

A black and white photograph of a man with long, dark hair, wearing a dark jacket and a watch. He is smoking a cigarette and has a tattoo on his left forearm. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

Doc Hammer, best known as one half of the creative team that brings you **The Venture Brothers** on Adult Swim, is a writer, musician, painter, and style maven.

As the October 18, 2009 premiere of the fourth season of *The Venture Brothers* looms closer Auxiliary Magazine had a chance to talk to Doc Hammer about style, men's suits, his band, oil painting, and why he does what he does.

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO **HAMMER**

INTERVIEW LUKE COPPING
PHOTOGRAPHS RON DOUGLAS

Being that Auxiliary is predominantly a style magazine; let's jump right in with the obligatory fashion whoring. You are known as something of a polymath, but outside of your multidisciplinary successes you're also known as something of a dashing dresser. Is it more a developed personal style or do you follow fashion or certain designers?

DH: Well, you know, fashion is really weird, I guess you could sum up fashion's strangeness in that there are two basic ways to pursue fashion. One is to be trendy, and not in a diminutive sense, the sense of someone who follows trends. The other way is to be kind of... stylish, and the way I'm using it implies not necessarily the following of trends, but a following of a personal style that kind of transcends trends. You would not call Nick Cave trendy. He never dresses to what's in fashion, but he's always very fashionable, and he changes with the times. If you look back at his earlier stuff, and Nick Cave is just a random example, twenty years ago he looked like Frankenstein, he dressed in a very weird almost goth style. And then he switched it, but at no point did he ever really touch base with the agreed masses fashion sense. When it was ok to have mustaches, Nick Cave had a mustache. Fashion is that weird thing where if you totally drift out and don't follow zeitgeist at all you end up being this kind of costume dresser, so if you look at it I guess I'm more of a dandy. And I don't mean dandy in the sense that people use it today which is this antiquarian idea of a dandy, that a dandy dresses in old fashioned dandy clothes. I mean it in the sense that the word dandy is alive, someone who who is very immaculate about the way he dresses and lives by his wit, it's a very classic paradigm. I think that's more what I fall into.

I am more interested in the fit of my clothes than men who buy shirts in packages. I don't think most men know what size they are or that shirts come in sizes. I have this weird theory that they go to a store, and they go, 'Shirt!' and then they see a package and they say, 'Color!' and then they buy that and put it on and the sleeves are way too long. Every guy thinks he's a large, unless he's a little bit big and then he thinks he's a triple extra large, but if he's an extra large and he thinks he's large, then he's wearing his shirt a little tight. If he's a medium, he's wearing his shirt huge, cause men are just larges. Try to fucking buy a t-shirt today! Just a t-shirt printed with, lets say, a Led Zeppelin logo, try to find one any size below a medium, and if you actually can find a small, put that fucking thing on, that is not a fucking small. This just proves that men like to dress in gigantic clothing. It's this weird kind of thing where now men wear burqas. They have lost all sense of sexuality, their pants don't fit, their shirts are huge, and they wear these gigantic winter jackets. They really gird themselves in this kind of sexless costume. Which is why I wear my shirt unbuttoned all the way down to 1974 to show a little man cleavage.

That's great, that takes care of the next three fashion questions I had right off that bat.

DH: I could go on forever and ever. I am actually right now getting a bespoke suit custom made for me by Paul Smith. That's how really into having shit fit me I am, and I am tiny, I am really small, at 5'11 I am 115 pounds, that's bird bone small. I don't look unhealthy skinny, but I am... small, so nothing fits me. I have to tailor everything but underpants, which they can probably tailor, but I would get them let out, if you know what I'm saying, and I think you actually do...

Talking about men's fashion, and now that we have a sense of how you've developed this personal style, it's interesting that you touched on Nick Cave and other icons of the same era and style who made their own statements in fashion though bucking the trends and taking the classes to update for themselves. Just in terms of how you perceive menswear, and perhaps even as a service to our less fashionable readers. Are there any basic items that you think any and every man should have in their wardrobe? Classics that never go out of style?

DH: I'll tell you this, I love the suit. I love it because you don't have to think about it, and you can dress it up and down. Let's just call a suit a pair of pants, made of the same fabric as a jacket. You can wear them as separates, you can wear them together. You can dress them down and wear any shirt you want underneath. You can dress it way up and top it with whatever you want. It's a really great fucking investment. And here's the thing, a lot of people are like, 'eh, the four button was in like ten, fifteen years ago.' Then it went to three, two, then one, how do you follow that sort of thing! Fuck It! You don't give a shit! Get a really good one, a really good one that fits you really well. Nobody is going to care how many fucking buttons it has or how big the collar is, just get a good classic suit that fits you really well. And here's another piece of really terrible advice; if you get a wacky suit, it's never in fashion. You're free to wear it all the time cause you're uniquely out of fashion, and I'm not talking about a giant laped orange number, I'm talking about something that you just really like. I don't know who said it, maybe it was the guy from The Talking

Heads, 'If you wear the same thing everyday, you will be remembered, everyone knows what Superman looks like.'

The suit is amazing, it's such a great thing. It speaks of this bizarre kind of authority. The weird thing about a suit is that if you start wearing suits be prepared to start hearing this every day for a year and a half, 'Hey, where you going?' Your going to hear it until people start realizing that you wear suits to functions other than weddings, funerals, and reunions. 'I am going nowhere, and I look great!' should always be your response.

The suit is one of the key elements of men's style that transcends all the trends.

DH: It's a hundred year old thing, the modern suit that we wear today is based on a sack suit, which is well over a hundred year old cut. If something that lasts a hundred years isn't stable enough for you, what else are you looking for? It hasn't changed that much. Men's fashion is really really slow going.

Exactly. Moving away from the items that are classic and never really go away, there are so many trends that do come and go. Being around stylish and fashionable areas like New York are there any trends right now that you just want to violently kill off.

DH: I was walking down the street and I was noticing trends that I thought actually died already that I was still seeing. Trucker hats that are worn perched atop the head at this rakish angle, what the fuck? Really? I'm still seeing that. That's kind of weird.

Here's the thing, most of these looks are based on irony. Your 80s headbands, men wearing bandannas around their neck, bad mustaches... your basic Brooklyn hipster is based entirely on irony. The definition of irony is that it's the last thing you are expecting to see, and when you expect this the item it is no longer ironic, therefore it's bad fashion. To wear these things in any kind of a trend makes them skip over irony and just turns them into... bad fashion, it's out of hand. I despise the ironic look because once it becomes a trend it's not ironic anymore. One of my biggest problems is the way people look at irony. A lot of what I do in my work through the comedy of The Venture Brothers and definitely in my paintings, almost everything I do, is this kind of rejection of the ironic and this acceptance of something that is truly beautiful and not even concerned of it's uniqueness. Just a good thing that's fucking well crafted.

You mentioned that you are in the process of having a bespoke suit made by Paul Smith, are there any other designers or boutiques that you follow?

DH: No, I shop everywhere. My key to shopping is that I shop constantly, I shop more than women, I really do shop a lot. But shopping is just a kind of walking around and looking at things. Every time I shop, I don't buy, it's very rare that I actually buy. It's the opposite of the way that most people buy, which is to go, 'I need a pair of pants' and then they go look for a pair of... pants, and then they buy... pants, and then they have... pants! The pants they get are the pants that they could find on that day, that were in stock in the store they were able to find on that day. They are not going to be great fucking pants, they are not going to be ideal. Shopping for me is a walk that I will do to clear my mind and not do something challenging while I'm trying to think. The idea that you can go around and look at a bunch of things, and when you come across the ultimate pants, you just get the ultimate pants, you're gonna need the goddamned thing eventually. So that's sort of how I do that, instead of just needing something and going to get it and having to settle for what I find. It's too utilitarian of a thing to do, and it's just not wise in my estimation. If you just get the thing you need, then you're treating clothing like food.

They say need leads to compromise, which is never a good idea.

DH: You're right on track. The way I do it is, not to just go out and purchase to have. I really do just look at fashion, and occasionally I see that thing that I think should be part of my life. I'm a clotheshorse, I just love that shit. If art is very important to you then adorning yourself is very important.

Speaking about some of your projects, with The Venture Brothers you and Jackson have created one of the most pop savvy and genre bending shows on television. Though there have been countless pop references that you guys have worked into episodes, are there any that you just won't go near, any celebrities that are too sacred to you to lampoon?

DH: No, we work in what we need, and never make a conscious effort to throw out pop culture references. We were just raised by the same zeitgeist that everybody

was raised with, so were just referencing our youth basically. It seems like we're throwing out pop references, but I was just raised on Star Wars.

One of the things that does stand out about the show is that it doesn't seem that cultural references are thrown in with any sort of disingenuousness and that it happens in a very organic way.

DH: That's because we're not working them in, we're just throwing in these little... wubbies, these things that feel good to us. There are a lot of ways for jokes to pay off, and I hate to get mathy on this crap, but you can use these references the way you and your friends use these references. I made a mention of "Little Miss Can't Be Wrong" by... who were they? Pocket Full of Kryptonite? Two Princes?

Spin Doctors?

DH: Yeah, Spin Doctors, I made a Spin Doctors reference. Someone asked me if I liked the Spin Doctors, that really doesn't matter. It says a lot, it puts people in the place. If someone brings up that song, "Little Miss Can't Be Wrong", you're getting the power of their personal nostalgia, you're getting a sense of their love for the song. To put out a reference that we all understand is really kind of a powerful thing to do. Which is why I hate stuff like Family Guy, it will just toss this crap out at you in this pandering, make you feel good way. 'I'm smart too, I know who Gary Coleman is,' and that's kind of the way Family Guy uses it. They just toss out this name so everybody can immediately feel the power of, one, knowing the reference, and two what that reference implies. But it's not worked into the plot and it has no potential meaning, it's just this ugly list; and if you didn't get it the first time shows like Family Guys will actually show you how the reference is used in a flashback, that has no value, of the time Peter and Gary Coleman got in a fistfight.

It does try a little too hard to smack you in the face with it. Too much of a wink and a nod.

DH: And it works, the show is very successful. This is an effective comedy device, clearly. I find it to be slightly ugly.

It's a little heavy handed.

DH: And heavy handed things work, they work beautifully.

Gearing up for the new season, Adult Swim recently released a teaser of the upcoming episodes on their website, which has generated a considerable amount of buzz. Are you as nervous or excited about the fourth season's premiere as you have been in past years? Being that you guys have been through this a few times,

DH: I'm even more excited for the season coming after this, and I think that we're just writing our best stuff. We are under a lot of pressure, Jackson and I work incredibly hard, I cannot explain to you how many jobs we have on this show and how hard we work. There is never a feeling of, 'lets relax and cash some checks.' We just care so deeply about this shit. If somebody says about our fourth season, 'second season was better and fourth season was a sell out!' It's the same thing that I did when I was a kid, when any band that had a new album come out I hated it, I fucking hated it. I don't care who they are. I hated the record because I had fallen so deeply in love with the album before it. A few years later I would go back and listen to this record I hated, and it's a fucking masterpiece! And then they would put out another record and I would think they totally suck now. I kept doing this, have to write notes going, 'stop doing this! The Pixies album is fine, stop acting like it sucks.' People do that to our show, they fall in love with a season, maybe the ones they first saw, and won't accept the one coming after it. But I am telling you, from our standpoint, they are coming from the same exact place. There is no sense of relaxing, we are just as in love with



this crap as we were before, if not more. I think we're challenging ourselves more and doing things that we think the viewer can tolerate.

You guys have been doing a lot of conventions lately. A lot of creators seem really polarized in their opinion's on the conventions. Is it something you guys actively look forward to or is it just part of the job having to go out and promote.

DH: I have no problem with conventions and I have no problems with fans, because I'm a fan of stuff, I know what a fan is. There are things that I love and there are things that I want to connect to. So the idea of fandom is not this wretched group of people that bug me. They are people that are interested in the same things I am interested in, they're kind of like me. So I can't look at conventions as anything more than a place to connect with these people. Who, aside from the cliché that they give me my living, are not dissimilar from me, and we have the same tastes and like very similar things. I like cons but they are draining and it's weird to be a celebrity, and the con is where you really get that. On a daily basis, once a day someone may be like, 'Hey Doc Hammer!' It's nothing. But at a con you feel the power of the cult status of The Venture Brothers, and that's kind of weird. People chase you and expect things out of you. I feel strangely indebted to these people and I don't want to give them a bad experience. I don't want to tell them to get the fuck away from me when I'm having a bad day, so I'll offer them everything that I think they're interested in. It's this weird sociopathic tendency that I have to give them this experience. Basically they just look at you and stare at you and you talk to them, later they will blog about the conversation that they had which never really happened, it was just me talking at somebody while they just looked at me. I really can't explain it, it's a very weird thing to talk to your basic silent fan. And then you meet other fans, who at the end of the day, you can call them up and go to the movies with them, they function entirely as part of your peer group.

So it's not like we're going to be seeing any Beatles-esque "Hard Days Night" montages of you and Jackson running through a con with false mustaches and hiding in phone booths to hide from fans?

DH: No... well, with any hopes maybe? Yeah, Jackson and I do have boy band appeal, don't doubt the mathematic equation there.

You guys have become quite the niche sex symbols apparently.

DH: That's what I'm hoping for, that would change my life. Whereas now, it's pretty much the same thing as before.

We have quite a few attractive readers, we'll try to help you guys out.

DH: They can send fan mail, they can go on Twitter, 'Those Venture boys are super hunky!' They have to use all antiquated Tiger Beat terms like "Super Hunky!" Nothing modern, shit your mom says, 'they have really cute buns.'

Aside from the television work you're also quite an accomplished painter and musician. With your work as an oil painter and the series of female portraits, what was the evolution of the Saints series and your latest show?

DH: It's weird, I always feel bad talking about this kind of stuff, but the reason I do these portraits is that it is a reduction of content. If you look at my paintings, they are always the same fucking thing. I keep repeating it over and over again. It's because I am not really interested in concept, I just don't really give a fucking shit. The idea of the painting as narrative does not appeal to me. I'm not being flippant or obnoxious, but when you work in the kind of realm I work in today, which is figurism, if not representational, it's overrun by illustrators. They're not really interested in the painting, they are interested in the subject of the painting. It's a girl and she is crying

blood, or a piece of meat, all that kind of nonsense which I don't care about, I care about this object, this painting which no one has seen. You see jpegs of it where once again it is reduced out of its painting realm and back into its subject matter of, 'that looks like a girl.' But if you see the painting itself, I'm really proud of it. That's what I have been working so hard to achieve, just the surface of this painting. Go to a contemporary gallery and look at the representational work, and then go to your local big ass museum and look at a Velázquez or look at a Rembrandt and you will see immediately that the surface is different. You can see through these older paintings. There is a sense of dimension that is higher in its ability to describe volume than a photograph. It's really miraculous based on the underpainting and the building up of whites that it almost becomes like a topographical map, where the light portions of the painting are actually raised up. It's micro-mental and perceivable, but unseeable, the amounts of glazes that liven the skin tones are amazing. There's a point in my work that I think is most represented by the Saints series, where I realized that this is what I cared about the most, this surface and the object of the painting. It's also the alienation factor, my work would be far more popular if it was more glitzy, if I had them crying blood or if there was something showy or comic bookish about them.

From a technical standpoint, I read, I believe on your Deviantart.com blog, a series of tips and suggestions for oil painters that came across with a very teacherly quality. It's something you don't see a lot of notable artists in any medium do for free these days. I was fascinated by it.

DH: A lot of people's work is facile. We're coming out of god knows how much modernism and post modernism, a hundred years ago the dadaists kind of changed art on us and were coming out of that. Students today are a little more interested in technique and creating something that their uncle can point at and call it art. Something that transcends the cliché of, 'my kid can do that!' Nobody looks at my work and says their kid can do that, unless their kid is fucking brilliant! We grew up in this Keith Haring; celebrity as artist world, where the artist is more important than the art, and we can rebel against that. I find that students are the ones that respond to my work the most. They will look at a late Rossetti from his Venetian style work and they might think it's pretty. But a teacher might tell them otherwise, that it's irrelevant and that it's not pretty, and the student will believe it because they want to get good grades and because the teacher is supposed to know better, so they get that beaten out of them. Students can come to me and say, 'you're doing the thing that I thought wasn't what I was supposed to do.' And that's been happening for some time now. When I did the Deviant Art thing I thought that I would be the thing that I wished I had when I was learning how to paint. A lot of my tips are more like Boy Scout good grooming tips, more than they are how to dress tips. It's teaching people that the discipline and sacrifice are the most important things, that keeping your brushes clean is important, that's really what painting is. Painting is showing up and dealing with sucking, that's the big tip, that's what I want people to walk out knowing.

A lot of artists want people to think that they are magicians, that it's easy and no one else can do it and that they just shit this stuff out, and

it's untrue. People with skill and passion can do it, that's the talent. The thing that you are born with isn't the ability to render figure, you can always learn that. What you are born with is the drive to fucking do it, and to want to do it in the face of constant failure. Painting is entirely failure, and if your painting wasn't failure then your not moving forward and you are not correcting your own mistakes. What's the point of making another one if you're so fucking good that you have painted your masterpiece already. Every painting that a good painter does, they hate it, it sucks, and that's what gets them going to do the next one so they can learn. That's a hard thing to do, to have your occupation, hobby, life, be a place where you suck and you know you suck. People will get on me and tell me that I need to relax and take it easy, that I'm not really that bad. What they are missing is the arrogance of what I am saying, the fact that I know I suck proves that I know I am better than this, which is a very arrogant thing to do, so people should not be concerned with my self esteem. When I say I suck, it actually means that this is not a representation of my ability, I know that inside me is better. Dealing with my sucking and proudly saying this sucks is how I get up and do it again. I can't let that thing get out there, I have to apologize for it with my next piece.

Do you apply those same drives and philosophies to your music as well as your painting?

DH: Oh yeah, and to my writing, and to my life. Once you have this weird operating procedure, these strange ethics, it's everywhere. My music is this thing I do entirely to challenge myself and to create things that appeal to me on a very micro-mental level. It's a very strange thing, the music that I make, and, like the paintings, when you see or hear it and think that's a really beautiful painting of a girl or a really nice song, but what created that is this really dark drive to create something wholly personal and full of challenges.

Moving into the music then, especially with your current band Weep, which has a more rock sound, when compared to your previous bands like Requiem in White, which has a more ethereal sound, has there been a major change?

DH: It's all the same thing, it came from the same exact place. In Mors Syphalítica, the band I was in for the most amount of time, I played all the instruments, Lisa, my ex, did all the singing. That was just what I was into then, it came from the same place. It really worked well with Lisa's voice, Lisa had this really good voice. And it's a bitter pill to some because it bordered on operatic, it's not your basic pop voice, but you write for that. I had a violin in the band so I wrote a lot of violin parts.

When I started Weep, which was a fucking accident, there was never supposed to be a Weep, I was just writing songs, because I do it habitually. My keyboard player that I had been in a band with previously called me up and asked what I was doing. I told him I was just writing my own shit, just to entertain myself, because it's what I do. And he was like... 'let's make a band.' He found two guys and we had a rehearsal with my songs and I sang them, I didn't know I was going to fucking sing... I can't

“Painting is showing up and dealing with sucking”



“No one in the band cares about the things that **ruin** albums”

fucking sing. I didn't care, I just wanted to write this crap. We had one rehearsal and just became a band. We never had a meeting, there was never this point of 'let's be a band', we all just sort of inherited this thing because we wanted to work together and they like the songs.

Weep has just become something that I am really interested in. I think it's a band of people that are capable of making a really good record. No one in the band cares about the things that ruin albums: we don't care about being popular, we don't care about being part of the zeitgeist, we don't care about sounding like another band, we just want to do our weird thing.

Outside of your own music, and it's that same horrible obligatory question you get asked in every interview, what are you listening to? Is it mainly the older stuff you tend to reference or are there any new bands you're really into?

DH: I go through everything, the way I look at art, comedy, music, it's all the same thing, is that there is no shelf life on this crap. Beautiful things, true things, are really eternal, they transcend time and you don't have to wait for a comeback to enjoy Joy Division, if you like that fucking shit play it all the god damn time. What was I listening to last night?... Suede, I was listening to Suede! Nineties I guess is when they had their popularity, never a really a big band in America, pretty big in Britain for a while... But what's in my turn table, and clearly it's not a turntable, it's my mp3 or dvd player, but I like the idea of turn table. What's being played at my apartment is a weird amalgamation of wubbie... the word wubbie by the way is a word I use for someones blanket as a child, this thing that is tattered and smells like pee pee, but you adore it. There are these wubbie bands that I can write to because they go right through me. I am so familiar with their work that I can just put them on repeat and write to them all god damn day long, and I do a lot of writing for Venture Brothers. There is a lot of music that becomes my own personal heartbeat, that weird cascade of white noise that you agree with. So I listen to a lot of Chameleons, and if you remember a band called Catherine Wheel... That band, they put out a million records, and I can put them all in the there, same with Placebo. Catherine Wheel and Placebo are old enough and I know them so well that I can paint and write to this stuff really well. They rock enough to keep me going and they're dumb enough to not challenge me too much. I don't have to stop and go, 'my god what is the, that's earth shatteringly beautiful.' It's really just successfully written stuff, no clunkers, just

really competent music. When I say it's dumb enough, I don't mean it to be insulting, they know that it's dumb, they know they are creating pop gems.

I like all of it, there are a few things that I cannot understand, but for the most part I am really open to a lot of crap. And there is a lot of crap that I just don't get, I don't get how anyone ever liked it and it's just very weird. And I'm not talking about the ones that I should hate, like the Journeys and the stuff like that, I get that, that stuffs fine. There are just some kinds of music that I doesn't make sense to me... weird gutless garbage.

Music lacking balls?

DH: Yeah, and as for balls, I mean Cocteau Twins has balls, its a very mechanical, solo-less studio driven thing, but it has nuts!

Looking ahead past the upcoming season of Venture Brothers, do you have any super secret project you're waiting to unveil?

DH: I'm so deep in production that it's so hard to think about any other crap. I do have a CD I'm trying to finish, and I guess in a couple months once the production slows down I'll finish it.

Where are you guys in terms of production right now? Last I heard you were all set with the first half of the season and getting into the second half of the season.

DH: Yeah, but I'm still editing and doing output. Editing is a really loose term for what I do, I don't really cut film cause it's fucking animation. What I'm doing is graphics and other things that have to be done for the episodes to give them last their minute polish. I guess we're half way done with the season that's about to air, and we're better than halfway finished with the writing of the season that comes after that. And then there is production and post of that season. Jackson and I are working all the time, there is never really any off time for us. They all sort of blend into themselves and we never really stop writing. So I keep forgetting what episodes are gonna air this season and what's going to air the season after that. It's all sort of the same to me, I can't really figure it out.