



DEATHGASM

A FILM BY JASON LEI HOWDEN

PRESS NOTES

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LOGLINE

In this hilarious and outrageous blood-soaked adventure, the members of a heavy metal band inadvertently open the gates to hell when they play a forbidden piece of sheet music.

SYNOPSIS

The producers of *Housebound* and *Starry Eyes* bring you the most Metal action horror film of all time—*Deathgasm*!

Metal-thrashing Brodie is an outcast in a sea of jocks and cheerleaders until he meets a kindred spirit in fellow metalhead Zakk. After starting their own band, Brodie and Zakk's resentment of the suburban wasteland leads them to a mysterious piece of sheet music said to grant Ultimate Power to whoever plays it. But the music also summons an ancient evil entity known as Aeloth The Blind One, who threatens to tear apart existence itself. Their classmates and family become inhabited by demonic forces, tearing out their own eyes and turning into psychotic murderers...and this is only the beginning! It's up to Brodie, Zakk and their group of friends to stop a force of pure evil from devouring all of mankind.

Produced in association with the New Zealand Film Commission and MPI Media Group, the hilarious and outrageous *Deathgasm* features an amazing original soundtrack of fist-banging metal and practical effects by Main Reactor (*Evil Dead* remake) to satisfy metalheads and splatter fans alike. *Deathgasm* will gush bodily fluids, rain limbs and tickle your funny bone, before tearing it out and giving you a stiff beating with it.

How *Deathgasm* Stems From *Bad Taste* and Real-Life Angst

As a kid, Jason Lei Howden had a thing for cover art. Living with his parents in the small mining town of Greymouth, located on the west coast of New Zealand, Howden wasn't allowed to rent or watch horror movies—rather, his father encouraged him to watch R-rated ninja movies, since Mr. Howden hoped his son would take an interest in martial arts. Films like *Ninja III: The Domination* and *Enter the Dragon* were okay, but horror? Not so much. Yet that didn't stop Howden from getting his fill of the genre in whatever ways he could.

When he wasn't in school, Howden's preteen years were spent sneaking into local video stores and gawking at the elaborate VHS box covers on display. If he couldn't watch the actual films themselves, he'd at least admire how they were being sold. Howden especially loved the designs created for the *A Nightmare on Elm Street* franchise's various cassette releases.

But Freddy Krueger's exploits paled in comparison to a certain cult horror classic that was made in Howden's native country, and his exposure to it happened by sheer chance. One day, when he was 9 years old, Howden was killing time inside a department store, casually perusing through the video game section, when something caught his attention on the display televisions above him. It was Peter Jackson's *Bad Taste*, that gleefully gruesome splatter flick that's pretty much the opposite of idea department store viewing. "Some irresponsible employee must have stuck a tape on," recalls Howden. "I just stood there stunned. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. I watched until the very end, and I think that was the moment my mind was corrupted. I even wrote a fan-fiction story, which I still have, a sequel to *Bad Taste* where the heroes have to battle the Predator."

That was the moment when Howden knew he'd one day make a horror film of his own. As a teenager at boarding school, he gave the dream his first shot. "I wanted to make a horror film: a deranged mental patient escapes and kills a bunch of boys with a pair of scissors," says Howden. "It was based on a true story, that of a metal patient who went crazy at Nelson Boys College and was taken away by the cops. My teacher was going to lend me his handycam until I submitted the script. He didn't talk to me much after that." As if his off-center tastes in cinema weren't alienating enough, Howden was also an unabashed metalhead, worshipping at the proverbial altars of hardcore groups like Cannibal Corpse, Morbid Death, Emperor, and Deicide. He was even part of an upstart metal band. "I probably shouldn't talk about our stage antics because I'm not sure about the statute of limitations," says Howden, "but they were the best years of my life."

Except for the times when his boarding school classmates would pick on him for his head-banging ways. High school wasn't easy for Howden, but then a fellow thrasher enrolled into his school. It was a case of best friendship at first sight. "I got a lot of shit from bullies until another metalhead named Marcus started school and we

became friends,” he recalls. “Marcus was insane, good at fighting, and got all the chicks. He once seduced a girl by quoting Slayer lyrics, asking her how an angel fell so far south of heaven.”

The combination of admiring Peter Jackson’s *Bad Taste* and befriending Marcus have combined into Howden’s feature film debut, *Deathgasm*. It’s Howden’s first full-length effort, but it’s not his first effort altogether. Howden has already made three animated short films: *Melodies of the Heart* (2010), co-directed by Wade Cowin; *Veil* (2011), about a man who copes with his girlfriend’s death by creating a fantasy world full of monsters; and *The Light Harvester* (2014), a post-apocalyptic tale set in a world where light has depleted and a husband needs to find light in order to save his dying wife. A major factor into why Howden went the animation route for his shorts was his inability to find VFX experts who’d work on the films for free. In order to learn the ropes himself, Howden went to work as an upstart also visual effects compositor for Jackson’s company WETA Digital, and over the course of six years with WETA, he collaborated with some of the best VFX people in the business on massive Hollywood productions like *The Avengers*, *Prometheus*, and Jackson’s *The Hobbit* trilogy.

An impressive resume, yes, but also just the glossy prelude to *Deathgasm*, Howden’s dream project. *Deathgasm* is a partially autobiographical horror-comedy about two metalheads, Brodie (played by Milo Cawthorne) and Zakk (James Blake), who band together as high school outcasts, form their own metal band, and unknowingly conjure up ancient demon known as Aeloth the Blind One after playing a mysterious piece of sheet music. Helping Brodie and Zakk out in their battle against the evil forces is the beautiful Medina (Kimberley Crossman), the only girl in school who’s interested in paying Brodie and Zakk any mind whatsoever. With a girl in their corner and countless hours’ worth of super-charged metal fueling them, Brodie and Zakk hack, slash, and riff their way through whatever undead and demonic force is ballsy enough to challenge them.

It’s the kind of insane concept only a guy raised on *Bad Taste* and *Cannibal Corpse* could ever come up with. Perhaps nobody can describe *Deathgasm*’s wonderfully crazy plot better than the man who dreamed it up. “A couple of teenage metalheads inadvertently bring about the demonic apocalypse, then have to save the world—using *the power of metal*,” explains Howden, “which of course means heaps of brutal guitar-shredding, corpse paint, and ramming crazy objects through skulls.”

And it all began with a foolproof title. “Honestly, the name *Deathgasm* came first, and then I worked my way backwards,” says Howden. “It wasn’t even about metalheads until very late in the process. I wanted to make a splatter movie but when I added the heavy metal element it just all came together. Metalheads are always portrayed pretty negatively in film and TV, and my whole motivation is that it’s time we have our own kickass heroes.”

Deathgasm went from dream to reality thanks to New Zealand-based genre

producer Ant Timpson, whose horror credits thus far include the critically acclaimed 2014 Kiwi horror-comedy *Housebound* and both the 2013 anthology film *The ABCs of Death* and its 2014 sequel, *ABCs of Death 2*. A few years back, The New Zealand Film Commission launched a micro-budget funding competition called Make My Horror Movie, in which aspiring filmmakers pitched their projects solely with the bare-bones concepts and self-made artwork. Out of the nearly 500 submissions, Howden's *Deathgasm* emerged victorious. "There were a ton of great concepts submitted by people but it was about weeding through those and seeing which ones had the potential to realistically find an audience," says Timpson. "One of our partners was MPI, who weren't onboard for their health. *Deathgasm* fit the bill as an entertaining premise, one that played with very familiar conceits but in a way that felt very backyard Kiwi in its aesthetic. It's also one of the easiest sells to people: two head-bangers summon demonic forces. Boom!"

Deathgasm was an intense labor of love. The shoot lasted a mere 20 days in Auckland, New Zealand, and with elaborate gore and makeup effects overseen by the Auckland-based company Main Reactor (who previously worked on the *Evil Dead* remake), it was a frantic and breathless three-week task. But it never felt like work for Howden, who eagerly embraced the opportunity to merge metal, demons, bloodshed, and laughs into the kind of horror film he loved as a kid. "With a modest budget and a script this ambitious, it's been hard as hell," says Howden. "We've had to beg, steal, borrow and prostitute our way to completing it. But I have zero regrets and would do it again in a heartbeat. Metal and horror helped me through some dark times in my life, and I wanted to give back to people who might be going through similar dark times."

Timpson, for one, couldn't be more impressed with the novice filmmaker's work. "Jason is the only guy who could make *Deathgasm*," says Timpson. "It's kind of his life growing up. There's a lot of material from his adolescence in the film. Not to say that he's written a small coming-of-age story—this puts boobs and bloods above any kind of serious attempt at the witnessing the growth of a child into a man. His script was laugh-out-loud funny when we read it, just full of goofy Kiwi humor that appealed instantly. He also treated the material with utter respect no matter how insane it all became. There's a real honesty to his work and a determination not to be another poser. He has a VFX background but I believe he's moved on from that world; he loves his characters in this film more than any VFX or practical gore shot."

And now that *Deathgasm* is finally ready to entertain horror audiences worldwide, Howden is anxious to showcase his love affair with horror that began way back in that department store with the not-so-kid-friendly in-store entertainment. Well, that and some other childhood influences. Says Howden, "If you took a baby, got it really stoned, and made it listen to Cannibal Corpse on repeat while an endless stream of horror movies played on a shitty old VHS player, feeding it only pizza, coffee, and disapproval, then after a couple of decades it would end up making *Deathgasm*."

Bringing *Deathgasm's* Metal-Loving Demon Slayers to Life

Brodie (male) 17 years old. Actor can be 17-24 yrs.

Lead character, charismatic and physically agile, skinny. Heavy Metal fanatic, always clad in metal T-Shirts, ripped jeans, boots. Into Death Metal and Black Metal. Plays guitar. A social outcast.

Never knew his father and his mother has recently been locked up in a mental institution. Uses music to escape his reality.

That character description was actor Milo Cawthorne's first exposure to "Brodie," the lead role in *Deathgasm* for which he was about to audition. Oddly enough, though, it wasn't the character's tortured home life or outcast lifestyle that caught Cawthorne's attention—it was one specific word mixed within that description that made the Whangarei, New Zealand, native interested in the part. "I really liked the skinny part," says Cawthorne. "I've always been a fairly skinny dude, and so many auditions come through where they want a buff, muscular, jock. You read that and you go, 'Oh well, no chance,'" but when something like this comes across your desk, you read that first line and go, 'Yeah, I could play that.'"

Cawthorne continues, "There's an immediate connection, because not everyone knows what it's like to grow up a skinny boy in school. That's a particular experience that only a few people have. It's something I was aware of growing up in small-town New Zealand where sports and physicality are honored quite highly and drama isn't so much."

Considering that *Deathgasm's* hero is closely based on its writer-director Jason Lei Howden's teenage years, it's interesting to note that Cawthorne and Howden had very different high school experiences. Cawthorne, for instance, was never a metalhead. "I went through a Metallica phase in my teenage years, but the bands we were listening to while making *Deathgasm* kind of made Metallica look like the Beach Boys."

In order to play the metal-obsessed Brodie, though, Cawthorne was able to pull from a real-life source of inspiration. "I did flat with a group of friends when I first moved down to Auckland," he explains, "and they were all in a death metal band that played fairly regularly at a local metal pub. So I had the experience of going to see them play, and being a tiny bit involved in the scene for a while. The lead guitarist and my flat-mate, Teejay Collins, came to my mind a lot as I filmed. Plus, I think that any 16- to 18-year-old guy has that sort of restless, explosive energy that Brodie has in the film, so just bringing to mind any sort of memories I had from that age was helpful."

Lead actress Kimberley Crossman could easily relate to Cawthorne's un-*Deathgasm*-like background. Born and raised in Auckland, NZ, the 26-year-old starlet didn't grow up around much head-banging or horror. But it didn't take much to convince her to pursue *Deathgasm*. Crossman reasons, "A good girl who turns into a badass

who saves planet Earth from a demon apocalypse with an axe—honestly, I didn't need to know much else.”

For Crossman, what makes *Deathgasm*'s heroic and atypical female lead so special goes much deeper than that surface-level description, though. Armed with an axe and taking no bullshit from anyone, whether human or humanoid, Medina is Jason Lei Howden's way of honoring beloved horror heroines like *Alien*'s Ellen Ripley, and Crossman jumped at the chance to join such hallowed ranks. “I love it when the good girl you expect to maybe die first turns out to be a hero,” says Crossman. “Medina is a great character and I love how she takes little convincing to get on-board and fight for her friends and how she turns out to be helpful in killing demons. She is loyal, with great comic timing and fearlessness, and that's what makes a great heroine.”

Their similar love and enthusiasm for their respective character aside, both Cawthorne and Crossman agree that what ultimately made *Deathgasm* such a rewarding experience was the chance to work with a director who lived and breathed the project. They knew they were in great and capable hands, even though Jason Lei Howden was a rookie. “Jason had enthusiasm,” says Cawthorne. “He had practically lived this story in his teenage years, minus the demons and dildo bashings, but he had an intimate knowledge of the story and material. The great thing about it was that, since it was his first feature, he was as wide-eyed and awestruck as we were by the whole process. So you really felt like an equal with Jason, and he was so open to anything you had to offer, which was fantastic.”

Crossman is just as forthcoming with her praise. “Jason is a genius,” she says. “I can't wait to work with him again one day. For someone to tackle his or her first feature with such a big project is a huge achievement. He's a great director and I loved that he allowed everyone to play and make suggestions and try things. That environment is always so exciting to work in, as you feel you are part of the creative process, and that, as a team, we're making something fun and different.”

JASON LEI HOWDEN INTERVIEW

Were there any specific movies that served as direct inspirations for *Deathgasm*?

I wanted to make a good old-fashioned splatter comedy. As a horror fan I'm distraught about the amount of found-footage supernatural films being churned out into the world. Every second horror movie is a cheap shaky-camera possession horror. I wanted to do something in the vein of *Braindead*, *Return of the Living Dead* and all those amazing Troma Entertainment movies like *The Toxic Avenger* and *Redneck Zombies*. It's all about laughs, guts, and fun. Other movies such as *The Monster Squad* and *The Goonies* were also an inspiration. I love movies about gangs of misfits and losers having to step up and save the day.

How closely does *Deathgasm* mirror your own high school experiences?

It was similar, except there weren't demons in my life—or girls, either. So some creative license there. Most of the moments like a kid getting stabbed by a math compass for smashing his King Diamond cassette tape are based on real events. You don't mess with King Diamond.

Ultimately, what do you hope audiences take away from seeing *Deathgasm*?

I hope they have lots fun, simple as that. It's intended to be an entertaining, loud and brutal splatstick comedy that your parents will hate, so go see it multiple times! I see kids wearing Cannibal Corpse and *Evil Dead* T-Shirts all the time; you will *never* see anyone wearing a *The King's Speech* or *Argo* tee. I want that to be our legacy, to see *Deathgasm* emblazoned on some dudes chest, all grubby and faded, covered in Cheetos dust. Kids quoting lines to friends in the schoolyard—that would be the real success for me.

MILO CAWTHORNE INTERVIEW

Your character, “Brodie,” is an outcast, a kid whose interests have alienated him from most of his classmates. Were you able to pull from any of your own high school experiences to help play Brodie and bring *Deathgasm*'s high school world to life?

There were definitely elements of my school life that echoed Brodie's, but in a much smaller way. I didn't really have a close group of friends at school, and nobody else was into acting as much as I was, so I knew that feeling of being different, of being the odd one out. Plus, I grew my hair down to my shoulders and wore weird clothes to make sure everyone knew I was weird. But I kind of enjoyed it. I didn't have to fit in—the pressure was off. There was definitely that feeling of, other people are boring and aren't into what I like, so why should I bother? Which in hindsight just feels like a teenager's coping mechanism, something I used to get through those years.

Was it easy to develop a chemistry with your co-star, James Blake? Did you guys have time to rehearse with them and get to know them before shooting began?

I got on well with James. We had similar ideas about living, except maybe he was a bit more fearless than I was. He is a skilled painter and plasterer and I wanted to be one, so I bugged him a lot about teaching me how to do that stuff. He never agreed, but there was definitely a similar relationship that developed. He was the leader between the two of us. We did have a bit of time to rehearse with everybody, which was really great. One of the highlights was a jam session with everyone in the movie's fictional band. We sounded awful! Absolutely awful. But it was great to start working on the group's dynamic, and how we all related to each other.

***Deathgasm* comes from a long line of splatter-horror films, particularly ones made in New Zealand. Are you a fan of the genre?**

I would never have called myself a fan in the past, but there is a recurring pattern I'm noticing. In 2013 I worked on a film called *Blood Punch*, which is another horror-comedy. Through the processes of working on *Blood Punch* and *Deathgasm*, I've been exposed to more and more horror/splatter films as part of my research, and I must say the genre is growing on me. I recently watched Peter Jackson's *Bad Taste*, which has a real amateur charm about it. You're aware that you're watching a film the whole time, and it doesn't really draw you in, but you're glued to the screen, rooting for the characters and for the entire film, really. It's a fun watch. That's the beauty of those films—they're an escape, not because you are totally absorbed, but because the idea is so outrageous and the approach to something so serious is treated lightly.

Kimberley Crossman Interview

Were you able to pull from any of your own high school experiences to help play Medina and bring *Deathgasm's* high school world to life?

Well, I can't say we ever experienced our teachers turning into demons at all. I went to an all-girls school, so I never experienced learning environments with boys. I tried to make Medina a bit more like Kim by doodling on my notepads and making sure my school bag was packed with books. We had so much fun with not only the cast but all the other talented actors that gave their time to play our peers as well. They were long days and it makes such a difference when everyone is having a good time. That made a difference in creating a high school environment for the film.

Was it easy to develop a chemistry with your co-stars Milo Cawthorne and James Blake?

Finding chemistry with those two talented, beautiful guys wasn't hard at all. I have known Milo for a while and I am a huge fan of his work, so I was stoked when I heard he had been cast. As an actor it's always such a gift when you get to work with other actors who are always open to ideas and dedicated to doing the best job possible. We also had loads of fun making silly videos and playing with the props on set.

Would you call yourself a "horror movie fan"?

To be honest, I have seen a lot of horror movies, but I would have to say it wasn't my genre of choice. When I first walked in to the *Deathgasm* production office, I was slightly creeped out by all the body parts lying on the ground. At some point during shooting I must have become de-sensitized to it all as I barely blinked when I would walk in to a blood-splattered room with limbs lying everywhere. After being in a film like this, I think I can watch these movies through a different lens. It's only made me want to be a part of more films of this nature.

ANT TIMPSON INTERVIEW

Was *Deathgasm* a difficult film to make in any respects? And if so, why?

All low-budget filmmaking is a pain in the ass for all involved. There's no way around the fact that people are going to get stressed, exhausted, bitter, and twisted, and the project will usually run out of money somewhere along the way. It's just par for course. The crew on *Deathgasm*, however, featured some very experienced members, which minimized a lot of those usual problems. The producers pulled together a crazy good team for this budget—just a ridiculous amount of experience involved. But doing effects and stunts and shooting during freezing nights with tight turnarounds always adds enormous pressure. Because there's so much crazy in this film, that definitely helped lift spirits. Any time a giant dildo comes out of the prop box you know there's going to be some crew camaraderie.

What impressed you most about *Deathgasm's* cast?

I could blow smoke up their asses all day long, but, hand on my heart, they're all great in this film. It's a risky project for some actors; they don't know how they're going to end up—all they see is this wacky stuff happening everywhere and probably think, "What the hell have I done?" Everyone committed to the type of film it was. They have to; otherwise, it all falls apart. We asked them to do some pretty gross stuff. Cameron Rhodes, who's a great classically trained actor—and plays the bad guy in *Housebound*—had to do a blood fart. I mean, come on—it ain't *Hamlet*.

Is there a mission statement behind Timpson Films? And, if so, how does *Deathgasm* factor into that?

No mission statement. People tend to break those all the time and look stupid. I'm just going to be involved with people and stories I think are fun. Okay, *that's* my mission statement: "Have fun."

Between *Deathgasm*, *Housebound*, and *What We Do in the Shadows*, there's a new wave of horror cinema coming out New Zealand right now, and it's all very exciting and high-quality. Why do you think now is the right time for NZ to make another big impact on the genre?

It's funny, we read that statement everywhere, whenever one of the films is reviewed. But there's no wave happening. There might be a ripple in which three low-budget comedic genre films arrived around the same time and all played many of the same festivals. I wouldn't call them high-quality in terms of production but they *are* high-quality in terms of entertainment value, and that's the price point I think every film should aim for. *Deathgasm* is different, though—it's way more over-the-top and bloodier than *Housebound* and *What We Do in the Shadows*. The humor is coarser and grosser.

FILMMAKER BIOGRAPHIES

Writer/Director: Jason Lei Howden

Although *Deathgasm* is Jason Lei Howden's first feature film, the Greymouth, New Zealand, native is no rookie in the movie industry. For six years, Howden worked for Peter Jackson's NZ-based effects company WETA Digital as a VFX compositor. As a visual effects expert, Howden's credits include work on the Hollywood productions *The Avengers* (Marvel Studios/Paramount), *Prometheus* (20th Century Fox), and *The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug* (Warner Bros.).

Before completing the horror-comedy *Deathgasm*, Howden made three short animated films: the comedic *Melodies of the Heart* (2010), the fantastical *Veil* (2011), and the dystopian survival drama *The Light Harvester* (2014).

Producer: Ant Timpson

Ant Timpson is the founder of Timpson Films, a New Zealand-based indie genre film production company specializing in horror.

Born and raised in Auckland, NZ, Timpson has always focused on genre cinema, accumulating a massive 35mm print archive that's been given the distinction of being the largest personal film archive in the Southern Hemisphere. In 1994, Timpson launched The Incredibly Strange Film Festival, which now exists as part of the New Zealand International Film Festival. And in 2003, he started the 48Hours film-screening event that now includes New Zealand hero Peter Jackson as a mentor.

In addition to *Deathgasm*, Timpson Films' steadily growing catalog of independent films includes *Housebound*, a horror-comedy that premiered at the 2014 SXSW Film Festival; *Turbo Kid*, a futuristic action-comedy that premiered at the 2015 Sundance Film Festival; and the anthology films *The ABCs of Death* (2013) and *ABCs of Death 2*, both of which Timpson co-produced by Draffhouse Films' leader Tim League.

CAST BIOGRAPHIES

Actor: Milo Cawthorne

A native of Whangarei, New Zealand, Milo Cawthorne has been acting professionally since 2003, when, in addition to studying at London's Young Shakespeare Company, he landed a role on the New Zealand children's television series *P.E.T. Detectives*. In 2009, he scored what, at the time, was his biggest role to date, the part of Ziggy Grover on the hugely popular *Power Rangers RPM* series.

A short stint living in Los Angeles starting in late-2011 led to Cawthorne filming the award-winning independent horror feature *Blood Punch*, which premiered at the 2013 Austin Film Festival. With the horror-comedy *Deathgasm*, in which he plays the lead role, Cawthorne continues his burgeoning career as a go-to genre film hero, but he's also keen on dramatic projects as well, appearing in the New Zealand miniseries *When We Go to War* (2014).

Actor: James Blake

A newcomer to the movie industry, James Blake is making his feature film debut in *Deathgasm*, playing the confident, metal-loving wild child "Zakk." Before working on the independently made New Zealand horror-comedy, Blake collaborated with NZ royalty Peter Jackson on the Warner Bros. production *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey*, learning the ropes of a huge film set while serving as one of Jackson's production's body doubles.

Actor: Kimberley Crossman

Born in Auckland, New Zealand, Kimberley Crossman has worked non-stop as a professional actress since 2007. Her first big break came on the New Zealand soap *Shortland Street*, which aired five nights a week and on which Crossman played the main character "Sophie McKay" for six years. Crossman's star rose even higher in 2011 when she landed the role of Lauren, the Red Storm Ranger, on popular children's action-adventure television series *Power Rangers Samurai*, which also led to providing voice acting for the show's accompanying video game, *Power Rangers Super Samurai*.

Crossman's steady small-screen career has also included an appearance on the successful ABC sitcom *Black-ish*. *Deathgasm* marks her first leading role in a feature film.

