

A Brief Conversation With Michael Barnett, Director of the Documentary Superheroes

By Keegan Hamilton Wed., Jun 8 2011 at 12:00AM



Just when you think the media coverage of real-life superheroes has reached a critical mass (see: [Jones, Phoenix](#)), somebody goes and makes a feature-length documentary about the entire subculture. That somebody is director Michael Barnett, and his movie, titled simply [Superheroes](#), screens tonight and tomorrow as part of the [Seattle True Independent Film Festival](#). (It's also been picked up by HBO, and premieres on cable August 8.) Barnett, who is in town and will make a cameo tonight at Central Cinema, was kind enough to offer his thoughts on costumed crusaders and of course the Phoenix Jones phenomenon.

SW: Why did you decide to make a documentary about real life superheroes?

Barnett: Probably the same thing that drew you to it. It was fascinating. I just sort of stumbled upon these adult men who are putting on costumes to fight crime and help their communities. I just couldn't believe it was real.

What surprised you most about these people?

It's really tough to generalize. Everybody was so different. I guess what surprised me most was, we sort of went out looking for this pop-culture phenomenon and found so many of these guys--there are literally hundreds of them--so we had to weed through the ones who are just online personalities, doing it as a sort of a cosplay thing. Then we sniffed out the ones who are really doing things--Mr. Xtreme in San Diego, Zetaman in Portland, Dark Guardian and Life in New York, and Thanatos in Vancouver--and focused on them.

A lot of people's first impression when you explain the concept of real-life superheroes seems to be something along the lines of, "Those people are nuts." How did you try and normalize them, or rationalize what they do? Or did you even try to do that?

Our first approach was to try and make people realize that each person is sort of eccentric in their own way, and they have their own reasons for doing what they do. It's not a rational thing to do, to put on a

costume and walk around a dangerous neighborhood. A lot of these guys don't have proper training to do that sort of thing--some do--but most don't. And in some states the laws allow them to carry some pretty serious weapons.

The other thing is showing their situation in life. Quite a few of them don't have the resources to do what they do. But they want to help their community. Some of them were sad--financially, personally, and just in general. But it's showing that out of that darkness they could rise above and try to do something good. It's not all cookies and rainbows, though, it's profoundly sad and tragic on a certain level.

You interviewed Stan Lee--the godfather of comics, and the and former president and chairman of Marvel--for the film. What was that like and what were his thoughts on these so-called superheroes?

Stan is the man. He's amazing. He's awesome. And he's 88 years old!

We thought about trying to interview all kinds of figures in the comic world, but ultimately we realized there was only one person we needed to talk to and that was Stan. He understands what it means to be a superhero better than anybody. A lot of these guys (the real-life superheroes) are very wary of the media and kind of protective of their community. But once they heard Stan was involved, it was pretty easy to get them at least on the phone.

Mostly [Stan] was worried that one of these guys is going to get killed or injured. And yeah, somebody is probably going to get hurt. It's going to be a sad day for the superhero community when that happens, but it seems inevitable.

Phoenix Jones isn't in the film at all. Why? And have you met the guy? What are your thoughts on him and his impact on the superhero world?

Never met the guy, never had a conversation with him. There's so many of these guys and we were meeting them, [and Phoenix Jones] didn't even exist yet. When we were shooting, we rolled through the Pacific Northwest and never even heard his name. And then while we were in production, he sort of came out of nowhere and was suddenly everywhere. So I don't know what my opinion is. If he is just in it for the attention, it's a bad thing. But he is trying to be iconic, and for a message of good, so that's a good thing.

Superheroes screens tonight at 7 p.m. at Central Cinema, and Barnett will be in attendance along with several members of Seattle's superhero scene. (Barnett notes that two other Seattle superheroes, Skyman and White Baron, appear briefly in the film.) The movie also will also be shown tomorrow at 1:30 p.m. at the JewelBox Theatre at the Rendezvous. Ticket info [here](#).