

Like

Follow

G+1

YouTube



The Legend of Master Legend

With his trusty sidekick, the Ace, he fights to vanquish crime and defend the helpless – if he doesn't get evicted first. Behind the mask of the Real Life Superheroes

BY JOSHUAH BEARMAN December 17, 2008

f Share

🐦 Tweet

g+ Share

💬 Comment


✉ Email



Master Legend Joshua Bearman


ADVERTISEMENT

< >



0 Rooms left

[Admiral Inn by the...
Niagara Falls](#)



3 Rooms left

[Utopia Hotel
Jurbise](#)

f

Everyone has the opportunity to awaken and become who they always wanted to be. –Green Scorpion

🐦



Master Legend races out the door of his secret hide-out, fires up the Battle Truck and summons his trusty sidekick. "Come on, Ace!" he yells. "Time to head into the shadows!"

The Ace appears wearing his flame-accented mask and leather vest; Master Legend is costumed in his signature silver and black regalia. "This is puncture-resistant rubber," Master Legend says proudly, pointing at his homemade breastplate. His arms are covered with soccer shinguards that have been painted silver to match his mask. "It won't stop a bullet," he says, "but it will deflect knives."

"Not that any villain's knives have ever gotten that close!" the Ace chimes in.

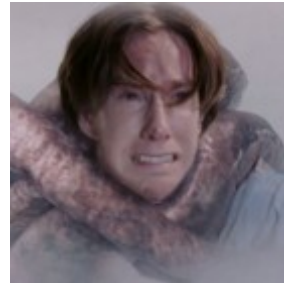
When Master Legend bursts into a sprint, as he often does, his long, unruly hair flows behind him. His mane is also in motion when he's behind the wheel of the Battle Truck, a 1986 Nissan pickup with a missing rear window and "ML" spray-painted on the hood. He and the Ace head off to patrol their neighborhood on the outskirts of Orlando, scanning the



Daniel Craig's Not So Inspiring Words For Next James Bond Actor



Peter Jackson Explains Why The 'Hobbit' Movies Were A Mess



10 Great Movies Ruined By Awful Endings



The Best Albums of 2015 So Far

POWERED BY ZERGNET

ADVERTISEMENT

SONOS

Acoustically engineered to sound awesome.

Meet PLAY:5 >

The advertisement features a Sonos PLAY:5 speaker, which is a white and black rectangular speaker with a curved top. It is set against a vibrant red and orange background. The Sonos logo is prominently displayed in the top left corner. Below the speaker, the text "Acoustically engineered to sound awesome." is written in white. In the bottom right corner, there is a black button with the text "Meet PLAY:5 >" in white. A small play button icon is visible in the top right corner of the advertisement area.

street for evildoers. "I don't go looking for trouble," Master Legend shouts above the engine. "But if you want some, you'll get it!"

Then he hands me his business card, which says:

MASTER LEGEND
REAL LIFE SUPER HERO
"AT YOUR SERVICE"

Like other real life superheroes, Master Legend is not an orphan from a distant dying sun or the mutated product of a gamma-ray experiment gone awry. He is not an eccentric billionaire moonlighting as a crime fighter. He is, as he puts it, "just a man hellbent on battling evil." Although Master Legend was one of the first to call himself a Real Life Superhero, in recent years a growing network of similarly homespun caped crusaders has emerged across the country. Some were inspired by 9/11. If malevolent individuals can threaten the world, the argument goes, why can't other individuals step up to save it? "What is Osama bin Laden if not a supervillain, off in his cave, scheming to destroy us?" asks Green Scorpion, a masked avenger in Arizona. True to comic- book

The 36-Inch, Plastic Longboard: Your New Favorite Ride



Forget the Vitamins, Get a Flu Shot



How to Remove Devices From Your iTunes Account



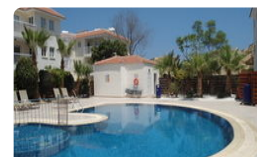
Get More From the Treadmill



How to Build the Perfect Thanksgiving Leftover Sandwich



ADVERTISEMENT



1 Rooms left

Blue Electra Complex
Paralimni



4 Rooms left

Hotel Pineta
Vrsar

tradition, each superhero has his own aesthetic. Green Scorpion's name is derived from his desert home, from which he recently issued a proclamation to "the criminals of Arizona and beyond," warning that to continue illegal activities is to risk the "Sting of the Green Scorpion!" The Eye takes his cue from the primordial era of Detective Comics, prowling Mountain View, California, in a trench coat, goggles and a black fedora featuring a self-designed logo: the "all-seeing" Eye of Horus.

Superhero – his full name – is a former wrestler from Clearwater, Florida, who wears red and blue spandex and a burgundy helicopter helmet, and drives a 1975 Corvette Stingray customized with license plates that read SUPRHRO.

Most Real Life Superheroes are listed on the World Superhero Registry, a recently assembled online roster. ("I can't say if I will ever fight an army of giant robots or a criminal mastermind," an Indianapolis superhero called Mr. Silent notes in his entry. "I just don't know.") Some superheroes have joined forces in local crime-fighting syndicates: the Black Monday Society in Salt Lake City, the Artemis National

Consortium in San Diego and the tautologically titled Justice Society of Justice in Indianapolis. Attempting to unite all the superheroes under one banner are groups like the World Heroes Organization and Heroes Network, which hosts an online forum where more than 200 crime fighters trade tactics (should I wear a mask?), patrolling tips (how do I identify a street gang?) and advice/feedback (can you get bulletproof vests on eBay?).

The Justice Force is Master Legend's own crime-fighting syndicate, a rotating cast of ad hoc superheroes that seems to include everyone he knows. There's the Disabler, Genius Jim, the Black Panther and a duo named Fire and Brimstone. At his right hand is the Ace, so named because he always needs "an ace up my sleeve!" The Ace lives with Master Legend at the team's secret hide-out, a dilapidated clapboard house in a seedy neighborhood outside Orlando. In the back is Master Legend's workshop, a converted garage where he develops various weapons, like the Master Blaster: a six-foot-long silver cannon fueled by cans of Right Guard that can shoot "a variety of projectiles," including stun pellets

made from plastic Easter eggs filled with cayenne pepper and rock salt. As the superheroes see it, the fact that they can't project energy bolts or summon force fields only adds to the purity of their commitment. Their heroism, in a sense, derives from their lack of powers. What they have instead is the power to craft themselves anew. "This whole movement is more than just fat guys in spandex," insists Superhero, himself a brawny guy in head-to-toe spandex.

Once you take on a secret identity, there's the problem of maintaining it. Many Real Life Superheroes shun press. Some are difficult to reach even by phone. Others allow interviews, but will meet only in costume and in public. The first time I meet Master Legend face-to-mask, for example, it is carefully choreographed by him to occur on the neutral turf of a restaurant in downtown Orlando. "I can't show you my face," he says as we meet in front of Gino's Pizza and Brew, which he has designated as a safe zone. "And there are only a couple places that will let me in with my uniform and mask on. But here they know all about me!"

Why all the secrecy? Compromised methods, safety of loved ones – the “usual issues,” according to Master Legend, that are confronted by superheroes. Don’t forget, he warns, that the public can be ambivalent toward masked avengers. Consider lovable Spider-Man, constantly facing exposure by his own boss, the irascible J. Jonah Jameson. Real Life Superheroes were alarmed by the sad case of Captain Jackson, a “police-sanctioned” hero in Jackson, Michigan – until his DUI arrest and the resulting *Jackson Citizen Patriot* headline: CRIME FIGHTER BUSTED FOR DRUNKEN DRIVING. The article went on to unmask Jackson and his sidekicks, the Queen of Hearts and CrimeFighter Girl. Superheroes nationwide were aghast that a town would turn on its heroes like that, and the incident drove skittish superheroes deeper underground. “You can see why I have to be careful,” says Master Legend.

Behind the counter, the cashier giggles as Master Legend orders a beer. “Master Legend thanks you,” he says, reaching out a gauntleted hand for the beer. When we go upstairs to the small dining room, the young

couple at a nearby table stop eating and eye us nervously. Master Legend gestures wildly as he shows me the scar from the time he was shot while saving an old lady being mugged. "They got me here," he says. "But it was small-caliber. Not enough to take down a superhero!" This is how Master Legend recounts his life, always punctuated with exclamation points, as if every moment is a high-stakes ordeal that ends with some deserving offender getting an "all-night tour of Fist City!" or the business end of his "trusty ol' Steel Toes!"

If there existed a *Master Legend Issue 1*, it would flash back 26 years to his origin story in New Orleans, where the teenage hero's identity was forged in poverty and abuse. "My momma and daddy were not good people," he says. "Through them, I saw how cruel the world can be." At age 15, Master Legend began looking after his grandma, a caring Creole woman from the bayou who showed him "the goodness of things." When Master Legend found some comics in a neighbor's trash, they became his blueprint. As early as third grade, he used a T-shirt, a magic marker and some old shoelaces to fashion a

rudimentary costume, which he donned while protecting classmates from the school bully. He also found a mentor named Master Ray, from whom he learned "kindness and kung fu."

Master Legend was 16 when fate whispered in his ear. One day he was playing guitar in Jackson Square – "just jamming, you know, picking up some change" – when a purse snatcher appeared. Master Legend instinctively tore after him through the alleys of the French Quarter, where he retrieved the purse. Later that night, he was recognized by the criminal and fought him off again. "That's when I knew I had to wear a mask," he says. Being in New Orleans made it easier: "I would dress up in a costume and walk the streets, and no one would notice. I fit right in." The next day, Master Legend's grandma ran across a story on the news: MASKED MAN SAVES WOMAN. "The Legend," he says, "was born."

At Gino's, after a few more beers, Master Legend announces that he must attend to some business back at the secret hide-out. After paying, we cross the street. It is early evening. The sun has dipped below Florida's

afternoon cloud cover, and Master Legend's silver uniform reflects the warm glow of the horizon. He turns and strikes an inadvertently dramatic pose. A passing taxi stops, and the driver cranes his neck to see the spectacle of Master Legend shining at sunset. Then the driver leans out of the window and yells, "Master Legend! How you doing? Say hello to the Ace!"

The next day, I persuade Master Legend to let me visit his secret hide-out. He gives me directions. Or rather, he gives me directions to a nearby liquor store, and in one last step of cloak-and-dagger maneuvering, he pilots me the final few blocks in the Battle Truck, its rear window destroyed during an attack by a hammer-wielding enemy.

When we arrive, the Ace walks out to greet us. Compared to the Fortress of Solitude with its alien zoo or the Batcave's techno-enhanced crime lab, theirs is a modestly appointed superheadquarters. The pleasant tropical afternoon can't quite conceal the state of the neighborhood, with its crumbling houses on the verge of

being reclaimed by swampland.

Inside the hide-out, a TV is propped up in the corner on cinder blocks.

Master Legend's mattress is on the floor. The wall is bare other than a Halloween decoration of a skull.

Against one wall is a folding card table covered with a pile of papers and some ninja stars. I pick one up, inciting a gleeful demonstration.

"Just a snap of the wrist!" Master Legend says, sending one flying straight into the far wall. "Catch this!" yells the Ace, joining in. "Takedown!" Master Legend says with a clap when I land one successfully. Eventually, Master Legend announces that "ninja time is over," but not before he freestyles a final behind-the-back throw, nailing the

Most Real Life Superheroes compensate for their lack of Adamantium skeletons or solar-fueled extraterrestrial strength by claiming extensive martial-arts abilities. Master Legend's own personal fighting style is called "The Way of the Diamond Spirit," which he says represents "an evolution of hand-to-hand combat." As if to demonstrate, he sends a few jabs into the air. "One place you don't want to be," he says, tightening his gloved

hand into a clenched fist, "is on the receiving end of the No Mercy Punch!"

The No Mercy Punch makes many appearances in the annals of Justice Force history. There was the time Master Legend and the Ace shut down a crack den; the drug kingpin they put out of business; the money Master Legend forcibly retrieved from a thief who stole from a handicapped Vietnam vet; and the recent mission when the Justice Force had to "put the stomp on a child molester and his gang of crackheads." They had a plan, but things went awry when Master Legend's brother was captured in the thick of battle by the child molester, whom they call Tree Man Roy. "That's when we went into chaos mode," Master Legend says. But they got his brother free and "cut that big ol' Tree down."

Master Legend has many more florid tales of adventure, some plausible, like retrieving a friend's stolen money, others quite outlandish, like the child molester and his gang of crackheads. (For starters, doesn't it seem like you would have to be one charismatic child molester to attract

an entire gang of crackheads to do your bidding?) On the folding table in the hide-out, I notice a police report. It documents the incident with the hammer and the Battle Truck. Sure enough, it describes how two men were taken into custody for attacking the inhabitants of the house at this address. Master Legend provided a statement, below which the officer wrote, "The hammer was placed into evidence."

Real Life Superheroes have a conflicted relationship with law enforcement. The hardcore types have a somewhat dated, *Death Wish*-era worldview, as if the cities are overrun by chain-saw-wielding clown gangs and the cops just can't control the streets anymore. The more civic-minded superheroes imagine themselves as informal police adjuncts, a secret society of costumed McGruffs. One of Master Legend's most prized possessions is a framed certificate of commendation from the Orange County Sheriff's Department, for the time he and the Disabler snapped into action after Hurricane Charley, helping to clear the roads and rescue people from the wreckage. "We were on the news and everything," Master Legend says.

"The police recognized what we did."

Since then, Master Legend claims that he has developed a police contact on the inside, his "very own Commissioner Gordon." To prove it, he gives me a phone number. I immediately call and leave a message; I've tried to confirm tales from other superheroes, only to discover that the police have never heard of them.

"I have friends in high places," Master Legend promises. "When they see the silver and black, they know who's coming."

As a means of establishing a superhero identity, it is difficult to overstate the importance of the costume. Real Life Superheroes devote much of their time to researching, procuring, making, comparing, fine-tuning and otherwise fetishizing their looks. The costume itself is the radioactive-spider bite, the source of their abilities. Without a costume, after all, you're just another do-gooder schmuck. "Anyone can have this power," Superhero says. "All you need to do is tie a towel around your neck and put a sock over your head and run out the door."

Master Legend often apologizes for the state of his own uniform. It's getting worn, the mask peeling in places, and feels unpresentable, like someone getting married in shorts. He tells me that he's ordered new outfits from Hero Gear, a custom supplier in Minneapolis, but high demand is causing a delay. "If only they were here," Master Legend says with regret. "You'd see a whole new upgrade for the Justice Force!"

Such upgrading can get expensive. Citizen Prime, a superhero based in Utah, spent \$4,000 hiring an armorer to forge a sci-fi suit out of plate mail (with canary-yellow accents). Green Scorpion has a tailored mask from Professor Widget, an ultraclandestine supplier of custom equipment who mysteriously appeared online not too long ago. "No one knows who Professor Widget is, where he lives or how he operates," says Green Scorpion, whose mask is supposedly formed from a ballistic alloy that Widget pioneered called Mongreltanium. (It is advertised as bulletproof, which is why Green Scorpion paid so much for it, although he would like to do his own "ballistics testing" before official deployment.)

Professor Widget also provides pricey tailored gear, like the steel cane with modular nonlethal attachments that Green Scorpion purchased with last year's tax rebate. Slightly cheaper are catalogs, which Superhero has used to turn himself into a mail-order Batman; his utility belt bristles with pellet guns, bear mace, a tactical baton and the Arma 100, a nitrogen-powered, 37mm personal cannon.

"A lot of those guys have quite the arsenal," Master Legend says in admiration as he gives me a tour of his own weapons lab, housed in a converted garage out back. This is where Master Legend tinkers with do-it-yourself creations, like the Master Blaster and the Iron Fist, a nasty-looking metal truncheon he made to fit over his hand and deliver "the good old throat slam." These days, budgetary constraints limit him to more basic gear: a staff, a sword, a good old-fashioned chain and whatever else he can buy cheaply and modify.

I notice some thick sheaves of foam on the wall of the lab.

"Soundproofing," Master Legend says. "For keeping down the volume."

"During practice," says the Ace.

"What kind of practice?" I ask.

The Ace smiles and pantomimes air guitar.

The weapons lab doubles as the practice room for Master Legend's band, which is also called the Justice Force. "The Ace plays the drums," says Master Legend. "I play guitar and sing." The drums are in storage at the moment, but the Ace assures me that the Justice Force has a tight set.

"This guy's wicked on the strings," he says, pointing at Master Legend.

"There's not a Steely Dan song that me and him can't play."

The Justice Force perform originals, too – more than 100 songs, all written by Master Legend. They recorded a single, with their friend, another associate known as the Pain. It's called "Epic of the Sunrise." "Want to hear it?" Master Legend asks.

Back at his computer, Master Legend plays the song and takes me through the verses – a Manichaeian tale of near-apocalypse wherein Master Legend is an agent of redemption. "I

put how I feel into music," he says, bobbing along with the riffs he composed to accompany the grand opera of his life. "There is a good world out there, and it's waiting to be restored. That's what I'm all about. I really hope I can save the world."

Saving the world, of course, requires personal sacrifice. Few Real Life Superheroes have families. And those with women in their lives often find that their higher calling can cause rifts. Master Legend has seen a lot of relationships go sour, starting with his wife, who divorced him 10 years ago. "She never believed in what I did," he says. Then there was his last girlfriend. "She left because she wanted to sit around on the couch and hold hands. Well, that's not in the cards for Master Legend."

Another casualty of the superhero lifestyle is career advancement. Unlike Peter Parker, Master Legend has no cover job. He can't hold down a nine-to-five, he says, because a life on the precipice of action means always being available to answer the call. "I'll walk right out the door if someone needs me," he says with a laugh. Three years of trade school exposed Master Legend to

electronics, welding and other "skills" he drew on while dabbling in odd jobs over the years: shrimp fishing, tree trimming, roofing, salvage work. Lately, he's been working as an assistant to elderly people. Here again, Master Legend finds himself locked in a battle between good and evil. "All these people are waiting to kick out the old folks, put them in the old-folks' home," he says, working himself up with indignation. "But as long as I'm there, they can't! And they hate me for that." For Master Legend, it's all just another type of superheroing. "These are the two sides of my life, which is really one side," he says, "and that's the side of making things right."

The Ace tells me about his conversion to the cause one night as we fetch some Chinese takeout to bring back to the secret hide-out. (Master Legend can't come with us, because he still won't remove his mask in my presence.) "I met Master Legend a long time ago," the Ace says. They hit it off at a party, bonding over music, and discovered that they had a lot of mutual friends. "Before that," the Ace says, "I was married. Had a good job." The Ace made good money setting up stage shows – Nickelodeon events,

Blue Man Group, that sort of thing. The Ace used to be a performer himself. In a surprising digression, he tells me he once led a "dance revue" called Male Factor. "This was before Chippendales," he reminds me. "Not like they do now, with just bump and grind, and no imagination. We had choreographers, like in Vegas. In fact, we even did Vegas! Movies, too. Ever heard of *Spring Fever*? 1982. Starring Susan Anton. Check it out."

But that was years ago, before the divorce. And the brief stint in jail last year. I didn't ask exactly how bad things got for the Ace, but eventually his wife's boss moved into his house, and he moved in with Master Legend. "That's when I got sucked into the whole Justice Force thing," says the Ace. He'd helped Master Legend before, but at a distance and never in costume. "I was getting more and more involved. Then M.L. got me a mask and convinced me to put it on. And that's when I saw the light. It's a powerful thing."

Late last year, when the Ace made his first public appearance, he worried what other people might think. But in the protective warmth of the costume, he says, the fear is quickly

overcome. "There's the flawed you and the good you," he says, striking a philosophical note. "And this" – he holds up the mask – "gives us the chance to make up for our flaws."

The windows are rolled down, letting in the sound of cicadas from the dark stand of trees across the empty parking lot. "I know it sounds silly," he says. "But once you change someone else's life, even in a small way, it makes you realize you can change things in your own life."

Back at the secret hide-out, as we lay out the Chinese feast on the table, a friend stops by for a quick conversation with Master Legend. It is dusk, and I watch two silhouettes against the twilight out on the porch, conferring quietly.

"That was the Black Panther," Master Legend says when the friend leaves. The Black Panther "doesn't want to get caught up with the press," so Master Legend didn't introduce him to me, but make no mistake: Black Panther is a Justice Force fellow traveler. Besides sometimes jamming with the band – Black Panther is known to introduce a "reggae vibe" – he helps out on missions. Not too

long ago, Black Panther told Master Legend about a local family that was having financial trouble and was in danger of being evicted. So Master Legend helped raise money to cover their rent. "Sometimes that's all people need," he says. "A little boost."

This generous spirit is what so impresses the Ace about Master Legend. "He'll buy a neighbor groceries if they're between checks," the Ace says. "He'd give a guy his last dollar." I've only known Master Legend a short time, but I've noticed that people are always coming by or calling, seeking his advice and help. One of his neighbors even sends his son over to the secret hide-out for guidance, which he gets in the form of Master Legend's boundless optimism and personal training in the Way of the Diamond Spirit.

One day last year, Fire alerted Master Legend to a controversial freeway extension up near Apopka, where the state was clashing with activists over the plight of the gopher tortoises living on the site. "I couldn't believe it," Master Legend says. "These are beautiful prehistoric creatures, and they wanted to bury them alive with cement. It's crazy, but that's the way

of the world. That's why the world needs us." The Justice Force joined the protest, costumes and all, and the state was forced to relocate the tortoises. "That was a great mission," Master Legend says. "Those tortoises are the nicest little guys you'd ever want to meet. They look like living cartoons, just eating their lettuce. They're adorable."

But nothing is more satisfying to Master Legend than helping those who are less fortunate. On their last big Christmas mission, he and the Ace filled the Battle Truck with supplies they bought, having pooled funds from the Justice Force, and headed to skid row. When they arrived, they were mobbed. Master Legend reckons that they gave something to every single homeless person in Orlando: toothbrushes, razors, soap, blankets, canned goods, cigarettes, candy. When the bags were empty, he and the Ace headed back to the secret hide-out to celebrate with a few beers.

"We aren't that much better off than the people we're helping," the Ace notes, gesturing to the squalor of the hide-out. Neither Master Legend nor the Ace received any Christmas gifts

themselves, but neither of them is complaining. "A lot of people talk about doing right by other people," says the Ace. "But what are they really doing?"

Despite their successes, things have been hard for the Justice Force lately. "These are bad times," Master Legend says, opening a few "thirst quenchers" after dinner. I've already noticed there are always a few empty twelvers laying around the secret hide-out. Outside the front door, a mountainous pile of crushed cans suggests that Busch is the Justice Force brand of choice.

"This is our one vice," Master Legend says, "the ol' brewski."

"That's right," adds the Ace.

"With all our aches and pains from fighting off so many criminals, we gotta have our beers," Master Legend says.

"Hear, hear!" The Ace hoists his can.

With that, Master Legend unloads about his troubles. It's tough being a superhero, he says, because your whole life must be lived to a certain

standard. Looking out for everyone in the Justice Force involves a lot of thankless work. And then there's the wider superhero community, which has succumbed to rival factions and bitter accusations over who the real superheroes are and who should lead them to greatness. A superhero named Tothian, who lives with his parents in an undisclosed part of New Jersey, serves as president of the Heroes Network – the self-proclaimed "United Nations of Superheroes." Tothian has tried to excommunicate several members, including his former partner, Chris Guardian, who then co-founded the Worldwide Heroes Organization. More than a few Real Life Superheroes seem like they're just one splash of acid in the face away from tormented supervillainy. Several superheroes once suggested kidnapping foreign leaders to make a statement on Darfur. Others pointed out that this was (a) illegal and (b) dangerously unheroic. As a universally respected veteran, Master Legend often plays a diplomatic role, moderating between sides. "I don't need any more problems from the superheroes out there," he says. "I have plenty right here."

Case in point is the secret hide-out. "I mean, look at this place!" Master Legend complains, acknowledging the disarray. "It's a disaster!" The reason, Master Legend confides, is that he's being evicted. This is the dominant battle in his life at the moment, one he didn't choose to fight. The secret hide-out, it turns out, is a rental. The state Department of Transportation has invoked eminent domain to widen the freeway, causing a protracted battle. This is why the place is empty. "They're gonna tear down the secret headquarters!" Master Legend says, pounding his beer can on the table. "We have to be ready to leave in a moment's notice."

Master Legend notes the irony: Having defended the gopher tortoises against a freeway, Master Legend must now fight the very same cunning villain again, this time in his own backyard. "It's like they're getting back at me," he says. "And believe me, they're coming full force. I'd rather face a dozen men with chains in an alley than deal with the bureaucracy of the state of Florida." It's a sobering thing, he says, for a superhero to be constrained by the demands of real life. "I want to be out

there taking care of criminals, not packing my stuff in boxes.”

It’s the first time I’ve seen Master Legend dispirited. He’s hardly eaten. But he brightens when talking about the new secret hide-out he just lined up. It’s a house right on the next block. The Ace will move with him. They have to wait to get their displacement check from the state, and pay back some people for storage, and then move their stuff in, but if all goes well, they’ll be up and running soon.

Master Legend decides we should take a tour of the new secret hide-out. When we get there, the place is empty except for a single ninja star Master Legend placed in the center of the floor as a good-luck talisman. We see the bedrooms, the hallway trapdoor (handy in case the duo are surrounded by “an enemy attack”) and the garage that will be transformed into the new weapons workshop and band-practice room. “I know this is a shabby, old place,” he says. “But there is a lot of potential here.” He’s already got big plans for a van outfitted to allow Master Legend to emerge from the back on a motorcycle – the Legend Cycle –

while the van is moving, like Knight Rider. Genius Jim, the mechanic, is already scouring his contacts for the van and the Enduro two-stroke that he will turn into the Legend Cycle.

"Can you imagine what that will be like?" Master Legend says. "If everything works out as planned, there will be no stopping us."

Together, he and the Ace admire the empty house with satisfaction. Then we go back to their current empty house, where the Ace offers a toast. And we all drink to the new secret hide-out.

I've forgotten all about Master Legend's police contact by the time he returns my call, several weeks after my message. "This is the Sergeant," he says, asking that his name not be revealed. "I was fishing down in the Keys. What do you want to know about Master Legend?"

The Sergeant tells me that one of his patrol officers came across Master Legend running through the bushes in costume one night. The encounter wound up in a report, and that report wound up on the Sergeant's desk. The officer recorded Master Legend's describing how he "fights evil" in the

streets, and the Sergeant, who's in charge of vice investigations, took a chance and tracked Master Legend down. Based on the neighborhood, he figured, Master Legend might be a good local contact. "And sure enough," the Sergeant tells me, "I start getting calls from Master Legend with information. And it checks out. Master Legend has helped put away a few criminals."

I call Master Legend to tell him I reached the Sergeant. He's not surprised. "I knew he would come through," Master Legend says. "He's a good guy. I'm in the process of gathering evidence against someone else for him. Master Legend does the recon, and the police strike! Just how it ought to be!"

When I ask how things are going otherwise, Master Legend drops some bad news: The Ace moved out. He just wasn't pulling his weight anymore. "He was depressed because of his personal stuff," Master Legend says. "I wanted him to start pitching in. That's part of getting back to normal. It would be good for him. But he was doing less and less, just hanging around all day."

The situation worsened when the Ace didn't show up for a few Justice Force missions. Suddenly, he wasn't fulfilling his duties as a roommate or as a sidekick. "I wasn't mad," Master Legend says. "I just tried to talk to him. We all did. The Third Eye gave me good advice about how to approach the situation. But we wound up getting in a fight, and the Ace up and moved out. Just like that. Being here was helping for a while, but I guess he just needs to sort things out by himself."

The Ace took his drums, technically disbanding the sonic wing of the Justice Force, but Master Legend has already found some new music partners. Among them is Ace Gauge, the new sidekick who has assumed the role of the Ace. The old Justice Force band, Master Legend says, turned out to be "more of a studio project," whereas this new venture will mean performing again.

"There is just too much going on," Master Legend says, "to worry about the past." The costume upgrades finally showed up, for one thing, and the two-tone bodysuit, improved mask and World War II helmet come together strangely well. Master

Legend also found a suitable van and located a motorcycle. In preparation for deployment, he had a magnet made for the van door that says JUSTICE FORCE SPECIAL OPERATIONS UNIT. On the world-saving front, the team is preparing to mount a new type of mission, a public-relations campaign to raise awareness about a strain of staph infection that's spreading among the homeless in the Orlando area. "It will be like the gopher-tortoise mission," Master Legend says, "but bigger!" The van will be pressed into service, and Superhero might come in from Clearwater with his Corvette.

This may be the real reason Master Legend inhabits a never-ending comic book in his mind, assigning everyone a character in the grand narrative. His roommate turns into the Ace, his mechanic into Genius Jim, and a friend with some recording equipment into the Pain. And so the reality of Master Legend, a guy who has no job and lives in a run-down house in a crummy neighborhood in Orlando, is transmuted via secret decoder ring into an everlasting tale of heroic outsiders, overcoming the odds and vanquishing enemies.

To the outside world, this makes Master Legend seem like a lunatic. But to the people around him, he is the charismatic center of an inviting universe. "It sounds a little silly," Superhero says, "but we all want to be part of a better tomorrow." Or, for that matter, a better today. Being a Real Life Superhero means that Master Legend can get in his Nissan pickup and call it the Battle Truck. He can tape together a potato gun and call it the Master Blaster. He can stand in the porch light of a disintegrating clapboard house, a beer in his hand, and behold a glorious clandestine citadel. And who are we to tell him otherwise?

This story is from the December 25, 2008 - January 8, 2009 issue of Rolling Stone.

From The Archives Issue 1068: December 25, 2008

 Share  Tweet  Share

 Comment  Email

EDITOR'S PICKS

MOST VIEWED
