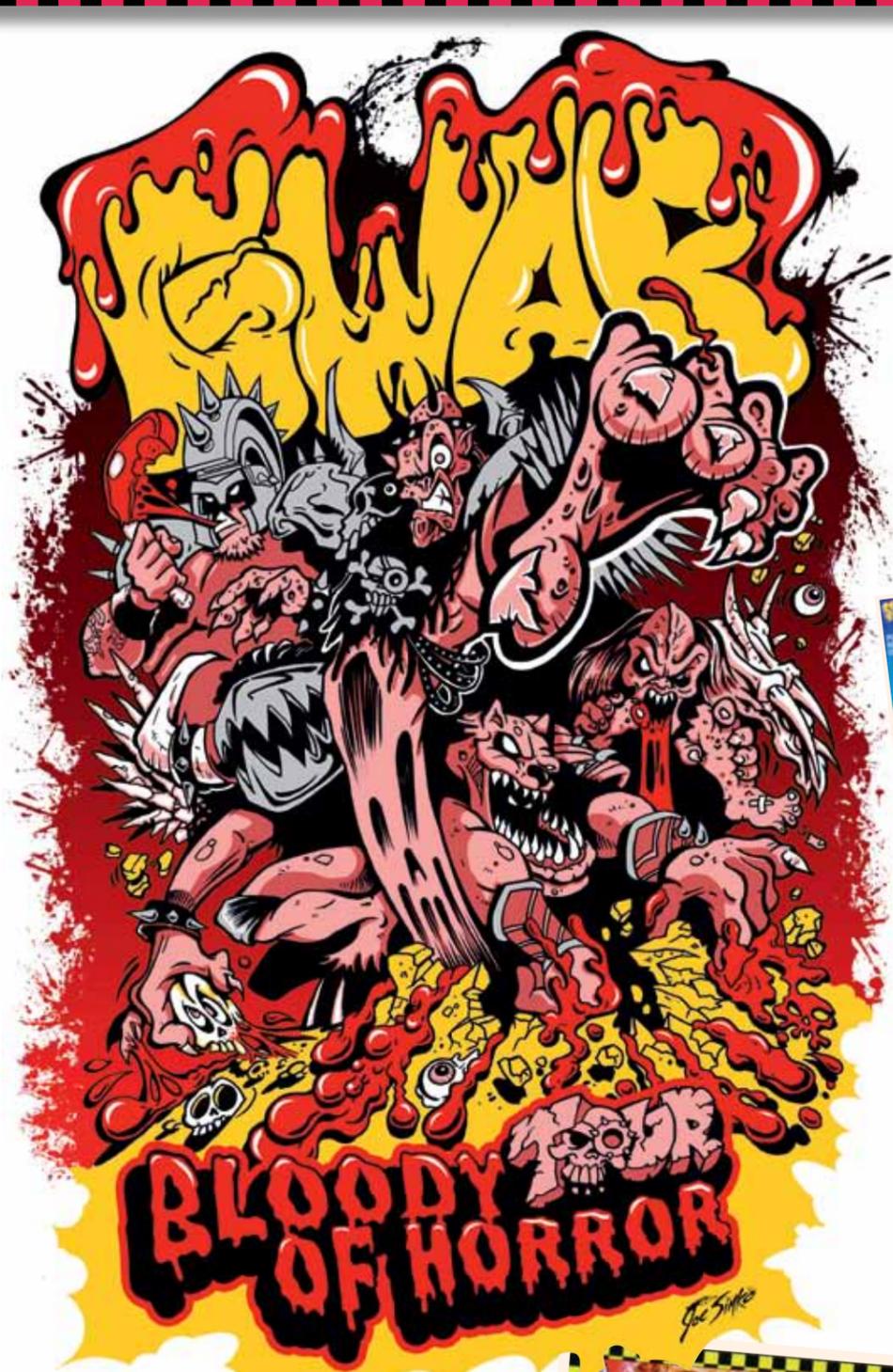


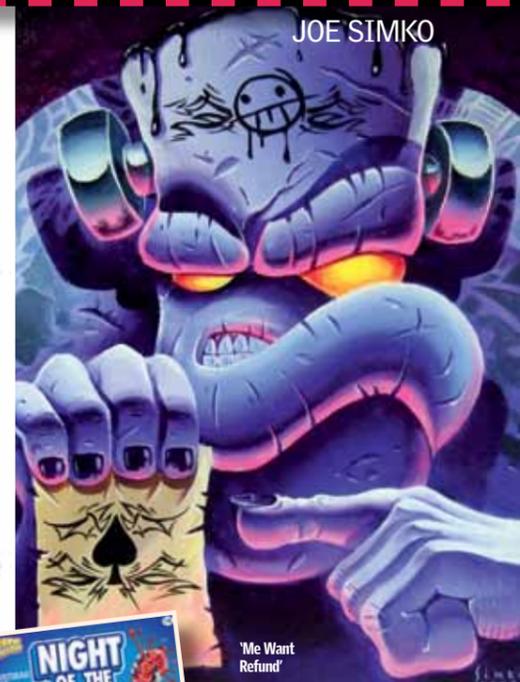
POSTER BOY!

Artist Joe Simko combines his love of 1980s cartoons with trashy monster movies, to create his Day-Glo 'happy horror' style



In the 1980s, a young Joe Simko sat in the glow of the TV in the suburbs of Pennsylvania, eating sugary cereal and watching horror movies including *Braindead*, *Bad Taste* and *King Kong*, along with Saturday morning cartoons such as *Transformers*, *He-Man* and *Gummy Bears*.
 "I saw all of that cheesy stuff!" enthuses Simko, now 35, with a geeky grin. "Sometimes when I did interviews in my teens or twenties, I'd say, 'It's just horror movies! That's all I like! And punk rock!' But now I'm like, 'Yeah, I grew up with all *this*...' because that's where my influences came from."

Simko's OTT *Garbage Pail Kids* cards, and a *Cereal Killer* card (above, right)



'Me Want Refund'



Concept artwork for *The Fiend Club*

This heady combination of chocolately milk, grotesque monsters and cartoon creatures fermented in Simko's brain and led to a career as an artist, making posters for the likes of comedy metallers GWAR, drawing the famous *Garbage Pail Kids* trading cards, designing his own range of *Cereal Killers* ones (see *Bizarre 180*), and creating his own critters for comics and books.

POP CULTURE VULTURE

Along with lounging in front of the gogglebox as a kid, Simko plastered every inch of his bedroom wall with posters of *Leatherface*, *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* and *Bart Simpson*, and doodled on perforated computer paper his supportive dad brought back from work.
 "My mother passed away from cancer when I was 10 years old, and I think my father wanted to guide me and make sure I was protected," Simko explains. "I had two younger brothers at the time as well, so I figured he thought as long as I wasn't getting into trouble – I was getting creative juices out on paper – it was safe. I'm glad he did that, because I look at things very positively; I'm hopeful and optimistic. There are friends of mine in punk bands who have a negative slant – they're a little angry, and aggressive – and I love drawing all that stuff, but I generally keep it happy. I call my art 'happy horror', because I combine twisted images with the bright colours I grew up watching on TV."
 When Simko was 11, the craze for *Garbage Pail Kids* cards hit playgrounds. The series →

spoofed the *Cabbage Patch Kids* by showing the cutesy babies in scary situations, and caused parental outrage on a monumental scale, so the future monster magnate began drawing and selling his own comicbooks starring the icky characters... never thinking he'd be drawing official cards for the series a couple of decades later.

When Simko reached high school, he made friends with the other artists in his year – “we all knew each other, and were the same type of people” – and then went to New York's School Of Visual Arts to study cartooning. Here, he was taught by professionals who worked at DC Comics and *Mad* magazine. “You had to learn to be a writer at the same time as an artist, so it was really cool,” remembers Simko.

ALL TIED UP

After college, the artist landed a job in his chosen industry... designing ties. “When I got a job designing paisleys and diamonds, I was like, ‘That sucks, but at least I'm doing art,’” he says.

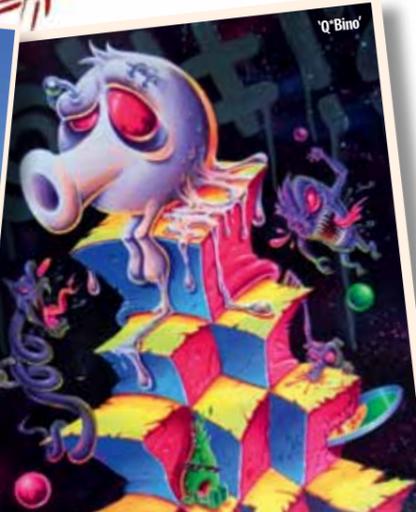
But the dull position turned into an interesting opportunity. The company managed an account

“I'D PAINT MINDLESSLY AS MY BOSS TOLD ME CRAZY DREAMS HE'D BEEN HAVING ABOUT GIANT WOMAN WHO WERE ATTACKING HIS HOMETOWN IN HONG KONG!”

for Tabasco sauce, and Joe ended up drawing cartoony alligators pouring the product on each other. He also sat next to his eccentric boss, who fuelled his imagination and inspired him to make a comicbook called *Peter Paisley*.

“I was painting ever day, but mindlessly, because Peter would be telling me all these crazy dreams he'd been having about giant woman who were attacking his hometown in Hong Kong, and visions of the future, and about his secret family elixir that made him younger!” Simko laughs. “He's a short, little guy, around two years older than me, but he looked like he was about 12, and he's super-nice and super-sweet. When Bill Clinton was still president here, he'd say, ‘In the future, we'll elect a moron for a president’ – and then we had George Bush!”

Leaving behind patterns and predictions, Simko took a job storyboarding for TV commercials, where he developed his bright, signature style. “The guys who'd been there for years were amazing – they'd colour frames with markers and throw a bit of white paint on them, and they looked like Renaissance paintings,” he remembers. “Even after college my colour palate



was brown, yellow and puke green. It was ugly, so using fluorescent markers helped, and I try to use them in all my paintings now.”

TOY AND DESTROY

You can see their influence in Simko's loud posters. In the early 2000s, he'd go to shows, befriend bands, draw them artwork in exchange for beer or twenty bucks, and worked his way up to bigger names including *Bizarre* favourites GWAR, KMFDM, Ministry and Cannibal Corpse. And in 2006 Simko got a commission for the *Warped Tour*, on one of his favourite subjects...

“The theme was ‘The Island Of Misfit Toys!’ chuckles Simko, his voice bursting with delight. “Kevin Lyman (*Warped Tour* creator) used to see all these kids waiting in line,



Cyber dubstep club kid Mixel Maze, in *The Sweet Rot*. The character's sex is unknown to the other children in town, and maybe even to him/her!

dressed up in these crazy, punky outfits with jingly, jangly chains, and belts, and buckles, and bondage pants, and make-up – and they'd look like a bunch of toys. So I designed a giant inflatable, slip'n'slide punk rock kid who looked like a toy.”

After the *Warped Tour*, Simko was approached by lots of companies who wanted his talents, and he ended up designing the labels for a product called ‘Man Glaze’. “It's black rock'n'roll nail varnish!” the artist explains. “When the owner told me about the name, I was like, ‘I'm telling you, that name scares me!’ He actually wanted to call it ‘malepolish’, but the name was taken by



“I CALL MY ART ‘HAPPY HORROR’, BECAUSE I COMBINE TWISTED IMAGES WITH THE BRIGHT COLOURS I GREW UP WATCHING ON TV”

a company in Scandinavia. I'm all for endorsing Man Glaze... the nail polish.”

Simko's work with the *Warped Tour* also got him a job doing the art management for the Japanese hardcore festival *Magma*, for which he created an inflatable monster and a spider. “It's funny, because at the end of the show there were so many kids passed out underneath the spider's legs!” he remembers. “He was protecting them... but he probably ate them later.”

LITTLE MONSTERS

The creepy-crawly was initially designed for a cartoon called *The Fiend Club*, which has never been made, though Simko hopes to get it into development in the future. It's about five punk-rock monsters that live inside a basement of a house in Coney Island, New York

City, who are befriended by a boy called Dean Mean and his twin sister, Drama Mean. “These weird monsters have all sorts of social problems, like a giant Frankenstein who has low self-esteem,



The Sweet Rot's Recoil, who dabbles in dark rituals

and a huge, one-eyed, testosterone-filled macho guy who has OCD. The spider is their little pet, who mumbles and constantly eats stuff,” Simko explains. “I wanted to make it look cool, but make sure there's something underneath it, too.”



This is a philosophy that Simko follows in his children's book series, *The Sweet Rot*. It's set in a town without adults, and characters include a nervous boy, a mute graffiti artist, and a little witch. “They have their own society, and I want it to get further and deeper into what we're like as humans,” muses Simko. “We're a bunch of kids dressed up; we all have these roles, and there's violence, and evil, and military, and politics, and social classes.”

Aside from cartoons, books and paintings, Simko is heavily involved with the trading card world, drawing Topps' *Garbage Pail Kids* cards for real, along with product spoof range *Wacky Packages*. His own range of *Cereal Killers* cards – pun-tastic horror film and cereal mash-ups – have been released as stickers, and he's taking his love for kitschy horror further by developing more products with his company, Wax Eye.

“I like the concept of the old EC comic, *Tales From The Crypt*, where you'd have a crypt keeper, the vault keeper and the witch. Inspired by that, I have three mascots for Wax Eye, called Cuzz'n Gumdrop, Tita Terrible and Professor Wax Eye. Professor Wax Eye owns Castle Wax Eye, and all the products we put out are made by slaves he's captured. So I'm a slave that's been shackled in a dungeon and forced to paint!” he laughs.

That's not the kind of slave we usually feature in *Bizarre*... but the results of Simko's time in the dungeon are certainly pleasurable. **B**

For more about Joe, visit Sweetrot.com and Wax-eye.com