

Zombieland

By Steve Bryant

On the strength of his all-American-boy good looks, his million-dollar voice, and his Walter Cronkite integrity, Jack White enjoyed a long career as San Diego's most trusted television news anchor. He is likewise highly regarded in magic as a noted collector, as a friend to many, and as the International President of the International Brotherhood of Magicians. But long before this—before the politics, before the collecting, before the television career—Jack enjoyed a different sort of career, a career on the dark side of magic. For four years, beginning at age 17, he was one of the youngest and most successful operators of midnight spook shows in southern California, bringing *Dr. Blood's Zombie Show* to dozens of area movie theaters.

Nowadays, zombies are everywhere. Movies such as *Zombieland* and *Shaun of the Dead* are critical and financial successes, books such as *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* and *The Zombie Survival Guide* are best sellers, and zombie action figures lurk on toy shelves. But 52 years ago, before they went mainstream, Jack White did zombies before zombies were cool.

It all began with Jack's after-school job working for the Sigel Brothers, who owned a string of movie theaters and booked attractions in others. Spook shows were popular at the time, and the brothers booked a number of them. It was after seeing Kara-Kum's show that Jack said, "You know, I can do one of those." The brothers knew that Jack was a magician, and so Robert Sigel turned to him and said, "Well, you're going to do the next one then. Start putting it together."

Jack's material quickly accrued. "I had an electric chair that I'm really lucky I never electrocuted anybody in," he said. "It worked on dry cell batteries. I did a lot of the standard stuff, like '20th Century Silks.' I had a ghost painted on one of them that was luminous, and that was actually part of our blackout. I had an Abbott's 'Super-X.' I had a really neat headless illusion that I bought used from Jack LaWayne. I don't know who it belonged to or who made it, but it was very effective and I had a great routine for it. Right out of the head chopper."

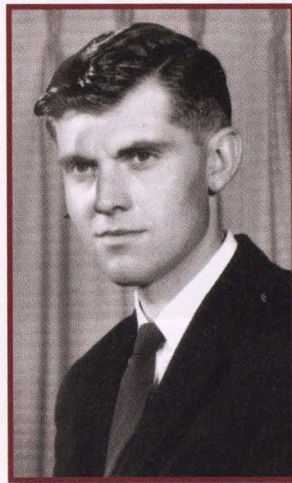
But all great shows are character driven, and it was here that

the show excelled. "Hollywood Magic sold some special masks that were made of liquid latex by Don Post. He was a famous movie make-up artist, and he had one called The Mummy. I used that on one of my characters, and I had an old pair of white overalls that we'd used to change the marquee at the theater. We dressed him

up in the white overalls and the mask, and he looked absolutely menacing. He became Zeke the Zombie. And Zeke the Zombie came out of a Doll House illusion that we had painted up like a haunted house. I don't know how you equate haunted houses with zombies, but we did. I had a sign painter do a pretty good job on it. And Zeke would come out, and run across the stage a couple of times. We had a big box with a sign on it painted *DANGER HIGH VOLTAGE* with a handle on the side of it and a red light bulb on top that blinked on and off throughout the whole evening. And Zeke

would then plunge the handle downward, and that would send the theater into the blackout. The projectionist up in the booth would turn all the lights out, and he would roll the trailer that had been advertising the show, and he would run the sound up as loud as he could, and the ushers would shoot kids with squirt guns, and we'd leave the lights down for about 45 seconds, and then we'd come up and the show was over."

Zeke the Zombie was the show's star. Jack learned quickly that he couldn't use any of the Universal monster names because they were



Young Jack White



protected by copyright; Universal watched closely and would sue. So he developed his own monsters. "Zeke was in all of the seasons that I did the show, then later I put a werewolf in, too. Post made a really great werewolf mask. In fact I had a girl play the werewolf and she was really good."

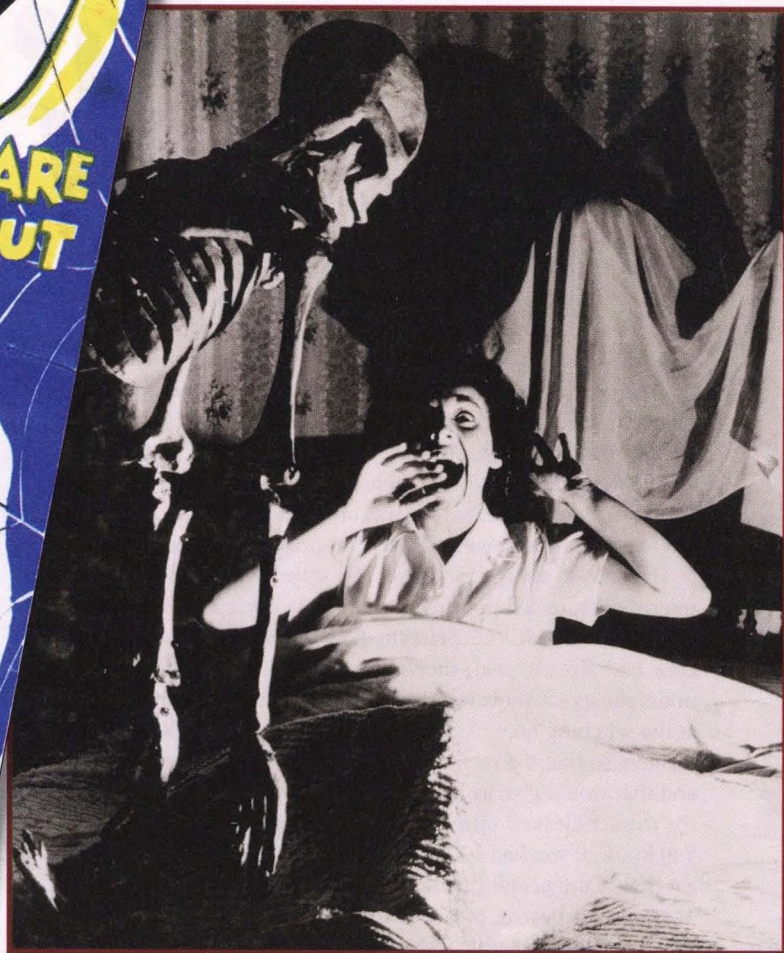
Of course, Zeke sought out victims. "Zeke always attacked a girl and was strangling her

when the lights went out. That's when he would run across and plunge the theater into darkness. We used that gag all four years that I did the show. It just worked well. It was a perfect cue for the projectionist. Even a blind projectionist could see that."

The show's blackout included a luminous skeleton that Jack had lying in the footlights. When the theater plunged into darkness, Jack would pick it up, and the thing would dance across the stage. "I had it fixed so his head would come off, and it looked like his head was flying up in the air," Jack said.

Jack would have liked using a gorilla suit in the show, but they were far too expensive. As he put it, "Fifty-two dollars for a 'Super-X'—I thought that was all the money in the world."

Jack included mentalism routines that no doubt impressed his young audiences. In the opening portion of the program, he did Questions and Answers, with the pre-show work done in the lobby by the theater staff. They would just bring him the clipboards. And he would do the "Premonition" card trick that Abbott's put out. "That was actually the opening effect. I just had somebody stand up in the audience and think of a card." It was presented as an experiment in thought projection,



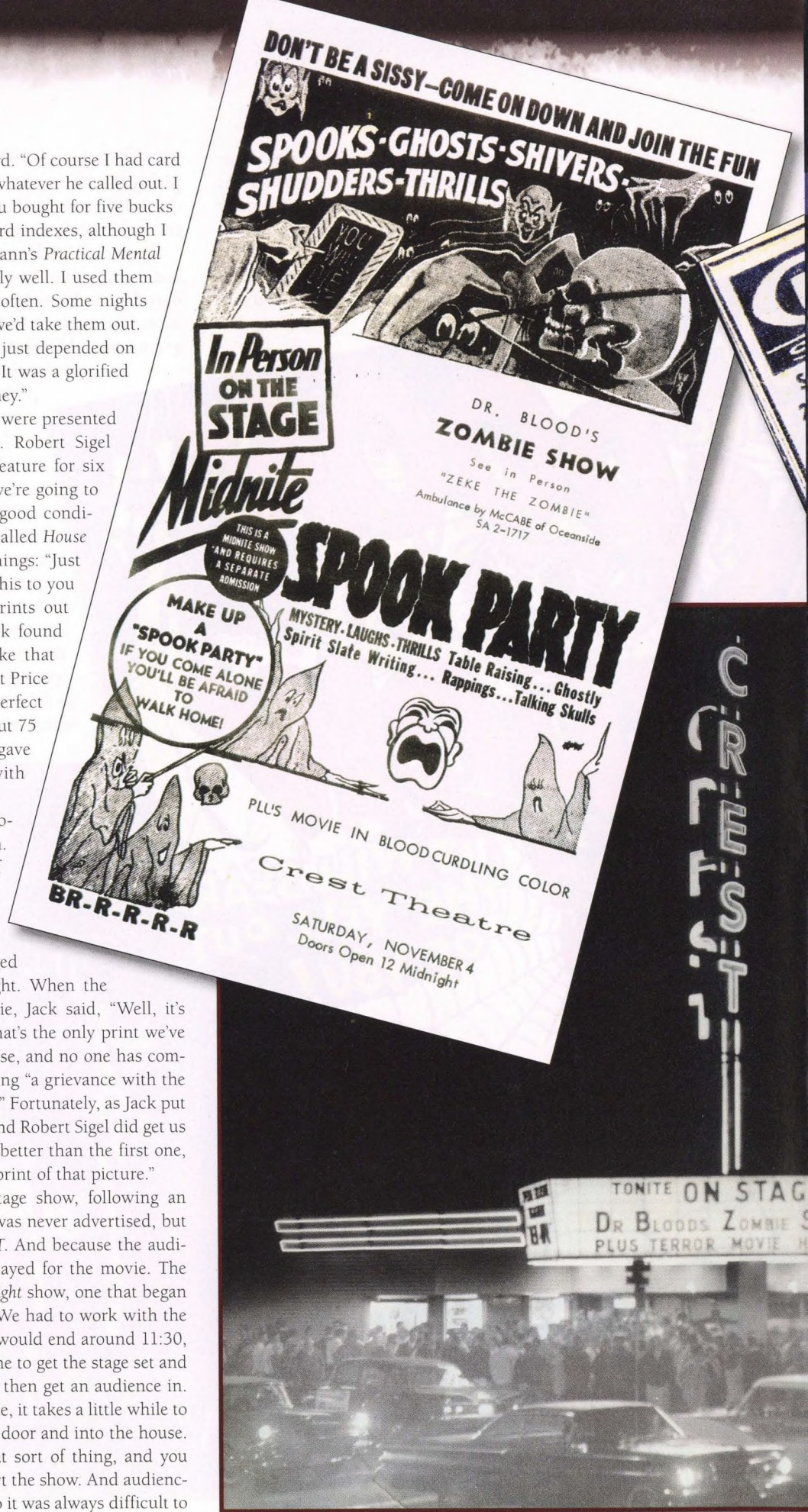
A scene from *The House on Haunted Hill*

and the spectator would call out the card. "Of course I had card indexes in my pocket and could go to whatever he called out. I think it was one of those tricks that you bought for five bucks or whatever. I still have my original card indexes, although I made another set after reading Annemann's *Practical Mental Effects* that actually fit my pockets really well. I used them most of the time. The show changed often. Some nights we'd leave things in, and some nights we'd take them out. It would go from 37 to 42 minutes. It just depended on the audience and how it was working. It was a glorified magic show. And we made a lot of money."

By tradition, midnight spook shows were presented in conjunction with a horror movie. Robert Sigel went to Allied Artists and rented a feature for six months. What they said was, "Here, we're going to give you this print. It's not in really good condition. We've run the hell out of it. It's called *House on Haunted Hill*." It was one of those things: "Just keep your mouth shut, and we'll give this to you for a few hundred bucks. Get the prints out and don't ever bring them back." Jack found that there were lots of little deals like that that you could strike. And this Vincent Price classic proved to be, as Jack put it, "a perfect movie for us to run. I think it ran about 75 minutes, so it was not too long. It just gave us time to pack up and settle the bill with the theater."

One night Jack had to deal with a projectionist who refused to run the film. He complained that it was so full of splices that he couldn't run it through the projector without a break. He had earlier refused to run a spotlight, citing that as a union job, and Jack assuaged him by stating no need for a spotlight. When the projectionist refused to run the movie, Jack said, "Well, it's eight o'clock at night. I'm sorry, but that's the only print we've got. We've had no trouble anywhere else, and no one has complained." Eventually the guy ran it, filing "a grievance with the union, and running this under protest." Fortunately, as Jack put it, "the thing held together somehow, and Robert Sigel did get us another print. I'm not sure it was any better than the first one, but for future dates, we had a second print of that picture."

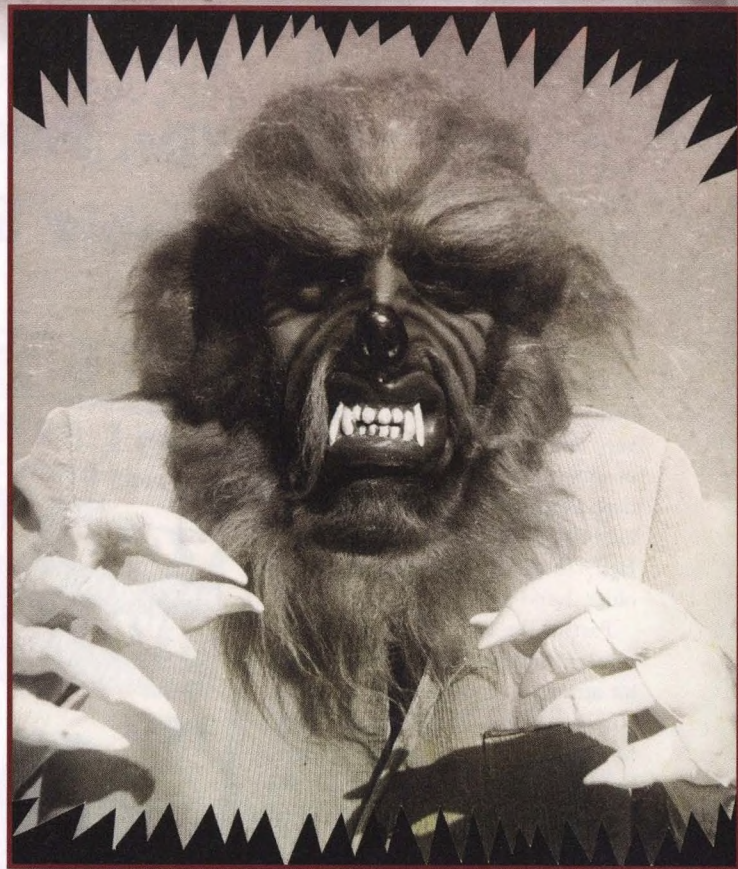
The movie always ran after the stage show, following an intermission to sell popcorn. Its title was never advertised, but was always *ON SCREEN HORROR HIT*. And because the audience had already paid, they always stayed for the movie. The midnight spook show was a true *midnight* show, one that began at the witching hour. As Jack put it, "We had to work with the theaters so that the regular attraction would end around 11:30, and that would give us just enough time to get the stage set and the theater cleaned up a little bit, and then get an audience in. You know, if you had 700 to 800 people, it takes a little while to get that many people just through the door and into the house. They are all buying popcorn and that sort of thing, and you want them in their seats when you start the show. And audiences are not conditioned to live shows, so it was always difficult to



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 Frank Sinatra
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 Thursday, Feb. 21st
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 NOT MOVIES
YOU NEVER
 HAVE SEEN THIS KIND OF SHOW
NEVER THESE MONSTERS ALIVE
 100 TIMES SCARIER FOR REAL!
FIRST TIME HERE!
 SLAVE MAIDENS AT
 MERCY OF
 MIBEOUS
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ALL NEW BLOOD CHILLING
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coordinate an audience and the show and everything else altogether, because everybody was used to movies. You just hit a button and start it. But now, you're talking about coordinating lighting and other things. Even though the lighting wasn't greatly sophisticated, still you had to turn the footlights on, and, if you were lucky enough to have a curtain, it had to go up. Or open, or whatever it did, and that wasn't very often. You were more likely to have a portable stage that some manager had jury rigged."

"The whole idea of the show," in Jack's words, "was to bring a date to this thing, and to try to steal a kiss if you could. So they came to laugh and



be entertained, so we really didn't have to have a spooky show." Jack spared his audiences some of the blackout stunts used by others, such as making physical contact with the spectators. As he said, "Theater managers were pretty careful. They wanted to know what you were going to do. Most of them were really antsy about having their exit lights turned out, so sometimes you were never in total darkness. You had to be kind of careful with some of the things you did."

One season, he did paint some paper plates with luminous paint and put them down in the trough of the footlights. He'd spin those out into the audience like flying saucers. And of course when people would catch them, they would throw them right back. So he had those things flying all over the theater. But there was concern about that, so he had to quit that rather quickly.

Despite the notoriety that attended some spook shows around the country, Jack's shows never attracted any trouble from the police or from parent organizations. "I never had any problem at all," he said. "We had a pretty good advertising campaign, and I still have a lot of the flyers and stuff like that. I think it's because we didn't show naked girls or anything like that, though we may have wanted to. We just promoted it as an extra show at midnight. Come and have the 'Yell' scared out of you. With a big capital Y. I don't know, maybe it was a more innocent time. We just never had that kind of problem. No parent groups ever came down on us."

Although the crowds were never rowdy, there would always be trouble spots. "You know, you always had a smart aleck," he remembered. "And so you had a couple of comebacks that worked. I remember one night, I had a smart aleck that wasn't going to give up. We never had to throw anybody out. I remember finally using a line, 'Well, thank you for that. You're a

lifesaver. I can tell that by the hole in your head.' And that was just enough to shut him up. I think that if I would have been five or six years older, I probably wouldn't have had any problems, but being young and looking young, sometimes I had a little problem. The one thing I had going for me, I was always very tall. I think that image kind of came across, and I had a pretty deep voice, and that bought me a lot of respect from the audience. Hell, some of the audience was older than I was."

Part of the lore and mystique of the midnight spook show era was its advertising and its promotional stunts, and *Dr. Blood's Zombie Show* fit right in. An avid collector himself, Jack is particularly proud of his paper. "National Screen made some wonderful stock posters. I have a nice big one hanging up in my museum, a 40 by 60. They also made up one-sheets and window cards. All you had to do was put your own snipes on there and it just made wonderful paper. And it was cheap. I think a 40 by 60 cost \$2.95. If you had to go have that stuff printed, if you went to Central Showcard Printing or one of those, you were paying a lot of money for paper, but I just went to National Screen and bought that and took it down to my local sign painter and he would put whatever I wanted on there." Of course, it was occasionally difficult to back up the claims. "I remember once," Jack confessed, "I had *FLOATING WOMAN*—*SEE THE WOMAN FLOAT* and we had left the 'Super-X' back at home. We advertised it, and nobody ever said anything."

Spook show operators were famous for stunts or gags to promote the show, such as having a coffin in the lobby or a nurse on duty. *Dr. Blood's Zombie Show* had an ambulance parked out front and issued Faint Checks. If you filled out the Faint Check, and you actually fainted during the show, they would give you free transportation to the hospital. According to Jack, "The Faint Check was very effective. Managers liked those. We had those passed out all over. When people were lining up at the box office, we'd have one of the ushers pass out Faint Checks to them, and of course we had them in the lobby usually a week before the show played, so that we could stimulate some interest."

Jack's favorite promotional stunt, which he used to great success, was a straitjacket escape. "I had a gimmicked straitjacket, and I was smart enough not to try to do one hanging upside down. So I would just do a regular straitjacket, and sometimes

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NOT MOVIES!

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HAVE SEEN THIS KIND OF SHOW
NEVER THESE ALIVE
MONSTERS
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MAIDENS A'
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HIDEOUS
BEASTS!

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FAINT CHECK

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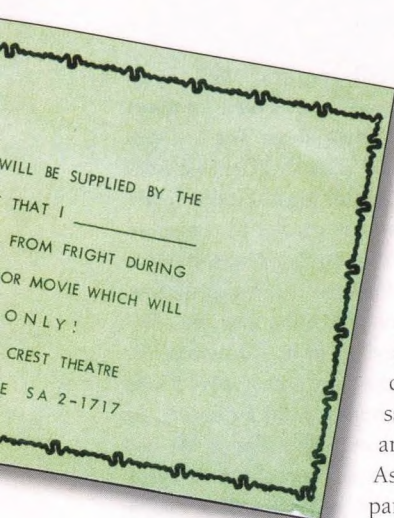
SHOULD "FAINT" OR PASS OUT
"DR. BLOOD'S ZOMBIE SHOW" OR SPECIAL TERR
FOLLOW THE LIVE STAGE SHOW. ONE SHOW

12:00 MIDNIGHT, SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 4 - AT THE
McCABE'S AMBULANCE SERVICE PHON

the theater manager would set up a cross plug with a radio station, and they would describe it on the radio. Once we did it in the lobby of the theater, and another time we did it in the parking lot of a radio station. We could build that up. We'd do that about two o'clock in the afternoon. And it was amazing. By four o'clock, the box office was jingling. So it did work. I remember we did advertising with radio stations that sold us a 30-second ad for a dollar. It was called 'a dollar a holler.' But you had to buy 200 spots over a period of a week, or some such thing. With theater managers, it was a 50-50 split. They would take 15 seconds of it and advertise their regular attraction, plus Saturday night would be the *Dr. Blood's Zombie Show*. So, the way it worked out, we did a lot of advertising pretty cheap."

It was one thing for a teenage spook show operator to deal with an audience of a thousand of his peers, another to deal with more adult theater managers. "I always had to be really careful after the show," Jack said, "because most managers would try to clip you for a little more than what you actually got. So I would have to make them account for every bit of it. And then they would always tell you, 'Well, we don't have today's advertising in yet, so we don't know.' You would split the money right then. You didn't get a check a week later. I'd go up after the show, while they were packing it up, and the movie was on, and I'd sit down with the manager, and he'd tell me how many people they put through, and I'd demand a 50-50 split right there. Of course, he'd have all his expenses. Some managers had a pretty sharp pencil. And others, they didn't care, they'd just go ahead and give you 50 percent and bite the bullet on whatever else. Because we were an extra show for them they made a fortune selling popcorn."

Jack ran into managers low enough to ask him to pay for light bulbs that had burned out during the show. On one particular



occasion, he finally had to phone the Sigel Brothers to complain that a certain manager was nickel and diming him. "Is he with you?" Mr. Sigel said. Jack said no. "Let me call him in his office," Mr. Sigel said. And Jack went up to the office to hear the manager on the phone with Mr. Sigel, saying, "Yes, sir. Yes, sir. Yes, sir." And he wrote Jack a check. "They were tough guys," Jack said. "All I had to do was call them and they would bail me out right away. As a matter of fact, once we had had a particularly successful run. A Thursday-Friday-Saturday, and I came home with a

lot of money. And my dad got a little worried. He thought I was selling dope or something, because I was making more money than he was. I think he went to see one of the Sigel Brothers. So Robert Sigel came to me and says, 'You know, I think we ought to put this into an account for you somewhere.' He says, 'Now I've got your dad coming down my neck, and I've got all these managers coming down my neck.'

Despite the occasional financial disputes, Jack found most of the managers to be pretty good sports. They were all men, usually in their 50s, and they were always "kind of eager to see the show."

Jack finds it interesting that few remember not only the genre, but the theaters in which the midnight spook shows played. "Even theater people. Young guys today have no idea what you are talking about. They know about fourplexes, and they think that *those* are antiquated old theaters. Well, I'm talking about theaters that held 1200 to 1600 people."

Of course, not all could match such elegant theaters as described by Mark Walker in his spook show history, *Ghostmasters*, those with "crystal chandeliers, classical statues, Wurlitzer pipe organs, marble pillars, beautiful stages, and massive banks of seats." Jack carried his show in a footlocker and two trunks, along with two Star Magic portable backdrops in case the theater had no curtain. On one such occasion, he arrived about two in the afternoon, introduced himself to the manager, and asked for directions to the backstage area. The fellow replied that there was no backstage area. "I had to build a stage for you for this show," he said. So Jack set up his portable curtains in the hallway that went out the Exit door. "It was totally illegal to do that," he said. "We were going to be there for one afternoon, and he figured the fire marshal wouldn't even come and look. So we kind of stowed our stuff in there and began setting some of it up." Between runs of the regular movie, someone asked Jack if he had been onstage yet. "So I decided I'd go out and just stand on the stage real quick," he recalled. "And it rocked. So I went to the manager and said, 'What's the stage made of?' And he said, 'Well, we bought all this toilet paper, and it's boxes of toilet paper. I had them put plywood down on top of it, but they nailed the plywood together, so it should be all right.' Well, hell, we put a P&L table on there and the thing practically flew off the stage. We had a flying table. Wasn't even part of the act. We were all seasick by the time we got through

with the show that night. Nothing was safe on there. It was all falling over. It was the worse night of my entire life. It was all this paper products that he had in cardboard cases, and he used that for the basis of the stage. It was just awful. So I crossed them off our list."

The most unusual theater at which Jack performed was in Twentynine Palms, California. "It's a big Marine base, and it's just desolate. There's nothing out there but a drive-in movie theater and they booked me to do a spook show. The stage was the roof of the snack bar. So everybody would get out of their car and come and gather around, and I'd do my little show. It was a Saturday night that we were going to do the show. About 11:30 the theater manager came to me and said, 'We're pretty well sold out for the show. I think we ought to start it at 11:40,' and he says, 'If you want to stay around, and do another show afterwards, I think we can sell enough tickets to pay for it.' So we filled the drive-in up once, and then they stayed for the show and movie afterwards, and as people would leave, they'd let the new customers in. About 2:30 in the morning, we did a second show. And it had to be 95 degrees out there. It was just outrageous."

Jack presented the shows all four years with a skeleton crew. Jack played Dr. Blood himself. A friend of his in the Navy, a corpsman, found him two or three white Navy doctor's smocks. Jack wore one of those with a mirror on his forehead, and it worked pretty well. "I remember once," he said, "because I was pretty young, I put a phony moustache on. About halfway through the show, the damn thing fell off. So we quit that after a while. It was one laugh after another, I'll tell you that."

Jack used one other principal assistant, "and then I had this girlfriend. And depending on what terms we were on, she would work with us. She did draw the line on certain things." The main assistant was Leo Quintanar. Jack grew up in Oceanside, and Leo, a fellow magician, grew up in nearby Escondido. Leo became a commercial artist and eventually drew a series of underground X-rated comics under the name Lee Carvel. "We were about the same age. We'd go out together and do the show. He did most of the backstage work, and he was Zeke the Zombie. Leo got a little bit chunky at one point, and we had a little bit of trouble one night getting him into the Doll House. I said, 'Leo, we've got to get somebody else, or you've got to go on a diet.' The Doll House we had was originally an Abbott's, kind of like a 'Temple of Benares,' and we were always working on that. Here we had it painted up to where it looked pretty good. It didn't look like an Abbott's anymore. It was always in need of some new repair. That poor thing was not made to troupe. We had a hell of a time with it. That was probably the one piece we were always repairing. The show was pretty trouble free. If it didn't work, we just didn't do it."

Given the success of the show, and the significant fact that its success was earned by someone so young, it is surprising that the show didn't make it into Mark Walker's excellent *Ghostmasters*. Jack was of course aware of others who did make it into the book. Perhaps the finest of those shows to ever tour belonged to Bill Neff. "Bill had a great spook show," Jack said. "I remember talking with theater managers who had booked the Neff show and they said that was the best show we've ever seen, and I'm sure it was. I always hated to have to do my show after

hearing them talk about Neff.” Briefly, he worked for Kara-Kum: “Kara-Kum hired me ... I only did it in an off-season type thing. He had some shows to do, some dates. They were small town dates that I think only picked up a couple of hundred bucks a night, that really wasn't worth anybody's time. I think that was the problem. He didn't want to go out and do them. And he had a rattrap old show. I did some of his stuff, and some of mine. I think I did four shows for him, and said that's the end.”

But the most influential operator discussed in Mark Walker's book was Henry Valleau. “I got my show from Henry Valleau,” Jack said. “He grew up with John Daniels. I was working for Mort Goldberg at the Academy Theater on Hollywood Boulevard, and Henry Valleau would come into the show. One night Mort said, ‘You know, Jack is interested in those spook show things that you used to do.’ And Valleau said, ‘Listen, I've got a case of stuff over there you can have.’ So he gave me some stuff, including some paper. His show was called *Valleau's Zombie Show*, and that's really where I got the name. That summer I went to work for the Sigel Brothers, and that was the genesis of this whole thing. I still have the original road case that Henry carried his show in. He had a very nice set of Spirit Paintings that I never got from him. He was going to give them to me, then at the last minute decided he was going to hold on to them. I don't really blame him. I think the Spirit Painting was Lincoln. Paul Fox made something similar to this, and it would bring that painting up with the light behind it, and it would slowly fade into existence. It was very effective. On stage it really looked like a million dollars. He used that as his feature of the spook show. But his show was far different from anything I did.”

So, to answer the question as to how Mark Walker might have overlooked the show, Jack considered that it might have been because he didn't go through any of the usual booking sources. “The Sigel Brothers booked it kind of exclusively. We were a 200-miler show. I played southern California, mostly. We'd get down into El Centro, areas like that. So probably that's how it kind of got overlooked. We weren't on a circuit like anyone else. We just booked everything the Sigel Brothers had some booking interest with.”

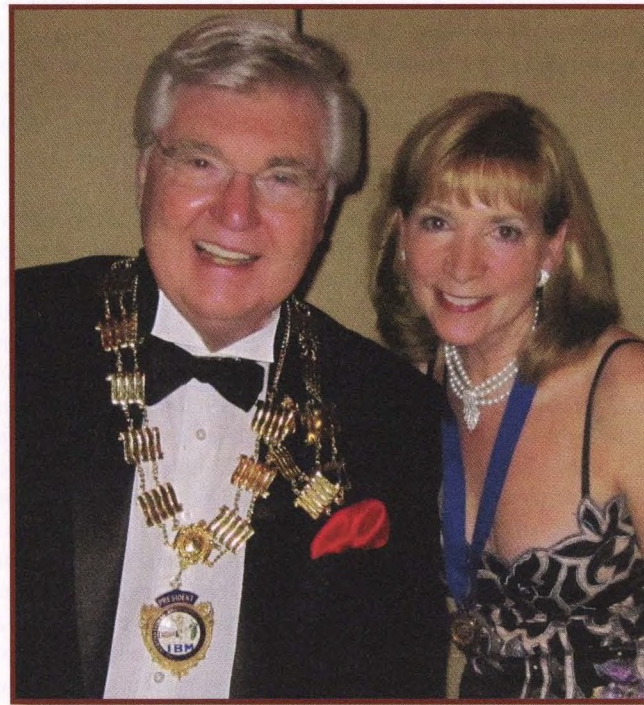
Some spook shows of the era failed to live up to the promises of their advertising, and the Sigel Brothers had been burned by less than competent operators. They said, “We've got to do something a little better than what we're doing here,” and because of this they had decided to give Jack White the chance. Jack recalls

doing the show for them, sometimes only in parts. “We'd just go into one of the theaters and set up the show and do it for them. After a while, they would even contribute ideas. The last year I did *Dr. Blood's Zombie Show*, they had actually given me some money to help produce the show. I had this big guillotine made, and it really looked good, but it was just a killer to transport. I would put a hood over the person whose head was going to be chopped off and have them kneel behind this big guillotine, and it looked like their head was going into the area, but they would slip another bag with a volleyball in it. And when the blade came down, they'd let go of the bag, and it would look like the head was chopped off. And honestly, for a minute, the audience would just gasp. And there would be a silence. We had

to do something to break the silence, and a couple of times, we were going to make the head float, and do some other things. And in joking one afternoon, I grabbed the head and I dribbled it across the stage. And that was the key. Everybody said, “Do that, leave it in. It's funny. Suddenly we know it isn't really a head in there.” It was something that we just kind of picked up in rehearsal. I think it was Robert Sigel who said, “Leave that in. I like that. That's funny.”

Eventually, the time for the midnight ghost show passed. In Jack's words, “The spook show was very popular in southern California from 1957 to about 1961. We don't know what happened. I was still

doing shows in '63. I went away to the Army the same year and, when I came back in '65, nobody would book a spook show because the attitude of audiences had become far more violent. I think it was brought on by the Vietnam War or perhaps the assassination of President Kennedy, I don't know. There was a lot that figured into that equation. I remember coming back and meeting with a group of theater owners from Los Angeles and showing them all my paper and trying to put a show together, and every one of them turned me down. And I said, ‘What happened?’ And they said, ‘We don't know. But we can't put that kind of an attraction into our theater, because the kids will just tear the theater to pieces. We need something else.’ So I created a rock and roll show. We'd run *Rock Around the Clock*—we got that movie real cheap—and I had a couple of turntables, and I'd spin some records, and they'd all get up and dance in the aisles and what have you. We'd do that for about 42 minutes and somehow or other I'd manage to do a couple of magic tricks in there, but it never had the success that a spook show had. •



Jack and Lynn White