



TV / FILM

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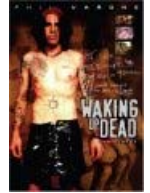
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REVIEW

Movie Review: *Waking Up Dead*

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Phil Varone was the drummer for Saigon Kick, a heavy metal band that sold over one million albums and performed thousands of concerts. Years later, he joined an even more successful group, Skid Row, and went on tour with Kiss. At one point in *Waking Up Dead*, Varone shows us the balance of his bank account: \$1.57.

Varone started playing the drums as a child, and joined Saigon Kick when he was barely out of his teens. The group scored big in 1992 with the unjustly forgotten hit "[Love is on the Way](#)," but tensions within the band - not to mention the rise of (ugh) grunge - took their toll, and Varone left the group in 1996 with barely a penny to his name. Skid Row came calling a few years later, and Varone was back in business - and into a downward spiral of debauchery and drug addiction.

Waking Up Dead director Fabio Jafet followed Varone through his life as a sort-of-famous rock star - just well-known enough to score all the groupies and cocaine he wanted, but not successful enough to pay for it, much less have anything left over for child support. It's a story we've seen many, many times before on *Behind the Music*, but *Waking Up Dead* shows it in often excruciating detail, with Varone snorting coke and having sex (with groupies for whom the word "skank" was coined) right on camera.

Addicts usually have to hit rock bottom before they start to turn their lives around (assuming they survive), and by the end of *Waking Up Dead*, Varone is suffering serious heart problems caused by cocaine use, and is forced to sell his drum set to his drug dealer. He finally quits Skid Row (most of whose members, except for guitarist Dake "Snake" Sabo, apparently refused to participate in the film), tries to reconnect with his children, and warns the viewer away from ever getting caught up in that messy business.

But will *Waking Up Dead* actually convince anyone *not* to become a rock star? I suspect most people who see the film will think they'd merely do things differently if they ever made it big as a musician. I also suspect Varone thought the exact same thing, once. Today, he's kicking himself for not taking a good job with Westinghouse when he had the chance.

Waking Up Dead gets a little repetitive at times, and I wish the filmmakers had shown us more about the business side - specifically, how record companies take advantage of young performers like Varone and leave them broke. Varone says he never got a nickel from "Love is on the Way," and rants about how Saigon Kick's record company, the Michael Douglas-owned Third Stone Records, had no idea what it was doing. I wish the film explained why.

Still, it's a very compelling documentary about life in the second tier of rock stardom. We all know about major superstars who destroyed their lives with sex, drugs, and rock and roll, but only occasionally do we get such a close look at those who just barely made it to the top, and only for a little while.

You can view [a trailer for *Waking Up Dead*](#) (warning: nudity, coarse language and drug use).

Comments

