



**EXPERIMENTA**

## **The Incredibly Strange Creatures Who Stopped Living and Became Mixed-up Zombies!!?**

+ live experimental music introduction by *The Howling*.

Set around a series of murders connected to a creepy sideshow fortune teller, *The Incredibly Strange Creatures* is an unusual, unpredictable ride that far exceeds its cheap and delightfully trashy origins. Shot by the legendary Vilmos Zsigmond (*Close Encounters...*, *The Long Goodbye*), Ray Dennis Steckler's masterpiece exists on the very edges of experimental film culture – channelling collage, vivid colour, dream imagery, masks, musical numbers and exotic dance as a way of telling its story of monster mayhem and hypnotic possession.

We're pleased to welcome *The Howling* (Ken Hollings and Robin the Fog) who will combine analogue tape-loop manipulation with spoken word to provide a fitting introduction to this special screening.

**[bfi.org.uk](http://bfi.org.uk)**

The failings of the 'Golden Turkey' approach to film criticism are admirably illustrated by this near-legendary (on the strength of the absurd title, some sources have suggested that the film is merely a hoax perpetrated by *Famous Monsters of Filmland*) cheapie. Connoisseurs of the ridiculous will find much to relish, both in the film itself and in the circumstances surrounding its production and exhibition, but the good-natured crassness of the movie and its publicity machine is threaded with both an engaging naïveté and a surprising sophistication.

Director Ray Dennis Steckler appears under the pseudonym of Cash Flagg in the lead role of Jerry, which seems to have been conceived as a cross between the very different brands of juvenile delinquency practised by Huntz Hall in the East Side Kids films and James Dean in *Rebel without a Cause*. While this casting indicates a certain amount of wish-fulfilment on the director's part, his idea of juvenile delinquent behaviour is touchingly innocent. 'He's dangerous', enthuses Angie, 'he takes me places I've never been before', whereupon the teenagers set out for an evening at the carnival.

Advertised as 'the first monster musical' (which wilfully ignores the use of rock 'n' roll in such 50s films as *I Was a Teenage Werewolf*, *Frankenstein's Daughter* and *How to Make a Monster*), *Incredibly Strange Creatures* uses its thin plot to fill in the gaps between an endless succession of enthusiastically gauche Las Vegas hopefuls and their peculiar acts. A suave comedian visibly cringes as he delivers the punch-line to the 'My parents were in the iron and steel business' joke; danseuse Carolyn Brandt (the director's wife and frequent star) totters tipsily through a weird routine with a partner who is the exact double of Max Headroom; and one of the chorus girls is out of step in every number. It is perhaps typical of the gap between the film's aspirations and its resources (although one could charitably assume an element of satire about the duplicitousness of carny barkers) that a girlie show which boasts, 'We've got twenty beautiful girls, but only ten beautiful costumes', should

consist of eleven fully clad dancers. While none of the songs ('Do the Shook-Out Shake', 'The Mixed-Up Zombie Stomp') are exactly memorable, the spirited attack of the second-rate performers has a grisly fascination, and some of the lyrics are horribly funny. 'Some were good when they were young, their mothers would agree', runs a mournful cowboy ballad, 'they never thought they'd see their sons a-hangin' from a tree!'

Although the crude monster make-up is quite gruesome by low-budget standards, the action and horror scenes are directed with clod-hopping ineptitude, particularly the final, interminable chase. However, Jerry's nightmare after murdering Marge is a genuinely imaginative and impressive sequence, prefiguring the climax to Corman's *Masque of the Red Death* by a year or so in its mix of elementary dance, Bava-esque lighting and jokey symbolism. The fact that Steckler's later work (*Body Fever*, *The Hollywood Strangler Meets the Skid Row Slasher*, *Blood Shack*) contains nothing that approaches this scene strongly suggests that future Oscar-winning cinematographer Vilmos (then William) Zsigmond was given his head (among Zsigmond's other early, poverty-row features is *Incredibly Strange Creatures*' co-feature, Arch Hall's *The Sadist*, a very impressive rural thriller that got to the Starkweather case ten years before *Badlands*).

The film's carnival setting might have been the inspiration for what now seems like its most memorable aspect – its advertising campaign. Starting with the outrageous title (which was sometimes changed to *Teenage Psycho Meets Bloody Mary* after complaints from cinema-owners who didn't have enough letters to write it on their marquees), Steckler personally organised perhaps the campest selling spree a low-budget promoter has ever attempted. The posters boast such ad lines as 'The First Full Length Feature in BLOODY-VISION', 'See the 1001 Weirdest Scenes Ever!', 'Who'll Chicken Out First – Boys or Girls?', 'Girls! Learn If Your Boy Friend Can Take It!', and 'Not for Sissies'. And, of course, this is the feature which launched Monsterama, the gimmick that went even further than William Castle ever dared ('Not 3-D but real flesh and blood monsters alive in the audience!') by requiring cinema ushers to dress up as zombies and run screaming up and down the aisles, abducting girls from their seats during the climax of the film.

**Kim Newman, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, August 1985**

**The Howling** is a collaborative project started by writer Ken Hollings and sound artist Howlround devoted exclusively to their shared love of text, audiotape and trash aesthetics. Ken Hollings is a writer and broadcaster whose has appeared in numerous journals and anthologies. He has written and presented critically acclaimed features for the BBC and Resonance FM. His books include *Welcome to Mars*, *The Bright Labyrinth*, *The Space Oracle* and *Inferno*, all published by Strange Attractor Press. Howlround was founded by sound designer and radio producer Robin The Fog in 2012 to create recordings, performances and installations entirely from manipulating magnetic tape on a quartet of vintage tape machines. Howlround's tenth album, *Trespass and Welfare* is currently available from Buried Treasure.

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## THE INCREDIBLY STRANGE CREATURES WHO STOPPED LIVING AND BECAME MIXED-UP ZOMBIES!!?

*Director:* Ray Dennis Steckler

©: Morgan-Steckler Productions

*Production Company:* Morgan-Steckler Productions

*Executive Producer:* George J. Morgan

*Producer:* Ray Dennis Steckler

*Production Manager:* A. Mckinney

*Assistant Director:* Don Russell

*Screenplay:* Gene Pollock, Robert Silliphant

*Story:* E.M. Kevke

*Director of Photography:* Joseph V. Mascelli

*Camera Operator:* William Zsigmond

*Editor:* Don Schneider

*Art Director:* Mike Harrington

*Make-up:* Lilly

*Special Make-up:* Tom Scherman

*Music:* Libby Quinn

*Music Editor:* Rod Moss

*Musical Numbers Staged by:* Bill Turner, Alan Smith

*Sound Recording:* Lee Strosnider, Ken Carison

### Cast

Cash Flagg [Ray Dennis Steckler] (*Jerry*)

Carolyn Brandt (*Marge Nielson*)

Brett O'Hara (*Madame Estrella*)

Atlas King (*Harold*)

Sharon Walsh (*Angela*)

Madison Clarke (*Madison*)

Erina Enyo (*Carmelita*)

Jack Brady (*Ortega*)

Toni Camel (*Stell*)

Joan Howard (*Angela's mother*)

Neil Stillman (*Barker*)

Bill Ward (*himself*)

Gene Pollock (*nightclub manager*)

James Bowie (*nightclub comedian*)

Whitey Robinson (*drunk*)

Son Hooker (*1st policeman*)

Steve Clarke (*2nd policeman*)

Jill Carson (*girl in dressing room*)

Titus Moede (*hobo*)

Don Snyder, Teri Randal, Carol Kay, James Bowie (*creatures*)

Patricia Michaels, Jill Carson, Denise Lynn, Patti Crandall, Pat Lynn,

Betty Downing, Cindy Shea (*dancing girls*)

USA 1963

82 mins

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## REGULAR PROGRAMME

### Experimenta: The Incredibly Strange Creatures Who Stopped Living and Became Mixed-Up Zombies?! + live experimental music

introduction by The Howling

Wed 20 Jul 18:15

### Woman with a Movie Camera: The Mirror Has Two Faces + intro by BFI Events Programmer Kimberley Sheehan

Thu 21 Jul 18:00

### African Odysseys: Commemorating Marikana

Sun 24 Jul 12:00-17:40

### Relaxed Screening: Electricity + intro and discussion

Mon 25 Jul 18:15

### Projecting The Archive: The Bay of Saint Michel (aka Pattern for Plunder) + intro by BFI curator Josephine Botting

Tue 26 Jul 18:30

### Terror Vision: Blood Games

Thu 28 Jul 18:20

### Member Picks: Grey Gardens

Fri 29 Jul 18:20

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Programme notes and credits compiled by the BFI Documentation Unit

Notes may be edited or abridged. Questions/comments? Email [prognotes@bfi.org.uk](mailto:prognotes@bfi.org.uk)

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