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Escape From MGM: The Making of the Escape From New York: Special Edition

 Final Fantasy

If there's one thing that's bound to arouse the ire of the DVD lover, it's when movies that previously received a perfectly respectable release on laserdisc are dumped onto the new format without any of their old goodies. So it was none too surprising that fans of **Escape from New York** (oops, sorry... I mean John Carpenter's **Escape from New York**) were more than a little miffed when MGM released the original Snake Plissken movie as a bare-bones disc a few years back. The picture was non-anamorphic, the sound was bland, and missing in action were the extras from Pioneer's special edition laserdisc.

Well, let it not be said that MGM ignored the cries of the Plissken faithful. The studio went back to the drawing board and recruited MogoMedia to create a special edition fans would be happy with. Founded by Michael Gillis, former producer of Special Editions for Pioneer, MogoMedia has been responsible for a number of high-profile DVDs, including **A Few Good Men**, **Stand by Me**, and **Groundhog Day**.

Recently, I had the opportunity to speak with Michael Gillis about **Escape from New York**. He gave me a peek behind the scenes at the creation of this disc and discussed the challenges of creating a special edition of a film with a rabid cult following whose enthusiasm for the movie has not lessened in over twenty years.

Adam Jahnke (AJ): Let me just start by asking the one question I think most people have when, not just this title, but any title gets reissued, which is why wasn't it like this in the first place?

Michael Gillis (MG): Well, some of the answer to your question does reside with the studio who makes the decision. But I will say that the day MGM asked myself and my team at MogoMedia to consider a special edition for **Escape from New York**, we were extremely excited. And we remained excited for several days. Probably about the third day, we decided that it was somewhat of a daunting task because it had been so long. And we had a large fan base that we needed to work hard for. So it was equally as daunting, in a way, to be given a task twenty years later to do the disc for **Escape from New York** rather than add to something that had already been done. I think in many ways the timing was just perfect, although we all have been waiting far too long for this collector's edition. But our documentary **Return to Escape from New York** strives to tell, in the cast and crew's own voices, the story of the making of this film from their own perspectives. From being there all those late nights on the set in St. Louis. My only real regret in the timing is obviously there were some cast people, specifically Donald Pleasence who is obviously no longer with us and unable to participate except through the memories of those who worked with him. Once we mounted the project and after our initial meetings with John Carpenter and Debra Hill and once Kurt Russell came on board, we realized that this was the perfect time, in a way, to remember the series, to dust it off, and to push this franchise into the new millennium. There are a number of new Snake-related directions that are taking place currently. There's an animated game that's being launched by Namco. There's a **Snake Plissken Chronicles** comic book. There's an anime series. So our hope was, once we realized that this was going to be a collector's edition for all time, it was important for us to gather the fan base from the old original fans like myself who saw it once, twice, three times in the theatre and innumerable times since then... and gather the old fans with the new fans and fans of **Escape from L.A.** and the fans of the Snake character and all of the new franchise material and try to pull them all together. So in many ways, this was the perfect time to do that because all of this is happening now. You know, Snake is back! And MogoMedia is really happy to be a part of the MGM collector's box set.

AJ: As far as the documentary goes, how difficult was it to gather all of those people together and have them participate in it? Because you do have a whole lot of people from the original film.

MG: Yeah and you know, we love doing this type of film where we get to go back and hear the stories as memories as opposed to a film that was shot in recent memory. It's always a pleasure to sit down with someone and have them look back and tell you something that happened that was important to them and let them tell that story. You know, Debra Hill was the heart of this project as she was with the entire franchise. It is, of course, John Carpenter's singular vision and that's why it has "John Carpenter" above the title in all of his great classic films. But it's also Debra Hill who's standing right beside him every minute of every day and late into production. And Debra Hill was the key to bringing this whole team back together again from their various places in their careers now. Celebrity schedules are always harder than people realize. There are numerous requests for their time and they're only one person. So obviously the key for us was to push forward with our interviews with the help of Debra and John while we were waiting for almost two years for Kurt to be available. This was, and he said so, one of if not his favorite character that he's ever played and he wanted to make the time for us. But it wasn't until we located the original deleted first reel that was clipped from the film right after the last test screening back in late '80 that Kurt could resist no longer. And we watched it with he and Debra and John for the first time while recording the commentary that's on the DVD. You can hear in their voices that they're actually shocked and surprised to see that not only did we find it after all of these years, but we remixed it, enhanced the picture, although it was severely damaged, and actually had John Carpenter record two new cues for it so there's original music in it. So to have that and to see John and Kurt sitting in chairs elbowing each other at the memory of this footage that they hadn't seen in so long, it actually brought certainly a smile to all our faces to make that happen for them.

AJ: Maybe the only criticism I've seen leveled at the documentary is that it's too short. Is there any reason it had to be less than half an hour?

MG: You know, there are some legal reasons that things need to be a certain length. There's also creative reasons. Some dictated by studio decisions and sometimes it's about content. In this case, we did have a longer version of **Return to Escape from New York**. But our team at MogoMedia really always tries to keep an eye on the notion that it's a good thing to leave people wanting more. The success of John Carpenter's film is that we want more of Snake Plissken. He is a character of mystery and secrets. We don't know everything about him and the more we do, the less interested one often becomes. In this case, it was not a case of substituting volume for intensity. We felt that we certainly had to have Kurt involved. We certainly had to have John and Debra Hill involved and the entire cast and crew as best we could get them and let them tell the story. Having more is not necessarily better. We hope that we did justice to the core issues of this film and hope we did justice to the memory of their experience making the film.

AJ: On the commentaries, the John Carpenter and Kurt Russell one is from the laserdisc, correct?

MG: Yeah, that's correct. There are two commentaries on this disc. The original commentary by John and Kurt done years ago for laserdisc really stands the test of time. And although we were sitting together in front of a microphone, ready to record a commentary, we all took a listen and determined that, not only the effort to save Kurt and John time redoing something they already did, but there's something archival on an older title to bring back the film, archival footage, archival stills, the older commentary and bring that together with a new perspective by Debra Hill and (production designer) Joe Alves. For us, it seemed like the right thing to do. We talked about re-recording it and having that new perspective on it but felt that we were going to cover similar territory that was covered in the documentary.

AJ: Did you run into any trouble licensing that commentary?

MG: There are always legal issues in a project that has had as many studios involved over the years as this project. The biggest issues for us were not legal clearance issues or cooperation from other studios but rather finding the right footage for the disc. Obviously in a film that was shot over twenty years ago, it's not always possible to find the original print master or other elements. It's quite difficult to keep track of if there was any archival B-roll. Even the stills that we used, many of them came directly from cast and crew, specifically Debra Hill shared with us her personal collection under lock and key in an entire storage unit full of Snake memorabilia. I have to credit Debra Hill for being the key to this whole disc. Everyone rallied around her twenty years ago to make a film on a very low budget for John. And everyone rallied around her and my team at MogoMedia to do the best we could for the fans. As far as the legal issues with the commentary, we did not experience any difficulties in bringing the various components of this disc together. As I say, there are always legal issues but none of those hurdles were too tough to jump.

AJ: Was it your decision or MGM's to make it a two-disc set?

MG: You know, I want to talk a little about MGM and the fact that fans owe a lot to MGM for stepping up finally after two decades to do not only a special edition but a collector's box set. I credit members of MGM's DVD department with that decision, Susan Marble, Matt DeNoto, Amy Zwagerman and Tracy Costage. They were all heavily involved in seeing that this was the time to bring Snake Plissken and the entire **Escape from New York** franchise up to date. It was obviously their marketing decision to spin off the second disc and let MogoMedia do what we do best and tell the story of the making of the film in various ways, trying very hard to keep an eye on the franchise to come.

AJ: I also wanted to ask about the comic book stuff on the disc.

MG: Jan Utstein and Hurricane Comics were extraordinary to work with. These are true comic book fans as well as creators. Working with their artists, including Tone Rodriguez who is well known and well renowned and his talent and character

precede him, it was so much fun for us to take a different look at the Snake character. It was so much fun to create the comic book that would then go in the DVD. We felt it important to create a paper comic book rather than an electronic media click-through on the DVD. Although it would be interesting, we felt it was much more important that fans see the comic book, albeit in its special small size, in the way they're used to seeing it. Feel the paper, turn the page, what's gonna happen next? Hurricane did a fantastic job from beginning to end helping us bring the **Snake Plissken Chronicles** comic in and launching it with the DVD.

AJ: What's next for you guys?

MG: MogoMedia is working on literally dozens of special editions currently and one of the things that we love to do most is to take a look at films that have a historical perspective. Recently through Columbia TriStar, we just completed a **Stripes** special edition that includes never-before-seen footage, including an entire missing reel. So perhaps we're going to become known as the company that will dig through the salt mines in Kansas underground where they store all this footage. Maybe we'll get known as the people that can really find these old stories and let them see the light of day again. It may sound trivial but I feel it's important that DVD, for all its entertainment value, be seen as a great opportunity to take a look back through film history and to tell the stories, to interview the creatives behind certain projects, certainly before it's too late. We have a number of current titles coming out that are totally different directions like **You Got Served** or the recent **I Know What You Did Last Summer** disc that just came out. You know, it's just as much fun for us to do a title that's happening today as it is to do a title like **Escape from New York** that happened so long ago. But there's something almost more rewarding about doing a title, as you started out by saying, whose time had come. And all those stories had remained silent until we finally got the opportunity to have them be heard. So no DVD is too small or too big for our company. The key is to find the right content, to take the right approach, to have access to the right people, which we do, and to create DVD added value content that has the fan in mind. The viewer in mind. And, without being too trivial again, also keeps an eye on its place in film history.

So, did MogoMedia and MGM deliver the goods this time? Is Snake back and better than ever? Check out [my review of the disc here...](#)

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