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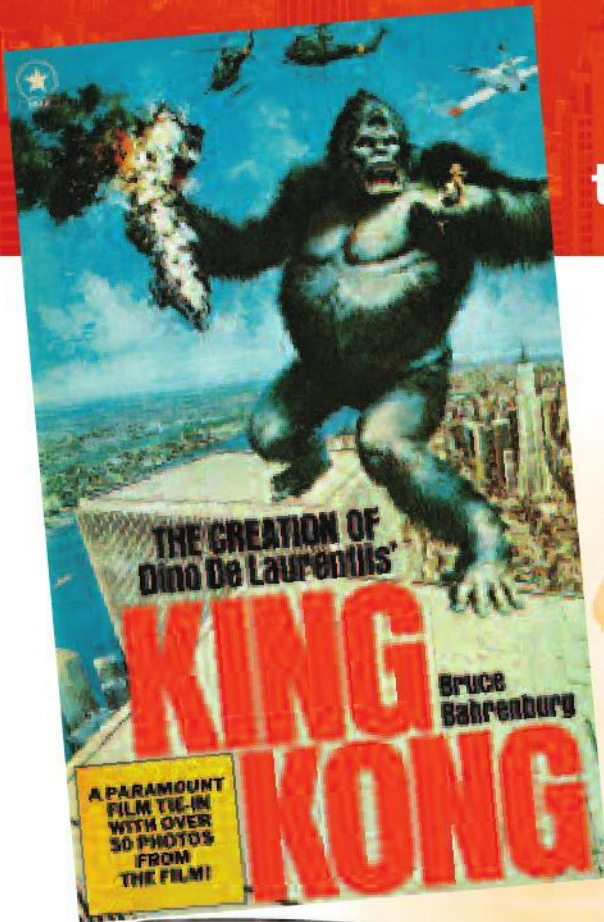
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Monkey business

COLLECTING KING KONG

the eighth wonder of the world



One of the most iconic and recognisable movie monsters the giant ape has attracted waves of memorabilia collectors over several decades of movie sequels

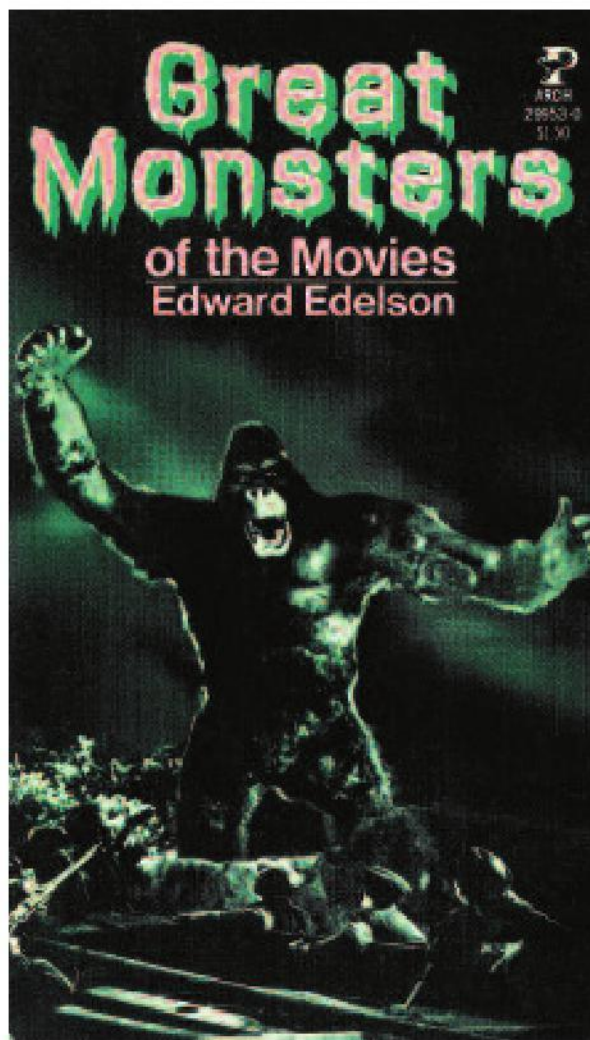
JOHN HARRISON

Originally roaring onto the screen in 1933, *King Kong* introduced us to one of the most beloved (and tragic) of all movie monsters, with the image of the giant gorilla standing atop the Empire State Building becoming one of the most iconic moments in Hollywood history. Directed by intrepid filmmakers Merian C. Cooper (who conceived the original story and whom the film's lead character of Carl Denham is reportedly modelled on) and Ernest B. Schoedsack, *King Kong* was both an exciting and engrossing adventure yarn as well as a stunning achievement in filmmaking.

The plot

The tale of a mythical island jungle beast who is tamed by an innocent beauty (Fay Wray's Ann Darrow) and ultimately meets his heartbreaking end in the urban canyons of New York City, audiences who were desperate to escape the realities of





the Great Depression turned *King Kong* into an enormous financial hit and cultural milestone.

Advances in special effects

The film also advanced the art of cinema special effects by leaps and bounds. Much of the footage featuring Kong was accomplished using 18- and 24-inch-tall movable model figures with metal armatures covered with foam rubber, latex and rabbit fur. These models were then painstakingly animated frame-by-frame and combined with live action backgrounds by special effects maestro Willis H. O'Brien in a process called stop-motion animation. This process would remain popular with filmmakers for the next several decades.

Creating sequels

In the wake of the film's instantaneous success, a quickie (but very enjoyable) sequel titled *Son of Kong*



was released later in 1933, and giant gorillas became a popular figure in horror movies over the next few decades with super-sized simians appearing in movies like *Mighty Joe Young* (1949), *Konga* (1961), *A*P*E* (1976) and *The Mighty Peking Man* (1977). Kong was resuscitated – this time as a man in a suit – by the Toho



Studios in such Japanese productions as *King Kong vs. Godzilla* (1962) and *King Kong Escapes* (1967).



Valuable memorabilia & merchandise

Apart from the usual promotional items such as movie posters and lobby cards, the first piece of Kong-related memorabilia was a hardcover novelisation written by Delos Wheeler Lovelace and published by Grosset & Dunlap shortly before the release of the original film. Featuring a beautifully illustrated dust jacket, original printings of the novelisation in fine condition or better have been known to sell for thousands of dollars, although this is still well below the

US\$388,375 paid for an original three-sheet *King Kong* poster at an auction in November 2012.

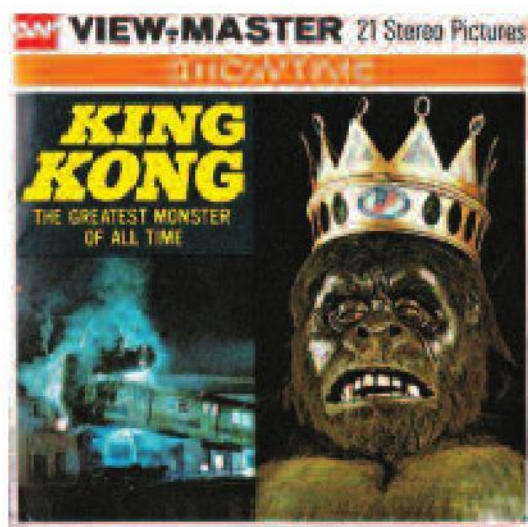
Monster craze

The monster craze which swept America in the early 1960s (see article in *Collectables Trader* #102) saw a new smattering of Kong toys and merchandise hit the store shelves, such as the classic 1964 Aurora model kit, a Gold Key comic book adaptation, paperback reissues of the original novel and two different board games, one released by Ideal in 1963 and another produced by Milton Bradley in

1966 to tie-in with the short-lived (but fondly remembered by Baby Boomers) *King Kong* cartoon series.

Remake garners cult following

The merchandising of Kong really hit high gear with the much-publicized remake which appeared in 1976. Produced by Dino De Laurentis and starring Jeff Bridges, Charles Grodin and Jessica Lange in her film debut, the remake was much-maligned at the time of its release, particularly by fans of the original. It has since earned a reputation as a cult favourite



from the era, and the memorabilia which the movie inspired – including games, promotional drinking glasses, making-of paperback, bubble gum cards, Viewmaster set, poster magazines and jigsaw puzzles – have become increasingly sought after. Collectors particularly look for items which depict Kong standing atop the twin towers of the World Trade Centre in New York where the climax of the remake took place.

Popularity of late model kits

A sequel to the 1976 version, entitled *King Kong Lives*, appeared in 1987 but produced very little in the way of collectables. A further remake in 2005, directed by New Zealander Peter Jackson, was a huge commercial success and featured state-of-the-art computer generated effects, but lacked the heart and

nuances of the original. Likewise, the plethora of merchandise released to tie-in with it was mostly bland and not particularly attractive or collectable. Much more desirable are the range of 'garage' (small run) model kits which have been produced by various independent companies since the '90s, and the large, highly-detailed King Kong diorama play set released by McFarlane Toys in 2000.

Kong lives on

Apart from cinema and television, Kong has also been featured in two major attractions at the famous Universal Studios theme park in California, while a major *King Kong* musical stage show debuted in Melbourne in June of this year, ensuring that the legend of the great ape is kept alive to thrill audiences – and keep collectors busy – for many generations to come.

