

## THE RONDO HATTON SYNDROME

by Kanguy Chow

*"I have an important message to deliver to all the cute people all over the world. If you're out there and you're cute, maybe you're beautiful, I just want to tell you something -- there's more of us ugly mother-fuckers than you are, hey-y, so watch out."* FZ, The Palladium, NYC 27-10-78 (*Dance Contest, Tinseltown Rebellion*)

For those of you who still don't know, Rondo Hatton was at one time "*the ugliest man in movies*". A WWI veteran and former sports reporter who only switched to a career in Hollywood when his acromegaly (google it) started to get 'out of hand', he is famous for his creepy roles in such B-movie classics as *Spider Woman Strikes Back* and *House of Horrors*, and also – according to one version of the legend – for marrying a pretty starlet after his first wife divorced him. Quite a rollercoaster run for someone twice voted "*The handsomest boy in high school*". And even some 60 years after his death, 12" Rondo Hatton action figures with their *abnorminably* large hands and faces are available for collectors to fondle and fetish, proving that you can never be too ugly (or too dead) for show business.

FZ's occasional use of 'Rondo Hatton' as a stage name in the 1970s clearly connects with his enduring love of monsters and associated B-movie cheapness – an enthusiasm for the bizarre and the ridiculous that runs right through his work. But his championing of the weird and the ugly is not about some voyeuristic delight in deformity. It's about exploring the limits of the possible, celebrating difference, and acknowledging that not only do most of us not fit the standard mould, worse deformities are caused by the effort to conform. As Zappa put it in an interview with *Playboy* in 1986, "*This concept of one world-ism – everything blended and smoothed out to this mediocre norm that everybody downgrades themselves to be – is stupid.*"

Rondo Hatton had literally '*outgrown the ordinary*', a man condemned to live out in public the ugliness that most of us try to hide from, both in ourselves and others. He may have had no choice, but his story is still a metaphor for what we all go through in learning to love the monster within – that world of secret hungers which may otherwise turn us into a politician, a policeman or a pop star. Though the hardest thing for a child to bear is not to be seen as 'normal', to truly grow up is to recognise that the truth about yourself (and the world) is always more extraordinary, more shocking and more sublime than anything the tyrannical boredom of the norm could ever lead you to expect. Creativity is about daring to be different, and delighting in it – surely one reason why Zappa was so fond of Halloween, a pagan festival that in its modern manifestation is a licence for a person to "*express creatively his relationship to his immediate environment and the social structure as a whole*".

Above all, we should remember that the concept of '*a French phonetic corruption of a short cloth neck ornament*' is always normative – as experiments by the early pioneers of composite photography showed. We may be instinctively drawn to the plain vanilla phenotype – studies consistently confirm that the faces we most

commonly perceive as 'beautiful' are the most 'average' of the range of human possibilities – but the 'model' is always an aspiration we are doomed to fall short of. If you aspire to be cute, you're riding for a fall – and if beauty is the lie you believe, there ain't much hope for a fool like you. Whether at the level of genes or memes, evolution is driven by mutants: *there is no progress without deviation*. The celebration of ugliness is a recipe for freedom, and the Rondo Hatton syndrome is about getting down with your bad self, and digging it while it's happening.

The present-day *mutant* refuses to die!