



# a.m. Magazine

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## EDGY ENTREPRENEURS

are looking for success

# ON THE LAUGH TRACK



Michael Mercadante sketches a new comic book character at his home in Perkasio.



CATHERINE MEREDITH / The Morning Call

**Michael Mercadante (left) and Christian Klusman say their adult comic book isn't meant to offend, but rather to poke fun at society.**

By JO-ELLEN DARLING  
Special to The Morning Call

**W**hat do you get when you mix an English major who loves to write with a film and art major who loves to draw? No riddle there: a comic book.

English major Mike Mercadante, 25, of Perkasio and art major Christian Klusman, 27, of North Wales have been friends for six years and recently self-published their first comic book — a dream come true, they say.

"We wanted to try it and see how far we could go," says Mercadante, who once owned a video production company and won a national Telly Award in 1996 for a documentary he produced about girls' soccer.

Mercadante, who attended Bucks County Community College before transferring to the College of Santa Fe in New Mexico, and Klusman, who attended Montgomery County Community College for a time, have not finished their degrees. Instead, they're working full-time jobs and pursuing their craft in their spare time.

Their first edition, "Honey," is in the adult genre, with a nod to the rude and crude socially critical underground comics that flourished in the 1960s and '70s. With its strong themes and even stronger language, it's definitely not for kids or refined adults.

It spins a story about two very different women who meet while traveling. Arlene is a 30-something truck driver and black-marketeer who's hauling "bootleg artificial organs." Her apparently more sedate traveling companion is Samantha, otherwise known as Honey. Samantha's secret is that she's had an unfortunate and X-rated encounter with the reprehensi-

ble red-neck governor of Georgia, Yang-Wei Svensson, a Chinese-Swedish midget, an encounter that had dire consequences for him and for which he seeks revenge.

Delicacy prevents the revelation of more detail, but suffice it to say that the profusely used Anglo Saxon-leaning language of the comic might prompt a perversely curious mind to count how many times a certain four-letter word appears. Although independent comics aren't rated through the Comics Code Authority of America, Mercadante says their comic is R-rated.

After encountering a situation in which racial insults and sexual harassment prompt Arlene to burn down a diner, the comic's opening edition ends with the duo bound for Mexico with their illegal cargo.

But the creators say they're not on the offensive. "We went into it not intending to offend anyone," Mercadante says. "It's meant to poke fun at society."

And Klusman — who says the story is based on "ridiculous reality" more than anything — apologizes to the state of Georgia for selecting it to be home to his antagonist. Klusman's only explanation for choosing Georgia: It's where REM, his favorite band, lives.

Mercadante and Klusman say they had some positive feedback on their effort from Philadelphia comic book author Jamar Nicholas at the Small Press Expo in Washington, D.C. Mercadante notes that 80 percent of comic books have male leads and heroes, with female leads usually cast as supermodels with "impossible proportions." But their female leads are

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different, he says. "We made them a lot more normal. They're not exactly role models, but we think females will like them."

Still, readers may wonder why two white men from suburbia have written a tale about a black, butt-kicking female truck driver, her white, somewhat milquetoast counterpart and an evil, profane governor.

"We've wondered who will take us seriously," admits Mercadante, who says a Mississippi printer turned them down because of the offensive content.

Although the two "Honey" creators were comic book readers as kids growing up — Klusman gravitated to superheroes such as Batman and Spiderman and Mercadante was inspired by such limited editions as John J. Muth's "Moonshadow" — the pair has been more influenced by the 1970s off-beat action movies "Smokey and the Bandit" and "Foxy Brown." In fact, they say a film convention last February inspired them to pursue the project seriously.

Klusman and Mercadante attended an Exploitation Convention in New York that featured black ac-

tors, directors and producers of 1970s action films, including "Foxy Brown" director Jack Hill, who discovered action film star Pam Grier, and actor Richard Roundtree from "Shaft."

"We heard them say they did [these films] because they didn't want day jobs," says Klusman, who works full-time in the animation art department at Warner Bros. Studio Store in the Montgomeryville Mall.

Within days of the convention, the two began working well into the night over coffee at Denny's Restaurant and finished their story line within 30 days.

The two say they sacrificed their entire summer, but within six months had developed the plot and characters, sketched the story, written the script and completed the page art.

"We vowed we'd take it all the way to print," Mercadante says, smiling.

The two have decided to self-publish 10 quarterly issues rather than work with the big comics publishing companies, they say, because that way they maintain complete creative control over their manuscripts. The tradeoff, according to Mercadante, is the amount of work they must do to promote and produce their product — not to mention the expense.

The first edition cost them \$1,500

for 1,000 copies. The comic sells in the stores for \$2.50. They are distributing the books to area shops and advertising to shops across the United States and Canada in catalogs. Their first issue is 24 pages, eight pages short of the industry standard, with just two ads. They plan to increase the second issue, due out in January, to 32 pages with several pages of ads.

These Pennridge and North Penn high school graduates maintain many obscure writers and their story ideas have found their way to lucrative careers via the comic book medium.

Mercadante and Klusman met Kevin Eastman and Peter Laird, authors of "Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles," at a recent Small Publisher's Expo. According to Mercadante, that story was originally a self-published black-and-white comic with "cheesy" art that later became a merchandise dynasty and eventually spawned its own TV show. And the blockbuster movies "Men in Black" and "Blade" also started as comic books.

The two are clearly delighted with their progress.

Besides the 10 planned issues about "Honey," an eight-page preview of a different series will be introduced in their January edition as well.

"Just seeing the book next to the others is a thrill," says Mercadante.

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