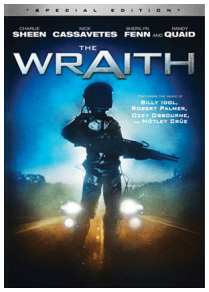
THE WRAITH hits you in the face with the ’80s so hard that after watching Lionsgate’s special-edition DVD (coming March 2), I had to double-check and make sure that I hadn’t gone BACK TO THE FUTURE.

Luckily, I was dressed in modern attire, but after joyfully taking a trip back in time to that amazing era, I half-expected to find myself decked out in Bugle Boy pants, a Spuds Mackenzie T-shirt and my old maroon Members Only jacket. 1986 was a great year for films: TOP GUN, CROCODILE DUNDEE, PRETTY IN PINK, COBRA, RAD (best BMX movie ever!), HOWARD THE DUCK, MY LITTLE PONY: THE MOVIE, RAD, SOLAR BABIES and THREE AMIGOS. It was also the last time the Mets won the World Series, the year that Heather Locklear married Tommy Lee and, most important of all, when THE WRAITH was released by New Century/Vista Film Company.



The film was written and directed by Mike Marvin, who not only penned the seminal Kenny Rogers racing picture SIX PACK, but has the unique distinction of having scripted HOT DOG…THE MOVIE and directed HAMBURGER: THE MOTION PICTURE. Although he hasn’t helmed a film since 2001, I do hope Marvin one day gets to make FRENCH FRIES: THE FEATURE FILM so he can complete his fast food trilogy.

Arizona. A blue-hued summer night. Glowing comets streak down to Earth, speeding through the desolate desert, finally colliding and combining on a stretch of open road to form…a kick-ass, futuristic-looking black Dodge Turbo Interceptor with tinted windows driven by a dude in a kick-ass, futuristic-looking black spacesuit with a tinted helmet that hides his face. After cheesy ’80s music plays over the opening credits, we’re introduced to Packard (Nick Cassavetes), the hateful, vicious, black-clad leader of a band of young punks who terrorize Tucson and force people into races in which the loser must give up their car (think the Speed Channel’s PINKS).

Packard’s motley crew of miscreants is a group of colorful and colorfully named freaks. Minty (Chris Nash) isn’t so memorable, but how can you go wrong with Griffin O’Neal as Oogie, who sports a bandana and studded wristbands? Skank (David Sherill) and Gutterboy (Jamie Bozian) are even better. (Peculiar piece of trivia: Sherill has co-starred in five [!] films with WRAITH lead Charlie Sheen, also including THE ROOKIE, MAJOR LEAGUE II, THE ARRIVAL and FIVE ACES). Skank and Gutterboy are tweaked-out, twitchy, dumb-as-rocks drug-addict punk goofballs who get their high off of some sort of liquid LSD and serve as the film’s comic relief. I especially dug Skank’s rainbow-tinted mohawk, various piercings and assortment of polychromatic eye shadow. But the *crème de la crème* is Clint Howard as the dorky tech mechanic Rughead. Rughead?! Once you see Howard’s stupendous ERASERHEAD hairpiece, you’ll understand the nickname.

These goons are used to running the town, but things are about to be shaken up, since the Wraith (remember that futuristic-looking dude in the black spacesuit?) has a score to settle with these bullying brutes. The Wraith is out for vengeance, and one by one he snuffs out Packard’s gang in a series of car races and other acts of vehicular homicide.

So what is a Wraith? It’s a ghost. And why is the Wraith seeking retribution? Could it have anything to do with Jamie (Christopher Bradley), who was murdered by Packard and his goons? You see, Packard is an *insanely* jealous person who is extremely possessive of his girlfriend Keri (Sherilyn Fenn), who was dating and having sex with Jamie when he was murdered. Unfortunately (and conveniently), she was hit on the head during the attack and doesn’t remember anything about the incident. The fact that Packard is so obviously the killer and how all the evidence points in his direction and yet *no one* suspects him is one of the movie’s many guilty pleasures.

I can’t believe I haven’t really gotten to Charlie Sheen yet! That’s probably because even though he tops the credits, he isn’t in the film all that much. He plays Jake, who arrives in town on a motorcycle (supported by the a song called “Hearts vs. Heads”) and makes an immediate impression on Keri with his awesome jean jacket, ’80s coiffure and CHiPs-worthy enormous yellow sunglasses. Keri is tired of Packard’s jealousy and temper (“Yeah, you can kill me, too, Packard. But you can never make me love you”) and falls for Tucson’s newest arrival, which creates some serious tension between Jake and Packard. Although Keri doesn’t notice the scars on Jake’s back (coincidentally, that’s where Jamie was stabbed), she does sense something familiar about him. Could Jake be the ghost of…naaahhhh!

Don’t get upset; I’m not giving away any spoilers here. You’d have to be dumber than Skank and Gutterboy to not figure out all the connections in the first 10 minutes. Besides, Marvin

doesn’t try to save these “secrets” for the end—and the studio certainly didn’t mind revealing all the mysteries in the trailer (one of the disc’s extras).

THE WRAITH is silly, senseless ’80s fun. If you focus on all its lapses in logic (Jake’s explanation for why he kinda looks like Jamie, but not completely: “It’s as close as I could come to who I once was.” Huh?), you’re missing the point. And screw KITT! The Wraith’s Dodge Turbo Interceptor is the shit! Can Michael Knight’s car repair itself? Blow up in a ball of flames and reappear good as new? Disappear into thin air? Actually, I don’t know, because I never really watched KNIGHT RIDER. But I’m still an Interceptor loyalist.

In addition to the cool car, you get an extremely hot, 21-year-old Fenn, who looks great in a swimsuit—and even better out of it! (Although it’s rated PG-13, there are two topless moments in the movie. Actually, it’s four if you include Sheen taking off his shirt, but who counts dudes?) There are also a slew of gnarly scenes in which the Wraith appears backlit by blue light, carrying a not-of-this-world gun and ready to kick punk ass, ROAD WARRIOR-style car chases and a sublime cast (I forgot to mention that Randy Quaid plays the sheriff). And the movie is chock full of fabulous ’80s tunes, by the likes of Bonnie Tyler, Billy Idol, Robert Palmer and Ozzy Osbourne. They even included Mötley Crüe’s “Smokin’ in the Boys Room”! Yowzer!

THE WRAITH’s jim-dandy soundtrack sounds great on the DVD’s Dolby Digital 2.0 soundtrack, and the 1.85:1 presentation is incomparably better and sharper than the VHS version I saw back in the day. Marvin discusses the music and other WRAITH tidbits on an audio commentary, which, in spite of occasional lengthy pauses, is quite entertaining. Marvin reveals that at the time, Fenn was dating Johnny Depp, whom he wanted to cast as one of Packard’s pals—but the studio gave the thumbs-down to the unknown actor. The writer/director also admits that ERASERHEAD really was the inspiration for Howard’s hair, that he studied THE ROAD WARRIOR frame by frame for THE WRAITH’s car sequences and that the reason he cast two actors as the Jake/Jamie character was because Sheen had to leave the shoot to go film PLATOON! The movie’s postproduction woes are also covered, and Marvin discloses that he had different ideas about the score and soundtrack, but was overruled by the music supervisor, who made a deal with a record company that forced all those splendid tunes into the picture, regardless of whether they worked or not. Last but not least, Marvin reveals that he has written two WRAITH sequels!

The disc’s other special features include a brief chat with Clint Howard, who frankly discusses his diverse 40-plus-year career, his WRAITH hairpiece and a short film he starred in with Depp in which he, not Depp, got top billing. Marvin talks some more in “Tales from the Desert,” which covers different ground than the commentary and touches on his battles with the disinterested

producing team—who wanted things done cheap and quick—and the death of camera operator Bruce Ingram during the picture. Marvin believes that tragic car accident made him a pariah, and it was three years before he landed another gig. Transpiration coordinator Gary Hellerstein and stunt coordinator Buddy Joe Hooker also recall the accident in “Future Car Revealed!”, but mostly concentrate on the Dodge’s creation and history and just how difficult and dangerous it was to drive. Speaking of difficult, I know it would have been hard to round up the *entire* cast, but the special features are sorely lacking the presence of Sheen, Cassavetes, Fenn, Quaid and co.

Absurd. Nonsensical. Ludicrously charming. THE WRAITH is all that and more. Revisiting the movie some 20 years later, I felt the urge to channel my inner Billy Idol and let loose a “Rebel Yell,” and was surprised to be visited by a ghost myself—the Ghost of ’80s Past. As a child of that decade, I often get nostalgic about the era where “What you talkin’ about, Willis?” was a popular catchphrase, THUNDERCATS ruled the airwaves, Molly Ringwald and Anthony Michael Hall were still John Hughes’ muses and the two most important people in my life weren’t my parents, but Crockett & Tubbs. The ’80s—what a time!

MOVIE: ***

DVD PACKAGE: ***