

~ Life in LAMORINDA ~

The entrepreneurial endeavors of one local comic book creator



Photos provided

Comic book writer/artist/publisher Mel Smith points out his Metallica Rock N Roll comic.

By Diane Claytor

As a boy growing up in Sunnyvale, Mel Smith, like most kids his age, read comic books. He liked them a lot. As an adult now living in Orinda, Smith still likes comic books. Actually, he more than likes them. He earns his living writing, drawing, producing and publishing them. His work has been praised, won awards, and now there is talk about making a movie based on his latest comic, "Becoming Frankenstein."

Years ago, the teen-aged Smith went to a comic book convention in San Jose. "I got bit by the bug to write and draw my own," he remembers fondly. He started hanging out in comic book stores, acknowledging that owners of two different shops took him under their wings. He became passionate about learning everything he could about the process of putting together a comic book and began going to more shows, talking to more people, drawing more pictures and writing more stories.

At 16 years old, Smith produced his first comic book, "Messiah," with Pinnacle Comics. It received considerable attention and he "actually got paid," Smith notes.

Basically self-taught, Smith went to work for Marvel Comics and Spike and Mike's Sick and Twisted Festival of Animation. The young Smith soon hit some major bumps and spent time in rehab, after which he decided to leave the comic book world and try his hand at something else. But the pull was too strong and he soon returned to his first love.

Smith attended ComicCon, the massive annual gathering dedicated to comics and related art forms. He started talking to colleagues again and produced "Feed America's Children," a 48-page original superhero story, with every page illustrated by a different known comic artist.

One day, his mind wandering, Smith remembered Gumby, the green clay humanoid character created in the early 1950s that went on to become a TV celebrity in the 1960s. "It was one of the characters I loved as a kid," Smith remembers.

By the early 2000s, Gumby had all but disappeared. But not in Smith's mind. A light bulb went off: how about a Gumby comic book series. Conversations, negotiations and deals between Art Clokey, Gumby's creator, and Smith took place before Smith was granted

permission to move forward. Smith put Gumby "back in the forefront," he says, "just as I initially promised the Clokey family I would." He and his Gumby team won the coveted Eisner Award, often referred to as the Academy Award of the comics industry.

Eventually, Smith felt he had "come to the end of the road with Gumby, having done everything I could with it," he explains.

Next from Smith's creative mind came "Dead Ahead," a zombie on the water story. One reviewer described it as, "An original spin on the Zombie Apocalypse/survival genre. Vivid characters, knockout artwork and a promising premise and story."

It became quite popular; so popular, in fact, that AMC apparently produced their "Fear of the Walking Dead" TV series using storylines from Smith's comics. In a lawsuit filed by Smith in 2018, he alleged that large portions of season two's "Fear of the Walking Dead" TV show were lifted from his "Dead Ahead" comic. Several months later, a deal was struck and the lawsuit resolved. Although the details are confidential, Smith is pleased with the outcome.

During the years, Smith dealt with personal problems, serious health issues and spent many years caregiving a loved one. Through it all, he kept coming back to his passion for comics.

A documentary on the late Todd Loren, creator of Rock N Roll comics, a line of comic book rock star biographies, presented Smith with his next creative opportunity. "I knew many Bay Area bands, knew how to publish comics and saw a void in this arena so I decided to give it a shot," he declares. The first band Smith wrote about was Slayer, an American thrash metal band.

This rock n roll series, like most of Smith's other endeavors, have become popular among comic book readers. "I even have bands approaching me now, requesting that I cover their group," he states.

Smith is quite excited about his newest publication, "Becoming Frankenstein."

"Have people ever wondered whose body parts make up Frankenstein?" Smith asked. He has and is now producing a series which gives the back stories on the Frankenstein's various body parts and the individuals that provided them.

As if all this creating, writing and illustrating isn't enough to keep Smith busy, he has just formed 10 Ton Press

which will produce color comics from different creators. In addition to "Becoming Frankenstein," 10 Ton Press is developing "Charlie and Humphrey" comics, featuring the mad-cap adventures of the legendary puppets, as well as the superhero "Red Dawn" comic series. "We'll have something for everyone," Smith promises.

Previews of these new comics will be available on Free Comic Book Day, Aug. 14, at your favorite comic book stores.



The preview of comics being produced by Mel Smith's 10 Ton Press.

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