

Hugh Hefner dreamed of being a cartoonist. Instead, he changed the market for top comic artists.



Special guest Hugh Hefner in the 1993 “Krusty Gets Kancelled” episode of “The Simpsons.” (Fox 1993)

By [Michael Cavanaugh](#) September 28 at 8:00 AM

BEFORE HE became a publisher of posed flesh and prose, Hugh Hefner dreamed of becoming a cartoonist. Young Hugh knew that the striking visual line could help deliver a message, and so he sketched his satire. Although his own comics-making career never fully panned out, his early aspirations shaped him: He later knew he wanted his magazine to carry some of the biggest names in cartoons.

Al Jaffee. Jules Feiffer. Shel Silverstein. Arnold Roth. “Plastic Man” creator Jack Cole. Those are just a few of the legends who drew for the then-dewy Playboy magazine, which Hefner — who has died at age 91 — launched in 1953.

“Hugh Hefner was as devoted to cartoonists as he was to the centerfold,” “The Simpsons” director-producer David Silverman tells The Washington Post’s Comic Riffs. “The first Playboy issue has the image of Marilyn Monroe, and a small drawing by the great Virgil ‘VIP’ Partch.

“Hef paid top dollar to his cartoonists, and he launched and provided for many careers,” Silverman continued. “He was a great man, and I was glad to have had the opportunity to ‘Simpson-ize’ him for [the 1993 episode] ‘Krusty Gets Kancelled.’”

As a boy, Hefner was attracted to cartoons partly because he wanted to give himself an image makeover in real life. As Patty Farmer notes in her new book, “Playboy Laughs: The Comedy, Comedians, and Cartoons of Playboy” (published last month), Hugh — by now going by “Hef” — wanted to imagine himself as a hip and suave ladies’ man who might one day pull off smoking jackets and silk pajamas.

But at that time, he was just a 16-year-old Chicago kid coping with an unrequited crush. So the comic-book scrapbook he constantly worked on, titled “School Daze,” became “a kind of autobiography that put myself center stage in a life I created for myself,” he told the Associated Press in 2006.

It was the curatorial act of keeping that comics scrapbook — which grew to include photos and pop-culture clippings — that put him on the path to launching Playboy. As Hefner told the Los Angeles Times in 2009, “The way I used the magazine in my life — it had a direct parallel to what I did in high school.”

Jaffee, the MAD magazine legend who holds the record as the longest-running cartoonist ever, said in Farmer’s book that Hefner brought “pizazz” into “the world of publishing, cartooning and sex.”

Hefner’s handpicked stable of cartoonists would grow to include such talents as Buck Brown, Gahan Wilson, Doug Sneyd and LeRoy Neiman — even his boyhood comics idol, Milton Caniff. From the start, Hefner aimed to rival the comics names being showcased in such outlets as Esquire, with his magazine — according to the 2004 book “Playboy: 50 Years: The Cartoons” — featuring “sweet young things, terrible tarts, winsome wives, suitors and studs.”

Playboy, in other words, was where a gifted cartoonist could get good money to work blue. You could go off-color in crisply reproduced color. For decades, the top artists kept arriving.

Hugh Hefner, who was born April 9, 1926, in Chicago, died Sept. 27 at the Playboy Mansion.

Of Playboy at midcentury, Hefner told The Post in 2003: “We changed the world.”