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## Love and Rockets Celebrates 30 Years of Queer, Punk Comic Genius

*Chris Hall*

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- Jaime Hernandez

*Love and Rockets* turns 30 this year.

Most people don't associate *Love and Rockets* with the legendary comic book by Jaime and Gilbert Hernandez (with occasional contributions by their brother Mario), but with the alt-rock band that named themselves after it. Even more unfortunately, some people will read that first sentence and see nothing but word salad. And that's a real shame. *Love and Rockets* is without a doubt one of the

most unique works to come out of the 1980s indie comics boom, or anytime since.

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- Gilbert & Jaime Hernandez

For anyone who hasn't been exposed to the work of Los Bros. Hernandez, this is a great opportunity to start exploring. On Oct. 13, the [Cartoon Art Museum](#), in conjunction with the [Alternative Press Expo](#) (APE), launches an exhibition covering *Love and Rockets'* three decades. On display will be over 50 pieces of original art, and Jaime, Gilbert, and Mario will be at the opening on Saturday night. It's a strangely appropriate pairing: like *Love and Rockets*, the Cartoon Art Museum is revered and loved by those in the know, but largely neglected by others.

Comics were a very different thing when the Hernandez Brothers started publishing. The term "graphic novel" was obscure even among fans, and the work of creators was owned almost wholly by the big publishers. "There was no alternative market," Jaime said when *SF Weekly* spoke to him earlier this week. "There were a few things, but most of it was all Marvel and DC, and it was kind of a formula: You do superheroes, or you're not in the biz. We wanted to do comics about other things besides the superhero world .... I wasn't seeing the kind of world that I was living in. I was not seeing anything close to what I was living."

The brothers were living in Oxnard, a coastal suburb in Ventura County, California, which was home to strawberry farms, industrial parks, and the "Nardcore" punk scene. Jaime's stories take place in a fictionalized version of Oxnard called Huerta, or "Hoppers," and center primarily around Maggie Chascarillo and her best friend and sometimes lover, Esperanza "Hokey" Glass. Gilbert is best known for his stories about Palomar, a rural Latin American town located "somewhere outside the U.S. border."

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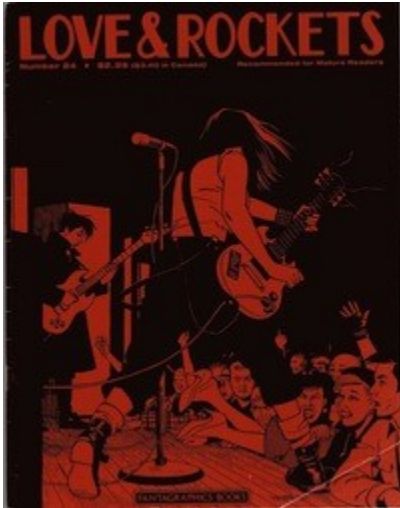


- Gilbert Hernandez

Even in the indie comics scene, *Love and Rockets* stood out in stark contrast to the rest of the market when it hit the stands. The other alternative comics of the time still used the trappings of traditional comic book genres, even when they tweaked or outright rebelled against their conventions. Jaime mentions titles like *Elfquest* and Dave Sim's *Cerebus* as examples of some of the first creator-owned titles. While *Love and Rockets* dabbles in surrealism and science fiction -- especially in the early stories -- what's bonded their readers to their material all these years is that Jaime and Gilbert are able to find the beauty in the mundane. There are few artists of any medium, for example, who can evoke a punk club like Jaime, down to the graffiti and the dialogue.

If *Love and Rockets* brought one innovation to the comics field, it could be its lack of misogyny. A certain breed of obnoxious, petulant sexism is a fact of life in comics, whether you're talking about the latest mutant team or the latter-day Robert Crumbs. *Love and Rockets* has, from the beginning, been praised for consistently depicting strong, complex women characters. Jaime's stories depict the volatile and complex relationship between Maggie and Hopey over years. In Gilbert's Palomar stories, the indomitable Luba, a single mother whose children all have different fathers, progresses over the years from being an outcast to the mayor of the town. But while heroic at times, Luba is flawed. Her relationship with her children is often abusive, and she ultimately makes Maricela, her lesbian daughter, flee the town. "When we started," Jaime says,

"women were, for the most part, handled terribly. And that was one of the reasons to pursue developing the women characters. It was kind of like a 'getting it right,' kind of thing. Like 'I'm not seeing this, guys, let me show you how it's done.'"



- Jaime Hernandez

It's also been, from the very beginning, a very queer comic. Or at least, one in which queer characters were normalized. Maggie and Hopey's affair could easily lend itself to cheap adolescent exploitation, especially in a medium that thrives on adolescent fantasies. In fact, their relationship was always treated as very matter-of-fact, as were all the other gay characters. Even in the '80s, when [ACT UP](#) was fighting just to get Reagan to acknowledge AIDS, gays, lesbians, and trans people were a natural part of the Hernandez's world.

What Jaime and Gilbert have after 30 years are two massive, cross-generational novels. And while that's to their credit, it might also be the single most intimidating thing about *Love and Rockets*

for newcomers. Gilbert, for example, has carried the history of Palomar's characters back into the '50s and '60s. It was challenging enough to read the issues when they first came out. The release schedule of indie comics in general was extremely irregular, and it could be tricky to remember the details of the last issue, never mind two or three or five before that. While that's less of a problem with the collections that Fantagraphics has put out since then, it's still hard to know where to tell a newcomer to start.

Jaime seems a little wistful about the aging of his characters, and where they've wound up after all this time: "A lot of the characters are in their late-40s now, and some of them are still trying to figure out their life. And I know that's like real life, but I kind of wish that some of them would've been responsible at a younger age, because that's real life too. But I preferred to follow the ones that didn't." But ultimately, he's happy with his creations and where they've gone. "I don't regret anything, you know. The characters are who they are, and I like them, still."

**Love and Rockets: A 30th Anniversary Celebration** opens with a reception at 8 p.m. at the [Cartoon Art Museum](#), 655 Mission (at New Montgomery), on Saturday, October 13. The exhibit continues until March 12, 2013. Admission is \$5-\$50, sliding scale.

**The 2012 Alternative Press Expo** is October 13-14 at the [Concourse Exhibition Center](#), 635 Eighth St. (at Brannon). Admission is \$10-\$15.