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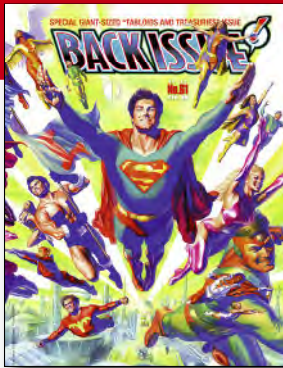
A TwoMorrows Publication

No. 1, Spring 2013

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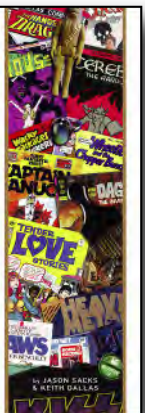
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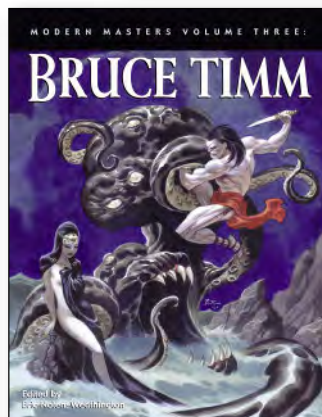
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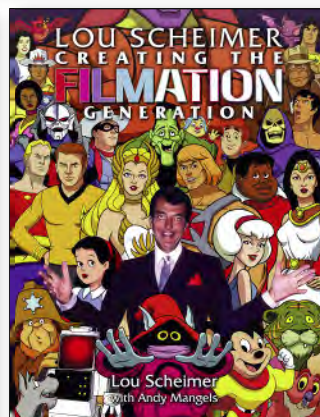
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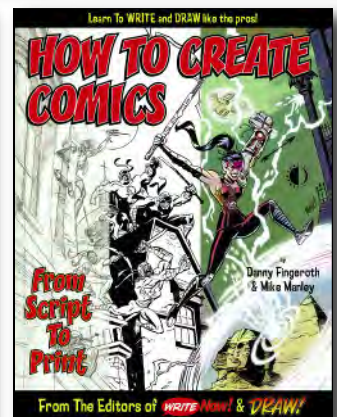
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Originally appeared as the cover of Kirby:
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Spring 2013 • The **New** Voice of the Comics Medium • Number 1

B O N U S P D F T A B L E O F C O N T E N T S

Captain America's Counterfeit Creators: Joe Simon & Jack Kirby's Star-Spangled Super-Star was, on respective occasions, attributed as the creation of Martin Goodman & Stan Lee! 3

Alex Ross Gets (More) Real: Portions of the *CBC* interview with the painter-comic book artist..... 5

Astro City's Kurt Busiek: Ye Ed talks more with the renowned comics scripter..... 16



CAPTAIN

and the Curious Case of the

Even after the team of Joe Simon & Jack Kirby suffered the indignity of being cheated out of royalties for their creation of Captain America, insult was added to injury when, in 1947, Timely publisher Martin Goodman is publicly given credit for originating the “Sentinel of Liberty” by a guy who certainly knew better — *Stan Lee*!

Simultaneous to the appearance of his article, “There’s Money in Comics,” in the November 1947 issue of *Writer’s Digest*, Stan Lee’s booklet, *Secrets Behind the Comics*, an inside look by the editor and art director of Timely Comics on how funnybooks are created, is published by Famous Enterprises. Included in the 100-page pamphlet is a focus on “exactly how Captain America was created.”

Well, not “exactly.” Bizarrely, Timely publisher Martin Goodman is cited as the creator of the star-spangled hero and — *surprise!* — there is no mention of Cap’s real creators, Joe Simon and Jack Kirby. This revisionism is particularly odd because, as any Marvel fan worth his/her salt knows, the author of the tract was hired in his initial comics job by the very same Joe Simon (then Timely’s first editor) and Stan functioned as a “gofer” for both Joe and Jack.

In 1985, much to Kirby’s chagrin, the Cannon Group lists Stan Lee as creator of Captain America in movie trade publication advertisements (trumpeting the eventually aborted film version).



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GEE, BUCKY, YOU WOULD THINK OUR PUBLISHER WOULD STRIVE TO BE LIKE “HONEST ABE” HERE AND TELL THE TRUTH, RIGHT? LIKE ABOUT WHO CREATED US?

YOU BET, CAP! YET SOMETIMES THAT HASN’T BEEN THE CASE! BUT EVERY RED-BLOODED, TRUE PATRIOT KNOWS WE WERE CREATED

by JOE SIMON and JACK KIRBY



NOT COOL: Variety’s Cannes film festival supplement included this ad which featured an erroneous acknowledgment giving Stan Lee credit for creating Captain America.

Left: Relettered detail from Captain America Comics #9 (Dec. 1941). Art by Jack Kirby & Joe Simon. ©2013 Marvel Characters, Inc.

AMERICA

COUNTERFEIT CREATORS

Secrets Behind the Comics scans courtesy of Javier Hernandez.

HERE IT IS!



HERE'S A MAGAZINE WHICH HAS BEEN READ AND ENJOYED BY MILLIONS OF FANS FOR MORE THAN 9 YEARS!

?

NOW LET'S FIND OUT EXACTLY HOW CAPTAIN AMERICA WAS CREATED!


and why...

63

IMAGINE YOURSELF LIVING 9 YEARS AGO, BEFORE THE WAR HAD STARTED...

ALL OVER THE WORLD THE NAZI MENACE WAS SPREADING!

AND, IN A BUSY OFFICE IN A HUGE NEW YORK OFFICE BUILDING, A PUBLISHER PACED IN A ROOM, DEEP IN THOUGHT...



THIS PUBLISHER WAS MARTIN GOODMAN, THE YOUNG BRILLIANT MAGAZINE KING WHO IS TODAY ONE OF THE GREATEST NAMES IN THE COMIC MAGAZINE WORLD!

MEET MARTIN GOODMAN, PUBLISHER

FROM HERE ON, WE'LL TELL MARTIN GOODMAN'S STORY - AND THE BIRTH OF CAPTAIN AMERICA, IN COMIC STRIP FORM!


MARTIN GOODMAN'S OFFICE 1938...

SOMETHING MUST BE DONE! THE YOUNG AMERICAN READING PUBLIC MUST BE MADE AWARE OF THE DANGERS OF NAZISM AND FASCISM! WHAT CAN I DO IN MY MAGAZINE TO PUT YOUNG AMERICA ON GUARD?

I KNOW! I'LL USE STORIES IN MY MAGAZINES WHICH HAVE NAZIS AS THE VILLAINS! I'LL TAKE THE STORIES FROM REAL LIFE!

SO WAS BORN A NEW KIND OF COMIC MAGAZINE PUBLISHING POLICY! A POLICY OF TELLING THE READERS THE TRUTH ABOUT THE NAZI MENACE!

AND SO WAS BORN COMIC MAGAZINE COVERS WHICH DARED TO BE HONEST, LIKE THIS...



MARTIN GOODMAN PUBLISHER

64

I MUST CREATE A COMIC CHARACTER WHO WILL REPRESENT FREEDOM'S BATTLE AGAINST FASCISM!

NO, THESE COVERS ARE NOT ENOUGH!

I MUST DO STILL MORE!

BAM!

DURING THE NEXT FEW WEEKS, MARTIN GOODMAN HAD THE NATION'S TOP WRITERS AND ARTISTS SUBMITTING IDEAS FOR A NEW PATRIOTIC TYPE OF CHARACTER...

SCRIPTS WERE SUBMITTED...

DRAWINGS WERE SUBMITTED...

66

UNTIL FINALLY, ONE CHARACTER WAS CHOSEN!



CAPTAIN AMERICA

SENTINEL OF LIBERTY!

BUT THEN-

67

MORE CONFERENCES HAD TO BE HELD TO DECIDE...

- WHAT TYPE OF COSTUME SHOULD HE WEAR?
- WHO SHOULD HIS ASSISTANT BE?
- WHO SHOULD WRITE AND DRAW THE STRIP?
- WHAT SHOULD CAPTAIN AMERICA BE WHEN HE'S OUT OF UNIFORM?
- WHAT VILLAINS SHOULD CAPTAIN AMERICA FIGHT?

AND MANY, MANY MORE SUCH IMPORTANT QUESTIONS HAD TO BE ANSWERED!

FOR WHEN A COMIC STRIP IS BORN, THE GREATEST EFFORT IS MADE TO SEE TO IT THAT THE COMIC STRIP IS PERFECT!



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Captain America, Human Torch, Bucky, Sub-Mariner and omics covers ©2013 Marvel Characters, Inc.
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Superman TM & ©2013 DC Comics

Above: Ye Ed just can't resist reproducing the cover art for his Comic Book Artist V2 #1 [July '03], with Neal Adams' pencils and Alex Ross paints, a dream come true for yours truly, who became a comics fanatic as a kid upon picking up Superman #233 [Jan. '71], mesmerized by Neal's striking orange cover.

publication of the *Mythology* art book to see if I would do a full-painted cover of the pencil sketch we printed of mine showing Uncle Sam giving the finger which I couldn't even remember we even published in the book but it was nice to know it got in there. And that led to a full painted cover of that and then whatever it was a year or so later... I think it was the lead-up to the election of Bush vs. Kerry that I did that cover of Bush biting the Statue of Liberty which I believe was a collaboration. I think they had an initial idea and it transformed a bit into what it became which I was very happy with because it technically doesn't have Bush with cartoonish fangs added in. It's really just sort of a lighting thing that makes it look more menacing than it was because the reference I found of him, I was able to mostly just cull those details and not really amplify anything too much. Later, after that, a less iconic image is the image I did for them of Bush and Cheney kissing, which was touching off the then very hot topic of gay marriage, which was becoming such a grand issue at that exact time. And then, when it came time for the run-up to the 2008 election, it was really me on my own, working with Bob Chapman at Graphitti Designs to do that [Obama] T-shirt. I had the idea and I wanted to do it. I thought it'd be fun and especially take advantage of one of his well-sold shirts of my Superman image figuring that, how can DC be upset? I'm stealing from myself and it's not going to be Superman's emblem. We did that and that



TM & ©2013 DC Comics

was the most successful T-shirt we've ever done. We sold sooooo many copies of that Barack Obama T-shirt. [...]

CBC: Did you take heat for those T-shirt images or Voice covers?

Alex: I think there was heat there to be felt but I just wasn't the one feeling it because I'm not on the frontlines of getting any e-mails related to me. For my Web site, I don't run that, so any kind of negative stuff that might come through... Even when I did *Uncle Sam* with Steve Darnall whatever it was, 15 years ago, Steve might have seen some negative postings and whatnot but since I'm not a technologically adept person, I don't check those things out and I don't have my wife go looking for them for me so I have to go by anything that might be reported to me by a friend saying, "Wow, do you know how much activity there is out there where people hate you?" And certainly you figure if it reaches that kind of level then I know something's gotten stirred up but for the most part, nothing like that occurred to me. Just some general things. I heard probably the worst of it is people that registered through other friends of friends, "Oh, you can't do an image like that of the President!" That was, of course, the image of George Bush. But, you had an overwhelming majority of people that seemed to feel sympathy for that.

CBC: Any idea how many Obama T-shirts you sold? Would Bob know?

Alex: Oh, I think it might have gone into the tens of thousands maybe. I forget. It's been a number of years. It sold very great for the first couple of years and then it's consistently sold somewhat since then. I've never done better than that. Previously, probably the most successful shirt before that was the George Bush one. Actually, he turned all three of the painted covers I did for *The Village Voice* into T-shirts.

The nice thing in doing the images for *The Voice* is that, because of the political commentary of them, it was something I officially would own. So, not really before having a copyright of my own on anything, it was an interesting experiment to have that now.

CBC: Were you familiar with Obama, being from the Chicago area?

Alex: Only vaguely. Really, when he was just a senator, I wasn't terribly up on him. I think I knew of him probably a good three or four years before because he started doing the public circuit of doing talk shows and things and I saw him in those places. If somebody went on *The Daily Show*, that's probably how I got to know who they were in the first place.

CBC: [Laughter] The Daily Show is the filter by which you know your politicians?

Alex: Well, you know, it does that for a great many people. In many ways, being a *Daily Show* guest means that you're capable

of going on there. Even if you're of a completely different ideology, you're able to handle it. That's a good measure of somebody, to know that they live up to that challenge. So Obama would have been one of those people doing that.

CBC: Was there any thought of doing anything this election season?

Alex: A thought, but nothing that was clear to me. Nothing that was clear as an image that would be likewise the same thing. And of course there's a sense of not wanting to be too aggrandizing in a way of him that it would come off as naïve. I think that what people didn't feel the same way during the initial election is that there was no sense of naïveté because we didn't know better. [laughter] There was a sense of, you know, we all believed this was going to work out and, to whatever degree, that didn't matter until you actually have the person in office. But I would have been happy to do something new if an idea really presented itself, if inspiration struck. I had inspiration just going back a couple of years ago to do a T-shirt that would have been a very right-wing

THE ART OF DYNAMIC REALISM

WITH NEAL ADAMS AND ALEX ROSS



Superman TM & ©2013 DC Comics.

vilifying shirt where I featured images of Rush Limbaugh and Sarah Palin and other commentators as sort of metaphors for the Batman rogues gallery with very close-seeming costuming added to them. Like treating Rush like he was the monocle wearing Penguin and such like that. I think my idea was... oh, who was the guy who used to have his own TV show on Fox... Ummm...

CBC: Morton Downey, Jr?

Alex: [Laughter] No, no, no! More recent! The guy who got kicked off after a few years.

CBC: Glenn Beck?

Alex: Yeah! Glenn Beck as a Joker-type figure with clown makeup painted on him and all that stuff like that.

CBC: Right.

Alex: Sarah Palin becomes like Catwoman and then I was sort of reaching for a fourth one so I made Bill O'Reilly a Riddler-esque looking figure. Well, anyway, my wife talked me out of doing it. Instead of getting more combative, stay on the more positive side is more the thought. Also, why give more attention to these people?

CBC: Right. Did you have any sympathies for Occupy Wall Street? We haven't really spoken for print in ten years. How do you look at what's going on in America?

Alex: [Long moan] I don't know how grand my thought process might be on this. You know, it did feel like, in much of the last four years that, once you were speaking out about more progressive issues, you would be labeled much more passionately by other people. We're in a culture now where we're all being encouraged to really despise each other. In such a contrast to the previous decade where, when George W. Bush was in office, you could bring up these kinds of issues and there was more of a general public perception that, yeah, something screwy is going on. But now the tables have turned because the left wing got their party in so now everything *they* did was vilified. It hasn't seemed quite as fair from, of course, my perspective. Suddenly the idea of

being as outspoken wasn't maybe as encouraged because you then begin to realize that a portion of your audience you could be relating to, like even with this interview, would be of such a different spirit that they'll then suddenly despise me for whatever views I shared in this way.

CBC: You know, it would seem to me that—who am I?—sitting in the sidelines, I've never worked within the industry, but it seems to me they very often miss the forest for the trees. When Archie Goodwin as an editor, when Harvey Kurtzman as an editor, who fostered this environment for creative people to come in — and sometimes super-controlling like Harvey, or sometimes just very open like Archie — and the work that resulted very often is of such high quality that it's always going to have a value, likely always to be in print in any number of different formats, consistently making money for whoever owns it — Mad comics, for instance. Sometimes I wonder whether in mainstream comics, when we get exceptional stuff, it's due to benign neglect. Is there too much control coming down from the top?

Alex: Well, I wouldn't say there's too many editors in comics because I know how understaffed the major companies are. I mean, hell, the one I work for most of the time, there's one editor in the entire company for God knows how many books. So editing is a craft and a skill unto itself, so I don't want to confuse what editors can do, and should do, with what the problems are. There are too many cooks in the kitchen, but that usually goes well above the editorial element and into the management up above. There's more of a brain trust occurring within the major companies of a very small handful of individuals guiding the entire direction for everything, and putting up these barriers. You know: "You can't use this character because he's locked in over here," or, "We gave you this project, but we're going to ask you to write this storyline to fit this thing we have going on over here," and so on. And there's a greater marginalization of talent, I think, almost than ever before. You can't do this

Above: Ye Ed will be forever grateful to CBA V2 cover and logo design team of Dave Bissel and Jim Titus, who also merged Neal Adams' pencils and Alex Ross' paints for what was intended to be a two-page opening spread of #1's color section. But, because of space constraints, 'twas printed sideways on a single page. well, a quarter of the intended size here, but at least the right orientation, fellas!



TM & © 2013 Marvel Characters, Inc.

Above: Alex's version of Jack Kirby's *Amazing Fantasy* #15 cover. Inset cover inked by Steve Ditko. **Opposite page top:** Proposed cover sketch, one of several which the artist told George Khoury in *The Jack Kirby Collector* #27 [Feb. '00], he "threw" at the Overstreet Comic Book Price Guide for the 1999 edition. This, of course, was the artist's re-visioning of Jack Kirby & Joe Simon's Captain America Comics #1 [Mar. '41] cover (upper inset). Another was a retake on Jack & Vinnie Colletta's *Mister Miracle* #1 [Mar. '71] cover (opposite page bottom), though the publisher chose *The Avengers* #4 image, seen on previous page. Alex Ross sketches courtesy of John Morrow & TJKC.

broad idea you might have with a character here because that'll get somewhat close to the big ambitions that this other guy has over here, and even though that guy's not going to get to it for a few years, we're not going to let you bring back the Joker or whoever might be the character property at that point. And just the fact that the last ten years of storylines have all been so buffeted about by the stunning turns of, you know, who's dead now, or who's going to be dying, who's breaking up this particular group, or who's messing up the look of this character, and that's how they're somehow demanding, forcing the remaining comic buyers into buying things they otherwise might go, "Oh, okay, status quo. I'm not going to buy that right now."

CBC: Does it really matter that there is, going back to the '80s, a John Byrne version of *Superman* and a Jerry Ordway version of *Superman*, and maybe never the twain shall meet? Does continuity have to be the great god? It just seems to be so short-sighted.

Alex: Well, I've been taught this enough to realize it's part of the ugliness of the world we live in that people aren't going to buy these things in the rabid kind of devotion that we're used to if you don't have these things seem to sort of intertwine, to have a living universe, in a way, and that's something that, as a buyer who only had so many funds growing up, I was always used to picking on the key special projects, or something that was a unique event book or crossover event, but not every character's main title. And

the only thing that keeps a lot of those readers on is the continuation of drama that pulls you in, not just to the one book month to month, but into all books that might tie in to that given book. Like, the second or third *Superman* title. So it's an ugly economic reality of comics that it just can't be broken, because otherwise they're just not selling the numbers they need to, and then they begin to think, "Oh, maybe we'll have to cancel this classic book that is otherwise a big part of history."

CBC: Or go back to #1.

Alex: Or go back to #1, yeah, and show that everything that all these craftsmen did for so long is suddenly negated and thrown back into history as if it's nothing but. ...

CBC: Did you have any idea what the story is with Karen Berger? Whether she quit, or whether she's...

Alex: Oh, she's gone?

CBC: Yeah, that was the big news of yesterday, but there were no details.

Alex: Oh, I didn't know that. Well, I can't say it's a complete surprise. I mean, they've been marginalizing her as well as what Vertigo is has been — But, then again, there's very strong editors and people in charge of Vertigo. I assume that Shelly Bond, she's still there, and she mostly runs that ship. But Karen is the founder of that corner of DC, which has been a beloved corner, as well as all the projects that were under Karen leading up to that were a beloved part of publishing. But at a certain point, the heads of everything over there have — There's no great love for that corner of DC. That becomes a remnant of a prior era.

CBC: Yeah. Well, one would imagine she could land on her feet rather well.

Alex: In comics?

CBC: In publishing somewhere.

Alex: Okay, publishing, probably, but, yeah, I don't know — I mean, not a whole lot of options in comics.

CBC: No, not a whole lot of options in comics. Why don't we, if we can, I think it was almost, it was nine years ago, almost ten years when we spoke for *Comic Book Artist*, Volume 2, #1. What's the last ten years been like for you?

Alex: I fear talking that way because I'm going to be editing myself way too much.

CBC: You fear talking? [laughs]

Alex: Well, I hate the idea that I'm going to hold back so much of whatever I have to say, so I'm going to parse my words so much that I feel like I'm going to be lying to people by my sin of omission. So I'll be speaking broadly—

CBC: You can generalize, right?

Alex: Yeah, I'll be generalizing, basically. You know, in the evolution of the last ten years for me, what it's meant is going from having a regular career path of designing projects I wanted to work on, things that were a long-scale ambition, things I may have envisioned years before and I finally got up to doing, and that would consume all my time. I basically graduated from doing only things like that to kind of eventually opening myself up to whatever came my way, because, if you follow what fortune I had from the beginning of the '90s, when I was able to, along with Kurt, sell *Marvel* on *Marvels*, and then go straight from that to selling DC on, first, *Kingdom Come*, then *Uncle Sam*, then the series of one-shots that took me into the new century, and then the comic book *Justice* was kind of a late-end addition to that plan of saying, "Okay, here's something more like a traditional comic book," but it fit my overall view, long view, of these things that were my grandiose ambition in comics of what I thought I should do with the majority of my time, with the greatest of my efforts being what I could do for interiors. And that came to an end with that project, with general fatigue of completion, and that for so many years I had postponed various things I was invited to be a part of and requested to do work for that would have asked a little bit of my time here, a little bit there, and I was always — Well, not always, but a good amount of the time turning those things down, and now I could finally see what it would be like to live in a career that was buffeted

about more by just where the wind was blowing, so I was less trying to guide the path of the storm and more let my boat get knocked about by it. Good metaphor? So that's what led me to a lot of the projects that people have seen me do a lot of covers for and a lot of things I've done design and guide work for. Like, for example, the Kirby: Genesis series that Kurt and I worked on together was one that I had no expectation of coming to pass, and then they emerged. And all of them were things that I was happy to work and collaborate on. Nothing was sort of a deficit of, "Boy, I'm ashamed of myself for even doing this." None of these things was far from the respect I would have for the projects I cared the most about, it was just trying to open my eyes to recognize, hey, you never know, something here might be one of the best things I've ever had a chance to work with.

CBC: And so has it been satisfying?

Alex: It has been satisfying. I mean, I'm gratified by the time to have also gotten a chance to live more of a normal life, because without the time I was putting into full interiors on the various projects I did, which would generally keep me working a seven-day work week, and much of that time when I was working, both when I was single and later when I was married, I would be working ten-hour days, often. I still work late into the night, but I get more time to basically live the life that I have wanted to live, that I have dreamed of living. So the first 20 years of my career were set up, hopefully, for earning the time I have now to maybe stop and smell the roses a little bit more, not work every weekend anymore.

CBC: The past work that you've done, is a lot of it in print? Marvels, Kingdom Come, the DC one-shots?

Alex: Yeah, to the best of my knowledge, the majority of stuff that I did, my lengthiest work on, interiors-wise, are all still out there, that people can find them in the average book store and find them online.

CBC: You obviously get royalties from this, right? Or whatever they would call it — incentives.

Alex: Yeah, yeah.

CBC: You do know they're in print because you get a check for it, right? Does a check come for this old work every six months, or on a quarterly basis, or is it every year so that you, it can help during rough times or whatever? It's just something nice to have? I mean, one of my philosophies is always have your work pay you back.

Alex: Yeah, I mean, and certainly that's been a consistent case much with the DC work because they have a very responsible accounting structure. They're very on top of that stuff. That's one of the things the company can still boast to people to this day, because the years that were put in the infrastructure of the way they ran things over there, they've got a strong system that monitors that, whereas Marvel is, say, a bit more fractious, where you just, you might get a check once a year, or every other year, depending on what you might have worked on for them. And, certainly, lots of things go out of print, so just having the trade collection of what you worked on once doesn't mean that always comes to you. I've been fortunate, though, that a lot of the key projects I did work on, something like *Marvels*, has remained out there. It's something that I take too easily for granted, because plenty of people work on astonishing stuff that hits big at a certain time and then peters out as far as how often it's kept in ready supply. You go to an average bookstore, what few exist, though, and find, you know, this thing's still on the shelves. Not everybody gets that option, so I can only imagine for guys we've known whose careers have been there to be on the grind, working on projects for ages, many of their things are barely ever kept in print. Some of the greatest creators in comics have barely had any of their work collected. Or in some case, the collections are only beginning now, after this long.

CBC: Yeah, it certainly is interesting how the volume of reprinted material that's steadily coming out. I was just considering the other day that the DC Archive editions, I remember when they started in 1986, 1987, and that they're still — You know, at a much slower pace and everything like that, but that's a heck of an achievement.

Alex: That actually started in '87?

CBC: Something like that. [The DC Archives began publication in 1989—Ye Ed.] Or maybe that was the Marvel Masterworks, the first one was around then [Marvel Mas-



Captain America TM & ©2013 Marvel Characters, Inc. Sketch ©2013 Alex Ross.

Mister Miracle TM & ©2013 DC Comics. Sketch ©2013 Alex Ross.



Above: Does Alex got it or does Alex got it? Ye Ed remembers the day he found this incredible Kirby: Genesis image zipping around the interweb thingle and he immediately selected it as his Technicolor screensaver. Great Kirby's Ghost, it's a beautiful explosion of Jack-created characters subsequently used in the Kurt Busiek-Alex Ross title — and the trio of spin-off mini-series, Silver Star, Dragonbane and Captain Victory. Space limitations kept yours truly from featuring it as a double-page spread herein, but readers can find it split into two covers on K:G #1 variants and properly displayed in the K:G trade paperback collection published by Dynamite Entertainment. Courtesy of Alex and Dynamite.

terworks began publication in 1987—Y.E.J. It wasn't long thereafter that the DC Archive editions came out. Anyway, that's quite a library of material that they now have... [Approximately 217 separate volumes to date—Y.E.]

Alex: Yeah, and I'm one of those crazy fan collectors who gets as much of that stuff—

CBC: Oh, really?

Alex: Yeah, I have every edition at least of the *Marvel Masterworks* [Approximately 195 separate volumes to date—Y.E.], and I might have missed a few of the DC ones, but, yeah, for the most part, I have a complete collection.

CBC: Wow, that's quite a few books. That fills up a lot of space, huh?

Alex: Yeah, yeah. In fact, I just had floor-to-ceiling bookshelves installed in my home because I needed the space with all the [laughs] various books I've got, which have been piling up for some time, so hopefully I will have licked it with this.

CBC: [Discussing the Universe X series] Was it collected?

Alex: Yeah, all the series, making a total of five trade paperbacks.

CBC: And how'd they do?

Alex: I believe most of them have been in print for a good long time. There may be some of them that are out of print currently, but over the last decade they've been out there in most of the bookstores I've seen, so knowing that did get out there. I don't know how much of, say, the second and third series was read as much as certainly the first, that was very successful. But, oh, well...

CBC: I think you nailed it right there as far as I remember my confusion at the series at the time was you did have a lot of these spin-offs and one-offs—

Alex: Oh, yeah, and that's all just, that's a creative—

CBC: I didn't know what I had and didn't have.

Alex: Yeah, that was a creative greed...

CBC: How many creative people are you in touch with — writers and artists — you're in touch with on a regular basis?

Alex: Barely any. Barely any. The friendships I've kept for a very long time I still have, with writers like Kurt, of course, and Paul Dini and I, Steve Darnall, and, of course, Jim Krueger. But, for the most part, I've learned through the hard way that maybe keeping such a tight connection with maybe some of the talent that is doing the physical work underneath you is not always — It can always lead to some explosion of... whatever, blowout. I'm trying to think of some way to phrase it that's—

CBC: Creative differences?

Alex: I don't know if that's even it. There's always a great chance for ego conflict, where if I'm giving notes directly to an individual that it could be taken poorly, that I might handle it poorly, or that you get all manner of disruption based upon how something is handled in that delicacy. And I'm not a trained editor. I should not be — I'm not a trained art director. But if I filter those notes through the person who is the facilitator of that, I've been able to see how the work does get done well, and that's a lot of what has worked well within my time with Dynamite. I'm getting to see any notes I've

wanted to be implemented be implemented. So I just know that there's, you know, no matter how much other creators I've gotten to know and be friends with can say they admired what my opinion might be, there's a breaking point. There's always a point you could push too far with it. [laughs]

CBC: *Do you suspect that there's a dynamic that's taking place here because of your success, your marquee, so to speak, that that is a part of it? Might there be, for lack of a better term, resentments, for instance, or jealousies, or envy? I mean, it must be interesting, if you're now going through the process of giving notes, and the notes are going through a middle person, and then that person is giving out notes, so you can see that you're getting things accomplished, you're going through, there's a sense of humility there, right? You're taking your ego out of it, and you want to see good work done.*

Alex: Oh, I don't know about — I wouldn't give myself that kind of clout. I don't think that I'm taking myself out of it enough in that sense. I'm—

CBC: *But you're being diplomatic, right?*

Alex: Hopefully that's what finally comes across, but if I just get a chance to make a note and it's been implemented by an editor who's playing the ultimate good cop/bad cop and everything — Now, on the one hand, I don't necessarily appreciate everyone being treated as just a hired gun that is not necessarily getting to make their own choices. I don't like that to be happening to me, or for me doing it to anybody else. So I'm sensitive to that, as well. I don't want to be party to that occurring to another individual. So I try and also be modest in any of the things I might be pushing for, but I know when I sit down to go through any amount of this communication, sending emails back and forth, that I'm ultimately just going straight for whatever my point is, not wasting time if I can cut something loose and say, "Look, this can fly, but here's what my real problem is. If you can just fix this one thing, this one element is bad enough," whereas not necessarily just grading the entire thing. And I've worked with people, oh, like, Kurt's a good one, where, man, when you get notes from Kurt, you get notes. And my friend Steve Darnall is the same way. Like, he gives some *loooong* notes on stuff, like, "I don't think this moment is exactly what was described." So I try to look for, like, "Uh, the costume is missing its gloves at this one shot, here." That's what I try to keep my comments to. And sometimes you just have to recognize that when something isn't interpreted the way that you could have hoped for, that, like, well, they just didn't get it. Let it go. It's not the end of the world. There are some places that I feel it is the end of the world, but I also have to recognize the place where I need to keep my greatest criticism would be on myself.

CBC: *Maybe that is the single most important thing to learn in dealing with other people is choosing your battles.*

Alex: Exactly.

CBC: *Just what is the right time. And raising kids, by the way, too. [laughs] Where can one be most effective in a situation? And,*

Kirby: Genesis TM & ©2013
Rosalind Kirby
Family Trust.

again, and we can edit this out if this is awkward for me to be asking you, though, but do you get a sense, I mean, you're, again, you have enormous marquee within the comics industry.

Alex: God, I hope so. [laughs] I still need to remain employed. I'm not independently wealthy yet, to be not working.

CBC: *I suspect that any number of artists from the '70s who had some high marquee, they do commission work and they get well paid for it. Do you look at that as a possibility for you, just to do commissioned work?*

Alex: I guess it is. I mean, those offers come in, but the thing is that I'm hoping that would remain the furthest outlier of survival for me, because I still have the market for original art that has been healthy for a good long while, where the things I'm commissioned to do one time, for one person, there still's an additional sell-through capability with a different entity over here where, again, the price fluctuates from the actual initial commission rate to things way above anything I imagined. So I'm happy to keep that going for as long as possible, and I'm not so directly opposed from ever doing commissions, but we generally haven't had to go into that arena yet. And I know that's been the province of a lot of creators that I admire. In some ways I know it's not that they only want to do commissions, but they just don't like maybe the creative directions the companies are in, or those companies are not inviting them back to the party. I have been invited back to the party in a number of cases, but for whatever they want of me, or whatever I think I want to do, it doesn't match up. So I've been an obstinate cuss when it comes to being part of the big publishers as a lot of other craftsmen are. That doesn't mean I disregard or dislike the work done by other people that work for them. It just means that whatever is right for me isn't matching up, exactly, yet, for what's going on there.

CBC: *Well, growing up on Marvel...*

Alex: Exactly, yeah.

CBC: *Are you working right now as*

Below: *A shattering explosion of Cosmic Kirbyness is depicted by Alex Ross in this detail from his and Jack Herbert's two-page spread in Kirby: Genesis #0. Courtesy of Alex and Dynamite Entertainment.*

Superman ©2013 DC Comics.





TM & ©2013 DC Comics.

we're doing this interview?

Alex: Of course, yeah.

CBC: And what are you doing right now?

Alex: I'm painting a cover for *Peter Cannon*, #8, specifically, and in this cover it's sort of making up for the prior month where I got to do a nice close-up shot of him that I was done within about a day. But I'm doing a shot of him being attacked by a mob of people where all the figures making up the cover are somewhere in the neighborhood of, like, fifty, all ganging up on him. And this just revolves around a bunch of mostly average. They're not characters in the story, they're a mob. And they completely gather around this figure, swarming him, as reflected in the story in the issue, and this seemed very appropriate as for relating the content of the story, but also for just sort of showing a different kind of spin on a cover, that here's the hero not posing in glory on the cover like I often wind up, like most of us wind up doing, but instead showing the difficulty. I mean, if anything, it's much

more comparable to that classic cover from *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* where the three characters are swarmed upon by — They're on that planet where it's overpopulated?

CBC: Right, right.

Alex: You know the one. So there's just tons of figures filling up the cover, and that's essentially the same kind of idea at play here in my design.

CBC: Wow. That's a lot of work, huh?

Alex: Well, I've got to always — Like, last week I did a cover of *The Shadow* amidst an entire cityscape in New York, with every little window painted and indicated, and very specific buildings played out, and not just making a bunch of crap up. And, in a way, it's just sort of always remind myself how hard some of the stuff is to get done, to never just completely turn out covers that only have a single figure and no background.

CBC: You know, I just sometimes sit back and marvel in gratitude that we lived in a world that had movie serials, and that had pulp magazines, and that had 10¢ comic books, 64 pages, full-color!

Alex: Yeah.

CBC: You know? And then we have all this stuff. Because I return to it, and sometimes I used to get in discussions with John Morrow in which he would just kind of, exasperated, he would say, "It's just comic books." But finally he's starting to turn around, going, "Well, it's comic books!" Like you were talking about Chris Ware, and you were talking about Dan Clowes, that it truly is an art form.

Alex: Well, the thing is, it can be both things. It can be complete tripe — Not tripe, sorry. It can be simple, disposable entertainment that's as lowest-common-denominator as you can imagine, and it can be high-falutin', self-important expressions of intimacy, and depth, and unique understanding of the human condition. It can be all those things.

CBC: Didn't you do a *Humn Torch* series? Am I misremembering?

Alex: No, no. Recently, yeah. In the last few years.

CBC: Dynamite, right?

Alex: Uh, well, Dynamite packaged *The Torch* for Marvel, but Marvel published it.

CBC: I was curious about that. What's the deal there? Again, that's what it was, that everything took place, Dynamite packaged the entire thing, or you dealt with Dynamite, they had a contract with Marvel?

Alex: That's right, yeah. Basically, before I had finished up all my work with, first, *Justice*, and then the time I spent doing covers for *Batman*, *Superman*, and the *Justice Society*, before I finished up all the run of those things I was doing then, Nick Barrucci had been working out the deal, with my blessing, with Marvel to try and get me back with them working on a brand new series, which I had nothing necessarily in my head I was trying to do was ambitious to try and pitch them, and he had this simple idea, which was crossing over *The Avengers* and *The Invaders*, and

that that could be a big success, particularly considering the enormous success *The Avengers* had begun enjoying in the last ten years. So he got that contract with them. It took a couple years to get it all coordinated, just to get it signed, and then, yeah, I was effectively working for both Marvel and him at the same time, because Tom Brevoort edited it, and all the work was commissioned separately through Dynamite, and then they were paid later by Marvel. It was a really good deal, and it had its extensions going into follow-up potential, which then allowed us, from the success

Above: During one of our interview segments, Ye Ed asked the artist what he was working on at that moment and Alex replied a cover for Peter Cannon Thunderbolt, #8 [Apr. '13], which was partly inspired by the Neal Adams cover for *Green Lantern* #81 [Dec. '70], seen as inset on opposite page. Ye Ed thinks another "crowd cover" of Neal's (seen inset at right), *The Flash* #195 [Mar. '70], is pretty nifty, too, particularly with that awesome color design! Sketch and final cover painting courtesy of Alex Ross and Dynamite Entertainment.

of that, to go into *The Torch* miniseries, which was something that I had wanted to work on ever since his previous big number anniversary, which was in 1999. Jim Krueger and I pitched something back then, and then now here it was 2009, and for his 70th anniversary, and it just seemed like we gotta get this done. This is the right time, we're reviving him, bringing him back into the mainstream of Marvel publishing, and he's their first hero, he should be up front somehow. And then the final project we had within that contract was just an *Invaders* reunion series that brought all these guys that had been revived, some by others, some by us, we revived Toro and Torch, and had all these original five members of the *Invaders*, or the All-Winners Squad, or whatever thing you want to note them for being, have them all together in the present day.

CBC: "You'll believe a man can fry?" I don't know...

Alex: It was one of the only things that made me happy with reviving Bucky, because I always thought, like, well, if Kirby decided somebody should be dead, you really should stick with that. Because if it made sense to him, I wouldn't second guess that guy.

CBC: You know, I talked to Kurt about this last night, and it's one of the sad, eye-opening moments, when I recently learned that Carl Burgos was, in the mid-'60s, pushing to gain the copyright on the *Human Torch*, and, perhaps circumstantially, at the same time, Marvel Comics kills the *Human Torch* in *Fantastic Four Annual #4*, and it was brought out in *Marvel Comics: The Untold Story* by Sean Howe, and it's just, well, how mean? [laughs] For one thing, you're reintroducing a character from the Golden Age so that you can reestablish the copyright on him, and then you kill him while the very creator who created the first Marvel hero is trying to get the trademark or copyright.

Alex: Right, I mean, that was such a weird thing to—

CBC: I read this a number of years later, but nonetheless, it was, like, so totally cool that the original *Human Torch* was back — and, wow, you know, the *Vision* connection Roy subsequently concocted making all these continuity connections — and it's just a f*cking business decision.

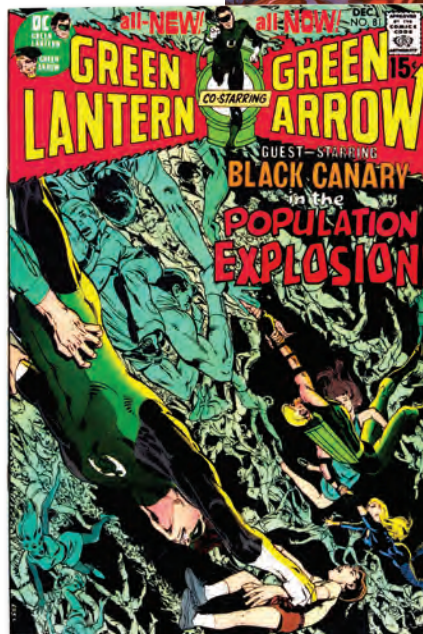
Alex: Yeah. One of the many rotten stories in the history of comics.

CBC: I never quite figured out the *Human Torch*. I mean, for one thing, he's not human, he's an android. Okay, we all know that. But he burns! I mean what kind of power is that? [laughs] What did you dig about him? I have to have a fanboy question like this.

Alex: What did I get off on with him?

CBC: Well, it's just like, you know, I mean, he really must seriously hurt the guys he goes after.

Alex: Oh, yeah, yeah. Well, artistically, what I responded to as a kid, aside from, you know, I liked *The Fantastic Four* and everything, but when I saw *The Invaders*, the blank-faced version of the *Human Torch* I thought was so unbelievably cool. Now, of course, it's ironic because my entire approach is to give him a face, which I do in a photonegative approach so it looks like he's lit from within, which to me was just a choice of how I've got to make use of my painted style to make it somehow sing in a new way, because if I do the faceless guy, it's like I'm leaving something on the table unrealized. Do you know what I mean? So I had to kind of put that love of what really turned me on — Because I loved all those characters from the '70s who had complete facemasks, starting with *Spider-Man*, going into *White Tiger*, and the *Human Fly*, you name it, anybody who had that kind of look, like the *Prowler*, I thought was the coolest, most mysterious thing



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Peter Cannon Thunderbolt TM & ©2013 the estate of Peter A. Morisi.

in comics, and so his faceless look really charged me up and made *The Invaders* one of my favorite books. You know, and having a little flaming kid sidekick would somehow seem absurd, but I'd think, well, the kid's on fire and flying. That's pretty cool.

CBC: I don't know. It probably all gets back to this reading *Steranko's History of Comics* and just trying to, like, comprehend — No, actually, All in Color for a Dime, and reading it,

and reading the chapter "Okay, Axis, Here We Come," and you're reading about these characters, and they're really pulpish and viciously brutal. The *Timely* characters were really rather grotesque and extremely violent in their dealings with the bad guys. It was just like, wow, you know, to be hit by one of these fireballs, you're really going to burn to a crisp. It's a horrible way to die for robbing a bank. [laughs]

Alex: Well, let alone what they did on the covers seemed to be pretty hard-core, because there's more than a few Alex Schomburg covers that show tremendous death occurring to



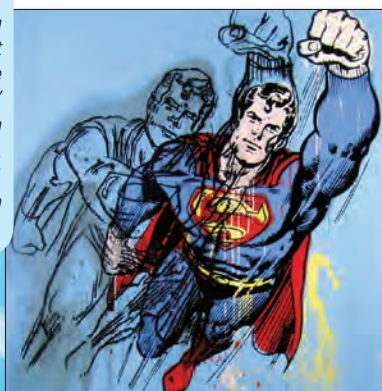
This spread: Above is Norman Rockwell's charcoal study for his abandoned United Nations mural. Alex is heavily influenced by Rockwell, especially the latter's lighting and composition, which Alex has incorporated into many pieces, most evident in the covers for *Kingdom Come*, *Justice* (trade paperback collection covers opposite), and, of course, this issue of *CBC*. Alex was celebrated recently by the Andy Warhol Museum, in Pittsburgh, with a gallery exhibit entitled "Heroes & Villains: The Comic Book Art of Alex Ross." Alex gifted the museum with his portrait of the pop art icon, below. Inset right is Andy's 1981 take on *Superman* by Curt Swan & Murphy Anderson.

the enemy, let alone the fact that he armed Captain America and Bucky. So the whole thing that even I was getting resistance on, not internally, but from people that saw it in *Marvels* showing it with Bucky with a machine gun under Cap's arm, like, well, yeah! He had a machine gun a whole lot of the time, at least on the covers. And I guess in the comics they weren't fighting the Axis as much as they were doing things on the Western front. They were still mostly stateside, in their adventures, I believe, isn't that correct?

CBC: Yeah, right.

Alex: And yet all of the covers immersed us in the actual war we were living at that time.

CBC: It's almost like a separate universe on the covers than what was taking place on the inside.



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Alex: Well, that's what it allows for creators in the last 40 years, including, starting with probably Roy Thomas and all the way up to the present, where we've now crafted this huge history of stories that took place during the war sending these guys overseas, but the great absurdity

there, too, is that most of these adventures occur in Europe, where we were in, for how many months were the American forces actually there? You know? I mean, most of America's involvement was in the Pacific, but we don't see nearly the amount of dedicated stories to that war because we had less intellectual connection to Asia and the Pacific. Or certainly wars on islands don't afford you the same level of dressing up a story as it would be to set something in Italy, France, or Germany. I only connected with the idea that we had all these *Invaders* stories happening around great, stylish castles that Baron Zemo had taken over, or whatever.

CBC: Bavarian castles, yeah.

Alex: Yeah, I mean, that

was always my impression of what the war was, and then to find out, like, wait a minute, we were only in Europe for how long? Oh, my heavens!

CBC: I know. I think of the *Sgt. Rock* stories, there must be three times the amount of *Sgt. Rock* stories than days that we were in the *European Theatre*—

Alex: I think *Sgt. Fury* and the *Howling Commandos* mostly was focused on the European War, and it's like *M*A*S*H*; here's a television show that lasted longer than the war they were documenting. Well, anyway, none of this needs to be used. [laughs]

CBC: Joe Simon said about Captain America that they were really horror stories starring super-heroes, and as I'm looking through the first ten issues of *Captain America* Comics, that's true. It's an interesting approach. It's not super-heroes as much as monsters, really, being fought by super-heroes. And horribly disfigured people.

Alex: But that's also an excuse for the jingoism of a lot of those stories, too. It's like, yeah, they're monster stories in retrospect because their representations a lot of times of the Japanese were so outsized in their ridiculousness and their racist interpretations that you have to reassess them as being something that was not necessarily meant to be real, or it wasn't responding to anything that was true. Does that make any sense? Do you know what I mean by that?

CBC: Yeah.

Alex: It's sort of like, "Oh, we never intended that to be what we really thought about the Japanese."

CBC: Weellll, that doesn't really hold up very well.

Alex: Well, you know, it's all part of the same discussion that gets into, like, what exactly did Will Eisner mean with—

CBC: I knew you'd bring that up. [Alex laughs] That one hurts. That one hurts.

Alex: The thing with him is, I was just thinking, he at least owes something for all that time that he did one of the most well-illustrated racist caricatures ever done in comics. [laughs] It's almost worse in Eisner's hands because his art was ten times better than the average artist, because when he drew, what was his name, *Ebony*?

CBC: Yeah, *Ebony*.

Alex: When he drew *Ebony*, it wasn't just like the poor draftsmanship of like, say, how *Steamboat* in *Captain Marvel* comics was drawn, but here's this extremely well-drawn caricature, but it's a cruel caricature, and I would think that Will would have had to do something based in the African-American community in his many years since I was born that he's done original graphic novels, and I guess he did do this one that was based in Africa that he did, I think, somewhere about 12 years ago. Are you familiar with that?

CBC: Well, he did a fairy-tale adaptation of a tribal folk story that was African.

Alex: Maybe I'm thinking of that. But I thought it was a full graphic novel.

CBC: You know what I love? I always get these fanboy things, to a certain degree. I remember the absolute plea-



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sure of getting a Kamandi book.

Alex: Uh-huh!

CBC: And to realize that, okay, you got page one full-page splash, then you open it up, you've got a double-page splash of pages two and three. And he did all these pages that were, like, four panels to a page of in-your-face, frantic action. I used to tease my brother — because I was the Demon guy and he was the Kamandi guy — it would take literally, two-and-a-half minutes, three minutes, to read the entire comic book. You know, we would use a stopwatch to see how fast it would get to the last panel. The Demon was always more words. [laughs] So I was one that took a little longer and stuff like that. But it was, part of it was the driving force that would just pull you into the comic and spit you out right at the end. It was just like, amazing. It was an amazing experience and I'll never forget it. When you channel Kirby, you really do get it spot on, it feels right to me. And I'd love to see that splash page, double-splash page, four panels, you know. [laughs]

Alex: Well, the problem with me is that I never run out of excuses for another splash, or another spread, or layouts that — Because, as a layout artist, I am a 100 percent Neal Adams disciple, whether I want to be or not. It's what's in my bones, so you'll get those angled panels like Neal did. For Kurt the layouts he would get from me for this stuff was never anything he envisioned, because he thinks in more of those squares laid across a page, the simple horizontal rectangle shapes. That was more akin to the comics

he grew up with, and I like to think of panels coming across like these little miniature paintings, not for the notoriety of it being a painting, but for the idea of every single thing being of its own impact and worth, graphically. Now, of course, there's a much more unconscious and simple, direct way of that thinking that came through Jack's hand, where no amount of power is diminished by the visual shorthand of the, you know, nine panels a page. When it has to come through my hands, because there is a certain deadness that can occur through realism, whether it's mine or just realism in particular. It's almost like you need to add that extra element that's pushing things out in the way that Jack's simple linework and presentation of reality would do naturally. So he could confine it in a square and it would still be bursting. Every figure, every angle, would still be bursting with energy. But if I did the same panel one 100 percent realistically, it's going to be subdued unless I'm giving you that further kind of Neal Adams twist, you know, the worm's-eye view, or bird's-eye view. There's so many things that artists like me have learned in the last 40 years from the talents like the layout style of John Byrne, George Pérez — Hell, I'll even say, when I was 17 and 20, I was very influenced by what Dave McKean did with *Black Orchid*, *Arkham Asylum*, layout styles that pushed things in directions that weren't the norm before. And, again, the biggest guy will always be, for me, is Neal Adams. Neal Adams is some particular mountaintop of excellence and execution that I always hold as sacred.

fin

KURT BUSIEK



More of the CBC interview on the Art of Writing Comic Books
and Revitalized Life in the Age of Marvels



CBC: Can you break down what your job is? For instance, how do you go about approaching a story?

Kurt: Oh, jeez. [laughs] Now you're asking a complicated question. There isn't one specific way I'll approach a story. I mean a story can spark from a whole bunch of different places; from seeing something and thinking, "Oh, you know you could do a story about that," to saying, "Well, we haven't seen this character in a while.

What would they be up to?" so that you're sort of asking the question, "What happens next?"

You know, you could start from setting: "I want to tell a jungle story." You can start from theme: "I want to tell a story about the heartbreak of young love," "I want to tell a story about the effects of illusion on people," or you can simply go, "Boy, it'd be nice to tell a story with Ultron."

So how I approach a story varies, depending on what kind of story it is. Typically, just to go the easy one, if I was going to be telling a story, an *Avengers* story, about Ultron or Kang or something, I would go and look at all of the previous appearances and say, "This is what they've done, what would they do next? What's the next chapter? Given all that they've learned, given the defeats they've suffered, given their motivations, the things that drive them, their obsessions, what are they going to do next?" Because you don't want to see a character come back and do the same damn thing he did last time. But at the same time, you don't want him treated like this is a completely different idea. You know, if you're going to do an Ultron story, it had better be in some way about robots and in some way about Ultron's Oedipal obsession, but you try to figure out, how do I take it further? Or at least I do.

In the case of building a story around a theme, I mean, the very first issue of *Astro City* [Kurt Busiek's *Astro City* #1, Aug. 1995, "In Dreams"] was about — I had originally come up with that story because Scott McCloud was challenging me to do a 24-hour comic. And I never got around to that, but I was thinking, what would I do if I were going to do one?

I'd been reading this book called *Catapult: Harry and I Build A Siege Engine*, by Jim Paul, which is about a couple of guys who got an arts grant to build a catapult and fling large, heavy things through the air. So I was thinking about that, and thinking about flight, and about what flight would feel like. And for this 24-hour comic I was thinking about doing, I wanted to do a story about flight and what flight would feel like, not simply in a physical way, but in an emotional way. Would it be freeing? Would it be exhilarating? And out of that

built this story about a super-hero who could fly, but who never had time to enjoy it. And it developed into this theme that turned out to be a lot more universal than I had originally thought it was, which is about doing what you love and being under so much pressure doing it that you don't have time to enjoy it, so

you don't have time to experience it in the way that you love. And there's a lot of people who — you know, work, family, all kinds of things — are in a position like that. And so the Samaritan story built around that. I don't know, have I rambled on long enough? Have I answered the question, or at least started an answer?

CBC: I guess we're getting there. [chuckles] I know that it's difficult to quantify, but how much is internal? How much is, "Oh, gee whiz, I want to do an Ultron story because Steve Englehart did a cool Ultron story." [Kurt laughs] And yet, you did answer. You were talking about the internal pressures of life and about doing something that you love, for me to switch that a little bit and ask if comic book writing is a labor of love for you? Is it a primal desire within you?

Kurt: Well, it's certainly a labor of love and it's one that can end up under so much pressure that I don't have time to enjoy it, where I'll take on an assignment because oh, man, that'd be so much fun to do, and then it has to be done by such-and-such a date and it has to be done under certain circumstances. And when I'm actually doing it, I'm trying to get it done in order to meet the deadline and I'm not necessarily able to have that sense of "Oh, I love this" that I imagined when I took on the assignment.

And part of that is if you're writing three books a month and they offer you something else, well, you know, you imagined the process of thinking, mulling it over, working out a story — but really, if you're going to fit it in around three other monthly assignments, you're going to be squeezing it in where there's time. [chuckles] You're just not going to have the air there to appreciate the process because you're going to be in a hurry. But yeah, I mean certainly in doing stories, sometimes there is a sense of "Man, I really liked what Steve Englehart did, or what Roy Thomas did. I want to do something like that." And in the case of doing a Kang story or an Ultron story, those are probably two of the *Avengers'* top three villains, so if you're writing *Avengers*, the idea of "Hey, let's do a Kang story, let's do an Ultron story," it's just always out there. It's like doing a *Fantastic Four* series and thinking, "Ah, I should really do a Doctor Doom story." With me, my

Interview conducted by
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Inset right: Alex Ross cover for the *Marvels* collection is a homage to John Romita, Sr. (layout) and Harry Rosenbaum (paints) cover of *The Spectacular Spider-Man* #1 [July 1968]. **Inset page opposite:** Courtesy of Dynamite Entertainment, Alex's cover for Kirby: *Genesis* #8 [July 2012] and vignette of Brent Anderson's Samaritan from Kurt Busiek's *Astro City*.



feelings like that.

CBC: What is the difference between playing in other company playgrounds? Astro City, obviously some of the archetypes are based on well-known characters and yet you certainly embraced them and made them your own.

Kurt: I'm sorry, that's not actually true. I mean what you said, actually, I'm not sure it makes grammatical sense. You said "archetypes based on well-known characters" and that's not what archetypes are.

CBC: Okay, go ahead.

Kurt: I don't mean to seem snippish or anything, but the *Astro City* characters are based on archetypes and there are other characters who are also based on similar archetypes. But what I've tried to do on *Astro City* is I try to get underneath the character as a symbol. So I don't go, "Oh, I need a character like Spider-Man." I go "You know, Spider-Man's kind of a clown hero, always joking, always bouncing around. I need a character who fills that kind of role who's a clown hero." But that's not looking to recreate Spider-Man any more than it is looking to recreate, say, The Creeper or The Blue Beetle or anybody else who's that kind of energetic, urban, leaping-around character. When we created Jack-in-the-Box, I mean we literally said, "What's the archetype of this whole class of comic book hero?" And it was just like trickster, clown — okay, what can we do with clown imagery? A jack-in-the-box is a clown image, a jack-in-the-box has springs, a jack-in-the-box can bounce around — Jack-in-the-Box, now we're working on an idea that's as basic and simple as any of the others, but there's no elderly aunt, there's no radioactive spider, there's no J. Jonah Jameson. The idea was not to treat Spider-Man as an archetype, but to say "Spider-Man, The Creeper, characters like that, they represent — they are different faces of a particular archetype. Let's take that archetype and put our own face on it." I don't know if that's really making sense, but a lot of times, people will look at *Astro City* and they'll say, "Aw, you're just telling Superman stories," or, "You're just telling Batman or Spider-Man or whatever —" and I'm not. That's not my interest at all. If I wanted to tell Spider-Man stories, I'm sure Marvel would let me. I mean I did it for two years in *Untold Tales of Spider-Man* and I'm pretty sure they'd pay me to write *Spider-Man* stories if I wanted to now. But Jack-in-the-Box, in the example we seemed to have stumbled onto, Jack-in-the-Box is a second generation super-hero, a character driven by the fact that he grew up fatherless and has a son and he doesn't want his son to grow up fatherless. There's nothing about Spider-Man in that. So Jack-in-the-Box owns a business, Jack-in-the-Box is a — I guess Spider-Man created his web shooters, so that the fact that Jack-in-the-Box builds his own super-powers, you could say there's a connection there, but it's coincidence. We decided that if he's going to be a clown hero, a jack-in-the-box is a nice symbol, a jack-in-the-box is a machine, so how about a guy who builds toys, taking those principles of toys and turning them into super powers? And that's where the idea came that Jack-in-the-Box was a toy manufacturer. So if you see that, and I realize I'm sort of nit-picking to some extent, we're not saying, "Let's start with an existing comic book character and do our version." We're saying, "What are the archetypes?" Superman and many other characters fulfill a kind of a "savior" archetype; Batman was something that Bob Kane and Bill Finger built out of earlier characters like The Shadow and The Scarlet Pimpernel, who themselves are built around this archetype of the vigilante, the scary guy in the dark. And what I did in creating The Confessor wasn't say, "Oh, I need a character like Batman," but say, "This archetype of the scary guy in the dark, there's another character built on that archetype and that's Dracula." Now Dracula and Batman aren't remotely the same character, but what if you saw a character that seemed to be a nighttime vigilante and he turns out to have more in common with Dracula? [*chuckles*] Then we're building a new character. You know, that's not Batman. There are certainly similarities, but the point

Above: Alex Ross cover for *Astro City: Dark Age #1* [2005] featuring Jack-in-the-Box, Kurt's "clown hero." From the original painting, courtesy of Heritage Auctions.

particular fannish tendencies also lean toward "Boy, I'd really like to bring back Ixar and the Ultroids," who appeared in two issues [*The Avengers* #36 & 37, Jan. & Feb. 1967] by Roy Thomas and Don Heck, or maybe it was Stan even [*It was Roy — Ye Ed.*], and I thought that there were some cool ideas there. I talked to Tom Brevoort, the editor of *Avengers*, about bringing them back and he said, "Well, you know, you're working with George Pérez, bringing back someone who maybe needs to be buffed up and made to look cooler and more modern, you're working with the perfect guy to do it." And I came up with an idea for the story and then just never got around to it. But there's nobody, *nobody* out there itching to see the return of Ixar and the Ultroids except me, so the inspiration for that is I liked reading that story when I was younger. I'd like to catch up with those characters and see what's going on. Bringing back Ultron or Kang is more like, who are the big, heavy hitters in the *Avengers'* rogues' gallery? Can we do anything with them? Because you do a good story featuring the A-level villains, that's going to be a crowd pleaser. It's also going to be fun to do for me because I'm part of the crowd, you know. I like a good Ultron story. So if I can write one, that's real good. If you ask me to write a good Mr. Sinister story, I won't have as much of a good time because I was never wild about him in the first place. So the thrill of doing the story would be much more about what I could find to bring to the character and not about any fannish memories of "Oh, boy. I loved that Mr. Sinister story back when I was however-old" because I don't have any



of creating the character was not to have a Batman-like character. The point of creating the character was to have the archetype of the nighttime vigilante and have something that we could do with that that was different, that was new, that was our own thing.

CBC: With the naming of the streets, the naming of any number of things within Astro City, you're acknowledging comic book creators. There's a running subtext about the history of comics itself in the series.

Kurt: Yeah, that's right. Our conceit for building the history of Astro City was to imagine that there was a company out there called Astro Comics and it had a history not unlike the others. So in the 1940s, they were reacting to the same kinds of cultural touchstones and imperatives that Marvel Comics and DC Comics and other comic book companies were. In the 1950s, you know, they were reacting to the Red Scare, they were reacting to monster movies. In the 1960s, they were reacting to the Summer of Love. Back before there were super-heroes, there were pulp-type heroes, there were war heroes, and those kinds of shapes and ideas that affected the development of comic book history, they affected Astro City history as well. So when we create a character who debuted in 1955, we're not saying, "Well, it happens to be 1955, and here's a character." We're saying, "If it was 1955, and we were creating a comic book character for the kind of comic book market and culture that existed back in 1955, who would fit that kind of role?" So that's why, for instance, we have a super-hero version of Cleopatra who showed up around the time of the Elizabeth Taylor movie. Back when that movie happened, Cleopatra showed up in a whole bunch of comics and it was because "Hey, Cleopatra's in the public domain, she's in a big movie, let's do Cleopatra in some stories and maybe we'll sell a few copies." And I imagined that the editors and creators at Astro Comics would go, "Hey, Cleopatra's going to be a big thing. Let's make her a super-hero." So I wanted the history of Astro City to have the kind of familiarity of its own history that the comic book industry as a whole has, as opposed to doing something like, say, [the George R.R. Martin-edited super-hero/science-fiction prose anthology series] *Wild Cards*, which says, "We're going to postulate that there was this event and then we're just going to spring off it in completely different ways," and you end up with something that does not look like a traditional super-hero universe because it's not playing off of the same history and the same events. Does that make any sense?

CBC: Yes. This summer, I sent you an e-mail, one also sent to any number of other comics creators about Jack Kirby and how he has been treated. The original pitch was asking

for contributors to imagine a world where Jack Kirby was treated fairly. And you brought up an example that was really very much at the beginning of his career. If indeed you're channeling the real history of comic books through Astro City, what would be a perfect world for comic books in a way? Have you imagined that, like are there other events that you could see it being better played out for everybody involved, perhaps?

Kurt: Well, I think we're conflating two different things here. *Astro City* is not intended to be the comic book history as it should have happened. I mean *Astro City* doesn't even get into the idea that if there are fictional creators behind these characters — other than Brent, Alex and myself, and we're not usually fictional — how were they treated? We can't really deal with the question of somebody like Kirby getting fed up at one company and going over to another company for a while because we've just got the one universe. [chuckles] So we're not actually treating *Astro City* as an ideal business environment for comic book creation over the course of its history; we're just taking *Astro City* as a super-hero history that played off of American history and world history in similar ways to the way other companies did.

I mean Marvel created S.H.I.E.L.D. in the 1960s as a response to *The Man From U.N.C.L.E.*, Wally Wood and the

Above: Kurt Busiek (wearing the hat at right) attending a store signing with artist James W. Fry III, sometime in the 1980s, at the Dream Factory, in South Norwalk, Conn.

Above right: The same event (promoting *The Liberty Project*, an early Busiek effort published by Eclipse Comics) with (left to right) colorist Adam Philips, artist James Fry, writer Busiek, and K.B.'s past mentor, artist/writer/editor (and onetime Comic Book Artist proofreader!) Richard "Claypool Comics" Howell. Pix courtesy of KDB.

Below: Kurt sans chapeau in this vintage pic of the future scribe while attending New York's Syracuse University in 1979. Courtesy of KDB.





for three years and then Brent says, "Oh, they offered me *Batman*. I want to draw *Batman* for a while. Goodbye," and now I can't do it any more. So Brent and Alex each have equity in *Astro City*, but I control it. You know, from the point that they stepped in, it was clear that I got to be the Big Dog on this one because none of us expected that seventeen, eighteen years later, we'd still be working on it.

CBC: How many issues, all told, have there been?

Kurt: Oh, I don't know. I mean not nearly enough. [mutual laughter] But that's because of illness and stuff like that, but who would think that if you start working on a comics project in 1995 that you're still going to be working on it in 2012? Brent didn't expect he'd still be working on it, but he's still enjoying it. And *Astro City*, when it comes out, still sells well enough and it makes money and so everybody's having a good enough time to stay, and it's making money so that we can keep doing it. But going into it up front, we didn't know that.

Backtracking to your question, when I created *Astro City*, what I started with, I built up enough stuff and then went to Alex and asked him if he'd be willing to design characters for it and the whole ball started rolling. I had been talking to Marvel about doing an ongoing *Marvels* series and the idea wasn't going to be "Here's the adventures of Phil Sheldon." You know, as far as we were concerned, Phil Sheldon was done after the first series. We were talking, we were going to do a sequel series, but Phil wasn't going to be the lead character in the sequel. Charles and Royal Williams were — and then they turned out to be the leads in *Astro City: The Dark Age*. See, the idea was it was going to deal with Marvel history by taking various events and showing you a normal person's eye view of it. Let's say somebody who is working as an emergency room technician on the night the X-Men died in Dallas or somebody who is up against Matt Murdock in court, and the more we roughed this stuff out, the more I realized that this wasn't going to work.

In the first *Marvels*, we started to have editorial trouble the minute it was clear it was going to be popular. Once artwork started to be shown around at conventions and people started to get excited about it. Up until that point, it was just this four-issue mini-series by some journeyman writer who got to do *Spider-Man* fill-ins every now and then and some new artist who was good, but he'd never done anything before, really. So when scripts went to editors for their input and approval, they just said, "Sure, fine, whatever." And when it was clear it was going to be popular, then they started saying, "Wait, wait, wait, wait, this is going to be a thing. I want in on it." So we started being told, "No, no, J. Jonah Jameson could not be around in issue one because he's younger than that." And I pointed out the math and how old Jonah had been established as in the past, how old he need to be during that time and I said, "Look, it's fine. He's this old, therefore he can be that old." But I was told, "No, you can't do that." And that's why J. Jonah Jameson is never named in the first issue. We couldn't take him out because it had already been painted. We were working on issue four, but we could change the script so that he's some unnamed guy who sure seems like J. Jonah Jameson, and everybody who reads the story knows that he's Jonah, but the editor who didn't want it to be Jonah can say, "Yeah, it's not really him. Look, he's never named." That was just one example. When we were working on the sequel, there was a scene in the first issue where again, the *Spider-Man* editor told me, "Spider-Man wouldn't do that." And I said, "Spider-Man did it. We're re-creating a scene from a Gerry Conway-Ross Andru issue." He said, "No, no, you can't have Spider-Man do that. Spider-Man wouldn't do that." And I just — I don't know what to say. I was literally showing what happened in an actual comic that had been published years ago and I was being told, "No, you can't show that. That would not have happened," even though it actually did. So we had to find ways around that sort of thing and I just sat there, going, "Doing this sort of thing every month? Needing to get

Above: Not entirely sure of the context of this one-pager but writer/penciller KDB tells us it's from the mid-'80s, and was inked & lettered by Adam Philips, currently on staff in DC's marketing department (and CBC pal!). Courtesy of KDB.

guys at Tower created the T.H.U.N.D.E.R. Agents. Looking at that, you're not saying "S.H.I.E.L.D. exists, therefore there should be some parallel to what you're saying." There was a response to James Bond and *The Man From U.N.C.L.E.*, and that response showed up in comics in different ways. So that response would show up in *Astro City* in some way and that's not a question of whether it's ideal or not. That's purely a matter of those being the cultural triggers at the time.

You know, there were probably superdogs in *Astro City*, dating back to back when Lassie and Rin Tin Tin were really popular because that's when superdogs started showing up in comics as a general thing; because they were popular, dogs in the movies and on TV. So comic book companies said, "I'm going to latch onto that and we're going to do Krypto and we're going to do Ace the Bat-Hound and we're going to do Rex, the Wonder Dog." And those are all DC examples, but you can probably put together a list of thirty superdogs from the late '40s and 1950s that were just reactions to the popularity of those characters. That's just a reflection of how popular culture reacts to other popular culture.

CBC: *Astro City* is owned by you and Alex and Brent, correct?

Kurt: Yeah.

CBC: Was that a conscious decision that no one else is going to own this but us?

Kurt: Yeah. Especially also going into it, I said to Brent and Alex, "Look, this is very, very personal to me and I want to make sure that we don't get into a situation where we do it



The Fantastic Four and the X-Men TM & ©2013 Marvel Characters, Inc. Art ©2013 Kurt Busiek

approval from the *X-Men* office, the *Spider-Man* office, and the *Fantastic Four* office, and whatever; this is going to be a nightmare."

CBC: Do continuity glitches equate to negative cash flow in any way? Or is it just self-justification for editors to hold onto their jobs?

Kurt: I don't — you know... I - I - I, you know... [sighs]

CBC: Speculation? [chuckles]

Kurt: Yeah, I'm sort of at a loss because I'm the guy trying to not have there be continuity glitches. [Jon laughs] You know, I'm the guy trying to say, "I want the history to be what the history was shown to be." And when I'm told, "No, you can't do that," then I'm just sort of pounding my head against the wall, going, "Why can't I show what Marvel Comics has already shown?" [laughs] You know, these are stories that now have been reprinted in *Masterworks* or *Essentials* or whatever. They hadn't at that point, not very many of them, but there's a certain amount of protectiveness, I guess, where the editor is saying, "I need to protect my character. I need to make sure that they are portrayed well." And oftentimes, what that turns into is, "I need to make sure that the character, when my character appeared in someone else's book, he's gotta look good. He can't make any mistakes." And to me, well, if you're dealing with Spider-Man, that's what he does. He makes mistakes and he fixes them because he's not Superman. He's somebody young who's figuring it out as he goes along and he screws up and he fixes things. But it seems in some people's eyes, that it's okay to have a story show your hero screwing up if it's his own book because you're going to get to show him coming through and triumphing in the end. But if it's somebody else's book, well, they're not showing a character as a fully-fleshed human, they're just dissing him. They're just saying, "Look at the screw-up," [chuckles] and I don't know, in some cases — I hate to keep ragging on Spider-Man and Spider-Man editors, but there was a point where I was up at the Marvel offices, and this was when I guess Byron Preiss was doing

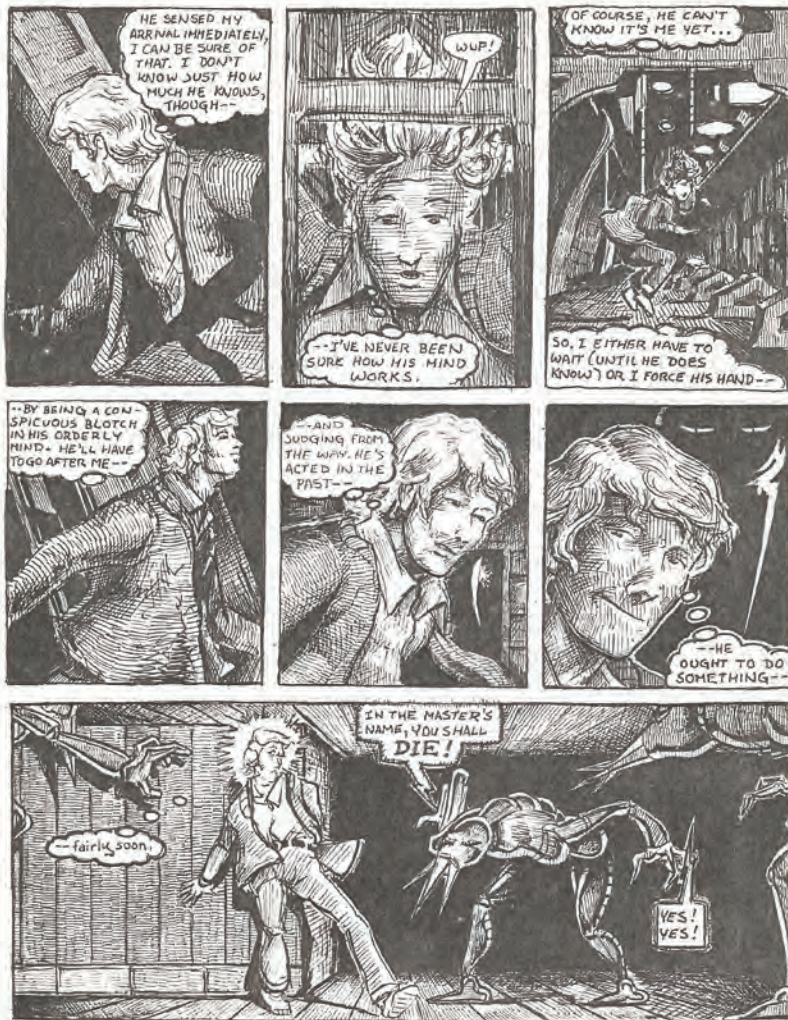
Spider-Man novels. They had the Marvel novel license and they were doing novels and short stories with the Marvel characters and the *Spider-Man* editor told me, "Ha ha, you'll never believe this. I had to just tell the Byron Preiss people that no, no, they can't do that story. Man, it's just like no, Spider-Man doesn't have radioactive blood. That's from that TV cartoon theme song." And I said, "But you remember the Master Planner Saga? The best *Spider-Man* story ever? Stan Lee and Steve Ditko? Where Aunt May got a blood transfusion from Spider-Man and now she's dying because his blood is radioactive and Spider-Man's got to get the ISO-36 back from Doctor Octopus and it's this whole big thing? Yeah, he's got radioactive blood." He thought he was protecting the character.

CBC: "Not my *Spider-Man*." [mutual laughter]

Kurt: Well, he just thought, "Boy, they don't know anything but the cartoons." But it turned out, no, that line in the cartoon may sound stupid, [Jon laughs] but it's actually based on a story. There is a story that establishes that yes, Spider-Man *does* have radioactive particles in his blood. So editing comics is not easy, and editing comics at Marvel and DC gets harder and harder every year. I mean I stop and think every now and then, I started reading comics in 1974 and the first comic that I read — aside from just reading the comics occasionally when I was younger and then throwing them away — I read *Daredevil* #120 and that issue had a call-back to *Daredevil* #83 and I thought, "Cool, it's this thing from 40 issues ago and that stuff that happened then still matters." It was maybe four years earlier. *Daredevil* had been bi-monthly for a while so maybe it was five years earlier. Nowadays, *Daredevil* #120 is so far in the past from today that it's farther in the past today than *Action Comics* #1 was when I started reading comics. So if you throw around casual references now to comics from 1974, 1973, 1968, you're delving back so far into these characters' history that it's like if I had picked up comics when I was fourteen years old and they were making all of these references to World

Above left: Kurt explains, "A cartoon I drew in 1988, based on a food-poisoning-induced hallucination on my honeymoon in Disney World, in which I dreamed that I'd been hired to 'take the FF back to their roots as a rock band.' Inked by Richard Howell. I sold a story based on this dream, to What The--?!, which Richard also drew [Fantastical Four, "World Tour 1992," #17, Mar. '92]."

Above right: Another Busiek original, this from '87, depicting the original X-Men, apparently drawn for a fanzine cover. Both are courtesy of KDB.



5

Above: Scott McCloud begins to show his Zot! cartooning style in the Busiek collaboration from 1978, "Once More With Feeling," which the pair hoped to sell to Marvel's Epic Illustrated. The "terrible" lettering is by Kurt himself. Courtesy of KDB.

War II stories. The length of time covered and the amount of material that's been covered with two and three and four *Spider-Man* books coming out per month, and all these *Batman* books, the idea that an editor can keep track of it all, that an editor can be the authority who can say, "No, no, no, *Batman* has never met Character X," or, "This particular piece of information about *The Daily Planet* can't be contradicted" is just bananas. There's no way to know all of that stuff. And at DC, it's compounded by the fact that every now and then, they blow up their whole history and rebuild it. So you don't know if the history of Wayne Enterprises or the genealogy of Clark Kent is the same as it was five years ago.

So I don't, for a minute, want to suggest that editing comics and trying to keep these gigantic, sprawling universes straight is easy. But sort of to circle back around to the question, I knew I wanted to do stories about this sort of thing, and I knew that it would be a nightmare to try to do it at Marvel so I said, "Well, why don't I make up my own city? Why don't I make up my own world, all my own super-heroes and I can tell this kind of story? And I don't have to go to anybody and say, 'Can I tell this story the way I want to? Can I present the history accurately?' Because I'm the only guy who gets to decide whether I can tell the story and I make up the history. So of course it'll be accurate." Naturally, in *Astro City*, I've screwed up my own history a few times, but at least I did it honestly. At least nobody was telling me, "No, no, no, you must contradict that earlier story." Jumping back in time for a minute, before Alex and I did *Marvels*, I had wanted to do stories about what it was like to be an ordinary guy in the Marvel Universe. I'd even done a couple of them.

I did an "Iron Man" short story about a guy who works in the Stark Industries motor pool and every couple of months, puts in an application for transfer. He wants to be Iron Man. And I'd done a story, an *Avengers* comic back-up story in an annual. It was about a kid in Iowa who — the Avengers are his greatest heroes and we see what happens on the day the Avengers come to town to fight the Sons of the Serpent. It turns out his older brother is one of the Sons of the Serpent and he's caught in the middle.

I had actually talked to a couple of editors about doing a series called *Marvel Super-Heroes* in which "Marvel Super Heroes" was a deli in the Baxter Building. [Jon laughs] You went in and you got hero sandwiches and in the morning, you get your coffee and your bialys or whatever, get a bagel. And each story would be a story of somebody who came in and interacted with the deli and then went out to their normal life and dealt with the fact that they had to get to work; they had to get somewhere where the Hulk was tearing up midtown or they were due in court — you know, here's your Matt Murdock story again — or whatever, and editors just laughed at me. And so doing *Marvels* was a way of doing that kind of story that I wanted to do. And if you notice, in issue four, one of Phil's old friends from back in World War II, we see that he's running a deli in the back of the Baxter Building called "Iggy's Super-Heroes." That's our nod to that series idea I had before. So the idea of doing an ongoing *Marvel* series was a way of saying, "Look, I had wanted to do this series before and everybody laughed at me. Now that I've proved it can work, I could do it," and then me realizing that the editorial difficulty of doing it in an existing universe would be so great that I'd be better off making up my own world and making up my own place. And once I'd figured out enough about it, I called up Alex and asked if he'd do covers and character designs and he said, "Sure." And we started shopping it around without an artist attached, other than Alex. Our plan was that different artists were going to draw different stories, different arcs, and over the course of pitching it around and talking to different editors, we realized that that was just going to be too much of a headache, that even though a book like, say, *Sandman* worked that way, *Sandman* didn't start out working that way. It just ended up working that way as artists left and the book sort of established itself as what it was. I ran into Brent at a science-fiction convention and asked if he'd be interested in drawing one of the stories, then I asked if he'd be interested instead of drawing a six-parter and then I said, "Well, how would you like to draw the whole series?" and he was very accommodating and said, "Sure" each time, and that's how he got into the picture. And he and Alex and the guys at Comcraft, they've been around ever since.

CBC: We were just discussing one of the jobs that the Marvel editor has is to keep an eye on this unwieldy, huge monstrous decades and decades of continuity. In your estimation, is that necessary? Is the thrill that you had in 1974 of noticing the footnote referencing Daredevil #83, is that still necessary? Is that part of the storytelling?

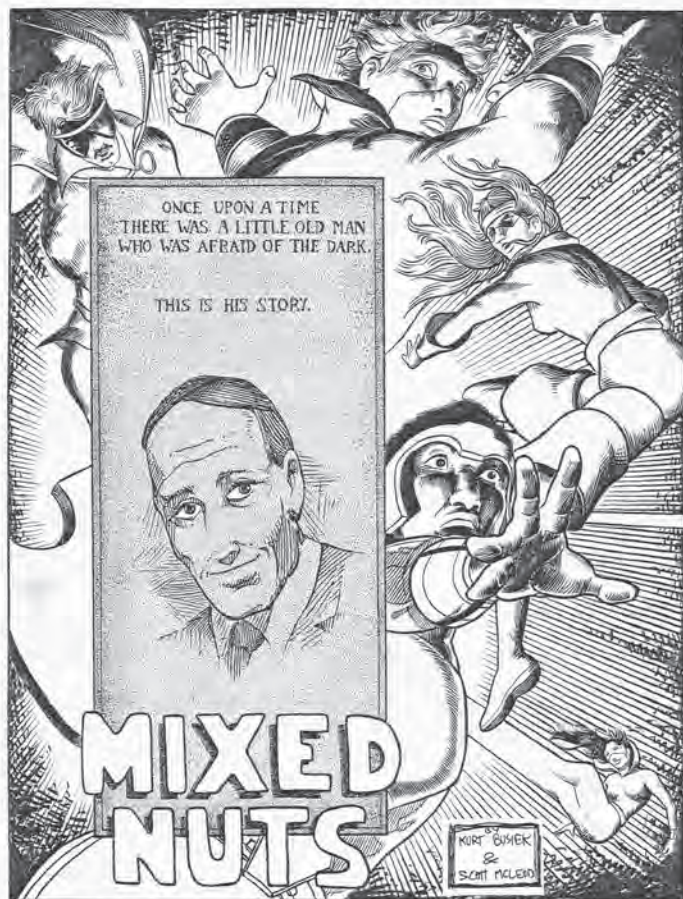
Kurt: Part of the storytelling in *Astro City* or in just comics in general?

CBC: In the *Big Two* comics, DC and Marvel.

Kurt: They seem to be a lot less interested in that sort of thing. But on the other hand, there are times when it comes up. For instance, I haven't read the *Avengers Vs. X-Men* mini-series to see if it's any good, but I've seen commentary online that suggests that they've established that the earlier incarnation of The Phoenix was this Chinese or Japanese girl who's connected to Iron Fist? Am I making any sense? Have you read the material?

CBC: No, I haven't, no.

Kurt: Okay, well, there's this six-part "Iron Fist" story by Chris Claremont and Rudy Nebres that ran in *Deadly Hands of Kung-Fu* back in the '70s called "Shall I Love the Bird of Fire?" It dealt with this ancient mythic story about this fire-bird girl who is this red-headed Asian girl and Iron Fist had



to protect her. And I don't remember all of the details, but I remember flagging that and talking to Tom Brevoort about it and saying this could be an earlier version of Firebird, the *Avengers* character. And the two of them could be tied together in a way that explores her powers and her history. We never got around to doing anything with it. But it seems like Brian Bendis or, I don't know, somebody else — I don't remember who wrote that series, I think they had four different writers — somebody said, "Hey, hey, look at this character off here in *Deadly Hands of Kung-Fu*. We could tie this bird of fire to the Phoenix legend and get this cool story out of it." So the thrill that I had at noticing that something from four years ago, or six years ago or eight years ago, still mattered — they're still doing that, even as recently as the latest big crossover. Unless I'm completely wrong, it seems to tie back into this six-part story in a Marvel black-and-white kung-fu magazine which is, you know, that's about as obscure as you can get. They're just not treating it as rigidly as they used to. So if they wanted to establish — and here we are on Iron Fist, still — that there were all of these different Iron Fists in the past before Danny Rand? Well, as far as I remember, that violates Iron Fist's continuity because nobody else had defeated the dragon and gained the power of the Iron Fist. Danny Rand was the first and now they're saying he's the latest in a long line, and they've decided to change that. And they got a good story out of it, so fine. Back in the '70s and '80s, it wouldn't have happened that way. You wouldn't have just sort of decided "oh, by the way, we're going to change the history of this character and ignore this stuff that's part of his origin story in order to tell this other story." And these days, it's like, "Well, you know, it's a good story so we're shifting things around a little bit." But they do use the past when they feel that there's value in it and they ignore it when they feel that there isn't value in it and things are much, much looser and that's probably an inevitable consequence of the fact that we're 51 years past the debut of *The Fantastic Four*. And

dealing with 12 years of backstory is a much, much easier thing than dealing with 50 years of backstory. Hell, even by the time I was starting to read comics in the early '70s, DC wasn't saying that all of those Superman, Wonder Woman, and Batman stories had all happened. They were basically saying, "Well, the ones that we like, everything from about 1958 on, that stuff happened. But the stuff before that? Eh, maybe it did, maybe it didn't." Some of it happened to their Earth-2 characters. So they weren't dealing with, at that point, a history that was even 35 years old. They split it in half. And nowadays, you've just got decades and decades and multiple books. It's just a huge amount of material and keeping it all straight and honoring it all, it seems like it must — it may not actually be impossible, but it's close enough to impossible that they handle it differently than they did back in the '70s, back when you could fit everything Marvel put out into a single bookcase.

CBC: I certainly recall really getting passionate about comics in about 1970, 1971 when DC was trying to "Marvelize" their line, trying to get some kind of over-arching continuity going. The Marvel stuff always seemed to be relatively complex and Kirby seemed to be a little grotesque to me. As a child, for whatever reason, my older brothers really liked Marvel, I stuck with DC. But I liked it

Above: Two pages from the Busiek/McCloud collaboration "Vanguard," originally intended for the Richard Howell-edited anthology, *Rising Stars*, a never-published comics magazine intended to join Howell's two (shortlived) b-&w mags, *Fantasy Illustrated* and *Adventure Illustrated* (below). The pair completed two or three chapters before word came that the mag was cancelled before it was released. Kurt would see his reporting published in Howell's Comics Feature newszine. Courtesy of KDB.



when there was this continuity suddenly started creeping into the DC books. And then nowadays, it almost seems to be a bane. It almost seems to be often — well, now like you're saying that Marvel is, at times, ignoring any sense of continuity and just going for story.

Kurt: It varies. I mean I don't think there is a single answer to the question. I can tell you that having that cross-universe continuity was a great idea when it came to making me a comic book fan in the first place, because I was a kid who loved series fiction. I'd go through the children's library and look for any author who'd written a lot of books. If they wrote a lot of books, then maybe it was a series and that way, if I liked one, I could find out what happened next. So I'd read the *Danny Dunn* books and I'd read the Lloyd Alexander books and then I'd read E. Nesbit and Enid Blyton and the *Oz* books and any book that was a series. I'd be attracted to that because then I could see what happens to the characters after the story. Particularly something like the *Oz* books where first, you'd have *The Wizard of Oz* and you had Dorothy; and then the second story, *The Land of Oz*, introduced Ozma, but you didn't have Dorothy in it and then Dorothy comes back and meets the characters that you met in other books so you're seeing characters from different books connect up. That was something that I was very, very interested in as a reader. So when I stumbled onto this issue of *Daredevil*, it wasn't simply that there was a reference back to *Daredevil* #83. That interested me. But *Daredevil* fought Hydra in that issue, as well. It was part one of a four-part story and you had all of these new Hydra chiefs of different departments. And they were characters who had appeared in other books, in *Marvel Team-Up*, in *Sub-Mariner*, in various — in *The Claws of the Cat*. So what the book was telling me was this is a series story, but it's not merely that what happened earlier in the series mattered, what happened in whole different series mattered. Here's a guy who fought Spider-Man and now he's fighting *Daredevil*. Here's a guy from *Thor*, here's this whole thing about this S.H.I.E.L.D. series — even the text page was a history of Hydra and even that was continued in the next issue. [Jon laughs] So there were references to past stories, there was a cliffhanger ending that led you toward the next issue, there was a text page that led you to the next issue, there were all these connections that said "this isn't just a series, this is a whole world. This sprawls out not just backward and forward, but sideways." That hooked my series-loving heart, really hard. I wanted to find more comics. I wanted to find more — I wanted to find *Daredevil* #83, I wanted to find the issue of *Strange Tales* that introduced these weapons that the Hydra guys used, and I wanted to find that issue of *Marvel Team-Up* and, *ahh* man, it sent me looking for all kinds of stuff. Now there are people who would tell you that that sort of thing turns them off, so is having a lot of continuity a good idea or a bad idea? Well, when I was 14 years old, it was a great idea for me and it might have been a bad idea for you, looking at stuff and going, "This is a lot of connections to stuff I haven't seen. I'll stick with the DC books where there's continuity, but it's not quite this sprawly." These days, I've gotta say the fact that I am less interested in the big, sprawling universes because they've been rebooted and tweaked and shifted around so much. I mean, when I started reading *Daredevil*, he was the spiritual descendent of the Stan Lee/ Gene Colan character and a little while later, Frank Miller came along and he turned *Daredevil* into a character who, you know, technically is the same guy, but it's virtually a different series. The spirit of those earlier stories just — what Miller did was, he built the series around a whole different spirit — and I say "spirit" and I start thinking about his Will Eisner influence and well, now we're sidetracking now on that. But for a while there, I thought of the Frank Miller *Daredevil* as kind of like the Earth-2 *Daredevil*, that the Lee-Colan guy and the Miller guy, they had various amounts of shared history and various technical aspects that were the same. But in terms of the spirit of the heart of the series, one of them is a gritty crime story and the other one is a super-hero farce. The guy that shows up in the Frank Miller stories did not have the daffy adventures that the Lee-Colan guy had. So it felt to me like somewhere in-between there's a demarcation point where one series stops and it starts in something else.

And then farther along, the Miller influence slips out and Kevin Smith does *Daredevil* and Brian Bendis does *Daredevil* and you've got this whole different sensibility with *Daredevil*. You've gone on so long that it does not feel like the guy who was in *Daredevil* #25 is the same as the guy who was in *Daredevil* #200 is the same as the guy who's in *Daredevil* whatever-number-they're-up-to-now. They have the same name and they have the same powers but really, they have about as much to do with each other as the two different *Battlestar Galactica*s. So the universe as a whole has been fragmented by essentially reinventing the characters for whatever the modern era is. I mean it happens, it's natural, but somebody who was an *X-Men* fan in 1968, versus somebody who is an *X-Men* fan now, they're reacting to

completely different books. And so it doesn't feel like a straight progression from one to the other anymore and to somebody like me who got very, very strongly into the fact that this was a pretty well-knit universe back in the 1970s now looks at them and goes, "You know, this is a revision of a revision of a revision of a revision of what I fell in love with." And it may be good stuff, but it's not exciting to me because I know there's another revision coming in a few years. And I know that it's not going to last, it's not going to feel the same. To somebody who's young and discovering it now, it may be hooking them just as hard as it hooked me back then, so they're not doing something wrong by not aiming the books at me. I'm 52 years old. They should not be aiming the books at me anyway. [laughs] I should be reading other stuff and I am reading other stuff, but the question of continuity, the question of how close do you tie these characters to their own history, it starts to just pile up too high.

I mean my sense of who Peter Parker is says that when he was back in high school, he wore a yellow sweater vest and a red tie and a blue sports jacket. And in these days, if you tell a story of Spider-Man, back in his high school years and you dress him like that and say "this happened eight years ago," he looks like some sort of alien being. People didn't dress like that in high school eight years ago. People dressed like that in high school in the late 1950s when Steve Ditko's fashion sense calcified, so you've got to change it, you know. You've got to loosen up, so the Peter Parker of today may be more like the guy in the movie. When he was in high school, he would have dressed like that, he would have acted like that; that's not the Spider-Man I grew up with, but that's the Spider-Man that's probably right for today that's appealing to an audience for today. So which is right? Which is wrong? Whatever connects with an audience is right. That's the way I look at it.

CBC: You know, I was also very much into series books. I started out with the Tom Sawyers — and yes, there are other sequels and poorly-written sequels — [mutual chuckling] oh, God — by Mark Twain. But I loved them as a kid. Then I got into the Doctor Dolittle series. In Boy's Life, there were short stories about a trio of time-traveling Boy Scouts that was just great and then they made it into books and stuff. And I would ponder at times what is that? What is that about series? Why was I so attracted to series? And I wonder whether there was a dysfunction to have not wanting characters to go away, of wanting this perpetual, never-ending story, and comics fit nicely into that yearning. I didn't want the characters to go away and wanted to fend off this sense of loss. I started with DC, and then it was Marvel, it was these universes where people didn't really go away, but then I began appreciating stories with beginnings, middles and endings. Super-hero comics didn't fulfill me so much anymore. I wonder if the continuity appeals to something that's common within us fans of needing this "comfort food," shall we say?

Kurt: Yeah, maybe. Another way I look at it is when I was 14 years old, I really, really liked *Daredevil* and the *X-Men* and *Iron Man*. But you know, when I was a couple years younger than that, I really liked *The Hardy Boys*. Now should there be *Hardy Boys* comics coming out today, or *Hardy Boys* novels coming out today, that I would want to read? That seems a little ludicrous. Like I said, I'm 52 years old. [laughs] If I want to read adventure stories about people solving mysteries, I move on to Alistair MacLean and to Michael Connelly and to Robert Parker and all kinds of stuff where it's aimed at me and I let the *Hardy Boys* fall behind and continue to say something that a 10- or 12-year-old is going to be thrilled by. And *Spider-Man* and *Superman* and so forth seem to have become something where there's this large portion of the audience that are in their 30s or 40s or older and they want their childhood heroes to be still around and still entertaining them, even though they now have an adult sensibility. And the question there becomes well, if you do that, are you making these characters into something that will no longer appeal to the 10- or 12-year-old who fell in love with them in the first place? If *Daredevil* is a book that is appealing to me as a 50-year-old guy, well, is it going to appeal to today's 14-year-old or today's 12-year-old or whatever? And that gets into a problem because comics distribution has developed in such a way that it's not as easy as it used to be to reach kids who were the age we were when we first started reading comics. So maintaining that existing audience is much more important than it was back in Mort Weisinger's day when you assumed that anybody — you know, kids who read superhero comics read comics for four years and then they discovered girls, so you could tell the same stories over again and you didn't want to refer to anything too old because the audience wouldn't remember that. There was too much turnover, and the bulk of the audience had, at any one time, only been around for a couple of years. Now the market's changed and it's a tough question whether you want to make the comics appeal to the fans who keep them buying for decade after decade after decade or if you want to make the comics appeal



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to kids and find a way to reach those kids when they're eight years old. It's not a question with an easy solution.

CBC: Well, arguably, those 14-year-olds are buying movie tickets, right? And they're now beginning to encounter the continuity within the motion pictures themselves.

Kurt: [Laughs] I have to laugh there. When they rebooted the Spider-Man movies and started off again with this past year, I thought it was a wonderful movie, a terrific Spider-Man movie. But I heard people complaining, "How often are they gonna just start over again?" And I thought, "Yeah, after all, it's only been ten years since they began the last run. How many times has Spider-Man's origin been retold in the comics in that 10-year period? And you're complaining that here in the movies, they've done it *once*?" [Laughs] It seems like 10 years is plenty enough time to say, "Okay, our actors are all ten years older than they were anyway, so let's fall back and start over." But that's not even what you're asking about.

CBC: You know, looking at the history of comics, you see that super-heroes dominated between '38 and '45 and then they waned, crime comics came in, horror comics came in, romance comics came in and then humor comics came in the '50s and then there's a resurgence of super-heroes that takes place again. And while the sales of comics, it's becoming more of a niche thing. I mean it's just a precipitous drop in sales from 1950 up into the present day. As you know, we had many adults reading comics in 1950 and I guess there's nothing but adults right now. Is this preoccupation

with super-heroes, is it healthy for the system?

Kurt: No, of course not.

CBC: Do you wish that there were more anthology books or other genres?

Kurt: I think that... [sighs] well, it's hard to wish things were the way they were in the past because the way they were in the past wouldn't work anyway.

CBC: I think there is a lifespan for a genre, for instance, that there is a shelflife.

Kurt: Well, I'm not sure you're right. For instance, you said that in the '50s, humor comics came in and that's not true. Humor comics were big all through the '40s as well and humor comics were big in the '50s and humor comics were big in the '60s.

CBC: I meant the satire comics of...

Kurt: Oh, like *Mad* and that sort of thing.

CBC: Yeah.

Kurt: Okay, I see what you're saying. But I think I'd still quibble with your historical overview a little bit, in that super-heroes were a very popular genre in the '40s, but they weren't the only popular genre. And once you got to the mid- to late '70s, super-heroes had gotten to be the popular genre and everything else was kind of hanging on by the skin of its teeth, if it was hanging on at all. Romance comics, by then, were dead; Western comics were nearly dead; horror comics were fading; humor comics, there were many, many fewer of them than there had been. But the problem isn't — a lot of people tend to look at it and think that the

Above: Nothing to add here, huh? George Pérez's cover for *JLA/Avengers* #3 [Dec. '03], scripted by Kurt Busiek. Ye Ed's exhausted just looking at this beauty! Courtesy of the mysterious world inside my computer.



Below: Relax, guys, you're already assembled! George Pérez's nifty cover art for the *Avengers Assemble Vol. 3* trade paperback collection [12]. Via that vast network of computers that dare not speak its name.

problem is super-hero comics. If only there were fewer super-hero comics, there'd be more room for other things. And I think that's looking at it backwards, because super-heroes didn't push the other genres out. The other genres all failed, leaving super-heroes as the last man standing. So the problem wasn't "super-heroes are selling"; the problem was "war comics aren't selling," "Western comics aren't selling," "horror comics —" Horror comics actually have been one of the more durable genres, but they faded and came back, faded and came back. So it wasn't that the super-hero comics got real popular and that spelled the end for *Patsy Walker*. *Patsy Walker* would still be going if people were still buying it, but people stopped buying it. The most loyal audience was the super-hero audience, and it was super-hero fans who built the comic book direct market. So the comic book

direct market is built on this idea that "super-hero fans are dedicated and they want their comics and we're going to find a way to get them their comics more efficiently and more dependably." So it's no surprise that the direct market is built around the super-hero fan, and that keeps the dynamic of the super-hero being the incredibly dominant genre going, that the industry is built for that. But whenever you get outside the traditional direct market function — the manga boom wasn't about super-heroes, the stuff that's happening now, like the graphic novels that are being published by book publishers like Scholastic and First Second; those aren't super-heroes. Those are reaching out to a different audience than the super-hero fan and unsurprisingly, the stuff that works in those, in that way, are not things that will primarily appeal to the super-hero fan. So genre diversity can be done, it's just it's unlikely to be done by trying to package material that

is aimed at somebody who isn't a super-hero fan, in a format that dedicated super-hero fans support, and putting it in and distributing it into a market that dedicated super-hero fans are the primary audience for, and then going, "Why didn't anyone else buy it?" The answer is, "Because you're not reaching them."

We are seeing comic book stores open up to other genres as we've seen the success of Vertigo and the rise of companies like Dark Horse and Image, and they've gotten more and more successful at reaching an audience that may have been primarily super-hero once. But the more the industry shifts over to a focus on trade paperbacks, the more the non-super-hero fan can find stuff that interests them that'll stay in print, that'll be available, that isn't a matter of finding six or seven comics on the newsstand, if you're lucky. Things are opening up, but they're opening up due to publishers and creators responding to market conditions rather than wanting to turn back the clock and say, "Things should be the way they were in 1960." Because in 1960, comics were failing. They were just failing from a lot higher on the hill than they are now. [mutual chuckling] You mentioned that the comics sales are much, much lower today than they were back in 1950 — and it's a steady slope down. We look at the 1960s as a boom time for comics — you know, DC was having the Silver Age and Marvel was coming into its own and doing all of this Stan Lee, Jack Kirby, Steve Ditko, all the great super-hero stuff — but comic sales were lower by the end of the 1960s than they were at the beginning of the 1960s. So they had found a way, through super-heroes, to stave off the decline, but it was still a decline.

CBC: Yeah, I'll never forget Joe Orlando telling me an anecdote that between 1969 and '70, there was just a massive drop-off in girl readership. So there was this desperate grab through *Leave It To Binky* and all these Archie rip-off titles that Henry Scarpelli drew for DC Comics. And then they went into the Gothic romances, just in this "where did they go? How do we get them back?" never to return.

Kurt: Mm-mm, yeah. And probably where they went was television and romance novels. And if you want to read a romance story, and you buy a Harlequin paperback, you're going to get such a better story — it's not necessarily going to be a great story, but it's going to be so much better than all what's coming out under the title *Young Love* or *Young Romance* or whatever, back in 1970. The romance comics were pretty cool in the 1940s and the first half of the 1950s, but by the 1970s, they were crap. So it shouldn't be surprising that nobody wanted to buy those books. They were bad. And DC, they tried to catch that humor audience and the girl audience with books like *Windy and Willy*, which was just





old *Dobie Gillis* stories with the characters redrawn a little and the names changed.

CBC: *With new hair styles, yes.*

Kurt: Yeah, and if you're taking a comic book from 1964, or 1963 or whatever that was, and you're saying, "It's almost ten years later and we're going to sell exactly the same story with a little cosmetic difference and gee, it didn't work? Why didn't it work?" The answer's not that mysterious. Kids don't care about exactly the same thing. You can't take a 1962 story and put the characters in bell-bottoms and tie-dye and expect it's modern now.

CBC: [Chuckles] *Such disrespect for the reader. You know, I wonder if you can compare the ratings for [Gothic daytime TV soap opera] Dark Shadows and girl readership in comics and find they all shifted over to watching Barnabas Collins.*

Kurt: You might very well be able to do that. I mean one of my favorite teen humor comics, one of my absolute favorite teenage humor comics is a John Stanley book called *Thirteen (Going On 18)*.

CBC: *Ah, right, yes.*

Kurt: I would show people a cover to one issue, where there's a couple of guys and a couple of girls, they're in a canoe, and somebody's playing a ukulele and he's got a porkpie hat on. And the joke is they're about to go over a waterfall and they haven't seen it coming. That's the visual gag on the cover, but you've got the ukulele and you've got the canoe and you've got the porkpie hat. What year is it, would you say?

CBC: [Laughs] *You're asking me? Nineteen forty-three? I don't know.*

Kurt: Yeah, they're singing "Roll Over, Beethoven."

CBC: [Still laughing] *With a ukulele.*

Kurt: It's 1968 and John Stanley had no idea what teenagers do in 1968. And that's why you've got these characters canoeing with their ukulele and porkpie hat, thinking, "That'll sell the kids today." The people who did the comics didn't relate to their audience. They weren't changing. They weren't looking at the changing audience. They were trying to do the same thing over and over again, even though kids and teenagers went through enormous changes in the '60s. You ended up with material done under the assumption that these kids were just like their parents, but they weren't. So it's not a surprise that lousy romance comics died, or teen humor comics that were completely out of touch with what kids were interested in at the time. Archie at the time were a little smarter about what kids were actually interested in than the people at Dell or at DC. So yeah, this was a period

when DC published *Challengers of the Unknown* all through the '60s and sales got worse and worse and worse and I don't know if they ever stopped and thought, "How do we make this appeal to kids today?" They just thought, "This is *Challengers*. This is how we've always done *Challengers* and this is the way we'll continue to do *Challengers*. This has got to work." And they watched the sales tail off and tail off and tail off until the book was cancelled. I don't know, I'm kinda babbling here, but I think the failure of the non-super-hero genre in comics — and for that matter, the slow decline of sales, even in the super-hero books — probably has a whole lot to do not just with the distribution changes and marketing changes and format changes and pricing changes, it also had to do with the fact that these middle-aged guys in their 50s and 60s were trying to do comics that would appeal to eight- and 10-year-olds, but they didn't think that eight- and 10-year-olds were any different than they had been 15 or 20 years before. So there was a disconnect and a lot of the comics weren't as appealing to the modern audience because they weren't aimed at the modern audience. They were aimed at the editors' and creators' idea of what kids liked.

CBC: *You know, you gotta shout out some props to Archie Comics, though, for staying resilient all these years. Any time I stand in line at a grocery store and I see one of the Archie Comics Digests, maybe the only comic book available to mainstream audiences. Today they're introducing gay characters and they're sticking with the times, and yet the model has remained the same since 1940 or whenever Bob Montana came up with that stuff, and I just had to shout out to Victor Gorelick and the guys.*

Top of spread: *According to Heritage Auctions, where these images were found, George Pérez drew these members of The Avengers circa 1978.*

Below: *Pérez cover for the collection of his Marvel super-team work, 1999's Avengers Visionaries: The Art of George Pérez. Courtesy of Heritage.*





Above: Beautifully designed covers for Kurt and Stuart Immonen's 2004 mini-series, *Superman: Secret Identity*. Ain't they just lovely? **Below:** A vibrantly colored Stuart Immonen page from same.

Kurt: Oh, yeah. Oh, I also think that there's a real strong value in the fact that Archie was their primary business. So while guys like Roy Thomas and Len Wein and Julie Schwartz were thinking, "How do I sell super-hero comics?" the Archie guys had it locked down how to sell teen humor comics. And the guys at DC who were doing teen humor comics, I don't think they were thinking much about how to sell them. They were thinking more about how to sell super-hero comics. And they approached teen humor as something they just had to get done and out the door. There was a joke back in the '80s that the way Marvel was assigning their movie adaptation comics was, an editor would just throw rocks out of the office door and the first three guys

who say "Ow!" are the ones working on the adaptation. For the most part, they didn't put a lot of care into those books. They were a sideline, not Marvel's bread and butter. And then Dark Horse came along and said, "Let's put as much attention and care into adapting movies as other companies do into super-heroes. Let's make it a spotlight thing, let's make it something you can be proud of. As opposed to Marvel where, if you had the license to do a James Bond comic, based on a movie, you were doing it because it'd make some money. So it's handed to an editor who isn't interested and he hands it to a writer who isn't interested and it's penciled by a penciller who isn't interested and inked by Vinnie Colletta and his background guy and it's crap — because nobody cares. Or if they do care, they don't have the time. So when Dark Horse came along, it's no wonder that their material

read a hell of a lot better than a lot of the Marvel movie adaptations. Now, Marvel had a long run with *Star Wars* and clearly, there were a lot of people along the way who cared about that and you had some really good comics. But for the most part, if Marvel was doing a movie adaptation, they were just trying to get it done. They weren't trying to make it good. [chuckles] The tangent here I went off on was that Marvel took care of its main stock in trade and its main stock in trade was *Spider-Man* and the *Hulk*. And DC took care of its main stock in trade and that's *Superman* and *Batman*. The Archie guys modernized what they were doing better than Marvel modernized *Patsy Walker* and *Millie the Model* and DC modernized *Swing With Scooter* because with Archie, that was their main thing. And with DC and Marvel, it wasn't, so it didn't get the full attention, it didn't get the passion. I don't know, maybe if you were really, really, really passionate about *A Date With Debbi*, you could make it into something cool, maybe, but I don't think they were really trying. They were doing formula comics to fill a hole in the schedule.

CBC: They were throwing mud at the wall to see what sticks.

Kurt: Yeah.

CBC: That 14-year-old boy, did he realize that? Were the credit boxes important to you at the time? Did you realize people were making a living at this?

Kurt: Not right away, but it didn't take all that long. I mean, I started reading comics regularly in 1974, and the point at which I realized that this was a job, that people did this for a living, was probably around 1976. It was a letter column in *X-Men* — I want to say #98, now it might have been #97, somewhere around in there — somebody asked a question and Chris Claremont talked about his grandfather asking him, "Yeah, yeah, Chris, you do the funnybooks, but what do you do for a living?" [Jon chuckles] And I read that and I went, "Holy cow, this is what he does for a living. This is a job. This is something that he does as his job. That must be really cool." And I had, for a long time, I'd wanted to be a writer, but I knew that if I wrote a novel, it would be bad because anything you're doing for the first time is bad. [Jon chuckles again] So if I spent like a year working on a novel and it stank, or I spent a year writing a screenplay that was no good, I didn't think I'd have the intestinal fortitude to get up and do another one. You know, it just seemed like such a big, forbidding job, particularly since I knew that the first try was going to stink. But when I noticed, "Hey, comics. This is a job. These things are 17 pages long. If I do a 17-page story that stinks... so what?"

CBC: [Chuckles] It's 17 pages.

Kurt: It's 17 pages. How long did that take? I'll do another one, I'll do another one after that, I'll get better. So at that point, I'd gotten Scott McCloud reading comics too and he drew pictures, and I was interested in writing, so I said,



"Why don't we do a comic book together? It'll be fun. I'll write it, and you draw it, and it'll be a fun thing to do." And Scott was interested in the comics from the stuff he'd been reading and he was up for it. And, for some reason, even though 17 pages was the standard in comics back then, we decided we were going to do a 15-page story — about five Marvel heroes fighting five other Marvel heroes in our high school and wrecking the place. And so we started doing this story, and we really had no idea what we were doing. It had no real plot, it was just fighting for no particular reason. And by the time we were done with it, we'd worked on it for three years. And it was 60 pages long and never did have much of a plot, and it kind of ended just by stopping. It wasn't an end in the story, and there wasn't really a beginning, either. So we spent more time on it than I'd have spent if I'd written two or three novels. [Jon laughs] But the advantage of it was, we were doing it together. So we weren't alone in a room trying to find the energy to continue on with something that stank. We were having fun. We were experimenting. The first few pages are *awful*. The last few pages are pretty damn good. There's no plot, but we'd gotten a whole lot better at pacing and drawing and telling a story and scripting characters in character. So over those three years, we figured out how to harness the craft of writing comics and went on to the question, "Okay, now that you've got some craft, what do you with it? How do you tell a story that's worth telling?" But that's how I got from that Chris Claremont letters page to actually figuring out how to do it.

CBC: Was that the next major project, comic book-related project, that you did after *Battle of Lexington*?

Kurt: We did that during *Battle of Lexington*. But yeah, I mean *Battle of Lexington* was the first thing we started and *POW! BIFF! POPS!* — yeah, that was the title — [Jon chuckles] — we did that during our senior year of high school. So those were our first two real projects.

CBC: You were hanging around *The Million Year Picnic*, you went to the *Prudential* — what was that, a Creation Con?

Kurt: You know, if there was a Creation Con back then that Wendy Pini and Neal Adams and Jim Steranko were all at, then that was it. [laughs] But all I really knew was it was a comic book convention. I don't remember what brand name.

CBC: What was the trajectory for you? You went to college?

Kurt: Yes. Scott and I both went to Syracuse University. He went to Syracuse because they had an illustration program and by that point, he decided he wanted to be a comic book artist. And I went because they had a creative writing program and I wanted to write comics. Of course, the year I got there was the year they abolished the creative writing major, so that plan didn't work out. I just focused on taking any course that I could take that would help me out as a comic book writer. I took Playwrighting, I took Creative Writing, I took Comparative Mythology, The Bible as Literature, I took a class in the Movie Musical because it struck me that movie musicals are structured a lot like superhero comics except that instead of breaking out into fights, they break out into dance numbers. I took a class that turned out to be very, very important to me, a class in Magazine Production so I'd know what the business issues of actually making magazines were like. Anything I could do that I thought would help me in my goal, I'd take it. And Scott went through the Illustration program. And while we were doing that, Richard Howell and Carol Kalish had gotten involved with a small publisher called New Media. They published a trade magazine called *Comics Feature*. It was supposed to be sort of like *The Comics Journal*, but more upbeat and not quite so elitist. And in addition to doing *Comics Feature*, they were going to do a comics anthology series. There was one called *Fantasy Illustrated* and there was one called *Adventure Illustrated*. And as far as I know, only one issue came out of each, maybe two issues of the *Adventure* and one of *Fantasy*, I'm not sure. And they were going to do a comics anthology called *Rising Stars* that featured new talent that hadn't broken in at the major companies yet. So Scott and I were doing a project for that and

Richard and I were cooking up a project to do for that and that's something we were working on. And it turns out that my writing at that time seemed to fall into a pattern. *The Battle of Lexington* was a bunch of Marvel super-heroes showing up and fighting at our high school. When we were asked to do a comic for the Boston Pops, it was a bunch of super-heroes coming to Boston to save the Boston Pops. And when it was "let's do a super-hero comic for this *Rising Stars* magazine," here we are at Syracuse, so of course what we decided was, "Okay, let's do a group of super-heroes, kids going to Syracuse who get powers and now they're super-heroes at Syracuse University and we can have all the fights like there and there,

and they can jump over that building." I was in something of a rut there, I guess.

[Jon chuckles] But we did a couple, three chapters of a super-hero series called "Vanguard" and before the *Rising Stars* magazine got going, it got scrapped and so that stuff never got published. But that was another way of practicing comics. We were practicing. Now that wasn't — back on *The Battle of Lexington*, we were drawing on notebook paper — well, not notebook paper, but plain old drawing paper and lettering in pencil and so forth. For *Rising Stars*, we had Richard as editor and Richard was telling us, "No, no, no, you use india ink, you use Windsor-Newton brushes, you letter with an Ames Lettering Guide, this is how it works," and so-and-so. We were learning the craft from somebody who knew it better than we did. And in-between, I'm leaving out one comic that we did. We did a comic called *Once More With Feeling* that was like a 24-page story of a champion of Life and a champion of Death fighting in a science-fiction scenario, but it actually holds together better than a lot of other stuff we did back then. We did it with the idea that we could maybe sell it to *Epic Illustrated*. And again, it was not drawn on Bristol board, it was all drawn and inked with Pilot Razorpoint pens. The lettering was terrible but you know, it was a complete story that wasn't about pre-existing characters fighting for no reason. A big step forward for us.

CBC: You mentioned a class that you took, a magazine production class.



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Above: Echoes of an earlier Kirbyverse! Top is Alex Ross' cover for Kirby: Genesis #2 ['11], above a similar struggle graces Jack's Thor #126 [Mar. '66], with inks by Vinnie Colletta. Ross cover courtesy of the artist and Dynamite Entertainment.



Above: Reproduced from the original art, top is Captain Victory and the Galactic Rangers #9 [Feb. '83] cover art by Jack Kirby (pencils) and Mike Thibodeaux (inks); and above, the cover of Silver Star #1 [Feb. '83] with Jack doing a rare pencil-ink turn. Courtesy of John Morrow. **Next page:** Kirby: Genesis #4 cover painting by Alex Ross. Courtesy of the artist and Dynamite Entertainment.

Kurt: Yeah.

CBC: You said it was practical information that you were able to use.

Kurt: Well, the real key thing for that class that was important to me was a term paper. We had to interview the publisher of a national magazine, get certain information, write up a paper about it. And because I was so focused on comics, I wanted to do something with a comics focus. "National magazine" was defined by circulation, an ad circulation of such-and-such a number. And I looked up DC Comics and said, "Well, there's no single DC Comic that sells as many copies as what would count as a national magazine by these things, but they don't sell ads in *Superman*, they don't sell ads in *Batman*. They sell ads in DC Comics as a whole, the same ads in all of them. And if you lump them all together, man, the circulation, the ad circulation's really high." So I convinced my teachers to let me consider DC Comics a national magazine and instead of interviewing the publisher, who would have at that time been Jenette Kahn, I wanted to interview the editor-in-chief, Dick Giordano. So I called DC and explained

that I wanted to do this for a term paper and they said okay. So Thanksgiving break of my senior year, I took the bus from Syracuse down to New York City and interviewed Dick for the term paper. I asked him questions about ad sales and all this other crap that I had no real interest in — he probably didn't either. And at the end of the interview, I told him that when I got out of college, I wanted to be a comic book writer, and he invited me to send him some sample scripts. So that was the big thing — it wasn't really the term paper. I do think the class was useful to me because it made me think about what the guy on the other side of the desk needs. You know, the editor isn't going to publish your story because you really, really want to write a story. The editor's going to publish your story because you're offering something that he needs in order to fill his schedule, to fill his comics, to make his business work, so that was a very useful outcome of that class. But much more important was that Dick invited me to send him some samples. So I went back to Syracuse and during spring

break of my senior year, I took the entire week and wrote four sample scripts. I wrote a *Flash* script, I wrote a "Superman, The In-Between Years" backup script, an eight-page story, I wrote a "Supergirl" script for the series, back when it was running in *Superman Family*, during the period when she was a soap opera actress, and I wrote a *Brave and the Bold* script, teaming up Batman and Green Lantern. Three of those scripts were my best shot at writing like Cary Bates and the other was my best shot at writing like, I guess, Bob Haney. And I sent them to Dick and Dick didn't have time to read them. I'm not sure he expected that I'd actually send him anything, but I kept calling and telling his assistant, "These samples were requested, these samples were requested." And finally, Dick must have looked at the scripts enough to say, "Well, they're in English, [mutual laughter] they're not in crayon, they make enough sense to me." He passed them out to the editors of the books they

were written for. So Julie Schwartz got the two Super-scripts and Ernie Colon got the *Flash* script, and Len Wein got the *Brave and the Bold* script. Len never read the *Brave and the Bold* script. I'm not really all that surprised — at the time, *The Brave and the Bold* was about six or seven issues away from being canceled so I think he was pretty sure he wasn't going to buy it. And Julie passed the two Super-scripts to his assistant, E. Nelson Bridwell, and Ernie Colon read the *Flash* script. And when I finished my last day of finals, it was like a week and a half until graduation, but I didn't stick around. Scott and I just headed down to New York, started looking for an apartment, and I went up to DC and made appointments to talk to the editors who'd looked at my scripts. Nelson Bridwell told me that my scripts were perfectly professional, *but...* and the "but" part was the "Supergirl" I'd written for *Superman Family*, for Supergirl as a soap opera actress — *Superman Family* was cancelled and they were bringing Supergirl out in her own new series where she was a college student in Chicago, so my script was useless. And the "Superman, The In-Between Years" story, Nelson liked it reasonably well, but the "Superman, The In-Between Years" back-up series had been cancelled. So neither script was viable. But because Nelson thought my scripts were clearly professional writing, Julie asked me to come up with a bunch of springboards for *Superboy* fill-ins. And I went away and I came back with like 16 different *Superboy* springboards and he didn't like any of them. Instead, he said, "Go to lunch and come back," and when I came back from lunch, he'd typed up a plot outline for a *Superboy* story and he said, "Here, 15 pages. Start writing the script, bring it in in a few days and we'll go over it." So it was his plot and I wrote up about six pages of it and brought it in and showed it to him. And one of the things he said — actually, this was about my samples — was about the script format I was using. I was doing two columns on a page with the panel descriptions on the left and then the dialogue, and so forth, on the right, which involved a whole lot of moving the typewriter around and lining things up. But that was what Richard had sketched out for me, and he said he'd seen it in a *Wonder Woman* script Julie had shown him at a convention. And Julie said, "The first question I've got for you is, why are you writing scripts in a silly-ass format like this?" [Jon chuckles] And I said, "Well, I was shown that and told it was the format you used." And he said, "Nah, it's the dumbest thing I've ever seen." And he showed me what a script should look like and I wrote stuff after that in the actual Julie Schwartz format. Digression over.

Anyway, I brought in six pages of script for this story and Julie read through it and said, "Ahh, this doesn't work at all," and he pointed out one reason or another that it didn't work. He said, "I'll tell you one thing: You're cramming way too much stuff in here." I said, "Julie, it's your plot. You said I had 15 pages to fit it in and I'm trying to fit it all in." He said, "You should tell me you need two parts for it." [laughs] And I'm thinking, "I've never sold a comic book story in my life and you're telling me I should tell Julie Freakin' Schwartz, 'No, you plotted too much?' [mutual laughter] Give me more room?" I was way too timid to say that and so I said, "I'm sorry," and I never did sell anything to Julie. But at the same time I was going to meet with Julie, I was also going in to meet with Ernie Colon. Ernie liked my *Flash* script, but he said, "I don't need a *Flash* script. Cary Bates has been writing this series for 13 years," or whatever it was at this point, "he's not going to be stopping any time soon and we don't need the fill-ins. But I also edit *Green Lantern* and we have a back-up series in *Green Lantern* called 'Tales of the Green Lantern Corps,' which is short stories about other Green Lanterns. We don't have one steady, regular team on that so that's open to scripts. Why don't you come up with some 'Green Lantern Corps' ideas?" So I went away and I came back with like 18 'Green Lantern Corps' springboards and he liked one of them. And he said, "Go ahead, write this one up." And so I got that assignment on a Thursday and college





graduation was that Sunday, so I had my first professional assignment before I actually graduated from college, even though I skipped the ceremony. [Jon chuckles] But I wrote it up — it was a seven-page *Green Lantern* story and I wrote it up and I brought it in to him, to Ernie, on a day I went in to the city with Richard Howell, who was also showing his work around and trying to get assignments. And Ernie liked it and he said, “You got any ideas about who should draw this?” And I said, “Well, my friend Richard is showing samples.” And so Ernie looked at Richard’s samples and said, “Okay, you got the job.” So my first major professional assignment was also Richard’s first major professional

assignment, which was nice. But that was my first professional script and I should probably stop talking and let you ask another question.

CBC: [Chuckles] Did you have relatives, even ancestors, who were creative?

Kurt: I don’t think so. My family runs to doctors and teachers. In my father’s immediate family, there were seven kids and there were like three of them were teachers — four of them were teachers? One of them was a doctor and my father was a computer industry executive. So he was kind of the black sheep of the family. [Jon laughs] But even going back up to the St. Louis branch of the family, which I barely knew anything about, there’s a lot of doctors and teachers in

that branch of the family too. Busiek State Forest in Missouri is named after a great-uncle of mine who was a well-loved pediatrician. But I don’t know of anybody in... yeah, I can’t think of anybody who was an actor, a writer, a painter. I may well be the first.

CBC: What’s the nationality of the name?

Kurt: It’s a Polish name, but the family was German. What I’m told is that “Busiek” was a town in western Poland somewhere that had German overlords and my family descends from the overlords. There’s a lot of people out there named “Busiek” who spell it differently. There’s the Boston Bruins Hockey player, Johnny Bucyk, and I keep running into other people named “Busick,” “Busik,” and like that. These were people who had a Polish last name and came into the United States through Ellis Island, where it got translated into English a ton of different ways. But my family is Polish-German on my paternal grandfather’s side and British on my paternal grandmother’s side, although British a long way in the past. We go back — her family goes back to the early 1800s in the United States, maybe farther. On my mother’s side, it’s almost the same thing. My grandmother, my maternal grandmother, her ancestors are German. She was a Rommel and was actually related to [WWII German Field Marshal] Erwin Rommel. And my maternal grandfather, his ancestry was British so I’m sort of British and German on both sides.

CBC: And how many siblings do you have?

Kurt: I have four sisters — two older, two younger — no brothers.

CBC: And were you vocal about that’s what you wanted to do with your life, you wanted a career, you wanted to go to college and graduate and start writing comics?

This page: A pre-Marvels writing assignment for Kurt was the Topps’ “Kirbyverse” gig, scribing Jack Kirby’s *TeenAgents* in 1993. Covers to the four-issue mini-series is top right. Jack’s concept drawing in top left, courtesy of John Morrow. Inset is Ryan Sook’s art featuring the kids on Kirby: *Genesis* #7’s variant cover.

Kurt: Yeah, once I knew that I wanted to do it, then yeah, I was not shy about saying so. And my father didn't think much of that idea. But my mother was very supportive. Her feeling was, anything that we wanted to do, if we worked hard at it, we could accomplish it. So she was supportive of whatever we wanted to do. My father, when he and my mom got married, they were living in a trailer. He worked his way up from being a refrigerator repairman to a vice presidency at Digital Equipment Corporation. He had a very, very strong work ethic, rooted in the fact that he was born at the height of the Depression. So his sense of things wasn't that you

picked a career based on what you wanted to do. His sense was you picked a career on what'll make you money, what'll give you security. And since he was successful in the computer industry, he wanted me to learn computer programming, get into the computer industry. It was something he understood. There was money in it. But I wanted to be a comics writer and he wasn't... like I said, he wasn't very supportive of it. It wasn't until I'd been writing comics for a couple of years and I was struggling — I wasn't making a good living by any means yet — but he was interviewing for a new executive assistant and one of the guys he interviewed for the job said, "By the way, are you related to Kurt Busiek, the writer?" My dad was startled that somebody else had heard of me and he called me up and asked me to send him some comics I'd written. So I sent him a bunch of what I'd written at that point and a couple of weeks later, for whatever reason, I was talking to his secretary on the phone and I asked her if she knew, had he read any of the comics? And she said, "No, I don't think so, but they're all on the coffee table in his office." [mutual chuckling] So he was showing them off. "This is my son, the writer."

CBC: Beforehand, did you have these practical discussions? Did your father try to talk sense into you? And did you have any ammo that you could throw back at him, that "yeah, there's money to be made here" or was there no communication?

Kurt: Oh no, I had no ammo whatsoever. [Jon laughs] I mean, I didn't have terribly realistic career goals. At one point, I wanted to be in the Air Force. I wanted to fly planes and since I wore glasses, that wasn't going to happen. And I wanted to be a writer, but I didn't know what I wanted to write until I stumbled onto comics. And one of the worst moments of this whole conflict over what I was going to do was when I got my SAT scores. I did pretty well on the SATs. I got somewhere around 700 in English which is a nice score, but I got an 800 in Math, which was perfect. So that was just more ammunition for my dad, that I needed to go into a technical field, not a creative field. There's no money in writing funnybooks, was pretty much how he looked at it. There's money in machines. And I guess I was just mule-stubborn because — well, I was interested in computer programming in junior high and high school. But the thing is, learning to program the computer is like learning to be a tightrope walker. You're learning to do all of these wonderful, cool things with great agility and then one summer, I was an assistant programmer at Digital. My father got it for me as a summer job and, holy cow, it was the most boring job ever! All they wanted was the same file-handling program written and rewritten and rewritten and rewritten to handle different files and to put data

out in different charts. So it's kind of like you go to school and learn how to be an acrobat, and then you get hired as a crossing guard. And back then, I read some statistics that said the computer programming was the most-often quit job in the United States. Not that people would quit being a programmer, but they'd quit the job that they were doing and go work someplace else as a computer programmer because then they'd get to write a different kind of program. And when they got fed up writing the two or three programs that company needed over and over, [chuckles] they'd quit and go to some other programming company, and so there was some question about whether people like this would ever get vested in pensions, but then the whole industry changed in the '80s and '90s anyway so the stuff that I was reading about back then didn't really apply. But I just wasn't going to do it. I didn't take any computer courses in college. I was not interested and didn't do anything to prepare a fallback position. I was going to be a comic book writer and it was the only thing that I was focused on. My dad was determined that I should have better options. But the minute that he was outside, out of the room, I wasn't paying any attention to him.



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Above: Husband & Wife, Pin-Up Artists! Yep, it's Jack Kirby's pencils and Roz Kirby's inks on this 1982 Captain Victory piece, later used as basis for the Captain Victory and the Galactic Rangers #9 cover (see three pages back). Courtesy of Heritage Auctions. **Inset:** Writer Busiek also scripted the (unfinished) Victory mini-series for Topps in the early 1990s. Artwork for the cover here of #1 [June '94], the only issue of the proposed five, is by Keith Giffen (pencils) and Jimmy Palmiotti (inks). Virtually every Kirbyverse character was a part of this story arc's action....

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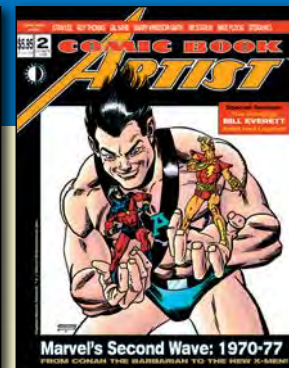
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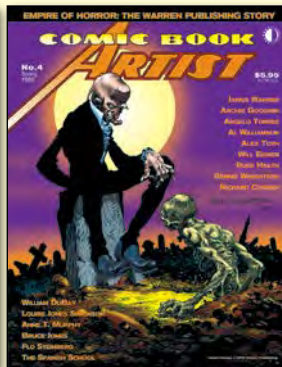
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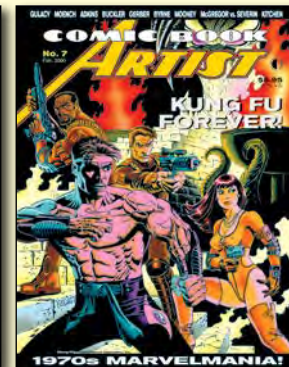
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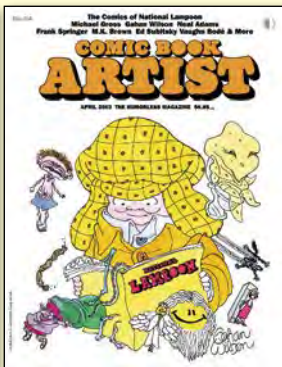
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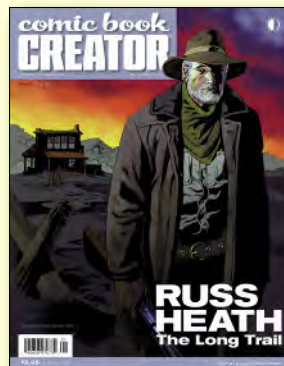
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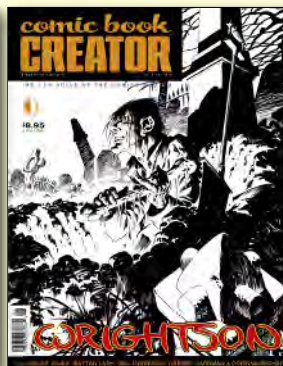
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RUSS HEATH career-spanning interview, essay on Heath's work by S.C. RINGENBERG (and Heath art gallery), MORT TODD on working with STEVE DITKO, a profile of alt cartoonist DAN GOLDMAN, part two of our MARK WAID interview, DENYS COWAN on his DJANGO series, VIC BLOOM and THE SECRET ORIGIN OF ARCHIE ANDREWS, HEMBECK, new KEVIN NOWLAN cover!
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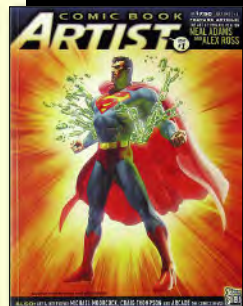


COMIC BOOK CREATOR #7
BERNIE WRIGHTSON interview on Swamp Thing, Warren, The Studio, Frankenstein, Stephen King, and designs for movies like Heavy Metal and Ghostbusters, and a gallery of Wrightson artwork! Plus writer/editor BRUCE JONES; 20th anniversary of Bart Simpson's Treehouse of Horror with BILL MORRISON; and interview Wolff and Byrd, Counselors of the Macabre's BATTON LASH, and more!
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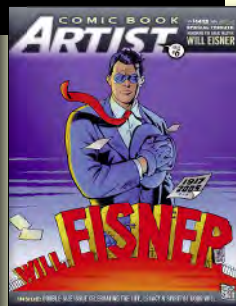
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