

Blog

Abbot Kinney — The King of California Cool

There's no better way to spend a summer Sunday afternoon than wandering up and down the famous Abbot Kinney Boulevard in the heart of Venice. Lined by towering palm trees and immortalized in vintage photos, it's a destination known for its bohemian spirit, fashion, food... and now, its own boutique marijuana dispensary.

As West Los Angeles' hipster haven, the boulevard embodies the best of a buzzing beach town blended with the rhythmic heartbeat of L.A. hip. While sophisticated and trend-setting, Abbot Kinney maintains its laidback Venice vibe. Much more than picturesque sunsets, iconic tree silhouettes, and diehard surfers, there is an undeniable hometown Americana feel as locals and tourists alike ride rented bikes - while holding cones of handmade ice cream.

Crowned one of the top shopping streets in the world, there is something for everyone on the boulevard, from eccentric thrift shops and unique bazaars, to edgy cafes and funky eateries. Think of Abbot Kinney as the cool, alternative cousin to Melrose Avenue, with boutiques curating a chic and new-age vibe. Whether you love window-shopping or people-watching, this is the place for you.

And before you finish your time on the boulevard, stop by the newest addition to the neighborhood: MedMen Abbot Kinney.

If Abbot Kinney is the perfect marriage of old-school funk and upscale hip, MedMen's premium cannabis dispensary should feel right at home. Step inside, and find yourself at the crossroads of counterculture and mainstream innovation. The signature dark wood display tables and open industrial floor plan invite you into a unique shopping experience that balances the familiar with the new. And there's nothing that says Abbot Kinney more than that.

There is no question that Abbot Kinney Boulevard offers some of the best that L.A. and Southern California have to offer, and MedMen's latest dispensary is no exception.

Book Review

When the Hardest Fight is Letting Go

Summary: *God Country* is the story of mortals versus gods, and sons versus fathers, in a mythic journey sprung out of West Texas. Taking us through the horrifying and the cosmic, at its heart, it's a timeless tale of legacy and letting go.



When news broke that the creative dynamic duo of writer Donny Cates and artist Geoff Shaw would be taking over the monthly duties of Marvel Comics' *Thanos*, I wept with joy, for Marvel could not have found a more perfect team to bring us cosmic tales of the Mad Titan. Their take on the book promises to be fantastic and insane, wrapped around a very human journey - even if the titular character is anything but human.

Why am I such a true believer? Because of *God Country*.

When talking about the six-issue series from Image Comics, it is essential to praise the one-two punch of line artist Shaw and the master of color, Jason Wordie. From the ethereal to the mundane, their range of world-building allows for grand epic battles juxtaposed with terrifying intimate moments that leave the reader exposed and vulnerable. When the hero's heart breaks, you feel their overwhelming sorrow.

The art inspires awe as it pays tribute to Jack Kirby, the King of Comics. His iconic Kirby Krackle of energy, usually drawn as overlapping black dots in negative space, is infused with subtle rainbows as we journey through a bleak and colorless underworld.

In re-reading the series as a collected trade, I noticed Cate's deconstruction of fallible gods from ancient times made the myth fresh and modern, rich with metaphor and relatable to us mere mortals. Set in idyllic West Texas, this is a tale of a storm like no other, told down through the generations. As gods and men fight an eternal battle, fathers and sons struggle to escape their own endless conflict. Their legacies hang in the balance, with a cantankerous 12-foot sword caught in between.

On the surface, *God Country* seems a story about a man ravaged by mental illness. We meet Emmett Quinlan, geriatric father and former patriarch, robbed of his memories and trapped in a quiet and lonely hell. As he suffers, so does the family he terrorizes and no longer recognizes. But this isn't a story about the horrors of dementia. Not really. Because it is a story about letting go.

When Emmett's memories suddenly return, he's determined to never lose his mind or family a second time. To hell with what the gods say or the trials sent to stop him, even if it puts those he loves in harm's way. The revived hardass battles gods and demons alike to protect them, wielding Valofax, a massively-compensating magic sword that grants him potency and clarity. In his hands, the blade becomes a knife cutting through the fog, bringing light where once was only darkness.

It is also a story of a god whose time is long past. Once all-powerful but now forgotten, he refuses to accept that both he and all he has built are in the death throes of extinction. His obsession with legacy prevents him from passing his kingdom to his son, which would secure its survival. With his remaining power, the desperate god grasps the last fragments of his realm, holding it all together by sheer force of will. He keeps entropy at bay, at the cost of his mind and reason.

It is also a story of two sons afraid to accept what their fathers have become. As spoken in *The Dark Knight*, you either die a hero or live long enough to see yourself become the villain. *God Country* illustrates that truth, literally and metaphorically. Both Emmett and the god, once heroes in their children's eyes are brought down by the ravages of time and disease. They have become monsters, shells of their former selves, both willing to destroy entire worlds for control of the sword.

It is also a story of a son learning to let go of his father. Emmett's son, Roy, at first refuses to accept that it's time to say goodbye. His denial brings demon hordes and cataclysmic storms to his family's very doorstep, threatening to tear their hometown to the ground. Though he wishes to have his father back, Roy realizes he's holding onto a past that is more fantasy than reality.

Finally, at its heart, it is a story about legacy. Whether fighting for family, memories, or the kingdoms slipping through their fingers, each character has a choice to make: let go of the past or forfeit your future. As one family ensures their legacy by making the more difficult choice, another family ends theirs in annihilation.

For legacy is not found in the kingdoms we leave to our children, but in the stories they remember. To be eternal, as the selfish mad god so desperately wished, we must first let go. Emmett learns this lesson, and with him, we realize that it is not nearly as easy as dropping a sword from our hands. In fact, it's the hardest battle we'll ever have to fight.

Feature Writing

Skybound's 'Wheel of Awesome' Shatters Entertainment Business Model

If you are by any measure versed in either television or comic books, you may have heard of a little show called *The Walking Dead*. Or perhaps you've read the eponymous, long-running comic book series from which the show derives. You might even be able to remember Robert Kirkman's name, writer and co-creator of the book and executive producer of the AMC series.

But did you know the company behind the *Walking Dead* franchise is flipping the script on how the entertainment industry works with, and more importantly, for creators?

Skybound Entertainment, a multi-platform entertainment company, was founded by Kirkman and CEO David Alpert in 2010 and now has developed properties in comics, television, film, interactive gaming, animation, online digital content, and virtual reality space. It's essentially a creator's wet dream, as Gene Wilder's *Willy Wonka* waltzes through their heads singing "Pure Imagination." As a company led by creators and for creators, that is precisely Skybound's ambition.

At this year's San Diego Comic-Con Skybound panel, Alpert noted that modern creators do not tend to think within the boundaries of a singular medium, despite historical means of distribution:

"We allow creators to have access to all the different divisions of Skybound, whether it's film, television, comics, novels, video games, live events, VR, AR, licensing, merchandising," explained Alpert. "If we have a creator with a strong voice and strong vision, we would make this pitch to the creators as to why they should work with us, and the joke would always be that they say, 'That's awesome!'"

And the nickname stuck.

Traditional Business Hierarchy vs. the Wheel of Awesome

Instead of putting the business itself at the center, Skybound focuses on the creators, who remain at the center of their projects, maintaining control at all times as they drive the extension of their intellectual properties (IPs) in the directions they want to go.

"Because Skybound is so creator-focused," explained Kirkman at the same panel, "we allow the creators to always have a voice in what they see coming from their ideas. It's really about what the story dictates and what their concept would most thrive as."

With creators and their IPs at the center of a multimillion-dollar company, essentially circling them with a full range of resources to leverage, the traditional hierarchy of a business becomes obsolete. Alpert said that the reason for a wheel model was to eliminate that hierarchy.

But another possible reason Skybound has avoided a vertical corporate structure could have something to do with their souring partnership with AMC Studios. On Monday, Kirkman and other executive producers of *The Walking Dead* television production filed a lawsuit against AMC for breach of contract. The lawsuit accuses AMC of exploiting and manipulating their own “vertically-integrated corporate structure” to avoid sharing more of the show’s profits with the producers.

In an interview with *Bleeding Cool* back in March of this year, President of Skybound Interactive Dan Murray talked about how most media companies are built as verticals.

“When you think of most corporate media companies, there’s a vertical here for film, and there’s a vertical here for TV, and another one for music. So they tend to build IPs vertically.” In light of the lawsuit’s revelations, we now know at least one reason why an emerging media company might choose a different approach.

Reinventing the Wheel with Creative Collaboration

Murray went on to describe how the Wheel of Awesome changes everything, diverging from the traditional vertical approach, and how Skybound as a media company instead uses the various departments as spokes:

“At Skybound, we tend to think of IPs as circular and putting the creator at the center. So building everything around the creator, and having the creator’s voice connecting through that wheel directly to the fans, is how we feel new media should be made. Everything is done with the creator in mind.

“Everyone is a creator themselves, and everyone wants to be connected to the creator, creating a community.”

Catherine Winder, formerly of Lucasfilm Animation and now CEO of Skybound North in Vancouver, elaborated at the panel that they found the wheel model allows for the different departments to work in concert with each other, to a greater capacity than media companies could before. “We work in parallel and collaborate as we go and develop our characters further and build out the world so it all works cohesively.”

Sean Furst, Co-President of TV and Film, had this to add at the panel: “We have all these different departments that are building their own businesses, but when we all get together, we share amongst each other those ideas. Through that collaboration, we find new opportunities for our creators.”

Not in the Business of Building Brands and Franchises

With all those opportunities for creators, one would imagine that every artist and writer in the industry would rush to franchise their IPs into million-dollar paychecks, leveraging Skybound to get them there. But keep in mind that *The Walking Dead* is a cultural phenomenon. The book outsells anything else at Image Comics by a wide margin, sometimes three times over, and is usually in the top 10 for all published comic books from month to month.

Despite the inclusion of building brands and franchises in Skybound's mission statement, Kirkman stopped short of saying that his company's primary objective is focused on franchises before serving the creators and providing "awesome" content for the fans:

"I think that's a byproduct of it, but it's really a desire to do the coolest things and tell the coolest stories, and the coolest things tend to get bigger and bigger, and tend to grow, and that yields itself to franchise storytelling.

"I didn't set out to build a *Walking Dead* franchise. I just wanted to do a really cool comic book about zombies and people struggling with the zombie apocalypse. But as you get deeper and deeper into that, and as its popularity grew, we had all these other opportunities around it that turned it into a franchise.

"What we try to do at Skybound is a lot more organic and a lot more story-based. If the story is there and the passion is there, then it just automatically grows into that."

For example, Kirkman offered that his *Thief of Thieves* book could potentially grow into other platforms due to the characters in the story. While the book explores the life and world around its lead character, there is a co-existing character whose own story is explored in the game.

Alpert added that the success of the *Walking Dead* games taught them the overall world story can be expanded in a variety of ways, such as gaming platforms and through different characters, so long as you don't break the rules of the world:

"The reason that was still *Walking Dead*, even though we had different characters, was because there was a world and there was a rule set. There were themes that were not being broken. Having that allowed us to expand out that universe."

Skybound and Beyond!

The long-term success of Skybound and the *Wheel of Awesome* remains to be seen, as is its influence across the breadth of media industries in how they do business with creative talent. But with over 30 comic book titles and creators from which to

mine new stories, and a growing slate of television productions and video games, it is safe to say that Kirkman's company is not fading away into the night anytime soon.

As far as he is concerned, comics are driving everything in entertainment today, and his company seems to be positioning itself to make full use of that expected momentum. July saw numerous announcements of expansion into new mediums, from the film adaptation of Kirkman's *Invincible*, venturing into animation, and even a new imprint of novels. And just this month, Kirkman signed a new exclusive development deal with Amazon Studios to produce *Skybound*'s future television properties.

It's as if we are witnessing the birth of a new kind of Disney, built on zombies and post-apocalyptic dread instead of wholesome family fare and whistling mice on steamboats, yet nevertheless still recognizing the insatiable and endless commercial hunger for new stories. A Disney that puts stories first and gives the storytellers the keys to the kingdom.

Ghostwriting, Persuasive Writing

The Day They Took Everything

April 2, 2012. They broke down the doors of our school with battering rams and took everything. But that is not what terrifies me the most about the raid that haunts me to this day. There remains another threat. One far more dangerous and insidious.

I remember the call that early Monday morning. I hurried to find the remote and turn on the news. I saw a newscaster huddled in front of the camera. Behind her was a barricade of federal agents and their trucks. And in the background was our school, Oaksterdam University.

Truth is, I had quietly dreaded the scene playing out before my eyes ever since our founder, Richard Lee, and I first launched our political campaign "Heard 'Round the World." It was our latest effort to legalize cannabis in the 5th largest global economy. As we expected, the feds took notice.

Waking the baby and my husband, we rushed to the campus in downtown Oakland. Handcuffed and in custody, four of our nursery employees sat uncomfortably on the pavement. Agents from the IRS, DEA, ATF, and the Federal Marshals were already inside the halls of our school, swarming every floor and every room, rummaging through the nursery, horticulture lab, auditorium, and offices.

Outside, the public gathered, and a police line formed between the people and the raid operation. An employee found me in the crowd and told me this was happening simultaneously at the founder's residence and several locations across downtown, including our dispensary, museum, gift shop, and even a friend's home.

Crowds, our community, convened on all four public locations to peacefully protest. Rows of local Oakland police officers, standing shoulder to shoulder, were forced to provide safe passage between the federal agents and the shouting crowd. Hundreds of concerned citizens, students, faculty, friends, and neighbors chanted in unison, "Shame! Shame! Shame! DEA, go away!"

With my one-year-old son strapped in a carrier, I stood there helplessly and watched. I felt violated, angry, and scared. I couldn't get ahold of Richard, a man confined to a wheelchair. But also a proud man. Had federal agents battered down his door too? Did they take him into custody?

The agents seized everything that wasn't furniture and loaded it into large moving trucks. They took every plant, every computer, the backup drives, school records, and curriculum videos. Anything with words written on it. All shoved into boxes or large black garbage bags and carried out like a bucket brigade. As the feds tried to drive off, a few brave patriots laid down in front in a desperate attempt to stop them.

We were robbed by those wearing badges. Left with nothing but a shell of our school. I felt a deep descending sickness at the thought of strangers rifling through our personal and professional belongings, taking anything and everything they wanted.

It was an intentional public violation of our property, our privacy, and our sanctity. The affidavit ordering the seizure remains secret and sealed to this day, and the founder of several successful and well-regarded businesses was forced to retire.

Yet no charges were ever filed. And the government kept our money and assets as if they were stolen treasure. More than our property, they took our trust. They took our faith in them to serve and protect those most in need of protection.

As our school was gutted, as Oakland police were duty-bound to shield the feds from locals, something horrible was happening elsewhere. A gunman had just opened fire on students barely a few miles away at Oikos University. I saw the torture on the officers' faces as they were forced to stay and hold the line.

Seven lives were taken that day, including a young mother. It remains the worst school shooting in Oakland's history because the government had robbed our officers of their ability to respond.

It was well known that the Oakland Police Department recognized Oaksterdam as a law-abiding, tax-paying institution. So the IRS, DEA, and the other agencies chose not to tell local authorities they were coming. Later, a FOIA request revealed the police did not have a chance to staff up.

They found themselves short-handed that fateful morning. Instead of being available to respond to a school shooting, law enforcement resources were reappropriated as glorified bodyguards. While a man with a gun murdered seven people just down the road.

Absolutely nothing came of the raids. There was no litigation, and our property was never returned. The school was immediately closed, and a hundred and eight people, including myself, lost their union jobs and healthcare. All because the government feared our efforts to reform the law and decriminalize marijuana. They were desperate to end our mission. Because of the crippling raid, we could not participate in the 2012 legalization campaigns. Our advocacy made us targets, and we were meant to be an example.

They never came back for us. But that didn't stop the cold sweats. The jumps out of bed in the middle of the night. The watching for black SUVs out my kitchen window every morning. The fear that they were always watching. Always listening. I worried - would my son be safe?

Eventually, the school relocated a block away, and we rebuilt. We became an example of strength, tenacity, and perseverance.

Our government continues to waste our tax dollars chasing a misguided drug war. Even as taxes from cannabis revenue revitalize Oakland's downtown. Even though cannabis is controlled, taxed, and regulated in California and other forward-thinking states. It has been the politics of prohibition over public safety for far too long. As a nation, at least when it comes to the cannabis industry, our priorities are backward.

The battle is not over, though, and it is far from a losing one. We can change the narrative. We can put an end to the federal raids. We can end the days of gang violence stemming from a black market that thrives on prohibition. We can place our resources and those who protect us where we truly need them. We can save lives. Imagine a world where all those wasted resources and tax dollars from legitimized cannabis are put toward education, healthcare, the arts, and civil infrastructure.

And we can choose a path that rebuilds our faith in a government meant to serve the people, not oppress them. Let us continue to fight for cannabis policy reform so that one day the prohibition becomes nothing more than a scary bedtime story, told to our children, of the way things were back in the day.