



**THE CREATURE FROM THE
BLACK LAGOON
THE GILMAN RISES**

By Scott Essman

From the 1930s through the late 1940s, the classic Universal Studios monster “cycle” had its glorious run. But when the studio merged with International Pictures in the mid-1940s, they had changed direction, discontinuing their work with many of the studio stars, and letting many of their top craftspeople go, including costume designer Vera West, makeup legend Jack Pierce, and visual effects expert John P. Fulton.

That key threesome had worked on every one of the horror films from 1931’s *Dracula* through 1945’s *House of Dracula*. But a new era was upon the studio, and the horror cycle ended. The lone horror film of the time was a horror-comedy, *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* (1948), featuring Béla Lugosi as Count Dracula, Glenn Strange as the Frankenstein Monster, Lon Chaney Jr. as the Wolf Man, and Vincent Price in a vocal cameo as the In-

visible Man. But by the time of that film, Bud Westmore had established a new team and method of creating the monster makeups with streamlined prosthetic techniques.

with old pro Boris Karloff as the titular characters.

By this time, Karloff was in his 60s, so cutting down on the makeup process was a must. Again, Bud brought in lab stalwart Jack Kevan to do the makeup. Now with his own style coming through many of his makeups, Kevan’s familiar look permeated his *Mr. Hyde*. As in earlier *Hyde* projects such as that of Bud Westmore’s older brother Wally, this *Hyde* required a transformation which Kevan created step-by-step with dissolves. In most of the *Hyde* scenes, however, Karloff is wearing mask-like pieces. At this time, Bud also was able to goof on the Universal mummies with *Abbott and Costello Meet the Mummy*.

But it was a project that came to the studio in 1953 that presented Bud with his biggest challenge. The *Creature from the Black Lagoon* was a huge project which

required a full head-to-toe Gill Man suit and mask that would be worn by two actors – Ben Chapman for the land scenes at Universal in Los Angeles, and Ricou Browning for the water scenes to be shot in Florida. For this daunting task, Westmore had Kevan by his side to break down and organize the suit but brought in key others to do the job.

Sam Borowski, writer and producer of *CREATURE FEATURE: 50 Years of the Gill Man*, a documentary about the character and the three films in which he appeared (followed by numerous references in American culture), noted the importance of the Gill Man in the Universal canon of films. “There hadn’t been a new monster for 13 years,” he said. “Suddenly, this amazing creature pops up. The audience had seen something they had never

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Artist Milicent Patrick designed the crea-

ture while Chris Mueller sculpted his key features. Kevan had a busy sizeable lab running at Universal with artists like Tom Case and Bob Dawn – Jack’s son – presiding over the molds and fabrication. In fact, it was Bob himself who suited up Ben Chapman on a daily basis. Though Bud’s name is the only one to appear in the credits, his astute assemblage of these key artists made the Gill Man one of Universal’s most unforgettable monster characters of all time.

seen before. To this day, the character holds up. There’s nothing to be improved upon. That shows how amazing the look of the creature was. You also have a very relatable story: a beauty and the beast angle that’s relevant today.”

On *Abbott and Costello’s Colgate Comedy Hour* in 1953, the Gill Man made his first public appearance, bursting out of a crate, succeeding Glenn Strange’s *Frankenstein Monster*. Westmore’s department even



decorated the set, as we can see a mask from Abbott and Costello Meet Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde in the background. The live audience's reaction to this first look at the character was a mixture of shock and nervous laughter.

Obviously, then came the first Creature From the Black Lagoon film – in 3D, no less – in 1954. Many Universal enthusiasts agree that the Gill Man is on par with the classic 1930s and 1940s monsters: Count Dracula, Frankenstein's Monster, the Mummy, and the Wolf Man. Borowski pointed out that the Gill Man is one of few Universal characters who did not have an antecedent in literature or history. "He is Universal's monster and America's monster," said Borowski. "If you look at the fanbase for him, when Universal releases branded material, the Creature is always the first one to sell out."

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According to Creature from the Black Lagoon experts, there is much speculation that Creature producer William Alland originally overheard a story with eventual plot similarities to his movie at a party given by Orson Welles. Supposedly, Alland determined that there was a Mexican folklore tale about a creature who would come out from the water, though Alland later pawned the story off as his own. Other Creature fans people believe that H.P. Lovecraft inspired the plot to Creature as the sci-fi/horror author featured different fish-man hybrid characters in his stories.

Additional controversy concerns the identity of who actually played the Gill Man in the first film. To set the record straight, all of the underwater swimming scenes were achieved with swimmer/diver Ricou Browning in Florida with a second unit (Browning is alive, well, and still working on films in Florida). However, whenever a scene features the character out of, above, or on the top of the water, it is being played by Ben Chapman, who only recently passed. Thus, the majority of the movie features Chapman. What's more, in close up, the creature closely resembles Chapman, as Westmore's team sculpted the creature mask and suit on a cast of Chapman's face and body. The suit team also put weights in Chapman's boots so that when the actor took the small steps in the suit, he would glide on screen.

As Borowski pointed out, the audience never feels as though the creature is a man in a suit. "That's why so many children love the creature – he looks real," said the filmmaker and Gill Man expert. "The creature resonated more with audiences than other genre films of the time due to how director Jack Arnold shot it. He does a better job than some directors today in taking that suit and making movie magic. Arnold has a certain touch with shooting and casting, and making that creature look absolutely real. To me, that's one of his masterpieces."

Of Borowski's documentary, he stated, "We have had an offer to re-release it in limited release in 25 theaters and are working on a DVD deal where we have a shot to get it out later this year. For more information, drop an e-mail to cinematicheroes@aol.com.

