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Interview

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At Long Last Snake...

In perhaps the single-most embarrassing (so far) lag time in Fanboy Planet deadline history, we ran the first two parts of this interview with Hurricane Entertainment back in September, always forgetting that the downside to having fun and in-depth taped conversations with creators is that they have to be transcribed.

Thank heavens for winter holidays, because finally, I had a chance to finish this up. Once again, a big thank you to the folks at Hurricane Entertainment for opening their home to a fanboy. That would be the kind and gracious Jan Utstein-O'Neill, the softspoken (and recently featured in Wizard Magazine impersonating George Lucas) Bill O'Neill, and the mercifully loud and easy to hear on tape Tone Rodriguez.

[Part One of our interview](#)

[Part Two of our interview](#)

and now, Part Three...

Derek McCaw: *All of this leads to Snake Plissken. Obviously, there's a lot of buzz on this book, and a lot of recognition for the character. You've got Violent Messiahs, with a dystopian metropolis, and of course, people are familiar with Snake from the movies. And that's not necessarily the most pro-social of characters. I like how you described him in the preview comic: "the anti-patriotic patriot."*

Bill O'Neill: John Carpenter called him that.

Derek: *That's two interesting characters for you to be working on. So I've got to know, what are your political leanings? How much is this reflecting what you really think?*

Bill: Oh, no. How should I say this? I'm politically incorrect, okay? I'm a moderate conservative. I admit it. As horrible as that seems.

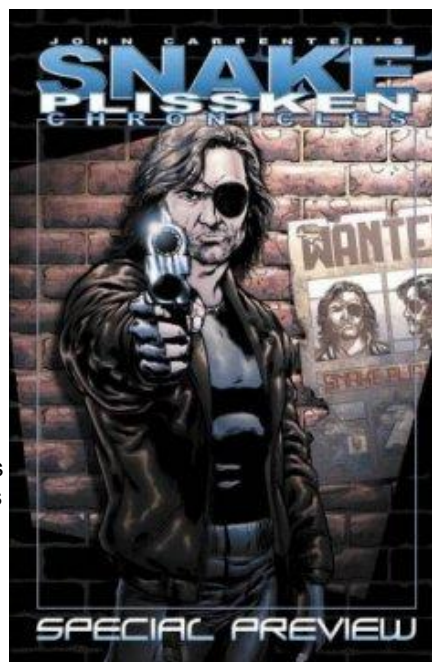
Derek: *You think that's weird in the comics industry? It would be in Hollywood.*

Bill: Actually, I run into some people, they're like... closeted conservatives. We have secret handshakes and stuff. Just kidding. But when somebody muscles it out of me...like right now...

Derek: *I'm going straight to Universal Studios with this information...*

Bill: I generally try to keep my political beliefs to myself. But when I'm like, "oh, all right, I'm a conservative more or less," their eyes light up. "You too?" So there's more conservatives in this town than I'd initially feared.

Derek: *So what makes Hurricane Entertainment the right company to handle Snake Plissken?*



Bill: Just because I'm a conservative doesn't mean I can't be cynical. (*laughs*) I understand the character, I think. I really loved the first movie, even though I... I don't know how to say this without sounding arrogant... I would hope anybody who is a good creator, writer, penciller, whatever, can work on characters that aren't exactly them. Not limited to, "this is a version of ME, with muscles and long hair," or something.

Because I really don't have too much in common with Snake. I could never be that much of an asshole. In the real world. But he's an entertaining character.

Derek: *Is there a place for Snake Plissken in a post-9/11 world?*

Bill: You know, I was wondering about that myself. When we were initially approached about this, I was wondering since patriotism is "in" again. People want to be proud of America. Whether they are or not is something else entirely. But even the most cynical liberal would like to be proud to be an American. And so I think that's a lot of the current patriotism, it's like, "I'm tired of hating America, I'm tired of not being happy about being here." Here's this attempt.

Derek: *Do you think Snake really hates America, or is he just the ultimate libertarian?*

Bill: I think he's more of a libertarian. In my vision of Snake, he's not really right or left, he's just himself. Belonging to a political party would be a waste of time in his mind. He's solely out for himself.

I think that's how I can be comfortable working with the character. I don't see him as a revolutionary, a person trying to overthrow the government, per se. He doesn't like the government. He hates the president that's in power in this universe. But he doesn't feel it's worth the trouble to do anything about it. He's just out for himself as far as I can tell.

And so I'm not planning to put him in any adventures where we have to get too political. I want to create some very entertaining stories for him to get into. Like the second film, *Escape From L.A.*, I didn't like. But I didn't like it for several other reasons than other people didn't. Sorry, John.

Derek: *It's true, though. One, it bombed. For something to have this huge cult following, finally gets a sequel, and then nobody goes to see it...*

Bill: A lot of people were disappointed with it. I think it bit off more than it could chew. They were trying to do a lot with special effects in that movie. Money-wise, they probably should have cut the amount in half, and spent more money on fewer special effects. They'd have gotten better shots. I thought the political humor wasn't very subtle, so it wasn't very funny.

Derek: *It was also following a very strict pattern.*

Bill: Yeah, it was also very much following the template of that first movie. So much so that it didn't seem clever.

Derek: *Carpenter himself admits that he pretty much makes the same movie over and over.*

Bill: I'm just afraid I've said too much about my political beliefs.

Jan Utstein-O'Neill: You are being taped.

Derek: *It's okay. None of it will make it to the final edit. (wink, wink) So they (Carpenter's production company) approached you on this?*

Jan: Pretty much what happened was we signed with a new agent, someone we had known for many many years, at least six years. And we had been talking with him on and off for about a year now. And he mentioned that they were working with John Carpenter and Debra Hill to bring Snake's world back out into the public in a very good way.

Part of that plan was to do a comic book. Before we even signed with him he said, "you guys are the perfect ones to do this. I can't think of anybody better to do this book."

And a lot of it has to do with the style and appeal about *Violent Messiahs*. Tone's artwork is just perfect for Snake Plissken. It wouldn't make much sense for Tone to be doing *Thundercats*, necessarily. But for him to do Snake Plissken, it makes sense.



We were actually looking at another property, to do this with, going after another property in the vein of Snake's world. We were pursuing it, and then this fell in our lap. It definitely was just one of those wonderful things. We did not look for it; it came to us. We met with John Carpenter and Debra Hill, and Tone, who's now here...

Tone walks into the studio, a big friendly guy with a casual style.

Tone Rodriguez: Hallooo.



Jan: Tony did some sketches beforehand of Snake. At the initial meeting, we presented those sketches, and John was so thrilled at the artwork that there was no question as to whether or not we were going to be doing this. And we were on our way.

Derek: *In your press release, you said that Kurt Russell is still involved...*

Jan: Oh, absolutely. Kurt wasn't able to be at the meetings because he was travelling at the time. But he is very much a partner in all of this. He will be part of the process of okaying everything, especially the likenesses. Tony's really happy about that.

Tone: What were you saying?

Jan: Just kidding. About Kurt Russell and your likenesses.

Tone: As long as he doesn't turn any of them back. That's all I'm really worried about. I really am. Because we've made Debra and John

happy. He (Kurt) is the only one we have to make happy with the likeness. He seems to be very very nice about it and not too concerned.

Derek: *From the previews, it looks like you've done a good job.*

Tone: It's not like the Star Trek stuff, that all those people were dealing with back in the day, where there's like thirteen different people that have to okay their likenesses. It's just one person. We lucked out on that one.

Derek: *You're moving a film into comics. At the Convention, you were hyping up the anime version of Snake, but do you have any involvement with that or is that a separate deal?*

Jan: We're not really involved; however, we are working with the writers of the anime.

Derek: *So you'll create a continuity?*

Jan: Exactly.

Bill: They're really intuitive, great guys. Nice guys. We've gotten together twice so far and just talked shop. "What are you planning on doing with the character, what are we planning on doing with the character?" To connect the two things. Stuff like that. We're not creatively involved with the film, but they wanted to hear what we had to say.

Derek: *My guess from reading what little there is in the preview is that you're ignoring Escape From L.A.*

Bill: I won't go so far as to say "ignoring" *Escape From L.A.*. It (the comic book) just picks up right after the first film. That gives us fourteen years to fill in.

Tone: We're not going to get to it immediately. You don't have to worry about it right now. I think we've got more important things to do. A, set up the life, the world, and all that kind of stuff. And then there's a lot of other things we might want to do that take place *prior* to *Escape (From New York)*. Whether or not we actually get to it or whatnot, people are interested in that stuff.

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We always get the *Escape From L.A.* question. And it's like, well, it's going to take a while before we go into that. It's a non-issue right now, I guess. It really is. But it is interesting because all of those really hard-core Snake fans, they always ask that question. "Is he going to be on that surfboard?"

Derek: *That made me laugh in the movie.*

Bill: It has its moments.

Derek: *Okay. This has been the summer where the comics/film crossover is on everybody's mind. Every producer, every studio, was circling (at Comic-Con) and looking for the project that they can own and take. Were people biting at Violent Messiahs?*

Bill: There were a lot of sharks at San Diego. I felt like Roy Scheider in the back of the boat, shoveling out the chum. "We're going to need a bigger booth."

We're at that point where we have people interested so we can't say. So just take that as a good sign.

Jan: We also like being very conservative about that. We've had things in the past as well, and we don't like talking about anything until it's real. Other companies put out, every time there's a nibble, a press release. I've been around the industry enough to know that it could be nothing.

Derek: *Sure. Anyone who's read Kevin Smith's Superman 5 knows that that ain't happening.*

Bill: Wasn't Tom Cruise attached to a Rob Liefeld project at one time, according to Rob Liefeld?

Derek: *Yes. He was attached to The Mark, and then Will Smith got attached to it. Then Liefeld published a book by Jada Pinkett-Smith to entice Will Smith, and now it's dead.*

Tone: It's like a game of poker. If you play with your cards way out here where everyone can look at them, you're not going to win the game.

Bill: It's also like that old line from the military. It's always "hurry up and wait." They go "we love it! We love it! Let's tell the trades right now!" And then the pages fly off the calendar. "What happened?" "Oh, it dried up."

Derek: *You feel the pressure of this. You've got the high profile of Snake, and then following up with the second Violent Messiahs story arc.*

Tone: I don't feel any pressure. I really don't. I have other pressure to f***ing piss me off. (*gestures at Bill and Jan*) They worry about that stuff. I'll let them do it. They'll come to me and say, hey, here's your check, and I'm like, "YEAH!"

That's how I handle it. Their pressure is "how am I going to get that check for Tone?"

Derek: *Just as long as they do.*

Jan: I get to worry about it. That's my job.

Tone: That's where the pressure's at.

Derek: *You also have mentioned that Chassis is headed for a re-launch, but you don't have an artist yet.*

Bill: No.

Derek: *But both it and Snake Plissken are going through CrossGen...*

Jan: No, not at this point. Just Snake.

Derek: *Then forget I said that, though I'm sure that Mark Alessi would be happy to have it as part of his plan to dominate the industry. He's a force of nature. Do you think Stan Lee was like that at forty?*

Bill: Probably.

Derek: Okay. So you're moving Snake to CrossGen while keeping Violent Messiahs at Image.

Jan: Absolutely.

Derek: Do you think, though, that the Snake Plissken thing kind of rocked the industry? After The Red Star, it seemed like, okay, it's not really CrossGen's thing, but they're dipping their toe in, and then suddenly they've got John Carpenter's Snake Plissken. That's a huge thing.

Jan: It was not an easy decision to make. I mean, we weighed everything, and took all the information we gathered and brought it over to our friends at the "Escapees." (John and Debrah.) We discussed what would be best for the project.

And it was decided that even though CrossGen was a newer company, some of the things that they were working on could potentially give us a much wider range of, not just distribution, but attention. It is a good time at CrossGen. There's a lot of excitement, there's a lot of buzz around the facility. But there's a lot of things that Mark (Alessi) is working on right now that haven't quite come out yet that I think will allow us to get into a lot more stores with a project like Snake.

Like I said, it was a very difficult decision. It wasn't something where we just went, "hey, yeah, let's go to a new company and see what happens."

I'm confident about the decision. I'm happy about it. But at the same time, we felt that it was best that we have *Violent Messiahs* stay exactly where it was. It's an Image book. Image has done right by us with the book.

I don't think that was the plan of anybody, necessarily, when plans were being made for how companies would come to CrossGen. But it's early. Some people told us that this was kind of a ground-breaking thing within the industry - a company like ours that produces comics going to different publishers at the same time.

Tone: We're the only people that are doing it. We're the test. I feel like little pawns right now.

Jan: There are writers that write for different companies, and so forth. But this is different. We're actually producing two different books at two different companies. Check with us in about six months and we'll tell you if it's working or not. *(laughs)*

Tone: It'll be interesting. It was very weird, not just at the press conference, but at the first panel we did with CrossGen. They actually produced a pamphlet, and I guess our names were on it.

Jan: A flyer.

Tone: To let you know who was going to be at what panels. Someone ran up to me and said, you know, you're on a CrossGen panel. And I freaked out. I didn't know anything about it.

Derek: Yes. Jan, you told me on the first night of Comic-Con that something big was coming with CrossGen, but made me promise not to leak it, which was okay because I really wasn't in any position to do so anyway. Mark Alessi sort of danced around it, but then hands me this press release with your names - it was pretty obvious what was up. Like you guys were just going to show up and say, hey, we like CrossGen...

Jan: We knew that once it was out...

Derek: You really enjoy reading *Ruse*...

Tone: One of the guys that was waiting to go into the CrossGen panel is a friend of ours here in L.A. But he's like a really big *Violent Messiahs* fan. And when we walked in, they were only letting the panel members in. He saw Jan and I walking in and he looked up and his face was just like a Tex Avery cartoon. He was freaked out. When it turned out that it was a Snake thing, it was kind of cool for him.

It's weird how personal people take this stuff. It's just a comic book.

Jan: Our name on the list, of course, let everybody know something was going on. But they didn't know exactly. A lot of people assumed that we were taking everything over to CrossGen and that was not the case.

Tone: We made it fairly clear at the panel.

Derek: Okay. We have the artist of *Violent Messiahs* and *Snake Plissken* in the room, but Bill, are you going to go back to drawing anything?

Bill: I'm developing another project right now. I hope to be the artist. It's two years away now. First we've got to do Snake. Hopefully that will increase my visibility a little bit.

Jan: It should.

Bill: And then we're going to be doing *Chassis* at some point, somewhere, which I'm going to write. Once we get that up and running, then I'll be able to launch this third project. It'll be a mini-series, but I've got a lot of ideas.

Derek: Tone, now that you're here, I'll ask what I asked Jan and Bill: What makes you the right guy to be doing *Snake Plissken*?

Tone: They couldn't find the right guy. I was just in the other room, working. They went looking for the right guy and they couldn't find him, so they said, "fuck, I guess we've got to give this to Tone."

No. You know what? It was just really weird. When the call came in from whoever, all I know is that one day Jan walked in and asked, "what do you guys think about *Escape From New York*?" I said, that's cool. Right?

It just sort of came out of the blue. She gave us the lowdown, they were interested in doing something, and our name got thrown in the hat. And we were going to meet with them in a week.

So I said, well, should I do some artwork? We didn't know *what* to do, because we didn't know anything. So I went ahead and did three or four...I mean, the night they told me, we were sitting at dinner at Mel's, you (Jan) explained to us there and we grabbed a napkin. I just drew a Kurt Russell picture. He looks like a long-haired guy, so I just drew a long-haired guy with a stubble beard.

And the only thing that really makes him Snake is the eye-patch. So I put it on there and said, hey, here's our first one! We'll take this to the meeting...

It always sounds good until you get back to the studio. You're like, "what the hell were we thinking about?"

Jan: It's the only one we didn't show them.

Tone: I wanted to take it. I wanted to show them that we were committed. We wanted to do this since Day One.

Jan: Even though it was on a place mat.

Tone: Okay, it was on a place mat.

Bill: I feel Tony's work is perfect for Snake Plissken. It's got a gritty, urban feel to it. It's nasty. And that really works.

Derek: Do you like that? Being nasty?

Tone: I don't know. I've heard crude, but not nasty.

Bill: His name's Tony. Mister Rodriguez if you're nasty.

Derek: Niiice.

Bill: Actually, that's what I want to bring to Snake. I want it to be humorous in a way, the way the first film was. The first film had some very funny moments in it. Let's go back to that cynical, dark humor.

I really like Garth Ennis' work on *The Punisher* right now. It's just this brilliant... he knows how to take it to the wall. He knows how to take a PG right to the edge of R. It's brilliant how he's



doing that, managing to play right on that fence.

It's got the wildest ideas, and it's drop dead funny. Violent, and yet half the time it's all set up and pay off. Most of the time it's not the actual act. He just describes what pain The Punisher is going to do to somebody. Then you cut to a scene and cut back, and it's been done to that guy. It's just a brilliant job.

Tone: It's never the action. It's set up and delivery.

Jan: What we're really going to be capturing more than anything in this series is the irreverence of the world of Snake. You asked about the world of post-9/11 and all that. I don't think we're going to be toying with the political, but we will be dealing with the world that is that way because of the political climate.

Bill: One of the things I really like about the first film is that it is apolitical. It's cynical and it's dark, but it's not preachy, either. It had a great balance to it.

Jan: And our first story arc, which we're not going to go into here, sorry...

Tone: We can't?

Jan: No. Sorry.

Derek: *Let's step outside, Tone.*

Tone: I'm really happy with what Bill did. We went over the outline. He hasn't finished the writing, but the outline was really, really cool.

Jan: It's perfect with Snake. It's just so Snake.

Bill: It's cynical.

Tone: I finally got one of the jokes the other day, and he gave it to me months ago. I called him on it, hey, I know what that means now. It's an East Coast thing. A lot of people on the East Coast are going to get it. Me being a West Coast guy, I didn't get it at all.

Bill: I think we can say that the majority of the action in the first arc will be taking place in Atlantic City. Regardless of what I end up writing, that's pretty much a given. I just want to do a story that's a really fun balls to the wall adventure. With a couple of cool thrills and a couple of cool laughs.

And then when we're done with that, I don't want to change anybody's world with it. I just want the guy who's done reading it to go, "that was fun."

And the next issue will be just as cool. There's no cardinal sin in being entertaining.

Derek: *Not at all. Have you guys achieved your dream project yet?*

Tone: Why does everybody look at me?

Derek: *I always like to ask artists that, especially. Because you grow up with certain books...even writers. Like it seems like everybody at DC wants a crack at Captain Marvel. It won't sell, but everybody wants it.*

Tone: No one's ever really bought Captain Marvel, and I feel sorry about that. I really do. I feel horrible about it, but it just doesn't sell.

Jan: Five years from now, Tony's doing Captain Marvel...

Tone: No. Not at all. I think Jerry Ordway nailed him. In that hardcover, *Power of Shazam*. Beautiful book.

I don't know. I've got a lot of stupid shit I want to do. But I keep talking to people about it and they say they can't do it.

Jan: What one character?

Tone: I have a Batman story I want to do, but I don't think it's ever going to get done. And that's it. That's the only thing I really have.

Derek: *Bill, anybody else's toys you want to play with?*

Bill: I'm happy with Snake right now. There appears to be a lot of interest in the property and everything I've shown to the public has had a good response. So maybe with higher visibility down the road I'll put something to DC or Marvel. I've got a couple of ideas. But nothing I want to say right now.

If the book does well, that gives me more clout to actually pick up the phone and say, "hey, I've got an idea for this character. Do you want to hear it?"

Derek: *Jan, how about for Hurricane? Do you want to see it grow like a studio like Wildstorm, where it becomes a whole line?*

Jan: Yeah. I really see us in the future...a lot of people ask us, "what is Hurricane Entertainment?"

Bill: The Hollywood answer is that we produce content.

Jan: We are content providers. That's the best way to put it.

Derek: *That would be the Silicon Valley answer, too.*

Jan: With my background in film, and in comics, and theater and all that, I don't that we just are publishers. My vision for this company is that it expands out, it gets us out of here (*gesturing around the apartment*). You're the first person to actually see where we're working.

Tone: No one ever comes here. EVER.

Derek: *I will be allowed to leave, right? I took no photographs.*

Jan: Everybody assumes that we and Team Red Star have studios somewhere, when we're really working out of our homes. My first dream, which is not very large, is to move out of here and into offices and have a full-time staff. I absolutely see this company growing larger, having a full-time running staff, a number of titles going at the same time, and entertainment as well. That's my background and where I want to take it.

And so we turned off the tape, looked at some art, and said our goodbyes. The Adventures of Snake Plissken is scheduled for release from CrossGen sometime in the first quarter of 2003. I can hardly wait.

[Violent Messiahs: The Book of Job](#)



[Derek McCaw](#)

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