STUBBORN. AGGRESSIVE. POSITIVE.

Legendary artist and writer Neal Adams talks creators' rights, social issues in art and—of course—comics, sans filter.

by Zachary Petit

The thing about Neal Adams is he doesn't really come across as the most, well, modest man.

"Your work is pretty amazing," a young fan gushes to Adams at a recent comic convention.

"I've noticed that," Adams replies. "I have noticed that."

The 73-year-old comic book writer and artist is opinionated, outspoken, wildly talented, engaging, a born cusser and a born hustler (you should see him hawking his artwork at these conventions). And that's all undoubtedly how he's been in the game so long.

Adams soldiered past initial barriers to the industry and became a legendary talent for both Marvel and DC, leaving his stylistic mark on such iconic series as Batman, the X-Men, Green Lantern and Superman. He co-founded the design studio Continuity Associates. Along the way, he became known as much for his work as his activism: For decades, he's battled for the rights of creators, winning Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster—who sold their character Superman to DC for a paltry $130 in the 1930s—long overdue compensation and credit.

For his life's work, he's received numerous awards, and has been inducted into the Will Eisner Hall of Fame (the industry's highest honor) alongside legends Jack Kirby and Stan Lee.

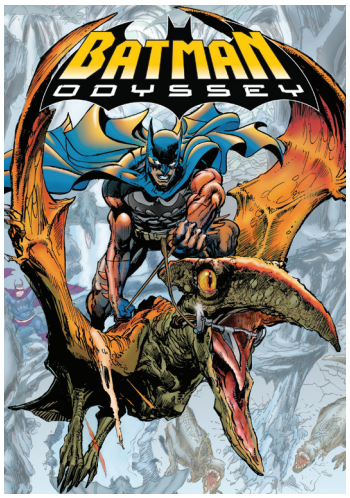
In addition to working on nearly every major superhero saga, Neal Adams took the camp out of Batman and returned him to the icon we know today.

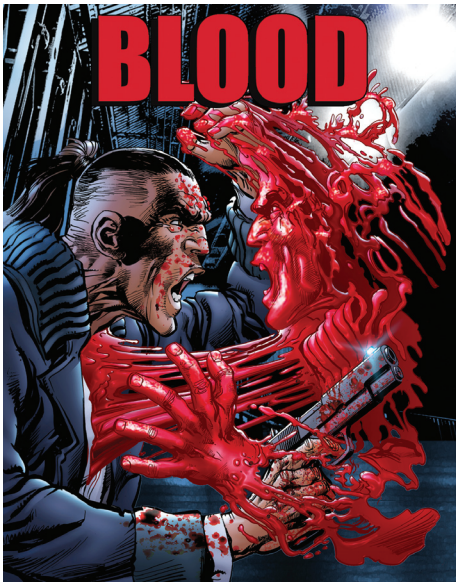
No, Neal Adams is probably not best described as modest. But he's one of those rare people who might just have a right not to be.

You had an incredibly difficult time breaking in. How did you persevere? I got better jobs. I worked for a place called Johnstone and Cushing, and we did comics for advertising and I was paid four to six times as much as a regular comic book artist. I did storyboards for advertising agencies, and I got paid better than any comic book artist got paid. I did illustration work, and I got paid better. It was a source of embarrassment that somebody would ask me what I was going to charge them and then they became quiet for a minute and said, "Well, I don't think our accounting department will pay a bill that's that low. We have to pay you more."

Did it ever get you down, how difficult it was to get your portfolio read? If I get rejected, I just come back. Look, there's nobody within the comic business that's five years my junior or five years my senior. There's nobody in comics that's a contemporary of mine. They don't exist. There's 10 years of *blank*. So obviously I was a very stubborn, aggressive, positive person. You don't get to be somebody like me without being very, very tough.

Looking at the industry today, what are new artists' chances of breaking in? Are you kidding? This is like fucking gold times. It's the easiest time in the world to break in—if you're incredibly talented. The thing you have to remember is there's an art student or an art guy in every junior high school and high school across the country. And there are tens of thousands of them. There aren't that many jobs. … It's a very, very tough field. And it's getting tougher because the





Adams' work on Armor (1985), Batman Odyssey (2013) and Blood (2011) .

illustration field is going away. There's very little real illustration being done in America today. Movie posters are photographs. Where is *The Saturday Evening Post* or *Life* magazine? They're gone. Illustrators now are doing comics. The very best artists in America and in the world are doing comic books.

From among all the characters you've worked on over the years, which rank as your favorites, creatively? I like Batman because I was able to bring him to what he was supposed to be. I didn't change him. I just brought him back to what he was supposed to be—[away from the campy nostalgia of the TV show, and back to brooding]. I created Havok out of whole cloth, so that's pretty interesting. I took Green Arrow, who was a copy of Batman, and turned him into his own independent-type character that you never saw before. So in effect I created Green Arrow, yet I'm stuck with the fact that I recreated Green Arrow. For Green Lantern, I didn't do anything except make him the character that Gil Kane created and saved him from obscurity, and then created John Stewart [in the early '70s], who is a black Green

Lantern, and I gave a character for black American kids and kids around the world to look up to.

You approach race and social issues a fair amount in your work, and don't pull punches. What's comics' role? I think the role of comic books is to be the adults while we're being children. We have to look to our children, at our children growing up and what kind of world they're going to be in, and try to reproduce that world in the art that we do so that the world will get there. If we don't show some of that world, then our kids will never get there. We're so close to the ground level with comic books that we're actually having an effect. I've had black men cry in front of me because of John Stewart. Just the impact. Other people may not think that much of it, but he appears on television to millions and millions of people.

What's it like to see your ideas so deeply saturated into popular culture? It's like being a movie star without being recognized on the street. It's pretty good. When I come [to conventions], they treat me like I'm something and they get all flustered and sweaty, and that's what they do with the actors. But when I go out on the street, nobody knows who I am. So I have the best of all possible worlds, because who the hell wants that?

Do you think people in general tend to overlook the value, impact and influence of creators? No. I think that what happens is nobody realizes what's gonna happen right at the beginning. At the beginning it's just, "Yeah, yeah, fine, I'll pay you for it." Later on when it takes off suddenly, corporations and people start to get protective, and then aggressively protective, and suddenly they want the whole pie and they don't want to share it because the pie's getting bigger and bigger and bigger. Superman was like that. Nobody knew Superman would become fantastic. Between the ages of 17 and 21, [Siegel and Shuster] failed to sell it to anybody and they were just busy working, and finally DC Comics agreed to run it, and then newsstands went nuts. And within a year, they were selling a million copies. Well, that's like unheard of. So now that quick little agreement that was given to Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster became life and death for DC Comics, and became a problem for the rest of the lives of Jerry and Joe.

What's one thing you wish you'd known going into all this? If something happens, sometimes I back off and I stay back, and I think about it and then I react to it. I've made so many mistakes, there's not one that I can point to. Tons and tons of mistakes and stupid things and ridiculous things, but usually I make stories of them. When I do something really stupid, I say to my family, "OK, remember this whenever anybody says your father's a genius. Because your father's a fucking idiot. Remember that." ■

WEB EXTRA

For much more with Neal Adams—including his advice on how creators can best protect their work today—visit www.printmag.com/october-2014.