

FIRST MAN INTO SPACE: (or how I learned to stop worrying and began to seriously consider marrying a monster from outer space)

**BY MICHAEL LENNICK
(1230 words)**

Looking back fondly on *First Man Into Space*, I'm forced to acknowledge that time has been slightly less than merciful to us both – and I've been around seven years longer than it has.

First Man emerged at a very odd moment in human history – post-Sputnik but pre-Gagarin, Shepard, Glenn and all of that. From our lofty vantage point in an era that regards the Apollo moon missions as ancient history, it might be tough to believe in an age when a title like *First Man Into Space* could evoke great passion among young, expectant filmgoers, but these were the matinees we lived for. Each and every Saturday afternoon we'd venture far from home (six blocks in my case), recalcitrant sibling or two in tow, eager to see the future laid out before us, sometimes awash in glorious Technicolor. The ideas underlying thoughtful genre offerings like *The Day The Earth Stood Still* made their way into our evolving worldviews, while grand, hugely enjoyable epics like *Destination Moon*, *Conquest of Space*, *Forbidden Planet*, and *This Island Earth* were promoted as Significant Events. We paid each its due reverence, but on some gut level, it was the B-pictures like *First Man Into Space* that really delivered the goods, week in and week out. (In those days a double feature at the Glendale Theater in Toronto set you back a quarter, plus popcorn. Science-fiction actioners were usually paired with a monster flick, though quite frequently, as with *First Man Into Space*, you'd be lucky enough to get both in the same movie.)

Although I didn't know it at the time, the theme of hubris that most of these films turned on had been a plot staple at least since Mary W. Shelley employed it to such tragic effect in her 1817 masterpiece *Frankenstein*, arguably the first true science-fiction novel. There was a very comfortable predictability to *First Man* and its many peers. They all opened so optimistically, as our hero prepared to assault the boundaries of human knowledge in order to break free of the atmosphere, capture some never-before-seen creature, teleport across the room, keep his dead sweetie's head alive in a photo developer tray, or whatever.

Despite their futuristic themes and settings, these films were really old-fashioned morality tales in which the central character revealed himself early on to be not the hero of our story at all but the patsy, the self-important dreamer who dared to push beyond the natural limits set by God or the physical laws of an uncaring universe. The consequences of such supreme cockiness were rarely kind to our patsy, who usually spent the third act lumbering around his Air Force headquarters, laboratory, village, or girlfriend's place, covered in goopy makeup, emitting horrible sounds, and trying desperately to reverse the effects of some experiment – or maybe just suck the life-force out of whatever unfortunate guards, janitors, or insatiably curious ex-girlfriends happened by. If our central patsy was lucky, his humanity might be restored in his (and the film's) dying moments, providing a bit of solace to his loved ones. If he wasn't quite that fortunate, the odds generally favored seeing him and all remnants of his doomed venture crushed into guacamole in a burst of necessary sacrifice, usually triggered by one of those very same loved ones. Either way balance was restored, the survivors reassured that their universe was secure (so long as nobody else was fool enough to attempt such folly again), and all was at last well – at least until the patsy's son signed on for the sequel.

Beset by the same time and money woes that constricted most of these films, *First Man Into Space* remains an economic marvel of the genre. Director Robert Day, executive producer Richard Gordon, and producers John Croyden and Charles Vetter Jr. managed to film a tale that takes place on a U.S. Air Force base and surrounding territory in the New Mexico desert (not to mention outer space) using little more than a small house in London as their prime location – during an English winter. Newly released stock footage of Edwards Air Force Base and various X-1A flights (coincidentally enough, the rocket-powered aircraft that nearly killed Chuck Yeager, the real-life hero who broke the sound barrier) set up the story of Bill Edwards's ultra-cocky test pilot, behaving more recklessly than any test pilot of the day could have gotten away with (and that's a lot!) Not even his brainy and beautiful girlfriend (Marla Landi), or his Über-stalwart brother/commander (the always reliable Marshall Thompson), can thwart our young hotrod's passion to pilot his craft out of the atmosphere and become the titular First Man Into Space. And darn if he doesn't actually pull it off! Sadly, in those days most flights into space tended to a) hurl the unlucky explorer

back in time, b) convert him and/or his entire family into cosmic-ray-enhanced superheroes, or c) as in the case of our rocket ace (and quite a few others, come to think of it), gradually mutate our hero into a rocky/hairy/goeey blood-sucking, girlfriend-traumatizing monster – the better to conceal his still-beating heart of gold until the film's last few moments.

Producer Richard Gordon and his equally film-obsessed older brother Alex were responsible for a remarkably wide range of work during the classic age of science fiction/horror that circumscribed my own misspent youth. A.I.P. co-founder Alex Gordon's early screenplays for the Ed Wood classics *Jail Bait* and *Bride of the Monster* gave little forewarning of his later work in film restoration at 20th Century Fox, where he rediscovered more than thirty films long considered lost. Richard Gordon, *First Man Into Space's* unaccredited executive producer, enjoyed a career as a producer and film distributor that led to such signature work as *Fiend Without a Face* and *The Projected Man*, as well as the Boris Karloff classics *The Haunted Strangler* and the deeply resonant *Corridors of Blood*. Although their basic storylines rarely varied, all the Gordon Brothers' films shared an abiding love of the art form that often seems under-represented today. Their films stand as icons of a very specific and unique style, identifiable as the work of true movie fans even when the Gordons' credits went missing, as they so often did.

Given the inherent silliness of its central story, *First Man Into Space* actually hangs together quite well after all these years and so much history – a tribute to the foresight and talents of its producers, director, and cast. The film clips along at a sprightly pace with nary a wasted shot or edit, delivering several nicely choreographed and thus well-earned shocks, and some genuine pathos at its climax. Far more than the standard monster fare it was initially sold as, *First Man Into Space* can now be seen in its larger context, as a better-than-average example of those goofy-yet-earnest speculations the Saturday-afternoon astronauts of my generation couldn't get enough of – for these were the films that inspired the dreams of our own inevitable future among the stars.

Writer/director Michael Lennick's Discovery Channel series "Rocket Science" explores the real history of humanity's first steps into space—though he's very fond of most of the fictional versions too.