

An Enigma Wrapped in a Comic Book

THE DEVIL YOU KNOW: INSIDE THE MIND OF TODD MCFARLANE

By Paul Eichhorn



"Dedicated to all those who stand up for what they believe in."

Spawn #97 — "Heaven's Folly"

Calgary-born comic book artist and creator of the hugely popular *Spawn*, Todd McFarlane is larger than life. Or it could be said, Todd McFarlane lives a life larger than everyone else. Documenting this "big life" was the challenge confronting Kenton Vaughan, director of the National Film Board's feature documentary, *The Devil You Know: Inside the Mind of Todd McFarlane*.

In this age of non-stop television biographies, the documentary form has morphed into a shadow of its former self. Fortunately, Kenton Vaughan had the freedom and scope to fully explore his dynamic subject without the restrictions of a TV-based "biography" segment. *The Devil You Know* attempts to create a documentary profile about a larger-than-life Canadian more reminiscent of the NFB's earlier classics such as Roman Kroitor's and Wolf Koenig's *Lonely Boy* (about the young Paul Anka), Donald Brittain's and John Spotton's *Never a Backward Step* (Roy Thomson) and Brittain's and Don Owen's *Ladies and Gentlemen...Mr. Leonard Cohen*. Yet as much as Vaughan's film has a connection to a rich NFB tradition, it also represents a whole new breed of NFB filmmaking.

Unlike the earlier NFB films that were made entirely in-house—from the director to developing the film negative—*The Devil You Know* is a "freelance" project. Vaughan is a freelance director as are the film's cinematographers Derek Rogers and Joan Hutton. He initially had the idea of doing something about McFarlane while working on CBC's *Venture*. Then he pitched the idea to the Board. Producer Silva Basmajian, who has been with the NFB for over 20 years, working with such legends as John Spotton, understood the film's potential. "Todd McFarlane is a good doc subject because he's a compelling character, and it's actually a little-known Canadian story. It's a good dramatic story and the artwork shown is amazing," says Basmajian.

Basmajian has witnessed first-hand the changes that have transformed the NFB. Most films are now shot on digital Beta with only 20 per cent shot on film for cost reasons and ease of production. She adds the Board long ago shut down its in-house film lab. Basmajian, who previously worked with Vaughan on his award-winning short doc *Turning Away*, has seen the NFB leave feature-film production to focus on short dramas, animation, child programming and documentaries such as *The Devil You Know*. The film works well with the Board's current mandate she says.



Todd McFarlane

The Devil You Know, shot during mid-to-late 1999 and completed this past summer, clearly distinguishes itself as a film and not a TV program. Director Vaughan uses the medium to its fullest in several instances. Right off the top, viewers see a visual-effects sequence of floating money followed by images of hundreds of McFarlane comic books. Along with an original music score by Kurt Swinghammer, Vaughan expertly utilizes the tone-setting cinematography of Derek Rogers (*New Waterford Girl*). Shots of New York City buildings work perfectly with scenes about McFarlane's rise as a comic book artist for Marvel Comics in the 1980s. Conversely, the shots of the sweeping, scenic flatlands of Washington State work nicely with the sequences about McFarlane's college years and failed baseball career. Especially filmic are the long sequences showing McFarlane drawing on his easel. Here viewers see "an artist" at work. The fine detail of his comics is clearly illustrated. Instead of "talking heads," we see his art and hear him talk. "Unlike a standard TV biography show, this film has a lot of layers," adds producer Basmajian.

Vaughan acknowledges making a documentary like this on TV would have been impossible. "I couldn't have done this type of film for the CBC. You would then have to create something to fit the TV format, including cutting it for a one- or two-hour TV slot with commercials." The director also doesn't hide the fact that you're watching biographical film about a subject. That wasn't the case with earlier NFB docs such as *Lonely Boy* or *Never a Backward Step*. They strove to come across as if they were just capturing the person's life as it unfolded in front of the camera. The lighter and smaller 16mm cameras the filmmakers used allowed them to discreetly shoot sequences and stay in the background. Vaughan also has the advantage of a lightweight and discreet video cameras, yet right from the first five minutes it's clear everyone knows what's up. McFarlane in one case asks if it's okay to swear. In another, he approaches the camera after it took the crew 10 minutes to do a white balance, gleefully saying, "I thought you guys were pros." Vaughan admits the shot had to be corrected later in post-production



Director Kenton Vaughan

but he likes it when the filmmaking process is acknowledged. "I like breaking down that conceit." The director found it was easy being with McFarlane because he is a natural storyteller. Yet he adds McFarlane is a big self-promoter. Clearly, the subject knows the publicity value that documentary like *The Devil You Know* offers.

To provide a non-McFarlane or a non-family/friend source, Vaughan conducted several interviews with McFarlane's former Marvel Comic colleagues. These sequences do offer a much different take on McFarlane. The director also tracked down two rabid fans, Matt and David. Matt offers some personal observations about why *Spawn* is so popular and why he likes McFarlane's work. David takes us into a small room in his apartment. It's filled from floor to ceiling with 1,500 figurines from McFarlane's toy line—still in their packages. David admits he sometimes skips meals to pay for these toys. Matt and David could be a film on their own. And that's the problem with this sequence. It ultimately doesn't do much to further reveal McFarlane. The pair are ardent fans and hardly impartial. And you end up wanting to know about these characters instead of the main subject.

“I'm only in business to do great art.”

**Todd McFarlane, from
*The Devil You Know***

The one thing that stands out about *The Devil You Know* is Todd McFarlane's numerous contradictions—in his life, his words and actions. It's something that he freely admits to. McFarlane's contradictory nature is illustrated best by a quote about his time at Marvel Comics where he rose to fame drawing *The Incredible Hulk* and *Spiderman*. He left in disgust because Marvel created flashy foil covers and other gimmicks to sell more issues. McFarlane felt such "special editions" took advantage of people just because Marvel could do it and make more money. Ironically, he has done the same thing by releasing essentially the same toy action figure with just one or two different accessories.

According to Vaughan, McFarlane lives "a simple life" and money is not a big thing to him. No, money isn't a big deal when

you have a huge house in an exclusive community in Phoenix, Ariz., and another large waterfront home on Vancouver Island. True, to meet McFarlane on the street he wouldn't look rich but his bank accounts would indicate otherwise. In one scene, wife Wanda, chief operating officer of his companies, asks a company staffer to provide a breakdown for Todd on how well a toy line is selling. He may create art but he wants to know bottom-line results. The film notes that in 1999, McFarlane sold six million figurines. Vaughan says McFarlane is based in the United States because it's easier to be an entrepreneur there than in Canada. He oversees a company with nine offices in four countries consisting of six divisions. According to McFarlane, he does a good job with art and the by-product is money.

Vaughan seems to have missed an excellent opportunity to confront McFarlane head on about his contradictory art vs. money lifestyle. Pick up a *Spawn* comic book and you find yourself emerged in McFarlane's empire. There are ads throughout for action figures, video games and other publications. It's no soft sell. Yes, it contains McFarlane's art, but also his commerce. His enigmatic side stands out prominently.

This side is also shown during sequences as he works in his think-tank—a long, hallway-like, walk-in closet. Almost like a child, McFarlane lies on the floor drawing or dictating comic book ideas into a tape recorder. Here he reveals strong opinions on many subjects. He says religion gives you hope but punishes you for not being a perfect follower. McFarlane suggests the Bible could be better if he edited it. He's a big gun control advocate. Yet he admits if someone ever hurt a family member, he would hunt them and kill them or pay someone else to do it for him. And he's deadly serious. McFarlane is a walking talking contradiction. Yet his picture perfect wife Wanda says, "he's as normal as they come." Maybe to her he is.

"There's two sides of his life—the beautiful and lovely people in his real life and the ugly comic book work he has created," says director Vaughan. McFarlane's longtime friend Terry Fitzgerald, president of entertainment for Todd McFarlane Productions, talks about the two Todds—the family guy, with a wife and three kids, and the *Spawn* guy. But after watching the film, there appears to be the Todd who loves his family, drawing and baseball and the Todd who is dedicated to making (and spending) lots of money.

McFarlane's big spender lifestyle is clearly illustrated by his much-publicized purchase of Mark McGwire's 70th home-run baseball for \$3 million (U.S.). Vaughan and editor Greg West create a riveting sequence using McFarlane's home video, as he bid for the ball over the phone, and footage from the actual auction. We all know McFarlane got the ball but the drama of an auction is created for viewers. No one ever asks him if buying a baseball, plus several others, for \$3 million is excessive. Vaughan does help us understand McFarlane's baseball obsession by focusing on how his promising ball career was cut short due to injuries. McFarlane is shown hitting balls in major league ballparks as his ball collection tours the continent. His vast fortune has allowed him to buy a piece of the dream he couldn't have.

The film seems to end abruptly with McFarlane throwing out the line "it was fun while it lasted" as we watch him sign his name to a drawing. After 75 minutes we still don't know who Todd McFarlane really is. A man who wears so many hats is a walking, talking enigma. We get a glimpse inside the mind of Todd McFarlane but how it all works remains a mystery. We'll have to wait for the sequel. Then again, maybe his life is just too big for a mere film. *