

## HORROR HOSTS IN THE NEWS

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## DO YOU LIKE SCARY MOVIES? IF YOU DO, YOU'LL LOVE ZOMBOO! Article by Dan Johnson Monster News - 10/01/0

When I started to prepare this edition of Monster News, one of the hosts that Cheryl suggested I contact for an interview was Zomboo, the Horror Host who has been haunting the airwaves of Reno, NV for the last few years. Cheryl had caught his show a few times before and really dug his style. After viewing a tape of one of his shows that my friend Michael Monahan was nice enough to get to me, I understood what it was that Cheryl found so appealing about Zomboo.

For those of you who may not be familiar with him, Zomboo is the host of "Zomboo's House of Horror Movies" and he is played by Frank Leto. This show airs on Reno's ABC affiliate, KOLO Channel 8, on Saturday nights at 11:35 pm. Besides Zomboo, Frank Leto also plays Frank, the Floating Head (Frank the Floating Head is just one of a few great characters that populate Zomboo's world), but we'll get to them all soon enough. For now, let's get back to the man behind Zomboo. When Monster News approached Frank Leto about an interview for this special Horror Host edition, he was more than willing to sit down with us and give us the inside scoop on Zomboo and his show. The first question we had was how did he come to be a Horror Host in the first place?

"Actually there was series of events there," Frank started as he told us the origin of Zomboo. "I had a show that I did here at KOLO right after "Monday Night Football". It was basically a show that promoted things that were coming up in the next week. We did the show on the fly. We did it between the end of "Monday Night Football" and the top

and the bottom of the hour where they ran the news. So the show ran anywhere between three minutes to twenty-eight minutes."

As we started discussing the first show that Frank did for KOLO, I not only began to learn the origin of Zomboo, but also where Frank got his inspiration for the humor that he uses on his show. "I grew up in New York, and one of my favorite comedians was Soupy Sales, and that's what we patterned the show after. I did all these little, funny skits and told you about who was going to be on "Oprah" and the big joke was here you are after "Monday Night Football" and you got all these jocks watching and who the hell wants to know what's going to be on "Oprah"? So we decided that you needed to take it out of the realm of seriousness and have fun with it."

So Frank was already bringing his brand of humor to Channel 8. As it turned out there was another factor working to inspire Zomboo. "What happened also was that they had a couple of guys who hosted movies in town here. That's how they earned their living. They went out, they bought the block of time and they sold it to advertisers and ran the commercials during their movie. They came on at the beginning, told you a little bit about [the movie] and then they showed the movie and thank you very much. So any way, the sales department said, 'we want to do a hosted movie on Saturday nights'. So they came to me because I actually run the production end of the station here and creative service. They said, 'Look, you did that stupid show after football, we want you to host a movie.'"

From there the station set out to find what films would fly best. Westerns and Charlie Chan films were both considered, but were tossed out for various reasons. "We learned real quick that we had to find a good source of t.v. movies which weren't copyrighted, public domain pictures," Frank explained to Monster News how Zomboo came to host genre films. "We found out that the biggest group of pictures that we could identify when we got into the project were science fiction or horror movies. We found about 200 of them when we did our initial search." Once the films that could be used for Zomboo's show were weeded out from the films who's public domain status were questionable, Frank got underway launching the House of Horror Movies.

With the films in place, Frank began to concentrate on the look and style of his host. "We did a lot of research from Elena Watson's book ("Television Horror Movie Hosts") about the t.v. horror hosts," Frank recalled as he remembered some of his other inspirations. "I remembered growing up watching Soupy Sales, I remember John Zacherley [from New York]. When I lived in other parts of the country, we had some other guys dressed up like mad doctors. [There was] Dr. Paul Bearer down in Tampa, FL. We thought, lets make up a character and let's do it so it works."

And what do you need to make it work? This is where Frank's philosophy regarding his post "Monday Night Football" show shone through again. "You need some humor, you need some silliness, you need some jokes and you need babes," Frank said summing up the main ingredients of his show. "We thought the thing would have to be cheesy to be

successful. Its something where its just silly humor [and] cheesy jokes. The whole thing works as a campy thing and basically its a throw-back to what people did years ago."

And how did Zomboo himself come to be. Where did Frank draw his inspiration for his character from? "We decided to pattern the character after like a wizard and a clown. "We decided to use a ghost type thing, clown white [make-up], a fright wig and like a wizard or magician [outfit]," Frank said as he outlined the origin of the Zomboo character and how the character took shape. "It ended up as a cross, basically between Bozo the Clown and Lon Chaney in "London After Midnight"."

Frank admits that he and his staff went into the show blindly and it took about ten shows for them to get to the point that they wanted it to be. The biggest switch was perhaps the shift in focus on the hosts. Originally, Frank's character of Frank the Floating Head was the main host and Zomboo was kind of a secondary character. In fact, the show was originally called "Frank's House of Horror Movies". "The sales people said, 'Look, after you did your show after football, you were Frank and everybody liked that and they remember you like that. [The show] will be "Frank's House of Horror Movies". You're gonna be Frank and do all this stuff and then you can have Zomboo just come to the door every now and then.' So that's what it was the first year. I tried to change it back to Zomboo from Day One."

The show was a success in its first year and Frank explained to Monster News that no one wanted to mess with what was working. So how did Frank buck the system and arrange it so that Zomboo could take center stage? "After some moaning and groaning and just saying, people don't watch because of Frank, they watch because of Zomboo. He's the guy who's always getting into trouble. He's the guys cracking all the jokes. And I don't want to be Frank anymore. Plus it took a lot of work to do all those shots of the floating head. It was all done in after effects. It looks really good, it doesn't look cheesy at all. It works, but it wasn't really working."

Eventually Frank won out and Zomboo began to take center stage at the House of Horror Movies. Heck, he even got his name on the show and Frank the Floating Head started being relegated to the secondary status. Frank explained that part of the way Zomboo took center stage was by he and his staff focusing more and more attention to the castle where Zomboo lives. With the castle came an opportunity to do something else with the show, mainly add additional characters to the cast.

First up is Bianca the Rack Girl, played by Bianca Paris. Frank met Bianca at the Miss Truck Stop pageant where she was a contestant and where Frank was shooting the show for a sponsor. "She was the only one that played to the camera and I always remembered that. When it came time to finding good looking women to put on the show, she was the first one I asked." Frank explained that Bianca's part on Zomboo's show isn't the only gig Bianca has going for her. She is also a model, a Bud girl and she does the round numbers at boxing matches. "She's a lot older than she looks," Frank added. "And she's as dumb as a fox because she's also a cosmetologist, a hair cutter and now she's learning all this new skin therapy that she'll get into. [Bianca the Rack Girl] is her fun thing and she loves to do it. She's also one of the nicest, down to Earth, normal people you'd ever want to meet."

Bianca the Rack Girl isn't the only woman in Zomboo's life. There is also Miss Transylvania and the Head Nurse, both of whom are played by Maureen Allan. "She's really funny. She's a big lawyer in town's wife and I met her because I was trying to find a gothic dress when we started to do this thing. She was in the store and I told her what I was doing and she told me, 'well I used to do make-up for a lot of these haunted houses and beauty pageants." From there Frank asked her about her acting experience and he learned that she had done a little, but was mainly an amateur. He invited her to come on down to Channel 8 because he realized she would fit in with his group. "We started giving her some scripts and [she] came down and it just evolved from there."

While the ladies are most pleasing to look at on screen, sometimes the funniest characters are the ones who stay just slightly off camera. It's a great gag and one that Frank borrowed from a childhood hero. "Soupy Sales, on his show, he always had the hand behind the door. That's what we do," Frank told us, explaining how they borrowed the unseen visitors at Soupy's door and brought some new characters to Zomboo's door. "We can always have the cops that are after Zomboo, we can always have his agent and all these other people that we do and just have them behind the door. We have another thing that is really funny, we got a big mannequin and that's Big Barbie. She comes to the door. I think that's funny."

The best of the hand characters, at least the one I liked best, is Were-Wolfie. When you see Were-Wolfie, all you see is his hairy paw and arm, but you do get to hear his cool howl. All the hand characters are played by Paul Dancer. "He's a stand-up comedian," Frank informed us. "He's also a producer here for me. It's funny because when we all get together and we do this stuff, and we've got a little bit of direction, he is very good. If you watch the hand gestures as he talks and does these skits, I tell him, 'Although I just see your hand behind the door, you make these [skits].' It is so neat to play off of someone that can put a gesture that goes with almost every word."

Also, we can't forget Quasi, who is sent to get the films that Zomboo shows each week. He is played by Oscar Alfaro. The story surrounding the man who plays Quasi is a very interesting one. "The janitor at the station is about 5' tall and from Costa Rica. He talks like Quasimodo [so] he plays Quasi," Frank said as we learned how Zomboo added this character to his show. It's here that I started to see how thoughtful of people Frank could be. The casting of the station's janitor has a very moving story behind it. "It's really funny because he was a teacher in Costa Rica and unfortunately he could make more coming up to this country working as a custodian [than he could working as a teacher in Costa Rica]. What we've done is we've taken him into our department and he goes out and helps us shoot and do things."

It was around this point in our interview that it became very clear that there is much more to Zomboo than just being a white faced character in a fright wig. It isn't his outlandish costume or jarring appearance that make Zomboo stand out. It's the heart of the man who

plays him that really comes through. "I know I got into a lot of the stuff that I did because somebody gave me a chance or an opportunity. You reach a certain age and you just want to give something back and you just want life to be nice. If you can help somebody, that's what you do."

This explains why Frank has assembled a very loyal group of people behind the camera and in front of it. The main person we have to single out who works behind the camera, and who helps to keep Zomboo's show running so well, is Dave Allan. Dave shoots the show and also does the graphics for the show and he even builds the Zomboo's props. Dave is just one of many talented people who put their hearts and souls into the show. No matter where the people Frank Leto works with on Zomboo go, they always find the time to come back and do what they can on the series. "The guys always say this is what [they] do everything else for," Frank says very pride in his voice. "This is the most fun thing we do. Whenever we need the people that have been on some of the skits to come on down, they always come down because it works and its fun."

Zomboo has also gained quite a loyal following as far as his viewers in Reno and has even made some fans outside of the state of Nevada via videotaped shows that his local viewers send to their friends. The thing that amazed me the most about Frank is how well he takes Zomboo success in stride. After talking to him, I got the distinct impression that Frank was a man who is able to take his success in stride and he has never lost sight of the fact that he is lucky to be doing what he does. he also hasn't lost sight of how important his character is to the community. "I just like getting the chance to do [Zomboo] and making people laugh. One of the things we got involved with early was charitable work and that's basically the only type of personal appearances we do," Frank told us, with the sound of unquestionable pride and joy at being able to help out the Reno community. "We do a big Halloween party every year for the St. Jude's Children's Hospital. Zomboo did a fund raiser for the American Heart Association this summer. We've done things for the local charities [and] things for the blood bank."

After talking with Frank Leto like I did, "I've lived a pretty good life," Frank told us, getting serious for just a moment. "If I died tomorrow, I've had two life fulls of experiences, I think [with] where my career has taken me. We (Frank and his cast and crew) don't have any problems or cares [like] some of these people out there who have medical problems. We approach this thing as [a chance to] make people laugh and having fun and that's what we do. I don't make any money doing this. It's something that if it goes somewhere in another market, that's fine. We hope it does, and it looks like it may, but it's something where I can do it for another few years, as long as we can get movies. I'm just happy to be doing it here. That's my philosophy." And what a good philosophy it is. It's one I think we can all take a lesson from.

Remember, you folks in Reno, NV can catch "Zomboo's House of Horror Movies" every Saturday night at 11:35 pm on KOLO Channel 8. Zomboo loves it when company drops by the castle! Stop in and visit a while at the Zomboo website at http://www.zomboo.com/ There you can find out how to send in your photos for Zomboo's Scary Photo Album and artwork for Zomboo's Picture of the Week, rate the films that Zomboo shows and find out how to send Zomboo your own three minute horror movies.