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Comics: Not Just For Kids

Latino comic book artists make the scene

By Kat Avila | Web Published 2.21.2003

"Flowers and chocolates?! Ugh! So-o-o 20th century! This year, make your Valentine REALLY happy and get your sweetie some monsters, mobsters, robots, zombies and Mexican wrestlers, courtesy of Big Umbrella Comics!"
--e-mail from cartoonist Javier Hernandez, creator of EL MUERTO

It's all Javier Hernandez's fault.

I'm sitting on the floor of the University of California Irvine library, perusing the comics section, and looking for information on some better known Hernandez cartoonists, namely Los Bros Hernandez of LOVE AND ROCKETS fame.

At last year's Comic-Con, special guests Gilbert, Jaime, and Mario Hernandez were celebrating 20 years of their highly praised alternative comic, summarized by BOB'S COMICS REVIEWS as, "Instead of one more comic about whining white boys, or cute white families, or the zany pets owned by white people, you're invited to hang out with some cute lesbian Hispanic punk rockers. Who could resist?"

Later, I found 11 volumes of a 15-volume reprint by Fantagraphics Books of the 50 issues of LOVE AND ROCKETS produced between July 1982 and July 1996 (it was revived in 2000), and I settled in a corner of the library to catch up on my reading.

But back to Javier.

His Valentine's Day e-mail made me recall our meeting last year at his booth at Comic-Con where he was selling the premiere issue of his comic EL MUERTO: THE AZTEC ZOMBIE, as well as related publications and T-shirts.

I bought everything he had and a T-shirt large enough to turn into a nightie (though it is kind of morbid to go to bed in a bloody red T-shirt with a stylized skull and "El Muerto" printed boldly in white across the front). We had a great chat about comics in general (Vicky Aguero of the New York City Comic Book Museum [http://www.nycbom.org] was also there), and Javier made me curious about the history of Mexican comics, the first book of which was published in 1934.

On Javier's recommendation, I made my way to Rafael Navarro's booth and bought a couple of issues of SONAMBULO (http://www.sonambulo.com), the wrestler-masked superhero.

Over a week after Comic-Con 2002, I was in San Francisco at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts and staring, with a mixture of disbelief and pleasant surprise, at a gigantic blown-up comic page from Rafael's SONAMBULO. "Created in one insomniac night from all my loves: Lucha Libre, film noir detective movies, and horror," said an autobiographical note. Rafael's work was part of the "Fantastic! The Art of Comics and Illusion" exhibit at the center. Pen-and-ink work by Jaime Hernandez and Gilbert Hernandez was also included.

California has produced other great Chicano cartoonists.



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Lalo Lopez Alcaraz (<http://www.cartoonista.com>), whose "La Cucaracha" currently runs in the Los Angeles Times, and political cartoonist and painter Sergio Hernandez (<http://www.chicanarteyque.com>) immediately come to mind.

I remember Lalo from when he used to hang with the irreverent theater group Chicano Secret Service. Also, he illustrated Ilan Stavans's LATINO USA: A CARTOON HISTORY. And Sergio once drew a hilarious cartoon for me for a LatinoLA article I wrote about a noise terrorist neighbor. He did illustrations in the late '60s and early '70s for CON SAFOS, a groundbreaking Chicano sociopolitical magazine. A bookseller is now selling a 1971 issue signed by the cover artist Sergio for \$45.

Kat Avila (buscandocalifornia@yahoo.com) writes about the Chicano and Asian American communities in California. If you would like to get on Javier Hernandez's mailing list, please e-mail him at azteczombie@yahoo.com.

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