Deathbed Vigil and Other Tales of Digital Angst
A Review of the video by Dave Haynie

by Merrill Callaway

Dave Haynie was the chief systems engineer for Commodore up until its demise at the end of April 1994. His video was filmed on the last day the Commodore facility at West Chester, Pennsylvania was open. Immediately after the closure, the film continues at a ''Deathbed Vigil'' party. Despite the unedited and amateur quality of this video, it is a ''must see'' for die-hard Amiga fans everywhere.

The people who made the Amiga computer a major passion in our lives are the stars of the show, and the stories they tell authentically document what it was like to work at Commodore during its heyday as well as at the end. They loved the Amiga even more than us -- after all they designed it from its chips outward. People who don't know or care about the Amiga will probably not appreciate this film at all.

It is basically a two hour home movie. The medium, however, is well suited to the message. It's a thoroughly honest film, painfully so at times. Amiga users are really more of a family than anything else, and the home movie approach somehow works. It is sure to become a cult classic among Amiga fans. Just like our computer, it will be misunderstood by outsiders, but what else would we expect?

Beginning at the end

The movie opens with Dave's last drive to work at Commodore. He films the empty factory and wryly describes where the production lines were, the warehouse space was, where the engineers roller skated in the empty space until they put up a fence. Gradually you become aware that the last people here are the engineers, packing their things and talking and joking quietly about the end.

We even get to see some prototype AAA machines. I wanted to weep. They would have been available in 1993 if management had not halted AAA. ''Design but don't build'' was a catch phrase, as was ''defeat snatched from the jaws of victory''. The feelings are so heavy as reality sinks in that I found myself wondering how the unsung heros of this story would ever get through it. The rest of the movie, in fact, documents in excruciating detail how the engineers and CATS people dealt with what the film describes as their ''angst''.

It seems that there were plenty of layoff parties for mitigating the pain of separation from work on what was an obsession rather than a computer. The Deathbed Vigil documents the last of these parties, where (to completely understate it) the engineers and technical staff bid farewell to Commodore and particularly to CEO Mehdi Ali.

The next to the last party is at a Margarita's restaurant, a Commodore hangout where more than several drinks have loosened tongues. Dave interviews his friends and former co-workers, asking them if they have any last words for Mehdi Ali. Some of the funniest lines in the film are here, but I'm sure they cannot be printed! Later, there is a party, an outdoor barbecue, with all sorts of lunacy and telling of tales. Every few minutes a printed screen comes up reminding us of what could have been,

but wasn't because of (mis)management. Then, back to the party.

As the night and their creative imaginations heat up, we view the frenzied ''smash the keyboards ritual''; the burning of ''LBM'' in effigy; the singing of impromptu computer ballads (''Oh what do I do, now that my 8520's blown?''); the re-telling of the ''Lemmings at DevCon'' story; and the recitation of the salient details of the speed-bump war between engineering and facilities manager, Joe Mecca. The engineers also dealt with the absurdity of their situation by filling in property passes for 727 jet aircraft, painting managers' names on the speed bumps, painting the facilities manager's privileged parking spot as a handicap zone, issuing bogus memos, and otherwise making subtle and not so subtle war on management.

You'll hear it all, and even witness some of the pranks on video (no faces of course). Generally what we have here is creative subversion. What else is there to do when you're asked to design but don't build something you've given your all for (again and again)?

I've always thought that the Amiga is somehow a subversive computer, and now I know why: it must have been built in by its designers! I suppose it's knowing what a truly brilliant computer the Amiga is, that makes the film so fascinating, and the engineers' hijinks so poignant. Among high school students, they would have been merely silly; among such talented geniuses, the pranks stand out as defiant humor confronting creative despair.

The Deathbed Vigil documents a sometimes humorous, sometimes malicious struggle for individual and collective sanity among extremely talented people whose every creative idea was somehow misdirected or squelched by a crew of clueless managers and corporate philistines. These are our heros, who created not just a computer, but a passion, a whole outlook on life. They came and slept under their desks at the plant and showered in the sinks in order to pursue their creative muses and produce something truly excellent. Throughout the hilarity you can feel their pain and frustration. They made computing history, yet they were ignored and ill treated to the last.

The Deathbed Vigil and Other Tales of Digital Angst is distributed by Intangible Assets Manufacturing, 828 Ormond Ave., Drexel Hill, PA 19026-2604, Tel: +1 610 853 4406, Fax: +1 610 853 3733. Cost for the regular issue is $35. A limited edition of 100, numbered and signed by most of the Amiga engineers sells for $75. Dale L. Larson, owner of IAM is a former network software engineer at Commodore.

Caption for illustration from the video:
'''Where the heck am I gonna go? I guess I'll go call 3DO. Well, where the heck am I gonna go? I guess I'll go call 3DO. But y'know I just don't know how they're gonna pay their CEO. Well a billion to nothin' in just about three, it's that strange kinda genius that Mehdi Ali...'
Unemployment band featuring Mike Rivers singing 'Chicken Lips Blues' Dir: Fred Bowen in Deathbed Vigil and Other Tales of Digigal Angst, a film by Dave Hayne.''