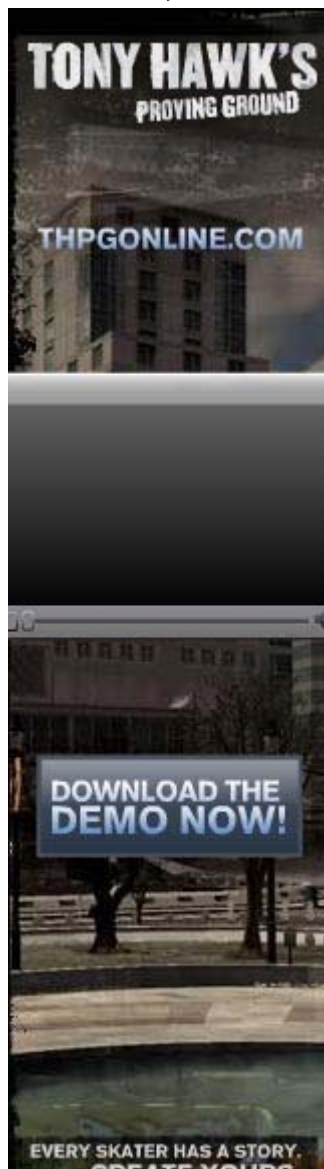




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## Waking Up Dead

**Director:** Fabio Jafet

(2004) Rated: N/A

US DVD release date: 26 June 2007 (MVD)

by **Adrien Begrand**

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In his last year of high school, Phil Varone had his future all set. He was already employed by Westinghouse, he was getting straight A's at school, his university tuition would be paid for by his employer, and he was going to study architecture and play for his university's golf team. He also loved to play the drums, though, and when someone came along and asked if he was interested in joining a band, all those plans for the future went out the window, as Varone set out to become a rock star.

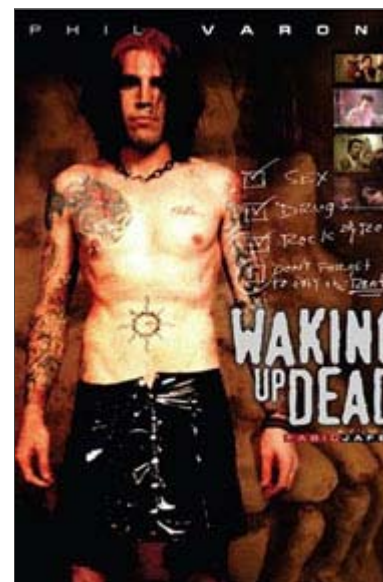
Nearly 20 years later, he was divorced, penniless, feeding a \$900-a-week cocaine habit, skipping child support payments, and selling his beloved drums to his drug dealer just to temporarily keep the wolves at bay. The fame he so doggedly sought after did arrive in the early '90s, but the fortune didn't follow, and before he knew it, he was a destitute 36-year-old who wasn't sure if he'd even wake up the next morning.

Journalist and filmmaker Fabio Jafet hated to see his good friend spiraling out of control, and his idea to help out his buddy was to follow him around with a camera and document this life that kept getting sadder by the day, in the hopes of making Varone realize just what he was doing to himself and the people around him.

The end result is *Waking Up Dead*, a fascinating documentary that is not only a heartbreaking story of a good guy who made some terrible decisions in his life, but also serves as a cautionary tale for anyone who wants to make it big in the music business. As Varone reiterates throughout the 90-minute film, it's nowhere near as glamorous as you think it is.

At first, Varone was just as hungry a young musician as anyone in the late-'80s, his Florida-based band, Saigon Kick, began building up a local following big enough to attract the interest of A&R reps from Atlantic Records. After signing to an outrageously ill-conceived eight-album contract and hitting the top 10 with the power ballad "Love is on the Way", the band started spending money recklessly, to the point where expenses badly outnumbered profits, and by the time they figured out the royalties just weren't as huge as they thought they would be (i.e., nonexistent), egos had taken over and the band fell apart in the mid-'90s.

It's when he is given a second chance at rock stardom by pop metal veterans Skid Row in 2000 that we join Varone, who is at first relishing life on the road once again, and at first our glimpse is as candid as it is titillating—the ladies are literally beating down his door on every tour stop—but it soon becomes more and more disturbing, from the graphic sounds in the background to an on-camera encounter with a mother who is just as eager to please as her daughter, who is in the same room. At one point Varone says that the rock star lifestyle is so tempting, that upon describing it to his therapist, the therapist almost sounded like he wanted to come along for the ride.



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It's not long before the cocaine becomes part of Varone's life, which collides head-on with Varone's self-medicating tendency, and we see him quickly sink lower and lower. He conducts an interview while anxiously waiting for his dealer to arrive, and wonders if the prospect of being in a movie will get the dealer to the house faster. He does copious, Tony Montana amounts of blow with his ex-porn star girlfriend, to the point where cocaine is permanently embedded underneath the numbers of his credit card. He is mortified when his nose stuffs up to the point where he can't inhale, and when he does, he simply stares at a TV screen for ages with a dazed expression. Meanwhile, his bank account dwindles to the point where his net worth is a measly \$1.57.

Filed during his descent and narrated after his decision to get sober, Varone is forthright in his interviews. The amount of freedom he gives Jafet is remarkable, the no-holds-barred approach is the best way to get the film's message across. That said, the real heart of the documentary is his long-suffering ex-wife Cathy, who is just as candid as Phil in her interviews, and although her marriage with Varone has long since ended, she still expresses great concern for the father of her children, and is beside herself with grief when he is at his most desperate.

*Waking Up Dead* opens seemingly on a triumphant note, as Varone takes the stage in front of 10,000 fans, sits behind his kit, takes a swig of beer, and kicks off an energetic Skid Row set. What is later revealed is that the stress on his heart from the excessive cocaine use takes its toll during that very performance, and immediately afterwards, paramedics are called in, and we see a barely conscious Varone receiving medical attention, his sweaty, bedraggled, eye-lined face looking more pathetic than glamorous. As Cathy emphasizes, no matter how bad you want to get famous, you can't fool yourself into thinking it will happen to you, and it took Varone nearly two decades and one near-death experience to realize that.



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### Waking Up Dead - Trailer

RATING:  1  2  3  4  5  6  7  8  9  10

EXTRAS:  1  2  3  4  5  6  7  8  9  10

— 30 August 2007

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