

Mystery of Vampira

Synopsis, a documentary, three episodes

Mystery of Vampira peels the many layers of the real-life story of Maila Nurmi, a daughter of a Finnish immigrant family, born in 1922 in Massachusetts. Maila became the first horror host on American television, a dark gothic character in the midst of post-war picturesque all-American mindscape, "the glamour ghoul", called Vampira. But the unbelievable true story behind her rise and fall is filled with mystery, passion, secrets, betrayals, occult elements - and a combination she was most famous for: sex and death. Her wish to become the real-life Evil Queen made her too dangerous for some. She crossed paths with many of the stars in the Golden Age of Hollywood, and sometimes these encounters were fatal, often calamitous. Maila made it in Hollywood. She got canceled. And she fought back. We will tell her incredible story based on her own diaries but simultaneously reveal the facts behind her sometimes altered versions of reality. But what stays undeniable is that Maila became Vampira, and she became iconic.

The Mystery of Vampira asks questions and brings about answers. What actually happened with the death of James Dean? What was Maila's relationship with Marlon Brando like? Did Mae West try to sabotage her acting career, out of spite and jealousy? Why did Elvis Presley refuse to date her, and why Orson Welles ghosted her after their affair? And what happened to their alleged son? Maila embellished her own story while the press distorted it. We want to dig deeper and find out the truth behind the myth. The production

Part 1, Glimpses of childhood – Youth and Hollywood let-downs – Vampira is born

An introduction to Vampira. Who, what, where, and why. What makes Vampira an icon and Maila Nurmi a legendary actress and influencer of pop culture? How did Maila describe her youth and background?

From here, the actual story begins.

Childhood; introduction of parents and Maila's Finnish background. Father's immigrant roots and Maila's colored version of her story: Maila convinced everyone that Paavo Nurmi was her uncle, that she grew up in Petsamo, Finland – although actually she was born in the US and lived an average immigrant family life in Massachusetts. This is the first glimpse of Maila's way of altering the truth. We'll find out how things actually were.

We'll show details from Maila's childhood years: her pets and the early love for comics, Maila's admiration for *Dragon Lady*, and *The Evil Queen* from Disney's *Snow White*.

A picturesque scene from a backyard; happy children are playing and laughing.

Then a camera zooms to a tree where a sinister-looking little girl, Maila, sits and reads a comic book.

"I never wanted to be Snow White; I just wanted to become the Evil Queen."

Maila's adolescent years are filled with the desire to get away. Dreams of Hollywood.

Maila is in her late teens. She sits in the bathtub and hears Orson Welles on the radio, gets up, and swears to meet him one day. Maila yearns to go to Hollywood, and so she finally does. The boring, thankless job at the fish processing factory changes to a one-way ticket to Los Angeles.

After moving to L.A., Maila works as a pin-up model and a circus performer – mainly to attract male customers. She has some auditions, but they don't get her anywhere. She meets a bunch of slimy male producers whom she firmly rejects. Maila values her independency and dignity more than random roles these reptiles might have to offer.

Maila sees an ad that seeks new female radio voices.

She goes to the audition, only to end up in a threatening situation where an elderly and repulsive male agent/producer tries to persuade her to pose for semi-nude photos" for promotion reasons."

Despite her young age, Maila gathers her courage to say no and storms out of the awful situation.

She realizes there never was a real job possibility and swears she'd never let herself be fooled again like that. The disappointment is bitter, but Maila keeps her head up.

This phase of Maila's life is like an ominous sign of what is to come; could she have become one of the biggest stars had she submitted to men's inappropriate approaches and proposals? Did her refusal of this sort of abuse already foreshadow her future cancellation?

Maila takes on odd jobs, as she is reluctant to try any more auditions because of the corruptedness of the industry. She works as a cigarette girl and a cocktail waitress. On her night off, Maila surprisingly bumps into Orson Welles.

Maila tells Welles how much she admires his work and how she was once considering a career on the radio because of him. Maila is sincere and believes Welles when he seems to take her seriously and respectfully treats her. Maila agrees to let Welles give her a ride home.

Perhaps because Welles is the first man in Hollywood to seemingly treat her as an equal, Maila lets her guard down and unexpectedly falls in love. This is Maila's first relationship, and although she is in many ways hard-boiled for her age, she is still too innocent emotionally. Welles gets to take advantage of her sincerity. Welles even offers Maila work in his upcoming live event, but this is now secondary to Maila. She wants to be Orson's girlfriend. For Welles, the infatuation is momentary, and within weeks he's over Maila and stops returning her calls. Once again, Maila finds herself deceived and let down by a man. She finds out that Welles is marrying Rita Hayworth, and worst of all, Maila realizes that she is pregnant. Heartbroken, Maila travels back to her parents and decides to give the baby away for adoption. She gives birth in a clinic for young unwed mothers. The dreadful experience makes Maila swear that she'll never put herself through that again.

Maila was always adamant that her pregnancy resulted from her brief romance with Welles. Can we find out more details about this? Why didn't Maila ever reach out to Welles to tell him about the baby? How can we be sure that this affair actually happened in the way Maila's diaries portray it? Did Welles ever know about his son?

Maila gets back to acting, something she's always been keen to do. She gets her break on Broadway in a Mae West production *Catherine was great*. During this time, she also meets a young aspiring actor called Marlon Brando. Maila and Marlon date a while but, more importantly, develop a friendship that would last almost all their lives. Maila succeeds in her Broadway debut, but Ms. West doesn't like her, and soon she gets laid off. According to Maila, West considered her to draw too much attention by her showy performance. But did something else happen between these two ladies to break off the collaboration? It's been known that Maila caused some drama in the ensemble by dating Brando and, this way, made him leave his previous relationship. Did Maila's tendency to attract the opposite sex create tension between her and West?

After this, Maila books a role in a horror show, and this is right up her alley. She catches the eye of a Hollywood columnist who praises her. Soon Maila gets that magical call; Howard Hawks wants her to audition.

Finally, Maila is on her way to meet a real Hollywood decision-maker. Unfortunately, Maila's bad experiences with producers and a deep distrust toward men are still very vivid in her

mind. Although Hawks is interested in her and even describes her as *"the new Lauren Bacall,"* Maila can't accept Hawks' suggestions to modify her looks – fixing her teeth, etc. Here Maila is way ahead of her time; very rarely would actresses have the courage to refuse opportunities like this, and most of them succumbed to the demands from the dominant male industry.

Maila is storming out of the audition room and being furious. She will not tolerate any patronizing or condescending talk from men. Maila clenches her fists and rips the offered contract.

On many future occasions, Maila's temper gets the best of her. Was she overreacting to these situations – was her ego getting in the way? Was she so determined not to be taken advantage of that she ruined her chances? Or was she one of the first girls in Hollywood to shout *"me too"*?

Maila is back in town and continues working random jobs and attending some auditions. She meets screenwriter Dean Riesner, and they hit it off. Dean and Maila move in together, but the relationship is occasionally turbulent, partly because of Dean's heavy drinking habits.

Maila's career is somewhat stuck, and she comes up with the idea to become an evangelist in her father's footsteps. This requires money. Maila sees an invite to an upscale Halloween costume party, with a money prize for the best dress. She decides to dress up as a zombie-like character, which is obviously inspired by her childhood idols Dragon Lady and the Evil Queen, but also the Addams Family comics. She creates her costume with care and attention to detail; she turns around a black dress that has a zipper so that the décolleté is shown and rips it to be more zombie-like, clips pieces of the plastic box to create fake nails, paints them black and glues them to her fingertips, and finally puts on a black wig. Maila attends the ball and wins the grand prize. Tv-producer Hunt Stromberg Jr. notices Maila.

Months later, Maila receives a phone call; TV channel KABC is looking for a host for late-night horror movies. She is asked to recreate the character she played at the masquerade. Maila has an epiphany. In her career, so many times already, she has refused to fulfill any sex fantasies for powerful, older men. So this time, she goes a step further. She seeks inspiration from the fetish world to become not an object to men's desires but a subject, a

dominatrix, a mistress, and a true Evil Queen. This is her final payback to the men who wanted to fix her looks. Maila comes up with the idea of combining "sex and death" and creates *Vampira* - a sexy yet deadly vampire woman, a seductress risen from the grave who shoots humorously macabre one-liners on live television. The TV channel falls in love with her, and Maila gets the job. *Vampira* is finally born.

Part 2, Rise and Fall of Vampira – Sympathy of Souls with James Dean

The *Vampira* show is about to go live, and soon after opening, it's at the peak of its success. Maila hosts the show and becomes the talk of the town. She starts to come up with even wilder jokes and one-liners for the program. The feedback is overwhelmingly contradictory. Maila enjoys her success, but she is obsessed with making it on her terms. This isn't always taken well by her superiors. There are appearances, visits, magazine interviews, and articles. Maila even receives an Emmy nomination. She lives a dark, gothic Hollywood fairy tale of her kind.

While visiting a movie premiere, mingling, and looking around, she comments that she doesn't like anyone there. Until she bumps into James Dean. Dean is loitering around with an indifferent look in his eyes. Maila is instantly intrigued.

"Well, that's the only person in Hollywood I want to meet."

The next day, James Dean walks into Maila's favorite hangout, the Googies coffee shop. Maila knows a Googies regular, Jack Simmons, a young aspiring actor, and he introduces James to Maila. From that day on, they are inseparable - of course, Maila is still Riesner's spouse, but she spends the nights with James Dean and mutual friend Jack Simmons. Their little group gets the nickname "night watch" in Hollywood social circles. The trio enjoys their special nightly adventures, hanging out at cemeteries & morgues. Spiritualism, interest in the afterlife, and other mystical trends are all over. James is fascinated by death and dark themes, as is Maila. They also share the same dark and macabre sense of humor.

Exactly how far did the trio's fascination with the dark themes go? Is it true that they even visited a Hollywood morgue to see a dead body? Did they dare each other to try even more outrageous things – as stealing a watch from a deceased person's wrist? And how big of a role the flirting with occultism play in their lives? And most importantly, how

seriously Maila believed in the supernatural – and what did James think of it? Did Maila have a pagan home altar that the press talked about later? Or was it all just innocent fun?

We see the "Night Watch" hanging around cemeteries, climbing across the walls in the darkness, inciting each other to daring acts, laughing, and having fun in eerie scenarios like a bunch of misbehaving teens.

James is romantically out of reach to Maila, but the relationship is more profound. A sympathy of souls. On an emotional level, Maila might see her lost son in Jimmy, as Jimmy would see a "mother figure" in Maila. *"We share the same neuroses,"* says Maila. The group is tight, and it also raises questions like, was there a romantic involvement between James Dean and Jack Simmons as it has been rumored? Was Maila jealous of that? Did Jack, at some point, create a wedge between Maila and James?

Jimmy starts to gain more success, *Rebel without a cause* is released, and James is the hottest topic in town. His friendship with Maila experiences distorted when Jimmy comments to Hedda Hopper about Maila, saying, *"I don't date cartoons."* Maila and James drift apart. James is suddenly a big star, Maila, on the other hand, is at odds with the production of her own show and finally the *Vampira* show gets cancelled - the reason being Maila's disobedience when she participates as a guest on a talk show without her employer's permission. Or at least this is the official story. We want to seek more answers and find the real reasons to the show ending so soon. Was Maila's relationship with James too scandalous? Did she piss off someone too important – was there a concern that her quirky behavior in civil life could hurt the tv-channel's reputation in some way? Could someone from Jimmy's new circle have had an influence on the matter? And did she actually – quoting her own words – get *blacklisted*?

The very last episode of *Vampira Show* comes out in April 1955. Maila is once again down and out.

Part 3: They say I killed Jimmy Dean – Maila's downfall

After things cool down Maila and James make peace again and the friendship starts to recover, although it's never the same. Maila jokingly sends Jimmy a sinister post card, with a picture of her sitting next to an open grave, and a note: *"I wish you were here"*. This is a perfect example of the type of humour the two have shared. But this time the joke backfires in a horrible way. Not a long time after that, James dies tragically and

unexpectedly in a car accident, in September 1955.

Maila is devastated. Her thoughts also stray into the supernatural and she starts to entertain an idea that maybe James is communicating to her from beyond the grave. A newspaper article appears in which Maila is slandered and accused of James' death, black magic, etc. *James Dean's Black Madonna*. We don't know how much Maila herself had to do with the content. There were pictures of her home, allegedly, as well a picture of the ominous post card. Nonetheless Maila receives a huge backlash from the public.

Maila is talking on the phone. "Did you hear the news? They say I killed James Dean. They say I killed Jimmy with black magic".

Maila's persona has now been publicly smeared. Just like Vampira, she herself is now cancelled.

Maila still envisions a future for Vampira's character on television. Bald Maila appears in a strange magazine article *Bald but Beautiful*. Theories about Maila's hair loss are thrown around: was this an attack from a raging fan or a radical decision to shave off hair due to her own grief? Around this time, Maila's relationship with Dean Riesner ends so this also makes her personal life unbalanced. There's also a strange fire in Maila's house. Maila manages to save her pet cat from the fire and this also gets to papers. Did Maila feed these stories to press, as a cry for help – of a cry for attention? Maila is desperate to redeem Vampira, not only for financial reasons.

A continuation of the Vampira show on another channel is being planned, but ultimately it doesn't happen. Eventually Maila won't agree to give up the rights to her Vampira character. She is torn between the dream of being successful and her own demons from the past telling her not to succumb to producers. This is an inner conflict she cannot resolve. Now desperate, divorced, disgraced and unemployed, Maila leaves Hollywood and travels to Las Vegas.

Clinging to the last shreds of her fame, Maila gets a chance to perform in Liberace's show, and during this time Maila and Elvis meet. This brief friendship seems almost like an echo of the relationship between Maila and James; a younger, talented man who Maila finds a special connection with. Maila has implied that Elvis wouldn't get intimately involved with her. In her version, Maila even describes the events as she had been the seducer, the one

who was more aggressive to take things to more intimate level. How much time Elvis and Maila spent together and what actually went down between the two? Maila is definitely no longer the helpless object of men's cravings, but more like an active subject, what it comes to sexuality. Perhaps the connection to Elvis inspires Maila to still attempt to fan the flames of her Vampira career. But things are not the same anymore.

Maila/Vampira's turbulent years follow and related headlines are being published every now and then: house fire, becoming a victim of a violent assault, *"The Vamp attacks Vampira"* etc. These events will be displayed, to depict the stormy times in Maila's life after Vampira. Maila has also claimed that around this time she posed as a model for Disney's "Maleficent". Was this one of her "stories" or did it really happen? Did the girl who never wanted to be Snow White, but the real Evil Queen, a villain from a Disney movie, actually become an inspiration to the legendary production company to create a new, even scarier villain?

Maila's career doesn't recover from the James Dean scandal and keeps spiraling downward. Maila has already been asked to do Ed Wood's film *Graverobbers from Outer Space*, but she's refused such a poor project. However, when there's nothing else in the horizon, she finally agrees to play the role for a minimum fee: \$200 for a one-day shoot.

Maila assents to play Vampira for the very last time, refusing to repeat the horrible lines, just portraying this mute Vampira-zombie hybrid character, walking in a trance, with her arms spread, stumbling her way straight into the history of horror movies, as a cult icon and a gothic archetype. "I knew it was a professional suicide, but I didn't care. I was dead already".

The End – Vampira's legacy

Last words, where the narration becomes more fact-like: the story reviews events of the rest of Maila's life as a decaying Hollywood hasbeen, who in the end did not benefit financially from her character, although she inspired so many. A woman, whose stubbornness, eccentricity and toughness acted as both career barriers and boosters, simultaneously making her an icon in certain circles, but equally preventing her from ever rising to the mainstream, alongside Hollywood's biggest stars. Had she been more submissive to the male-dominant industry, "made nice", not acted out, would she have made it to the mainstream? One must wonder, what would Maila's career be like today, in the post "me too" era?

We'll introduce punk and goth-scenes that still worship Maila, songs that have been written about Vampira, collaborations with alternative bands, etc. This was a big part of Maila's life in the later years. Maila and therefore Vampira live on amongst the alternative punkrock subculture circles on the streets and clubs of Los Angeles, aswell as the whole world. And Plan 9 will forever be mentioned in the horror movie history.

We'll see old Maila sitting in the front of her garage home in the suburbs of the less glamorous Hollywood. This is how she lived her final years, in great poverty and dealing with illness and other hardship.

Final scene of the series has an introduction and an interview of Maila's son, who learns that he is the illegitimate child of both the lead star of the "world's worst movie" and the creator of the best rated movie ever.

Maila's story is a puzzle with many missing pieces, that this documentary is eager to find and finally put together. *The Mystery of Vampira* unfolds in a documentary where true crime genre meets a fascinating biopic – adressing not only a story of a unique personality but also viewing the Golden Age of Hollywood through the eyes of an independent woman, not tamed by the rules of men.