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## Where are they now? ó Interview with a Vader

Former city man's Internet video is a 'efarce' to be reckoned with

By Deb Anderson, Variety Editor

Who knew Darth Vader had a brother, Chad?

Back in 1993, when Menomonie native Aaron Yonda began doing a public access TV show in Eau Claire, that lineage had not yet been established. Now, having created Chad Vader for the Internet, Yonda is enjoying some celebrity that sprang from humble beginnings and a fertile imagination.

His first endeavor, Splug Urtaf, made for TV, was co-produced with friend Benson Gardner in Eau Claire. Friends John Lee, John Rompala and others contributed to the production that had most of its scenes shot in Menomonie. Splug Urtaf gained some attention for its unique sketch-type comedy, parodies, send-ups and genuinely original talk-show-based format. The videos are still available for rental at the Menomonie Public Library. And fans may remember a special farewell performance a few years ago at the Mabel Tainter Theater.

In 1996, after he graduated from UW-Eau Claire with a degree in English, Yonda moved to Madison, continuing the show with his new collaborator, Matt Sloan, a graduate of St. Norbert College in DePere. The pair met while doing improvisation comedy with ComedySportz, a now-defunct group.

Now neither one does improvisation, but it finds its way into their films, especially with dialogue. They have been making short films for nearly five years, completing a film a month on average.

Yonda and Sloan became co-directors of a group of filmmakers known as Wis-Kino. The film society's goal was to support and encourage the making of short films that are innovative and utilize just the resources at hand. The low-budget, quick-shoot methods are very much a part of Chad Vader.

Writing and directing, using minimal special effects for maximum impact of simplicity, they film under the production company Blame Society Productions, a name that reflects their dry sense of humor. Sloan's wife, Tona Williams, is the cinematographer and art director for Chad Vader. Yonda's fiancée, Courtney Collins, is producer. Assistant directors are John Urban and Doug Chapin. More videos can be found on the Web site, [blamesociety.net](http://blamesociety.net).

Together, Yonda, 34, and Sloan, 33, developed Chad Vader, an episodic Internet video filmed in Madison. Begun last June, Chad Vader is up to six episodes (episode six features the mayor of Madison) and has gotten more than 10 million downloads on YouTube and Myspace. Yonda and Sloan are currently working on episodes seven and eight, which will "round out the first season."

### Chad ó a true dark horse

Based on the notorious Star Wars antihero, Darth Vader, Chad Vader, by appearances, looks and sounds related, but that's where the similarity ends. He may seem like a force to be reckoned with, but has a much different approach to life in a much different occupation ó that of a bumbling grocery store day-shift manager. His empire doesn't strike back, but it may strike out at Empire Foods.

Like Star Wars, Chad Vader relies on special effects. To achieve the big-bang-for-your-buck emphasis, Lee was enlisted as sound engineer. Referring to him as a "technical wizard," Yonda said that Lee came up with the idea to use a synthesizer while recording Sloan's voice through a PVC tube. He also uses a rackmounted Digitech 2201 Artist effects processor to further refine Vader's utterances.

Soundman Lee's expertise, combined with Sloan's voice, spawned a winner.



photo: john urban  
Matt Sloan, as Clint, left, faces off with collaborator and former Menomonie native Aaron Yonda, as Chad Vader, in an episode from the Internet video hit.

LucasArts hired Sloan to play Darth Vader in the PC game "Empire at War: Forces of Corruption."

"We were able to create a very good pitch level for the voice," said Yonda.

Combined with Sloan's best James Earl Jones impression, the voice needed for the central focus was complete.

"We had the voice down perfect," said Yonda, who plays Chad in costume while Sloan films.

Yonda's attempts at creating the light saber effect were not easy. He finally resorted to the input of professional editors to achieve the look he was seeking. And now, even holograms materialize and spirits find their way into several episodes.

On occasion, Sloan portrays Chad's nemesis, Clint. Christina LaVicka, another cast member, who plays the love interest, Clarissa, has not only gained popularity, but penpals to boot, is getting to know people worldwide.

Brad Knight who plays Randy, Chad's boss, says that Yonda and Sloan are equally skilled in improvising and planning. Those talents come in handy since the pair have to take advantage of the time allowed to film at the local grocery store by night.

#### **Media takes note**

In Madison, Chad Vader is receiving rave reviews. To date, Yonda and Sloan have gotten a nod from the Wall Street Journal, New York Times and Good Morning America, to cite a few big names in media. And TV has come calling again ó the dynamic duo will be featured on VH-1's 40 Greatest Internet Stars on Friday, April 6.

Having both have left their regular jobs for a time ó Sloan at a bookstore and Yonda at metalworking ó to devote their time to filmmaking, they are banking on a lucrative future in film. Chad Vader is available to download for free, so Yonda and Sloan are working on a couple of major deals to earn income through Internet videos for major entertainment companies.

"We've gotten a few corporate clients who we're making 'viral' videos for," said Yonda. "And YouTube paid us to make a couple holiday videos back in December."

Things continue to look up, according to Yonda, the self-trained film artist, who said he's proud he got his start in video at Community Television in Eau Claire.

"We're working on a number of big deals right now that will be worth a lot of money," said Yonda. "Can't give details at the moment"

Blame Society's newest project is a short series entitled Morning Radio Mysteries headed to VH-1. For now, freelance work and other Internet projects keep the guys busy, too. But they also aim to move into even bigger territory as they stretch for mass appeal.

While the hoopla for Chad Vader is heartening, Yonda and Sloan hope that it is a means to an end: that viewers will acknowledge their versatility for a broader scope and take interest in their other work and the work yet to come. And, despite Chad Vader's popularity, Yonda said his favorite series remains Fun Rangers, about the humdrum capers of two weird friends. Hmmm, who could that be?

Even though Sloan works for LucasArts, copyright infringement is still a concern. Blame Society hopes that if George Lucas, director of Star Wars, comes after them, it's for encouragement and not litigation.

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#### **[House of Hope to benefit from Rotary Fest](#)**

"It's not just a place to stay," says Christine Cheevers, executive director of Interfaith Volunteers of Dunn County, of the House of Hope emergency shelter. The House of Hope is one of three programs managed by the Interfaith Volunteers of Dunn County and is this year's Rotary Fest fund recipient.

#### **[From shade tree to a work of art](#)**

"Trio of Waxwings at Lunch," pictured, is the grand prize for the raffle ticket sales at the free Woodcarvers Expo, Saturday, April 14, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Raffle tickets are available through local woodcarvers or at the Woodcarvers Expo on April 14.

#### **[ACT holds third Art Feast](#)**

Arts Coming Together (ACT) will hold its third annual "Art Feast" from 5

to 10 p.m., at Olde Towne Conference Center (903 Cedar Falls Road in North Menomonie), on Friday, April 13.