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### 'Unauthorized' Interview: The Story Behind the Story Of The 'Rock 'N' Roll Comics' Doc

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Todd Loren was either a visionary or a real piece of work—depending on who you ask, that is, based on director Ilko Davidov's documentary, *Unauthorized: The Story of Rock N Roll Comics*, about the founder of Revolutionary Comics (and occasional writer for the line), and even if his life didn't end in a still-unexplained murder that might be linked to high-profile serial killer Andrew Cunanan, his early 90's tangles with record company executives over his unauthorized comics about popular rock and pop acts from the day would still be compelling film. Todd is painted as everything from a penny pincher, carnival barker, bane of record executives, and outlaw hero by the many talking heads who populate the doc, including fellow publisher Denis Kitchen of Kitchen Sink Press, rocker Alice Cooper, writers and artists for the line, and even his own father.



For a little background on the documentary and Todd himself, we spoke by e-mail to Davidov as well as a couple of people who worked with Loren, Jay Allen Sanford and Robert Conte, about what they thought made Todd tick, and why he was so willing to tick off the record companies with his comics. *Unauthorized* will be released by Wild Eye Releasing in April.

**MTV Geek: How did you get involved with Todd and *Rock'n'Roll Comics*?**

**Robert Conte, writer for *Rock'n'Roll Comics*, owner of**

**Manhattan Comics & More:** Back in 1989 I had managed Collector's Kingdom, a comic-book store in Huntington Station, Long Island. Independent comics such as **Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles**, **Cerebus** and **Faust** were all the rage. The leading consumer publication at that time was the *Comics Buyers Guide*, and I came across an ad from Revolutionary Comics advertising its first issue of **Rock'n'Roll Comics**, featuring Guns and Roses. I called the company and spoke to their sales rep, Stuart Shapiro, and ordered a few copies for the shop. They sold out immediately. I reordered twice, doubling the quantity each time and all of those copies sold out too.



Eventually, "Stuart" advised me that he was actually the company's publisher, Todd Loren, and asked me to be a sales rep for the east coast. I replied that I was interested, provided he consider publishing a comic book I wrote based on the rock group, KISS. Initially, Todd was reluctant but, upon reading my story, believed I was a good writer and gave me my first creative job in the field. **Rock'n'Roll Comics** #9, featuring KISS, was published in December 1989 and was reprinted four times.

**Geek: Based on the documentary, it seemed like you were pretty tight with Todd. Still, did the film allow you to learn anything about him you didn't know before?**

**Jay Allen Sanford, former second-in-command at Revolutionary Comics:** I'd never heard many of the stories told by various Revolutionary contribs about their one-on-one interactions with Todd, like **Hard Rock Comics** writer Spike Steffenhagen talking about how Todd tried to help Spike get over his fear of heights by confronting that which he feared. Todd was a big believer in self-actualization and realization, so that sounds very Todd-like.

I don't think I realized Todd had so actively mentored several of the RevCom creators. With me, he just threw me in the deep end of the pool with a new deadline and page count every week, with almost no discussion about script content before, during, or after I worked on them. Todd and I talked a lot about what we wanted to accomplish with a visual history of rock music, and how best to market such a line, but my scripts or thumbnail layouts almost never came up.

So I was surprised in the documentary to see how creators like Patrick McCray related how Todd served as both instructor and muse for his own comic scripting. Patrick all but retired from the comic book biz after Todd passed away in 1992, only recently returning to the field

to script some new biographical comic books for Bluewater Productions, who reprinted some graphic novel collections of **Rock 'N' Roll Comics** over the last couple of years.

**Geek: Could you tell us about day-to-day life at Revolutionary in its heyday?**

**Sanford:** I guess that 'pends what you'd call its "heyday." The first year was spent operating out of the old Musicade warehouse, which ALSO housed the Comicade mail order business, so there'd be three different companies' people bumping into each other all day long, with Todd's door-less office as both the philosophical and geographical center of the maelstrom. Hectic days to be sure, but quite exciting, especially when the truck would dump a load of the newest issue of **Rock 'N' Roll Comics**.

After RevCom moved to the upper floor of an old bank building in the heart of Hillcrest, just north of downtown San Diego, the other two businesses were liquidated in favor of Revoutionary. Around eight to ten people worked full time in production, shipping, and editorial, all of them very creative and motivated. What was odd, though, was that very few of the actual artists ever came to the office—most were freelancers based all over the globe. To this day, I've never met contribs like Canadian Larry Nadolsky, with whom I must've done at least two dozen comics. The only times I ever met artists like Greg Fox and Joe Paradise were at signings we did together at comic shops and conventions, and I only ever met each of them once, even tho we did quite a few comics together via phone, fax, and FedEx (hard to fathom now how we ever accomplished all that without the internet and email).

After Todd was killed, the day-to-day became far more subdued. In the next two years, we still had some "hurrah" moments, but nothing quite like gathering around Todd's office TV to watch Bud Bundy on *Married With Children* using our Metallica comic as a prop in one episode.

**Geek: In all of this, what made Todd an interesting documentary subject for you? How did you actually arrive at him and Revolutionary as a subject for a documentary?**

**Ilko Davidov, Director of *Unauthorized*:** In the mid-90s, I met one of the cover art artists, Scott Jackson, in Chicago, and he told me a bit about the **Rock'n'Roll Comics** story, which I thought was fascinating—Rock'n'Roll, First Amendment, comic books, and a murder mystery—how can this be boring? At Bulletproof Film, we are continually pitching story ideas to each other. I pitched the **Rock'n'Roll Comics** story to Chris Swider and Carmine Cervi who confirmed my instincts about the story and came on board as co-producers.

A few days later, I went back with a camera and recorded the whole story as Scott remembered it. Unfortunately, the leads he had for contacting the rest of the people involved didn't pan out until a few years later, when I got a call from a British journalist, Ian Shirley, who was writing a book about **Rock'n'roll** and comics. He had already spoken with Herb Shapiro, Todd's father and gave me his contact info. A week later, we were in production, and the whole mad process started.



Loren in a self-produced video, agitating for comics

**Geek:** What was the narrative hook or “story” you were looking for when you started filming?

**Davidov:** I discussed many with Chris, Carmine, and Eric Burton, our cameraman, designer and animator. Certainly, the First Amendment angle in connection with music and art and the unsolved murder were strong enough to follow up on. We started gathering the pieces, making initial arrangements of the material and then examining how they added up. Then we’d reshuffle the pieces and discuss that approach. It’s the way we make documentaries. A lot of it came together in the editing process with the help of my editor, Vedran Residbegovic.

**Geek:** What was it like getting people in the film to talk about Todd, working with him, or Rock N Roll Comics?

**Davidov:** Most of the artists and writers agreed to talk. Most of the musicians and music business people thought he ripped them off. They usually did not respond to our interview requests, or wouldn’t talk to us on camera.

**Geek:** In [the piece you sent along](#), you talk about Todd creating his new last name. Reinvention seemed like an ongoing interest for him. Did you ever have a sense of what that was about?

**Sanford:** Only kind of. His father Herb Shapiro later told me Todd had been a pudgy kid, and that may have affected his later determination to reshape himself. The things he accomplished while still Stu Shapiro, though, were impressive by ANY measure, with his successful pop culture trade shows and various business endeavors, so it wasn't like he had a reason to distance himself from a former persona that had suffered the taint of failure or non-accomplishment.

I actually think much of the name change was simply about the name itself. He loved when people's names reflected who they are, what they're like, in both fiction and real life. Characters by authors he liked such as Ayn Rand always had that kind of name. So I think he chose a new name with that intent.

When real life brought him an adversary in the form of a trademark lawyer named Kenneth Feinswog, who sued Revolutionary on behalf of New Kids on the Block, it made Todd literally giggle to set headlines in type like "Loren VS Feinswog."

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