

# Hefner's young life through his comics

By Amy Kaufman  
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LOS ANGELES — Hugh Hefner didn't get a lot of hugs as a kid. He grew up in a repressed Midwestern Puritan home, and his parents were strict. He couldn't ask them about the things he saw at his favorite movie theater in Chicago — like the confusing censorship codes, or why an adult married couple in a film had to sleep in separate twin beds. So he began questioning these ideas on his own — through comic books.

During his junior year in high school, Hefner began his own comic autobiography, documenting the events of his life through his own drawings. "What I was doing, in effect, was putting myself in an imaginative world where I put myself center stage," he recalls.

It's hard to imagine a time when Hefner, the impresario of Playboy, wasn't the center of attention. But it was through his early comics — published for the first time in "Hugh Hefner's Playboy," released domestically last month by Taschen — that Hefner first began to cement his identity.

## Boyhood memories

"To really tell my story in an interesting way, the part that I wanted to include in the book — the part that intrigued me — was what came before. The origins ... where the inspiration came from: my creative life as a boy," he says, resting his hands behind his head.

During an interview at the Playboy Mansion, Hefner, 83, is, of course, wearing his trademark silk pajamas even in the afternoon. A square of fabric from old pairs of his pajamas is included in the beginning of each of the 1,500 limited-edition copies of the collection, which comes in a Plexiglas box, weighs 50 pounds and retails for \$1,300. The work chronicles the first 25 years of Playboy, including the most renowned centerfold spreads, Marilyn Monroe's legendary nude portrait and, most surprisingly, keepsakes from Hefner's childhood.

Hefner is seated in his library, his delicate frame barely making an indent in the faded cushions of a red and green striped couch as he sifts through the behemoth six-volume anthology splayed in front of him on a backgammon table. Somewhere within the 3,500 pages, there is an image of Hefner on this very couch in the '70s, surrounded by friends and then-girlfriend Barbi Benton, who is strumming a guitar.

## Early years stand out

"Quite frankly, my early

life is fresher in my mind than last Tuesday, but I think that is the way of things," he says. "I think one remembers with delicious detail things from your early years, especially things that have special meaning for you. You will find in my bedroom images from long ago, little photographs and things from when I was a kid. I'm a very happy guy, and part of that has to do with my connection to my childhood."

Sauntering upstairs, he points out the relics of his childhood — personally inscribed art from comic book artist Milton Caniff, Boris Karloff characters, Flash Gordon cartoons. There are artifacts everywhere: pictures that have yet to be hung and gifts sent from fans cluttering the corners of the room. On a couch rests a mountain of stuffed animals gifted by past girlfriends.

In another wing of the home, Hefner's full-time archivist, Stephen Martinez, works in an attic-like space collating the monthly happenings of his employer's life into binders; there are now more than 2,000. Though parts of the Playboy brand remain popular, including the E! reality show featuring Hef and his ladies, "Girls Next Door," the magazine's circulation has plummeted. Hefner prefers to focus on how the project he started on a dollar and a dream became "the single most influential magazine in the 20th century."