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VERNE LANGDON INTERVIEW PART TWO...

PAT'S FINGERS, A CALENDAR, AND A FEW DOZEN ZOMBIES



Did you do all of your own designs? How much creative freedom were you given?

I designed and/or designated everything in the commercial area that came out of Don Post Studios from January of 1963 until the day I said goodbye in 1968. I upgraded the clown and old man masks that Don had originally produced, made clown shoes, wigs and noses, white clown bald caps, and rubber chickens! The only things I ever sculpted at Post were the clown noses we made, on a cast of my own nose which I took myself, and the custom ape head and chest (as seen on the 1966 Monster Calendar) made from a clay press from a waste mold of Charlie Gemora's green Negacol master. I also did some life masks, including the one of Don Sr. (copies are floating around today!), and John Carradine.

"Don tried his hand at the first DRACULA mask, but lost the likeness and gave up... Enter the QUEEN of PLASTICINE, PAT 'Fingers' NEWMAN!"

When I first came into the business, Don Sr. tried his hand at the first Dracula "Hollywood Horrors" mask, and at one point it was actually getting there, but he lost the likeness and gave up. This surprised me, because a year before, he had knocked out a terrific likeness of Cliff Arquette ("Charlie Weaver"). I mean REALLY good. But I think psychologically it was the "monster" thing: Don Sr. was a very gentle soul, and just didn't care much for the grotesque.

He told me, "I think I know somebody who can do this, a girl I've used before." Enter The Queen of Plasticine, The Ace of Water-base, The Max of Bees-Wax, Pat "fingers" Newman! She banged out the Dracula mask in less than three days, a mold maker at Glendale Mold by the name of Mike Plesch (swell guy - a Hungarian!) did the mold, and we had the first Don Post Studios Count Dracula mask. Benny poured and cured it, I trimmed and painted it, rented a set of full dress formal tails, and used my own cape (doesn't everybody own a Dracula cape?), and modeled so J. Barry Herron could capture it on film, and that was the beginning.

Incidentally, Pat Newman sculpted nearly everything in our custom/commercial lines that came out of Post Studios as long as I was there. I barely let her out of my sight, actually sitting with her and watching, coaching and keeping her in good spirit as she pushed and pulled the clay into exact likenesses of Ygor, The Wolf Man, Mr. Hyde, or whoever we were making that week.

Pretty soon we hired mask & prop maker Ellis Burman Sr. who had created the Frankenstein Monster headpiece worn by Lon Chaney Jr. in "Ghost of Frankenstein," and the lycanthrope cane head in "The Wolf Man." I had Ellis sculpt a marvelous human skull we sold to Disneyland, Disney World, and magic shops all over. Ellis also later sculpted our new \$8.95 line ("800 Series") of the Universal monsters, which we poured in a specially-formulated (loaded) latex he had devised. We appointed Ellis Head of our lab, and eventually his two sons worked for us, Tom Burman and Ellis Burman Jr. Both the boys were great, and have gone on to fine accomplishments in the makeup profession. Their parents, Ellis and Dorothy, would be so proud.

John Chambers was interested in the direction I was going with the Studios, and became

involved in a couple of our projects, specifically creating or advising "prehistoric men" for showmen Jerry Malone (John created this "dead" Neanderthal) and Frank Hansen (we referred Frank to La Brea Tar Pit/Natural History Museum sculptor Howard Ball who cast this figure in hot melt; John joined us in consultation of the project). It has been unfounded speculation for years that Johnny also made a "bigfoot" costume for a fellow named Patterson. Don't you believe it. John's level of quality was way above that sort of thing; he was a perfectionist and very proud of his craft, and *couldn't* make anything like that if he had tried!

John also joined us in creating the wax museum for Mack Howe in Canada. Johnny and his wife Joan (we called her "Virge") became two of our closest Friends. Along the way, Don Sr. pretty much left me to my "lion's share" of the Studios, as he was investing a great deal of his time with his newly-established vacuum-forming business with partners/movie special effects men Milt Rice and Bobby Bonning, of which I was not a part, making vintage car bodies for movies like "The Great Race" and realistic sides of beef for "Irma La Douce".



Verne Langdon models Don Post Studios' first Dracula mask. The white tie & tails were rented, but the cape belonged to Verne. Mask sculpted by Pat Newman. (Photo: J. Barry Herron)

When John Chambers did "Planet of the Apes" at Fox, he took Pat Newman and Tom Burman... and me... along with him. We worked on "Planet," all the sequels, the "Planet" TV series, "Lost in Space," and "Hello Dolly!"

I got my card in Makeup Artists and Hairstylists Local 706, Pat Newman joined the plasterer's union and worked exclusively for all the major studios, including Universal, and Tom joined Local 706 and became a lab technician and makeup artist. He started his own company and teamed up with John Chambers on many projects, and I went on staff for two years at CBS Television City in Hollywood as a makeup artist, turning people like Pat Paulsen into wolf men, making Tiny Tim noses for the Red Skelton Dancers, and making up people like Burt Reynolds (for his very first pilot), Bobbie Gentry, Liberace, Boris Karloff, and applying clown makeup (a specialty of mine) on Anthony Newley and others. I did weekly duty on the Carol Burnett Show making up Tim Conway and Harvey Korman, two very professional (but really funny) Gentlemen.

Your ZOMBIE mask is considered an icon. How did that mask come to be?

After I left Don Post Studios, while at CBS I decided to sculpt at home just for fun. I did a "Neanderthal man" which was kind of interesting, and The Zombie. Milt Lewis was by then doing photography for me, and he captured both on film, and I sent the color transparencies to Jim Warren. The next thing I knew I received a check from Warren Publishing for cover art, and The Zombie was on the cover of the CREEPY SPOOKTACULAR 1972 ANNUAL. I got a big kick out of that, and after that issue hit the stands Jim called to say he was getting inquiries as to when & where his readers could buy the mask. We struck what seemed like a fair price back then, so in my spare time I made Zombies. I got tired of that real quick, and turned the project over to a makeup artist Friend (the late Terry Smith).

I'd always assumed ZOMBIE was a Don Post mask, but it wasn't! So you turned Zombie production over to Terry Smith. Between yourself and Terry, how long did production of that mask go on? About how many did you turn out? Do you still have a photo (or sculpture) of the Neanderthal?

"Everything that came out of Don Post Studios during my time there was something I wanted for myself."

I think between myself and Terry Smith we did The Zombie masks for maybe a year. I recall making less than a dozen. About that time my partner in Electric Lemon Records, creator of Hollywood's famed Magic Castle - Milt Larsen - was opening his Mayfair Music Hall out in Santa Monica, and Milt and I were writing songs for the show. I was directing the first show as well, and working by then at CBS, and then later writing and producing for Stan Freberg (Stan lured me away from CBS to work at his Freberg, Ltd. - but not very! - advertising agency). My plate was full. I needed somebody to do The Zombie, and Terry was willing. He probably did less than two dozen before Jim Warren retired the ad.

Somewhere, in stored boxes of files documenting my life, there exist some color transparencies of The Neanderthal Man.

What was the general atmosphere at Post like during the 60s?

For the five years I was there, 1963 through 1968, the atmosphere was pretty light. Don Sr. and I got along really well for being partners, and so did our wives. And Don Jr. was a great kid, and now a great adult. Don & Louise would be really pleased with his progress. I enjoyed an evening with Don Jr. and his wife Nancy at the Magic Castle a year or so ago, and we reminisced all over the place! A real reunion! Now they have kids that are older than he was when we first met!

Why did you leave Post after only five years?

My life seems to run in five-year segments. Music, magic, radio, college, wrestling, advertising, makeup, producing, recording, and the rest, with an occasional encore. So, from the day I teamed up with Don Sr., I had that five year format in the back of my mind ("Well, I'll give this five years, then we'll see," kind of thing). Also as the business evolved, I envisioned that Don Jr. would eventually more than likely want to come in with his Father, which would be natural and right. In fact, Sr. and I touched on the subject a few times.

Don Sr. liked cute things like clowns, old people, comic and animal masks (chimps, rabbits, etc.)..."funny faces." Clown makeup and clowning were always an integral part of my life, but I was into monsters big time, and I don't think he ever really understood my penchant for the macabre. Of course he had been licensed to do the Frankenstein Monster (probably the world's very first commercial monster mask!) some years before I came in, but it seemed to me "Frankie," as Don Sr. would often refer to the classic character, was just another mask in the line to him. Norma Jean Wright (later to become Norma Jean Trietsch), a free-lance merchandising maven, put that deal together for him with Universal Studios' attorney Lomida Visma, but as the years passed Don Sr. forgot to make a royalty payment, and when he heard nothing from Universal, forgot to make any more royalty payments. Be that as it may, he never forgot to continue making the Frankenstein Monster masks.

One day in 1964, The Don Post Studios telephone rang. It was David A. Hammond, Head of Universal's newly-formed Merchandising Department, calling to talk to us about making custom Munster masks for a rock group to be called "The Munsters," which Universal was assembling to record a single, "Make It Go Away," to promote "The Munsters," a new Universal/Kayro-Vue television series. Mr. Hammond also, by-the-way and not-so-coincidentally, wanted to reactivate our old mask license (Heads of newly-formed Merchandising Departments have a way of digging up the past).



Don Post Studios' first "Mr. Hyde" over-the-head rubber mask, sculpted by Pat Newman, sold for \$8.95 in 1964. (Photo: J. Barry Herron)

Within the week I met with David A. Hammond, and Universal renewed our license to create mask likenesses of their monster characters, plus a new license for "The Munsters." So now we were making Munster masks (Herman, Lily &

Grandpa), the Herman Munster Headpiece (and neck bolts), plus the Universal Monsters line (I dubbed them "The Universal Horrors" - \$35.00 each), the \$8.95 line of "Don Post Monsters," the later "800 series" that Ellis Burman sculpted, and - eventually - the line of half-masks which Pat Newman sculpted. All famous monsters, known to everyone, then and now. Later we did masks - regular and deluxe - of Uncle Creepy and Cousin Eerie, by special arrangement with Jim Warren and Warren Publishing Co.

Ambivalent as Don may have been about monsters in general, in 1967 it pleased him that I put our Karloff version of The Frankenstein Monster mask on the cover of "An Evening With Boris Karloff & His Friends," with a credit for Don Post Studios, and he really liked the 11x14 photos of our custom "Universal Horrors" Universal monster masks I had framed (by Aaron Bros!) for our new, improved office! Not long after I hung those prints, my Friend Larry ("L. Strock") Rupert (Uni-Mart shows) brought a friend (publisher Jim Matthews) into our office, and that is how the notorious Monster Calendar idea was born. Jim Matthews wanted to sell the masks in a new monster magazine he was going to publish ("Modern Monsters"), but he also wanted to do something commercial with the photos themselves, like sell prints of them. I suggested a calendar, and you know the rest of that story!

The 1966 Monster Calendar featuring Don Post Studios' masks, produced by Jim Matthews for his own Prestige Publications, came from new product shots of the masks I conceived and directed in 1965. I painted and haired those masks, put together costumes, and directed the photo shoot (executed so beautifully by J. Barry Herron, now a famous ocean and aerial photographer). This was a big project, and we were all very happy with the results.

**"Everyone from
TOR JOHNSON and
FELIX SILLA to
KORLA PANDIT
and GLENN
STRANGE visited
the studios."**

In 1967 a puppeteer Friend, Hank Higgins, joined with me in creating and producing a dinner theater marionette revue for Al Saks' Nob Hill Theatre-Restaurant in Panorama City, California, at 8229 Van Nuys Boulevard. Pat Newman sculpted twenty-two heads, including great Karloff & Dracula, Frankenstein's Monster & Wolf Man break-away marionettes that performed to Bobby "Boris" Picket's "The Monster Mash" (no one seemed interested in these terrific caricature characters when I later advertised them for sale in Genii, so I scrapped the bodies and gifted Forry with all four heads). I had worked a brief stint as a puppeteer for Sid & Marty Krofft, and wanted to explore that area, plus I felt it would give Don Post Studios a crack at the puppet world in general, and the outdoor entertainment business particularly, and thus increase our cash flow. Don Sr. didn't take to the idea, and looking back now, I think at the age of 66 he may have been winding down.

About this time I was becoming more and more involved with outside studio makeup work, and I was increasingly absent from the business. It was impossible to work full-time in the motion picture & TV Industries, run Don Post Studios, and pursue all my other interests. It didn't take Don Post Sr. and me very long to realize the time had come to dissolve our partnership, so in 1968 we met at our (the company's) attorney's office, by then counselor Gene Alpern of Berk & Bise Law Offices at 3030 Temple Street in downtown Los Angeles, California (Voltaire Perkins passed on to that great State Bar Association in the sky), and we made it legal: I sold my lion's share of Don Post Studios back to Don Post Sr.

We shook hands, said our goodbyes, and I moved on to a lifetime of fulfillment of the rest of my dreams!

Did you work with or know Robert Short? Rob Tharp? Chris Mueller?

Chris Mueller did a couple of projects for Don's vacuum-forming business, and I think he even did one or two of our museum heads. Robert Short and Rob Tharp came to Post Studios long after I had left, I'm told mid-seventies... but I met Rob Tharp and his wife Cathy at Slammers... my Friend Dante Renta brought Evil Wilhelm, Dan Roebuck, and Rob & Cathy to one of our wrestling shows!

How did you first meet Dante Renta and Evil Wilhelm?

Dante Renta originally contacted me about doing an interview for The Halloween Gazette #5 in Autumn of 1987; this was the Official House Organ for The Halloween Society. We got together and did the interview, and that's how we first met. Dante has been a very good Friend ever since. As for how Evil Wilhelm and I met, In January of 2000, Dante took me to lunch at one of my most favorite restaurants, the Musso & Frank Grill in Hollywood. He brought Evil Wilhelm along, and we had a great day! I ordered the sweetbreads.

Any particular stories or amusing anecdotes about anyone?

I think one of my fondest memories of Don Post Sr. was every year as we got close to Halloween and things would get really rushed and hectic. That's when we'd run into each other in all the confusion, and he'd ask me or I'd ask him: "Is this your first Halloween here?" and we'd laugh hysterically and that would break any tension. He had a great sense of humor! There were so many other things, weird and funny, that happened. One guy came in and wanted a bid from us to convert his VW Bug into an animated TARANTULA he could drive on the freeway! And he was serious. We were just as serious when we turned down his project.



Puppeteers Hank Higgins (left) and Verne Langdon with their Emmett Kelly marionette from "Puppet Pzazz '68!" All the marionettes for the show were sculpted by Pat Newman and costumed by Bob D'Arcy.

Other stuff we'd roar over is just too far out to relate! Honestly, there were times when either Don or I would actually have to stagger out of the office we'd be laughing so hard. Ours was almost a "father & son" relationship, except Don already had a son. I was missing my Father, and still miss him very much. I would say that beyond mutual respect for one-another, Don Post Sr. and I had a genuine bond that held throughout our time together, and a similar sense of humor; the fun and countless good times we enjoyed during our partnership mean a great deal to me.

Do you still do any sculpting or monster make-up?

I did clown makeup on my Friends Arlene & Milt Larsen for a masquerade ball last year. Otherwise, no clown, monster or any other kind of makeup since 1989 when I did my Friend Jeffrey Jones' TV series "The People Next Door." The series wasn't renewed, and that's when I opened Slammers. I haven't picked up a sculpting tool since creating "The Zombie."

What are your thoughts on the mask industry today? On the monster industry in general?

My thoughts on the mask industry today are that there are some terrific artists out there doing their thing, and I'd hate to be competing against them. One fellow, Joe Riley, sent me a Tor Johnson mask he created that ran circles around the one we did at Post. Plus on the Internet I've seen some great masks.

What really pleases me is all of these artists - at least the ones whose work I've seen - really go for the quality, as I have done all my life, with everything I've ever tackled. I am known as a perfectionist, and I was raised by perfectionists. One of my favorite singers, the legendary Peggy Lee, also a perfectionist, used to have a sign hanging on her recording studio wall which quoted Michelangelo: "Perfection is made up of trifles; but perfection itself is no trifle." Amen.

As far as my thoughts on the monster industry in general, I don't see too much merchandise or many monster films; in fact, I don't see too many films, period. So I'm not "up" on that subject.

Does it seem strange that the merchandise you helped pioneer as fun kid stuff now commands such adult dollars? I mean, the Universal monsters have become such commercialized, big, big business! Does it make you think, "Whoa, times have changed!"

Also, what did you think of the resurrection of your "Universal Horrors" (Calendar Masks)?

"Don liked cute things... clowns, old people... funny faces. I was into MONSTERS big time."

The things I conceived and created at Don Post Studios weren't meant for children. Our least expensive item was The Skinhead Wig, which retailed for \$1.50; a child could afford that price, except it was made for an adult - or at very least a teenager - to wear. Don came up with that item before I entered the picture. I took away the trim line, thinned the rubber, and called it "The Professional Bald Cap." We also poured them in white and called them "Professional Clown Bald Caps" and bumped up the price to five bucks. (Dennis Smith, the son of Jerry Smith, at the time an NBC Staff Photographer who photographed the clown Bald Cap, was the model in a clown makeup I applied to his face. "Denny" as we called him made a GREAT clown!) The half-mask Frankenstein Monster retailed for \$2.98, the overhead Frankenstein Monster sold over the counter for \$4.95. Don made both of these prior to my coming in. Our other masks ranged in price from \$4.95 to \$35.00, hardly kiddie prices in the sixties. Our "Herman Munster Headpiece" (and neckbolts), worn in the photo taken by Jerry Smith at NBC on model Enrique Nieves, retailed for \$8.95. All of our caps, headpieces and masks were sculpted on adult heads for adult wear.

But they were never really intended for children, they were only intended for child-hearted Verne Langdon, who dreamed them up as a young man and wanted to wear them and scare the YELL out of his friends!

That never happened, but one night, when Dawn and I were living in a cute little cottage in Laurel Canyon with eighteen stairs leading up to our front door, I took out the trash, waddled down those stairs lugging the heavy bag, then trudged back up the eighteen stairs. My heart was already pounding from the steep ascent, when I opened the door. There stood my adorable bride, perfectly motionless, exhibiting her penchant for improvised mirth, wearing a rubber mask Don had made of the silent screen comic Buster Keaton. What Lon Chaney Sr. said was true about even a clown being able to frighten you if he takes you by surprise! I almost fell backwards down all those stairs I'd just climbed. Gentle reader: DO NOT TRY THIS AT HOME!

As for the "resurrection" of the "Universal Horrors," any good businessman would bring those beauties back, and Don Jr. is a very good businessman.

What in your opinion is the greatest mask ever?

This is one of the toughest questions I've ever been asked, because you're really asking me what - in my opinion - is the greatest MAKEUP ever from which a mask has been made, or so it applies in my case, as most of our masks were based on actual character makeups. Among the greatest in my opinion: Frankenstein's Monster (Karloff & Strange), Dracula (Lugosi), The Wolf Man (Lon Jr.), The Phantom (Lon Sr.), the Hunchback of Notre Dame (Laughton) which Keith Cray sculpted so magnificently for "The Spirit of the Mirror" illusion in our "Land of A Thousand Faces" makeup show for Universal, Mr. Hyde from the Abbott & Costello picture, the iron mask Louis Hayward wore in the 1939 version of "The Man in the Iron Mask," and of course my own Zombie. But I don't think I could narrow all those down to just one!



Verne Langdon clowns for a Simi Valley moppet on DeWayne Bros. Circus.
(Photo: Jerry Smith)

Do you keep in close touch with Don Jr? Forrest Ackerman? Jim Warren?

As I mentioned earlier, I enjoyed an evening with Don & Nancy Post a year or so ago. Forry and I talked just recently, and I am in constant communication with Jim Warren, ever since "that day" when I received "that letter" from him in 1964! The last time I saw him and his dear Friend Gloria Goldberg, they came out from Philadelphia in August of '98 to do a convention in San Diego, and rode the train up to Montecito and stayed with me. We talk on the phone frequently. We also communicate by email (and even snail-mail) continually. We're very close.

How did Kelly Mann/Retro Rubber approach you about bringing back ZOMBIE?

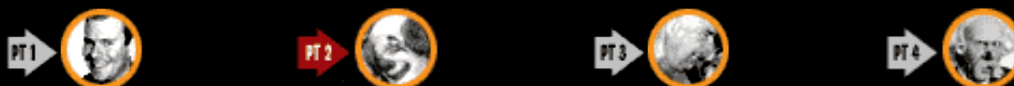
Dante Renta was over for dinner and brought up the question as to whether or not I'd be interested in having The Zombie re-created in a limited edition. I liked the idea, and so Dante put me together with Kelly Mann, who is just sensational! Kelly really nailed the likeness, and those few who invest in this mini-issue (only 30 will be made!) will possess a real collector's item.

Are you pleased with how it's turned out?

Am I pleased with the way The Zombie turned out? Not JUST "pleased," I'm really DELIGHTED the way The Zombie turned out! It's AWESOME! Kelly came in from his mad lab in Arizona to present me with the Zombie prototype, and let me tell you, it's a thing of BEAUTY!!! Dante Renta brought Kelly up for the day, and while we signed the Certificates of Authenticity, Dante photographed and recorded the auspicious occasion for posterity!!!! Kelly is another perfectionist like myself, which makes it so easy for me to work with him. I very much admire his artistry, and beyond this he's a scintillating individual.

Any chance of that NEANDERTHAL seeing the twenty-first century?

I have learned several things as I wander aimlessly through this life, and one of the things I've learned is to never say "never." I know Kelly Mann would turn in a sensational recreation!



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