

JENNIFER WOLFE

# INSIDE THE SECRET STASH

*Comic Book Men* Captures Kevin Smith's Unconventional Universe

PHOTO BY DANE POTTER/AMC



Walt and Mike with Chucky in the Secret Stash

Comic book fans have been flocking to AMC in February to watch the cable channel's new unscripted series, *Comic Book Men*, which dives deep into fan boy culture, following the antics in and around filmmaker Kevin Smith's iconic New Jersey comic shop, Jay and Silent Bob's Secret Stash.

Known primarily for his role as Silent Bob,

Smith has written, directed, produced and acted in films including *Clerks*, *Mallrats*, *Chasing Amy*, *Dogma*, *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back* and *Clerks II*. For AMC's *Comic Book Men*, Smith keeps a watchful eye over Secret Stash, where staff and customers alike geek out over mind-blowing pop culture artifacts and the legends behind them.

Leading the crew behind the counter is



moody manager Walt, followed by über-nerd and comic book virtuoso Mike, the shop's technical expert (and go-to whipping boy) Ming, and career slacker Brian, who doesn't actually work at the Stash but can always be found perched on a stool behind the front counter. As the team buys, sells and discovers the treasures of the comic collecting world, they share all the juicy details with Kevin through their outrageous podcast, which is woven throughout the series.

Director of photography Jeremy Schneider sought to create a distinctive look for the six one-hour episodes of the series, employing saturated hues reminiscent of comic books and designing a lighting scheme for the store that would allow the crew to shoot in a 360-degree panorama.

"This is AMC's first foray into reality," Schneider explains. "They are known for their stellar original programming on the narrative side, so we felt a responsibility to give them something new and unique in reality programming. The podcast concept allowed us to go beyond traditional formats and bring a little bit of a new flavor to reality."

Walt and Brian doing the podcast



PHOTO BY DAVID RUSSELL/AMC

The "Dear Comic Book Men" podcast is available after each week's episode of *Comic Book Men* on [AMCtv.com](http://AMCtv.com) and iTunes.



Shot with the Panasonic AJ-HDX900, principal photography for the series was completed in six weeks. "The time frame was a little challenging, but it's nothing we haven't done before," comments Schneider. "AMC wanted to stick with the one-hour format, which presented its own challenges. There's a lot of time to fill in an hour."

Schneider used a single-camera setup

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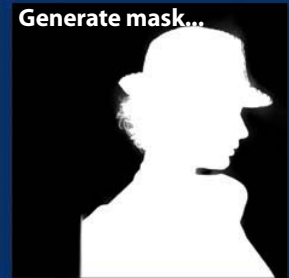


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augmented with HD GoPro cameras for scenes shot inside the Secret Stash, but he employed a four-camera setup for the podcast sequences in order to deliver extra production value. “Kevin Smith has built this podcasting empire, which gave us the perfect way to get around the traditional on-the-fly formal interview format usually employed in reality TV,” he says. “We needed to do something that was a little different, a little outside of the box in terms of interviews as well as narrative exposition, so we set this in the world of podcast. Podcasting is Kevin Smith’s world, so that’s what Kevin’s employees use in order to communicate with him.”

The set for the podcasts was designed in grey and white to evoke the idea of a comic book panel and set up with vintage microphones. “It was very graphic,” Schneider says. “The guys, who are pretty colorful characters in their own right, would wear bright, vibrant colors and sit around old-style microphones in this retro black-and-white radio station, hashing out the highlights from the week intercut with footage from the shop. It was a great way to get the exposition to Kevin without feeling stifled.”

Conditions for shooting inside the Secret Stash were less than ideal for Schneider and his crew. “The shop was a very dark, under-lit place, and

Smith and producer partner Scott Mosier are behind the extensive SModcast Podcast network, which is broadcast on SModcast Internet Radio, or S.I.R.



since 80 percent of the show takes place inside the store, we had to come up with something that would allow us to have more light but still look organic,” Schneider details. “We also needed to shoot 360, which meant that all the lights had to be hung from light boxes. We ended up using a mixture of lighting: 575-watt HMI lamps to move daylight through the windows, along with a bunch of array heads—going from 150 watts on up to 650 watts—to bring up the ambient level.”

The colorful, highly saturated look of the store as it is shot for the series contrasts with the podcast footage, which has a stark, vintage black-and-white feel. “I wanted to build the primary colors in the store,” Schneider says. “The store is already red and blue, so I put red and blue accent lights throughout it to make it look like a living, breathing comic book—juxtaposed with the podcasts, which were more of the opposite comic book style. The goal was to bring a strong visual style and make it stand out, and we’re hoping we’ve accomplished that.” **dv**



PHOTO BY DANE POTTER/AMC

(L-R) Walt, Brian (obscured), Ming and Mike



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PHOTO BY DAVID RUSSELL/AMC

Left: Secret Stash manager Walt | Right: Brian