

SDCC: LION FORGE COMICS ROARS IN SAN DIEGO

08.03.2013 by John Parkin in Comic News Comment

In early July, *Lion Forge Comics* made headlines when they announced plans to publish comics based on “Miami Vice,” “Air Wolf,” “Saved by the Bell” and several other NBC Universal properties. At *Comic-Con International in San Diego*, the St. Louis-based company shared details on their plans for KITT, Punky Brewster and the kids from Bayside, as well as Andre the Giant, Rampage Jackson and their own original properties in a panel hosted by Geekscape’s Jonathan London.

The panel kicked off with a trailer spotlighting several Lion Forge Comics, including “Catalyst Prime,” “Roboy,” “Wondrous” and “Joshua Run.” Lion Forge’s comics are available digitally for the Amazon Kindle and the Nook, as well as through the iTunes bookstore.

Panelists included Dave Stewart, Lion Forge CEO; Ramon Govea from Black Mast Studios; *Shannon Eric Denton*, a former editor at Wildstorm who writes comics and has done storyboards for shows like “*Avengers: Earth Mightiest Heroes*”; Adam Staffaroni, a former editor for BOOM! Studios’ kaBOOM! imprint; and writers Brandon Easton and David Gorden.

Govea said Black Mast Studios is working on a live-action webseries set in the world of “Catalyst Prime,” titled “The Incidentals.”

“They just came out with a few issues of the ‘Catalyst Prime’ series in the spring,” Govea said about Lion Forge. “When I first talked to Dave, I was really excited about the concept. What they’re essentially doing is creating a whole universe of heroes from the ground up.”

The studio has launched an *IndieGoGo campaign to fund the series*, which will take place in the same universe as the “Catalyst Prime” series, but will feature different characters from those found in the comics.

“We’ve taken this idea of a meteor coming toward the Earth and breaking up into a whole bunch of pieces, and picking up the story of six strangers who are on the beach when one of these fragments hits the Earth. So we’re going to create a web series that essentially outlines the origin story of these characters. So we’ll see what it’s like for a real person in real life who all of a sudden is exposed to these powers and how they cope with it.” Govea said they plan to go into production in September.

Moving on to the NBC Universal properties the company has licensed, London introduced a crowd-pleasing trailer that showed artwork for “Miami Vice,” “Airwolf,” “Knight Rider,” “Saved by the Bell,” “Punky Brewster,” “Denver the Last Dinosaur,” “Saber Riders” and “Galaxy Rangers.”

“When I found out that you guys were allowing us fans to start buying back our childhood on digital comics, I got really excited,” London said.

The line, which kicks off this fall, will be edited by Denton, who will oversee the more adult-oriented titles like “Miami Vice” and “Knight Rider,” and Staffaroni, who will edit the Cubhouse kid’s line.

“My writer on [‘Miami Vice’] is one of the best in the industry. He’s also MC’ing so I wanted to make sure to give him a shout out,” Denton joked. London will be joined on “Miami Vice” by artist Carl Reed.

London said the book will be set between the first and second seasons of the show. “I want fans of the old series to feel like... they are watching an episode of the show,” London said, adding it may have a bit of a “Grand Theft Auto” feel to it.

Thorne, who writes for TV’s “Leverage,” will write the “Knight Rider” comic, while Gorden will write “Air Wolf.”

“Basically with ‘Airwolf’ we’re reimagining and relaunching the whole series,” Gorden said, noting it would feature “spies, saving America and dealing with the CIA,” and “the same action and adventure you’re used to and remember from the old series.”

Thorne said he was taking the same approach to “Knight Rider.”

“We want to keep the tone — the fun tone, the action tone — of the original show,” Thorne said, “but we do live in 2013, so those old fans will find some stuff they find familiar, but there’s a lot of twisted stuff — and a couple of new characters we were allowed to bring in. In fact, I was requested to bring in a couple of new people. It’s just going to be a lot of fun.”

Since technology has advanced so much since the show aired in the 1980s, Thorne said he’s been researching what could be possible in the next five years. He also hinted at a crossover with “Airwolf.” Jason Johnson, another Wildstorm alumnus, will provide the art.

Staffaroni said “Punky Brewster” and “Saved by the Bell” will both be written by the same writer. “I’m very lucky to be working with an incredible writer on all these titles, Joelle Sellner,” Staffaroni said, noting that Sellner was recruited before he was. “She’s been absolutely incredible,” he added. The art teams for each title have not yet been announced.

“We had an interesting problem with especially ‘Punky’ and ‘Saved by the Bell,’ because those actors grew up on those shows, so we can’t pick up where they left off,” Staffaroni said. He said “Saved by the Bell” would be set in the modern era, with characters just entering the ninth grade. A.C. Slater will be the new kid just meeting the rest of the gang.

“What’s great is to do something that can engage the younger readers, but also still have that nostalgic feeling for fans of the original stuff at the same time,” Staffaroni said. “We’re excited to be able to have those parts of the characters and those shows that we loved so much as kids, but also to take the seed of those shows that made them so popular at the time, and we think there’s something essential there that kids today can pick up, too, and make a product that kids are excited to read, and excited to get into, and bring back everything we loved and show a new generation what was great about those characters and what was timeless about those characters. With ‘Denver’ and ‘Punky’ and ‘Saved by the Bell’ it’s really a great chance to make something that kids and parents can read together, and each enjoy it on a different level, but share the experience.”

In addition to bringing back several of NBC’s fictional characters from the 1980s, Lion Forge is also working on comics based on two real-life giants — wrestler Andre the Giant, and wrestler, actor and MMA fighter Quinton “Rampage” Jackson.

London introduced Easton, who is writing the “Andre the Giant” comic, as one of the biggest wrestling fans he knew.

“This is an officially licensed book,” Stewart said. “We have a deal with the estate of Andre the Giant,” noting that Andre’s family would receive proceeds from sales of the comic. He said Easton had done an enormous amount of research for the project, which is a comic book biography of the late wrestler.

“I don’t think there’s been an actual, factual-based, officially licensed and sanctioned-by-the-estate [comic book] biography of a professional wrestler, particularly one of such great stature,” Easton said. “And I don’t mean that as a pun. The reality is, for people who don’t know anything about professional wrestling, the first name that might come to mind is Hulk Hogan, but the second would be Andre. What I wanted to do was really get into who that man was, and I wanted to use the wrestling industry itself as the fulcrum from which to explore his life and career. Because it was a great shift from the late 1960s and 1970s to the Vince McMahon era, up to around Wrestlemania III — that’s when you saw a massive change. It was like a paradigm shift for professional wrestling.”

Jackson, who joined the panel about halfway through, is the star of another Lion Forge project written by Gorden — “Rampage Jackson: Street Soldier.” In the comic, Jackson becomes a superhero werewolf after being exposed to a meteorite. The trailer showed Jackson changing into a werewolf, which elicited some laughs from the crowd.

“Y’all need to stop laughing,” Jackson said as the trailer played.

Jackson brought he always wanted to be a superhero, and a “mutual friend of a mutual friend” brought him together with Lion Forge. The publisher gave away a sample at the panel and plan to release a one-shot in the fall, followed soon after by an eight-issue miniseries.

“What kinds of villains can we see actually step up to Rampage and cause any kind of threat?” London asked.

“Just imaginary ones,” Denton joked.

“Dave was talking about this porn star that had super powers, and I was like, ‘C’mon, man, I want to stay away from the porn,’” Jackson said. “So we got away from that. Then we said, ‘OK, let’s use some aliens,’ because people gotta be out of the world to deal with this strength right here.”

During the Q&A session, someone asked Jackson why he wanted to be a werewolf in the comic.

“They asked me what type of powers I wanted, and I asked their advice as well, because they’re professionals and I don’t have a big ego,” Jackson said. “But together we came up with some of the powers and some of the weaknesses... but I had to put in there that I’m a werewolf because I always wanted to be a werewolf,” which elicited laughs from the crowd again. “Why y’all laughing again? That’s real talk right there, that’s why I howl.”

In regards to the NBC Universal properties, another audience member asked if they considered picking up right where each series left off and do a “real Season Four for ‘Airwolf’” or Season Six for “Knight Rider.” Thorne noted “Knight Rider” had several different versions that followed the original, and they all “failed in some way” and “didn’t last as long.” He said he felt the property required a “back to basics” approach.

“If you’re going to reboot something, you have to figure out what elements from the original really appealed to people — keep that, and then for the new audience, go, ‘But look at this.’” Thorne said he looked at all the versions of “Knight Rider” over the years, and even looked at the competing show “Viper,” and decided to just focus on Michael Knight and KITT.

Lion Forge ended the panel by giving away a Galaxy Notebook to one lucky audience member.