

Arts and Leisure: Beach blanket retro - The Frankie and Annette films recall simpler times

by Alex Jones

Jump in your time machine and set the dial for the 1960s - it's time for a flashback ... if you were around back then.

MGM has released a boxed set of DVDs starring Frankie Avalon and Annette Funicello. Though these movies were popular then, they don't stand the test of time today.

BEACH BLANKET RETRO - Frankie Avalon, Annette Funicello, Deborah Walley and John Ashley wore sunny smiles in 1965's 'Beach Blanket Bingo.' CNS Photo. For the most part, the four dual-sided discs (eight films in all) portray the idealized white American lifestyle, complete with singing and dancing. The singing is somewhat annoying. After a while, you can either pretend you're watching a Disney movie and get used to it or train your ears to block it out.

Funicello, a former Mouseketeer, and Avalon, a teen-idol singer, have good chemistry on-screen, though there is a sameness to the surrounding actors. Many of the films' characters seem shallow and fit the mold of stereotypical jocks and airheaded girls.

Most of the films are set at the beach, although there's a mountain backdrop for "Ski Party," and "Fireball 500's" action takes place on a stock car track. But just because they're filmed at the beach doesn't mean there's any serious surfing cinematography. The surfing scenes are ridiculous. Much of the films are shot in Malibu, Calif.

While people living in landlocked states were flocking to the theaters to catch the latest Frankie and Annette film, real surfers were busy in the water. And if they weren't, the surfers in the '60s watched classics-to-be such as "The Endless Summer" and the lesser-known "Waves of Change." That generation's idols were surfers Gerry Lopez, Jeff Hakman and Shaun Tomson or photographers Bruce Brown and Hal Jepsen.

Regardless of who starred in surfing films, it was during this period that surfing really took off. Thanks to the short-board revolution, surfboards lost inches, foam and fiberglass became design staples. Much of the progress in board shaping began in Australia, moved to Hawaii and then hit California.

In the '60s, there were tons of surf spots only locals knew about. Now, thanks to the Internet and surfing magazines, very few breaks are undiscovered or uncrowded.

Just as surfing was cool on screen, if you could rip at the beach, you moved up in the social structure. Many of the Frankie and Annette films explored the topic of popularity among the men and women who were a part of beach culture in Southern California. During that period, Huntington Beach, Calif., was the hub of surfing in the south and Santa Cruz started a similar trend in Northern California.

Many surfers were known for their laid-back attitudes and the pranks they pulled on each other, in and out of the water. Similarly, the Frankie and Annette films, if nothing else, feature high jinks that are good for a laugh.

The teen issues transcend the decades. In "Beach Party," for instance, Annette talks to her friend about how she loves Frankie and wants him to think of her as spousal material and not some one-night stand. Frankie tells the fellas he loves Annette, but to get back at her for changing their plans from an intimate weekend for two to a party for 20, he's going to hit on other women. It's amusing to watch the couple keep trying to outdo one another.

One of the surprising aspects about the boxed set is how many references to sex are made in the films. In "Beach Party," a professor (Bob Cummings) is studying the sexual behavior of teenagers. That's not to say anything explicit is shown. Then again, it shouldn't be shocking - this was the generation that would fuel the counterculture movement and sexual liberation.

It's also hilarious to see the lengths to which the guys go to hook up with girls. There's cross-dressing in "Ski

Party," where Avalon and Dwayne Hickman pose as women to learn secrets from the girls they want to date. It's practically the "Sorority Boys" of 1965.

The films' fashions, which included ruffled, semi-conservative bathing suits, are almost as embarrassing as the over-sprayed, helmetlike haircuts. Chances are, you'll find yourself debating with your friends over which bikini is the ugliest.

These movies are filmed in Technicolor, which doesn't stand up to HD, but at least you can see the horribly fake footage of people longboarding in the Pacific. A little cheesy, yes, but hey, this was the '60s and Steven Spielberg didn't rule Hollywood yet.

The "Frankie & Annette" boxed set includes the films "Beach Party," "Bikini Beach," "Muscle Beach Party," "Ski Party," "Fireball 500," "Thunder Alley," "Beach Blanket Bingo" and "How to Stuff a Wild Bikini."

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