

Bikini Beach Party Bingo Blankets!

The first film released in this series was advertised as a naughty and sexy out-of-control movie about wild youth. Like most AIP films, of course, it never delivered on that promise. In fact, these films took the moral high road, depicting teen surfers as clean-cut, honest kids who rarely smoked, never drank anything stronger than lemonade, and whose sexual escapades were limited to drooling. The films were so sappy and campy even by the standards of their own time, that by the second film they had already begun lampooning themselves.

The combination of music, bikinis, and low humor proved to be a commercial success, if not a critical one. The Hollywood establishment looked down on these flicks as low grade garbage, yet by the mid 1960's, every major studio was churning out carbon copies. None of these came anywhere near the success of Frankie & Annette & the Beach Party gang. In short order, they went from drive-in staples to television regulars to pop culture icons.



in chronological order:

BEACH PARTY

(1963) dir: William Asher; w/ Bob Cummings, Dorothy Malone, Frankie Avalon, Annette Funicello, (Vincent Price in a quick cameo).

An anthropologist studies the surfer culture, but of course he is drawn in by the “primitive sensuality” of his subjects. At first he is an obstacle in the eternally rocky romance between Frankie and Dolores (called “Dee Dee” in the later movies), but becomes an unlikely ally in the surfers’ struggle with Eric von Zipper and his gang of “stupids.” This first Beach movie is light on plot even by beach movie standards, but makes up for it by having better humor, showing more gyrating flesh, and being more suggestive than its sequels. A fun movie for when your brain is a complete blank.

MUSCLE BEACH PARTY

(1964) dir: William Asher; w/ Frankie Avalon, Annette Funicello, Luciana Paluzzi, John Ashley, Don Rickles, Buddy Hackett, Rock Stevens (Peter Lupus), (Peter Lorre in a cameo).

Surfers and bodybuilders clash over beach turf while a contessa with more money than God tries to steal Frankie away from Annette. The music is only so-so in this episode, but the bikinis are a bit more daring and the plot is actually visible. The real gem in this flick, however, is the wicked verbal catfight between Annette and Luciana. Yowch.

BIKINI BEACH

(1964) dir: William Asher; w/ Frankie Avalon, Annette Funicello, Martha Hyer, Don Rickles, Keenan Wynn, (Boris Karloff in a quick cameo).

A quick follow-up to *Muscle Beach Party* - a stodgy old land developer tries to shut down the beach, but then -- aw, heck, it's just the same old plot full of empty calories. There are a few good songs and some skimpy bikinis, and Avalon plays a dual role -- he also does a really bad Beatles imitation as the British rock star, Potato Bug. It's okay, if you haven't already had enough of Eric Von Zipper.

PAJAMA PARTY

(1964 - aka *The Maid and the Martian*) dir: Don Weis; w/ Tommy Kirk, Annette Funicello, Elsa Lanchester, Buster Keaton, (Dorothy Lamour, Don Rickles, & Frankie Avalon in cameos).

An idiotic Martian is supposed to be scouting for the coming invasion of Earth, but falls for Annette instead. This is often considered a part of the Beach Party series, but although the cast is nearly identical, they all play different characters than in the real Beach movies (except for Harvey Lembeck, he's the same old Von Zipper). Of course, it's filled with music, but also has a couple choreographed dance numbers, stronger sexual innuendo, and is played more as an outright comedy. A big flaw is the clumsy editing, which makes the movie seem to stagger about more than usual. However, a bigger role for Buster Keaton, and Susan Hart's slow-motion hip-shimmy make up for a lot of flaws. Some Beach movie purists frown on this one, but I thought it was genuinely funny and I like it.

[And I could swear that was Ronnie Howard in there with a cameo, but I haven't been able to confirm it.]

BEACH BLANKET BINGO

(1965) dir: William Asher; w/ Frankie Avalon, Annette Funicello, Deborah Walley, Linda Evans, Don Rickles, Paul Lynde, (Buster Keaton in a running-gag cameo).

Paul Lynde is the smarmy promoter for a new singing star and, um, then there's some skydiving, and there's a mermaid, and Eric von Zipper *sings*. God help us. Although the script is just scattershot, this fifth Beach Party movie (if you count *Pajama Party*) achieves a fine distillation of the formula. With a bigger budget and cast, and more & better music, this is one of the best loved of the series. Heck, I even enjoyed it without having to make fun of it.



HOW TO STUFF A WILD BIKINI

(1965) dir: William Asher; w/ Annette Funicello, Dwayne Hickman, Brian Donlevy, Mickey Rooney, (Buster Keaton & Frankie Avalon in bit parts, Elizabeth Montgomery in a quick cameo).

While Frankie is away with the Navy, Hickman moves in on Annette; meanwhile, an adman puts Von Zipper in a three-piece suit. This sixth Beach Party movie is an uninspired churn of the old formula. The cast of regulars is showing their age this time, they make no pretense at being teenagers -- Annette even stays fully clothed the whole time. Rooney & Keaton have some fun with their parts, but they can't really save the flick, which is ultimately sunk by the soundtrack. The music for this entry is not merely mediocre, it's downright tiresome.

SKI PARTY

(1965) dir: Alan Rafkin; w/ Frankie Avalon, Dwayne Hickman, Deborah Walley, Yvonne Craig, (Annette Funicello & Dick Miller in cameos).

Here's an attempt to refresh the series with new characters & locales. Two college kids are getting nowhere with the ladies, so they decide to go on a ski vacation and they end up impersonating girls so they can get some girls. Huh? Anyhow, they end up using a string of gags so worn out, they should be embalmed. However, the flimsy plot is obviously intended only to be a loose framework for the music. And granted, the music is decent on this Beach Party variant, and they even get Lesley Gore & James Brown to contribute a song each. It's not too painful a movie, provided you don't actually pay attention to it.

AIP obviously had hopes for Beach Party spin-offs; this flick ends with a promo for *Cruise Party*. Apparently, their hopes never crystallized at the box office, because there were no more "parties".



the GHOST IN THE INVISIBLE BIKINI

(1966) dir: Don Weis; w/ Tommy Kirk, Deborah Walley, Aron Kincaid, Quinn O'Hara, Basil Rathbone, Nancy Sinatra, Boris Karloff, Susan Hart.

An old con-man's ghost tries to make up for his misdeeds by stopping his shifty lawyer from doing away with the rightful heirs. It's a Beach movie without the beach, but to stick to the formula, they have a whole busload of bikini-clad partiers arrive at the haunted house just in time for the reading of the will. And Eric von Zipper shows up just to provide the only tenuous link with the rest of the series. This one tries to be a slapstick comedy, but doesn't quite make it. The music is so-so, and some of the humor is just lame. However, the cast does their best to rescue the film, and it's not a complete waste -- if you cut it some slack.



and more than twenty years later...

BACK TO THE BEACH

(1987) dir: Lyndall Hobbs; w/ Frankie Avalon, Annette Funicello, Lori Loughlin, Connie Stevens, (appearances by Bob Denver, Don Adams, Pee Wee Herman, & others).

After 25 years of marriage and two kids, Frankie & Annette finally return to the old beach, only to turn the place upside down with a lovers' quarrel. This is both a parody and a celebration of not just the Beach Party movies, but of lightweight pop culture in general.

At first, the lampoonery is forced and exaggerated, but they eventually get on a more even keel, and are aided by a good supporting

cast, a passable script, and some great music. Weak points include the unfortunate absence of most of the original Beach movie alumni, and they're so focused on reliving the old gags that the movie really doesn't reach to a wider audience. It remains just a treat for fans of the old series -- but it is a nice treat.



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Icon Glossary



Good Stinker -- These are the films where a good deal of the entertainment comes from filmmaking incompetence; fun to watch in spite of themselves.



Goey Gore -- These films exhibit distinctly above-normal quantities of unpleasantly abused body parts.



Naughty Nudie -- Films with this flag feature frequent and/or explicit nudity (almost always female) beyond that normally found in your average T&A flick.



Butt Stompin' -- These films feature at least one superior violent fight or shootout scene that will get the testosterone pumping.



Gold Star -- These are the flicks that I felt reached above their expectations or at least pleasantly surprised me; they may not always be actually *good* flicks, but I did find something in them worthwhile.



Blue Max Medal of Really Goodness -- These are flicks that I not only enjoyed, but I think are actually quite good films (not always the same thing).



Lethal Cinema -- These wretched viewing experiences go beyond being merely bad to become genuine sources of pain and regret; they should be avoided by all but the most masochistic trash cinema veterans. Don't say I didn't warn you.