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Baring their souls: Players in the porn-film industry shed light on an often-overlooked cultural and economic phenomenon

By David J. Garrow

The Other Hollywood: The Uncensored Oral History of the Porn Film Industry

By Legs McNeil and Jennifer Osborne, with Peter Pavia

ReganBooks, 620 pages, \$27.95

The top people in American pornography know that size does matter. No, not actors and actresses like Ron Jeremy and Jenna Jameson, who have crossed over into mainstream popular culture, but millionaire businessmen like Steven Hirsch and Edward Wedelstedt. Their names rarely appear in the press, but the explosive growth of what is now a more-than-\$10-billion-a-year industry owes more to the corporate savvy of little-known executives than it does to the sexual skills of the stars.

Yet one fact stands out more than perhaps any other about American porn: Astonishingly little serious journalism or scholarship is devoted to it. Journalist Eric Schlosser and film scholar Eric Schaefer have each published instructive essays, but "The Other Hollywood" is the first mainstream book in many years to attempt a comprehensive portrait of an industry that's often overlooked as a cultural phenomenon and underappreciated as an economic dynamo.

Lead author Legs McNeil, a former magazine editor who co-edited a widely praised oral history of punk, has teamed with two younger researchers to produce a highly informative tome. But "The Other Hollywood" is not easy reading, even for those who are not the least bit squeamish about the subject matter.

McNeil spent seven years recording hundreds of interviews with porn-industry participants past and present, but his continuous interweaving of brief snippets from different interviewees will frustrate any reader who yearns for a fluid narrative rather than constant jump-cuts. McNeil writes that the "overwhelming majority" of the book's first-person comments derive from his team's own interviews, but extensive endnotes reflect that many other excerpts are drawn from long-forgotten newspaper and magazine articles.

"The Other Hollywood" has plenty to say--indeed, perhaps way too much to say--about now-dead porn legends like Linda Lovelace and John Holmes. Lovelace's subsequent claims that she was forced to perform against her will in the landmark 1972 hard-core feature "Deep Throat" sound unconvincing, but the story of Holmes' descent into drug addiction and deadly gang violence is depressingly gruesome by any standard.

McNeil devotes far more attention to porn's past than to its present, and organized crime's undisputed financial sponsorship of most early, 1970s hard-core films is one of the book's recurrent themes. "Deep Throat" itself was financed by Anthony Peraino Sr., a member of the Colombo crime family, and countless directors and actors recount how two other now-dead New York Mafiosi, Michael Zaffarano and Robert DiBernardo, exercised quiet control over much of the industry into the early and mid-1980s.

But retired FBI agent William P. Kelly, once law enforcement's premier expert on porn king-pins, identifies a former Cleveland businessman as the truly crucial figure. "Reuben Sturman was by far the most important pornographer in the history of the world," Kelly says. Sturman, who died in federal prison in 1997, built a small magazine-distribution business into a nationwide network of adult bookstores with coin-operated peep shows that made them veritable cash cows.

Sturman was a pioneer not only in porn's growth but also in the federal government's unsuccessful efforts to derail the industry. Targeted by multiple prosecutions, Sturman repeatedly prevailed until an Internal Revenue Service probe into massive tax evasion led to his conviction and jailing.

Ironically, as Schlosser noted in "Reefer Madness" in 2003, Sturman's downfall turned "the distribution of hard-core material into a fiercely competitive business." The competition was intensified decisively by the technological shift from film to videotape in the mid-1980s. As actress, director and magazine publisher Gloria Leonard told McNeil:

"Anybody can shoot video. Anybody. Shooting film requires great skill."

The advent of video and the VCR also moved most viewing of porn from adult theaters and bookstores into the home. From 75 million hard-core video rentals in 1985, the annual totals spiraled to 665 million in 1996 and 759 million in 2001. Private access undeniably appealed to a huge and eager audience. As one porn executive told *The New York Times* in 2001, "We realized that when there are 700 million porn rentals a year, it can't just be a million perverts renting 700 videos each."

What's more, those numbers do not include cable-TV pay-per-view sales in homes and hotels, nor Web access to hard-core porn. Market-research firms report that more than 20 percent of households pay to access adult content, and that upward of 25 percent of Internet users visit Web sex sites. "The spread of sex films into mainstream distribution channels" like those, Schlosser explained in 2003, "has fueled a tremendous rise in the production of porn"--an almost unbelievable 11,000 new video titles each year.

Most American porn comes from the San Fernando Valley, just north across the Hollywood Hills from another of America's moviemaking centers. The porn industry is often a family affair. Take Steven Hirsch, who started the Vivid Entertainment Group in 1984 at age 23. Vivid is perhaps the industry's premier producer of top-class porn, turning out some 60 films a year and generating annual revenues of about \$100 million. Hirsch's sister Marci and father, Fred, work for Vivid. Fred Hirsch began working for Sturman in Cleveland in the 1970s before moving his family to California. Sturman's son David owns Sin City, one of Vivid's main competitors, and Edward Wedelstedt, who operates one of the nation's largest networks of adult video stores, is an old-time protege of the elder Sturman's.

Vivid recently opened a Vivid Nightclub inside Las Vegas' Venetian Hotel and Casino, and Vivid's president, Bill Asher, a Dartmouth College graduate with an MBA from the University of Southern California, proudly told the *Los Angeles Times* in 2002:

"We're already past the acceptance stage, and at this point we're just talking about a business as a business. We are nothing more than widget makers."

But Vivid exemplifies the corporatization of American porn in ways that are bad as well as good. In "The Other Hollywood," top stars and directors from the prevideo era reminisce wistfully about the so-called golden age of porn, when feature-length films made some effort, however lame, to include plots and dialogue, not just raw sex. Former actor Tim Connelly, now the publisher of Adult Video News, the industry's top information source, told McNeil that 25 years ago:

"We liked what we did. We felt there was craft to it, a certain element of art to it." Nowadays not even industry publicists would make that claim.

"There was a certain amount of talent that would compel a consumer to want to sit [in a theater] and watch something because there was no fast-forward back then," Connelly says. But now, he adds, "you can't even think about porno without thinking about fast-forward."

Early Vivid stars like Ginger Lynn Allen, once Steven Hirsch's girlfriend, earned ongoing residuals from their films, but such arrangements are long gone. When the Los Angeles Times asked entertainment lawyers to evaluate Vivid's now-standard contract for on-camera performers, one said with amazement, "It's practically slavery."

Young actresses face a particularly difficult career path. Filmmaker Adam Glasser, better known as Seymore Butts, his industry pseudonym, told a PBS interviewer in 2001 that "most women that come into this business, they're 18, 19, 20 years old. They have no business acumen whatsoever. And they have no plan. Then all of a sudden, lots of money is thrust their way. It's a very difficult thing to handle. It's somewhat analogous to young athletes who come into money quickly." As actor Tom Byron, a long-time industry veteran, told McNeil, "A woman's longevity in this business is extremely limited." It "chews 'em up and spits 'em out."

Old-timers like Byron have mixed feelings about how porn has become "the corporate, legitimate machine that it is now." But not everyone is willing to acknowledge that legitimacy. During the Reagan and Bush I administrations, federal tax and obscenity prosecutions targeted many adult businesses, not just Reuben Sturman. Such probes largely ended during the Clinton era, but since 2000, Republican Attorneys Gen. John Ashcroft and Alberto Gonzales have revved them up again.

In 2003 federal prosecutors in Pittsburgh indicted two outspoken porn producers, Lizzie Borden and Rob Black, and their company, Extreme Associates, on obscenity charges. Janet Romano is Borden's real name and Black's is Robert Zicari; his father, Dominic, once operated dozens of adult bookstores in partnership with Reuben Sturman. The criminal charges allege that a U.S. postal inspector, who paid \$89.95 for three months' access to their hard-core Web site, downloaded six video clips and mail-ordered three videos that are obscene under federal legal standards that date to 1973.

Early this year, U.S. District Judge Gary Lancaster dismissed the charges in a ruling that drew extensive news coverage. Rather than applying the subjective, three-part, 1st Amendment-based test for obscenity, Lancaster relied on a 1969 Supreme Court decision that bestowed constitutional protection on the in-home possession of hard-core porn and on the high court's 2003 ruling that overturned all remaining U.S. sodomy laws. That decision, *Lawrence vs. Texas*, "can reasonably be interpreted as holding that public morality is not a legitimate state interest sufficient to justify infringing on adult, private, consensual, sexual conduct even if that conduct is deemed offensive to the general public's sense of morality," Lancaster wrote.

Lancaster's ruling has been heralded by the porn industry, but the Justice Department is appealing. What's more, in mid-March federal prosecutors in Dallas indicted Edward Wedelstedt, his wife, and five employees on obscenity and tax-evasion charges. The obscenity allegations may prove no more successful than the ones against Extreme, but targeting a major industry figure like Wedelstedt, who also is a well-known philanthropist in his hometown of Denver, clearly signals that the Bush administration is intent upon attacking an industry that had hoped the days of law-enforcement busts were long gone.

"The Other Hollywood" offers a rich smorgasbord of old-time porn history to anyone with an appetite for such, but it provides disappointingly little insight into today's complex industry and the legal hurdles that still confront it.

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