



Ingrid Schram and Travis Nutting as Amber and Jerome

Interview with Lev Kalman and Whitney Horn, directors of *Blondes in the Jungle* By Blythe Sheldon

Lev Kalman and Whitney Horn's first feature, *Blondes in the Jungle*, is a 50-minute tropical cyclone of ideas and images. In 1987, three teenagers, Jerome, Chino, and Amber, brave the Honduran jungle on a quest to find the Fountain of Youth. A squall of Saved By the Bell décor and sultry landscapes, of innocuous teen talk, hand-drawn animation, and 1960s archaeological tracts blow in from out of blue. Sustained winds of an eclectic world beat soundtrack approach 75 mph, with some higher gusts, and threaten to rock us like a hurricane. "We're trying to say: there's this, but there's also *this*. We want it all," explains Kalman. In other words, there's this, and this, but there is no *that*. Nothing is out of reach. Our only choice is to take shelter in the storm.

BLYTHE SHELDON: Teen comedies usually operate within a limited worldview—they take place in the suburbs. Can you explain how you apply that narrow experience to say, teen cokeheads looking for the Fountain of Youth in 1980s Honduras?

LEV KALMAN: Our idea was to stress that this adventure into an exotic location would take the same structure as a shopping trip to the mall. With the one exception of Amber having that encounter with the Jaguar god, nothing would at all break their expectations. They were under the impression that they could go find the Fountain of Youth, as they would to a day spa, and it'd work. They met up with their friends, how they would

somewhere in New York, and be like, "Hey, how'd you find us?" Even the one exception, the encounter with the Jaguar god, which gives her the knowledge of where it is, he is still the hunky Anglo version of a Jaguar god. They don't go to the jungle to encounter the Other. That's why there are no real brown people in the movie. In these characters' experience, Indians and Latinos would be absolutely marginal to the story. That's why the Jaguar god is a white guy in brown face.

WHITNEY HORN: We think of ourselves as Eric Rohmer if he were retarded. I feel like in Eric Rohmer, the conversations aim toward the highbrow. Ours aim toward the lowbrow, like TV. It's not philosophy.

LK: Right, and as in Rohmer, the conversations are texture as well as text. They are part of the scenery. That's why the characters are often telling stories about other places.

BLS: It's called *Blondes in the Jungle*. Did you take any B-movies as your inspiration?

LK: In the end, we took movies that took B-movies as their inspiration. Warhol's *Lonesome Cowboys*, for example. *O.C. and Stiggs* was like Robert Altman doing a teen comedy. We watched so many teen comedies-- definitely *Degrassi*. We recommended our actors to watch *Degrassi Junior High*. On the old one, when they make a joke, it's very straightforward. That character wants people to laugh at their joke.

BLS: What were you like as teenagers?

WH: There are no interesting facts about me as a teenager. I was unremarkable.

LK: I was arrested. It was shocking to the school.

BLS: Why were you arrested?

LK: I was charged with assault with a deadly weapon. A car. We stole a pumpkin off some guy's lawn after Halloween, Nov. 1st. It was a cul-de-sac, and when we sped off we ended up where we started. The guy was out there, this drunk ex-cop and he and his huge friend got in front of the car. The windows were open and they tried to get into the car and grab me. They punched the window as I'm trying to close the window, and that was the assault. They said we hit their hands with our car. The cops luckily didn't buy it because they knew this guy was a drunk and an ex-cop. We were co-conspirators in a larceny. We had to go to trial around the same time a big rape trial in Stamford was going on that was on national news. It happened literally two days after I got my early acceptance from Columbia. First everyone was like, "Ooh ooh" and then "ha ha." The principal made fun of me on morning announcements.

BLS: So, you lived out a teen movie. Why did you choose Honduras?

WH: Convenience, in a way. We had a place to stay down there, a reason to visit. My boyfriend Oliver's mom moved down there a few years ago. She on a river across from a national park. She runs yoga retreats, eats raw food.

BLS: Can you talk about the soundtrack? What was the concept behind it?

LK: The concept for the soundtrack is that the blondes carry a portable tape deck with them and listen to one tape over and over. And the tape is by a band we made up called El Jefe and the Executive Look, a very eclectic 1987 World Beat band. Our friends, the guys from Vampire Weekend, John Atkinson from Aa, Judd Shoenholtz of the Birthday Boyz, and the producer Billy Pavone (of Aa, The Fall, etc). And then John brought in the new age-y sounding vocalist Julianna Barwick. The Executive Look is a band, like Devo, that both punks and preps could like, and thus could be shared by Chino and Amber (the sibling blondes). Sometimes the music is the blondes' soundtrack--as in, it's what they're listening to and affects their mood or whatever. But other times it acts as another distancing device like the silent sequences or the epilogue and takes us out of their story. Suddenly you lose the flow of the narrative and are just enjoying like a jungle music video.

<http://www.blondesinthejungle.com>