time* and *Living Venus* before moving into the nudie cutie market with *The Adventures of Lucky Pierre*. As the decade wore on, though, and skin flicks became the rule rather than the exception on the grindhouse circuit, Lewis sought a new angle to appeal to those looking to satisfy their baser cravings: blood.

*Blood Feast*, as it turned out, was a huge hit, and for a time Lewis ruled the drive-in. Over the next several years, he churned out a number of gore pictures, each more sensational than the last (see sidebar). However, as he was always quick to point out, his passion wasn't for pulp but for profit, and, sensing another shift in audience tastes in the beginning of the



'70s, he stepped away from filmmaking after 1972's *The Gore Gore Girls*. Applying the knowledge he'd accumulated in the movie business, Lewis became a marketing guru and published over 30 books on the subject, eventually being inducted into the Direct Marketing Association's Hall of Fame.

But he wasn't quite done with grue and came out of retirement in 2002 to direct *Blood Feast 2*, a sequel to/remake of the original. Lewis took full advantage of advances in special effects, delivering an even more frenetically graphic picture than the original. Predating *Saw* by two years and *Hostel* by three, it was arguably the opening volley in the splatter revival of the early 2000s.

Though he remained focused on his marketing career, Lewis was a regular on the indie horror scene, doing voice-over roles and on-screen cameos. His gregarious personality and reputation eventually grew larger than his films, and a bit part would get him top billing on a DVD cover; promotional art for his final directorial effort, for example, the anthology film *BloodMania* (in post-production at the time of Lewis' death), features his likeness prominently on the poster. He also stayed active on the scene by becoming a fixture on the horror convention circuit, meeting fans and receiving lifetime achievement awards. (He appeared at *Rue Morgue's* Festival of Fear in 2007, and performed the theme song from *Two Thousand Maniacs!* on stage during a party.)

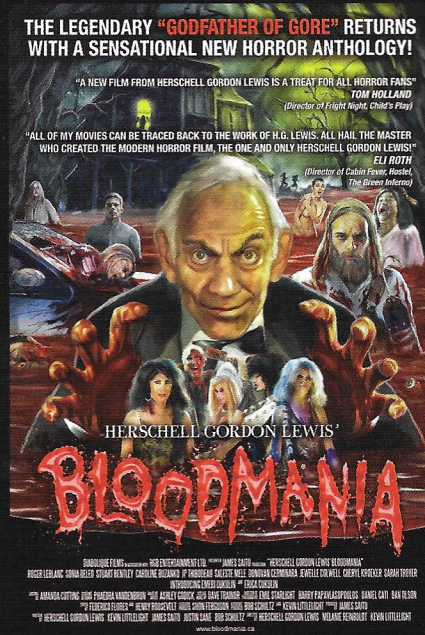
Just before he died, Arrow Films announced the *The Herschell Gordon Lewis Feast*, a collection of fourteen of his most notable films along with considerable extras. Promoting several of his upcoming projects in the weeks before his death, the man who was instrumental in the birth of the modern horror film spoke to *Rue Morgue* about what it means to be the Godfather of Gore.

#### WHAT WAS THE GENESIS OF YOU BECOMING THE GODFATHER OF GORE?

One day, lost in history, I was watching an old movie on television with Edward G. Robinson. Police had pumped him full of bullet holes, and he died quietly with a little splotch on his shirt. And I said, "Wait a minute, that is not what you're doing if you're a professional." That gave me the notion for a movie in which blood would spurt. We called it — our phrase — "gouts of blood." That phrase, in fact, still exists all these years later. ... And that was the genesis, really, of the entire splatter film world. Of course, no one knew at the time what a splatter film was. That came some years later. We simply called them "bloody movies," and then a little later "gory movies."

#### WAS IT DIFFICULT TRYING TO GET SOME OF THESE EXPLICIT FILMS IN TO THEATRES?

I had a very good time making them, except worrying if any theatre would ever show 'em. And if a theatre did show one of my movies, who would pay to see it? In those primitive times there was



*Butchered Beauties:* Montag the Magnificent (Ray Sagar) works his bad magic in *The Wizard of Gore*, and (opposite) a victim of Fuad Ramses in *Blood Feast*.

no such thing as video cassettes or DVDs. You made it in the theatres or not at all. And it had to hit within that limited sphere of theatres who were outside the orbit of mainline distribution. And that's what we aimed for; we hit it smack in the middle of that target.

#### OF COURSE, YOU'RE STILL MAKING MOVIES; THE HERSCHELL GORDON LEWIS' BLOODMANIA ANTHOLOGY IS UPCOMING, FOR EXAMPLE. WHAT CHANGES HAVE YOU EXPERIENCED SINCE STARTING IN THE '60S?

When I first started making movies, I had no notion that it was plausible for an outsider to set a pattern within the motion picture world. I always had felt that if you weren't Metro Goldwyn Mayer, or Paramount, or in later days Universal, you simply followed what other people dictated. The result was that the motion picture industry split itself into two pieces: one was what they might call "acceptable" and the other was what they might call "borderline." And borderline were films the major companies wouldn't touch. Usually for that to happen, the films either had to

be obscene, or so primitive, so amateurish, that there was no possibility of professional distribution taking place.

#### THAT'S CERTAINLY CHANGED.

Even today I find it very hard to realize how far we've come, but then, really, it's been two generations. I think I'm walking proof if you live long enough you become legitimate. [Laughs] Because when I first started making these films, everybody in the industry, whether it was the major companies, whether it was executives, whether it was film critics, they all attacked — almost like a witch hunt. "How dare he come in here? He's certainly not a part of the establishment! Worse yet, he comes in here, makes this crap and people pay to look at it! What's the matter with the world today?" So I quietly chuckle.

#### YOU CONTINUE TO WORK ON OTHER FILMMAKERS' LOW-BUDGET INDIE FILMS. WHAT DO YOU GET, FOR EXAMPLE, OUT OF APPEARING IN A FILM SUCH AS TERROR TOONS 3?

Working with [director] Joe Castro. See, I've

ARROW VIDEO SERVES UP FOURTEEN OF THE GODFATHER OF GORE'S ESSENTIAL FILMS IN THE MONSTROUS HERSCHELL GORDON LEWIS FEAST BOX SET



# "HOW BANANAS IT'S A GIRL'S LEG!"

BY THE GORE-MET

**L**AST JULY, ARROW VIDEO ANNOUNCED THE OCTOBER RELEASE OF *SHOCK AND GORE: THE FILMS OF HERSCHELL GORDON LEWIS*,

a deluxe seventeen-disc combo box set limited to

500 in the UK and 500 in the US. Along

with seven Blu-ray and corresponding DVD double features and three bonus Blu-rays, came a 92-page art book on Lewis' career by Stephen Thrower, a reprint of the *Blood Feast* novelization by Lewis, a companion 7" vinyl record with music from the score, a 28-page Lewis "annual," a set of fourteen postcards with reproductions of the poster art for the included films, a barf bag and a handmade eyeball. They sold out in 24 hours. A second set, *The Herschell Gordon Lewis Feast*, limited to 2500 pieces in both markets, with all of the discs and the annual is also available. Let's dig in!

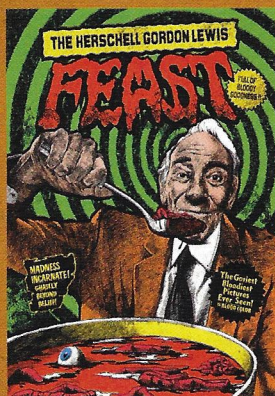
*Blood Feast* (1963) was conceived while Lewis and his producer, David F. Friedman, were driving to Miami to shoot a nudist camp film. In it, a bug-eyed caterer collects body parts from nubile young women to mount a cannibalistic "Egyptian feast" - which he will serve at a convenient dinner party for the Egyptologist daughter of a local socialite - to resurrect the goddess Ishtar. Using depart-

ment store mannequins and butcher scraps, Lewis depicted limbs being hacked off, brains being removed, and tongues being cut out in clumsy, lurid detail. There had been nothing like it before. *Blood Feast* is presented on the first disc in anamorphic widescreen, as is the first of the "roughie" subgenre of nudie cuties, *Scum of the Earth* (1963).

With a hit on their hands, Lewis and Friedman immediately began production on their next gore film, *Two Thousand Maniacs!* (1964). Inspired by a Broadway production of the musical *Brigadoon*, they twisted the tale into a southern-fried epic about a town called Pleasant Valley that appears one day every year so that the townsfolk can exact revenge on Yankees after their slaughter by Union troops during the Civil War. Three couples find themselves guests of "a town of madmen insane with blood lust!" One hapless tourist has an arm lopped off with an axe, another is rolled down a hill in a barrel with nails in the sides, and yet another is torn limb from limb by horses! Lewis cited this as his personal favourite of his films. *Two Thousand Maniacs!* is also presented in anamorphic widescreen,

paired with Lewis' first post-"blood trilogy" feature, the hicksploitation effort *Moonshine Mountain* (1965).

The final entry in the unofficial Lewis-Friedman blood trilogy was *Color*



*Me Blood Red* (1965), about a temperamental artist who has difficulty selling his paintings until he starts adorning them with human blood. When he can't squeeze enough red out of his own fingertips to meet the newfound demand for his work, he resorts to murdering women. A crass gag in which blood is milked out of the entrails of a disembowelled victim is the only distinguishing bit in a film that lacks the naïve showcases and sheer verve of its predecessors (Though does contain the immortal line, "Holy Bananas! It's a girl's leg!"). Legal battles within the production company delayed post-production, distribution was hampered by fed-up censors, and Friedman abandoned Lewis while he was in pre-production for *Moonshine Mountain*.

Lewis returned to the horror genre with the aptly titled *Something Weird* (1967), the second feature on the third disc. In a script written by a college professor obsessed by ESP, an electrical linesman survives a near-fatal accident in which he is disfigured but recovers with heretofore unknown psychic abilities. A hideous old witch offers to heal his face if he will be her lover, and his fame as a celebrity seer grows until their relationship implodes after they offer to help a small-town police force catch a serial killer. There is kung-fu, a séance, a ghost, an acid trip and police procedural action!

The gleefully bizarre *The Gruesome Twosome* (1967) sees Lewis get gory again on the fourth disc, which includes a talking Styrofoam wig block to pad out the run time. Monte Norman's "007 Theme" is quixotically ripped off in the credit sequence and the franchise is referenced in ensuing expository dialogue – "How'd I ever get mixed up with a female James Bond?" – said to a college student intrigued by the disappearances of a number of young female co-eds that have connections to a wig shop that sells realistic swaths of hair and has an apartment perpetually for rent. Turns out, Mrs. Pringle shoves would-be renters into it so her developmentally handicapped son Rodney can scalp them with an electric carving knife and she can sell their hair. A decapitation, a disembowelment, some ocular trauma and a stuffed civet named Napoleon would be lost were this film not restored from beat-up 35mm prints.

Rounding out the disc is *A Taste of Blood* (1967), Lewis' sole stab at mainstream filmmaking. A businessman receives a package from mysterious European relatives containing two bottles of vintage Slivovitz brandy that, after he consumes them, turns him into a vampire intent on carrying out vengeance on the descendants of his forebearer's killers. At two hours, it's the longest film Lewis made, and boasts the highest production value; the omnipresent blue glow of the vampire's face is the most sophisticated technical trick the filmmaker ever pulled off. Arrow's restoration is presented in anamorphic widescreen.

Disc five has a double bill of Lewis' lively addi-



**Art Of The Kill:** (clockwise from top) scenes from *Color Me Blood Red*, *Something Weird*, *The Gruesome Twosome*, and (opposite) *Two Thousand Maniacs!*

tion to the bikersploitation genre, *She-Devils on Wheels* (1968), about an empowered girl gang whose code is "Sex, guts, blood, and all men are mothers!" and the rowdy juvenile delinquent joint *Just for the Hell of It* (1968).

*How to Make a Doll* (1968), which presages John Hughes' *Weird Science* (1985) by nearly two decades, sees two socially inept college professors use computer technology to fabricate living sex dolls in a risibly unfunny, community theatre-level farce. No extras – or apologies – for this one. Fortunately, it's paired on the sixth disc with one of Lewis' most enduring and genuinely revolting films, *The Wizard of Gore* (1970). Here, an illusionist performs Grand Guignol-style magic tricks onstage – in one show a woman has her torso sawed open with an electric chainsaw, in another a woman has a spike driven into her skull and her brains pulled out – but his volunteers walk away unscathed, only to die later from the same wounds. Meanwhile, a daytime television talk show host and her sports reporter boyfriend try to get to the bottom of it all. Some of the gore effects – eyeballs that would be plucked out if those damn effects would co-operate and a gag-inducing sword-swallowing sequence – are disgusting despite their ineptitude. Arrow has conjured up another widescreen presentation.

The final dual feature disc includes another of Lewis' moonshine-addled hicksploitation efforts, *This Stuff'll Kill Ya!* (1971), and the last film he made before a 30-year hiatus, *The Gore Gore*

*Girls* (1972). Lewis said he "upended the gore basket" for this one, in which a black-gloved killer brutally murders exotic dancers while a snooty private investigator and a young female newspaper reporter are on the trail. There's a face smashed into a mirror, a bare ass tenderized with a mallet, eyeballs plucked out with a barbecue fork and squished, and snipped off nipples that spurt white and chocolate milk! Arrow provides the bump and grind in widescreen once again.

Two of the bonus discs contain *Blood Feast*, *Scum of the Earth*, *Color Me Blood Red* and *A Taste of Blood* and *The Wizard of Gore* in "open matte" presentations that preserve their original full-frame Academy (1.33:1) aspect ratios. A third bonus disc contains Jimmy Maslon and Frank Henenlotter's delightful 2009 documentary *Herschell Gordon Lewis: Godfather of Gore*, accompanied by an hour of equally entertaining outtakes and the trailer.

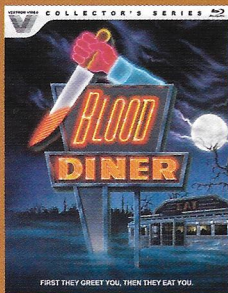
Though Lewis passed away not long before the release of these sets, he was involved in their production, recording charming introductions for every film and participating in a number of the myriad special features. He also appears on ten of the eleven commentary tracks licensed from *Something Weird* and conducted by *Something Weird* Video founder Mike Vraney and Friedman, both of whom sadly predeceased him. This feast is an unwitting but fitting final tribute to an exploitation legend. Rest in peace. ☹️

## A FEAST FOR THE SENSES

### BLOOD DINER (1987) Blu-ray

Starring Rick Burks, Carl Crew and Drew Godderis  
Directed by Jackie Kong  
Written by Michael Sonye  
Lionsgate

Fifteen years after Hershell Gordon Lewis stepped back from the filmmaking biz following 1972's *The Gore Gore Girls*, a lot had changed in the genre world. The booming home video market was rife with opportunities for low-budget filmmakers to push the horror envelope with practical effects, outrageous storylines and adult content. Enter Jackie Kong (*The Being, Night Patrol*), a young Asian-American filmmaker who hooked up with the producers who owned the rights to Lewis' films to mount a sequel to *Blood Feast* (1963).



They agreed to let her helm it if she could secure funding, which she did, delivering one of the most ambitious movies ever made for under \$400,000. And one of the most insane. *Blood Diner* (distributors rejected the *Blood Feast* name) begins with preteen brothers witnessing their crazed serial killer uncle, Anwar (Drew Godderis), gunned down by police. Flash forward to their twenties and Michael (Rick Burks) and George (Carl Crew) are grave-robbing Unc's still-active brain and eyes from his mummified corpse. Reincarnated as a brain and eyes in a jar, Anwar cracks one-liners while giving his nephews instructions on how to harvest body parts from nubile young women in order to create a patchwork corpse that will be the vessel for an ancient Egyptian goddess to make her return. The brother's cheerfully commit mass murder, eventually attracting the attention of the cops.

As in *Blood Feast*, young women are butchered in a variety of gory ways to service an ancient Egyptian prophecy, but that's where the similarities end. Kong's film is an outrageously rich buffet of exploitation tropes that also serves up cannibalism, zombies, Nazi wrestlers, topless aerobics, a garishly punked-out rockabilly band and a doo-wop soundtrack. Most of the performances are amateur but the production value is admirable given the budget and some of the gore gags laugh-out-loud funny, such as a rival diner owner getting both hands chopped off and trying to drive away as his stumps spray all over the inside of the windshield.

Nearly as entertaining are the ample supplements spotlighting the movie's wild production, colourful cast and crew and Kong's skill as a low-budget filmmaker. The tribute she receives on this special edition Blu-ray (the second release in Lionsgate's line of resurrected Vestron titles) is overdue and bittersweet, given the reality of a misogynist industry that cut short the film career of an exploitation queen.

DAVE ALEXANDER



**Head Games:** The black-gloved killer goes to work in *The Gore Gore Girls*, and (top) Marcy (Ashlyn Martin) gets scalped on the beach in *Blood Feast*.

been on sets it's a constant battle. The cast and the crew are constantly fighting. The executives and the company are constantly fighting. Every actor wants to be a director. Every director wants to be an actor. And somehow or other you feel, as you stand there, even as a spectator, they're not having a good time. I will tell you plainly and openly, on my tombstone they should put "He had a good time." And I give Joe much credit for that. ... He's one of the most underappreciated people in the splatter film world, and I'm very, very delighted to be involved in this thing with him. We worked out a situation in which he felt, and I do too, that my position in it would not be that negative of a factor [Laughs]. So, who can say no to that?

#### WHAT DO YOU CONSIDER TO BE YOUR CROWNING CINEMATIC ACHIEVEMENT?

Oh, God, that's a horrible question! [Laughs] Ask someone who's made splatter films, "What's your proudest achievement?" Nobody died on

**"IF YOU LIVE  
LONG ENOUGH  
YOU BECOME  
LEGITIMATE."**

**—HERSHELL GORDON LEWIS**

the set, I guess that would be it. I think, if you want to call it an achievement, I've — in several instances, by the way — been invited to these horror film festivals and presented with a Lifetime Achievement

Award. I will point out to you, if there's one thing my movies are not, they're not achievements. Except commercially. I look around me, and I see *again* big companies with big budgets losing, losing, *losing* because they don't know how to exploit a film! And if I'm credited with any contribution to the world of motion pictures, it's the knowledge that it is possible working within a niche to generate enough interest among people who'll make your motion picture successful. For that, I do take credit.

#### ANYTHING YOU'D LIKE TO ADD?

To the readers of *Rue Morgue*: Anyone who wants to make a movie, hire me as a director, I can't start shooting until this evening. I'm available after that. And that, to me, is the good life. ☺