

MCA INK, 1986

KING KONG by John McMasters

King Kong died twice, once in 1933 and again in 1976. Both times the great ape was in love.

The history of King Kong seems riddled with duality, and before we examine the parallels and explore the development of King Kong for Universal, let the record show that King Kong lives on at the Universal Studios Tour!

In the classic 1933 film KING KONG, the adventure/filmmaker Carl Denham (Robert Armstrong) sets sail for the Indian Ocean with his leading actress Ann Darrow (Faye Wray). Legend has it that a ferocious giant inhabits Skull Island and it was Denham's goal to find and film the great beast.

All hell breaks loose and Denham quickly decides that instead of filming the great ape, he will capture it and ship him back to the U.S. where a live and in-person performance would surely be more profitable than any film.



Parallel number one: What the ambitious Denham did in the film, the staff of Universal Studios Tours has done in reality, that is: King Kong has been secured, perfected and will by the end of this year thrill more people in person (at a distance of 3 feet) than the film character Denham ever imagined possible.

Parallel number two: The original 1933 King Kong feature is considered one of the earliest and perhaps finest examples (for its period) of animation.

The 30-foot 6½ ton Universal Studios King Kong has been called the most successful and complicated piece of animation work every built. In fact, Peter Alexander, Producer of the King Kong attraction says, "the face and the creature itself is so lifelike. It defies the normal rule of animated figures."

The normal rule for animated figures is that you don't want to see them too close. This is due in large part to the fact that one can tell the difference up close between a living thing and a non-living thing.

Alexander knows this principle first hand from the many years he spent working for Disney. He offers the Mr Lincoln attraction at Disneyland as an example. "Mr Lincoln is an excellent piece of person animation and is better seen far away." Such is not the case with King Kong, as Alexander and his design teams went to extraordinary lengths to give King Kong facial expressions (more on this later) and thus, tour

guests will meet the ape face-to-face at the incredibly close distance of 3 feet away!

Parallel number three: In the summer of 1974, MCA began negotiating with RKO General for the rights to remake the original King Kong first done by RKO in 1933. At the time, Charles Champlin, Entertainment Editor for the Los Angeles Times, speculated that MCA/Universal's success with its film EARTHQUAKE and specifically with its new Sensurround sound system, would be a natural combination with a King Kong remake.

On a parallel track, Dino De Laurentis had the same idea and was also negotiating with RKO.

A protracted legal battle ensued but was ultimately settled in 1976 between the groups clearing the way for Dino De Laurentis to go ahead with his version. Universal would wait 18 months before releasing its own version according to the agreement, yet only after average box office results, Universal opted not to make its version.

MCA/Universal never really forgot about King Kong and in 1983, the prospect of utilizing the most misunderstood beast of all time surfaced again. With a second Studio Tour being planned for Florida, King Kong was once again given the nod to be a major attraction. Progress slowed on the Florida project and the King Kong special effect was put on the "back burner."

Interestingly, King Kong was originally planned to be a show type attraction wherein people would not be so involved but would instead be passively entertained.

Jay Stein, President of MCA Recreation Services, is credited with originally envisioning King Kong as a major tour attraction decided that audience involvement must be designed into the King Kong plans. It was Chairman of the Board and Chief Executive Officer, Lew Wassermann's suggestion to construct Kong's home adjacent to New York Street on the famous Universal back lot. However, it was President Sidney Sheinberg's support and belief in the project that actually made it happen.

Most people remember King Kong's original romp through New York but it was his precarious perch atop the Empire State Building and his ultimate fall to his death after numerous woundings by aircraft that truly sticks in the public mind. In the 1976 remake, King Kong goes through the same motions, only we find him straddling the World Trade Center and instead of being attacked by bi-planes, jet aircraft sweep by shooting at the poor animal.



Dual locale endings from the two features and the fact that King Kong should be seen close up and realistically prompted the design teams to find a locale that would allow for close interactions with guests and at the same time be unquestioningly and immediately identifiable as New York City. Peter Alexander came up with the ideal locale, the Brooklyn Bridge.

Today as each tram load of 175 guests enters the huge sound stage they find themselves suddenly travelling along an elevated New York city street late at night. Kong's devastation is everywhere.

Once the stage is set, the guests will round a bend and approach the 100 year old Brooklyn Bridge where, in a matter of seconds as their tram carefully drives across the great landmark, King Kong's huge head suddenly rises next to them. Kong's temper is a rage and he quickly reaches out and grabs the bridge, shaking and twisting the steel superstructure roaring at the top of his lungs and snarling like the ferocious beast he is. The tram loses its footing as Kong tilts the bridge and guests have the sensation that they might well fall into the angry beast's mouth.

Seconds later, guests are safely driven out of the huge sound stage and returned to the "real" world.

It was a most complicated task bringing King Kong to his current location within Universal Studios Tour. A legal dispute early on, starts and stops on the development of a tour in Florida and lastly the wise decision to have King Kong interact with the audience instead of being built as a show-type attraction all had an impact on bringing the attraction to fruition.

Technically speaking, building King Kong was not any easier. First consider the following statistics: King Kong is 30 feet tall, he is totally computer controlled, his head alone measures 10 feet high, he snarls to show 32 deadly teeth, his wooly

exterior consists of 660 pounds of fur sewn in place by nine expert costumers, his growl is powered by 10 watts of power, his home (sound stage) is 26,000 square feet, he took over 3 years to build and cost around 6.5 million dollars.

Safety was the main concern of the development group and the number one rule was to isolate everything that could present a danger from the tour guests, and to make sure that nothing would jeopardize the safety of our guests.

Consequently, the Brooklyn Bridge is designed to place no stress whatsoever on the trams. The amount of tipping a tram will endure will not tweak the panel hooks which link the trams together. The tram must be in the right place at the right time or the bridge will not slide. There are "electric eyes" in place to make sure that nothing has fallen out, or no foreign objects are in the tram's path. The entire attraction is fireproof and nothing



surrounding the area in which fire is used could become hazardous to our guests.

The advertising of King Kong has played a critical role in the ultimate success of the attraction. Credit Mr. Sidney Sheinberg, President of MCA Inc., Jay Stein, President of MCA Recreation Services and Executive Vice President of Marketing for Recreational Services, Gordon Armstrong and his talented staff. The MCA Universal Advertising team guided by Gordon Armstrong worked closely with advertising agency Foote, Cone and Belding.

One important factor which surfaced early in the development of the advertising campaign was to make certain that the public not be confused and think that King Kong was another movie but in fact a new thrilling tour attraction.

The Tour Advertising Team and the agency began to consider many concepts and each was tested and ultimately a clear direction began to take shape. Then one day, a thought came to Jay Stein. It was "KONGFRONTATION".

Though "KONGFRONTATION" was thought to be too jarring for a 30 second T.V. spot, after initial testing, the "KONGFRONTATION" concept was a dramatic hit. In fact, "KONGFRONTATION" tested far higher than any of the earlier concepts.

It was Mr. Sid Sheinberg's idea to do what had not been done before: to release the "KONGFRONTATION" campaign very early and to go strong! Mr Sheinberg felt that, though costly, this would be excellent exposure not only for the multi-dollar "KONGFRONTATION" attraction, but for the tour in general.

Through selective buying a massive teaser campaign was initiated and "KONGFRONTATION" was unleashed to the general public. Unquestionably the

aggressive and bold advertising campaign has paid off and the "KONGFRONTATION" advertising campaign may well be headed for a Cleo Award (Advertising's highest honor).

The next issue of INK will explore in detail the advertising and merchandising for KING KONG from bill boards and bumper stickers to the New York Times and banana purses.

Peter Alexander's credentials for creating Kong were impeccable. After college Peter worked as a staff engineer for Hughes Aircraft. He then spent 2½ years working for Walt Disney as Director of Project Management and Support. Peter helped in managing the construction of Epcot Center and also Tokyo Disneyland.

Peter had worked with Mr. Stein before, as producer of "Conan", "The A-Team Stunt Show", and "2010 Spacewalk", three enormously popular shows on the tour. Such a winning track record for creativity, endless ideas, and an abundance of talent made Peter the obvious man for the job.

Dave Schweninger, Tom Reidenbach, and Bob Gurr formed their own company, Sequoia Creative in order to take King Kong from concept to completion.

Bob Gurr was responsible for the total engineering design of the gorilla which makes King Kong operational. His other achievements are the serpent in the "Conan" show, the special animated lighting device for the "Jackson Victory Tour" and the spacecraft which flew over the Coliseum during the closing of the 1984 Olympics. Henry Bumstead served as Production Designer, and created all the buildings and backgrounds seen in the attraction. A veteran of the motion picture industry since 1935, Mr. Bumstead received 2 Academy Awards for his work on THE STING and TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD. Larry Lester served as Project Manager and was responsible for the technical performance of the show and was also involved with the design for all the special effects, including their installation and maintenance. Bill Watkins designed the sliding Bridge and Steve MacIntire designed the computer system which controls Kong. Barry Upson, V.P. of Planning and Development for MCA Inc., acted as Executive Producer for King Kong and was responsible for the planning and development of all tour attractions.

In the original 1933 King Kong, as adventurer/explorer Carl Denham stood on the deck of his chartered vessel "The Venture" and looked for the first time with intense purpose at the jungles surrounding Skull Island, the audience sensed that something truly awesome awaited him.

As each tram approaches New York street, we wonder what goes through the minds of tour guests as they nonchalantly are advised by their tour guide that they will now go behind the brownstone facades to see what awaits them...

Congratulations to all. A tour attendance record was set July 4 1986. With the help of King Kong and our committed employees, the old record of 26,154 guests was shattered by 31,064 visitors!

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