

**INSIDE:
GIVING**

STUSSIE

WEEKLY

Unearthing
the movie
Hollywood
made in
Richmond
that became
the stuff of
urban legend
— and ended
up in a
closet.

The Best Worst Movie You've Never Seen

by Dale Brumfield

YES, VIRGINIA, THERE IS A “ROCK 'N' ROLL HOTEL”

Boasting young stars, '80s exuberance and local extras working on the cheap, Richmond's lost movie finally has been found.

BY DALE BRUMFIELD

Inside a deserted Jefferson Hotel, a demonic Willy Wonka type sneaks through the hallways, a robotic keyboard named Igor scoots around like a Roomba and a few hastily thrown-together rock bands are in the competition of their lives.

And Robert Albertia is dressed as a drunken Beethoven.

“To tell the truth, the role didn't make any sense to me at the time,” says Albertia, a local actor who works as group sales manager at Swift Creek Mill Theatre.

But then, little makes sense about “Rock 'N' Roll Hotel” — why it was made, what it was about or how so many people involved in the production know so little about what happened after Hollywood's swing through Richmond in late 1982.

“I never saw a completed script,” Albertia says — “or for that matter, an abridged one.”

But who needs a completed script for a feature-length music video? The visiting filmmakers from Schuster Films weren't in town to make another “Citizen

Kane” but rather a harmless extension of those new-fangled music videos being shown 24 hours a day on Continental Cablevision channel 33 — on something called MTV.

Besides, filmgoers would be too enthralled by the visuals to concern themselves with mundane things like a coherent plot. Executive producers Howard and Francine Schuster, along with cinematographer and stereoscopic film expert John Rupkolvis, had developed a new type of inexpensive 3-D filmmaking called Arrivision. They were eager to put it to the test amidst a flurry of films coming out to showcase 3-D technology.

“That's why the film was made,” says the film's original scriptwriter, Russell Dvorch, who also co-wrote the Ramones vehicle “Rock and Roll High School” in 1979 for producer Roger Corman. “[It wasn't] because someone had a terrific idea for an intellectually compelling and emotionally inspiring story, but because they needed some objects poking the audience in the face.”

Spurred by word of mouth and posters placed in

Shafer Court at Virginia Commonwealth University, hundreds of Richmond residents skipped classes and jobs to be part of a movie-making experience that turned the Jefferson Hotel — closed at the time — into a neon-drenched, dry-ice-laden music-video set — an atmosphere that was often noxious from the small bits of party confetti constantly floating in the air.

Artist David Powers describes being an extra in the movie as “a cross between standing in a soup line and being picked on behind the high school dumpster.”

One extra, Linda Messer, a VCU student at the time, recalls in a Facebook entry how she was bowling one night with some friends. “Next to us was a group from the production team looking for extras,” she writes. “I went for it. ... Boy, was that a long day!”

That's nothing compared with the long road to the film's one and only screening in New York years later — or the time it took for Richmonders to finally have the chance to see the film in one special showing this month.



Let's put on a show: In October 1982, a visiting film crew took over a dormant Jefferson Hotel, turning it into the garish set of a feature-length film called "Rock 'N' Roll Hotel." For years, the hundreds of local actors and crew members who worked on the MTV-inspired movie wondered what happened to it. Now the lost film has been found.



LEE BRAUER

The Jefferson Hotel may be a landmark, but in 1982 it was a ghostly victim of urban flight and home to a handful of transients before closing completely, soon after French director Louis Malle and a small film crew finished the independent film, “My Dinner with Andre,” there.

The empty structure was quite a sight. “I roamed the dark and empty hotel like Eloise, the little girl in the famous kids’ book,” recalls Eddie Fitzgerald, who served as storyboard artist for “Rock ‘N’ Roll Hotel.”

The results of the Jefferson’s short stint as a movie location were as mixed as you could get. “My Dinner with Andre” became a high-brow critic’s favorite, recently rereleased on DVD to great acclaim, while “Rock ‘N’ Roll Hotel” became a disaster and a cautionary tale, crashing and burning into pop culture oblivion.

And while “Dinner” centered on conversation, “Hotel” had singing in mind. “It was going to be a musical — that’s why they brought in Richard Baskin,” screenwriter Dvonch says of the movie’s original director.

Baskin was a likeable and energetic young man best known for his songwriting for Robert Altman’s classic film, “Nashville,” in 1975 and his portrayal as a shadowy singer and songwriter in Alan Rudolph’s “Welcome to L.A.” He also was heir to the Baskin-Robbins Ice Cream fortune, brother to “Saturday Night Live” writer Edie Baskin and ex-boyfriend to Barbara Streisand.

“Rock ‘N’ Roll Hotel” follows the exploits of three young members of a band called the Third Dimension

(get it?). The leather-wearing guitar player, “Johnny,” was played by a brooding young native of Portland, Maine, named Judd Nelson, who brought a smoldering stare but had no screen credits. Three years later, the actor hit it big as a member of John Hughes’ Brat Pack ensemble with movies such as “Breakfast Club.” Another band member, “Rick,” was Matthew Penn, a New York City-born stage actor and feature film unknown, and son of director Arthur Penn.

“Lisa” was played by Rachel Sweet, a native of Akron, Ohio. She’d started a promising country singing career in 1974 at age 12 before switching to rock ‘n’ roll, cultivating a good-girl-going-bad image on the pioneering Stiff music label, the initial home of Elvis Costello, Wreckless Eric, Nick Lowe and many other late-’70s new wave icons.

A few older actors with some star power were brought in to appeal to a broader audience, cast as fading 1950s rock ‘n’ rollers: comedian Dick Shawn, character actor Joe Grifasi and Broadway veteran Donna McKechnie. The latter was the second choice to play Shawn’s girlfriend. Sexy 1960s film and television star Stella Stevens was originally hired, but baled for unknown reasons before the production arrived in Richmond.

Stevens “was far enough involved in the project that they started recording her vocals for some of the musical sequences,” Dvonch says. “I was there in the Manhattan sound studio one night while she worked, singing a ‘50s rock ‘n’ roll standard. I got the sense

she was unhappy and that she was going to jump ship. Sure enough, a few days later she was no longer part of the production.”

The Schusters, along with producers Peter Rodis and William Gilmore, raised about \$4 million for the project, Rodis says, and preproduction began on the second and last film made inside the Jefferson.

But “Rock ‘N’ Roll Hotel” would disintegrate into a morass of bad planning, lost money and aimless direction before becoming Richmond and the Virginia film industry’s great lost movie.

Judd Nelson, Rachel Sweet and Matthew Penn, as the Third Dimension, rock out in a concert filmed in the Jefferson’s lobby. “Nobody was going so far to say, ‘This movie is a turkey,’ crew member Doug Dobby recalls. “But there was a sense of disorganization on the set.”

There were several competing motives surrounding “Rock ‘N’ Roll Hotel.”

Rachel Sweet’s father, Richard Sweet, saw the film as an introduction to, and a showcase for, his sultry young daughter with the sweetheart voice and manufactured bad-girl persona.

But according to Rodis, he and fellow producer Gilmore saw it more as a tax-shelter movie. “This was a way for investors to invest their money and then double their write-off,” he says. John Carpenter’s “Escape From New York” was a similar tax shelter project that was

fortunate enough to gain a side release.

A small and skeptical third group, including screenwriter Dvotch, feared the project was so poorly conceived it was doomed from the beginning.

A temporary production office was set up in Manhattan in September 1982, and less than a month before coming to Richmond, the original outline was jettisoned by the film's producers. Dvotch was called away from vacation by his agent to create a Page-1 rewrite, then cram 12 weeks' worth of script work into three hellish weeks inside a New York City hotel room. "I was being asked to join a troubled shoot, write a good screenplay from Page 1 to get them out of trouble, and at the same time meet a deadline almost certain to end in disaster," he recounts. "I said, 'Sure.'"

Meanwhile, Rodis scouted several locations before settling on Richmond's empty Jefferson. "We looked at Atlanta and down in Orlando," the film's co-producer says, choosing Richmond because of some film-friendly credits offered by the Virginia Film Office and the "just terrific people" found here. "I have nothing but fond memories of Richmond," he says, a sentiment echoed by storyboardist Fitzgerald and set designer Craig Hodgetts.

The crew began trickling into the Jefferson on Oct. 16. Five days later, with Dvotch's script and other pre-production details almost complete, director Baskin took the crew to Frog Level, a community at Routes 30 and 301 in Caroline County, to film some early scenes at Franklin Elliot's restaurant, the Burger Shoppe.

"It's caused quite a commotion down here," Elliot is quoted as saying in a 1982 Fredericksburg Freelance Star interview. "It's probably going to put us on the map."

But the production turned ugly in Frog Level, centering on Baskin's competence. After he was seen carrying a book entitled "The Sayings of Ghandi," many of the crew members questioned whether the neophyte director was the best choice to oversee a 3-D rock 'n' roll teen horror musical. There were

Veteran character actor Joe Grifasi discusses the art of piano pantomiming with director Paul Justman, who took control of the production when original director Richard Baskin was fired.



LEE BRAUER

heated arguments regarding the script, the shooting schedule and, especially, budgets — all within the first week.

"I had the impression that Baskin wanted to mostly improvise the shoot, against the advice of almost everybody," Fitzgerald says. Two days before arriving in Frog Level a production guy asked Baskin where

he wanted the trucks parked, so they wouldn't be in his shots. "Why do I need to worry about that now?" he's said to have asked. "I don't know where my shots are yet."

"Richard Baskin just did not work out," Rodis says. Production temporarily ceased for about a week while he was removed from the director's chair.

Bruce Springsteen's E-Street Band saxophonist Clarence Clemons, a Chesapeake native, was hired to play a motorcycle-riding disc jockey.

"I was introduced to him on set. I was supposed to know who he was, apparently," says extra and crew member Doug Dobby. "Not being a [Springsteen] fan I had no idea." According to the film's still photographer, Lee Brauer, Clemons completed his scenes in a week and then flew home.

With the production shut down, money pouring into expenses and no filming being done, actor Dick Shawn arrived in Richmond, exhibiting his own eclectic star behavior. He and a pet monkey shared the penthouse suite (with separate bedrooms) on the top floor of the former Holiday Inn downtown on Franklin Street. VCU student Anita Perr waited tables there and said that Shawn and the Hollywood crew were "great for tips," but she never came in contact with the monkey, which supposedly trashed its room.

With the director removed, the producers hired



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The Third Dimension enters the Jefferson's lobby. "Rock 'N' Roll Hotel" originally was filmed in state-of-the-art 3-D. But screenwriter Russell Dvotch says "there was only one sequence where the 3-D effect really worked, a scene with a lot of bubbles floating out over the audience." That scene eventually was cut.



LEE BRAUER

"Haven't you heard bad vibes before?" Joe Grifasi, Dick Shawn and Donna McKechnie play the Weevils, an aging band of classic rockers determined to foil the ambitions of the young and vibrant Third Dimension.

Paul Justman to assume the helm. New to feature-film directing, Justman had several well-known music videos in heavy rotation on the still-new MTV, including "Love Stinks," "Shake it Up" by the Cars and "Centerfold" by the J. Geils Band (his brother Seth was the band's keyboardist). He was also film editor of the notorious 1972 Robert Frank-directed unauthorized documentary of the Rolling Stones, "CS Blues," and later directed a critically acclaimed documentary on the history of Motown Records.

Justman wanted a new screenplay, so a writer named Janice Shapiro flew to Richmond to rework Dvonch's script. "Most screenwriters hate being rewritten," Dvonch says, "but in this case I didn't mind. I was thinking, 'Great! Somebody else is going to take the blame!'"

Final set decorating was completed by designer Hodgetts and future "Pet Sematary" director Mary Lambert while the new director and script were readied. A stage was built at the foot of the famous Jefferson staircase, and one of the large conference rooms was painted flat black to allow the construction of numerous smaller sets within. "There were 'hot sets' all over that hotel at any given time," says Brauer. "It was a big empty playground."

The original screenplay involved a rock 'n' roll band contest. "The heroic kids' band, led by Sweet, would play contemporary rock — the template was Joan Jett — and the villains would be '50s rock 'n' rollers, who owned the hotel," Dvonch says.

"Weevil, king of evil" (Shawn), his girlfriend (McKechnie), their sidekick (Grifasi) and a walking puppet named Ricky Raccoon ("A little person in an animal suit," Rodis says) would try to kill the kids to keep them out of the contest — all while staying within a PG rating. "And," Dvonch says, "they wanted a roller-coaster scene and rat and spiders for 3-D effects."

As assistant casting director, Richmonder Doug Dobby

hired many local musicians to appear as bands in the film. "All I had to do was call all my friends," he says. "And \$50 a day in 1982 was nothing to sneeze at."

Dobby also befriended the young actor Nelson, introducing him to Richmond nightlife and also (he says) hepping him to the leather jacket, engineer boots and jeans look Nelson later wore to great effect in 1985's "The Breakfast Club."

"We went to Benny's and Hababas," Dobby says. "Of course nobody knew who he was at the time." While Dobby showed Nelson how to dress, local musician Harry Gore of the Good Guys taught him how to rock out on his guitar.

Another local musician, Clifton Cloud, was among those who shared the stage with Johnny, Lisa and the Third Dimension.

"I was visiting the location and got access to the guitars and amps from the prop room," Cloud recalls on Facebook. "I would just rock out in one of the rooms when they were not shooting and Judd Nelson used to come in and just kinda watch what I was doing. I had a two-minute audition for Rachel and she said, 'OK, you can be the back up guitarist.'"

Many of the 61 members of a Facebook page — "I Remember Rock & Roll Hotel in Richmond," moderated by this writer — say they were enticed to the movie by the \$30 daily pay and KFC box lunch, which was remuneration for cheering wildly on-camera for a few minutes after sometimes hours of down-time. They were oblivious to the chaos surrounding the production.

While the extras cheered, fueled by 25-cent drafts from Becky's Diner across the road during the lulls between takes, many of those involved in the production nuts-and-bolts expressed doubts that the filmmakers had any idea of what the movie was supposed to be. "Nobody was going so far to say, 'This movie is a turkey,'" Dobby says. "But there was a sense of disorganization on the set."

"The movie was seriously underfunded," Hodgetts

says. But filming soldiered on. "Being non-union, everybody was invited to see the daily rushes, even the extras," Brauer says. "We watched them at the end of every day." T-shirts featuring the Hodgetts-designed pink and black "Rock & Roll Hotel" logo were printed and sold by a company called Shirtz.

Production stills show a colorful, heavily stylized stage, displaying the seminal music video art form influence in all its pastel, feature-length glory. A "Rock & Roll" pink and blue neon sign made by Louis Rudd at Talley Neon (now Talley Signs) on Chamberlayne Avenue was set over the original marquee at the Jefferson's Grace Street entrance, flanked by sputtering fireworks.

After a Thanksgiving-break dinner in Williamsburg, the filming resumed the last week of November, with money continuing to be a problem. "Sometimes they would fall a day or two behind in pay, but they always made it up," Dobby says. "But there was a lot of tension, and a lot of closed-door meetings. This waiting may be inherent to the movie industry, but it seemed excessive to me."

Second assistant grip Lee Pillsbury says that local bartender and promoter Bob Hardtimes had his own solution to the boredom. "Bob set up a bar in the green room where they kept the extras waiting," he says, "so a bunch of people were fired for drinking."

Actors Shawn, Grifasi and McKechnie were hardly seen off-camera, choosing to hole up in their Holiday Inn rooms or play the Pac-Man machine in the lobby between takes rather than hobnob in the freezing Jefferson or pound down quarter drafts in Becky's Diner with the enthusiastic locals. Many of those who worked as extras, however, say that Rachel Sweet was kind to them, as was Nelson, who welcomed the occasional quarts of beer and impromptu guitar lessons.

The production also traveled to the old Village Restaurant in Richmond's Fan District for at least one scene. Extra Lisa Perilli recalls it was decorated in a "cheesy but rockin' way." Another scene intended to be filmed at Kings Dominion never materialized.

And then, suddenly, the week before Christmas, they were gone — and the movie disappeared with them. "I was caught completely unawares when the film shut down," Fitzgerald says.

"I wasn't surprised," Brauer says.

Regardless, no one was sure if "Hotel" was finished, the money just ran out, or if everybody just threw up their hands and quit.

TO SEE "ROCK 'N' ROLL HOTEL"

Style Weekly presents a special Richmond premiere of the movie in all its '80s glory, enhanced through a partnership with Studio Center Total Production, and shown with the gracious permission of producer Richard Sweet and Rachel Sweet.

When: Monday, Aug. 30, at 8 p.m.

Where: The Byrd Theatre

Benefits: The landmark Byrd Theatre through the Byrd Theatre Foundation

Cost: Donation \$10 in advance, \$15 at the door; a VIP package includes a 6:30 p.m. reception at the Jefferson Hotel with the movie's original screenwriter and other guests, and free transportation to the Byrd on the To the Bottom and Back bus, and reserved balcony seating: \$40 in advance, \$45 at the door.

For Tickets: styleweekly.com/thebyrd



PHOTO COURTESY CRAIG HODGETTS

In the days following the crew's exit, there was much speculation about what happened to "Rock 'N' Roll Hotel." Some people claimed the original negatives were lost, stolen or accidentally ruined in a lab accident, prompting a supposed flurry of lawsuits against the producers, bankrupting them and, according to one story, exiling the Schusters to Australia. Others claimed the movie was cut up and spliced into a 1986 Matthew Penn film called "Playing for Keeps." But the unique shape of the frames because of the 3-D process would have made this impossible.

"Some negatives disappeared when Hollywood's Ashfield film lab went bankrupt," co-producer Rodis says. "I also lost footage from a documentary I was producing about [jazz artist] Nina Simone in that bankruptcy."

As the movie faded into memory to Richmonders, it abruptly popped up in a double-truck ad in the March 8, 1983, issue of *Variety* magazine, proclaiming "The Cannon Group Presents Rock and Roll Hotel in Wondervision 3-D." The ad stated there would be two industry screenings at the former Movie Lab on Santa Monica Boulevard in Los Angeles on March 9 and 10 at 3 p.m.

Dvovch attended one of the screenings to his eternal disappointment. "The awful awfulness of the movie was on several levels of awful-ocity," he says. "The writers, myself included, failed to write a good screenplay. Intense pressure can spark the creative spirit. Or it can push you into writing half-baked crap. 'Rock 'N' Roll Hotel' ended up firmly located on the 'half-baked crap' end of the scale."

Dvovch cited poor production values for the non-3-D portions of the film. "I really don't know anything

about the money situation of the film," he says, "but it looked really cheap. Sometimes cheap is not a problem, but here the whole film looks like it was made by amateurs."

It's true — the movie indeed was completed. Not only that, it played at least once at the Waverley Theater (now the IFC Theater) on Sixth Street in New York City during the weekend of March 11, 1983. "The terms of the tax shelter agreement to the investors included a minimum of one showing," Rodis says. "In order to get the write-off it had to be released for at least a weekend."

After that showing — with the terms of the agreement satisfied — the film was acquired by Sweet's father, Richard. Apparently anxious to re-present the movie with his daughter as the centerpiece, a West Coast team refilmed many of the Richmond scenes. "They energized [the movie] with more shots of Rachel Sweet, bringing her to the forefront," Hodgetts says. It's unknown if this version played anywhere.

Then the movie disappeared yet again — for 24 years. Most of the people who worked on it didn't know what had become of it — all that seemed to exist was 50 raw frames scrounged out of construction rubble at the Jefferson during its 1983 renovation.

Then, on Feb. 12, 2010, set designer Hodgetts discovered a VHS tape inside a box of sketches and production stills in the archive room of Hodgetts + Fung Architects in Culver City, Calif., while researching for this story. The tape was labeled "Rock and Roll Hotel,' 83 mins., 1986."

This version shows the result of too many meddling hands and opposing perspectives. Called "A Richard

Sweet Production," it's choppy to the point of incoherence, with awkward camera placements, bizarre zooms onto brick walls, and numerous continuity blunders that confound the viewer and render the narrative virtually incomprehensible. Also on display are some of the most unimaginative and cheaply made special effects seen since any high-school film buff picked up dad's super-8 camera.

The tone, style and direction of the West Coast and East Coast scenes are startlingly dissimilar, and the end result is two very different movies badly spliced together. Sadly, many of the Richmond shots are missing, including the Village Restaurant and most of the Frog Level scenes. The Jefferson Hotel is easily recognizable, with the front marquee, a fog-shrouded downstairs lobby and some upstairs hallways in the movie's murky *mis en scene*. A few Richmonders, including Dobey, still appear briefly as extras.

Sadly, too, Alberta's drunk Beethoven is missing. The basic plot of what's left of this fitful and meandering film involves the band trying to enter and win a big rock 'n' roll "battle of the bands"-style contest while "The Weevils" (Shawn, McKechnie and Grifasi) try to sabotage their efforts using hypnotism on Penn and Sweet and the lure of white-robed, harshly permed sirens on Nelson. The hotel and its characters are a hodgepodge of genres and styles. There's a rat-faced, wheelchair-bound talent agent and a zombie room with a guy in Frankenstein-style makeup crooning in his best "Monster Mash" meets Bauhaus impersonation, among other oddities.

The film, to its credit, contains two decent concert scenes filmed in the Jefferson. Tony award-winning

The Jefferson was like a playground for the out-of-town cast and crew. "I roamed the dark and empty hotel like Eloise, the little girl in the famous kids' book," storyboard artist Eddie Fitzgerald recalls.



LEE BRAUER

DISTINGUISHED GUESTS

Whatever happened to the makers of "Rock 'N' Roll Hotel"?

Rachel Sweet dropped out of sight after the making of "Rock 'N' Roll Hotel" before appearing in original "Hotel" director Richard Baskin's musical, "Sing," in 1989. She had a musical role in John Waters' films "Hairspray" and "Cry Baby," and was host of cable TV show "The Sweet Life." Her most famous acting role came as George Costanza's cousin on an episode of "Seinfeld." She later became a writer, composer and producer of numerous TV shows, including "Dharma and Greg," "The George Lopez Show" and "Legally Blonde."

Judd Nelson gained fame a few years after leaving Richmond with back-to-back performances in "The Breakfast Club" and "St. Elmo's Fire." Since then he's been seen in theatrical movies such as "New Jack City" and on television in "CSI: Crime Scene Investigation." Nelson's most recent public appearance was at the 2010 Academy Awards, when he and fellow Brat Pack actors paid tribute to the late director John Hughes.

Following "Rock 'N' Roll Hotel," **Matthew Penn** tried his hand at other teen movies, such as "Playing for Keeps," before becoming a television director and producer. The Emmy nominee has worked on numerous episodes of "Law and Order," as well as "NYPD Blue," "The Sopranos" and, most recently, "House" and "Damages."

Comedian **Dick Shawn**, the veteran of such films as "It's a Mad Mad Mad Mad World," "Love at First Bite" and Mel Brooks' "The Producers," died onstage in 1987 in San Diego.

A veteran of numerous award-winning Broadway productions, including "A Chorus Line," "Cabaret" and "Annie Get your Gun," **Donna McKechnie** overcame debilitating bouts of depression and rheumatoid arthritis to continue her singing and dancing career. McKechnie's autobiography, "Time Steps," was published in 2006.

Colin Quinn became a "Saturday Night Live" cast member and appeared on such shows as MTV's "Remote Control" and Comedy Central's "Tough Crowd with Colin Quinn." He currently appears in an off-Broadway one-man-show, "Long Story Short," directed by Jerry Seinfeld.

Screenwriter **Russell Dvnoch** is a writer, blogger and author of the book, "The Heart Attack Germ." He recently recorded a narration track for the Blu-Ray DVD edition of "Rock and Roll High School" (starring the Ramones), which he wrote prior to "Rock 'N' Roll Hotel."

Set designer and film discoverer **Craig Hodgetts** worked briefly with producer **Roger Corman** after "Rock 'N' Roll Hotel," and is an architect with the firm Hodgetts + Fung in Culver City, Calif.

The younger sister of Sen. Blanche Lincoln of Kentucky, "Hotel" set designer **Mary Lambert** went on to a successful career as a director of horror films such as "Pet Semetary" and "The Attic." She's also helmed music videos for artists such as Janet Jackson, Go-Go's, Mick Jagger, Chris Isaak, Mötley Crüe, Sting and Whitney Houston, and directs the epic Syfy Channel series, "Mega Python vs. Gatoroid."

Producer **Peter Aristotle Rodis** was president of the New York University Film School from 1991-1995. He now works with the Bloom Real Estate Brokerage in New York and Florida, and is in preproduction on a documentary on singer Nina Simone. — *D.B.*

Broadway star McKechnie gives a typically energetic performance in her rather disturbing song-and-dance seduction scene with Nelson. And there are numerous flashes of ingenuity, like a weird Devo parody and a bizarre performance of the '50s rockabilly standard, "Pink Pedal Pusher," by Shawn and company.

The film also boasts a healthy dose of camp value with many unintentionally hilarious non sequiturs. Hearing an off-key xylophonist, Penn opens a door and finds Shawn, who asks, "Haven't you ever heard bad vibes before?" while he thrusts the mallets in and out of the camera for ersatz 3-D effect.

In an earlier scene Nelson sits in front of a television in the Jefferson lobby beside a snoring corpse covered in cobwebs. "Can I turn the channel?" he asks the guy. "There's nothing on."

After performing in the big contest with an original Sweet song called "Heart-beat," there's a freeze frame on Sweet's face, followed by a whole lot of credits.

After the last name appears, the words "The Beginning" scroll by, indicating that perhaps Richard Sweet was anticipating his daughter's future movie career.

When this version was completed in 1986, however, Nelson was a far more bankable star than Sweet; still, he remained in a relatively minor supporting role — yet another production blunder. Future "Saturday Night Live" regular Colin Quinn plays a fast-talking DJ — featured prominently in the first half of the film — and is clumsily spliced into a scattered few Richmond scenes in the second half.

The film has no director credit; neither Baskin, Justman or even the perennial Hollywood pseudonym Alan Smithee is listed, which is almost unheard-of for any completed movie bound for theatrical or television release. Rachel Sweet's Wikipedia entry says the movie played on Home Box Office in 1986, but

representatives at HBO deny this. There seems to be no proof this version of the movie went anywhere other than into a box in Hodgetts's closet.

Considering the talent involved, it's difficult to comprehend how things could have gone so wrong; but with a half-baked concept, a rushed and continuously evolving script, money problems and the process pulled in so many opposing directions, the movie was doomed. Many of those involved, however, went on to greater things, so perhaps Richmond's cinematic *objet d'art* can be seen more as a real-life exercise in the teeth-grinding frustrations of feature filmmaking, giving a true perspective of what can and does often go so grievously wrong, despite the best efforts of everyone involved.

A footnote to the movie is the curious death of Dick Shawn a year after the completion of the film. "I can't work places like Vegas or the Catskills where people are belching," he'd said in an interview three years earlier in

1984. "Maybe I belong in colleges. At least if I die, I die in front of intelligent people who know what I'm talking about." He got his wish, falling during a comedy bit at the University of California at San Diego in 1987 and lying on stage for almost five minutes before anyone realized he was

having a fatal heart attack.

As one music-critic character says prophetically near the end of the movie, "Yes, Virginia, there really is a rock and roll hotel."

And while the original 35mm "3-D Wondervision" version of "Rock 'N' Roll Hotel" languishes somewhere, awaiting rediscovery in somebody's basement or storage room, we can still find comforting closure in this: a low-tech, 2-D, direct-from-VHS digitized copy of a lonely Richmond artifact has at last been found.

It's been out of town far too long. **S**

"Boy, was that a long day." Dozens of students from Virginia Commonwealth University were enticed to appear as extras in the film. They each were rewarded with \$30 and a box lunch from KFC.



LEE BRAUER