

# BLOODSTOCK:

## FOUR DAYS OF STRESS, CHAOS, AND WONDERMENT

By David J. Schow

Conventions. Love 'em or hate 'em, they're everywhere.

Regional science-fiction conventions used to be simple: You rang up some paperback authors and spent a weekend drinking with them. A film program consisted of two or three 16mm wonders rented from Universal 16 or Films Incorporated (or Swank, Budget, Kit Parker, or Westcoast—if you're old enough, you remember the drill). Catalogue rentals were frequently the only chance you would get to see, say, *Twins of Evil*, nudity and all, after its theatrical run. The themes of science fiction, horror, and fantasy were always a reliable envelope for university-sponsored festivals, which tended to favor movies over books and used cult credibility as a programming scheme to attract audiences larger and less minutely focused than genre fans. But even these had the air of a weekend party—that is, if you can imagine a party with *no alcohol*—instead of a militantly micromanaged cash cow event.

As film-on-film became too dated and cumbersome, conventions big and small began to succumb to the dreaded "video room syndrome." From the larger and more prestigious literary cons to the smallest regional fan gathering, the organizational idiom remained hobbled by an unspoken Golden Rule that seemed to mandate that each con committee start from scratch every single time, with no learning curve from event to event.

Then *Star Trek* cons redefined the whole playing field in the 1970s, catalyzing the out-of-control growth cycle that spawned many of the present-day Zilla-sized media mash-ups that look like conventions, call themselves likewise, but operate under the moniker of shows, or festivals, and segregate audience from performers behind

a nightmarish wall of commerce—autographs for pay, extra fees for preferential seating, and a complete absence of return considerations. No freebies. No exceptions. No socializing. No programming after dark. The operative rule seems to be pay up, run the gauntlet, then get out

and stay out...unless you have more cash.

Sometimes these assemblies are christened "conferences" to lend them a bogus veneer of respectability. Whatever the social function, and wherever more than five fans gather together in one place with money in their pockets, whether to

**THE EVENT OF THE MILLENNIUM!**

L.B. Abbott	Robert Bloch	Harlan Ellison	Frederik Pohl
John Agar	Lin Carter	Phillip Jose Farmer	William Tuttle
Poul Anderson	Roger Corman	Frank Kelley Freas	A.E. Van Vogt
Jack Arnold	Buster Crabbe	Arnold Gillespie	Albert Whitlock
Tex Avery	Jim Danforth	Chuck Jones	Jack Williamson
Mel Blanc	Gordon Dickson	Jeff Jones	Robert Wise
	James Doohan	Robert McCall	Roger Zelazny
		George Pal	and many more

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Lori Nelson and John Agar are under the watchful eye of the Creature in this shot from 1954's *Revenge of the Creature*.

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wear rubber foreheads, wallow in trivia, or purchase tchotchkes, such events are generally still called conventions.

Which is better than calling them big-ticket media orgies, the better to distract the attendee from the reality that his or her role has been reduced to that of generic consumer. The convention, as once idealized by Trekkie-eyed EquiCon veterans, is no more. There really should be a new word for the sort of event that characterizes such gatherings, now—perhaps one that explains why the San Diego Comic Con has so little to do with actual comic books.

Things were different in 1946, when author Robert Bloch experienced his first convention, a PacifiCon in Los Angeles, which featured a tiny attendance, most of whom already knew each other—A.E. Van Vogt, Leigh Brackett, Ray Bradbury, and many other future genre giants. As Bob said, "That was back in the day when Arthur C. Clarke would drive 500 miles just to pay to be an attendee." The very first World Science Fiction Convention, according to Forry Ackerman, drew 185 people, many of whom could not afford the one dollar banquet fee.

Imagine, then, the fantasy construct of a damned-near ideal convention, featuring dozens of celebrity guests to whom you could have damned-near unrestricted access, and costing mere mortals a pittance. No way it could break even. The costs would be crippling. It could only truly happen once, like Woodstock, and you just had to be there.

It happened, and I helped run it.

It wasn't perfect, but it damned-sure was memorable. And it's probably still my favorite convention ever.

It was called the Science Fiction, Horror and Fantasy World Exposition. It was held in Tucson, Arizona, in the middle of 1977 (June 2-5). It featured over 50 "official" guests and three tracks of film programming—over 100 features, half in 35mm, not counting numerous shorts, cartoons, and TV episodes—as well as such then-milestones as the first mass public convention showing of original Frank



Producer Charles Schnee and Ray Harryhausen set up for a shot.

Courtesy of Photofest

Frazetta paintings (they arrived in a U-Haul truck), overseen by Ellie Frazetta personally, and four tons of Kenneth Strickfaden's Frankensteinian Van de Graaf generators, Jacob's ladders, Tesla coils, and "lightning screens" all fired up and discharging electricity, live, under the supervision of Strickfaden himself, shouting, "Throw the third switch!" The host hotel featured a life-sized wedge of *Star Trek* bridge. Besides displays from attending artists, exhibit rooms boasted an original Martian dreadnought from *War of the Worlds*, armatures from *Mighty Joe Young* and *When Dinosaurs Ruled the Earth*, and the submarine from *Atlantis, The Lost Continent*. World-famous organist Lee Erwin flew in from New York to play live accompaniment to such silent classics as *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (for which Erwin composed an original score in 1923) and the Chaney *Phantom of the Opera*—the only 35mm print known to exist at that time.

Guests? They literally ran the gamut from A to Z, including (effects maestro) L.B. Abbott, John Agar, Poul Anderson, Jack Arnold, Ian Ballantine, Whit Bissell (and his ultra-charming wife, Jennifer Raine), Lin Carter, astronaut Charles "Pete" Conrad Jr., Buster Crabbe, Jim Danforth, Lester del Rey, Gordon Dickson, James Doohan, Harlan Ellison, Philip Jose Farmer, Ellie Frazetta, June Foray (voice of Rocket J. Squirrel and other Jay Ward immortals), Frank Kelly Freas, Friz Freleng, Clyde Geronimi, Jack Haley, Ray Harryhausen (with producer Charles Schnee in tow; *Sinbad and the Eye of*