

## Visual Afrofuturism and Dieselfunk in the works of Tim Fielder

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Tim Fielder is, first and foremost, a *visual Afrofuturist*. This distinction is significant in understanding Fielder's corpus, who works as an illustrator, cartoonist, concept artist, and even animator. Born in Tupelo, Mississippi alongside Jim, his twin brother, Fielder has become an ardent advocate, pioneer, and creator in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century Afrofuturist movement, creating visual representations of Black people overcoming past, present, and future systems of oppression, all within fantastic and speculative settings.

Building on the seminal work of Mark Dery, Julian Chambliss notes that "careful consideration of comics produced by African Americans highlights an engagement with speculation and liberation that defines Afrofuturism," an idea that holds true for Fielder's own Afrofuturist contributions ("Mapping"). Inspired by underground comics such as *Andromeda* by Dean Motter, the works of Ralph McQuarrie, Robert McCall, Jean "Moebius" Giraud, and more, Fielder began creating comics and illustrations as a self-taught artist for venues such as *The Village Voice*. At the same time, Fielder was introduced to the Black aesthetics movement by his brother Jim – the movement of art, criticism, and scholarship centralizing Black life and culture, as well as exploring its capacity to counter whiteness (Taylor). This love of futuristic and fully rendered speculative art combined with Black aesthetics drove Fielder to embrace visual Afrofuturism as a primary modality of critical-making in comics. Reynaldo Anderson highlights the critical function of such acts by noting "The comics medium provides examples of the links among gender, race, sexuality, technology, and the future in the production of science fiction," and indeed, Fielder's emphasis on digitally drawing, painting, and rendering explicitly Black characters within speculative arts enacts a powerful and visual counternarrative (171).

In 1993, Fielder advanced this vision by creating *Matty's Rocket*, a comic following Matty Watty: a young Black woman who creates her own rocketship to battle Nazis, aliens, and Jim Crow-era racism in a reimaged and alternative post-WWI world. The comic critically expands on the genre known as dieselpunk – 1940s aesthetics with retrofuturistic tech – with Black aesthetics to create what Fielder terms *DieselFunk*: "Imagine if they had made a serial like Buck Rogers or Flash Gordon, but they put Lena Horne in there. I don't shy away from Jim Crow and FDR that were very much indicative of black life in that time. It's my life's work." (Threadgill).

While Fielder also pushed the boundaries of his speculative illustration work into other fields including concept design, animation, and video games, much of his Afrofuturist contributions find critical purchase in comics. These efforts inspired Fielder to collaborate with his twin, Jim, on a new enterprise, Dieselfunk Studios: a multimedia company designed to provide a platform for Afrofuturist narratives, via training workshops on sequential art. This

allowed Fielder to continue advocating and representing Afrofuturist ideals not just in what he creates, but in empowering others to manifest their own drawings and visions into reality, particularly children in Fielder's cartooning workshops. Here, visual Afrofuturism becomes a platform for supporting future cartoonists and comics creators; students are learning from visual Afrofuturists working in the field, rather than teaching themselves by studying the work of white speculative artists.

Eventually, Dieselfunk Studios gave Fielder the platform to fully self-publish *Matty's Rocket, Book One*, manifesting his vision of the future as it were with the first full collection of Matty Watty's stories. At the 2018 Glyph Comics Awards, Fielder won Story of the Year, Best Cover, and Best Female Character Writer for *Matty's Rocket, Book One*.

If *Matty's Rocket* represents Fielder's self-published forays into visual Afrofuturism, *INFINITUM: An Afrofuturist Tale* is the full realization of that vision. Published with HarperCollins, Fielder first began this tale with an early concept of *High John Conqueror*, "a social media graphic novel...loosely based on the African American folk myth of John The Conqueror" ([highjohnconqueror.com/About](http://highjohnconqueror.com/About)).

Inspired by Fielder's frustration of seeing Black man after Black man die in popular horror, fantasy, and science-fiction movies, the character of High John Conqueror eventually developed into *INFINITUM's* AjA Oba, an African king cursed with immortality. We see AjA move throughout time, always burdened by a violent and bloody past, always looking toward the future. And, across 260 fully rendered and vivid digital pages, we see AjA Oba confront his own shortcomings: finding love, combating racial inequality by finally rejecting violence and alienation, and securing humanity's existence in ages beyond our own.

*INFINITUM* is a conflux of Fielder's passions: Afropunk and Dieselfunk aesthetics, and Fielder's deep love of popular culture: the comic draws visually from Moebius and Richard Corben just as much from *Heavy Metal Magazine*, Akira Kurosawa, and *Star Wars*. But, just as much, *INFINITUM* represents Fielder's steadfast commitment to fully realized Black representational art, and an unflinching vision of the future, further inspired by the Afrofuturist work of Octavia Butler and Samuel R. Delany.

Anderson speaks to what he terms the second wave of Afrofuturism, or "Afrofuturism 2.0" as being the "accelerating place of technological change...approaching things like metaphysics, aesthetics, theoretical and applied science, and programmatic" and in this case, Fielder's work with *INFINITUM* embodies the Afrofuturism 2.0 moment ("Interview by Pennamon"). He embraces digital modes of art, infuses speculative practice into a complex engagement with the metaphysical narrative of a Black man living through to the end of time (and beyond), and further, represents that through a comics narrative.

Through the comics work of Fielder, visual Afrofuturism becomes a frame to not only imagine Black people, culture, history, and lives in speculative and fantastic spaces, but to render the Black aesthetic on the comics page, utilizing Afrofuturist practice to make critical representational art.

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