



A Morbid Curiosity

BY LESLEY GOLDBERG

From Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, Anne Rice's *Interview With the Vampire* and Joss Whedon's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* to today's craze over *Twilight* and *True Blood*, the vampire genre has come from out of the grave to take center stage.

And as it has taken hold of movie complexes, book stores and the small screen, members of the LGBT community have found interest in the genre's gay undertones, specifically in Alan Ball's scorching-hot HBO series *True Blood*, which is based on the best-selling *Sookie Stackhouse* book series by Charlaine Harris.

With "God hates fangs" and the show's ostracized vampire community paralleled with the homophobia that still exists across the country, vampires have always appealed to the LGBT community, according to author Pam Keeseey, who has written such texts as *Dark Angels: Lesbian Vampire Erotica* and *Daughters of Darkness: Lesbian Vampire Tales*.

"The vampire's blood lust is often associated with sexual lust," she says. "While some vampires clearly have gender preferences, the fact that vampires don't necessarily differentiate by gender makes it easy to project an ease with bisexuality and gender transgression onto one of the most enduring creatures of the human imagination."

"Vampires flaunt any number of taboos—returning from the dead, drinking blood, killing with abandon, taking whom they want, when they want, regardless of gender or sexual orientation—and I think that makes them compelling figures for all of us who step outside the traditional roles that have been outlined for us by society," Keesey adds.

"Vampire fact, folklore, fiction and film is steeped in homoeroticism," she says. "There is the proto-lesbian murderess Countess Bathory (1560-1614) who, by her own accounts, killed 610 women—to bathe in their blood, the legends say—before she was finally arrested, tried and imprisoned for the rest of her life.

"Homoerotic vampires also have a long and illustrious past in vampire fiction, including Samuel Taylor Coleridge's lesbian vampire poem *Christabel* (1797), John Polidori's *The Vampire* (1819—inspired some say by the homoerotic relationship between Polidori and his employer, Lord Byron) and Sheridan LeFanu's *Carmilla* (1872), which has been the basis for countless lesbian-themed vampire films. Of course, the impact of Anne Rice and her homoerotic vampires can't be underestimated when it comes to the appeal of vampires to an LGBT audience."

Fred Olen Ray, writer-director of Here TV's *The Lair*—a supernatural drama revolving around the happenings at the Lair, a gay vampire sex club on a small tropical island—believes the genre, as well as his show, appeal to a wide cross section of viewers.

"The content seems to appeal to all types of people, which I find refreshing," he says. "(We attract) gay males, but we're also seeing a lot of couples and straight horror fans turning out at the different media events I've attended."

The Lair, which will have 28 episodes under its belt when its current third season concludes, has pushed the vampire genre to include boy-meets-boy story lines.

"Vampire films have always dealt with guys biting girls, and girls biting girls, but it never goes too far into the 'boy meets vampire, vampire bites boy' story line until now," Ray says. "I think there is something inherently erotic about being forced to submit and give into a force that is both sensual and dangerous at the same time. Maybe that's something people would like to think would be cool and can live it out vicariously through our characters without having to give up their blood!"

David Moretti, who plays good-guy reporter Thom Etherton on *The Lair*, says the "morbid sensuality to vampirism" helps attract viewers to the show.

"The act of death is somehow romanticized through an embrace and a climactic bite, often between two men, yet never with a stigma," he adds. "It's very sensual in a way, which definitely piques our sexual curiosity. There's also something to the whole 'coming out only at night' thing, which surely could be looked at as a metaphor for those who feel ostracized from a societal norm."

With the recent third-season pickup for *True Blood*, and *Twilight* fans storming San Diego's 40th Comic-Con International in late July for a glimpse at *New Moon*, the second film in author Stephenie Meyer's book series-turned-big-screen smash, the genre doesn't show any signs of cooling off.

Vampires are so hot that network TV is throwing its hat into the ring with the CW's upcoming fall launch of *The Vampire Diaries*, an hour-long drama based on the tween *Night World* books written by L.J. Smith.

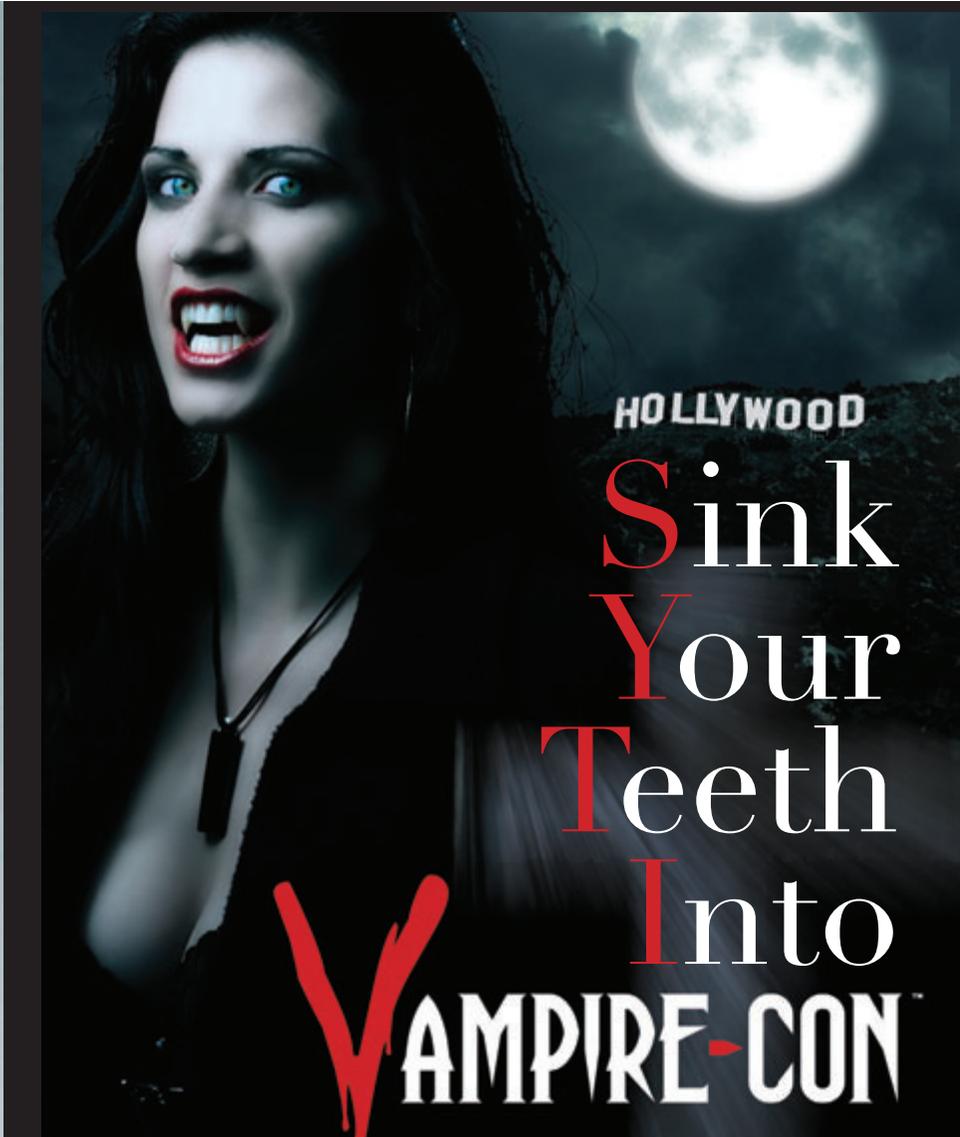
Beyond that, Wendi Mirabella, through her Moondance Entertainment company, has launched the first-ever Vampire-Con, a weekend of panels, screenings and parties intended to mimic Comic-Con International with a focus purely on vampires.

"Historically, there always has been a homoerotic subtext to vampire literature," she says. "The LGBT audience for so long was in the closet yet fortunately was able to enjoy books and films that not only fed their fantasies but addressed their real-life activities as well.

"In addition, vampires have always had an outsider or taboo status, which today still speaks to the LGBT audience," Mirabella adds. "Hopefully with the popularity of *True Blood*—which seems to be reaching all sectors of society—it will help break down barriers or at the very least allow even the conservatives to consider their long-held positions about homosexuality."

At Comic-Con, where *Twilight* fans camped out overnight to get into the panel, star Robert Pattinson (who plays vampire heartthrob Edward Cullen) was asked why people love vampires. His response was simple: "The problem is that when I look at it, I never look at it as a vampire story." Co-star Taylor Lautner (who plays werewolf Jacob Black) added: "I think a lot of the characters are very relatable."

Indeed. At the end of the day, it really is all about the love story, isn't it?



Taking advantage of the popularity of the *Twilight* books and subsequent movie series, as well as HBO's *True Blood*, Vampire-Con is touted as the first convention of its kind focusing entirely on the vampire genre.

The inaugural event, set for Aug. 14-16 in Hollywood, will feature a number of events and activities, beginning with the Vampire Film Festival at the New Beverly Cinema on Aug. 14-15.

Films screened during the two-night festival will include *Count Yorga, Vampire*, the 1970 film starring Robert Quarry; 1987's *The Lost Boys* and a sneak preview of the upcoming vampire film *Midnight Son*, produced by the team behind *The Blair Witch Project*. Saturday's lineup includes *The Velvet Vampire* from 1971; 1983's *The Hunger* and a special announcement that was unavailable at press time.

While the film festival will offer opportunities to see vampires past and present, Sunday's full slate includes panel discussions, vendors and entertainment at the Music Box Theatre.

Panel discussions slated for Aug. 16 begin with "Why We Love Vampires: A Brief History of the Undead," with moderator Steve Biodrowski, editor of *Hollywood Gothique* and a number of panelists including Del Howison, the only actor to have played Renfield onscreen more than once. As the sun shifts, panels turn up the heat at 1 p.m. with "Hot-Blooded: Vampires & Sexuality," which will feature panelists Hal Bodner, Pam Keesey and the cast and creative team from Here TV's *The Lair*.

"Inked in Blood: 40 Years of Vampirella" will pay homage to the sexy comic book icon at 3 p.m. and includes guests like Donald F. Glut, director of *The Vampire Hunters Club* and a writer on *Vampirella Magazine*.

Contests running in connection with Vampire-Con include the chance for one woman to become the face of Vampirella at the weekend's event. Other giveaways are currently available on the event's web site and feature prizes including guitars, tickets and T-shirts.

Vampire-Con closes with a bang on Aug. 16 with the Vampirella's Ball, which like Comic-Con, will feature a costume party at the Music Box Theatre. *True Blood* music supervisor Gary Calamar will DJ the event, also featuring "VampirErotic" burlesque and "Blood-lusty" go-go girls and boys.

In addition to screenings and panels, Vampire-Con, in conjunction with the American Red Cross, will host a blood drive Sunday from 10 a.m.-4 p.m. outside the Music Box, with limited-edition "Blood is the Drug" T-shirts given to the first 40 donors.

More information and links to purchase tickets to all the events of the Vampire-Con can be found at vampire-con.com.