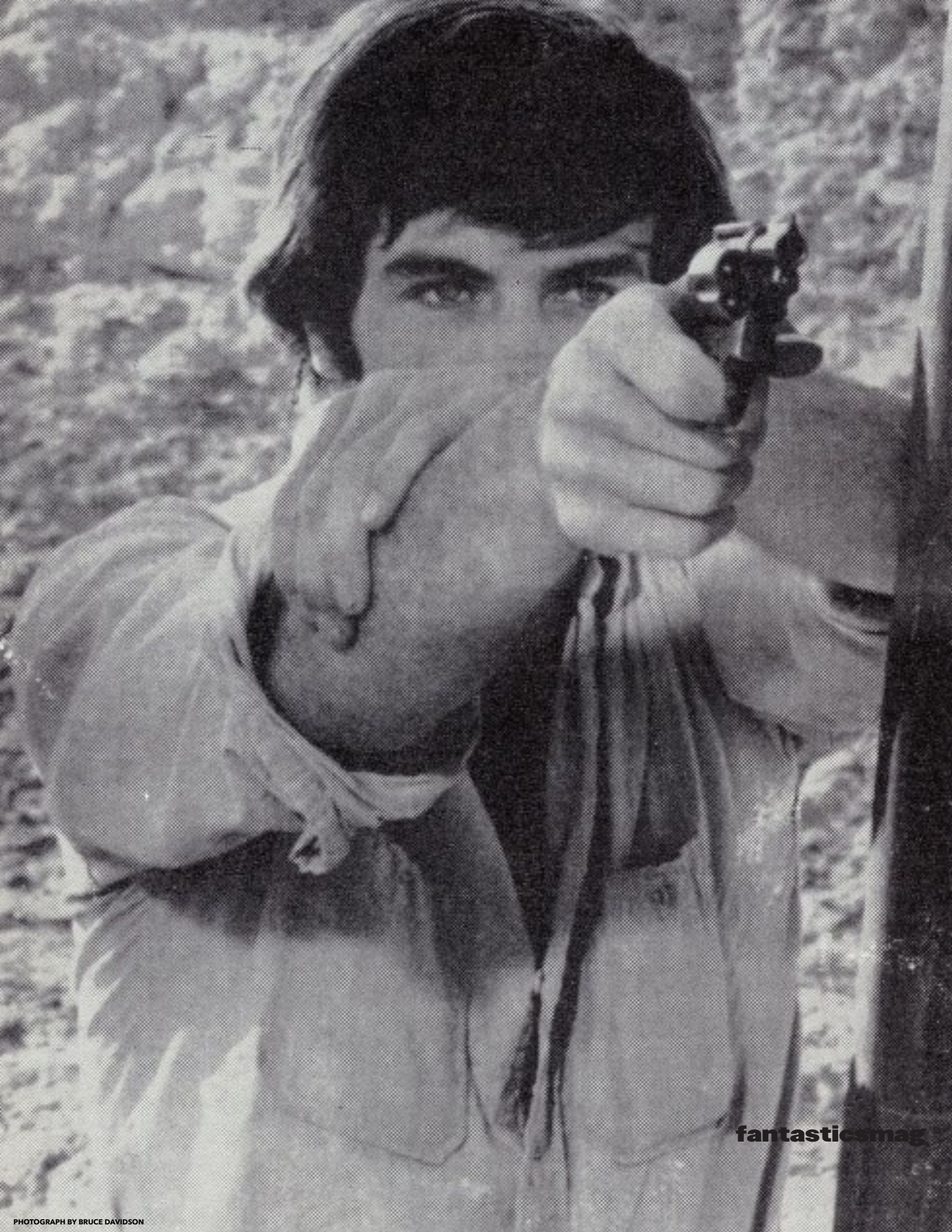


**FAVES & ENTHUSIASMS**

# DEATH VALLEY SUPERSTAR

Michael Yaroshevsky's film traces actor Mark Frechette's remarkable ride from obscurity to fame ~ and its strange and tragic consequences.

**INTERVIEW BY JAMES NIXON.**



fantasticmag



**IN HIS FILM *DEATH VALLEY SUPERSTAR* DIRECTOR MICHAEL YAROSHEVSKY EXAMINES the strange life of actor Mark Frechette. Frechette, randomly discovered in 1968 by a casting agent in Boston found himself, at 21 and with no acting experience, cast in the starring role of famed Italian director Michaelangelo Antonioni's first American production. Backed by Hollywood budgets, *Zabriskie Point* was to be Antonioni's masterpiece; an ode to 60's youth rebellion. After a troubled production, the film was a critical and boxoffice disaster.**

**Frechette found himself in a role that would strangely echo his real life. In just a few years he would go from coverboy to criminal when he and two members of a commune he was involved with attempted a bank robbery as a political action. One member of the crew was killed and Frechette ended up an inmate serving 6-15 years for armed robbery. On September 27, 1975 at the age of 27 Frechette was found dead in the recreation room of the Massachusetts Correctional Institution lying on a weight bench, a barbell with 150 pounds of weight on his throat. Though the circumstances were considered "a little strange," by the DA's office the death was deemed accidental.**

**Within our need to create, commodify, consume and destroy our icons, Frechette ended up a footnote rebel pin-up, forever 21. A take that sadly negates the realities of a damaged soul with dreamy yearnings and an amazing – if unhappy – destiny. *Death Valley Superstar* is less a bio-doc than it is jewel box full of riffs on the parallels of Frechette's life, the film role he played and the sad short path fate sent him down.**

**A short film on an obscure star of a little known film. What were the origins of *Death Valley Superstar*? Originally what do you find compelling about Mark Frechette?**

When I first saw *Zabriskie Point* something about Frechette struck me as strange. It wasn't just bad acting, more this awkwardness, as if he was outside the story somehow. I suppose it's the shot of him in the stolen plane laughing, just after he's taken off with Los Angeles far below. He seems completely in the moment there, spontaneously amazed to be where he is. Then I found out how he never made it to thirty, that he'd died in prison, that his life and his screen persona were these distorted mirror images of one another.



PHOTOGRAPH BY BRUCE DAVIDSON



*Mark Frechette with co-star Daria Halprin in a scene from Antonioni's Zabriskie Point.*

**How did Frechette end up the star of a big budget film with no previous acting experience?**

Antonioni had just had an enormous hit with *Blow-Up*, the film that was the first of a three picture deal he made under MGM. His follow-up was to be *Zabriskie Point*, and it was the only picture the giant studio was working on at the time. The film's executive producer told me they were going bankrupt but hoping this production would save them. They invested nearly 7 million dollars, which for the late '60s was some kind of record. As I understood it the studio in LA wanted to kill the 'Italian Marxist son-of-a-bitch', but the lawyers on the east coast ordered that he get carte-blanche. So the production auditioned thousands of professionals and unknowns across the States. They were apparently looking for someone living the 'truth of the times', whatever that meant. After the better part of a year they were still nowhere. Then one day in Boston, the casting director was having lunch in a Charles Street restaurant when she noticed that at the bus stop outside a fight had broken out between a handful of people and this wayward, wildly volatile eighteen-year-old who turned out to be Mark Frechette. Perhaps he simply was louder and better looking than rest. Whatever it was, time and chance did a number on him.

**Critics at the time savaged his performance. What's your view of Frechette as an actor?**

Antonioni was not the director to give any kind of motivation or to help him 'get it down to a the verb' if you like. The only thing that really counted for him was a physiognomy. Frechette seems to have been desperate for direction. In the dialogues he's mostly lost. In any event dialogue was never the principle thing for Antonioni. Plus if you read the essay about the film by William Arrowsmith, you'll be convinced it was all genius.

**Is he a performer or just playing himself?**

He's somewhere in between. If we accept that to perform on screen is more about *being* than acting, then at his best he's being himself. The trouble starts when he tries *acting* like himself. I find the threshold between the two fascinating.

**What is your critical opinion of the film?**

I've seen it so often that I've lost perspective. I wish it'd been a silent film. It would've worked perfectly.

**Why do you think the film was a box-office/critical failure for Antonioni? Was it simply bad timing?**

The expectations were immense. Here was the paragon of intellectual European cinema come to interpret the chaos of late 1960s USA: the Civil Rights Movement; the SDS; the Weather Underground; the Chicago Seven; Kent State; Vietnam. Antonioni wanted to film the desert.

**Did making a film about a film impact you as a director?**

Only insofar as getting lost in the details of a finished film deceive you into thinking you understand how it was made. No matter how closely you examine its decisions the existence of any film is a kind of strange accident. Sometimes a miracle, sometimes a disaster. Or in this case both.

**Frechette seemed to have no love for Antonioni. My feeling was that he seemed incredibly disappointed in the man.**

Someone as idealistic as Frechette could only have been disappointed. I think he believed the film could somehow portray what was going on at the time and expected as much. In any case I doubt Antonioni had much love for Frechette. There's a view that he related with the women in his films more than with the men.

**How did you approach the research aspect of the film? Was it difficult to get people from Frechette's life involved?**

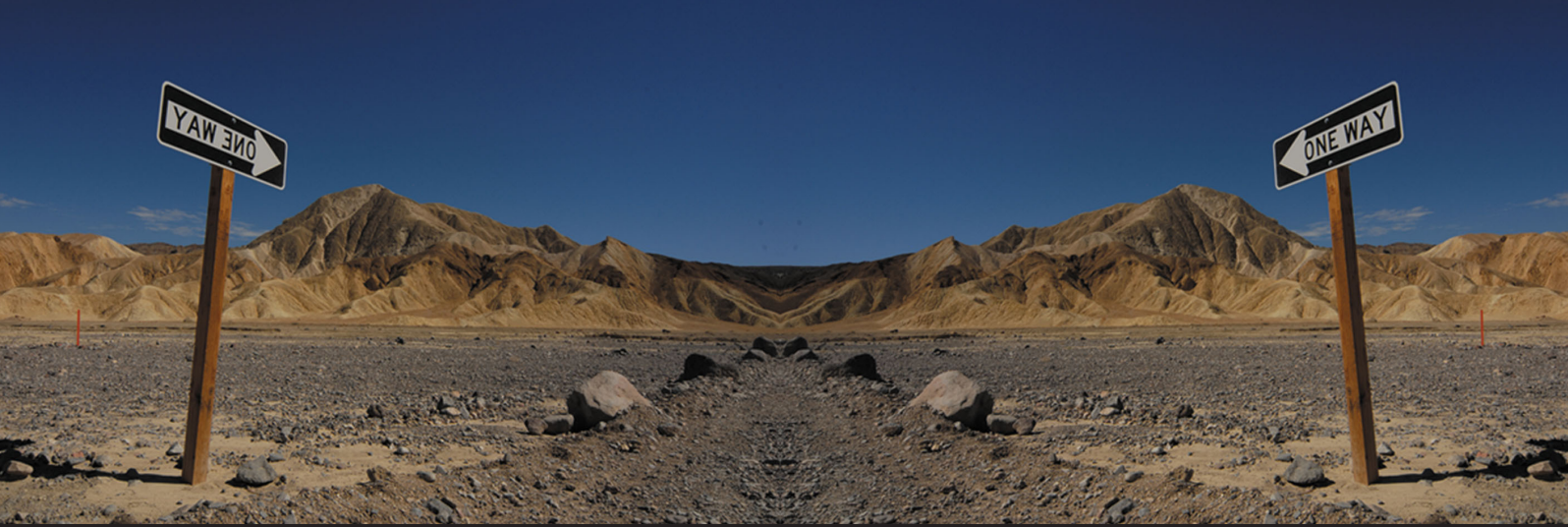
It's Frechette's marginal celebrity that's interesting. Initially I wanted to recreate this person out of the ephemera of publicity. When he was cast there was huge press coverage: the covers of *Rolling Stone* and *Look*, the *New York Times* quipping about him being a new James Dean. He disappeared from public view only to resurface as a news item when he robbed that bank four years later. Ultimately there wasn't as much material as I would've liked to find. Discovering the prison footage was something I never expected though. I also tracked down as many people who knew him as I could, from his lawyer to his old Boston friends and his immediate family.

**Frechette and co-star Daria Halprin ended up together for a time. Were you able to get input from her?**

Judging from how many times she declined my requests to participate, I think it's a period of her life she would rather keep far behind her.

**Were you generally met with resistance or enthusiasm from his friends and family? Of those that knew Frechette, who were most interested in your developing the film?**

I think the people that knew Mark wanted to share something about him that doesn't exist in the film because it







*Frechette and Halprin.*





can't. The people that knew Frechette keep a memory of this twenty-something youth. He represents someone fixed in time. They describe him as a revolutionary firebrand, impulsive, brilliant but unbalanced.

**How did your interactions with his family members go? With his children?**

A series of uncanny coincidences led me to Frechette's widow Elizabeth and his son Ezra. I met a cameraman at a local film festival – originally from Boston but living in Montreal – who was a close friend of theirs and who eventually vouched for me. Otherwise I doubt they would've been as open as they were. They'd been approached before by individuals looking to get their consent for a feature script about the story. The project would often get resurrected by similar chance encounters.

**To what extent was Mel Lyman's commune responsible for Frechette's downfall do you think?**

In the film I never mention the Lyman Family. In a way it's absurd that I don't considering the role they played in his life before and after his being swept up in the making of *Zabriskie Point*. *DVS* is not really a biography, and this aspect of his life, however major, wasn't important to me in this particular film. Frechette would be the key to a story about Lyman and his followers. Before being cast, Frechette was just one of many Lyman 'family' members who were living in and renovating the cold water flats around the old revolutionary war tower on Fort Hill just outside Boston. He would also sell the group's newspaper and proselytize for their leader Melvin Lyman around Harvard Square. It was after his bus stop discovery that Frechette was allowed into Lyman's inner circle. He suddenly had a potentially immense audience, something that Lyman would certainly have wanted for himself. Of course there was also the money; Frechette gave most of his salary, something like sixty-thousand dollars, to Lyman. After the film he continued bringing in cash through modeling photoshoots and a few other acting jobs. Then a few years passed and I imagine his stock in the group must have fallen. This can't but have played a role in the delirium that sent him and two of his Fort Hill friends to rob a bank. The truth I'm sure is complicated, but it's inevitably linked with his life and state of mind at Fort Hill.

**Within his involvement with Lyman what do you feel Frechette was looking for?**

From what I can gather Lyman was a possessing and bizarrely magnetic personality who surrounded himself with seekers. Another detail to Frechette's biography that was not presented in my film



the cinema, managed to stir up the angry suspicions of, among others, park rangers at Death Valley National Monument, several discharged MGM crew members, a Federal grand jury at Sacramento, the Department of Justice and California campus militants. Had he violated the Mann Act when he staged a nude love-in in a national park? Does the film show an "anti-American" bias? As a member of the movie Establishment, is he distorting the aims of the young people's "revolution"? The irony of this hubbub of conflicting interests—it erupted before the film was completed—is that Antonioni is an elusive artist who works in symbols, enigmas, fantasies, never hard facts (*L'Avventura*, *Blow-Up*). He never commits himself to direct answers: "I am too shy. What is a question or an answer? I am not presumptuous to give answers about America. Anything one might say—good or bad, nasty or nice—could be true." He himself doesn't know what shadings his discovery of "your

ON AMERICA HAS ALREADY STIRRED UP OFFICIAL SUSPICIONS AND WILD EXPECTATIONS

# ANTONIONI'S AMERICA

staggering American landscape" may finally take. He shot 60 miles of film, "with two viewpoints for each scene," that alone will take him 54 hours to screen. But it's known that *Zabriskie Point* (named for an area of Death Valley, which has

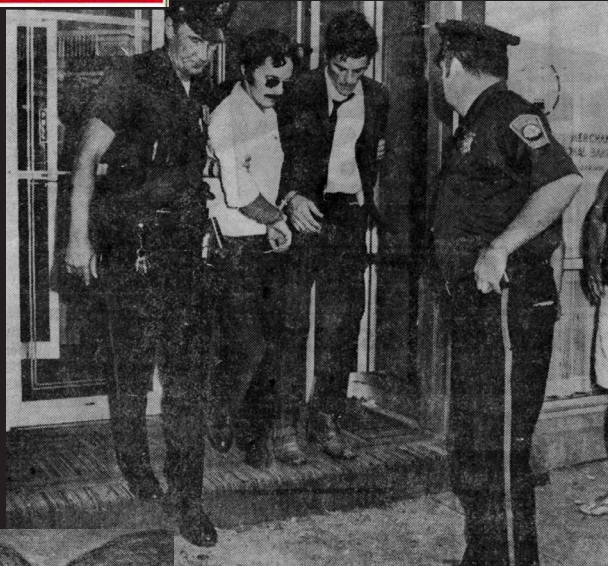
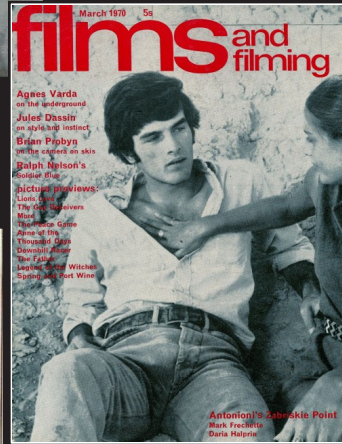
TEXT BY JACK HAMILTON  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY BRUCE DAVIDSON



Mark, the fugitive hero (above and at left), has his mysterious adventure in the primitive desert still-

Antonioni as media seer circa 1969.





Mark Frechette - cover boy to con.

Michael Yaroshevsky.



PHOTOGRAPH BY JESSICA LEE GAGNÉ

but that I discovered in speaking with his family is the abuse he suffered as a young child at the hands of a man who was also the local priest. It was the event that triggered a series of institutionalizations and the mental instability that plagued him. As I say in the film, Frechette was dying to believe in something. I suspect Lyman filled that void.

**Do you feel a connection with Frechette?**

Only as a mortal.

**By the end of your filmmaking process how had your feelings about *Zabriskie Point* evolved or shifted?**

Every film project is the same in one way, they consume huge swaths of time. After *DVS* made a round of festivals, I was happy to move on to other things. Not long after I was at a bar in Greenwich Village. Sam Shepherd walks in and takes a seat nearby. He was one of the writers Antonioni hired to work on the *Zabriskie Point* script. It's another strange coincidence, so I introduce myself. I tell him



about my film. He looks at me for a moment. Then with something between alarm and disbelief he asks, 'Why?'  
I should really send him a copy.

**What finally is your opinion of Frechette?**

There's two great ironies at work here. One is that there's a warning somewhere about meeting famous people who interest you. Something about guaranteed disappointment. The other thing is using images of someone makes them into a commodity regardless of anyone's intentions. The irony of trying to reveal the Mark Frechette behind the Mark of *Zabriskie Point* is that I'm just perpetuating something that accidentally started at a bus stop. It's the process I'm interested in. My connection to Frechette is more in my experience of the desert and the interstate and finally the way cinema is a kind of blind guide in my life.


**How would you explain his story to those that had never heard of him?**

I'd eventually give up.

**If he had been around to be included in the story what questions would you most have liked to pose to him?**

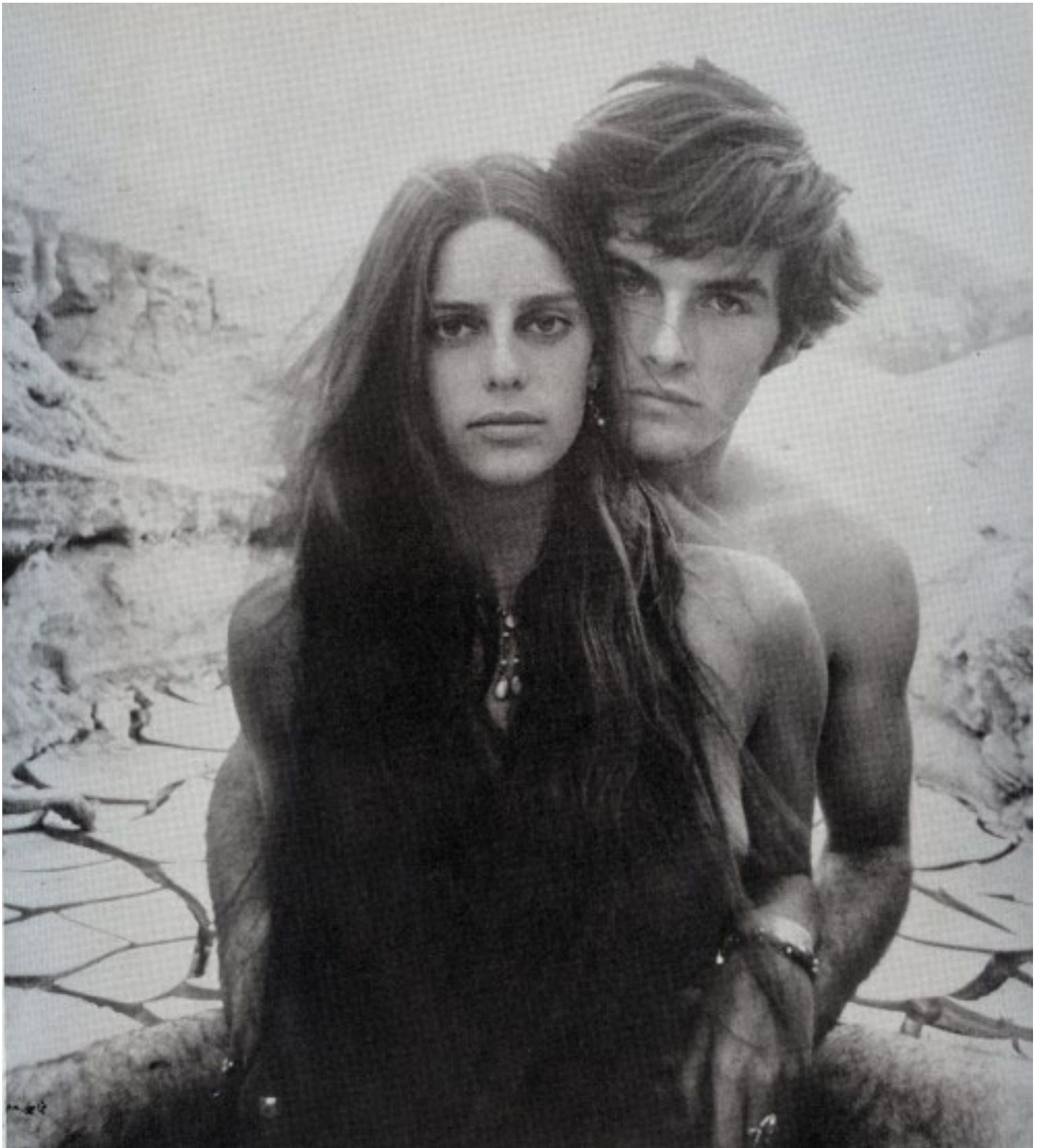
I wouldn't have posed questions, I would've had him reenact the whole thing.

**How do you think he would have responded to your work about him?**

The process of making the film was a bit like a séance only without candles. I wouldn't be surprised if he was responding the whole time. 

*Michael Yaroshevsky is a Montreal-based filmmaker. He has written and directed several award-winning short films including Death Valley Superstar which won best documentary short at Docúpolis Barcelona and the International Jury Award at the 32nd São Paulo International Film Festival. He is on the part-time faculty at the School of Cinema, Concordia University and is currently at work on a feature-project set between St. Petersburg and New York.*

*Right ~ Obscure rebel icons Frechette and Halprin.*



PHOTOGRAPH BY BRUCE DAVIDSON