

# YOUTH CULTURE IN PURGATORY

AN INTERVIEW WITH THE CREATORS OF *THE GRATEFUL UNDEAD*

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**T**he *Grateful Undead* is a low-budget, surrealistic horror film set in the 1990s. Filmed in and around Rhode Island over a two-week span in the summer of 2006, *Undead* features original music by Providence bands Nefarious and the New Federal Hillbillies. Its heroes are Dr. Zog and Eno the Zero, “wastoid” hippies who find themselves stranded in an aimless slacker limbo, barraged by ’90s clichés (the baby boomer, the goth, the MCM grad student). I spoke with Allen Riley and Patrick May, who wrote, directed and starred in the movie, after its first public screening at Providence’s Columbus Theater on November 27. Riley and May have plans to take the movie on tour; the next Providence showing is scheduled for December 4 at the Brooklyn Coffee and Tea House (209 Douglas Ave.) After the tour, Riley and May will begin work on a science fiction film with the working title *Captain Blood and the Space Cosmic*.

**THE INDEPENDENT: Why don’t you guys talk a little about how the idea for *The Grateful Undead* originated?**

ALLEN RILEY: The story goes back to I think 1999, when we were 17 or 18. We were talking about vampires—what the deadliest kind of vampire would be, or something like that—and so we were going over the different things vampires might be immune to, one of them being crosses. They would be immune to crosses and Christian symbolism, so I was thinking, what kind of person would be immune to that? So they’re hippies. So it’s like: “We’re immune to your Judeo-Christian bullshit.”

**INDY: How did the movie as it is now take shape?**

AR: When we originally came up with the concept of *The Grateful Undead*, it was: oh, Judeo-Christian bullshit? Oh, hippie vampires. What would that movie be called? *The Grateful Undead*. That was a long time ago. So then, Patrick started writing the script, and we discussed it more and came up with a plot outline—in high school, probably in 12th grade. At the time it was somehow a bizarro version of our lives and the relationships in high school. That was an important aspect of it at the time.

**INDY: How are the ’90s represented in the movie?**

PATRICK MAY: It was supposed to be an anti-*Forrest Gump* movie. Because that’s a movie about the ’90s and it’s about hippie values being good. Originally when I conceived it there were supposed to be vampires that [were] hippies. So they were like leeches—bohemian, bourgeois, yuppified versions of hippies from the ’60s that became this baby boomer, nostalgic crap. But they’re not really vampires anymore.

AR: In the execution of filming the movie they became less and less undead.

**INDY: If they’re not vampires, what are they?**

AR: They’re demon leeches.

PM: They’re just this immortal... they’re like this stupid youth culture that’s grown up. They don’t have any identities, it’s just stupid youth culture.

AR: [Main characters] Eno the Zero and Dr. Zog formed their identities as human beings when they were young and when they identified with all these movements and all these

things that were supposed to do something to their lives and be some sort of catalyst for meaningful change or revolution. The situation in the movie is just the purgatory that they’re in because of that belief. They have a purgatorial obsession with youth culture.

**INDY: How does that relate to the ’90s and slacker culture, which is also a big part of the movie?**

AR: A lot of the slacker stuff is in response to the perceived failure of the ’60s at changing culture and introducing freedom or revolution. There’s this cynicism that was prevalent [in the ’90s] about politics and about revolution and about idealism. It was extremely cynical and apathetic and filled with rage. So I think, in a way, the hippies’ transformation into the undead represents that [slacker] youth culture.

PM: With the slackers and the hippies, there was an idealism. There’s no ideal group anymore—there’s no beatniks, nothing like that.

AR: It’s about the death of youth culture, in a way.

**INDY: Is there a grunge influence?**

AR: The movie is very grungy and muddy and gross, and rather than taking a conventional blood and guts approach to horror—if it is even a horror movie—we were emphasizing junk food and just like, being disgusting. We tried to put in some grunge-sounding music. I think Kurt Cobain’s attitude towards ’60s idealism is similar to what we were thinking about. In our promo stuff we used this phrase “tie-dyed in blood,” and that

was something that Kurt Cobain repeatedly said: that he wanted a t-shirt tie-dyed in Jerry Garcia’s blood.

PM: Before we started working on [the movie] I saw *Slacker* and I was reading *Hate Comics* and I was reading Douglas Coupland books about the ’90s. But basically it was just the scenario and then mostly for the slackers we just made slackers. They improvised. We were like, “Say all these buzzwords.” You know, AIDS and global warming.

**INDY: What was the process of filming like?**

AR: When we started filming it, we had never filmed anything ever.... The day we started filming—May 19, 2006—Patrick picked up our camera equipment, which we were borrowing from the local public access station...

PM: For free.

AR: For free.

PM: It was mostly like a game of chicken: we just kept on doing it to see if we’d actually do it. We would confirm stuff; we would confirm that we’d get the camera so it would be like, “Alright, I guess we’re filming now.” We would confirm a location and it would be: “Alright, we’re going to be here at this time.” AR: We just kept telling people that we were going to make a movie, and then they just came because we said we were going to do it. And we demanded that they keep to a schedule, so they did. People came and stayed at my house for two weeks, and we did it day in and day out from seven AM to three AM.

PM: It sucked.

AR: We didn’t follow the schedule exactly

because it was so crazy. Everyone was emotionally devastated by the experience.

**INDY: How do you respond to people laughing at the movie? It doesn’t seem like it’s necessarily supposed to be funny.**

AR: I find the movie funny but I don’t know if I find it funny that it exists—because it spent so much time being this thing that was never going to be done. For a large part of my life, this movie was just something that Patrick and I would talk about for fun. Now, the fact that it’s an actual object and that I can see that idea being animated makes me laugh.

PM: If they laugh, that’s good.

AR: All that I want is for people to be entertained, and then to remember it. I don’t feel like you could watch the movie and completely forget it. So if they laugh and they seem to think that it’s a funny, ridiculous movie, that’s fine. But we’re not trying to make it into a Troma [studios, marketers of gory horror-comedy] movie; it’s not a ridiculous slapstick gore-fest.

**INDY: Why did you decide to take this movie on the road, as it were, rather than going through more traditional distribution channels?**

AR: Patrick and I talk sometimes about film festivals, and the kinds of people that are interested in movies at film festivals. And I can’t imagine this movie appealing to film lovers—people who love cinema.

PM: I think we’re both cynical about mainstream films. It’s a pain in the ass to make a stupid movie that’s goofy, and it’s going to take as long as it took to make the movie that we made. But you’ll feel stupid making it and it’s just one of many movies that are like that... there could be a funny movie about zombie hippies, but I don’t think we could make that movie.

AR: *The Grateful Undead* isn’t ironic. When it’s funny, I think it’s simply funny. It’s not making a joke about the ’90s; it’s not making a joke about hippies. Well, it is making fun of those things but it’s not making a joke about the idea of *The Grateful Undead* itself. PM: It’s not meta. It’s in there. It’s in the trenches.

AR: And the idea with the tour is that I think the movie is more at home in non-theatrical settings... we’re in someone’s basement projecting it onto the wall, or at an art space or something like that where you wouldn’t expect to see a movie. And then you start watching this thing and gradually realize that it’s a movie.

**INDY: But it’s an unconventional movie.**

PM: It doesn’t really have a niche group that would like it.

AR: It’s not a horror movie; it’s not a drama. It was filmed by people with no expertise in camera operation so it has a very crazy aesthetic.

PM: It’s ten years too late.

AR: [laughter] Yeah, it’s about the ’90s and I don’t know if people are interested in those themes right now. So we wanted to just force it out there and just show it, and see if people would come. And today 50 people came, so I think that’s a good sign.

**DILLON SAVAGE B’08** listens to “Floyd the Barber” 1,994 times daily.

