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Milk and Cookies with Ron Spears

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Taste the Magic
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PRO TOUR-VALENCIA

So there we were, huffing up the side of a cliff, Ron Spears, Ixidor, and me. We were climbing up to the Muffin On the Mountain, a fine little breakfast place in northern Otaria. It was to be the place where I interview Mr. Spears, but it is also to be the place where Spears and Ixidor Indian Leg Wrestle to settle a little score of their own.

See, when I heard that magicthegathering.com was having Akroma week, I thought it would be a great idea to interview the artist who created **Akroma, Angel of Wrath**. I sent an email to Ron Spears and he graciously accepted my invitation for muffins, a wonderful view of Otaria, and a little **Magic** art babble. But trouble stirred. Ixidor caught wind of this and sought me out, angered by my tapping Spears as the "artist who created Akroma." He threatened me with his funny scepter thing, so I made a deal - Ixidor would come with us to Muffins on the Mountain and leg wrestle for the interview. But I had an ace up my sleeve.

You see, we artists have to stick together. So I called up Kev Walker and asked him for a favor. As the artist who created Ixidor, Kev had power over the upstart "Reality Sculptor." Little did Ixidor know, Kev would be at the top of the mountain waiting with an eraser in hand!

So we clambered up to the top of the mountain, "Muffins" in sight, and Ixidor threw down the gauntlet. Just as he and Spears assumed the leg-lock starting position, Kev leaped out from behind a boulder and erased Ixidor's left leg. That threw off his leverage entirely, and Spears made quick work of him. After the match was won, Kev took pity on his creation and scribbled him a new leg - so he could make the long trip back down the mount.

So anyway, Ron (the artist who created Akroma) and I entered "Muffins" and began our interview.

MC: Thanks for joining me, Ron. How about starting off with a little background info on Ron "Iron Leg" Spears?

RS: My wonderful wife, Karen and I recently relocated to Reno, Nevada from the Washington D.C. area. I'm originally from Bothell, Washington, where I met Karen in High School. She's the brains of the operation and we've been married for 22 great years. We have 2 Beagles, a Camry, a Chevy S-10 and a G5.



MC: Before we get to jump into the artsy-fartsy jabber about your artwork, let's address some of the questions that the peeps have on their minds: What inspired you to become an artist?

RS: My mother was very creative and my grandmother was an artist. My first time at the easel was with grams. High school is were I decided I wanted to pursue illustration as a career, so after graduation I went to a private art school to study painting, design, and illustration.

While I learned a lot there, I felt I needed a formal degree from a university. My grandfather and father both attended The University of Puget Sound in Tacoma, Washington and I was fortunate to have received writing scholarships and art scholarships to that school. I graduated with BA in studio art in 1988.

MC: And why, specifically, a fantasy artist?

RS: Fantasy art gives artists an incredible amount of freedom in creativity. People are drawn to fantasy art for a lot of different reasons. Some like the stories, characters, adventure, escapism - I like the art itself. These days, hidden far below, in the darkest corner of my studio, I'm experimenting with new shapes, textures and forms. Someday they may come into the light and show up in some of my work as creatures, environments and vehicles. That's the adventure of fantasy art for me.

MC: How long have you been working as an artist?

RS: My first paid job was an advertisement I did for Rainier Beer while I was in high school. After that, I was hooked. After graduating from the university, I worked independently for a couple years as a designer and illustrator. Feeling I was missing something and should have a "real" job, I worked on staff as an art director and illustrator for several corporations. Being part of a team is the great part of a staff position that I really enjoy. However, the solitude of being independent really allows me to focus on my art.

Today I'm independent and doing work I enjoy.

MC: Where else might we see your artistic handiwork?

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RS: I had the pleasure of working with actor Jason Alexander (That's Seinfeld's "George Costanza, people!) on his children's book "Dad, Are You The Tooth Fairy?" I did about 30 paintings for it. You can find it on the shelves in just about any bookstore. I had a fun time doing some **D&D** spots not too long ago and there are a few video games with my hand in them.

In addition to the fantasy work, I also do a lot of illustrations for Kid's Discover Magazine, corporate publications and several projects that aren't out yet. If you were in the D.C area around Halloween, you would see the murals I painted for the neighborhood kids. I documented the murals everyday on my website (www.ronspears.com) if you want to see how they developed. I also do a lot of personal work that nobody but the dogs see.



MC: Who are your artistic influences/faves outside of fantasy art?

RS: When I was young I was very inspired by early 20th century artists like N.C. Wyeth, Rockwell, Lyndecker, and other illustrators of that time, before photography took over. I enjoyed how they could communicate stories through their paintings. Today, it seems, I'm inspired by every artist I meet - sculptors, welders, painters, writers, musicians, etc. There is so much amazing work being done today by artists all over the world that it's impossible to name just a few.

MC: Who are your fantasy art influences/faves?

RS: Of course we all owe a great debt to Frazetta, and the early fantasy illustrators. They got the ball rolling and now we, as artists, need to keep it moving forward. When I first worked at Wizards and saw all the great artists that work on the cards, I was blown away. I still am. It was such an honor to work side by side with Anthony Waters, rk Post, Mark Tedin, Brom, Todd Lockwood, and seeing all the originals from the other **Magic** artists.

There are also amazing artists working in the film industry such as Ian McCaig, Neville Page, Scott Robertson, Ryan Church, Feng Zhu, Nick Pugh, and the list goes on.

I also get inspired by the players I meet at events. They tell me stories about a particular card or show me something in the art that connected with them. Knowing that someone takes the time to look at the art is meaningful to every artist.

MC: What media do you use? (This is a good one - since peeps will be very interested to know that you do both traditional and digital work.)

RS: I'm a huge fan of the creative process, so I tend to work in a lot of different mediums. Traditionally I use oils or acrylic depending on the circumstances. These days, many clients want digital work, so I also use Photoshop, Painter, and the 3D program Light Wave. The transition to digital is necessary in today's market. Computers make the process faster and you can do things you just can't do with traditional media. I'm sure I'll be doing almost all my commercial work digitally someday soon. However, I'll always continue to paint and draw traditionally for my personal work.

In addition to commercial work, I also attend life drawing classes, and seek out artists in other fields such as fused glass, ceramics, masonry, sculpture, metal, video, industrial design, etc. I even carved a totem pole in Alaska. It's all about creating something and not getting too comfortable in a single style.

MC: **Magic** fans may not know that you were the **Magic** art director for a while. Could you talk a bit about when you ran the art show and what it was like? Did you resist the urge to assign yourself all the good cards?

RS: It was a real pleasure to have the opportunity to work with a group of such talented people.

As for the cards, I really didn't assign myself cards, rather I was sort of a safety net if an artist dropped a card, or if a new card was needed and there was no time to assign it. As a result, much of my early art was done very quickly.

MC: Switching gears a bit from totem poles - do you know how to play **Magic**?

RS: While at Wizards I learned the game and played when I could so I could understand how the universe worked. Today, my time is so limited I'm not able to play **Magic**, or golf, ski, bicycle, swim, or just about anything else it seems. I feel it's important to know the game, however my focus is on the art these days rather than the play.

MC: What was your very first **Magic** illustration?

RS: Still one of my favorites: **Veiled Sentry**. Acrylic on board. Best knight I've ever done.

MC: My favorite Spears pieces are **Rootwater Thief** and **Addle** (Not to mention the one you just did for **Time Spiral** that is my all-time Spears fave!) Can you talk about what you were going for with these two pieces?



RS: Thanks! **Addle** is also one of my faves. Not because I think it's an exceptional piece, but because one of my favorite artists was kind enough to model for the guy in the vise - rk Post. I still laugh every time I see it. (Acrylic on board). I like to use a lot of color (sometimes too much) and I felt the colors worked well in projecting the image off the card.



MC: I think you hit the nail on the head. This, for me, represents the point where you pushed the color envelope way farther than I'd have the courage to push it - but it still feels like you were driving the bulldozer. The wacky palette still works. Speaking of wacky palette, what was the scene with **Rootwater Thief**? For me, of all **Magic** cards, not just yours, this one has the sweetest colors. And when I say "sweet," I don't mean "sweet, dude," I mean actually sweet - like candy!

RS: **Rootwater Thief** was an honor to do since it was a special card. Mike Long is the guy in the boat. (Oil on board) There was a lot of ambiguity about whether the creature was about to eat Mike, or if it was in league with him. I like that.



MC: Okay, enough about what I like, which of your **Magic** illustrations are you most proud of?

RS: I really like **Krosan Cloudscraper** (oil on masonite). Much to the chagrin of many art directors, I resist doing tight sketches for paintings. I like to have the painting develop as it wants to (it's a zen thing). Most of the time I crash and burn, but this time it really came through.

When I do presentations at schools or organizations I often use this one as an example of how I like to work. No under drawing, just let the big dog loose. I started with broad strokes of burnt umber and "carved" out the creature from there. The painting moved along on its own and I just hung on for the ride. It's great when that happens.



Another card that I like is from the second *Unglued* set - *Ladies' Knight*. It's a silly image with about five different jokes in it. I had to do it larger than usual just to get everything in. It's not that popular of a card, but I spent a long time on it and had a blast doing it. (Oil on masonite).



MC: This is my first opportunity to see this piece big and up close. I must say it is sweet, dude! The way you sling purple and green right along there with the bright red and warm colors of the foreground is inspiring. I really enjoy how this piece is lighthearted and comical, but still shows all the artistic skill of your non-"Un" pieces. Good show... and good muffins too. This cranberry cream cheese muffin is what it's all about.

Doh! Actually, it's supposed to be all about Akroma. It is Akroma Week and all that. We don't want to let all the Angel of Wrath fans down. Can you give us some scuttlebutt on her?

RS: Here's the low down on the Akroma/Phage piece:

(MC interjecting here - just so you know, *Akroma*, *Angel of Wrath* and *Phage the Untouchable* were both illustrated as one panoramic piece shown here:)



RS: As artists, we don't always know the importance of a card until it comes out. Nonetheless, we always try and do our best to capture the essence of the card mechanics and the characters. Sometimes we get lucky. Such is the case with Phage and Akroma and myself.

I was very fortunate to have been given the Akroma and Phage cards. While I would like to claim all credit for the acclaim surrounding these two legendary ladies, let me give credit where credit is due.

As everyone knows, with most characters in the **Magic** Universe, we artists work from style guides developed to help provide a consistency to the characters, environments etc. from artist to artist.

Phage was originally designed by the brilliant rk Post. I believe Akroma was originally designed by the equally brilliant Matt Wilson, and let's not forget the art directors, Jeremy Cranford and Dana Knutson - plus the legion of writers, brand managers, and other folks who contribute to the **Magic** World.

Okay, here's where it gets personal.

Originally the painting was to be used as a wrap around book cover with Phage on the back and Akroma on the front. In addition, they would be separated for the two cards and possibly packaging. So the figures couldn't overlap and had to fit into a specific format based on the design of the book cover. Not as much freedom as with usual **Magic** cards, but in the end, it turned out to be a good thing.

Both Phage and Akroma are very detailed characters with lots of tattoos and stuff sticking out from various body parts. As many of you may know I'm not that big on detail, and many a long night I wished a painful death for both rk and Matt.

The original is 24 x 18 inches, acrylic on masonite. I was forced to work much tighter than I usually do given the circumstances.

After turning in the original, I waited for the trumpets to sound and the angels to sing.

Instead, the phone rang and the art director - directed.

A good art director makes you a better artist. Jeremy and Dana made Phage and Akroma better card illustrations, and as a result, me a better artist.

Changes to the card were done digitally, by me, and included darkening the background and changing the expression on Akroma's face. Some folks who have seen the original prefer it to the altered piece, however, in the context of the card dynamics, it was a good call.

In the end, the cover design for the book series was changed, and only Akroma appears on the front. As a result, few people ever saw the complete image with Phage and Akroma in mortal combat.

I'll take this opportunity to thank everyone involved with this piece, as my appreciation may not have come through at the time.

MC: That's great stuff Ron. I think the Akromaphiles out there will be happy campers. Thanks for your time, effort, and superb contributions to the art of **Magic**.

So after conversation and tasty bakery, Ron and I struck out to descend the great mountain. But Ron did not climb down with me. Instead, he busted out from his Bag of Holding an easel and paints - to capture the wondrous view from the top of Muffins Mountain. (He's big into plain air painting.) So down I went. Even after a long talk with Ron and a half dozen muffins of varying flavors, I was still able to pass poor gimping Ixidor. He threatened me again, so I slapped a **Muzzle** on him to shut him up.

If you are looking for Ron's complete **Magic** portfolio, here's [a handy Gatherer link for you to check it out](#). Keep your eyes peeled for Ron's work in *Coldsnap* and *Time Spiral*. He illustrated *Coldsnap*'s main character and, as I stated before, my favorite piece of *Time Spiral* art!

Matt Cavotta has always been a fantasy goober. At various points in his gooberhood, he has used his nerdy knowledge to become a professional goober. He went from scribbling pictures of his own D&D characters to illustrating books and cards for his two favorite games; D&D and Magic. Then he channeled his inner 7th level Illusionist/3rd level Bard and landed himself a job at Wizards as a writer. He continues to cast his illusion spells each morning, lest they find out he's just another goober.



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