

THE ART OF MICHAEL AVON OEMING

INTERVIEW BY JOHN SUINTRES • INTRODUCTION BY BRIAN MICHAEL BENDIS • AFTERWORD BY DAVID MACK





Hammer of the Gods cover, colors by Mark Wheatley

I met Mark Wheatley through Neil Vokes, and we shared a mutual interest in Norse mythology. I'd come up with the *Hammer of the Gods* plot when I was working in the security booth, but I didn't have a real ending. In 1998, just before *Powers*, I was working

with Mark on a very early web comic called *Dr. Cyborg* by Alan Gross. Mark helped me work out the *Hammer* story, as well as finding a publisher (Insight Studio Group, later at Image Comics) and someone to do colors. We had a very easy working relationship.



I don't have a title for this dragon guy. I've done a lot of illustrations for this idea over the last twenty years. I've always liked the Brothers Grimm fairy tales with their hidden allegories. And I love children's "road stories," like *Alice in Wonderland* and *Wizard of Oz*. Both were big influences on this project. I wanted to call it

The Last Dragon, but for anyone my age that title's tainted by the movie with the El DeBarge song. It just can't be done.

I want to do it as an autobiographical story, but do I want it to be an all-ages story with adult undertones, or an adult story disguised as a children's piece? I'm still not sure.



Powers covers, colors by Pat Garrahy

The idea of *Powers* goes back to when Bendis, David Mack, and I all first met. David and Brian had already been friends for a few years, traveling around the country promoting their independent books and doing all kinds of crazy, fun stuff. I met them at a signing at Claude's Comics in Pennsylvania. We all hit it off and stayed in contact. We each had books at Caliber Comics, so we started supporting each other's work, setting up at conventions together.

When I was done working with Bryan Glass on *Ship of Fools*, I wanted to break away from sci-fi/fantasy stories to do some crime noir, which I'd always loved in film. That's what Bendis was doing on *A.K.A. Goldfish* and his other Caliber books.

Around this time I was drawing Bendis's and David Mack's characters in a new, cartoony style I was trying out. Brian had just started *Sam and Twitch* for McFarlane and said he had an idea.

At first it sounded like superheroes, and I said I didn't want to do that. Brian said, "No, the superhero elements are really small. We'll only ever see them in glimpses. This is a cop book, like the TV show *Homicide*, except when you see dead bodies, they'll be superheroes."

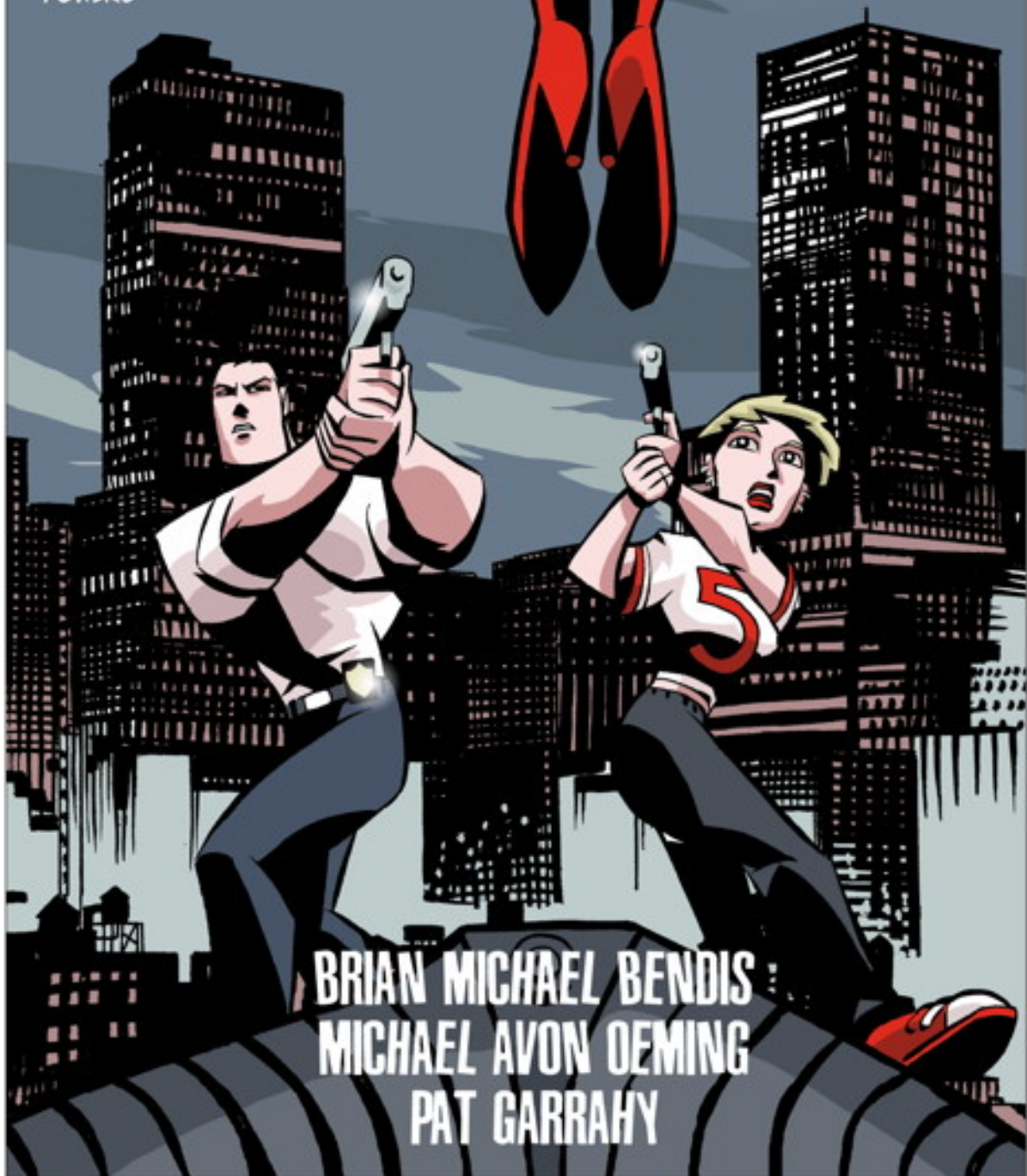
We took a cue from the *Marvels* miniseries by Kurt Busiek and Alex Ross, seeing the superheroes from the citizen's point of view, the characters at ground level looking up to see a hero fly by in the sky, watching these gods fighting from a distance. Light and shadow would play big roles in the book. We talked a lot about the film *Taxi Driver*, and the use of light and shadow setting the mood for that film.

When I designed Walker—it's silly to think about it now—I wanted him to look like a cross between George Clooney and Ricky Martin. He needed to be a big guy, but I wanted Ricky Martin's hairstyle. I gave Walker what we call a "shovel face."

I gave Deena black hair at first, but Brian thought she looked like she could be Walker's sister. I made her blond after looking through fashion magazines to give her the right haircut. I fell in love with Alyssa Milano's hairstyle in the film *Double Dragon*, blond on top and dark on the sides, which became Deena's haircut. *Powers* debuted at Image Comics in April 2009 and moved to Marvel/Icon in 2014.



POWERS



BRIAN MICHAEL BENDIS
MICHAEL AVON OEMING
PAT GARRAHY



I first contacted Alex Toth just as I started drawing *Powers* in 2000. In my early days I'd send samples of my work to publishers and creators like Steve Rude and Mike Baron for feedback. Alex had become reclusive, doodling and letter writing all day, so I got his contact info, and I was surprised when he wrote back with great things to say about my art. I'd expected an ass whooping, because he was known as a harsh critic. But he was complimentary, citing my work to other artists and to the press as new work that he liked.

He told me to stop drawing "Bruce Timm-looking shovelheads" and draw faces in my own way, but I loved that look and wasn't going to stop. He also suggested I not overrender, and I still struggle with that in my art today.

My favorite period of Toth's art was his DC short stories of the

1970s into the early eighties. Toth's work was realistic but cartoony at the same time, and he used heavy black on the page. Toth taught us all how to appreciate and balance shadows and light, not only for composition but also to display character traits. Lighting would fall on the face of a character, or a body would appear in silhouette encircled by a flashlight. I always try to emulate Toth's philosophy of making shadow and light important in conveying emotional story moments.

When Toth went into the hospital I heard many fans were sending get-well letters to his room. I figured I'd wait till he was home to encourage him to get better, but he died in the hospital in 2006, and I didn't get a last chance to wish him well.



Drawing by
Oeming's son Ethan



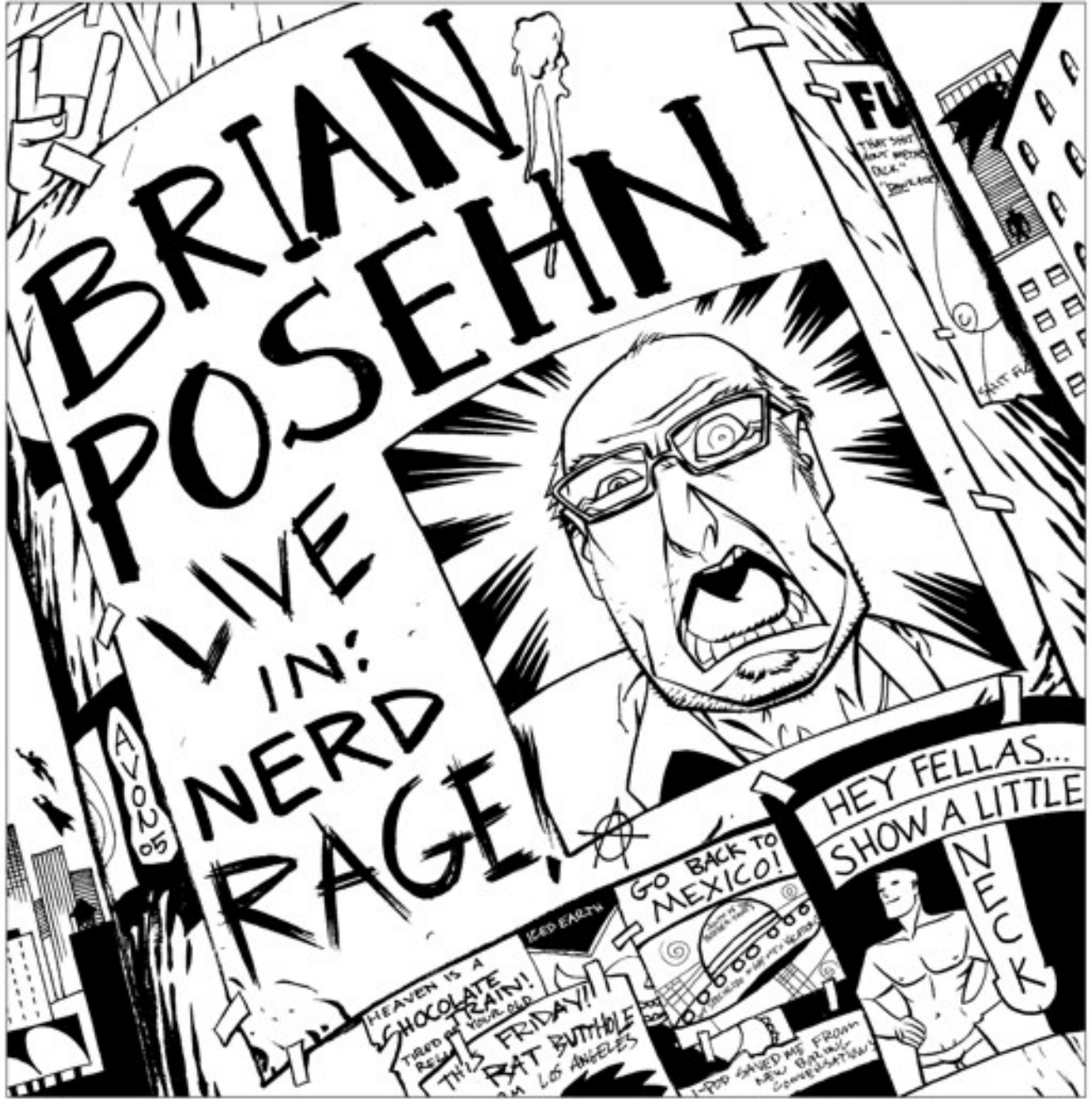
When I started reading comics in the mid-eighties, I mostly saw that watered-down, Marvel house style of art, but there were a few artists with their own distinct style. Mike Mignola stood out. There was a dream sequence in a Spider-Man story Mike did that blew my mind.

I'm just such a fan of his that when I draw his characters I throw away my brushes and use the kind of pen he does. I think Mike appreciates artists who don't ape his style, but do their own thing while having something in common with Mike's art. He breaks all the rules with his drawing. It's as enigmatic as his story choices.

I've worked with Mike now on *B.P.R.D.* and on other *Hellboy*-related projects, all at Dark Horse Comics—most recently a short

story called "Mood Swings" with Chelsea Cain [page 159], and before that an issue of *Abe Sapien* [page 114] with Scott Allie, and a 2003 one-shot called *B.P.R.D.: The Soul of Venice* [page 26] that we cowrote with Miles Gunter.

When Mike was still living in New York we talked for maybe five minutes about working on something together. It involved a thief and a sort of mermaid split in half. I did a couple sketches, but we never followed up on it. I look back now and realize I was going to cocreate something with one of the people I admire most in comics—how the hell did I let the ball drop?



Cover to Brian Posehn's debut album *Live in: Nerd Rage*