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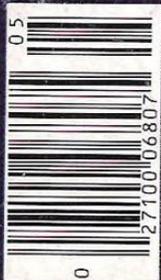
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THE GIANTS

by H.J. KIRCHHOFF

The original 1933 **King Kong** spawned one genuine sequel and a host of imitators, which eventually came full circle with the release of the completely updated Dino Di Laurentiis version — a direct, though not clearly recognizable, descendant which took back the original family name.

(continued on next page)

John Agar in *THE HAND OF DEATH*. ➔

Jessica Lange and the big ape who's just fallen for her. ➔





Kong, as he looked in **KING KONG VERSUS GODZILLA**. ↗

But the original Kong may have made its greatest impact on cinema history simply by establishing "big" as a winning formula at the box office. If a giant ape could make money once, producers (and bankers) reasoned, it could roar and stamp its way to a profit once again. And if another giant ape couldn't do it, they were more than willing to try another type of giant — any type at all.

Not all of the monster epics that followed **King Kong** made big killings at the box office, of course — whatever



Modern-day **KING KONG** doing a two-step on the World Trade Center. ↗

carnage took place on screen. But that didn't stop Hollywood, or wherever, from trying. Once moviemakers thought they had a money-making formula, they fell all over themselves trying to duplicate it, or whatever they thought it was.

The first effort was, predictably, **Son of Kong**, which was into the theaters before the echoes of Daddy Kong's final bellow had finished rattling the projectors.

Son of Kong producers (RKO Stud-



↖ The 1933 classic **KING KONG** atop the Empire State Building.



KING KONG brings a flying beast down to earth (RKO). ▲

ios) did everything they could to duplicate their initial success. They hired the original director, Ernest B. Schoedsack, got back two of the original cast — Robert Armstrong and Frank Reicher — and, perhaps most important, special-effects man Willis O'Brien. Fay Wray couldn't make the remake, but RKO shuffled in another delectable blonde in the person of Helen Mack. They even transferred the action back to the original site, Skull Island.

Willis O'Brien's task was the most important — it was up to him to create a rival for his spectacular special-effects success in **King Kong**. He couldn't make "Son" larger than "King," of course, so he decided to make Sonny cute, instead.

A more intimate 15-20 feet high, and albino white from head to hairy toe, King's little boy also was a far more benevolent fellow. When the explorers return to Skull Island with their new blonde, they are attacked by all types of monstrous lizards and other prehistoric dangers. Son of King to the rescue — and if he's a mere shadow of his daddy, Son was still enough to handle a handful of lizards and snakes on behalf of the intrepid treasure-seekers.

Unfortunately, even the Son of King can't keep the lid on when the island

Robots invaded in **THE DAY THE EARTH STOOD STILL**. ▼



turns out to be a very active volcano. The treasure is lost, but Kong Jr. manages to get the stars back to their boat. Alas, he can't go on the boat, and as the film ends the baby giant's hand sinks out of sight — waving good-bye.

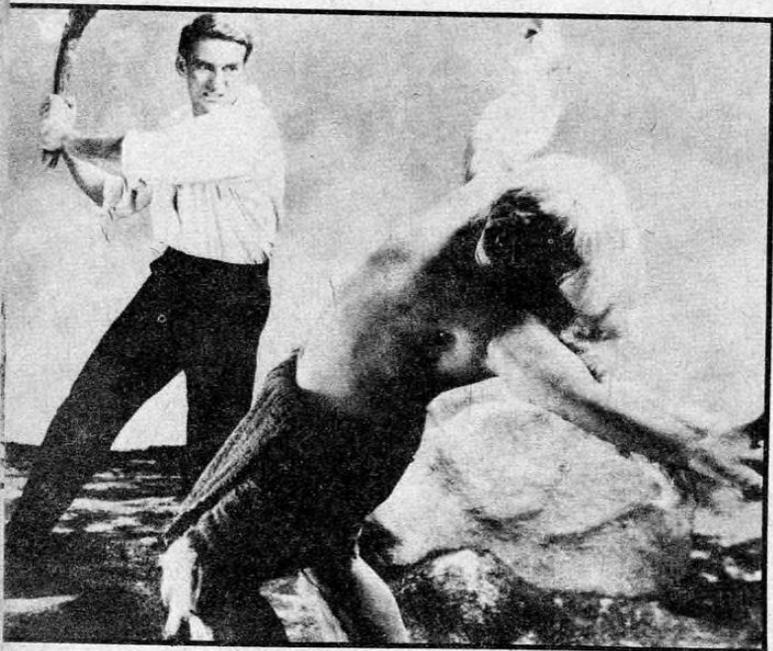
Son of Kong was a get-rich-quickie from the word "go" — and it did just that. It made money, all right. But, in

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KING KONG and first love Fay Wray. ▶

Charles Middleton as Ming in
Universal's FLASH GORDON. ➤



Rod Taylor battling for his life in THE TIME MACHINE. ⬅



Buster Crabbe in FLASH GORDON'S
TRIP TO MARS (he should have stayed
home, there's nothing there).

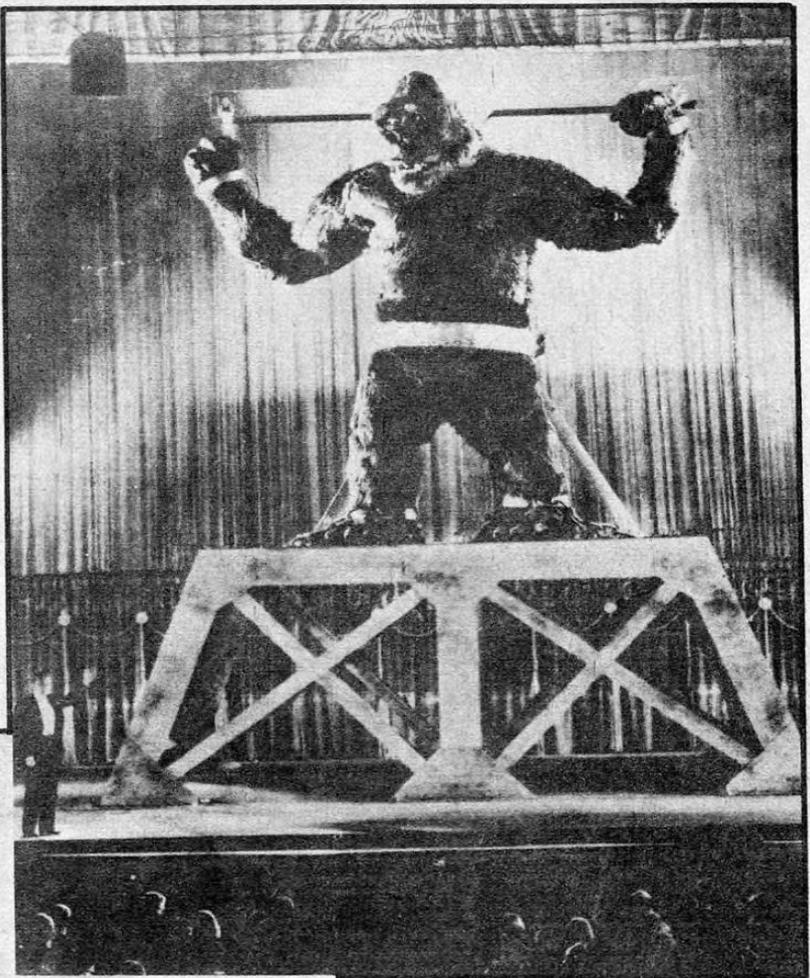
MIGHTY JOE YOUNG, when he broke into showbiz. ➔

the words of one critic, "It's no King Kong."

It was not **King Kong** at the box office, either, even though it did turn a quick profit. Why? What made "King" great that "Son" didn't have? Critics — and producers — still didn't know; but they sure weren't about to quit trying.

King Kong was the beginning of a virtual herd of movies devoted to the notion that a huge menace had to be a success. **Son of Kong** might have been the first imitator, but it sure wasn't the last.

Mighty Joe Young was the next monster ape movie to deserve mention, mostly because it reunited a few of the original Kong crew 16 years later, in 1949. Robert Armstrong returned as a slightly aged, but still intrepid, explorer-adventurer-promoter.



Most important — again — was the signing of Willis O'Brien to handle the special effects for **Mighty Joe Young** with the same creative genius he had applied to **King Kong** and **Son of Kong**.

Joe Young was another success, and won a special-effects Oscar for O'Brien. O'Brien had had a couple of successes — both financial and artistic — before the 1933 Kong, including the 1925 **Lost World**, in which he populated an entire South American plateau with dinosaurs for First International Films. He even brought a brontosaurus to London in that one.

Unfortunately, **Mighty Joe Young** was the last real hurrah for O'Brien. He did a few grade-B horror flicks in the '50s — insects as big as tanks in Mexico for **The Black Scorpion** and a radioactive beast to London for **The Giant Behemoth**. He also contributed to a

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➔ A glandular problem which enlarges hands, feet and face made Rondo Hatton a natural for horror flicks.

few sequences in a remake of **The Lost World** and **It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World**. But his last real effective monster was **Mighty Joe Young** — and he made his lifetime reputation with **King Kong**.

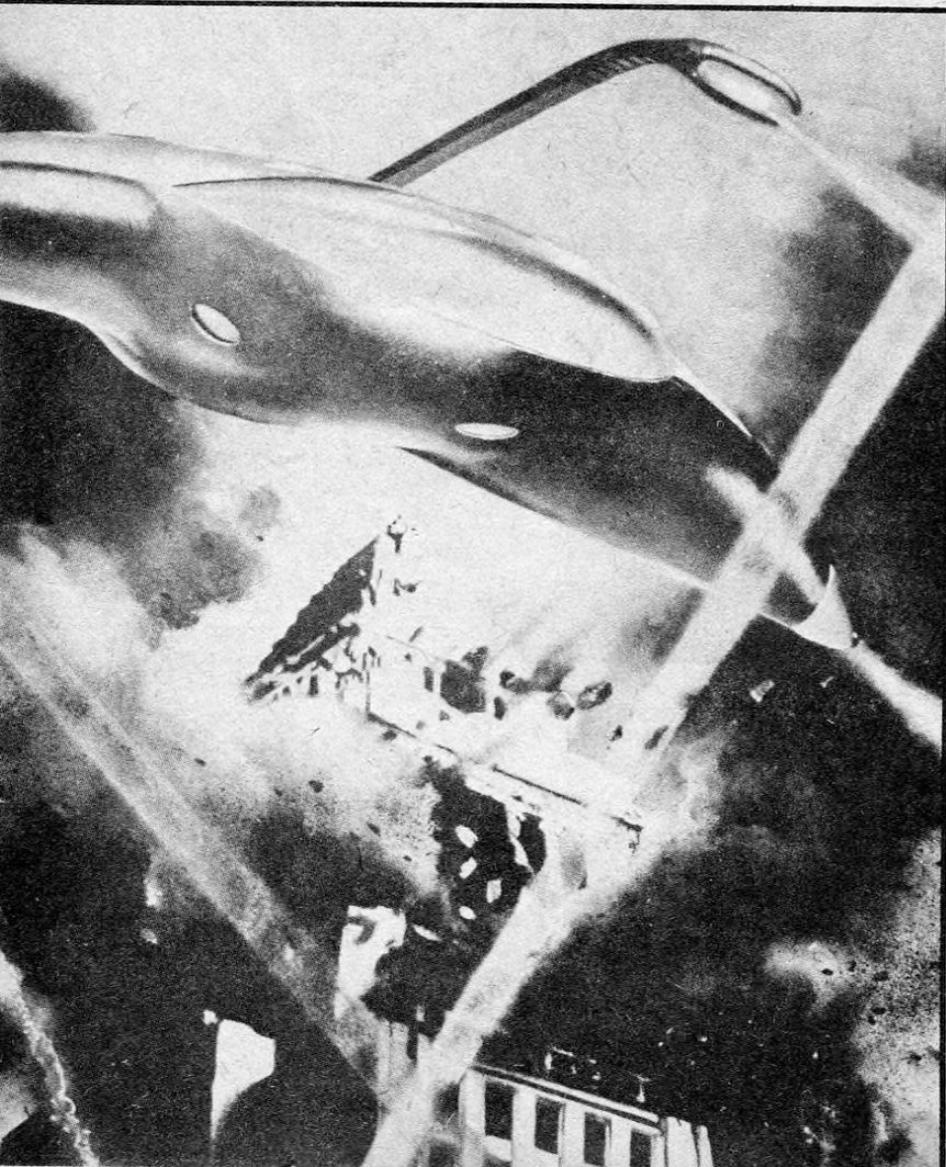
Unfortunately, **Mighty Joe Young** was not the last giant ape movie made. And even **King Kong** himself, in a couple of ineffectual Japanese productions by Toho Studios.

King Kong vs. Godzilla was introduced in 1963 to a world that hadn't asked for it and didn't really want it. It was no classic, with nothing to recommend it but some totally unbelievable fight scenes between a giant ape and a giant radioactive lizard. They crushed Tokyo during the battle, but didn't make much of an impression anywhere else.

Bad as the **King Kong** of "vs. Godzilla" fame was, it was equalled easily by



EARTH VERSUS THE FLYING SAUCERS
(Columbia).



Spectacular shot from Paramount's
WAR OF THE WORLDS.

Toho's next epic, **King Kong Escapes**. The Toho special effects men once again sank to the occasion. Borrowing heavily but unskillfully from techniques pioneered by Willis O'Brien, they cooked up a huge metal ape to fight off the shoddy Kong they had already introduced to audiences.

As bad as the Japanese quickies were, however — and they were very, very bad — it is interesting to note that they both made money. They were not box-office bonanzas on the scale of **Gone With the Wind**, true; but they had not actually lost money. This fact would confirm — if any confirmation were needed — that movies featuring big monsters were safe. They might not make you filthy rich, but they wouldn't lose you any, either. And you might just make a little, too.

Konga, one American-made Kong rip-off film, had proven it already in 1960. **Konga** featured a 25-ft. mad scientist-created chimpanzee smashing London that was openly, obviously, a man in a monkey suit smashing cardboard buildings in a studio. Critics jeered, and fans stayed away by the millions, **BUT: Konga** didn't lose money. At least, not very much. And considering how very bad the movie was, that's not bad.

Toho Productions also chimed in



↑
Young boy meets **THE COLOSSUS OF NEW YORK** in Central Park.

with a couple of non-ape entries, which were distinguished mostly by terrible production quality, silly plots and ludicrous monsters. **Godzilla**, the radioactive lizard, was Toho's responsibility as were **Rodan** and **Mothra** — the last was, you guessed it, a giant moth. Toho also gave us **Ghidrah**, **The Three-Headed Monster**. This film had the distinction of reuniting three earlier monsters — **Godzilla**, **Mothra** and **Rodan** — to defend their home planet from the fire-breathing meteor-born **Ghidrah**.

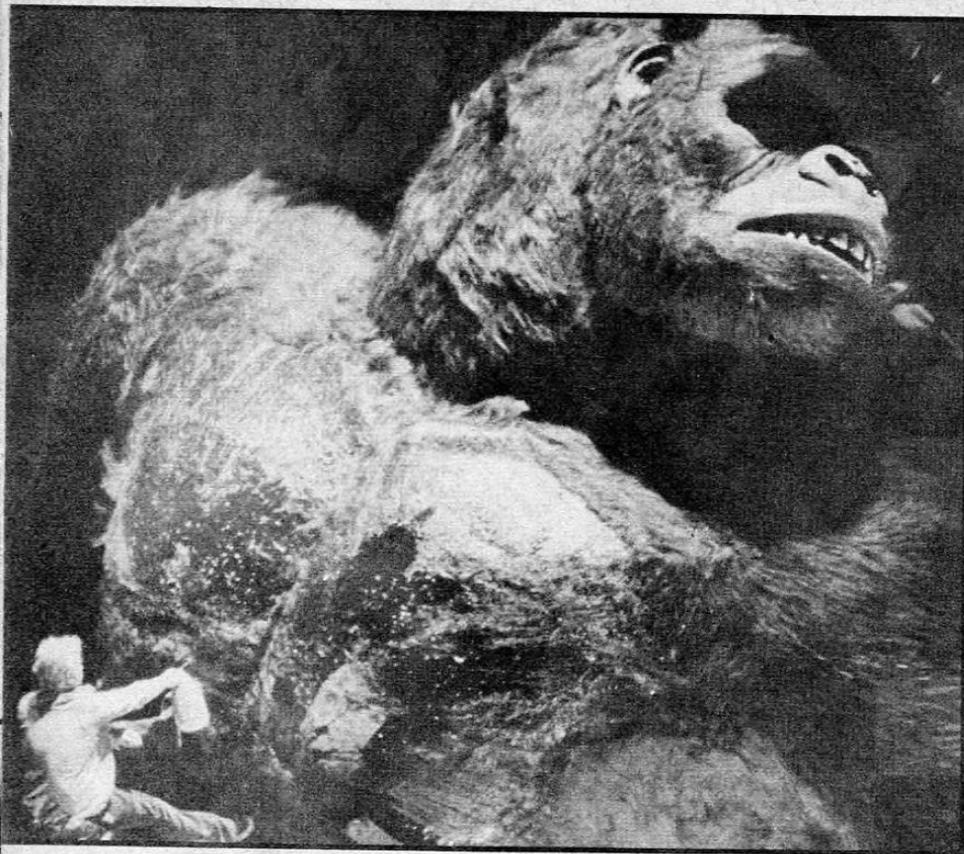
The Japanese productions were not the only monsters to appear between **Mighty Joe Young** and the 1976 **King Kong**, of course — even though they were far and away the worst of the lot. There were a number of other gigantic, destructive menaces concocted during this period, most of them produced by American film companies.

There have been giant cockroaches, giant alligators, giant rats, giant dinosaurs, giant insects of every type, giant men and even a giant woman or two. Some, like **The Amazing Colossal Man**, were even fairly well plotted and acted. Almost all of them suffered from low-budget blues.

When Dino Di Laurentiis decided to remake **King Kong**, however, he resolved that he would not, at least, be accused of making a cheapie. His 1976 **King Kong** cost a ton, but it is one of the biggest box-office money-makers of the 1970s. But is it as good as the 1933 RKO classic?

Well, the most pertinent question might be, is any copy, sequel, imitation or rip-off as good as the original thing? The 1933 **King Kong** left an entire culture with an image — a great ape atop the Empire State Building, waving Fay Wray at a flock of World War I biplanes. Everybody, whether they've seen the movie or not, recognizes the

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◀ Crew member putting fake blood on Dino's **KING KONG**.

scene. But how many people remember the relatively tiny **Son of Kong** waving good-bye as he goes under the Pacific waves? And who's ever heard of Helen Mack?

As to whether the 1976 Kong will have any lasting effect other than to boost the "big is good box office" notion, that remains to be seen. It certainly won't hurt the move to gigantic monsters. In fact, Di Laurentiis already has his very own **King Kong** sequel on film and ready for release. **King Kong in Africa**, with the original imitation cast and a brand-new screenplay, will be released sometime this year.

Not surprising, really — everybody knows a movie about a gigantic ape can't lose. And judging from past history, it would be even less surprising for Japanese horror merchants to follow **King Kong in Africa** with something like **King Kong Invades Hong Kong**. Toss in a Bruce Lee look-alike and it can't miss. ★



Bela Lugosi in one of his early flicks, **THE APE MAN** (no relation to Kong).

Yes, that's Primo Carnera taking on MIGHTY
JOE YOUNG, courtesy of RKO.



Kong takes a low blow from Godzilla in KING KONG VERSUS GODZILLA. ▼

