

EVOLUTION ON THE BIG SCREEN

BY STEVEN X. REA

What do you do with a movie that takes place 80,000 years ago, is spoken in a language that doesn't exist, that depicts man's primitive ancestors scratching at their rears and picking their noses, and that co-stars a gaggle

of furry-skinned apemen, red-faced cannibals and elephants decked out in giant matted Beatie wigs? Well, if you're the head of a major Hollywood studio—the head of any of the Hollywood studios, in fact—you advise the earnest folks proposing such a harebrained scheme to take their project somewhere else. Which is exactly what happened to the people responsible for *Quest for Fire*, a picture that took four years to make: three of those years spent trying to convince somebody—anybody—that their idea was actually worth the time of day.

Directed by Jean-Jacques Annaud, a Frenchman whose first feature, *Black and White in Color*, won him the 1978 Academy Award for Best Foreign Film, *Quest for Fire* is the story of a trio of long-faced Homo sapiens who venture beyond their tribal boundaries when their life-sustaining possession, fire, is stolen by a bristly platoon of marauding Neanderthals.

The fire is carried in a skull-like lantern-cage (sort of pre-history's answer to the Olympic torch), and the threesome's sojourn to retrieve the vital embers takes them across treacherous mountains, arid, blazing plains and swampy boglands. Along the way, our hairy heroes—Naoh (pronounced *now*), Amoukar and Gaw

—have to contend with the likes of wolves, bears, quacksand, flesh-eating humans, saber-toothed lions, giant thundering mammoths and Ika—a cackling, paint-covered nymphet from the advanced Ivaka tribe (read: love interest). Not exactly your average Sunday afternoon outing.

On paper, *Quest for Fire* looks like potential Monty Python material. Indeed, executive producer Michael Gruskoff—a William Morris mailboy grown into Hollywood honcho who has been with *Quest* since October 1977—reports that one of the standard lines he'd be handed by studio chiefs when they were busy saying no was "How are you going to pull this off without having the audience laughing at these people? It's going to look downright silly."

But on screen, *Quest for Fire* is anything but silly. From the opening sequence, when the peaceful Ulam tribe is besieged by the fearsome Wagabous, the audience is swept up in this epic primeval adventure. The makeup, crafted by Englishman Chris Tucker (*The Elephant Man*) and Canadian Michele Burke, is a marvel to behold. The Ulam's features are coarse and elongated, but they're instantly recognizable as the expressive, wondrous visages of our predecessors, the Nean-

derthals, the animals, the bamboo-masked and body-painted Ivakas—all of them resound with the vibrant color and documentary authority of an animated *National Geographic* layout.

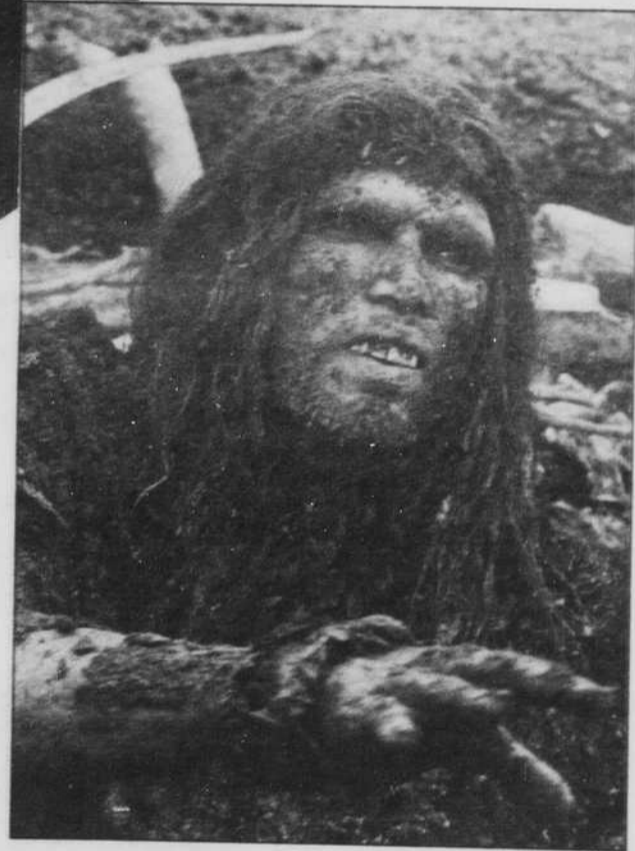
As for the actors, they present sympathetic, deeply drawn characters. Miami-born Everett McGill, who has worked extensively on the New York stage and co-starred in such films as *Yanks*, *Brubaker* and *Union City*, takes the role of the dreadlocked Naoh, the hero of the quest. Ron Perlman, a native New Yorker, plays Amoukar. Nameer El Kadi, the son of a Turkish diplomat, is the persistent Gaw; and Rae Dawn Chong, the 20-year-old daughter of Tommy (Cheech and...) Chong, has the part of the skinny, wailing Ika who wins the heart of Naoh. We watch as these ignorant, innocent human beings struggle to grasp at new concepts and emotions, as they learn to smile, to laugh, as they make the transition from fornicator to love maker. *Quest for Fire* is a journey-story with the same mythic overtones as *The Odyssey*. As the protagonists' adventures unravel, the humor, the fear, the love, the violence and the bravado—the essence of human nature—come to the fore.

Based on *La Guerre du Feu*, a 1911 novel by Rosny Aisne, *Quest for Fire* is a purely speculative work (the ad campaign touts it as a "science fantasy"), but Gruskoff, Annaud and screenwriter Gerard Brach have gone to great lengths to make it as realistic, as historically and anthropologically accurate as possible. "We approached *Quest* with the same serious intent as the people who made *2001* or *Alien*," says Gruskoff. "Where they endeavored to create a tenable vision of the future, we've tried to create a similar vision of the distant past." Adds Annaud: "We show early man as I believe he truly was, a peaceable creature except when roused, a stranger in an environment he could not understand and had reason to fear."

An avid amateur anthropologist who came to filmmaking from a background in TV commercials, Annaud arrived at his concept of primitive man by consuming a veritable library's worth of information and by pooling that knowledge with his own theories and imaginings. "Intelligent speculation, backed by research, may lead us to the truth," he muses.

The filmmakers' quest for the truth as it may have been eight millennia past led them to elicit the aid of a couple of modern day experts: novelist/linguist Anthony Burgess and author/anthropologist Desmond Morris. Burgess, who created a futuristic lingo for his book *Clockwork Orange*, was recruited to shape a new—but theoretically old—verbal language for the Ulams, while Morris (*The Naked Ape*, *Manwatching*) was hired to provide the actors with a complementary vocabulary of physical gestures. Combined, the prehistoric guttural yammering and the simian gesticulations render the film's story line readily understandable. As such, *Quest for Fire* is probably the first movie in history that will play worldwide without the use of subtitles or dubbing.

Burgess, writing in *The New York*



A masked Ivaka tribesman (left), hero Naoh (Everett McGill) in the mud (center), and Rae Dawn Chong as Ika (right)



Times Magazine, explained the strategy behind his newly formed lexicon: "People usually expect what is called a primitive language to be simple, but the further back you go in the study of language the more complications you find. Simplicity is the fruit of the ability to generalize, and primitive man found it hard to generalize. One word for this man's weapon and another word for that man's weapon, but no word for weapon. It would have been stupid, preparing a script in a new tongue for actors to learn, to be too pedantic about the probable complexity of an ancient language, so I compromised. But I could not compromise too much..."

Speech still seems, all these thousands of years ago, to be an aspect of gesture, and speech and gesture together will make things clear. But it has to be established—in what, though promoted as entertainment, is still a serious, even scientific, film—that man is a talking animal, that articulate speech is what defines his species."

Desmond Morris, discussing the nature of our ancestral earth-dwellers, has this to say about his work on *Quest for Fire*: "One of the notions we're seeking to dispel is the misconception that early man was a lumbering brute who was always dragging women off by the hair and living in lousish conditions. If you study the social life of primitive man from the remains we have, you discover that he could only have succeeded if there was a considerable amount of mutual aid, cooperation and love within his group. This sense of assistance, tenderness and friendship contrasted strikingly with the killing and the hunting he had to do to survive."

One would think that with the involvement of popular scholarly types like Burgess and Morris, and with the guidance of an Academy Award-winning director, filmdom's financial powers would have readily given the go-ahead to shoot *Quest for Fire*. Not so, says an emphatic Gruskoff. "They said we were crazy. They were worried about it not being in English; they were worried about going way over budget [the picture came in at around \$12 million]; they were worried about the locations; and they were worried about a French director. Sure he won an Academy Award, but he was French—it was esoteria land."

Gruskoff, whose screen credits as a producer include Mel Brooks' *Young Frankenstein* and Werner Herzog's *Nosferatu*, tells a frustrating tale of unending rejections, commitments that were wrenched on, commitments that were cancelled out by the ouster of one corporate regime for another and then, finally, after the capital, the cast, the crew and the country had been finalized, he tells about the actors strike that began in July 1980, two weeks before shooting was to commence. "We just sank. Everybody was in London waiting to go to Iceland, which was our original location, and we were stopped cold. So I tried to find some independent financing—if we were independent we could continue to shoot through the strike—and I did, in Hong Kong, but then that fell

through. Then I went to Switzerland and got another group. I had them for a week and then they withdrew. Finally, I got together with a Canadian-French outfit and we pulled it together."

By the time the new money was found, it had become too late in the year for Iceland and filming began with four weeks in Scotland, followed by five weeks in Kenya and—after a four month layoff due to weather—five weeks in Ontario and British Columbia. The animals—elephants, lions, wolves, bears—were transported from

HARLAN!
Harlan Ellison Reads Harlan Ellison

(The Harlan Ellison Record Collection) This spoken word package containing two of writer Harlan Ellison's best known short stories has all the marks of blatant self-aggrandizement—a sort of audio version of a vanity press Best of Collection. The Harlan Ellison Record Collection, we are told, is "the most innovative record society for the spoken word ever devised." There is more than a note of irony in all this, considering Ellison's reputation as an abrasive, outspoken and even arrogant

ON DISC

Delbert McClinton *Plain' from the Heart*

(Capitol) For a shady stretch there, it seemed like Delbert McClinton's albums were being cut by someone who only thought they were Delbert McClinton. Early in 1981, though, this long-time rocker scored his first Top Ten hit, a loping track called "Giving It up for Your Love," from a passable (by McClinton standards) LP called *The Jealous Kind*. Whether that hit restored some deeper confidence base, or simply convinced his label to spend more money on the follow-up, *Plain' from the Heart* is the solidest album in several years.

The first three cuts are just hors d'oeuvres to get the party started. The Muscle Shoals team, which smothered a few of *The Jealous Kind's* tracks, is thick with multiple horns, but punchy with sometimes staccato, sometimes trilling riffs.

Side Two is recorded with smaller ensembles, which has a liberating effect on the bluesier side of McClinton's musical scope. Also, every cut on this side has a dose of McClinton's harmonica playing, a proven quantity since *Nineteen & Sixty Two*, when it highlighted fellow Texan Bruce Channel's hit "Hey Baby."

"Sandy Beaches," the single release, may be the sweetest ocean-sound-emulating cut since Leon Russell's pinnacle "Back to the Island." Also, it's a refreshing change up from the R&B mold, a warm and soulful mood piece.

"Lipstick Traces" benefits from a chugging guitar figure, and "I Feel So Bad" gets what might be the best reading of its entire career. It's still a stronger groove than it is a lyric, though. In Reaganical tragicomic times like these, it's revitalizing to come across music with some power in it. *Plain' from the Heart* is one of 1981's best releases.

Byron Laursen

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demi-celeb.

Be that as it may, *Harlan!* is an excellent showcase for its author's propulsive prose style. Despite the disadvantage of a rather high and at times reedy voice, Ellison delivers a subtle, amusing and resonant reading of his material, with a surprisingly dramatic flair. The emphasis here is on the cadence and rhythm of the words and Ellison's rendering soars and careens with a breathless precision.

"Repent, Harlequin!" said the Ticktockman" is, we are informed by the cover blurb, "one of the most reprinted stories in the English language." Ellison's treatment of the 1966 cautionary tale—where every late minute in a person's life is subtracted from the total life span—makes us almost believe the claim. Compared with the album's B side—the rather mordant "Shatterday"—"Repent" is a masterful translation from print to groove. Ellison evokes a marvelous array of character and nuance in the tale, the prose taking on a near-poetic ebb and flow. It is an absurdly appealing tale given a loving familiar touch by its creator. "Shatterday" suffers from a heavyhanded finale and does not quite survive the delicate transition to sound, but is, nevertheless a creditable effort.

Ellison is marketing his own albums; those who wish to purchase same (for \$8.95) should write to The Harlan Ellison Record Collection, 420 S. Beverly Drive, Suite 207, Beverly Hills, CA 90212.

Davin Seay

THE BLASTERS *The Blasters*

(Slash) The Blasters are a 100%, died-in-the-wool traditional rock 'n' roll band who have their early blues, rhythm & blues and rockabilly licks down cold. Their second LP—the first was released on the Rollin' Rock rockabilly label—comes courtesy of the LA punk label Slash. But that only goes to show how utterly myopic—if not outright blind—major labels are to basic, energetic American rock 'n' roll these days.

The Blasters is fundamentally a groove record, meaning its first objective is to get fingers snappin', toes tappin', and heads bobbin'.

The material ranges from covers of songs made famous by country singer Jimmie Rodgers ("Never No More Blues") and r&b great Little Willie John ("I'm Shakin'") to originals that evoke the musical spirit of Professor Longhair ("Hollywood Bed," which features one of two appearances by Lee Allen, the tenor sax man whose solos pop up on all the old Fats Domino and Little Richard hits) and

projects the heady zeal that comes after an obstacle-strewn course has finally been run. Like any self-respecting hot-shot producer, he's already talking sequels, and if *Quest for Fire* lives up to the expectations its creators and its backers have for it, a sequel is certainly in the offing. "We'll have the same principal actors, but we'll bring it into another time period," he explains, gearing up for the hard sell. "Maybe 6,000 years ago, at the dawn of the agricultural age."

Ah yes, *Quest for Hoes*. Sounds kind of crazy, doesn't it?

Chuck Berry (the marvelous "Marie, Marie"), "American Music" not only serves as a statement of the Blasters' intent but is every bit as powerful an anthem as the title dictates it should be.

The finest single moment comes on "This Is It" where a few Delta blues licks cartwheel into a rock steady shuffle rhythm while Alvin throws in simple fills that are so utterly right they all but strut out of the speaker, cross the room and yell "YEAH" in your face.

The album comes a cropper on the stone country blues of "Highway 61." The Blasters get off that swinging groove tht powered the first nine tunes and never really find their way back that doesn't change the fact that *The Blasters* is an excellent record.

Don Snouden

QUARTERFLASH *Quarterflash*

(Geffen Records) Just out of the chute, in the outside lane is another new band—Quarterflash. Galloping into the first turn they're in good position, with their first single from their first LP on Geffen Records in the top ten. "Harden My Heart" is the kind of ditty one can find oneself singing along by the second chorus. *Quarterflash* is a glossy, middle-of-the-road pop album. A couple of tracks are dogs, but three or four tunes hold up under repeated listening.

Rindy Ross, lead singer and saxophonist, shares the spotlight with her husband, the guitar player, songwriter and sometimes lead singer for the group, Marv Ross.

In 1980, the band independently recorded "Harden My Heart" and had a #1 regional hit with it. Somebody noticed and they were whisked away to Los Angeles to record *The Album*.

They open it with the hook-filled single and keep it rolling from there with an eerie-melodized, driving rocker called "Find Another Fool." "Critical Times" is the next cut and a surprise because it's a ballad sung by Marv. The theme of the song is great but the lyric is contorted and Marv sings like he's trying on a British accent.

It's Rindy's turn again on "Valerie." This is a pop song with a twist, the story of one girl being very attracted to another. Hot stuff and done tastefully to boot. Rindy is an engaging singer who shifts in and out of her falsetto with the greatest of ease. She's a good sax player, too.

By the way, the name Quarterflash comes from an old Australian folk saying: "A quarter flash and three quarters foolish." You gotta get a name from somewhere.

Donna Ross