



WORDS DAVID MCCOMB  
PRODUCTION STILLS CATHERINE E COULSON

# MAKING

# ERASERHEAD

**Thirty years ago, an independent film from an unknown director set cinemas and imaginations alight. Three decades after *Eraserhead*'s debut, the people who worked on the movie remember bringing David Lynch's nightmare to life**

**T**hree decades ago, David Lynch's first feature, *Eraserhead* – the torturous tale of a man living in a harsh industrial world, whose girlfriend gives birth to a mutant baby – introduced a generation to the possibilities of surrealism. Hitting British cinemas in the year punk rock changed attitudes towards music, Lynch's luscious nightmare also encouraged aspiring artists to ditch convention and cut their own path; indelibly marking the work of directors such as Darren Aronofsky and the Coen Brothers, while countless bands from the Dead Kennedys to the Pixies either referenced *Eraserhead* in their work or covered the film's haunting 'In Heaven (Lady In The Radiator Song)'. Famously, *Eraserhead* was also Stanley Kubrick's favourite flick, and the director screened it for the crew of *The Shining* to help define the oppressive mood he wanted his movie to convey.

But while there's no doubting the importance of *Eraserhead*, the story of how it was made is

also captivating, a five-year odyssey financed by odd jobs, goodwill and paper rounds. Now, 30 years after the film's release, key players in the making of *Eraserhead* have spoken to *Bizarre* about their memories of working on Lynch's most personal picture.

### The Log Lady speaks

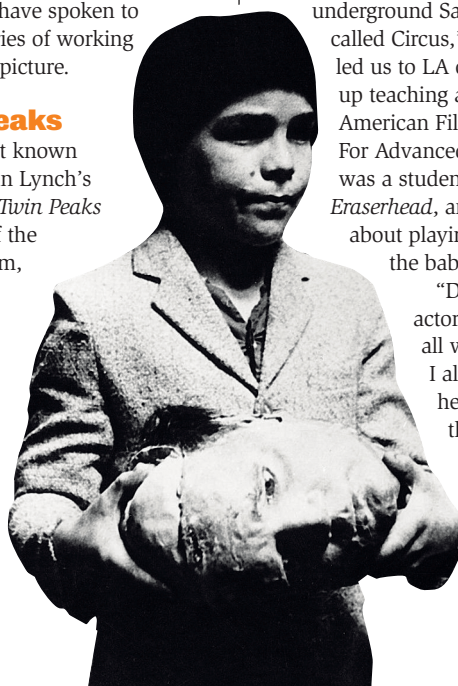
Catherine E Coulson – best known for playing The Log Lady in Lynch's groundbreaking TV show *Twin Peaks* – was a crucial member of the *Eraserhead* production team, taking on a multitude of roles that helped keep the project afloat. At the time she was also married to Jack Nance, the shockheaded actor who became the film's baffled hero, Henry Spencer. But when she first came into contact

with David Lynch, she was hoping to appear in *front* of the camera.

"In the 60s and 70s, Jack and I were in an underground San Francisco theatre group called Circus," she tells *Bizarre*. "That led us to LA on tour, where we ended up teaching an acting class at the American Film Institute (AFI)'s Center For Advanced Film Studies, where David was a student. He was looking to cast *Eraserhead*, and asked me to see him about playing the nurse who gives the baby to Henry and Mary X."

"David never auditions actors," she continues. "Instead, all we did was have a chat.

I also vividly remember when he interviewed Jack for the lead; we went over to David's house and his three-year-old, Jennifer, was crawling all over Jack, who didn't →



PICTURES: DEFD; ALLSTAR; CAPITAL PICTURES

**MAKING  
A MONSTER**

ERASER  
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## MAKING A MONSTER

### PIXIE GONE TO HEAVEN FRANK BLACK ON ERASERHEAD'S IMPACT



One of *Eraserhead*'s creepiest moments is the Lady In The Radiator singing 'In Heaven', shortly before Henry's head pops off and is turned into pencil erasers. To this day the song has been part of the Pixies' live set, and we spoke to Frank Black about the impact

David Lynch's movie had on his work.

"I was at college when I first saw *Eraserhead* – I think I caught it at the mall on a Friday night. And I remember a few years later dragging the other Pixies along to see it.

"Some people are horrified by *Eraserhead*'s gore and squishing but, in a funny way, I've always found it uplifting. It's a film about some poor sonofabitch with this weird hair living in an apocalyptic world with an alien baby, but if you're grossed out you're taking it too seriously. It's not that it's meant to be a joke, rather that the film is – for want of a better word – a dream, and if you can't accept its rules and are too hung up on reality, you can't see the Charlie Chaplin-esque humour at work there.

"For me, *Eraserhead* is like a Hollywood version of an old surrealist film – it has a proper script and is full-length, so as a kid raised on Hollywood movies I was able to connect with it more easily. It crystallised surrealist art for me, and then I tried to incorporate this into my work. I was like, 'Aha, I understand surrealism – now I'm going to do my own thing.'

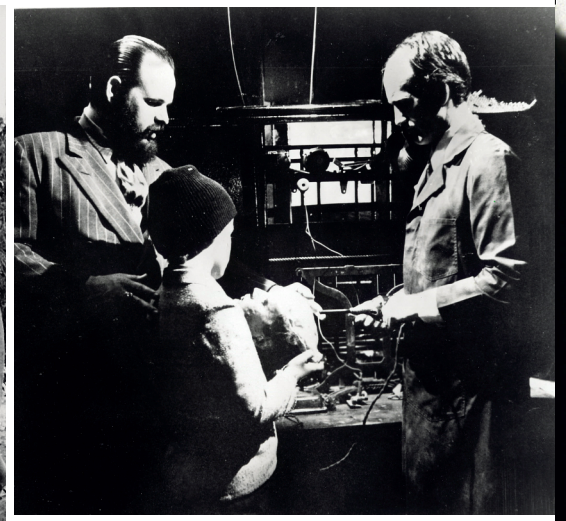
"I think the sentiment of the lyric is a little dark. It says, 'In heaven, everything is fine', but if you're not a believer you'll have an inherent problem with the concept of heaven. But even if you have trouble with the concept, a lot of people still cling to the idea that there must be *something* on the other side – like a child, you hold on to that idea. And the second half of the song is 'everything is fine...' – to me, that becomes a mantra, a statement that everything is wonderful, even if it isn't. Like, let's tell ourselves that everything is fine, even if it's not, even in the face of death and the horror of life. Even if it's in ignorance of a harsher reality, so be it. It's what we do to swallow our bitter pill, what we need to get us through the night and remain positive, even when there's nothing to be positive about."

Frank Black's greatest hits album, *Frank Black 93-03*, is out 18 June

FRANK TALKED FOR BLOODY AGES ABOUT *ERASERHEAD*. IN THE END, WE HAD TO MAKE OUR EXCUSES AND HANG UP. TO READ THE FULL INTERVIEW, LOG ON TO BIZARREMAG.COM



"We often joked that one day people would wear their hair like Henry's," says Catherine Coulson. "And now they do."



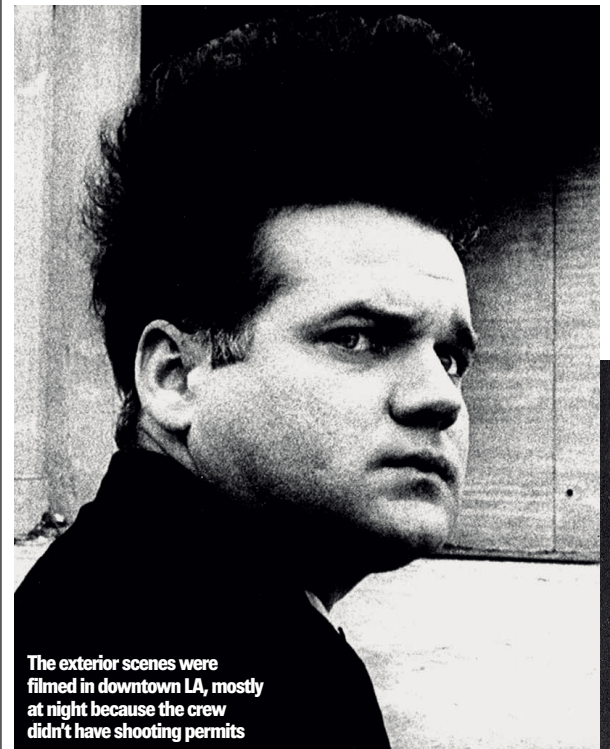
Left to right: Doreen Small, Charlotte Stewart, David Lynch, Catherine E Coulson and Herbert Cardwell



necessarily appreciate kids. But I'm sure the look on Jack's face was one reason David chose him – he looked completely bewildered."

Although the nurse scene was never shot because of budget constraints, Coulson became an indispensable part of *Eraserhead*'s skeleton crew – which also included cameraman Herbert Cardwell (later replaced by Frederick Elmes), soundman Alan Splet and production manager Doreen Small – working in various roles including lighting, special effects and maintaining Nance's electroshock hairdo. "His hair doesn't always match up in the film," Catherine says. "Lots of people would have gone back and reshot scenes, but to us the evolution of Jack's hair is part of the story." During the earliest days of production Coulson also helped Lynch figure out the magnitude of project he was embarking on. "On the first day, David asked me to time a scene between Henry and Mary X," she recalls. "I didn't know why he was doing this, but it turned out to be his first attempt at working out the length of *Eraserhead*. Before we started we thought it was only going to be a 40-minute film, but eventually David realised it was something much bigger."

While the film was financed by the AFI and contributions from family and friends – and the Center For Advanced Film Studies allowed Lynch to borrow equipment, and turned a blind eye to him using the abandoned stables on their grounds as a studio much longer than anyone expected – money was still tight and funding came from unconventional sources. "David paid everyone a small salary, but every time we got a little extra money we'd buy a roll of film," Coulson says. "I had various jobs to keep us going, and during the day I was working as a waitress and in the AFI offices." And even the director got his hands inky to keep the production ticking along. "David had a paper round every night, delivering *The Wall Street Journal*," Coulson continues. "We'd help him fold the papers, then he'd start around



The exterior scenes were filmed in downtown LA, mostly at night because the crew didn't have shooting permits

midnight – and although it was supposed to take eight hours, he would always finish in two. He had a little Volkswagen, and sometimes Jack would go along for the ride. As Jack was left-handed he'd throw the papers onto the left side of the street; David handled the right. Jack and David were such good aims they'd get the papers right on people's porches."

#### Setting the mood

Given *Eraserhead*'s relentlessly bleak and cloying atmosphere, it's no surprise the entire feature was shot at night, giving rise to an unusual filming schedule. "Every night we'd shoot until sunrise, then we'd lock David in Henry's room as he

No one would tell us how Lynch made the mutant baby, but it's rumoured he either used an embalmed cow foetus or the guts of a dead cat

**"TO DAVID LYNCH,  
ERASERHEAD IS  
A SIMPLE LOVE  
STORY - BOY  
MEETS GIRL,  
BOY LOSES GIRL,  
BOY GETS BABY"**

wasn't supposed to be in the stables during the day," Coulson says. "I'd wake him up in the afternoon, give him breakfast, then Jack and the crew would come over and we'd begin the laborious process of lighting the sets."

This insular cycle soon gave rise to a sense of isolation in the crew, a feeling of being cut off from the outside world that Coulson believes was one of the keys to creating *Eraserhead*'s dreamlike mood: "The way the movie was made, in the sealed world of the stables, affects how you feel as a viewer; the film creates its own space with its own rules, and I doubt we could have achieved that in a normal studio. And the strange thing is that this world seemed normal to us. I remember telling my parents what I was doing, and finding it impossible to explain this world to them - to us *Eraserhead* was, as David used to say something like, a 'simple little love story'. Boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets baby. We created an hermetic place, and although David would stay there day and night, the rest of us were able to go out, live our lives, then step back in again."

**Staying focused**

Although *Eraserhead* took five years to complete - including 12 months stoppage time while the crew raised funds, and Lynch and Splet edited the footage - Coulson says it was Lynch's enthusiasm and a sense of belonging that kept the team focused during their darkest hours: "We stuck with *Eraserhead* because of David, because he's so inspiring to work with. We didn't know where we were going - we had an outline script, but our inspiration was watching the footage shot each day, along with the friendships we'd built. It was all about making something worthwhile that we wanted to devote our young days to. We were in our early 20s and full of energy, and there was a magical quality to working in that world.

"It was an adventure. I can still remember the textures, tastes and smells of the stables; ➔

**MISSING IN ACTION**  
WHERE DID THE OUTTAKES GO?

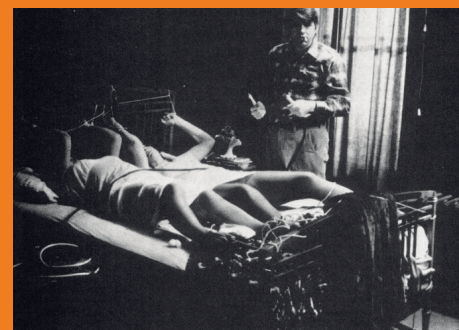
While editing *Eraserhead*, Lynch screened a version to his family and friends that was 20 minutes longer than the theatrical cut. However, disappointed by their muted reaction, Lynch hacked out several scenes, creating the version we know today.

But while every Lynch aficionado knows what happened in the excised episodes - women tied to a bed and tortured with electricity, drawers full of peas and so on - the director has never revealed what happened to the missing footage, only saying he "left it behind" during a move. However, there remains a slim possibility that the outtakes may be rotting in someone's garage - even if they're most likely lost forever under tons of landfill.

"A terrible thing happened to the missing scenes, and I'm kind of responsible," Mary Fisk admits. "When David and I got married we moved to Virginia, and all the *Eraserhead* film cans were in this storage garage. When we moved out of the house during our separation I hired a trash service to come and remove some junk; not from the storage garage, but from another hut full of rubbish.

"I was inside so I didn't see what was happening, but when I came out to see how the trash guy was getting on I saw him loading David's film cans onto his truck. I asked what he was doing, and it turned out he'd emptied the wrong shed.

"That afternoon everything was lost, including all the outtakes. I'm still suspicious as the junk guy knew who David was, and he may have known what the film cans were. But I never followed him to the dump, so I can't be sure the missing scenes won't turn up one day. Even years later, David talked about going to the dump, opening it up and trying to dig up the missing scenes. But he still hasn't done it."



The Lady In The Radiator came to Lynch in a flash of inspiration, long after filming had already begun

**TALKING TO MARY X**  
FROM *THE WALTONS* TO *ERASERHEAD*

Henry's jittery girlfriend, Mary X, was played by Charlotte Stewart, an actress best known at the time for her roles in the TV series *The Waltons* and *Little House On The Prairie*. We caught up with her to talk about her spell working on *Eraserhead*.

**When you joined the project, what were your first impressions of David Lynch?**

The first thing I thought was that he's a true eccentric. He was wearing a shirt and jacket with holes in the elbows of both, a Panama hat with the hole in the top and two neckties. As a gift, he'd bought me a sack of wheat seed, assuming that – because I lived in a rural area – I liked to grow my own.

**As a professional actress, did you find it tough dealing with *Eraserhead's* weird working routine?**

Hell, no! I work for the love of working, and at that time I just rearranged my schedule around *Eraserhead*. I remember staying up all night with David, then driving to Burbank at 6am to shoot *The Waltons* without any sleep. But the slow pace was hard to get used to, especially hanging around between shots and waiting for the lighting to be set up.

**How do you feel about the movie now?**

I love it. To me, it's like a painting, or a cold, dark, hard, black-and-white love story. A wondrous piece of film sculpture. When he screened the movie for the first time, David asked me what I thought and I said, "David, it's like a toothache – it hurts!" I think he was pleased. Now I'm glad to be part of film history... and, no, no-one ever recognises me as Mary X.

**Can you tell us how Lynch made the mutant baby? Is it true he used a dead cat?**

No comment!

**To buy Mary X T-shirts direct from Charlotte, log on to [Liquidbutterfly.com](http://Liquidbutterfly.com)**



**David Lynch (left) and Jack Nance relax on set**

the kind of earthy scent you only get in old buildings. Even talking about it now brings back a warm feeling, about a fabulous time of exploration. David and I have been friends since then, and I believe we're always there for each other no matter how much time has passed."

**Finishing the movie**


After years of nocturnal shoots, *Eraserhead* was finally in the can. But, inevitably, the story didn't end there. Still strapped for cash, Lynch could do little with the footage as he couldn't afford to process the film. But again fate stepped in, this time in the form of Mary Fisk, sister of the director's best friend, Jack Fisk (he plays *Eraserhead's* mysterious Man In The Planet, incidentally), who became Lynch's second wife. "I moved to LA in 1975," says Fisk, "and although I'd known David for years, that's when our friendship first began. He needed money to get the film out of the lab, but he was broke. Fortunately, a family friend of ours had just become a millionaire and was happy to invest in any businesses I was interested in. David asked me to speak to him about investing, but I couldn't show him any footage as David was still working on it. Anyway, because my brother had already donated money my friend put in the rest."

With the film ready to roll, Lynch and Fisk began looking for places to exhibit *Eraserhead*, but were disheartened when an attempt to show it at Cannes fell through. "David didn't know what to do," Fisk continues. "He was a director who made films as art, not for theatrical release. It was 1977, and the first year of the LA Filmex festival, but David didn't want to submit *Eraserhead* as he couldn't take another rejection. So I took the film cans, drove down to see the organisers and managed to get it into a screening, where it was accepted for the festival. That's where the film got picked up."

Before long, *Eraserhead* began playing on the US midnight-movie circuit, often on the same bill as John Waters' *Pink Flamingos*, and building a reputation through word of mouth.

**"IT'S A BIZARRE MOVIE - LYNCH IS DEALING WITH A LOT OF FEAR. BUT THERE'S STILL A SENSE OF BEAUTY"**

The ascendancy of home video also helped build a fanbase, with viewers able to experience the movie in places where local cinemas didn't screen leftfield pictures. But as Mary Fisk wasn't part of the "sealed world" where *Eraserhead* was created, how did she feel when she saw it? "It wasn't like any movie I'd ever seen," she says. "I was stunned – you're looking at something that's bizarre and uncomfortable, but there's still a sense of beauty. I can see David's dealing with a lot of fear. But when things get troubling for most people they tend to run away from their problems. If anything, *Eraserhead* shows you should let your imagination take you to places you don't necessarily want to go, but where it's still interesting to explore."

Despite its difficult birth, *Eraserhead's* importance in cinema history is sealed. "At the end of 2004, *Eraserhead* was chosen by the US Library of Congress to be part of the National Film Registry," Fisk says. "This means the movie will be archived and protected forever, which shows how culturally significant it is. And it's a great testament to David; he's a dreamer, but while most people only dream, David has a bright light around him that gets people excited about making his dreams a reality. Without that, *Eraserhead* would never have happened." 

**Many thanks to Catherine E Coulson and Mary Fisk. Catherine is currently working with the Oregon Shakespeare Festival acting company, and you can find out more at [Osfashland.org](http://Osfashland.org)**