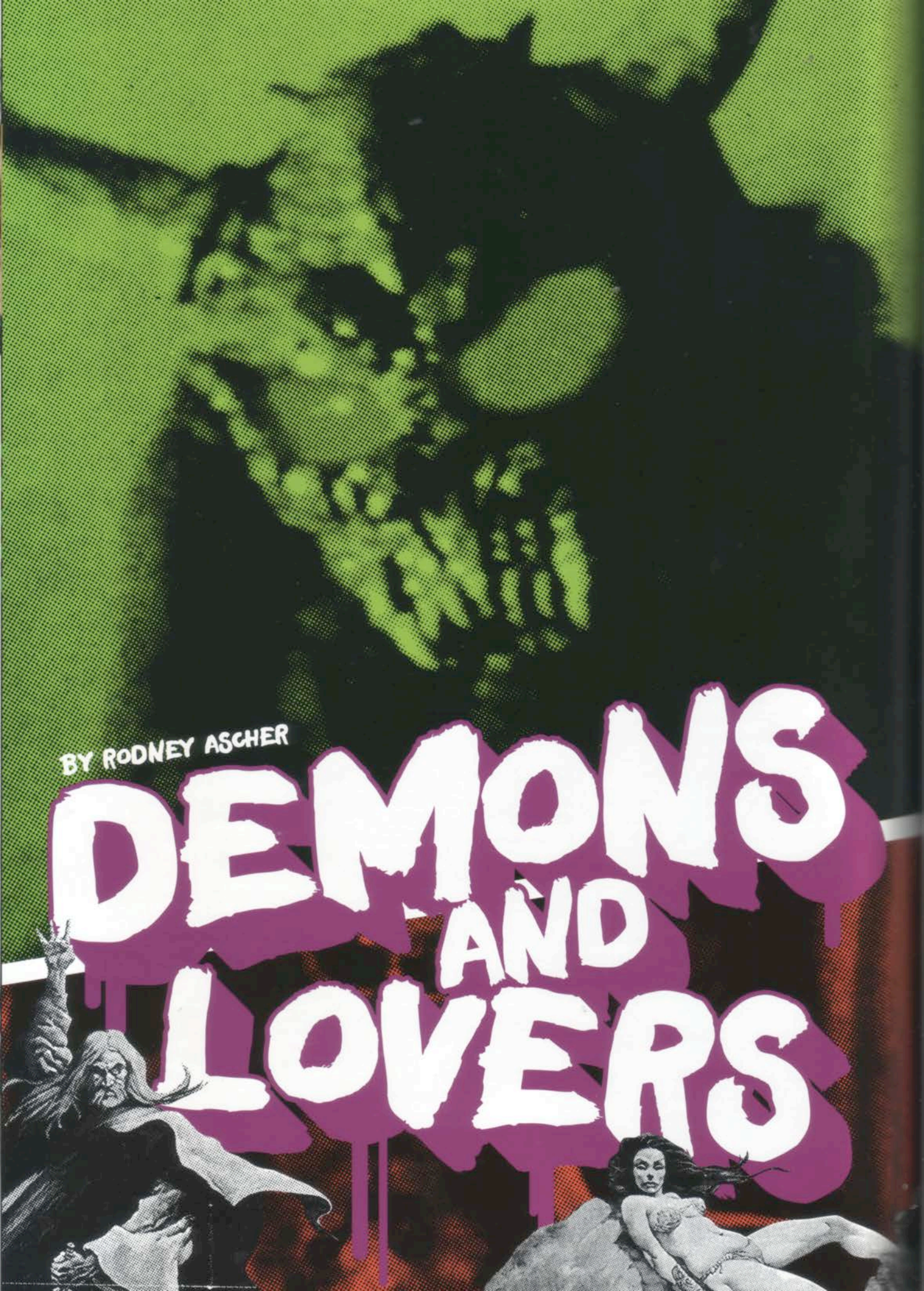
BY RODNEY ASCHER
DEMONS AND LOVERS

The year is 1976 and in the city of Jackson, Michigan (oft-disputed birthplace of both the Coney Island Hot Dog and the Republican Party) a series of cascading crises are hitting critical mass as a small group of friends are pitted against one another in a potentially lethal confrontation. No one who survives this terrible night will ever be the same.

The strange thing about that story is that it applies equally well to the 1977 horror movie *The Demon Lover* as it does to 1980's *Demon Lover Diary*, the verité documentary that captures all the tedium, drama and chaos that erupted on set during *The Demon Lover*'s rocky production.

Maybe it's not a coincidence; making-of films often have an eerie way of echoing the plots of the projects they're documenting. Three quick examples:

- *Hearts of Darkness*, and the movie whose creation it documents, *Apocalypse Now* each tell the story of a once-promising leader who loses his mind while creating an isolated militaristic compound.
- *Burden of Dreams* tells a similar story as *Fitzcaraldo*, both of them concerning European madmen whose sheer force of will managed to compel hundreds of Peruvian laborers to carry a 320 ton steamship over a mountain on their backs.
- In *Lost Soul*, Richard Stanley is fired as director of 1996's *The Island of Dr Moreau* (and replaced by John Frankenheimer) only to secretly infiltrate the set and find himself turned into a beast-man, damned to wander a tropical hellscape among a horde of no-longer-human companions.

Still, *Demon Lover Diary* is a singular experience. It's not even very much like *American Movie*, its sunnier doppelgänger. That newer doc made gentle fun of, but ultimately admired, the pair of aspiring horror filmmakers it focused on. The crews of *The Demon Lover* and *Demon Lover Diary*, on the other hand, palpably loathed each other. Strangely enough, they created dueling films with more in common than you'd expect.

BACKSTORY: Director/ Cinematographer/ Narrator/ Editor Joel DeMott and her boyfriend Jeff Kreines were living in Cambridge, Massachusetts studying film at MIT. They had a special interest in a rigorous branch of documentary filmmaking called direct cinema. Long story short, this was a pared down, fly-on-the-wall approach to non-fiction film, swearing off all sorts of artificial manipulations, dedicated to capturing an ever elusive TRUTH. The films from this movement (including D. A. Pennebaker's *Don't Look Back* and Frederick Wiseman's *Titicut Follies*) were made possible by small, lightweight, synch-sound cameras that allowed filmmakers to observe life as it happens. Interestingly, the same technology did a lot to liberate horror films from the stiff and creaky stage-bound creations of yore to productions as raw, visceral, and, yes, "real" as *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, made just two years earlier by former documentary cameraman Tobe Hooper.

Hooper's movie was almost certainly an inspiration to Jeff Kreines' friend in Michigan, Don Jackson and *his* friend Jerry Younkins. Don and Jerry wrote *The Demon Lover* together while working at a speedometer cable factory and took time off to shoot it, reaching out to Jeff for help. They struck a bargain: Jeff would do the camerawork for Don and Jerry's film for free and in exchange, Joel would have complete freedom to shoot a documentary chronicling *The Demon Lover*'s production.

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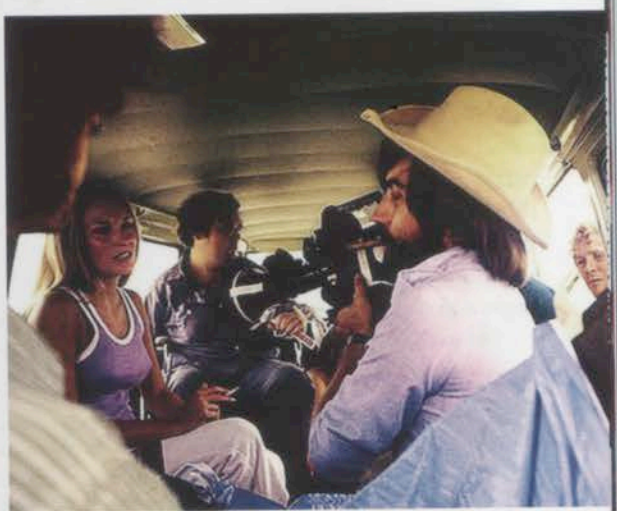

(TOP) RELEASE ART FOR *THE DEMON LOVER*.

(BOTTOM) *THE TEXAS CHAIN SAW MASSACRE* UNLEASHED — FOR BETTER OR WORSE — A NEW WAVE OF VERITÉ GENRE FILMS.

CUT TO: Both films' productions are jeopardized just about as soon as the two teams meet. Once the documentary crew arrives in Michigan, Don, short on help, demands that Joel stay and work in the office. She scoffs at the idea and Jeff threatens to quit. The argument goes on and on and on; "I'm not gonna stay and be the girl who answers phones" she tells them, and keeps right on rolling as Jerry gives her camera the finger. You might think things could only get better from here, but you'd be wrong.

In quick succession, Jeff's gear is ruined by a whipped cream-heavy improv, precious shoot days are blown off in lieu of interviews with local press, and real, loaded weapons are used as props (albeit under the watchful eyes of Ted Nugent).

When I watched *Demon Lover Diary* for the first time, (a pristine film projection at a festival almost 20 years ago) it was clear to me that Joel was a true auteur and a sly anthropologist. There's something to that, and focusing on the ineptitude, arrogance and strange regional quirks (from the perspective of East Coast academics, anyway) exhibited in Jackson is a perfectly valid way to watch the movie. I was surprised, though, that my recent rewatch (of a hideously degraded, but still completely absorbing Nth generation bootleg) left me with a fair amount of empathy for Don and Jerry, too. Not only did they risk everything they had putting together their blood- and satanism-soaked labor of love, but Jerry threw in money from a recent (likely deliberate) injury at the factory, too: during the standoff at the top of the film he shouts "I lost my fucking fingers to do this movie!"

Demon Lover Diary is one of the most visceral documents of life on the set I've ever seen. Beautifully filmed and carefully observed, it's a testament to how much one person with a camera can accomplish (and not with an iPhone 13 in cinematic mode, either; she did it in 1976, changing 400' magazines of 16mm film every time she exposed 12 minutes of footage.)

The film's minimalist approach is unrelenting; without music, talking heads, or even lower thirds, we are immersed in this slow-moving trainwreck along with the cast and crew. When Joel and soundman Mark Rance collapse into a giddy, manic, sleep-deprived laughing fit I suffered flashbacks to my own former life as a P.A on TV commercials where I survived countless 20-plus hour days that only ended when a producer would pull the plug in order to avoid paying the crew triple-time. Some behind-the-scenes docs capture the camaraderie and adventure of life on a film set, as do some of my favorite scripted movies-about-making-movies (like *Tristram Shandy*, *Irma Vep* or *The Stuntman*) but few of them drag us into the sucking quicksand of being trapped on a dispiriting and endless shoot, working for nothing on a project you hate.

The best documentaries bleed into other genres and this one frequently works as a comedy (well... cringe comedy, anyway) with deadpan readings of lines worthy of Armando Iannucci; "When he says it's junk," Don tells a local reporter, correcting Jerry's way-too-candid remark, "he means it's pure entertainment." There's even a passage that plays as a gentle romantic comedy as Mark falls for one of the local actresses while Joel delightedly eggs him on, not so much a fly on the wall, as wingman.

Most fitting here, of course, are the passages where it becomes a real-life horror movie, foreshadowing frantic moments from *Cannibal Holocaust* or *The Blair Witch Project* as, in its final act, Jeff and Joel, camera still rolling, literally run for their lives with gunshots echoing behind them. As they frantically pack their shit and race to their car, Don's mother's offscreen voice rings out behind them "I'M PROUD THE MOVIE'S BROKE! I'M PROUD THE MOVIE'S OVER WITH! I HATE THAT MOVIE! NOW THERE'LL BE NO MORE MOVIE, WILL THERE?"

Surprisingly enough, there was. I have no idea if they had enough in the can to finish *The Demon Lover* at the point where the documentary abruptly ended or if Don and Jerry found a replacement for Jeff and kept on going, but the movie was fully shot, cut, and released in 1977. I recently tracked down a copy of *The Demon Lover* (here retitled *Demon Master*) and

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DEMON LOVER DIARY FILMMAKER JOEL DEMOTT

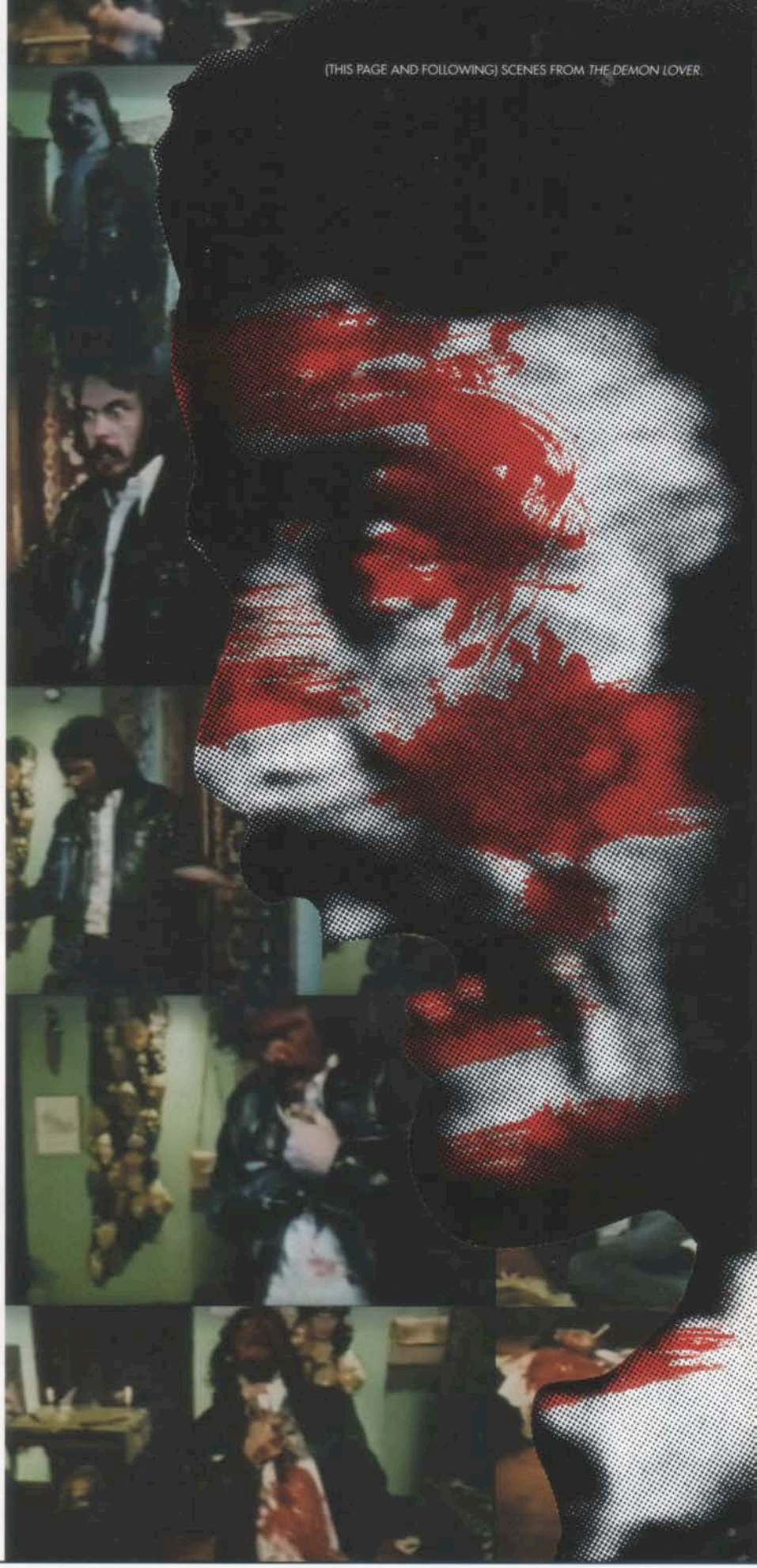
it and the doc make an unbelievable double feature. (If you try it at home, I'd suggest you screen *Diary* first.)

I was thrilled to discover that just as *Demon Lover Diary* sometimes plays as a horror film, the reverse was also true. Thom Andersen, in his must-see essay film *Los Angeles Plays Itself*, talks about 'accidental documentaries' and makes a lot of startling discoveries about LA's real-life history hidden in background details of forgotten noirs. Low-budget films tend to shoot in real locations, and here, within *Demon Master*, lies a rich visual history of 1970s Southern Michigan. The film is filled with the authentic period haircuts and cars, furniture and neon that would take a team with as much money and talent as the crew of *Once Upon a Time... in Hollywood* to put on the screen today. In *Demon Lover*, as Detective Frazetta* meanders his way through his investigation of the strange occult murders bedeviling Jackson, Michigan (at one point interviewing a scholar of the dark arts played by Gunnar Hansen), we're treated to lingering shots of 49202's finest dive bars, dojos and doughnut shops.

The Demon Lover, on its own terms, is a sloppily charming story of a half-dozen aimless 20-something dirtbags who look to the knife-throwing karate champ and aspiring cult leader Laval Blessing (played by co-director Jerry Younkins under the alias "Christmas Robbins") for some new kicks via black magick rituals. Soon enough, victims are being dragged into the woods and dead boyfriends are briefly resurrected to throttle their former lovers from the backseat of their cars.

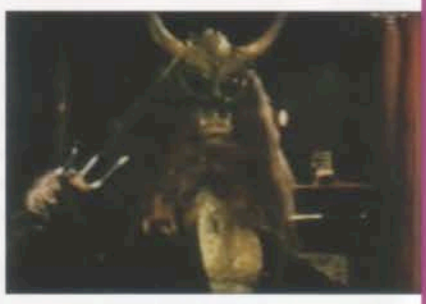
Don and Jerry's movie takes its time setting up all its dominoes, but the final act does manage to build up some genuine momentum, and the film goes out on an effectively jarring note. The surprising success of its final act is aided by a very effective, if primitive, proto-electronic score.

It's fascinating, after looking over Jeff's shoulder throughout *Diary*, to see the work he did here on Don and Jerry's behalf and to imagine him



(THIS PAGE AND FOLLOWING) SCENES FROM *THE DEMON LOVER*

*Many of the characters are named after geek culture luminaries, from Sam Pekinpah to Bernie Wrightson. Bolstering the film's cred in this capacity, is the fact that Val Mayerik, co-creator of the original *Howard the Duck* comic not only did the Frazetta-esque poster, but is also in the cast.



watching the mayhem unfold through the viewfinder. One of the surprising things about *Diary* is we see so little of the film Don and Jerry are making, and not even a glimpse of the monster that Jerry says is "the real star of the movie." That makes the titular demon's reveal (straight from a '70s metal album cover or airbrushed custom van) all the more rewarding when one finally watches *Demon Lover*. For me, it was a wait of almost 20 years.

The relationship between documentary and horror, halfway coincidental here, is one that others have pushed further by design. From *In Search Of...* to *Cropsey*, docs have used horror-inspired musical scores and atmospheric filmed reenactments to great effect, and the whole contemporary cycle of found footage horror from 1998's *The Last Broadcast* to last year's *Host* incorporate non-fiction film techniques to make their nightmare scenarios all the more believable.

Both films are tricky to find these days; *The Demon Lover* is available only as an out-of-print VHS or DVD with copies going for hundreds of dollars on the collectors market and *Demon Lover Diary* has never been released on home video in any format. It still periodically screens on film at festivals and revivals, at least as recently as part of the 2017 series "Woman With a Movie Camera" at the BFI.

AFTERMATH: Joel DeMott and Jeff Kreines would continue collaborating, going on to co-direct the widely acclaimed documentary *Seventeen* that took the top Jury prize at Sundance but whose raw, uncensored look at teenage life led to a long and painful conflict with PBS and the Xerox corporation, the film's sponsor.

It becomes a real-life horror movie as Jeff and Joel, camera still rolling, literally run for their lives with gunshots echoing behind them.

Don and Jerry would go their separate ways. Don moved to Hollywood where he plunged ever deeper into exploitation cinema (directing over 40 films, including *Hell Comes to Frogtown* and *Lingerie Kickboxer*) before dying in 2003. Jerry Younkins, seen wielding some formidable blades in the movie, is the author of two well-regarded books on knives. 💀