

# THE STORY OF ROCK 'N' ROLL COMICS

**New DVD documents the short and four-color life of comic book publisher and First Amendment crusader Todd Loren and his band of Rock 'N' Roll outlaws—who took on the music business—and won.**

ARTICLE BY GREG PRATO

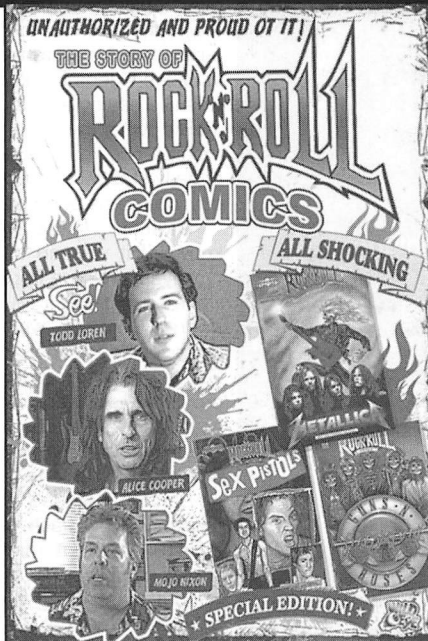
Several names are almost always linked with First Amendment rights—Lenny Bruce, George Carlin, Howard Stern, 2 Live Crew, etc. However, one figure is often overlooked in the records of free speech battles—and that is Todd Loren, who was best known for creating Revolutionary Comics, and its popular *Rock 'N' Roll Comics* series. Now, Loren gets a little of his own well-deserved screen time in the new DVD, *The Story of Rock 'N' Roll Comics*, from Wild Eye Releasing. Directed by Ilko Davidov (*William S. Burroughs: A Man Within* and *Children in Exile*), the 80-minute documentary also features interviews with Todd's father, Herb Shapiro, as well as fellow co-workers and former employees, plus rock industry insiders like Alice Cooper and Mojo Nixon.

"I had seen the comic books at newsstands early on," recalls Davidov, "and then my first encounter with somebody that worked with them was at an art gallery, here in Chicago. I met Scott Jackson, who did most of the covers, and he told me the story briefly. I thought it would be a good story for a documentary, and it was very interesting. I did a short interview with him over the next week, and tried to shop the project around, did some more research, spoke to some more people to see where it goes. For a while, it didn't go anywhere, until I got a call from a journalist from England, Ian Shirley, who was writing a book on comics and music, and also an article for *Mojo* magazine. He called me and said, 'I saw on your website you're working on this project.' From then on, he put me in contact with Todd's father [Herb Shapiro], who he had interviewed already, and that gave it the spark to move forward. A week later, I had discussed it with my producers, Chris Swider and Carmine Cervi, and we went to Florida and interviewed Herb, who put us in touch with the rest of the people. It took a while, but we did track down a lot of them."

And as Mojo Nixon (who received his own entry in the *Rock 'N' Roll Comics* line—one of the few to be actually "authorized") says, the doc touches upon all the necessary elements to perk up the average viewer's interest. "It's got rock n' roll, it's got comedy, and it's got a murder mystery! Most people who like rock n' roll also like comics. Y'know, *what is Kiss?*"

As the documentary explains, Loren got his start in the 1980's by opening up a San Diego, CA-based rock n' roll merchandise store, Musicade. And although the store was doing well financially, Loren's true passion was to launch a line of comic books that told the story of rock and pop's biggest names. "He was actually still brainstorming *Rock 'N' Roll Comics* when we first met, around 1988," recalls Jay Allen Sanford, who would eventually become one of Loren's "go to" illustrators. "I ended up going to work for him—a couple of previous businesses, selling rock memorabilia. I actually didn't think it was that good sounding of an idea, doing real life stories of rock bands. But he proved me wrong, and I ended up jumping aboard as of the second issue."

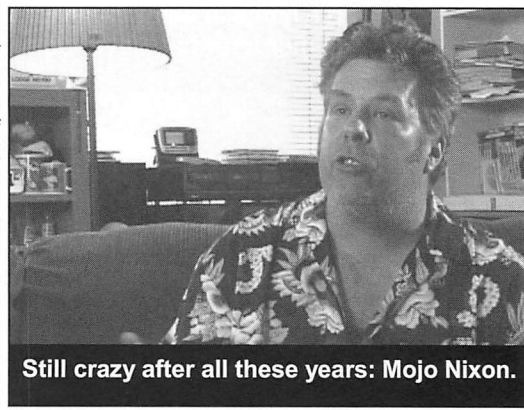
What soon followed were comics that featured Guns N' Roses, Metallica, Kiss, The Beatles, Pink Floyd, Nirvana, and New Kids on the Block, among countless others. The only problem was that some artists were supportive—and some were not. "The comic books were published without authorization from the actual subjects of the stories," explains Davidov. "And they were biographies of real people. A lot of the subjects were not happy that they were portrayed in a comic book—some of the things that they did or the way they were portrayed wasn't flattering at times. For the most part, they didn't have that much of a problem with it—but their licensing companies and merchandising companies, which represented record labels, were not happy about this, because they felt that this is an infringement, that this is 'merchandise,' and comic books are merchandise. The problem was that they thought they were losing money by not publishing those books themselves—somebody else was exploiting the name of the celebrity and making money on that. So they put a cease and desist on quite a few of the titles in the beginning. They didn't end up going to court—they just stopped them from being distributed."



"When the New Kids on the Block comic book came out, they got a threatening letter again from their lawyers, that said, 'You cannot publish this,' and Todd and his father decided to go to court and prove they had the right to . . . In the end, all the information that was in any of those books was already published—the writers did their research based on articles from the press and other biographies. So it was not anything that wasn't already available. Todd ended up winning the case for the most part, because they were able to prove that comic books were not merchandise, but they're similar to other forms of journalism or literature. You can publish an unauthorized biography of many of those people, and also write an article without their permission in the press. So that was the importance on the ruling in that case."

But as Sanford recalls, it was a long and arduous process. "They practically had a bench with our name carved in it in the courthouse at one point! It was a constant thing in the early days. We got sued for various matters that had to do with Bon Jovi, Mötley Crüe. Injunctions that prevented us from doing issues on Judas Priest and Skid Row. The Skid Row issue had actually already been drawn and solicited. It was supposed to be 'number eight.' There is no number eight—there's a number seven and then there's a number nine—because Skid Row successfully blocked us from putting that out. It all came to a head with New Kids on the Block, though. They sued us as of our twelfth issue. That was the first time that it went all the way through, getting a judge to make a declaratory judgment at the end of the case, that stated—definitively—whether a company can do comic books about real people, without infringing their rights to their images. And it came down in our favor. After that, we still got lawsuit threats, but we wouldn't even offer a settlement—we'd show them the New Kids judgment, and they'd generally whimper and go away. Or make a noise in the press—which would make us sell comic books. But we spent a lot of time in court. Todd claimed that he spent about \$30,000 fighting the New Kids case."

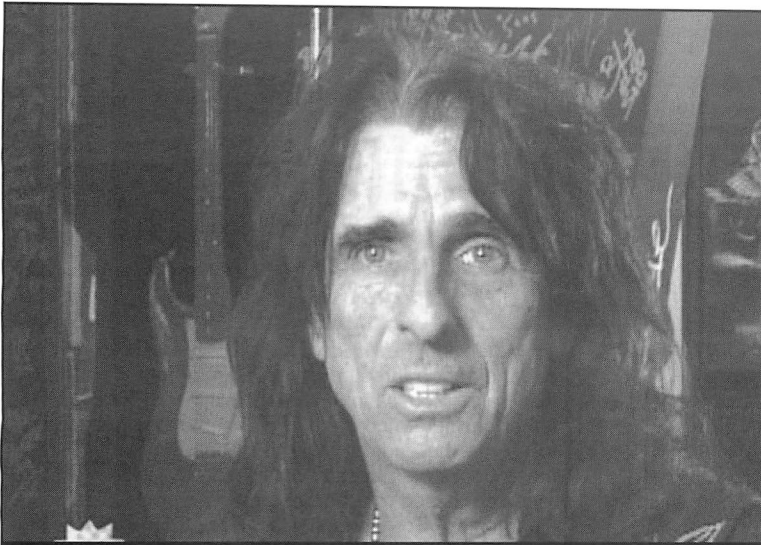
Playing devil's advocate, Mojo Nixon brings up a good point. "If I do a comic book about ZZ Top, does ZZ Top have to authorize it? If you did a story on ZZ Top, do they have to authorize it? I'm sure ZZ Top would like to authorize it if you did a story, but they don't have to. So there's a legitimate question there. I think the problem with all these kinds of legal questions is that the big guy can



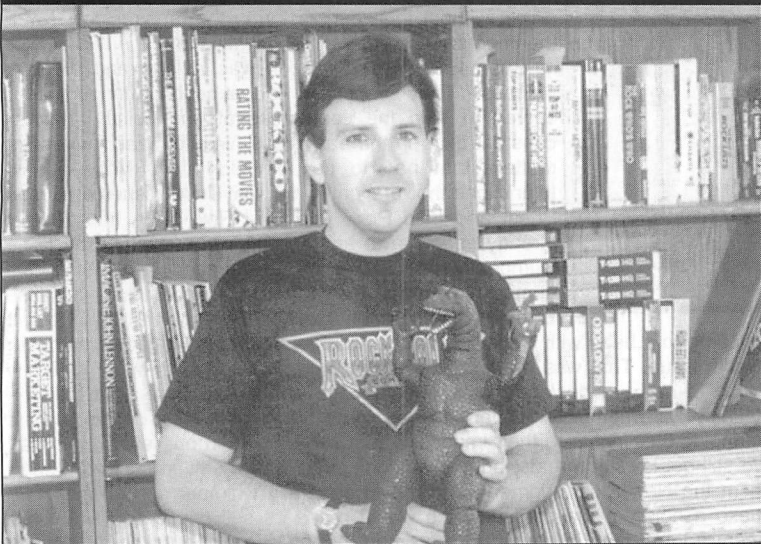
Still crazy after all these years: Mojo Nixon.

always hire enough lawyers to make you say 'Uncle.' Even if you're right, under the current legal system, whoever can hire the most lawyers can get the most justice. That's what I liked about Todd—he was ready to take the battle on.

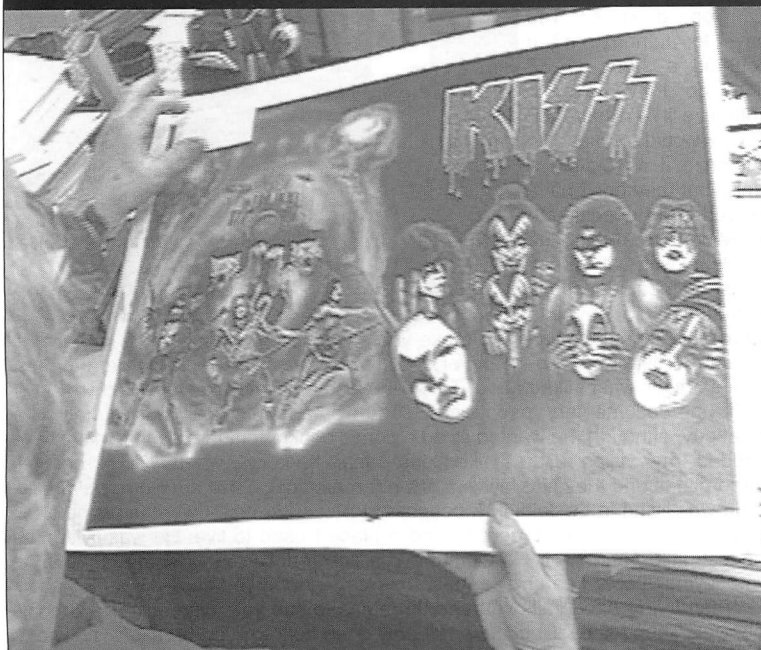
"In the documentary, people say 'Todd was an asshole.' I thought he was a great guy, although, he wanted to do a comic book about me, so that might have clouded my vision. But I liked the idea, because when bands become corporations and they hire lawyers, it's not really rock n' roll anymore. It's not like Todd was living in La Jolla in a beachfront house. In fact, I went to his house—he was living in Hillcrest, right behind a place I used to live. He was living in a modest, little apartment. He didn't have a zillion dollars. I liked the fact that he was saying, 'Look, I can make these comics . . . and you can't do a thing about it.' When Irving Azoff calls you and threatens to sue you, nine out of ten people roll over. They roll over because not only does he know leg-breakers, he knows \$500-an-hour lawyers. And so most people give in. Todd didn't. That's what I liked about him."



Alice Cooper is featured in the documentary *The Story of Rock 'N' Roll Comics*, now on DVD from Wild Eye Releasing.



*Rock 'N' Roll Comics* creator Todd Loren was stabbed to death at his home in June 1992. He was 32. His murderer has never been found.



Artwork for a KISS edition of *Rock 'N' Roll Comics*.

Loren certainly didn't give in, and *Rock 'N' Roll Comics* was free to carry on their merry way. But not all the artists opposed being selected for the series, such as Kiss. In the documentary, a phone call from Kiss singer/bassist Gene Simmons can be heard, in which he is clearly a fan of their work. "[Kiss] were very receptive, actually," remembers Sanford. "'Number twelve' was the first time we did a story that was an overview of their entire career. It wasn't really that good of an issue, but apparently it impressed Gene enough that he contacted Revolutionary, and we subsequently did four more comics. We did one called 'Kiss: Tales from the Tours,' which they sat down with us. We met in LA several times and went to Gene Simmons' birthday party, did several different interviews, and based the comic around their best ten or twelve different tour tales. Then we did a three issue series, that was straight biographical from their growing up to . . . I forget what album, but they still had the makeup on as of the third issue when it wrapped up. And he was real supportive. He wore the *Rock 'N' Roll Comics* t-shirt in magazine spreads, and in all the videos from *Kiss Alive III*, he's wearing our *Hard Rock Comics* shirt. It was like having a rock star in the camp—it was great."

But what seemed like a promising future for Loren as an accidental renaissance man came to an abrupt halt on June 11, 1992, when he was brutally stabbed to death in his San Diego apartment, aged only 32. Still to this day, there has been no arrest made in the killing.

Davidov: "A lot of it isn't clear. He was stabbed to death in '92. It's not known if it was an intruder or somebody that he knew. The murder is still unsolved—we are hoping that this film will also help keep this story alive and we're hoping that it will be solved some day. There has been speculations that Andrew Cunanan, who was a serial killer—he killed a lot of gay men—there is some evidence that they knew each other and it might have been one of Cunanan's first murders. But again, that's a speculation and it can't be really proved—there were some articles to that effect in the press. If this film helps in any way to shed some more light on that mystery, that would be great. Or at least keep that investigation alive, because it's been a long time, and the more time that passes, the harder it will be to find out what really happened."

Sanford: "There's a school of thought that says that [Loren and Cunanan] probably knew each other, but I've become more of a mind to focus on the possibility that it might have been someone that he knew, or business associate. Because my fear is that by dwelling on the Andrew Cunanan angle without there being a definitive clue, other than, 'Yeah, they probably knew each other,' is that we might lose track of a guy that might still be out there, that needs to be caught. But they traveled in the same circles, there seems to be—according to his own family and people that are close to him—someone in his life that sounds a lot like Cunanan, and lived in a house right where Cunanan is said to have lived. So it's possible." [Cunanan would commit suicide on July 23, 1997, after he murdered fashion designer Gianni Versace a few days earlier.]

With a cult following developed around Loren and his comics over the years [*Rock 'N' Roll Comics* would continue on after his death], Davidov began assembling the aforementioned documentary. Originally released in 2005, *The Story of Rock 'N' Roll Comics* finally made its debut on DVD on April 24<sup>th</sup> via Wild Eye, who in addition to the full documentary, have compiled a great deal of bonus features, extended interviews, TV news clips, commercials, trailers and a Revolution Comics/ *Rock 'N' Roll Comics* cover art gallery. Additionally, liner notes are included from both rock critic Rob O'Connor and Sanford, the latter of which was very pleased with how the documentary turned out. "I always thought this was an interesting story that people should know. The reason I'm so excited about the film is that someone out there may be able to finally finish the story for us. Give us the ending—tell us who killed Todd Loren."

Looking back, Davidov wonders what Loren would have been up to today. "Had he lived, I believe he would have gone on to do very interesting things, and I think he would be remembered as one of the first to do it on that scale—to do a real biography of real people in comic book form. And put the two together—being a reporter and publishing it in comic book form—that hadn't had been done before. Comic books were about fictional heroes and characters. I'm sure it had been done before, but not on that scale. And not consistently by one publisher. From what I understand, he had aspirations to do many things—he was a good businessperson and had a lot of ideas. He would have ended up maybe working in the music industry. He would be remembered in general as a controversial figure, but who knows—I believe he was capable of becoming an important figure had he not been killed."

Lastly, Loren's former co-worker and friend Sanford offers these parting words. "I would like Todd to be remembered the way that he is portrayed in the film—a polarizing figure who earned the ire of many, but also, gave many their starts in this great business. I don't think he'd mind that at all." And as evidenced by the long-awaited release of *The Story of Rock 'N' Roll Comics* on DVD, Loren's contributions to rock n' roll, comics, and First Amendment rights continue to reverberate to this day.

**Greg Prato is a writer whose work has appeared in Rolling Stone, and is the author of such books as The Eric Carr Story and MTV Ruled the World. For more info about his books, visit [www.lulu.com/spotlight/gregprato](http://www.lulu.com/spotlight/gregprato)**

