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THE SELLING OF THE PLANET OF THE APES

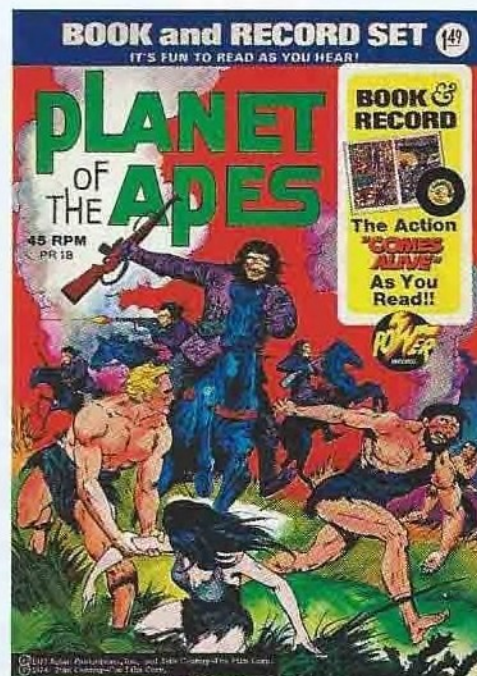
By CHRISTOPHER GIARDINO

In the 1970s, there was much more to the original franchise than the movies.

When George Lucas was negotiating to direct *Star Wars*, he pulled off a once-in-a-lifetime deal that no filmmaker has ever been able to make with a major studio

decade ago. And often, you can measure a film's success by walking into a toy store a season or two after the release of a studio tentpole that failed. Over the years, next to such winning toy/movie tie-ins as *Star Wars*, *Spider-Man*, *Batman* or *Harry Potter* have lain the ghosts of flopped blockbuster wannabes such as *Buck Rogers in the 25th Century*, *The Black Hole*, *Tron* and *Prince of Persia*. But one of Hollywood's most durable screen series makes a return this summer with *Rise of the Planet of the Apes*, which Fox opens August 5.

Beyond the five initial films the studio released from the late '60s through the early '70s (*Planet of the Apes*, *Beneath the Planet of the Apes*, *Escape from the Planet of the Apes*, *Conquest of the Planet of the Apes* and *Battle for the Planet of the Apes*), the franchise was one of the biggest successes of its era in terms of motion-picture product licensing. Indeed, it might be argued that part of the reason the series' flame has been kept alive for so many decades is the popularity and creative potential of these side projects.



The heroes and villains of *Planet of the Apes* were among the first you could bring home with you.

One of the first crucial stepping stones in *Apes* merchandising was the short-lived TV-series spinoff that aired from September-November 1974 on CBS. This *Planet of the Apes* starred franchise stalwart Roddy McDowall (who had portrayed Cornelius and that character's son, Caesar, on the big screen) as an ape named Galen, adding credibility to this new incarnation—even if he was playing a different character. In addition, new humans Col. Alan Virdon (Ron Harper) and Major Peter J. Burke (James Naughton) were added—but the show was hardly a ratings smash (13 episodes of the 14 filmed were actually broadcast), and arrived after the final theatrical entry, *Battle for the Planet of the Apes*, opened to lesser box-office results in 1973. A number of these episodes were later re-

packaged and aired as five two-hour TV movies beginning in 1981, bringing *Apes* lore into the era of the '80s blockbuster.

Apes products outperformed the initial box-office grosses of the movies themselves.

In addition, 13 episodes of a companion children's cartoon, *Return to the Planet of the Apes*, were aired on NBC in 1975. While it's worth noting that all of the feature films had G or PG ratings and were deemed suitable for a family audience, the live-action and animated shows might have been many kids' first exposure

since. In order to give 20th Century Fox the confidence to finance the then-risky proposal of a "Western in space," Lucas forfeited a high writer/director fee in exchange for retaining the merchandising and sequel rights. And the rest, as they say, is history. While the *Star Wars* franchise is the second-highest-grossing film series of all time (\$5.49 billion worldwide, with *Harry Potter* at #1 with \$5.57 billion) and one of the most durable, it is undoubtedly the merchandising that has helped keep the title alive for generations.

That is why James Cameron announced he would write the *Avatar* novelization himself. It is why Hasbro/Kenner recently manufactured *Jurassic Park* toys (anticipating a sequel that may or may not happen) even though the last installment was over a

to *Apes* before the dawn of VHS. This meant Fox could keep the franchise alive, much in the same way that *Star Trek* remained strong thanks to repeat TV viewings in syndication during the '70s after the original series left the airwaves after three seasons. So if *Star Wars* set the template for the mix of commerce and art, *Planet of the Apes* was certainly the blueprint.

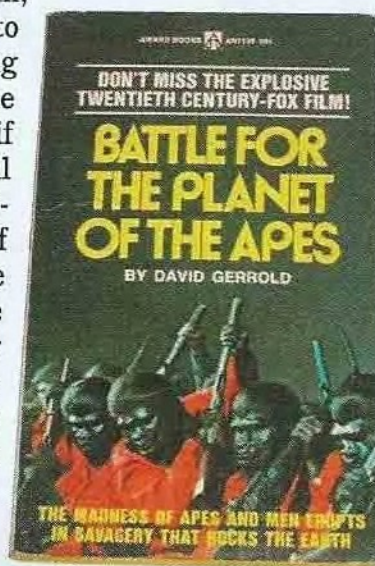
Although the grosses of the original films (\$81,826,314 domestic combined) came nowhere near what would be expected of a blockbuster today, they were big for their era, and after

The live-action and animated shows might have been many kids' first exposure to *Apes* before the dawn of VHS.

the first film's release in 1968, the Topps trading card company licensed a series of *Apes* cards (at 5 cents a package)—the start of the franchise's marketing history. These were followed by a reissue of the original Pierre Boulle novel, and the Jerry Goldsmith soundtrack was released on LP at the same time.

With the release of *Beneath the Planet of the Apes* in 1970, Gold Key issued a comic-book tie-in; it was the only film in the series to have such an adaptation coinciding with its theatrical run. But while the movies continued to be successful (if on a declining scale), it wasn't until after the last feature, *Battle*, debuted in 1973 that the tidal wave of merchandise that would keep the franchise alive would hit. With the death of the films' producer, Arthur P. Jacobs, that same year, his production shingle APJAC Productions sold all the rights to the series back to Fox, which then exploited them for full value.

First, a "Go Ape" marathon hit screens in 1974, with all five films playing in one long theatrical sitting for a single admission price. These proved very popular (and were later mimicked by *Star Wars* and other movie series) and, along with CBS' broadcasting of the first three films in one block (to phenomenal ratings), led to the *Apes*-mania craze that swept popular culture in the mid-'70s. Selwyn Rausch, who controlled Fox's merchandising, led the studio to a windfall as *Apes* products outperformed the initial



Monkey marathons of all five features remain popular draws to this day.

box-office grosses of the movies themselves. Addar Products Corporation was in on the ground floor with model kits of the most popular characters (Dr. Zaius, Cornelius, General Ursus, General Aldo, Caesar and Dr. Zira, plus Stallion and Ape Soldier) between 1973-75. These kits were so iconic that several of them were rereleased in 2000 by Polar Lights.

After that, the floodgates opened. At the time, the Mego Corporation was having great success licensing popular characters from the comic-book world and issuing articulated 8-inch action figures and playsets. The company had the rights to such iconic heroes as Tarzan, Superman, Spider-Man, Batman and Robin and others. As toy legend goes, it was after being dragged to a "Go Ape" marathon by his son that Mego president Marty Abrams was inspired to contact Fox to license those characters. They couldn't get the rights to utilize original *Apes* star Charlton Heston's likeness, so the human action figure was simply called "Astronaut." Utilizing cloth costumes and facial features that were quite detailed for action figures of the time,



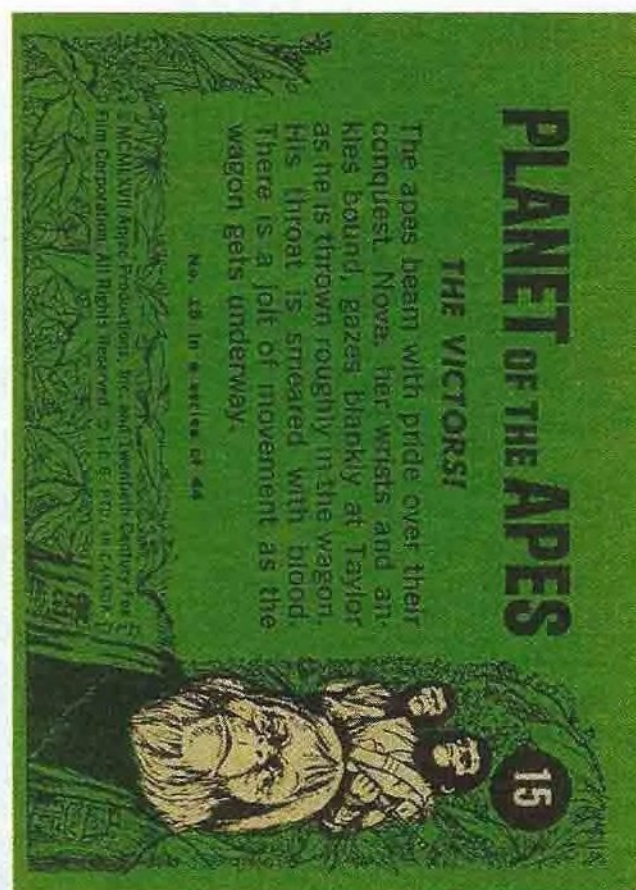
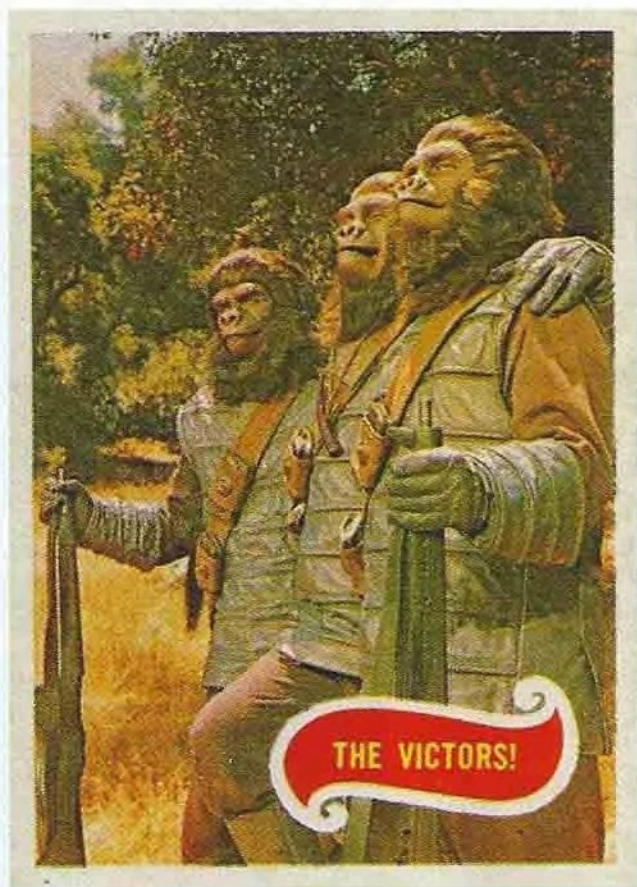
No doubt parents hoped their kids didn't ape the eating habits of the characters on their lunchboxes.

Mego's iconic style has become a template for today's collectors' superhero and movie action figures, moving away from the molded-plastic toys that became the norm following Kenner's *Star Wars* line.

These licenses helped put *Planet of the Apes* at the forefront of the cultural zeitgeist, even if the subsequent TV spinoffs had more of the whiff of a fad than a long-lasting success. Additionally, all of the features (except for *Conquest of the Planet of the Apes*) were turned into audio LP/comic-book sets by Power Records, and Marvel Comics released various *Apes* titles from 1974-77. *Apes*-mania became so big that a Connecticut rock outfit called Electric Cowboy released an album on TPI Records called *Planet of the Apes...A Musical Trip* in 1974, and the band members were invited onto the Mego float for that year's Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade to play their music wearing *Apes* costumes!

Other musically based projects made the scene during this period, from acts inspired by the phenomenon to compilation soundtrack records abetting the score with other sci-fi themes—a very common practice at the time on labels such as Wonderland Records. References to *Planet of the Apes* would later appear in recordings by everyone from Adam Ant to They Might Be Giants.

But that's not all. For children, the popular lunchbox company Aladdin issued *Apes*-themed boxes; Halloween over-the-head



In the days before home video, you could relive the *Apes* saga via the trading cards.

created by the Ben Cooper Company. Piggy banks were produced by Playpal Plastics Inc., and Topps issued another card set in 1975, based on the TV series. At the time of this writing, over 3,500 items were listed on eBay under the "*Planet of the Apes*" heading, with one notable entry being gauntlet gloves used by the gorillas in the original 1968 production, with the top bid at \$1,750. Not bad for a pair of used gloves!

While *Apes* merchandise peaked in the mid-'70s, it created a prototype for film franchise marketing that would be perfected by *Star Wars*, *Star Trek* and many others. In particular, what the *Star Wars* team learned from it was the strategy of coinciding product release with the film debut. And if Tim Burton's 2001 *Apes* remake was not as popular with fans or critics, it was a solid financial hit with a domestic gross of \$180 million and \$182 million overseas, leading to new releases of some of the old products as well as new action figures and trading cards to introduce *Apes* to the next generation of filmgoers.

Did it work? The answer must be yes, if Fox's decision to produce *Rise of the Planet of the Apes* is any indication. Indeed, the marketing factor was so important that the original title, *Rise of the Apes*, was changed to its current incarnation to assure the film was seen as part of the durable legacy.

Thanks to *Apes*, modern studios now factor in a film's merchandising potential before they even greenlight a big-scale production. *Tron: Legacy* was only a moderate hit given its budget, but ancillary products will help offset its cost. Chocolate versions of both Thor and Captain America found themselves alongside Easter bunnies on grocery-store shelves recently, in anticipation of their movies' respective releases. And while many may say—with some merit—that this sort of marketing exemplifies a cynical approach to filmmaking, the *Apes* legacy proves that it can also help a movie endure for future generations. Perhaps if there had been a *Logan's Run* chocolate bar, we'd be on *Logan's Final Run Part 7* by now.

