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Mike Hammer hits the Heartland

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BY STEVE LUNDIN

I met Mickey Spillane back in 1994 in Muscatine, Iowa, where he was working on "Mommy," a movie written and produced by Max Allan Collins. Collins was the local boy wonder of his small town who had gone out and done good in the national media spotlight as the heir apparent to Chester Gould on the Dick Tracy strip. He was in no rush to leave Iowa and his big fish status behind. He got the movie bug and assembled a list of B players who all descended on Muscatine for a month to star in his feature.

Collins pulled together *Scream Queen* Brinke Stevens; Majel "Nurse Chapel" Barrett of *Star Trek*; Jason Miller (who won a Pulitzer Prize for his play "That Championship Season" and had more talent than all of them put together), and of course the hero of our story, Mickey Spillane. I was a stringer on assignment for two movie rags, *Cinefantastique* and *Big Reel*, with double expense accounts to cover the whole affair.

I arrived in Muscatine with my camera and notepad and immediately bumped into Majel Barrett at the airport. Being *Star Trek* Royalty, she wasn't accustomed to traveling without a "handler" and her ride from the "studio" was late. We split a cab and some spirits on the long trek down to the Hotel Muscatine.

When we arrived, we immediately hit the bar and ran into Jason Miller, who was already a local legend for many reasons, not the least of which was his traveling companion: a dog with an incessant bark. At the request of the august Hotel Muscatine (rooms with AC extra), he had been removed to a more pooch-friendly establishment. Needless to say, he kept his bar stool at the hotel's watering hole warm. Although I was downing shots with a Pulitzer Prize winner and one of the most famous voices on TV (Majel also played the computer on *Star Trek* and most of its spinoffs), to the locals we were just three more afternoon bar flies warding off the 100-degree heat with Coronas. The cloud of dust didn't kick up until Mickey entered the room.

Everywhere he went, a crowd followed

I don't know if it was the 10,000 Miller Light commercials he made or the books he wrote that made him famous, but everywhere Mickey went, a crowd followed. And the bar was between him and the lobby. He spotted Miller, a serious writer in a non-serious environment, and joined us. The crowd kept a good three feet behind. Spillane ordered a water.

"Miller," he said, "the difference between you and me is you're a novelist and I'm a writer."

"What's the difference? Slurp," Miller responded.

"With me it's a job. A plumber's got his wrench, and I got my typewriter. You're an 'artiste.' You worry about the words. I worry about the sales."

On that note, I scheduled an interview with Spillane, explaining that I was also counting on words for money. He got it.

Spillane had only been interviewed about 10 million times on the same old stuff: sex, violence, action, Mike Hammer and the creation of the entire lurid action genre, which he eagerly took credit for. He had pat responses for most questions and revealed that unlike his alter ego, Mike Hammer, he didn't drink, swear, womanize or carry a gun. As a matter of fact he was a Seventh-day Adventist (or one of those fringe religions) and led a fairly peaceful life in the Carolinas.

On his advice, I interviewed him several times for several magazines (to multiply the revenue stream) and learned that at one time he actually had to play the Hammer role.

"I was a different guy in the '50s," he said. "I played with guns and girls and flexed muscles on the back of paperbacks to help sell books. I was walking from a bar in Manhattan late one night, wearing my Hammer outfit -- trench coat and hat -- when a guy comes out of the shadows and asks for my cash. I carried a gun then and pulled out the .45 I kept from the war. That was a large gun, man, like the size of a kid's head. He took one look at me and it and said 'sorry Mr. Hammer, my mistake.' I raised the gun and said 'Yeah, it was, because the name's Spillane.' He must have read *I, The Jury* because I had it pointed at his belly and he wet himself." (Writer's note: for those who haven't read all the classics, Hammer shoots a woman in the stomach at the end of *I, the Jury*, and explains his action to her as she slowly dies: "It was easy." This passage kicked off an international furor over violence against women. Sales skyrocketed following news of the controversy).

Hammer, like Mickey, got older

Spillane loved the Hammer character and actually played him in a couple of movies, most notably the "The Girl Hunters." I asked him how he wrote in character for all those decades and he responded, "I just kept making Hammer older and older. He's an old guy now, like me. And the only old guy who could play a lover boy was the Duke, and he's dead."

As a side note, John Wayne -- the Duke -- had given Spillane a "Hollywood thank you" after a movie they worked on together. Spillane told me he had rescued "Ring of Fear," as an uncredited screenwriter and actually played himself opposite Jack Stang, who served as the real-life inspiration for Mike Hammer. Although the Wayne-produced film was subsequently held out of print in a long legal dispute, Spillane woke up one morning to find a new Jaguar wrapped with a ribbon outside his flat with a thank you note from the Duke himself. The original writer probably woke up to a horse head.

Anyway, my encounters with Spillane and the gaggle of Hollywood bust-outs and hangers on was a long time ago in a place just far enough away to be forgettable, save for that summer when Hollywood hit the Heartland.

Adios Mickey, you really started something.

But you knew that 50 years ago.

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