

## Herpetological Horrors No. 3

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May 22, 2009

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The Giant Gila Monster Movie Poster. Any fan of cheesy horror movies looks back with relish on the spate of giant monster movies that were quickly cranked out in the wake of the hydrogen bomb tests of the 1950s. Soon after the tests began moviegoers were bombarded with movies featuring an interesting assortment of giant animals such as tarantulas (the aptly named Tarantula in 1955), grasshoppers (The Beginning of the End in 1957), scorpions (1957's The Black Scorpion), ants (1954's still-classic Them!) and crabs (Attack of the Crab Monsters in 1957 – more than mere giant crabs, these guys would eat your head and absorb your intelligence...smart crabs!). And this doesn't even count giant monsters such as Godzilla, the Giant Behemoth, the Beast from 20,000 Fathoms and many, many more titanic terrors.

Taking advantage of the trend is 1959's The Giant Gila Monster. The filmmakers of this beauty were shrewd. Not content to merely exploit the public's interest in atomic testing, The Giant Gila Monster also set out to capitalize on the hot rod craze of the time. Hot rods and a giant lizard – box office gold with a capital B! Unfortunately, the movie sucked. And it's not even a Gila monster that stars, it's a Mexican beaded lizard. I guess the marketing folks at Hollywood Pictures Corp., the movie's distributor, didn't think that movie posters touting The Giant Beaded Lizard would put butts into theater seats. So they switched species to capitalize on the crucial word "monster." I wonder why it was a beaded lizard anyway. The trailer (you can view it below) screams out in urgent type, "IT ALL STARTED LIKE AN ORDINARY RECORD HOP...HAD THEY ONLY KNOWN...THE BLACK MONSTER WAITING OUTSIDE..." Maybe this copy was already written and approved for the movie's trailer, and so they had to go with a lizard that was mostly black. I suppose a darker lizard is scarier than one with a lot of pink coloration. But then again, the movie was in black and white, so nobody could...

Let's move on. Some teenagers turn up dead and before long the sheriff and his trusty mechanic pal, who also is the head of a hot rod gang, are warning the populace of their Texas town about a 60-foot-long beaded lizard that's terrorizing the area (sorry, I cannot bring myself to call it a Gila monster, despite the film's title), one that has a penchant for knocking cars off the road and into ravines. Of course, the scaly terror is not above using its feet to stomp people, too, and there's a funny point-of-view shot of a foot – or a lizard-claw-shaped rubber glove – coming down onto the camera's lens, representing someone's noggin.

Many of the shots of the lizard are close-ups, so there's nothing very scary about them, unless you're scared of lizards in general. And the scenes meant to convey the size of the giant, those that show the beaded lizard slowly crawling among miniature buildings, are pretty funny. Let's face it -- the beaded lizard is not the most energetic lizard species and is not prone to very quick movement. It was only through the use of shrewd special effects, such as jamming the poor lizard's head through a jagged hole in some wooden paneling to make it seem as if it's crashing through a wall, that the filmmakers were able to make the star seem at all threatening. Whether or not they were successful I leave up to you to determine.

If you like 50s monster flicks, hot rods and "record hops," then you could do worse than watch The Giant Gila Monster. Personally, I prefer Attack of the Crab Monsters.

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