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CIMMFEST'S ILKO DAVIDOV TALKS ROCK 'N' ROLL COMICS

Andy Markowitz of MusicFilmWeb interviews CIMMfest director Ilko Davidov about his film The Story of Rock 'n' Roll Comics, finally released on DVD and recently shown on the big screen in NYC.

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From 1989 to 1994, Rock 'n' Roll Comics was the delight of some bands and the scourge of others – or rather, of their management and merchandising agents. From its very first issue (on Guns 'N Roses), the popular line of very unauthorized bios published by San Diego-based Revolutionary Comics generated a string of legal threats and lawsuits. The litigation wave crested with a case brought by New Kids on the Block that resulted in a ruling that comic books are entitled to the same First Amendment protections as other forms of biography.



In some circles, that made Todd Loren, Revolutionary's self-made founder, a heroic free-speech crusader. In others, he was a dishonest and manipulative master who ripped off writers and artists, and whose scandal-soaked books soiled the art of comics. Parties on the cover, as well as comic book subjects Alice Cooper and Mojo Nixon, are heard in *The Story of Rock 'n' Roll*

*Comics*, a music documentary from Chicago's BulletProof Film that's fresh out this week on DVD. Originally titled *Unauthorized and Proud of It* (after Revolutionary Comics' motto), the movie chronicles the rise of Rock 'n' Roll Comics and its enigmatic owner, who died in 1992 at the age of 32 in a still unsolved murder.

Director Ilko Davidov, who got his start in film making underground music videos as a teenager in communist Bulgaria, is also the co-founder of CIMMfest. After decompressing from the recent fourth edition of the fest (of which MFW was a media partner), he answered some questions via Skype about telling Loren's strange but true story.

*MFW: How and when did you first encounter Rock 'n' Roll Comics? Were you in the States when they were going on?*

**Ilko Davidov:** I had just arrived. It was 1990, '91. But I never got into them. I would go to a record store and see them, or the newsstand.

*So how did this become a subject of interest for you, sufficient to make a movie about it?*

Years later I met Scott Jackson. He did some of the most famous covers for Rock 'n' Roll Comics. He told me the story of the publisher, Todd, and of his involvement. I thought it was quite a story and decided to interview him, and then follow up and see if he could put me in touch with the rest of the people involved. This was in '97, '98. It was hard because – you know, this was pre-Facebook and everything, and his contacts were outdated. It was hard to follow up and find whoever we needed to talk to. We put it on the [BulletProof Film] website, a brief description, went to a couple of [film] markets. There was some interest, but I didn't really follow it up and was involved with other projects at the time.

Until one day I heard from Ian Shirley, who was writing an article for Mojo magazine in London, and was also writing a book about rock 'n' roll and comic books. He called me to ask what stage the film was at, because he had found it at the website. It ended up with him giving me more information than I was able to give him [laughs]. He had already talked to Todd's father, Herb, and to [Revolutionary Comics writers] Jay [Allen Sanford] and Spike [Steffenhagen]. He gave me their phone numbers and via London I was able to get in touch with these people. I called Todd's father and we talked briefly about it, and a week or so later we flew to Florida to interview him.

*Do you think that one of the reasons they got behind it so quickly – you get the sense from the film that they feel Todd's gotten kind of a raw deal from history. Not just in the sense of being murdered at 32, but in terms of how he was perceived in the music and comics worlds.*

There is that. The articles that were out there in the *Comics Journal* and whatnot were not so kind to Todd.

*You interview Gary Groth, the editor of the Comics Journal, who wrote an article headlined "Todd Loren: First Amendment advocate or lying sack of shit?" Unlike him, the movie seems acknowledge that it's possible to be both.*

For sure. [Loren] did it not just for – I mean, making money was important to him, but he was, by everyone's account who worked with him, a truly real music fan. That's why he did what he did. It was not just to exploit the bands and make money. He was a very, very dedicated music fan.



Todd Loren, Comic-Style

*Why do you think he was such a polarizing figure?*

I think he was eccentric and opinionated. He didn't filter anything he said, and a lot of times that rubbed people the wrong way. He burned a lot of bridges, as you can see in the film, because of the way he was. That's why I think he was a polarizing figure. He had his opinions and ideas and stuck to them, and went to court for that.

*Maybe it's just because so much time has passed, but it does seem hard to believe that these rock stars believed they could win suits like this. As people in the movie point out, no one would go to court over a Rolling Stone article, or an unauthorized biography of one of these bands. Was it the use of logos and likenesses that made people think there's something actionable here?*



Ilko Davidov

No, the licensing companies and the management viewed comic books as merchandise – not as a book, not as a biography. Because they own the copyright or whatever on the band, they own the merchandising rights. What [Revolutionary Comics] had to prove in court is that the comic book is not necessarily merchandise but is a legitimate biography or a legitimate

form of literature, which is protected by the First Amendment.

*Did you try and get to some of the musicians that he pissed off or was sued by for the film?*

We tried nearly everyone that there was a [Rock 'n' Roll Comics] book about. It took a long time to track them down. They all declined to be interviewed on camera.

*Except for Alice and Mojo.*

Yes, exactly. That is a very small percentage. Mojo was certainly a big supporter of the books and a friend of Todd's. But other people didn't want to talk about it. Including the lawyers and people from the music business and the licensing companies, who were also approached to be interviewed, and said they would be and when we showed up for the interviews weren't available [laughs]. We tried numerous times to have the other side in, but that's all we got. I finally stopped saying what the movie's about, because once I'd say "Rock 'n' Roll Comics," everybody said, "No! I got ripped off by that guy." Finally I started saying, "We're making a movie about rock 'n' roll and comic books," to be able to get through that.

*Do you have a view on the quality of Rock 'n' Roll Comics? A lot of people call them straight-up schlock.*

I'm not an expert. I think some of them are better than others, depending on the artist. I know that there were a lot of people that didn't stick around because of the way [Loren] was hiring young people that didn't have a lot of experience. Some of them were able to move on pretty quickly and make a name for themselves. Some were pretty bad. Also, the quality of printing varied. There's a lot of stories where they didn't have enough time and had to print overnight, so there's a lot of typos and spelling mistakes and whatnot. They received pretty wide distribution at some points, but it was very much done as an underground publication, independently, by a few fans.

*People who worked with Rock 'n' Roll Comics defend what they were doing as journalism. They talk about how much research they did, how they fact-checked everything. As someone who does quote-unquote serious documentary, how seriously do you take those claims?*

I think it was an incredible amount of work, what they did. I've talked to a lot of people who all agree that this is the best part of the books. Even if in some of the books the printing was not of a high quality, the facts were so well researched. And all of it was taken from things in the press. When they had a chance they interviewed the actual musicians, which happened in a couple of instances, but mostly it was information that was already out there. As somebody pointed out, back in the day it was like what *Behind the Music* became for television. It was *Behind the Music* in comic book form.

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