

ROCK N ROLL COMICS | March 19, 2012

# Proud of it: The Story of Rock 'N' Roll Comics



**Christian Lipski**

Portland Comic Books Examiner



<http://www.examiner.com/comic-books-in-portland/proud-of-it-photo>

Todd Loren conducted business at maximum volume.

**Credits:** Wild Eye Releasing



<http://www.examiner.com/comic-books-in-portland/but-i-like-it-picture>

"It's my video, I'll do it my way, god d\*mmmit." --  
Todd Loren, The Story of Rock 'N' Roll Comics

## ***The Story of Rock 'N' Roll Comics***

<http://www.wildeyereleasing.com/unauthorized.html> is the

DVD release of Ilko Davidov's 2005 documentary film

*Unauthorized and Proud Of It: Todd Loren's Rock 'N' Roll Comics*. On the face of it, it's a movie about a man who

helped to battle for the First Amendment through his publishing company. And while Todd Loren did participate in many high-profile court cases, his story is ultimately one of control, both of himself and of others.

## **First Steps**

Todd Loren first makes a name for himself in the literal sense.

Born Stuart Loren Shapiro, he decides at an early age to change his name and hide his origins, forcing his father to use his new name.

"In a way," Herb Shapiro says in the film, "he trained me to call him Todd."

This act is the beginning of a long line of moves by Loren to control his own surroundings.

Loren's youth is spent promoting and organizing his own music and comic conventions, eventually becoming successful enough to purchase a home at the age of 18. Loren now has his own house, and can make his own rules.

**Slideshow: [But I Like It](http://www.examiner.com/comic-books-in-portland/but-i-like-it-picture)**  
<http://www.examiner.com/comic-books-in-portland/but-i-like-it-picture>



<http://www.examiner.com/comic-books-in-portland/the-story-of-rock-n-roll-the-trailer-video>

**Video: [The Story of Rock 'N' Roll: The Trailer](http://www.examiner.com/comic-books-in-portland/the-story-of-rock-n-roll-the-trailer-video)**

<http://www.examiner.com/comic-books-in-portland/the-story-of-rock-n-roll-the-trailer-video>

**Rating for The Story of Rock 'N' Roll Comics:**

His first major business endeavor is Comicade, selling back issues of comic books via mail order. This is followed shortly thereafter by **Musicade** (<http://www.trademarkia.com/musicade-73724300.html>), another mail order business selling music merchandise of dubious origin. *Rock 'N' Roll Comics* writer Spike Steffenhagen was a customer of Musicade, which he recalls sold "import" items -- read: possible bootlegs."

Loren, in his desire to be successful, is not to be hampered by the need to license official merchandise. The entrepreneur has again constructed his own house with his own rules.

The DVD contains a number of clips from a promotional video for the company. In it, Loren is confident and at ease as the important businessman he sees himself to be.

He has also taken up a new cause, including in each shipment from Musicade the latest news on censorship in the music industry. It's the first step in what will become a life-long crusade.

### Rock 'N' Roll Comics

*"Anybody that f\*cks with me, I can f\*ck with them right back!"*

When Loren happens upon a copy of *Hey Boss*, a comic-book spoof of Bruce Springsteen, he sees his two businesses combined. Immediately, he dismantles Musicade, dumping employees and any material that is not useful for his new business: **Revolutionary Comics** (<http://www.revolutionarycomics.com/>), a comic book publishing house. Herb Shapiro is taken on as vice-president.

The company's first issue of *Rock N' Roll Comics*, covering the story of Guns N' Roses, goes relatively unnoticed until Axl Rose threatens to sue. The resulting media frenzy causes sales of the book to soar. Any attention is good attention for the small business.

It's obvious from the DVD that the publisher and his writers are genuinely interested in their books' subjects, as several interview clips mention the large amounts of research that go into each issue. These are not *Mad Magazine*-style parodies but comic-format biographies of the bands.

### Related topics:

[Rock N Roll Comics, review, Todd Loren, stuart immonen](#)



**Christian Lipski,**  
Portland Comic Books Examiner

Christian Lipski has been enjoying comics since before he was able to read, and has written articles about the world of sequential art for a number of web sites, including Popshifter.com. His appetite for comics is seemingly never-ending, and his

favorite books  
change almost  
daily. Contact...

However, Loren makes sure that he holds complete control over his domain; his house, his rules. Checks are printed with rubber-stamp contracts on the back, so endorsing the check means agreeing to certain stipulations not likely to favor the artist.

In general, the creators involved with Revolutionary Comics seem to be content to have a job in comics, although writer Jay Allen Sanford claims that the pay isn't "anywhere near the wages they'd get from other similar-sized companies."

Things go smoothly, unless disagreements arise.

Robert Conte is hired by Loren to write for *Rock 'N' Roll Comics* -- paid with a contract-stamped check-- and promised a raise beginning with his third book. Conte asks Loren to make good on the agreement, only to find his name stripped from the credits of his next issue.

When he confronts Loren about the blatant omission, Conte recalls Loren responding, "Anybody that f\*cks with me, I can f\*ck with them right back! Your name's cut out, nobody can prove it was you."

The master of the house will not put up with anyone he feels is challenging his authority.

### **In Defense of Freedom**

Loren revels in his "outlaw" persona, printing "Unauthorized and Proud Of It!," underneath the company's logo on each book's cover. He brags openly about flouting what others see as a point of trademark law.

The **PRMC**

**([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parents\\_Music\\_Resource\\_Center](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parents_Music_Resource_Center))**

's concerns over the content of music at the time makes the 1st Amendment a hot topic, and no one has been more excited about the controversy (or any controversy) than Loren. He fills his editorial pages, as he did his Musicade shipments, with discussions about freedom of speech and its detractors.

When the New Kids On The Block sue Loren and lose, the case proves the publisher right by supporting the legality of unauthorized biographies, even those in pictorial form.

The group's subsequent suit, however, successfully prevents Loren from using their trademarked logo without permission. As a merchandiser with Musicade, Loren operated with impunity because he is never caught, but now he is forced to obey someone else's rules.

### **The Real Story**

When it comes to his private life, Todd Loren is even more controlling than in his business dealings. Even his closest friends in the company report seeing the "real" Loren only rarely, and referred to him as "paranoid" in his need to hide his personal information. His homosexuality is the most hidden of Loren's secrets, revealed only to one close friend.

In the public arena, Loren revels in being the center of attention through manipulation of people's perceptions. Taking on a brash, egotistical persona, he stages scenes in public places, starting mock fights with employees in restaurants or offering wait staff money for unusual food items, just to make them react. He enjoys having others dance to his tune.

Loren's murder, which is used as bookends for the film, is still unsolved. Many of his friends place the failure to find his killer on the San Diego Police, noting their blatant overlooking of evidence and their prejudice against Loren's habit of cruising for one-night stands. Several interviewees point to Loren as the first victim of serial killer **Andrew Cunahan** ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andrew\\_Cunanan](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andrew_Cunanan)), who would eventually make waves by murdering designer Gianni Versace.

### **Rock 'N' Roll Legacy**

Despite his confrontational and controlling nature, and often sub-standard salaries, Todd Loren did make advances for a comics industry that for the most part ignored him.

Unable to get distribution in many comic shops, Loren sold *Rock 'N' Roll Comics* in other locations. Stocking the books in places like music stores brought the comic medium to a whole new audience of readers.

His NKOTB court win allowed other publishers to create biographical books without fear of reprisal. Now, biography

comics about everyone from Barack Obama to Lady Gaga are taking their place on the shelves.

His company also brought exposure to new talent who were not able to get jobs with big publishers. **Stuart Immonen** (<http://immonen.ca/>) (*Ultimate X-Men, Ultimate Spider-Man*) was illustrating the stories of Prince and Guns N' Roses long before he was drawing for the Big Two. Periscope Studio member **Terry Dodson** (<http://www.terrydodsonart.com/>) (*Uncanny X-Men, The Defenders*) began his career with caricatures of Rod Stewart. **Andy Kuhn** (<http://kuhnart.blogspot.com/>) (*Firebreather*) got an early start drawing the Rolling Stones and other rockers.

*The Story of Rock 'N' Roll Comics* provides a view into the DIY fringes of the comic book world, which is certainly topical today. Making it work on his own (for whatever reason), Loren brought music and comics together, on his own terms.

The documentary includes interviews with comic subject Alice Cooper, fellow traveler Mojo Nixon, and many of Loren's employees. Remaining at least somewhat balanced, it also collects quotes from two of Loren's comics industry detractors, Denis Kitchen (Kitchen Sink Press) and Gary Groth (*The Comics Journal*, Fantagraphics Books). Everyone has an opinion about the big personality behind Revolutionary Comics; love him or hate him, he can't be ignored.

It would have been useful for *The Story of Rock 'N' Roll Comics* to have included more interviews from within the comics industry, to give more focus on the movie's depiction of Loren as an outcast from that world. Making claims about being rejected by mainstream comics without providing any evidence is a weak position.

It would make sense for the underground comix scene to have embraced Loren and his belief in freedom and goading authority, but even underground publisher Denis Kitchen seems to have a dim view of Loren. It's an intriguing angle that is sadly not pursued.

Shapiro believed that had his son lived, he would have been "one of the great men of the 20th century." That claim may be arguable, but as far as comics history goes, Todd Loren and *Rock 'N' Roll Comics* made a permanent mark.

**Wild Eye Releasing (<http://www.wildevereleasing.com/>)**'s *The Story of Rock 'N' Roll Comics* arrives April 24th and includes over two hours of extra features, including news stories, deleted scenes, a comic cover gallery, and vintage commercials.