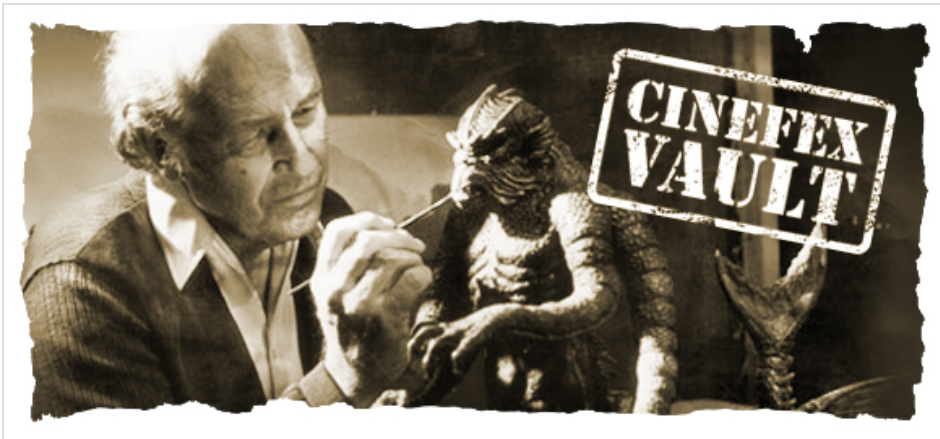




Cinefex Vault #7: Ray Harryhausen – An Animated Life

by **Joe Fordham**

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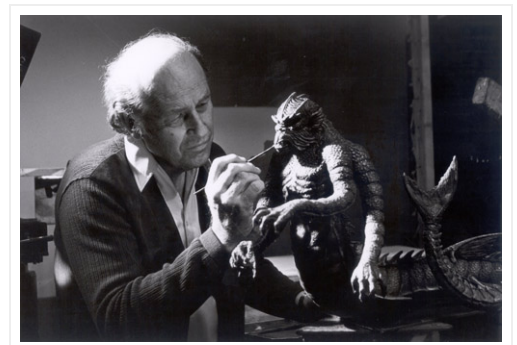


Following [Don Shay's review of Peter Ellenshaw's autobiography](#), Cinefex presented an online review of another literary property by a visual effects giant, the first exhaustive authorized volume in which Ray Harryhausen discussed his own life and work – resurrected here at the Cinefex Vault as another one for the ages.

Adventures in Fantasy – book review by Joe Fordham

“What is there to be said that is new about Ray Harryhausen?” asks writer Ray Bradbury in his foreword to the current book by his life-long friend. The answer, as chronicled by stop-motion legend Harryhausen and film historian Tony Dalton in *Ray Harryhausen: An Animated Life*, is quite a lot – 304 glossy pages crammed with text, photographs, film posters, diagrams and sketches – many previously unpublished from Harryhausen’s personal archives.

The book, which appeared last November in the United Kingdom – where Harryhausen has resided for decades – has now been released in the United States with considerable fanfare and a full-blown book tour by the author. This is Harryhausen’s second book, following the slim, technically deficient *Film Fantasy Scrapbook* – which first appeared in 1972, with revisions in 1974 and 1981 – a mostly-pictorial guide to creatures that have populated the effects maestro’s films. *An Animated Life* towers over that. The book is part confessional – revealing techniques never previously divulged by their creator – and part love letter to a craft that Harryhausen describes in meticulous prose as ‘dimensional animation.’



— Stop-motion maestro Ray Harryhausen performs a touch-up on the Kraken during production of his final motion picture, *Clash of the Titans*. In



- Ray Harryhausen's first feature work was on the original *Mighty Joe Young*, in which he produced most of the film's animation under the supervision and tutelage of his mentor, Willis O'Brien. Photo copyright © 1949 by RKO Radio Pictures.

pre-World War II Los Angeles, assisting their son in fabricating miniature costumes, props and creature armatures, as long as their manual dexterity remained. Harryhausen lists other early influences – including the fiction of H.G. Wells, the art of Gustav Doré, John Martin and Charles R. Knight – touchstones that remained with him his entire career, as illustrated in atmospheric pencil and charcoal creature concepts, from his earliest student renderings to *Force of the Trojans*, an unrealized project that was to have followed his 1981 swan song, *Clash of the Titans*.



- The 7th Voyage of Sinbad represented Harryhausen's first venture into color, a factor which necessitated the changing of many effects techniques he had developed over the years. It also represented a shift away from contemporary times and single-character animation to episodic confrontations between human protagonists and a variety of mythological creatures. Photo copyright © 1958 by Columbia Pictures.

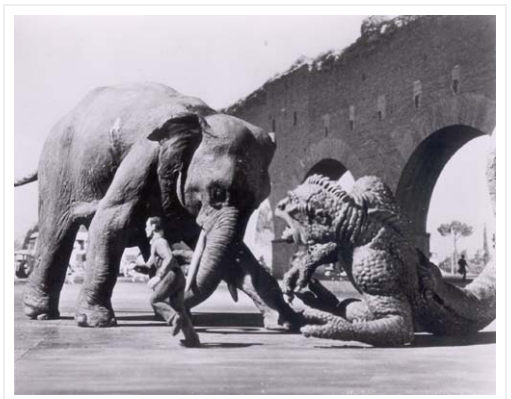
photochemical and stop-motion paraphernalia. Digital artists should take note as Harryhausen reveals methods by which he rigged saucers to fly in his 1956 production *Earth Vs. the Flying Saucers* – physically hand-painting wires prior to exposing every frame to render them invisible. Unfortunately, the book then concludes without an index to provide easy reference for this compendium of a lifetime's achievement.

But *Ray Harryhausen: An Animated Life* is a rare entity. Despite its considerable bulk, the book is immensely readable, a hoot from front to back, as well as a treasure trove of imagery and reference material. As anyone who has stood in line to meet the man will attest, Harryhausen is a bright and witty storyteller, with a

Bradbury sets the tone in his spirited introduction. Tony Dalton's preface continues in similar vein, recounting his 30-year friendship with Harryhausen – almost half the length of time Bradbury has known him – and outlines his journey into the archives of the British Film Institute, where much of his research material was obtained. The book is an exhaustive historical study, five years in the making, covering the production of every one of Harryhausen's films, written by the man himself with the support of close contemporaries.

While fans may be familiar with the films described, Harryhausen is quick to shoot down frequently printed fallacies, such as the origin of the material used to skin his first animated creature, the title character in *Cavebear* in 1935 – not purloined illicitly from his mother's favorite fur coat! He also goes to pains to place his peers in context – tracing how his first employer and mentor, Willis O'Brien, made the transition from sculptor in a San Francisco marble shop to the creator of *King Kong* – and outlining his own lineage.

Fred and Martha Harryhausen are pictured as the loving parents of a strange, but talented only child in



- In *20 Million Miles to Earth*, the Ymir – a creature from Venus – hatches from an egg and grows to monstrous proportions. For a sequence in which the Ymir confronts an escaped circus elephant on the streets of Rome, Harryhausen animated both creatures and a fleeing human. Photo copyright © 1957 by Columbia Pictures.

Unrealized projects abound in the back pages of the book, which contains a catalogue of 53 'Lost Worlds,' including some titles now in development by present-day filmmakers. Harryhausen relates how he decided J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* was not suitable for a live-action/dimensional-animation treatment, then adds: "How wrong I was!" Harryhausen also recalls how, following *The 7th Voyage of Sinbad*, he and producer Charles H. Schneer discussed, and rejected, the idea of doing an adaptation of Edgar Rice Burroughs' *John Carter of Mars*: "We felt the story simply wasn't strong enough." Harryhausen states the unrealized project he most wanted to pursue was *The War of the Worlds*, retaining H.G. Wells' Victorian setting. The book contains illustrations of Harryhausen's proposals for the film, which he submitted to producer George Pal in 1950, before learning that Pal had already been in discussions with Paramount to mount a contemporary adaptation.

A chronological filmography follows, listing Harryhausen's short films, television commercials, documentaries for the Army Signal Corps and 16 feature films. Harryhausen and Dalton then supply a glossary of filmmaking terms, which are quite poetic in their descriptions of



— For Jason and the Argonauts, considered by many his magnum opus, Harryhausen created a fiendishly complex sequence in which live characters battle seven skeleton swordsmen. On some of the shots, Harryhausen was able to average only 13-14 frames per day — less than a second of screen time. Photo copyright © 1963 by Columbia Pictures.

craftsman's passion for film and an intolerance for interfering producers. All the anecdotes are here — the 'sixtopus' from *It Came From Beneath the Sea* and, at last, the real story of how he choreographed seven sword-fighting skeletons. Throughout, the narrative enthralls and captivates.

- *Ray Harryhausen: An Animated Life* at [Amazon](#).
- *For more information about Ray's legacy, and plans to celebrate Ray's centenary in June 2020, please visit [The Ray and Diana Harryhausen Foundation](#).*



— The Valley of Gwangi, a prehistoric drama set within the framework of a western, was based on an unrealized Willis O'Brien project that had been in preproduction, then abandoned, nearly 30 years earlier. Photo copyright © 1969 by Warner Bros.

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