STRANGE ENCOUNTERS OF THE SWISS KIND

by Deborah Harry and Chris Stein

When Chris Stein and Debbie Harry first came to Heavy Metal *with these photographs, we all were overwhelmed by the results of their collaboration with Giger. Giger, of course, was already a highly esteemed contributor to the magazine and had long been considered not only a megastar in the field but almost in a class of his own. Debbie and Chris not only suited the general musical tastes already represented within the pages of* HM, *but had proven their credentials as purveyors of fantasy. (They have just completed the musical score for the upcoming animated film* Drats.*) So, when these photos landed on the desk here, we all said, "Sure, but how?" Well, it was decided that nobody except Debbie and Chris themselves could speak of their experience with and observations about Giger, his success, and the effect of his art. So, the forum has been turned over to them (with a little bit of help from me).*

-BB

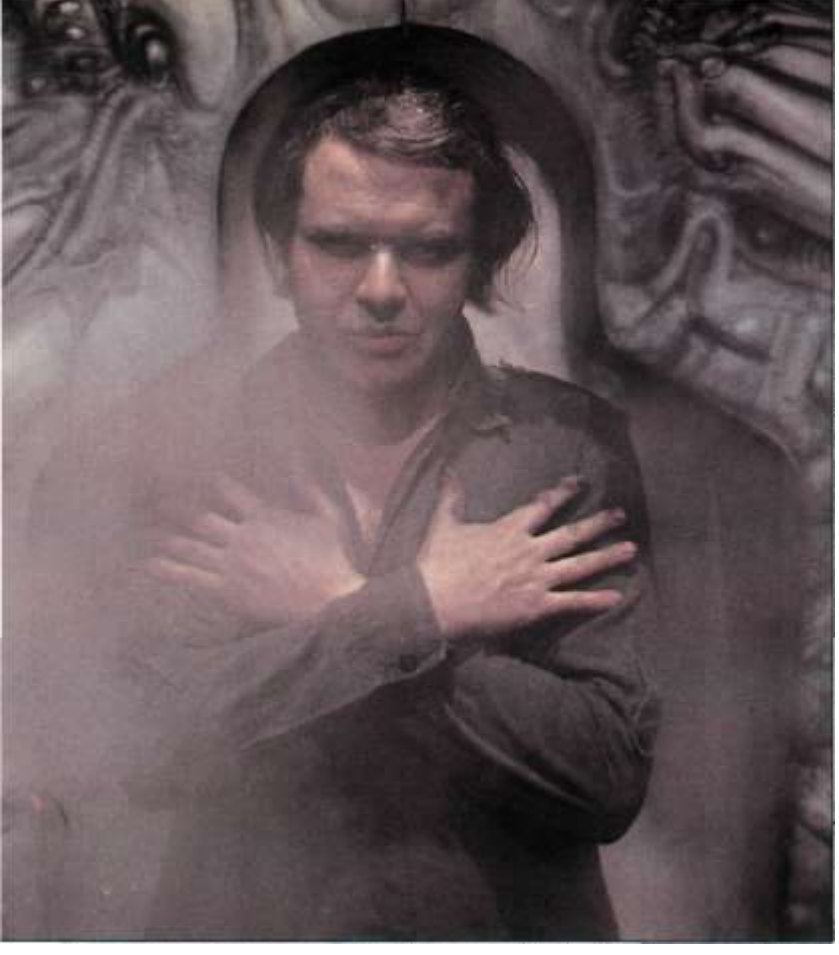
H. R. Giger is a man easily misunderstood. Dressed in black, with his intense fascination with bones and skulls, he's been accused of practicing black magic and witchcraft. He's been dubbed this generation's Alei ster Crowley. or worse. To many, he seems like unleashed voodoo hell. And in Switzerland, his home, he's known among journalists as "Horror Rex."

Yet, like his many fantasy-art contemporaries, he is merely attracted to the imagery. As with Nazi imagery, which has historically had its magnetic appeal. there's a sense of the pagan and forbidden to his work as well. The clandestine has always attracted people, just as the forbidden fruit has. The same goes for Giger and his powerful work. He goes beyond the conventional; he takes things further than most of us do.

When the movie *Alien* first appeared, it was Giger's designs that stirred up all the pseudosonsationalist bullshit. Giger became internationally notorious as Alien, and the Alien's images became banned. Theaters in England even offered special treat ment for Alien shock. The full-sized Alien, face hugger, and baby Alien that burst out of the man's stomach were all "too"

Photographs by **Chris Stein**

From left to right: Giger and Debbie Harry in metal face masks; another style of body and face make-up: Debbie with sarcophagus: the members of the cast all together.



Photographs by **Chris Stein**

strong. (Giger even scared himself one night when he went to brush his teeth and ran into his Alien model in the dark.)

When *KooKoo* came out, there was the same intense reaction. "Did you hear about your cover being banned by British Rail?" asked an English journalist during a phone interview while we were in Switzerland. That was the first we heard of the reaction. Then another British station banned the cover from television. The explanation: it was too disturbing.

We knew the cover would cause reaction, but maybe were overconfident, even naive, to believe it would simply be taken as art. It was a risk we were willing to take.

Risk taking was something we have been familiar with. We were very conscious of what was involved. It is a matter of having style more than anything else, something Giger understands and possesses as well. When we began doing what we're doing, we didn't think in terms of *new wave;* we thought of having a sense of style. Having style meant not walking with the crowd but being either a bit forward or behind it. When we started out we were called a nostalgia act because we did sixties pop material rather than the get-down-and-boogie stuff which was popular then. We did the opposite of what was current, and we've never stopped trying to do the unexpected.

Giger also plays with opposites; that's the essence of his work. In a philosophy called aesthetic realism, the use of opposites makes things in art and life challenging. What is beautiful and horrible, appealing and frightening, whatever draws you in and repels, biological and organic—in Giger's own vision—is all related. Even in music production it's the same combination of opposites, of working with machines to produce the organic sounds of music.

Ever since we met Giger at the Hansen Gallery in New York nearly two years ago, we've thought of working together. Similar loves for science fiction, skulls, and pagan archetypes forged an automatic union. We remembered his posters in the late sixties when he was the first European psychedelic-poster artist. Then we knew of him as the artist of *Alien.* And we found out that Giger began listening to us while working on *Alien* in England. Our ascendance paralleled his as we simultaneously became aware of each other.

So, when the decision faced us to do the album cover, a phone call was made, arrangements were discussed, and Giger was on the job. From a head shot by English photographer Brian Aris, Giger did four massive airbrushed paintings (two have never before been seen and will be in his next book), all of his own design. But that was only the beginning. We decided he would direct the promotional video made from two songs off the album—and he chose them.

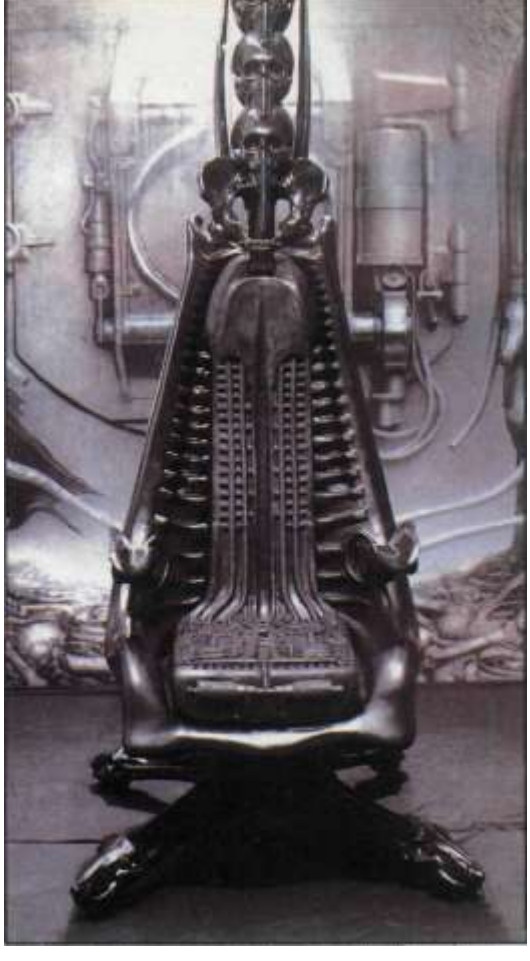
When we landed in Zurich to do the taping, we didn't even know whether Giger, his wife, Mia, and his manager, Ueli Steinly, would be there. But they were, in their customary colors: Giger and wife in black, and Steinly—to add the opposite—all in white. It set the stage for our visit to Giger's hometown.

Giger lives in a quiet section of Zurich, in a couple of modest, simple houses—the semidetached kind that one often sees in England. He bought and combined two of them to create both a home and a studio. Outside was quiet as in the rest of the neighborhood. Only his garden, wild with untrimmed shrubbery (growth which he has purposely maintained because he likes the random images and shapes that occur), suggested the atmosphere inside.

Walking into his house, one sees that it's totally his environment, from the burning frankincense on. It's like stepping into a world completely black and white. It seems to be a huge collection of opposites—both cluttered and orderly at the same time. He's the perfect counterbalance to the typical staunchly conservative citizen of Zurich. As he jokingly told us later, "Until I was on television my neighbors regarded me with extreme suspicion. Afterwards, it was all right."

From the foyer at the entrance, either the stairs, country kitchen, or dining room confronts you. But the dining room is the temple—a shrine for Giger's art, with huge floor-to-ceiling paintings and objects Gigerian. In the middle sits a black dining table, biomechanically designed with a marble-slab centerpiece inlaid with a gold pentagram. And atop that sits a black candelabrum with Christ figures upside down and right side up (that's pagan).

Giger is an industrial designer, which is very apparent to you the moment you step into his home. Even something as alien-



From left to right: Giger stands menacing in his own "Passageway"—part of the temple used in *Now I Know You Know;* (top) Debbie in cover makeup with Giger; (bottom) sarcophagus and needles used in *Backfired;* Debbie looking perfectly Morticia-fied with a black wig and bone-colored chair designed by Giger; Giger's ebony version (one was bought by Debbie and Chris); "Are you boys from around here?" asks Ms. Harry.

looking as his chairs is structurally sound. The Alien creature—with its McLuhanesque quality of being the machine as an extension of the organic—makes sense biologically. The face hugger, with its air sacs, isn't just decorative. Giger's work has a subconscious effect: it engenders the fear of being turned into metal. It's awesome—the work of an ultimate perfectionist, a true obsessive.

For his work with our video, he was as driven as he always is. He gathered together the huge murals as backdrops, made a sarcophagus, special stencils, a headband, and exaggerated acupuncture needles, which were used for the album cover. Like the Phantom of the Opera looming over his organ all hours of the night, Giger was completely immersed in the two productions. From the moment we arrived he fired questions at us to work out concepts he had in mind. And compulsive man that he is, he was always supercritical of himself, forever meticulous and careful to get what he wanted.

The shooting didn't take long at all, only four days, in fact. In *Backfired,* they had to reshoot the explosions of the sarcophagi to get it right. Using a smoke machine that looked something like a mechanical vacuum cleaner out of a Max Ernst painting, they kept yelling, "More smoke, more smoke," in German. With *Now I Know You Know,* Giger assembled a whole temple made from the multipaneled *Passageway* painting. Within the painting is the image of a huge cock made of melting babies coming out of an even larger abstract zipper. A portion of it, called "The Steps of the Magician," has all his weird male/female symbols. And worked into it are the serene and haunting eyes of his dead girl friend, who can be seen almost symbolically peering from the passageway, out of which Debbie—looking like a Martian whore—comes dancing. But the video can hardly capture the true, massive sense of proportion to Giger's work.

In the two weeks we stayed in Switzerland we not only saw Giger at work, but also at play. His manager is something of an entrepreneur and owns both a restaurant and a club—each with a touch of Giger in it. But despite a huge reproduction of one of Giger's temples, the Ugly Club is just an ordinary rock club. On Saturdays they would hang out there cooking hamburgers 'til five A.M. Occasionally everyone would dress in monks robes and hold a ceremony, all the while burning torches and carrying around Ueli's costumed girl friend.

Just as we were exposed to Giger's world, we exposed him to a little bit of ours when we went to England together after the taping. He seemed a little bemused and caught off guard with all the fans and star treatment we encountered. We kidded him a bit in our brash, curt, but not disrespectful American way—but he soon got used to it. He gave interviews and learned to "enjoy." And as we found out later, we might even have helped to inspire his next book, a series of paintings of New York. No other city inspires him as much; no wonder, with the smoke coming out of the manholes, the machines, and all the other images he loves.

While we were there on the last day of business, it was a total panic. A Swiss-German friend of Giger's was shooting a documentary of us doing the video. Then a BBC crew came to shoot a story on all that was going on. All during this, we were taking photographs of our own. If any scene had us swimming in opposites, and layers upon layers—just like Giger's work—it was this scene, our final one.