

# From Brooklyn to Skull Island a 40-Year Affair in the Dark



*My Life with*

# KONG

*By Elliott Stein*

**K**ING KONG WAS not the first movie I saw; it was the first I remember vividly. I was already a film fan when the ad for it appeared in February 1933. I even owned a "movie pillow," bought expressly by my mother when she got tired of holding me on her lap in the dark. Bored

*Stein has worked on several films, the last of which was 'Les Apprentis Sorciers,' a melodramatic comedy about South American political refugees in Paris, with Dennis Hopper and Marie-France Pisier. In it he played Ezra Fickletoes, an odious movie producer—and wrote his own scenes.*

*King Kong comes to the gates of the great wall to reclaim his bride. Above, Jack Driscoll (Bruce Cabot), Carl Denham (Robert Armstrong) and Ann Darrow (Fay Wray) of the original cast watch in horror.*

with school (first grade, Bensonhurst, Brooklyn) and annoyed by teachers, I learned to read mostly on my own by devouring the movie ads. At first I had my parents read the copy to me, spelling out difficult words, then I went through the glorious purple prose myself.

A lot of weighty current events were bouncing around on the front pages of those newspapers about the time *Kong* had its world premiere at the Radio City Music Hall and the New Roxy. Japanese troops were invading Manchuria, the amendment to repeal Prohibition was up for vote. I didn't care much about those events. I had heard the radio ads for *Kong* (it was the first time radio spots were ever used to plug a movie) and I ripped out the entertainment pages the minute the papers hit the sofa to find out when I could see the big ape who was roaring every hour on the hour inside the little box on the kitchen table.

The first news of *Kong* in the press came on February 16th, 1933, as a small insert in the Music Hall's ad for its then current attraction, *The Great Jasper*. All it said was: "King Kong is coming." It didn't

say when. I pestered my dad until he promised to take me. He had not yet been to the Music Hall himself—the theater was just a few months old. It would be my first movie in New York, as Manhattan was then called in Brooklyn. We were all excited the day that first ad appeared—I because of *Kong*, my parents because of FDR. The president-elect had narrowly escaped an assassin's bullet in Miami. Giuseppe Zangara told the press: "I tried to kill Roosevelt because I have been in constant torment from a stomach operation." The *New York Herald Tribune* described him as "a stingy, morose Communist bachelor."

On February 27th, the first real *Kong* ad appeared. It didn't show his body, just two giant feet—one of them poised for stomping. The text read: "A raging monster, mountain high! . . . With the strength of a battleship, the fury of a thousand demons, crashing out of time's black abyss! . . . Smashing into our world!" Every day the radio spots became louder, and now there were two gorilla roars, followed by a woman screaming—and, at last, a date: March 2nd!

The March 1st ad showed a full-sized *Kong* holding tiny Fay Wray. "King Kong, of a former world, comes to destroy our world—all but that soft, white female thing he holds like a fluttering bird!" My mother took one look at the ad and ordered Dad to take me to some other picture. She then said something for the first time which she has repeated often over the years: "Monsters shouldn't be allowed." But I wouldn't eat my dinner until she read me aloud the part about "King Kong, of a former world . . ." and soon we both knew it by heart.

*Kong*'s world premiere was announced by a whopper of an ad with the gorilla on top of the Empire State Building, holding an airplane—"See him wreck men's proudest works while millions flee in horror!" Front-page trivia concerned FDR's leaving New York for his Washington inauguration.

Roosevelt was inaugurated and promptly closed all the banks, but my dad kept his word and that Saturday, we bolted breakfast and prepared to leave for Radio City. I didn't want to lug my movie pillow on the BMT, but after my mother wrapped

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rentiis' lamentably sentimental simian. I renewed acquaintance with the King five years later and saw the film a few dozen times during its 1938 rerelease. But old buddies often change, wizen and grow soft. The world usually sees to it that they are willfully defaced.

During the late Thirties, the Production Code was particularly stringent. When *Kong* returned, the image of the *entire* film was darkened to obliterate some gory details and soupçons of eroticism. *Kong* since 1938 has been like an expurgated edition of Grimms' Fairy Tales.

Several scenes were removed in toto: Kong attempting to peel Fay Wray like a banana, then sniffing his finger; Kong pulling a woman from her bed in a New York building, then hurling her to her death when he discovers she is not his blonde; Kong munching and crunching and stomping a mixed antipasto of Skull Islanders and New Yorkers—these ape antics were considered a threat to the nation's morals and were excised. The changes were made in the negative.

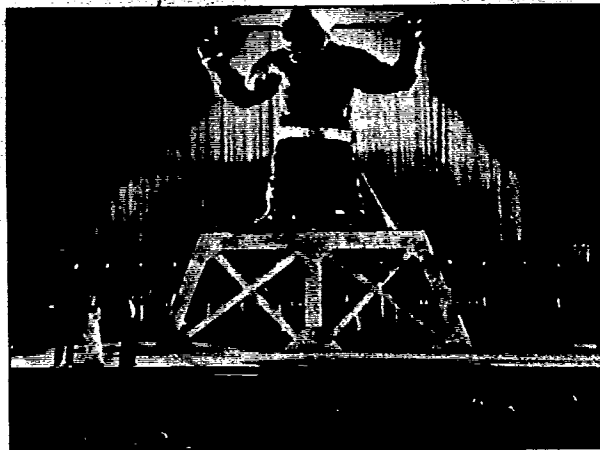
RKO ceased production in 1956. When Janus Films later acquired distribution rights, it sought the clipped scenes and finally, in 1969, found a nearly complete print in the attic of a collector in Pennsylvania. Most of the censored scenes were restored, but not for television. In spite of Janus' laudable restoration work, no complete and undarkened prints are shown in the United States: thus, no one who has seen *'King Kong'* in this country in the last 39 years has seen it properly. Censorial vandalism was not committed on the film in Europe; one can see *Kong* in all its uncut, well-lit magnificence on British screens.

**T**O MY PASSION FOR *Kong* I owe my friendship with one of the noblest film historians this country has produced. I majored in motion pictures at NYU. The first day of History of Cinema class, Professor Theodore Huff asked us to list our "ten greatest movies." The results were mostly predictable bouquets of the fashionable warhorses of the day—*Henry V*, *Brief Encounter*—this was the mid-Forties. I scrawled *Kong Kong* ten times. Huff later confessed that although his field was basically Chaplin and Griffith, *Kong* was one of his greatest too. He thought the only crowd scenes in the American cinema which could be compared to those in Griffith's *Intolerance* were contained in *Kong's* "bridal sequence."

He flew to the Coast to be a pallbearer at Griffith's funeral. Huff died, quite young, a few years later. One of New York's most recondite coteries bears his name: The Theodore Huff Memorial Society, a group of unkempt Foofs (Friends of Old Films) which meets twice a month to screen obscure vintage prints in a drafty dental surgery amphitheater near Gramercy Park.

**J**EAN BOULLET WAS the biggest *King Kong* freak in Europe. One morning in 1949 we packed an enormous basket of blood sausage, pâté and baguettes and repaired ourselves to the Cinéma Rex in Paris. It was opening day of *Monsieur Joe*, as *Mighty Joe Young* (the final gorilla film made by *Kong's* directors) was called in Gallic parts. The Rex was famous for *La Féerie des Eaux*, an entrancing "dancing waters" spectacle





which squirted all the way up to the rafters with different music and lighting effects each week. It was recently chopped up into two theaters; the waters do not dance anymore.

Though no *Kong*, Joe Young was rousing and fanciful. Some of its trick work was superior to that in *Kong*; it received the special-effects Oscar that year. It ends with a scene more truly audacious than anything in 1976's "liberated" *Kong*: Terry Moore, her cowboy friend, Ben Johnson, and the gorilla, Mr. Joseph Young—the strangest *ménage à trois* in screen annals—all return to Africa to live happily ever after.

My Parisian *Kong* freak Boulet was a painter, illustrator and writer. His *La Belle et la Bête*, which dealt with the Beauty and the Beast theme in literature and in the cinema, was the first volume published in postwar Europe which analyzed fantasy films with any degree of seriousness. He founded *La Société des Amis de Bram Stoker*, a loose amalgam of vampirophiles and gorilla buffs, that held irregular meetings at his house to screen films and air baroque ideas.

Boulet's early biography paralleled mine—one of his prize possessions was a souvenir program of the European premiere of *King Kong* at the Gaumont Palace in 1933, which his father had taken him to. (For many years the largest movie theater in Europe, the Gaumont Palace closed its doors for the last time not long ago.)

I saw the dubbed French version of *Kong* under Boulet's pointed roof many times. The house was filled with his portraits of Jean Marais, Perial (the talented dwarf featured in Cocteau's *The Eternal Return*), Kenneth Anger, King Kong and other friends and ex-friends. This portrait gallery was part of an interior décor of mummy cases, vampire-bat skeletons, sarcophagi and huge chairs in the shape of kneeling elephants.

When *Kong* was shown at the French film museum—the *Cinémathèque*—and anyone laughed, tittered, or even chatted during the film, Boulet would rise, walk over and slap the person in the face with his gloves, usually accompanying the blow with something like: "Imbécile! *King Kong*, c'est un film sérieux et poétique!" Then he would calmly return to his seat.

Jean's father was a cat skinner by profession. Cat skins are still sold in some drugstores in France, mostly to elderly women who wear them pinned under their dresses all winter as bronchitis preventives. The custom is dying out, but in the Fifties, cat skinning was still a thriving trade. One night in 1951, Jean discovered Boulet père's corpse in the smelly atelier. His father had hanged himself. He must have decided to do so on an impulse; a half-dead cat, prepared for skinning, had to be put out of its misery.

During the Algerian war, Jean was a violent opponent of his government's colonial politics. He sheltered North African activists and militants, and was often in

*Willis O'Brien with full-scale Kong torso (far left); Fay Wray's shipboard 'screen test' (above); Kong at Radio City (center); and Buz Gibson helping an 18-inch Kong model scale a miniature Empire State Building (below).*

deep trouble with the gendarmes. He left France in 1967, vowing never to return. He didn't. Jean was also found dead—his corpse was discovered hanging from a tree in a suburb of Algiers.

Fantasy films have become intellectually kosher in France. This was hardly the case when Boulet started campaigning for them three decades ago. In the last year, in fanzines edited by youthful followers, two homages have appeared to the greatest *King Kong* freak in Europe.

**I**'VE SEEN KONG IN Italian a few times, always with pleasure, although this version is inferior to the French. The translation does come up with some nice colloquialisms. When the natives' nuptial ceremony is first viewed, the reaction of Carl Denham (Robert Armstrong) is: "Holy mackerel! What a show!" In Italian, this comes out as: "Mondo cane! Che spettacolo!" When, during the first reel, Denham is searching for a girl to act in his picture, we pan by a line of women at a Salvation Army shelter. One of them asks the girl in front of her: "What do they give you in this joint?" The snappy answer is: "Soup tonight, coffee and sinkers in the morning." In Italian, this comes out as: "Spaghetti, but with no sauce."

**O**NE OF MY MOST EXCEPTIONAL encounters with *Kong* took place in the mid-Fifties in Israel. One day in Tel Aviv I was going through the movie ads. I nearly hit the ceiling—a theater in Jaffa was showing *Kong* in the early afternoon, and then later, *Flash Gordon's Trip to Mars*.

Now, to realize how bogging this was, it should be known that just a day earlier I had come across an item in a guidebook which linked Jaffa to *Kong* for me. The Andromeda legend is located there.

Andromeda had been chained near the sea at Jaffa because a monster who had been preying on the country could only be appeased by her sacrifice to him. She was saved by Perseus, who slew the monster from the air and married her. Sometime later, Pompey's captain, Marcus Aemilius Scaurus, decided to put on a show with animals never seen before in Rome. In his travels, Scaurus had discovered at Joppa (Jaffa) the carcass of the monster and had it transported to Rome to be displayed before the wondering eyes of the populace.

I was not only a few miles from the spot where the Beauty and the Beast legend entered history—but from the beginning that legend had included a Carl Denham—Scaurus! And *Kong* was about to be shown at a site where his trail could be traced back thousands of years.

Dozens of kids of kindergarten age were lined up in front of the undistinguished school-auditorium-type theater when we arrived. They were all nattering away in Hebrew. Some boys heard me talking to my buddy Benny (a Sabra movie fan who works for El-Al) in English, and asked where I was from and why I was going to the kiddies' matinee in Jaffa.

Why not have some fun? I told them that *Flash Gordon* was my cousin. I had dropped in to see my cousin's movie. It was also a good place to see *Kong* because he was born here.

—Is *Flash Gordon* Jewish?

—His real name is *Flash Goldberg* and

he's from the Bronx.  
—Was King Kong Jewish?  
—He first appears in Greek legend, but he was probably some kind of primitive Sabra.

More and more kids came up, encircling us, repeating these news items to each other. The doors finally opened.

The Israeli print of *Kong* was the scratchiest I had ever seen and was subtitled in Hebrew and in French. It was so subtitled that even when all of *Kong's* body was on screen, you could spy only his head peering above the titles. It was also titled in Romanian on a high, narrow scroll, like a movie Torah, which stood at one side of the screen, cranked by a young man. This was the most distracted visit to Skull Island I had ever made, for we had to fight off the kids, who all wanted to know if *Kong* was a Greek Jew and which hotel Flash Gordon was staying at.

In 1962, the French magazine *Midi-Minuit* published a special issue devoted entirely to *Kong*, coedited by Jean Boullet. It included an essay I contributed on *Kong Jr.* which, thanks to a typo, came out: "Son of Gonk." This number has long been out of print. I broke up several years ago when I was shown an index card—"Elliott Stein—see SON OF GONK." This was in the library of Dr. Kinsey's Institute for Sex Research at Bloomington, Indiana, where a mint copy of *Midi-Minuit* No. 3 was to be found on the "Bestiality" shelf.

**K**ONG IS NO FILM for auteurs. Its artisanal perfection was made possible through un-self-serving conjoint teamwork under the studio system—now a dead dinosaur like the Roxy and the Albee.

One of my long-term, now unrealizable dreams, was to meet the four men who served as *Kong's* godfathers: Merian Cooper, Willis O'Brien, Max Steiner and Ernest Schoedsack. The first three have died; Schoedsack, near blind, now lives as a semirecluse.

He was born in Pottawattamie County, Iowa, in 1893, ran away from home at 12 and headed for California. He started in films with Mack Sennett, was later a cameraman on Erich von Stroheim's *Greed*. His first feature (made with Merian Cooper) followed a migratory Persian tribe seeking pasture land for its herds. This landmark documentary was released by Paramount in 1925. The posters read: "Adolph Zukor and Jesse Lasky present *Grass*, and *Grass is great!*"

Schoedsack's wife, historian and zoologist Ruth Rose, wrote the screenplay for *Kong*; it was produced and directed by Schoedsack and Cooper. The character of strong-but-silent sailor Jack Driscoll (Bruce Cabot), who falls for Fay Wray, was based on Schoedsack. The character of Carl Denham (Robert Armstrong), the pushy cinéaste/explorer/go-getter/impresario, was based on Cooper.

When they were preparing to shoot the final sequence, it was Cooper who suggested: "Let's kill the bastard ourselves!" The two pilots seen in close-up when *Kong* is executed from the air are the film's directors.

Cooper came from a family of Florida plantation owners. With America's entry into World War I, he enlisted in the Air

Corps and was shot down over German lines. After the armistice, when released from a German prison hospital, he joined the Polish army and helped form the Kosciusko Squadron which resisted the Bolshevik invasion of 1920. He was shot down behind Russian lines, and after several months in a prison camp near Moscow, escaped and found his way to the border.

After the success of *Grass*, Cooper and Schoedsack went to Siam in 1926; in the Laotian jungle, they shot *Chang*, a film which is in many ways a precursor of *Kong*.

The genius in charge of *Kong's* special effects was Willis O'Brien, the Giotto, the Leonardo and Michelangelo of three-dimensional stop-motion model animation in the cinema. His work was fantastically painstaking, never facile—at no point did it include the manipulation of men in monkey suits or ungainly 40-foot robots. His *Kong* was 18 inches tall (for a few scenes a 12-foot arm or a full-sized bust were used)—but when viewed whole, *Kong* was always a hunk of rubber and aluminum, under two feet tall. Through O'Brien's empathy for the character, created by Cooper and Ruth Rose, and his endless patience—a new shot was required each time any of his animals changed position one-sixteenth of an inch—this small doll became the hero of the most moving passion play ever seen on the screen.

O'Brien felt that character had to be added to his models, otherwise they would remain mechanical toys—so he added himself to the film. His widow noted: "King *Kong* was Obie. It was his personality. I could see Obie in *Kong's* every movement, every gesture." O'Brien had been a professional boxer in his youth, which accounts for *Kong's* superb pugilistic form during his bout with the tyrannosaurus. O'Brien died in 1962 while working on the animation scenes for Stanley Kramer's *It's a Mad Mad Mad Mad World*.

Maximilian Raoul Walter Steiner died in 1971. His godfather had been Richard Strauss; he studied with Mahler. During a concert tour of England in 1914, he was about to be deported as an enemy alien, but made his way to the United States where he found work as a vaudeville pianist. He conducted many Broadway musicals, and then, when sound came in, was hired as director of RKO's musical department. His hair-raising, often dissonant score for *Kong*, in which Steiner used leitmotifs for characters à la Wagner, was a new concept in film music; he scored dozens of films, but is now best remembered for his work on *Gone with the Wind*. (It was in *GWTW* that the Great Wall of Skull Island expired—it was repainted as background buildings for the spectacular burning of Atlanta.)

Bruce Cabot died in 1972. Merian Cooper's last public appearance was at Steiner's funeral, where he delivered the eulogy. The two Carl Denhams died within a few hours of each other in April 1973, and obituaries of Cooper and of Robert Armstrong appeared side by side in the *New York Times* and *Variety*.

**F**EBRUARY 1ST, 1974, bulks large in my *Kong* annals. He was back at Radio City! Even the Music Hall, one of the Apple's great attractions, has fallen on hard times recently and modified its format to present

an occasional rock concert or a special exhibit to bolster receipts. The 1974 New York Art Deco Expo settled in there—the lobby crammed with antique dealers hawking Thirties bric-a-brac, vases, ashtrays, deco chamber pots at outrageous prices—and on screen, film hits which had first played at the theater.

I went with Kenneth Anger, and we plopped down in the center of the very first row during a vintage *March of Time*. Kenneth decided that the sound for *Kong* should be turned up all the way, and got up to do a number on the projectionist. It worked—from the first mighty detonation of Steiner's chords during the main credit titles, I knew that this was it! What roars and bellows and snarls—what walls and whines and full-throated screeches from Fay Wray! I was back home with the King in the vast theater where I had first had my mind blown by him 41 years earlier. The popcorn I held made Proust's madeleine seem like a moldy bagel.

**L**ABOR DAY WEEKEND 1976. Telluride, Colorado, a crag-rimmed mining town 9000 feet up in the San Juan Mountains. I had hobnobbed with *Kong* in many sites, but never in a theater like the jewel box Sheridan Opera House, built in 1914; where Lillian Russell once performed.

The third Telluride Festival was honoring King Vidor and King *Kong*. After the losses the *Kong* family had suffered during the Sixties and the early Seventies, it was gratifying to meet so many remaining members of the team: Fay Wray; Cooper's widow, Dorothy Jordan; his secretary, Zoe Porter (who, in a test shot, was the first person lifted by *Kong's* hand); Linwood Dunn, who worked with Obie on optical effects; Orville Goldner, who created the foliage; Mario Larrinaga, a wee, beaming old man with a feathered alpine cap who looks like Pinocchio's father—he painted the backings and the exquisite series of receding glass paintings which gave such depth and richness to the jungle scenes.

The *Kong* screening at the altitudinous opera house was preceded by a slide show, put together by Goldner, which made intelligible the complicated processes with which the glass paintings, the miniature animals, the foliage and the live-action scenes were blended into unified, credible life.

The next day Miss Wray took part in an outdoor seminar. She was seated at a table on which had been placed the armature of one of the original 18-inch *Kongs*. She picked up *Kong*—in itself a memorable sight—and at that moment something really eerie occurred. A hang glider which had sailed from one of the slopes overlooking the town came into view—and from our vantage point it soared in a direct line above Fay Wray, where it loomed, resembling nothing so much as a pterodactyl in flight.

She was approached by a boy who asked her to autograph his poster for the De Laurentiis film. She refused—but added that she would sign a photo, or autograph his shirt, his arm—anything except that poster. She had read the script of the new one; a representative of De Laurentiis had asked her to be associated with it. "I refused. Our *Kong* has always meant so much to young people. This one seems to me destined to be an unholy project."

**A** FEW DAYS AFTER the festival, I presented a screening of *Kong* at the Pacific Film Archive of Berkeley and spoke on O'Brien's animation techniques. After the show, a ten-year-old Berkeleyite named Michael came up and requested my autograph. I asked why.

Because Tom Luddy, the Archive's director, had mentioned in introducing me that I had seen *Kong* more than 200 times. It was Michael's favorite movie. His ambition was to see it 300 times.

He wanted to know if he ever would be able to, if what the program note said was true: "Sadly, this tribute may be a farewell as well, for *Kong* will be removed from distribution later this month to make way for the De Laurentiis remake."

I cheered him up somewhat by remarking that although from now on, and for an indefinite period, it would be impossible to see the big boy under the best conditions (in theaters, in 35 mm, the way he was made to be seen), apparently Janus is going to be able to continue supplying 16 mm prints for nontheatrical showings in colleges. I added that many collectors own prints of *Kong* and would not part with them, even under torture.

**L**ATER LAST AUTUMN, the last time I saw *Kong*, the place was the most appropriate on earth—why had no one ever had this brilliant idea before? Ballantine Books organized a party and a screening of the film in the Empire State Club, on the 21st floor of the Empire State Building, to publicize the paperback edition of Orville Goldner and George Turner's *The Making of King Kong*. (The book is invaluable, and reproduces many prodigious sketches of O'Brien, Larrinaga and Byron Crabbe.)

During the last reel, when *Kong* started to ascend the building we were in, most heads turned apprehensively toward the windows. No giant paw appeared, no hairy arm or ample brow—but since the windows all faced south, something infinitely more foreboding came into view—there, in the distance, the huge unsightly bulk of the World Trade Center.

**T**HIS HAS BEEN THE story of an abiding love affair. There is no place in it for De Laurentiis' 40-foot turkey.

Let my last reel be an excerpt from a tribute made by Ray Bradbury last fall at Telluride: "Of all the films produced in the early Thirties, *King Kong* probably changed more lives than any other. When Skull Island's black chieftain summoned *Kong* from the jungle deeps by pounding a vast gong, a mob of boys went quietly mad in dark cinemas all over the world. . . . *King Kong* is a perfect picture. . . . In fact, you might say that it made its own category and then self-destructed. Dozens, and then hundreds of imitations followed *Kong* out of the jungle, and through the streets of New York, San Francisco and Tokyo. From *Mighty Joe Young* down to the bottom of the barrel *Godzilla*, all were pretty much bastard. And, not only illegitimate but imitative and lacking soul, whatever that mysterious element is. You can't invent soul. It simply happens."

May Michael be able to see our *Kong* 300 times.