

The world of GLAMOUR NOIR

Entrepreneur, banker and artist Keith turner, president and CEO of Calgary-based meridian merchant capital Canada, has put his left brain in service of his right brain to launch the multimedia project are you awake, which mixes music, a detective story, comic books and social media.

BY ERIC VOLMERS, CALGARY HERALD OCTOBER 24, 2010

It's inevitable that any conversation with Keith Turner will turn to questions about the old left-brain/ right-brain divide.

Turner is president and CEO of Calgary-based Meridian Merchant Capital Canada, an investment banker with a global reach who has created and managed loan and equity portfolios over a billion dollars. He's been nominated for Ernst and Young's Entrepreneur of the Year four times.

But he's also an author, songwriter, radio host and, most recently, the executive producer of an ambitious multimedia interactive detective thriller about a narcoleptic gumshoe and former felon who can see crimes in his dreams.

So, does Turner consider himself a right-brain person, where creativity rules his thoughts, or more of a practical, left-brain type?

"I'm a businessman who's also a writer," says Turner, on the line from one of his offices in Vancouver. "I'm kind of a right-brain person with a left-brain training.

"I believe that they are not necessarily that dissimilar," he adds. "I think whether you are an artist or a banker, you need a certain amount of discipline. Frankly, there's not a whole lot of difference between making a PowerPoint presentation to a room full of investors and actually being on stage."

Turner's project is called Are You Awake, which he has dubbed a

"glamour noir." It was unveiled earlier this month at the New York Comic Con, a celebration of graphic novels, comics and video games that is reliably populated with hardcore fanboys.

That was where Turner's Dream Detective Media Properties launched the Are You Awake trailer, as a four-minute "appetite whetter." They also hired actors to prowl lineups in New York, giving the 50,000 convention dwellers a comic book that could be used to "solve an online mystery" with the use of their smartphones or BlackBerrys.

Yes, it's all fairly complicated. It's an interactive comic book, online game, graphic novel, website and what Turner hopes will eventually be the basis for a television show or web series. Songs have been written, plans are underway for a fashion line and various layers of social media -- Facebook, Twitter, avatars and discussion boards -- are being put to use to promote the project.

But in the end, it all boils down to a high-tech and complex marketing blitz that Turner hopes will end with a television or movie deal.

The New York Comic Con was the first salvo in what he sees as a long-term, multi-platform enterprise.

"We cooked up some high-grade spaghetti and threw it at the wall and hope it has a good chance of sticking," Turner says. "What we really did here was, instead of going out and blowing our brains out making a two-hour movie and shopping it, we built this up from the back end. We went out and listened to people about what they may want, used the Internet to establish what was hot and what wasn't. Even before we made a thing, we had a distribution agreement in place. It's a rare commodity. It's a bit of a holy grail for independent producers, to go and get somebody who is interested in representing your property."

It doesn't take long into the conversation with Turner to realize that, while he may be the creative mastermind behind the project, he approaches it with a businessman's acumen and salesman's drive.

He talks of properties, business models, social media strategies, "known entities" and the need to monetize much more than revealing

any of the creative nuts and bolts that went into the storytelling. But Turner has written two self-published detective novels. He's an amateur songwriter and, judging by a profile in B.C. Business Online a few years back, a fashionista of sorts.

But even the world of entertainment needs a pragmatic approach, he says. That's where the left-brain training comes into play.

"I'm a bit of a cynic," he says. "I don't believe there's necessarily anything new under the sun when it comes to the entertainment world. I'm a major consumer of music and books and movies. So I know things have to hit certain buttons for the public to be interested. I do think we have something creatively that's fresh."

Turner says he would like to see the project go from a web series to a TV series, suggesting that his recent travels to New York and San Diego comic conventions was a way to build a loyal fan base. Fanboys who hang at conventions are nothing if not loyal.

"Our strategy right now is, using the social network we've built and the PR we've built, is to drive a deal in the web space that can morph into a television deal," he says.

Born in London, Turner moved to Scotland as a child. He went to the Edinburgh University before starting his career as an investment banker in New York City. He formed Meridian in Calgary five years ago and now splits his time between Vancouver and Calgary.

While he didn't want to reveal how much the Are You Awake project costs, he did say many of the investors are from Calgary and knew a sound business plan when they saw one.

"Why I like the detective genre, and always have since I was a kid reading Sherlock Holmes when I was eight years old, is basically that there's durability," he says. "You don't expect your hero to be killed off in the first book. We believe we have a cast of characters who will endure. They're colourful, they're believable. Whether it's a second or third book or second TV series, we know the genre has durability. Whether it's Sherlock Holmes or CSI. If you hit the right notes, it's not a one-shot wonder."

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