

Making *The Grateful Undead*:
A Lesson in Insanity

Pre-Production

Pre-Production for *The Grateful Undead* began in the spring of 2006, when, after a string of missteps in their first post-graduation year from college, longtime friends Patrick May and Allen Riley decided to put their years of actively watching bargain-bin movies to use. There was little discussion as to what their first project together would be: the two budding filmmakers had no interest in anything but a feature-length film of epic proportions, and decided upon an idea they'd been kicking around since high school, one involving vampiric hippies coming back to life and "returning to the scene" of a post-flower-child world.

It was also quickly decided that since the story of *The Grateful Undead* was so associated to them with their life in high school, their movie would somehow take place in the last decade of the 20th century. While Patrick and Allen researched Nineties culture from an objective viewpoint and agonized over how-to-film books at the public library, Patrick hammered out a script with budget and manpower limitations in mind. True inspiration came when he happened upon a book entitled *Voices From the Love Generation*, a collection of interviews done with real hippies in the summer of 1969. Many direct or inspired quotes from these interviews can be found sprinkled throughout *The Grateful Undead*.

After countless weeks of argument and bruised egos, three instances cemented Patrick and Allen's dreams of filmmaking into a sobering reality. Allen called his friends, mostly college students that would have the summer off, and scheduled for them to act or participate in the making of the movie by staying in his house for three weeks. Patrick signed up for camera equipment from a local public access station and scheduled to rent the equipment out for the same three weeks. And finally, both of them pooled their resources to pay \$500 for a used van, a pivotal location in the movie.

In the weeks before production, the duo scouted locations and scheduled meetings with prospective crewmembers, held an open casting call and tried on sample costumes for the protagonists of the movie, Eno The Zero and Dr. Zog. It was determined early on both Patrick and Allen would be the "stars" of the movie, for no other reason than they couldn't expect anyone else to put as much

time and effort into the production. Also at this time a name was lifted from an obscure science fiction paperback for the title of their film company, Emsiac Productions.

Too quickly, production time was upon them. People began showing up at Allen's parents house (inexplicably abandoned by them a year before) and Patrick, in a panicked state, bought much of the props and costumes for the movie at the Salvation Army. Reality was sinking in. It was the last time they'd experience reality for a long time.

Production

Filming began hectic and would remain hectic for the next three weeks. Three to four locations were filmed a day, with each location containing three to four scene units. Production would often run until 4:00 A.M., and begin again at 6:00 A.M. the same morning.

Right away, disaster struck. One of the leading actresses scheduled to play a goth girl friend of Leslie Weinberg canceled at the last minute and the script was hastily rewritten to merge her and Leslie's characters together. While attempting to film a driving scene dressed as brain-dead, blood-drooling hippies, the local police were alerted and production halted until the matter was sorted out. Locations canceled and then rescheduled, and then sometimes canceled again. With no other crewmembers but a sound recorder, videographer (often Patrick or Allen), and, in the last two weeks, a script supervisor, equipment or necessary costumes or props would be forgotten and production would stop until they were retrieved. By the end of the first week the sound recorder quit, but production continued as normal the next day.

There were certainly times, such as when Patrick and Allen fought over the direction of the film, or when an actor or special effect failed to cooperate, where it looked like Emsiac would never complete its first production. Yet often the spontaneity and pressure of the "film happening" would produce beneficial results. Characters not in the original script, such as the mob of angry children at the beginning of the feature, would show up unexpectedly and save an otherwise mediocre scene. Adlibbing was the name of the game if one of the non-actor actors couldn't remember his or her lines. This was handled brilliantly by two of the actors, Brandan Crowley and Allison Laplatney, who came up with nearly all of their dialogue on the spot.

Most of the cast and crew slept and ate under the same roof and the nights were full of debauchery for those not involved with preparation for the next day's shoot. By the end of the three weeks of grueling 20-hour days, the bulk of the movie had been filmed, the cast and crew had gone home, and Patrick and Allen spent the next month in an over-exhausted catatonic stupor.

Captain Future And Additional Filming

Additional filming a month later went well overall, with the exception of Captain Future. Since the beginning of production, Patrick and Allen had difficulty finding anyone willing to commit to the part, and further difficulty in finding a location for his store. After fruitless attempts with another actor, Patrick and Allen ran into Phill McGee, an acquaintance from high school they hadn't seen in years, and pressured him into taking on the role. Captain Future's scenes were then filmed without Phill McGee having any idea how they figured into the film itself. A stand-in was used for the scene in which Captain Future crushes Yelpie's head, for both Yelpie himself and the watermelon he becomes, as both scenes had been shot earlier and with different actors playing Captain Future. A stand-in was also used for the scene where Eno the Zero eats Leslie's guts; they are not Leslie's guts he is eating but in fact Brendan Crowley's.

Post-Production

The filming completed, and their minds sharper after a few months absence from the project, Patrick and Allen spent the fall of 2006 editing the movie. After their day jobs they would retire to the Brown University computer complex, where, using a pilfered account, they edited the movie for six hours every night. Even with all that time, it was an arduous and painful task to cut 90 hours of deviations from the script and often compromised scenes into a somewhat cohesive narrative. Egos were bruised once again, but after a long time (a very, very long time), they had chopped the beast down to a manageable 98 minutes, and after progressive screenings they were able to cut the film down even more.

For the film score, Patrick and Allen turned to the now-defunct local improvisation band New Federal Hillbillies and New York-based ON/OFF. The movie was played on a projector and the bands improvised a film score to go

along with the action on screen. Sound correction and audio dubbing was handled by a variety of patient and talented people, and Allen himself fuddled around with the compromised amateur audio recordings for many months. Color correction was also attempted, but along with fancy digital effects was quickly abandoned as both Patrick and Allen felt it made some aspects of the film seem overproduced and homogenously linked with other amateur film projections. The unique style and raw quality of *The Grateful Undead* makes it stand out (whether you like it or not) from other amateur productions made for tremendously more money. There is something rebellious about the style of *The Grateful Undead*, something more ambitious and primal than any other film being made today.

How The Film Is Being Distributed

Finally, on the 27th of November, 2007, thanks to the support of The Rhode Island Film Collaborative's Treasurer Mike Ryan, *The Grateful Undead* had its first public screening to a packed house at the historic Columbus Theater in Providence, Rhode Island. Many more screenings were to come in a variety of venues. In January of 2008, Patrick and Allen packed up a car with garage sale items and took the movie on tour from Philadelphia to Chicago and back. Every night the film was shown at a diverse scene, from communist living rooms to punk houses to empty art theaters in bankrupt mining towns. A garage sale was held with items from the car to help Patrick and Allen and their cohorts pay for gas and accommodation, and the film was enjoyed freely by all. In the Spring of 2009, Allen partook in a self-imposed "residency" in Austin, Texas for two weeks, and was able to show the movie at various venues every night. The movie is available for rent at video stores on the east coast and west coast of the United States, and has been screened on public access and at bars and basements all over New England.

Sadly, in the Spring of 2008, the van used in the movie was sold for scrap metal.

Emsiac Productions has taken on the role of distributing and showing the movie independently. *The Grateful Undead* is the property of the non-elite, and audiences of the film must always be the sort that can see beyond the present-day formulas of film production. Emsiac is always looking for odd venues to show their experiment in willpower, their labor of love, the best \$850 movie ever made.