

The Cool Ghoul

John Zacherle was spooky and often wacky on local TV's "Shock Theater."

By Barbara March, Cheyenne, Wyoming

THE LATE 1950s and early '60s were wonderful, simpler times. As kids, we were in awe of television. We loved everything we saw, even down to the American Indian test pattern.

At the time, an actor named John Zacherle exploded onto the scene. The former World War II Army major with a bachelor's degree in English literature was to hold the positions of disc jockey, emcee, singer, announcer and, best of all, horror-show host.

Zacherle obtained various bit parts on TV in a serial-styled Western called Action in the Afternoon, a live local show with a typically low budget in his hometown of Philadelphia.

One such role called for him to portray an undertaker in a long black frock coat. The coat was to become one of Zacherle's trademarks, and he still has it today.

In 1957, when Universal released its horror films of the 1930s and '40s, television stations across the country began showing the movies, sometimes with creepy hosts.

That year, Philadelphia's WCAU asked "Zach" to host Shock Theater as a ghoulish-type character, Roland, who lived in a crypt with his wife, My Dear (later to become Isobel), and his son, Gasport, a shapeless creature who lived, unseen, in a burlap bag and moaned. His assistant on the spooky set was, of course, Igor.

As Roland, Zacherle was hysterical to us as he inserted himself

into the horror films he hosted. His funny faces and crazy antics were the talk of my town—Paterson, New Jersey, northeast of Philadelphia.

WCAU held an open house so that Roland fans could meet their hero, and more than 14,000 fans showed up, bringing city traffic to a halt!

Bernie Lowe, one of the owners of Cameo and Parkway Records, saw Zach and recorded him singing Dinner with Drac. The record was a hit, and Zach appeared on American Bandstand. He credits Dick Clark with coining his nickname, “The Cool Ghoul.” Later, Zach went on to record albums and CDs.

Growing up, in the '60s, we always watched “Zacherley,” now his character’s name as well, hosting horror or cartoon shows. The “y” was added to his name for pronunciation.

When my husband, Dave, was a boy, he collected Zacherley photos, record albums, maps of Transylvania and so on. Through the years, these items were lost, and Dave lamented not having them.

For Dave’s birthday, more than 10 years ago, I was determined not only to replace these items, but to have Dave meet his childhood horror hero in person.

Now, not only does Dave have his memorabilia replaced, but he is good friends with The Cool Ghoul himself. Zach even replaced some of Dave’s missing treasures.

In the early '80s, I turned my own children on to Zach. At this time, he was hosting the popular CBS FM Halloween show from New York City, where he now lives. It was not officially the end of Halloween until you heard Zach, in his stentorian voice, say for another year, “Good night, whatever you are.”

Last fall, my son Jack was putting up Halloween decorations and blasting Zach's CD Dead Man's Ball. My 1-year-old granddaughter Olivia, sitting in her high chair and wearing a witch's hat, was rocking out to Zach's Everyone Wears Leisure Suits in Hell. She was so excited—another generation of fan.

We are all instant kids in Zach's presence. The twinkle in his eye tells me that he knows he has that effect on his adult fans.

We speak often on the phone, and Zach still has that great voice for which he is so famous. Just before I say good-bye, I always say, "Do it. Say it, please!"

Zach chuckles and says, "Good night, whatever you are," and a tear comes to my eye as I say, "We love you, Zach."