

ASSAULT ON PRECINCT 13

Like gangbusters

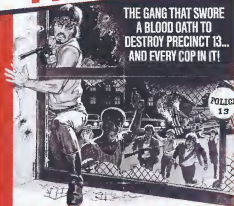
What do you do when you're a fledgling filmmaker itching to make a Western, but lack the money to tackle that form? If you're John Carpenter, you loosely adapt Howard Hawks' John Wayne-starring classic *Rio Bravo* into a script called *The Anderson Alamo* that can be filmed on the mean streets of Los Angeles on a \$100,000 budget, and expertly craft an action-thriller that launches your big-screen career.

In *Rio Bravo*, the Duke portrayed Sheriff John T. Chance, who takes on a gang of armed men trying to spring a murderer from jail, with only a motley group of compatriots to help him. Carpenter's urban version, released as *Assault on Precinct 13* (even though it actually takes place at Precinct 9, Division 13), makes a couple of crucial changes that give the proceedings the aura of a horror film. Unlike Hawks' unlikely heroes, the skeleton crew defending an isolated LA police station in the process of closing down in Carpenter's movie never know why they're being besieged, and their attackers are not defined characters but a faceless, seemingly endless mob of street-gang members who suggest a faster, better-armed variation on the zombie hordes of *Night of the Living Dead*—another of Carpenter's acknowledged inspirations.

A further way in which *Assault* echoes *Night* is in its casting of an African-American actor (Austin Stoker as just-promoted police lieutenant Ethan Bishop) in the heroic lead, yet with the color of his skin beside the point. The potential for racial differences arises and is just as quickly defused when secretary Leigh (Laurie Zimmer) makes coffee for Bishop: "Black?" she asks, to which he replies with a

A WHITE-HOT NIGHT OF HATE!

ASSAULT ON PRECINCT 13



smile, "For about 30 years." While they and their compatriots aren't privy to the events that incite the gang, we are, and they begin with a truly harric act: the cold-blooded shooting of a little girl, even more shocking as she was played by fresh-faced Disney moppet Kim Richards. (No doubt her gruesomely ironic

casting was intentional, as Richards recalls Carpenter virtually stalking her to sign her for the film after her agent had turned him down.) Her father in turn kills the warlord responsible (Frank Doubleday, who would reappear, all punked out, in *Escape from New York*); his "brothers" follow the fleeing dad to the station house, and the action begins.

The intense situation forces the cops and convicts stuck together inside to drop their differences and band together for survival, with Bishop forming an especially strong alliance with cocky criminal Napoleon Wilson (Darwin Joston). Wilson's repeated request "Anybody got a smoke?" becomes a running joke in a film that finds just enough ways to leaven the tension with humor, as when a crucial, life-or-death decision is arrived at by having those involved play "potatoes." The violence, however, is deadly serious, with startling bursts of blood erupting from victims (kudos to Richard Albain Jr.'s special FX), and somehow scarier for being accompanied not by loud gunshots, but by the sharp whispers of silencers. Richards' murder was upsetting enough to inspire the MPAA to demand cuts before the film would be awarded an R—though Carpenter, after making the trims and winning that rating, sent the uncut movie to theaters anyway.

Last amongst its many fellow low-budget genre pictures in the States, *Assault on Precinct 13* found greater rewards overseas; its success in England paved the way for *Halloween*, which took its villain's name from the film's British distributor, Michael Myers. Even as *Assault* similarly pays homage to Carpenter favorites of the past (he took "John T. Chance" as a pseudonym for his editing credit, Leigh's last name is Brackett, after *Rio Bravo*'s scripter, etc.), it also set the template for many of the director's films to come. From *The Thing* to *Prince of Darkness* to *Ghosts of Mars*, he has always been fascinated by studies of isolated groups of people, and how they react to the threat of malevolent, seemingly unstoppable enemies. And with its skillful use of widescreen and impactful presentation of violence—even a scene in which an empty room is shot up is intense—Carpenter demonstrated at this very early stage that he was a filmmaker who knew exactly what he was doing.

—Michael Gingold

Ethan Bishop (Austin Stoker) has just one night but not nearly enough ammo to survive the *Assault on Precinct 13*.

