

Jonathan Mumm  
Interview by Sue Staats

The headline for this interview could be “Former TV Anchor Reveals Dark Past!”

Too dramatic? Well, maybe. But former TV reporter and anchor Jonathan Mumm does write paranormal thrillers and produce blood-soaked horror movies that have become cult favorites. But although he’s a writer of horrific scenes, it’s not the vampires and the things that go bump in the night that scare him most ... But more about that later.

Let’s start at the beginning. How did this affable, Emmy-winning TV reporter and anchor happen to cross over to the dark side? Where did it all start?

*Edited for length and clarity.*

**Jonathan:** Well, I had wanted to make movies ever since I was a little kid. My granddad had given my father all his Super 8 camera equipment and my brothers and I would make all these Super 8 movies. But I was also interested in broadcasting. I had my first job on the radio in my hometown when I was a junior in high school. And in college, I worked in radio and television, as a booth announcer, and then for PBS. And when, after college, President Nixon vetoed the funds for public broadcasting, I went home and worked for the local TV station, and that's what got me on camera. But I still had this movie dream of going to Hollywood and being an actor.

I had an uncle who was an actor, Claude Akins, and he said, “Sure, come on out.” So, I did, and gave myself five years to make it. I had an agent and because I’d been in the union on TV, I could join the Screen Actors Guild, so I got small parts in big things and big parts in small things and, after five years, I got tired of it.

**Sue:** Really? It sounds like you were doing pretty well.

**Jonathan:** Well, I'll tell you why I finally quit Hollywood. I was doing a lot of voiceover work and the dream of a voiceover artist was to become the spokesperson for a product. A client, Brookside Winery, had never advertised before. They hired me and we did a series of six test commercials. The deal was, if their sales went up by any amount, they’d hire me as their spokesman and use the production company to produce the spots. Well, the sales went up 14 percent! We’d made it! We’d have full-time jobs! And we never heard from them. And then one day, I’m driving home, listening to the radio, and an ad comes on for Brookside Winery. Voiced by ... Vincent Price. I guess they figured that if a commercial voiced by a nobody could make sales go up 14 percent, what if they had somebody like Vincent Price? Oh, my God. Anyway, I gave it up. I went back to broadcasting.

**Sue:** And eventually ended up at Channel 10. But you’d begun producing the *Chupacabra* movies while you were working there, right?

**Jonathan:** That's true. It was at a time when really low-budget independent films were getting noticed. Robert Rodriguez had made *El Mariachi* for \$7,000 and Warner Brothers released it. Of course, they pumped a hundred thousand into it to make it palatable, but still, it was kind of a rush. And then Quentin Tarantino was successful and Sacramento had sort of a local version in Joe Carnahan. Joe was a promotions producer at Channel 31 and he made a movie called *Blood, Guts, Bullets and Octane* shot on 16-millimeter film for \$7,000. And around this time there was an article in The Sacramento Bee

about this creature called the chupacabra. I'd never heard of it — nobody had — and I thought, somebody's gonna make a movie out of this. And whoever does will have the first one out there.

**Sue:** So, we're in the early 2000s. Take me through how this movie got made — but first, tell me what in the world a chupacabra is.

**Jonathan:** It's a creature in folktales in Mexico and Puerto Rico that mainly attacks goats. The name, chupacabra, means "sucker of goats." It's kind of like a vampire in that it drains them of their blood, but if it's hungry enough, it'll get sheep. And it's not too big a stretch, at least in a movie, to imagine that it would prey on humans, too.

The movies took years to make. The first one, *Blood of the Chupacabras*, we started on 16-millimeter film but couldn't get financing to finish it. But about a year later, one of the engineers at Channel 10, Mike Strange, had bought a digital video camera — they were just coming out. And he suggested I could shoot the movie in digital video and loaned me the camera with the promise that when I'd finished, I'd teach him how to use it.

So, the movie was back on. It was a long slog. It took another two years to finish it. The people who had parts in it were friends of mine, local Sacramento actors, and it was like, I'd call them up and say, "Are you free this weekend? Can we shoot your scene?" Once we were finished, it took another year to edit, and then there was the business of trying to sell it. We entered some film festivals and it got into the New York International Independent (Film and Video) Festival, and after that we had a premiere at the Crest Theatre. We had reviews in the Bee and the Davis Enterprise, but the News and Review couldn't cover it because their two film critics had been actors in the film. Eventually, we got a distributor and they put it out. They changed the name to *Bloodthirst*.

**Sue:** So, that's the one you originally called *Blood of the Chupacabras*. What about the second one? *Rise of the Chupacabras*?

**Jonathan:** Well, that was a sequel. And how it got made was funny: we got so many negative reviews on *Blood of the Chupacabras* that one of the guys in it said to me, "Have you ever thought about seeing if the distributor would be interested in part two?" Almost in spite of those terrible reviews. So, I wrote a letter and the distributor immediately got back to us with a letter of intent so we could raise money. They actually wanted it, which made me feel good and bad at the same time. The good part was that they wanted it, and the bad part was that our deal was a straight buyout. The movie was in every Blockbuster and Hollywood Video in the country. So, somebody made some money off of it, but it wasn't me.

**Sue:** I think what's remarkable is that both movies have survived so long. They've gone straight from cassettes in Blockbuster to DVDs in the Netflix red envelope to today's streaming video. Is it fair to say that they've achieved cult status, and are you surprised?

**Jonathan:** Well, it's been kind of a long, strange trip. I was under contract to my original distributor for 17 years, but when the contract was written, things were in a video store or Netflix sent you a DVD, like you said. It was an entirely different world. There was nothing about the internet in the contract. So, once that was over, we got another distributor and he took it to sell on the internet. People were watching it here and there, it was on Amazon and other places. And then that kind of petered out. That distributor handed me over to another one, who had this bright idea of creating a company to put out all these old movies that had been shot on video for practically nothing. He called it Visual Vengeance. It's out on Blu-ray now and you're seeing it everywhere — Hulu, I think, and a whole bunch of places.

**Sue:** Like the Chupacabra itself, your movies cannot die.

**Jonathan:** That's pretty much it. You know, they've been called the worst movies in the history of the world, but it's true, they cannot die. And I have to say, they are not the worst movies in the world. I wouldn't say that. I've seen that movie and it is not mine.

**Sue:** I did read some pretty bad reviews. But lots of them said things like, "It's cheesy and awful and I loved it." Kind of a mixed blessing. But at least it was being watched. And that brings us up to date with your movies. And now I'm curious about what drew you to this genre. Have you always loved mystery and horror? Were you the kid who loved to tell scary stories?

**Jonathan:** I loved scary things when I was a little kid. I'd see ads for horror movies in the paper and beg to go to them. And my parents would say, "No, you're too little." And I remember waking up scared in the middle of the night and my mother coming in and asking what was the matter. And I remember telling her, it was that movie. "But you never saw it," she said. I'd just made the whole thing up in my head, just from seeing the ad in the paper. But when I was older in the Boy Scouts, I always told the scary story, you know, around the campfire.

**Sue:** I can see you, holding that flashlight under your face, terrifying all the other campers! I want to turn to your written work, part of which will be read at the upcoming SOSS event. It's called *Stop It, You're Scaring Me*, and I understand that some of the stories you covered for Channel 10 inspired the novel?

**Jonathan:** That's definitely true. Vikingsholm is a castle on the shore of Lake Tahoe on Emerald Bay. We'd done a story there and I was just really taken with the place, the whole setting. It was built in the 1920s and I interviewed a woman who, as a teenager, spent summers there as the guest of the woman who built it. She'd written a pamphlet about its history and I was really taken with the whole story. It's a really beautiful place, but it's very isolated. And I could imagine being there late at night all by yourself and listening to the waves wash against the shore. I imagined it could get really spooky and also, there was a ghost story involving the tea house that's built on a little island just offshore. We went to the island and got shots of it and I started thinking, what if someone, maybe a young woman, was getting over mental depression and problems she's had and can't recall parts of her life? And as part of her therapy, she's sent to this place and then really odd things happen.

**Sue:** And that, in a nutshell, is *Stop It, You're Scaring Me*! Which is indeed spooky and scary and very odd things happen in that isolated setting. Part of the novel will be read at Stories on Stage by an actor. I was wondering, because you're extraordinarily comfortable in front of a camera and an actor yourself, what will it be like for you, hearing your words read by another actor? How do you think you might react to a reader who might interpret your words in a way you wouldn't?

**Jonathan:** Well, I don't know. It's a very good question. I'm very curious to see how it goes. And to see her interpretation of the work. And, of course, because every actor prepares, she'll have thought it through and figured out how she sees herself as my heroine. You know, I also wrote plays for my wife's little theater, so I've had actors interpret words that I've written. And a lot of the time it'll surprise you because they'll find something that maybe didn't really occur to you or stand out to you as the writer. It's buried and they find it. So yes, I'm very curious to see how she does. I'm sure she'll do great.

**Sue:** Do you ever see yourself making another film? Maybe based on this book?

**Jonathan:** Oh, I had a slim chance of doing that a few years ago, back when *Stop It, You're Scaring Me* was first published. I was at the Los Angeles Book Fair with a friend who had also published a book and a producer stopped by and was very taken by his book, which was a crime novel, and they ended up making a movie out of it. I got a small part in it and they were a little interested in my book, but it never went anywhere. But I still think it would make a good movie.

**Sue:** Well, I agree. You can't improve on the setting, for sure! Jonathan, one last question: You write all kinds of scary stuff, words and scenes intended to frighten. And I'm wondering, what frightens *you* the most?

**Jonathan:** Well, I could be frivolous and say, you know, an overdue mortgage bill. But really, thinking about it, those deadlines on TV — when you absolutely have to get your story done by the deadline when it goes on the air — are really terrifying. And something else I still have nightmares about is back in the days when I worked in radio. Back then, before everything was digitized and computerized, you'd have turntables and play records. And sometimes I'd put the record on and go out for a break, to get a Coke, something like that, and all of a sudden, I'd think, is the record still going? Has it ended? And then I'd run like hell back to the control room to make sure it hadn't ended. I'm telling you, to this day I will dream I'm walking down the street and all of a sudden, I think, oh my gosh, the record! It's about to end and I'm not there, I'm not in a control room!

**Sue:** So, not blood and guts? Not monsters under the bed or maniacs with chainsaws?

**Jonathan:** Nope. Because those deadlines — that threat of dead air — that's real-time terror.