Featuring BLACK SUPER-HEROES OF THE 1970s!

BACK ISSUE!

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BEST COMICS-RELATED PERIODICAL/ JOURNALISM

The hard-hitting history of Marvel's Hero for Hire

LUKE CAGE

The "Irreverent" BILLY GRAHAM • Black Panther • Black Goliath • Black Lightning • TONY ISABELLA interview • Mal Duncan • Black Bomber (who??) • DON McGREGOR & PAUL GULACY's Sabre with CLAREMONT • ENGLEHART • O'NEIL • THOMAS • VON EEDEN & more

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BACK ISSUE
Comics' Bronze Age and Beyond!

Black superheroes of the 70s Issue

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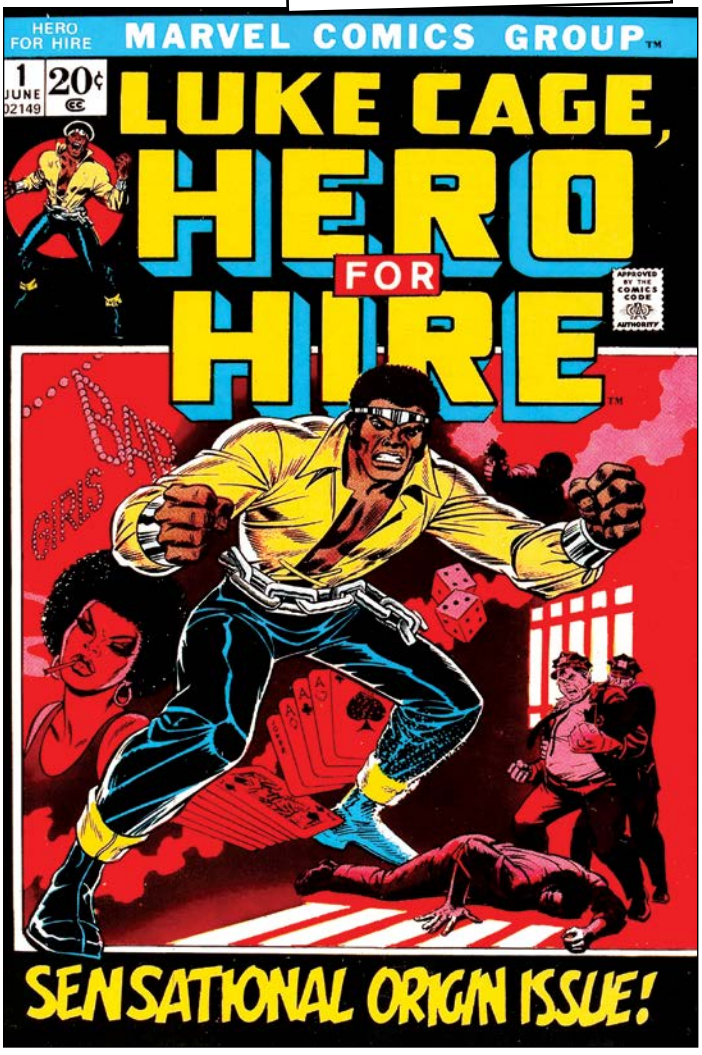
LUKE CAGE, HERO FOR HIRE

THE BRONZE AGE ADVENTURES OF POWER MAN

by Dan Hagen



FlashBack

His rationale and his rage are all right there in his name: "Cage." It's the trap that he's in, the prison where he began, and the symbol of his unyielding strength.

Although he wasn't the first black superhero when he debuted in March 1972, Luke Cage was arguably the one closest to readers—the street-level super-guy, not especially interested in saving the day, who was as tough and steamed-up as the Harlem pavement on a hot summer afternoon.

And when he was introduced in Marvel Comics' *Hero for Hire* #1 (cover-dated June 1972), he had plenty of reasons to be angry.

BRONZE AGE DIVERSITY

Cage was part of a second wave of Marvel superheroes that appeared a decade after the first wave, and has proven to be among the most durable of them.

He began as an African-American *Count of Monte Cristo*—a masterful, wrongly imprisoned man who escapes and adopts a secret identity so he can use his abilities to exact revenge.

Roy Thomas tells *BACK ISSUE* that he and the other creators of Luke Cage didn't explicitly consider the 1844 novel by Alexandre Dumas during their character-development discussions.

"But Stan [Lee] or Archie [Goodwin] may have read it, and it might've had a conscious or subconscious effect," Thomas adds.

The groundbreaking character would also take literary inspiration from a 1930 science-fiction novel by Philip Wylie and, in an odd way, anticipate headlines about a major American scientific scandal that would be exposed just a few months later.

"Since none of these characters is real and the possibility of them ever existing is basically nil, superheroes become representations of human ideals, emotions, tragedies, evils and conflicts," wrote Alex S. Romagnoli and Gian S. Pagnucci in their book *Enter the Superheroes: American Values, Culture and the Canon of Superhero Literature*.

"These themes of difference, alienation and mutantism make superhero stories an excellent genre for exploring the concept of 'the other,' the person who is different and never quite gets accepted by society. When it comes to superhero literature, issues of otherness are also complicated by a nonfictional history that reflects monoculturalism among most of the comic creators. To a great extent, comic writers, artists, inkers, editors and other members of the many creative teams are predominantly white males."

Although his creators were mostly white, their intention in publishing the first comic-book title devoted to a black superhero was not condescension, but uplift. Cage had the good fortune to arrive at the point in history when American popular culture was finally ready to spotlight black heroes and protagonists.

Superheroes represent an ideal of human perfectibility, and Stan Lee, Roy Thomas, and the artists at Marvel Comics clearly thought that ideal ought to embrace a wider spectrum of humanity.

So Marvel introduced the world's first black superhero—the Black Panther, in *Fantastic Four* #52 (July 1966)—then launched a female superhero into her own solo feature—the Black Widow, in *Amazing Adventures* #1 (Aug. 1970)—then unveiled an Asian superhero—Shang-Chi, Master of Kung Fu, in *Special Marvel Edition* #15 (Dec. 1973). And in between, they debuted a Native-American superhero—Red Wolf, in *Avengers* #80 (Sept. 1970).

In his book *Marvel Comics: The Untold Story*, Sean Howe noted that one of Thomas' first responsibilities when he was named Marvel editor-in-chief in 1972 was to further diversify the Marvel Universe. Not as easy a task as one might think.

Uncaged

Jazzy John Romita, Sr. provided Marvelites with this iconic cover art for *Hero for Hire* #1 (June 1972), and designed the hero's appearance as well.

Trailblazers

Black Panther, Black Widow, Red Wolf, and Shang-Chi paved the way for Luke Cage's premiere in his own title.

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"It's kind of a shame," Thomas says. "You could get blacks to buy comics about whites, but it was hard to get whites to buy comics in which the main character was black. And it was even harder to get boys to buy comics about women."

Comics historian Barry Pearl notes, "In 1972's America, it took courage to produce Luke Cage, the first African-American hero to have his own national title."

The black audience for superhero comics was always large, but could be ambivalent. "The racist administrative government with its Superman notions and comic-book politics," sneered activist Bobby Seale during the Chicago Seven trial in 1969. "We're hip to the fact that Superman never saved no black people."

Seale had a point—in a Silver Age superhero comic, you were more likely to find a green face than a black one.

But Marvel's attitude on racial justice had long been clear. For example, in the *Tales of Suspense* storyline that culminated in *Captain America* #100, Cap tackled a redoubt of the Nazi supervillain Baron Zemo, the man who had seemingly killed his partner Bucky and who now wielded a space death ray that threatened the entire planet.

Odds against him, Cap met and teamed up with the African king who was the world's first black superhero—a nice thematic irony given the fact that Steve Rogers' archenemy was dedicated to the subjugation of "inferior races," whether black or Jewish.

It made perfect sense to me that, soon after, Cap would recommend the Black Panther as his replacement in the Avengers. They shared a similar power set and true-blue virtues, despite the fact that one was a democratic citizen and the other presumably a monarchist.

A MARVEL HERO FROM THE STREETS

Luke Cage arrived as both a complement to and a thematic reversal of Marvel's Black Panther concept. While the Black Panther ruled a hidden, super-technological African kingdom, Cage walked the ordinary streets of a recognizable New York City. Where the Black Panther was a king, Cage was a common man.

Cage was born in the era of the "Blaxploitation" films, although it's not a term I particularly like. In movies like *Shaft* (1971), Hollywood wasn't "exploiting" black audiences so much as providing them with stories they were eager to see—crime dramas about effective, independent black heroes and heroines. I count that a considerable step up from the virtual ghetto of sidekick, victim, and buffoon roles to which black actors had been confined since the beginning of the film industry.

John Shaft, a character created by Ernest Tidyman in his 1970 novel *Shaft*, was an African-American heir to the knight-errant role played by figures like Philip Marlowe and Mike Hammer—tough customers who must walk mean streets alone, dispensing justice where they can.

The film proved extremely popular with both black and white audiences, and was one of only three profitable movies made by MGM that year.

"A parade of copycats stalked the screen in the footsteps of the black private eye taken as a model soul brother," noted Roland Leander Williams, Jr. in his book *Black Male Frames: African Americans in a Century of Hollywood Cinema, 1903–2003*.

Nor was Shaft's influence confined to one medium. "Publishers were eager to tap into a market segment that they had ignored for too long," wrote Jeffrey A. Brown in his book *Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics and Their Fans*. "But instead of producing straight blaxploitation heroes, the comics publishers melded the superficial conventions of the film genre with the characters they knew best, the superheroes. The comic-book versions may have looked and talked like John Shaft, but they were given fancy costumes and superpowers. The comic-book blaxploitation heroes were also watered down for a younger audience so that such prominent film conventions as the hero's sexual prowess were left out of the stories."

And just as John Shaft became the first African-American action hero with his own film series, Luke Cage became the first African-American superhero with his own comic-book series.

"In the 1970s, Cage's costume wasn't a hoodie but a metal headband, bracelets, and a chain-link belt—attire inspired by the blaxploitation films," noted Charles Moss in *Atlantic* Magazine. "Characters in these films typically rebelled against the white establishment and were considered more or less antiheroes—especially significant following the turmoil of the 1960s and the civil-rights movement."

Hero for Hire #1 begins in maximum security Seagate Prison, where militant inmates Shades and Comanche

Meet Luke Cage

(left) "The Man" touted the premiere of Luke Cage in his Soapbox appearing in Marvel's May 1972 cover-dated titles. (right) This jugular-grabbing splash from *Hero for Hire* #1—with the Tuska/Graham art team recreating Romita's corner-box illo of Cage, also seen in Stan's Soapbox—proves that Stan's praise was no mere hype.

A MODERN-DAY *GLADIATOR*

In flashback, we learn that Lucas grew up on Harlem streets where "The name of the game is survival… an' you learn to play it any way you can!" His playmate at that "game" was Willis Stryker, as good with blades as Lucas was with his fists. The best friends were finally divided by two things—Stryker's involvement with organized crime, and their romantic rivalry over the beautiful Reva Connors.

"Willis had the bread to show her the good times I never could," Lucas recalled. But when Stryker was being beaten by mob thugs, Reva ran to Lucas for help. Despite the fact that Lucas saved him, the hospitalized Stryker turns against Lucas, blaming him because Reva had decided Stryker's life of crime was too dangerous.

The vengeful Stryker frames Lucas by planting drugs in his apartment and, while Lucas is in prison, manages to woo Reva once more. But Reva was right the first time. She is killed in a mob hit directed at Stryker.

In the *Luke Cage* TV series, Reva (Parisa Fitz-Henley) is retconned into Cage's prison counselor and later wife, the woman who is killed by the mind-controlled Jessica Jones in her own Marvel Netflix TV series.

Wrongfully imprisoned with his girl murdered, it's no wonder Lucas' prison files are "…nothing but depressing, brawls, attempted escapes," as Burstein observes. Still, the powerful Lucas is ideally suited for Burstein's experiment, which uses Tony Stark's technology to create a bio-electrical system for stimulating human cell regeneration.

"If successful, it could counter the damages of almost any disease," Burstein enthuses.

But Lucas rejects the offer of a possible parole, noting it would be no use to him if the experiment killed him.

"Mankind's done nothing for me, and I'm returning the favor," Lucas says.

However, he changes his mind when Rackham, now demoted to a mere prison guard thanks to Lucas, promises to turn Seagate into his personal hell.

But Rackham, refusing to be cheated of his revenge, sneaks into the experimental chambers and amplifies Lucas' electro-chemical "brimstone bath" to an agonizing, presumably fatal level. Lucas breaks free and, with a single open-handed slap, nearly kills Rackham. In frustration, Lucas punches a prison wall and is surprised to find it isn't his fist that breaks.

He has become a superman.

Punching all the way through the wall, Lucas runs from the Alcatraz-like prison. Shot by guards, he plunges from a high cliff into the river.

Naturally, the authorities presume him to be dead. Unnaturally, he is not.

The experiment left Lucas with skin as tough and durable as prison bars, and muscles to match. Alex Abad-Santos, a culture reporter for *Vox*, observed "…deeper allegories and parallels woven into that first issue. Cage's brown skin—a feature that sets him apart—is the source of his power and strength."

"It was always intended that he would be exceptionally strong," Roy Thomas says. "I based his powers (minus the jumping) on Hugo Danner, hero of Philip Wylie's 1930 novel *Gladiator*, that probably influenced Superman."

And the similarity is marked. Here's Hugo Danner on the battlefields of World War I: "Across the gray ashes was a long hole. In front of it a maze of wire. In it—mushrooms. German helmets. Hugo gaped at them. All that training, all that restraint, had been expended for this.

Rebranded

(top) With issue #17 (Feb. 1974), Luke Cage's comic was now titled *Power Man*. Cover by Gil Kane and Romita. (bottom) It's Cage vs. Cottonmouth on this dynamite cover—sans copy and titles—for *Power Man* #20 (Aug. 1974). Original Gil Kane/ Mike Esposito art courtesy of Heritage.

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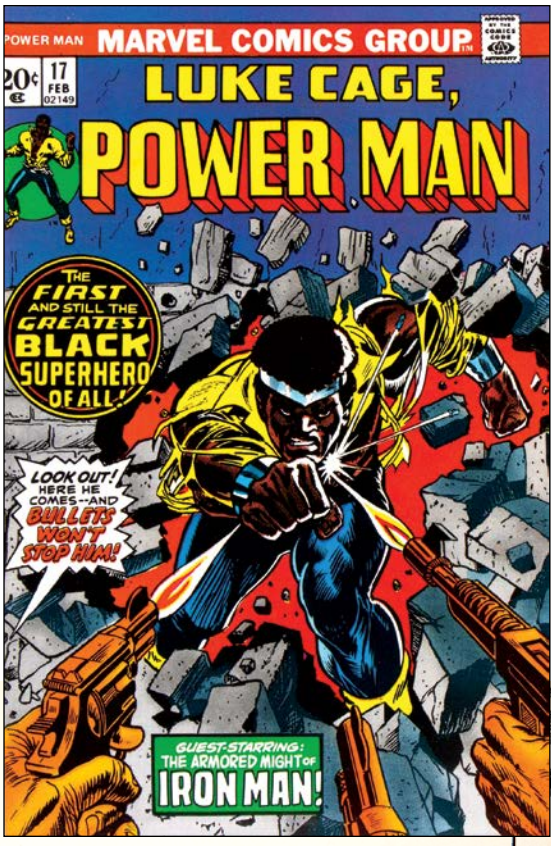

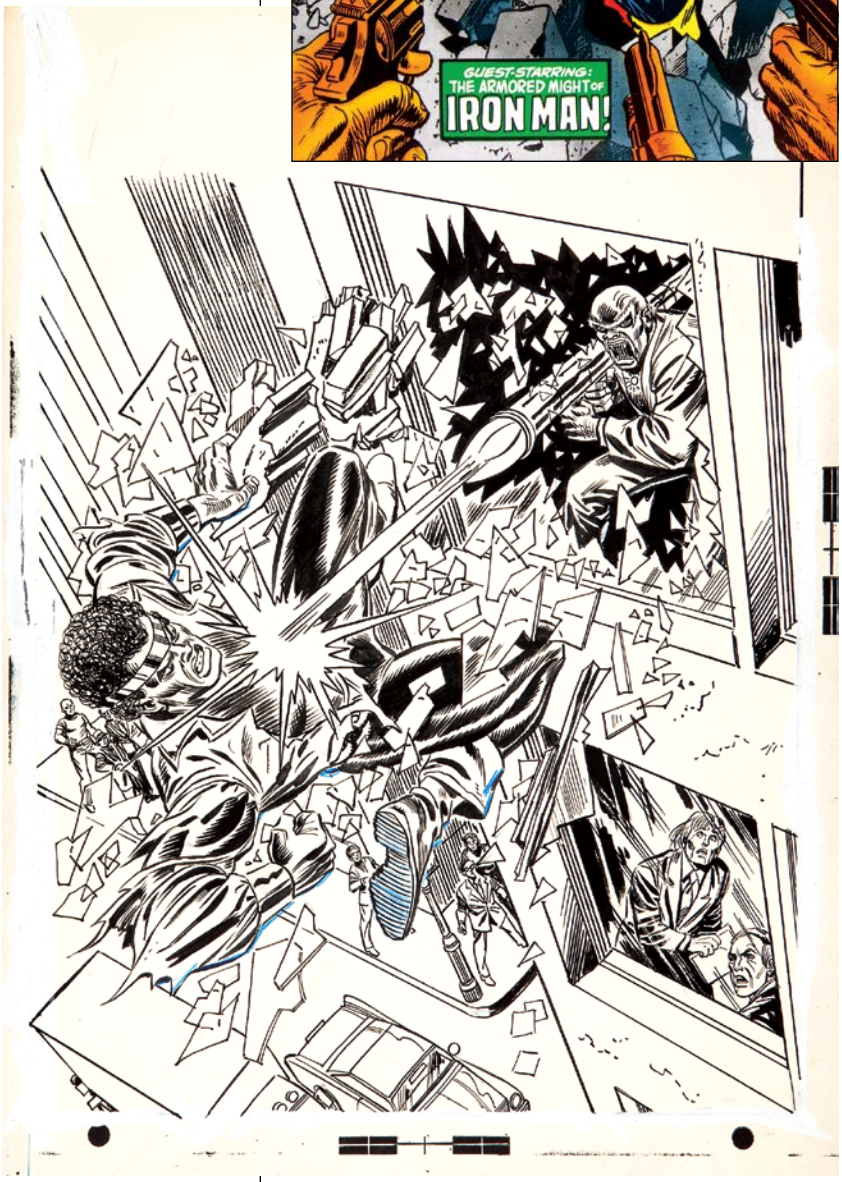

he traces to the Latverian embassy, where he finds himself being lectured by his unwilling host and secret employer, Dr. Doom.

Cage is unimpressed. "Doctor What? C'mon, man… Nobody walks around with a tin can on his face and a jive name like that!"

"Did you expect to gain superhuman powers and stay within your limited world of petty hoodlums and petty crimes?" Doom sneers.

Doom hired Cage to track down his runaway robots because they had disguised themselves as black men in hopes of evading the monarch. "Latveria is European, Mr. Cage," Doom explains. "I have no black subjects, and—sad to say—no one ever emigrates to my land."

The robots are destroyed in a life-and-death battle with Cage, who discovers that Doom has departed for Latveria without paying his fee.

"When Doom walks out on his bill, Englehart's purpose in pitting the title character against one of Marvel's top bad guys is clear: he's trying to juxtapose the street-smart bulletproof brawler with an aristocratic evil genius," observes popular-culture writer Evan Narcisse.

Borrowing a rocket from the Fantastic Four's Reed Richards, Cage flies off to collect from Doom, who regards him as crazy for crossing the Atlantic to demand a paltry $200. Cage fights the mastermind, then saves him from an assassination attempt by the alien rebel leader the Faceless One before flying home with his money.

"At this point, the only thing Luke truly has in his life is his honor, and Doom besmirched that," noted comics historian Patrick D. Gaertner on his blog. "He treated Luke like an object, one not even worth paying. That $200 was a trifle to Doom, he didn't give it to Luke out of spite, because he didn't actually see Luke as a real threat. So Luke flew around the world to show Doom that not only is he a threat, but he's a better man than him. He doesn't kill Doom, nor does he let the alien kill him. It wasn't about vengeance, it was about justice. Once of the best things about Luke Cage is his iron-hard principles."

Hero for Hire #10 and 11 (June and July 1973) pit Cage against Senor Suerte, a lunatic Puerto Rican gambling czar who, like Batman's foe Two-Face, is obsessed with luck and gives his enemies a 50-50 chance of being electrocuted. And Cage's luck takes a turn for the worse when Phil Fox discovers who he really is.

WANTED: ONE WALL-CRAWLER

Meanwhile, Fox's reporting makes publisher J. Jonah Jameson aware of Cage, whom he decides to hire to capture Spider-Man.

In *Amazing Spider-Man* #123 (Aug. 1973), we're treated to a fresh look at Cage through the art of Gil Kane and John Romita, Sr. Jameson meets Cage just as the freelance superhero is throwing a disagreeable would-be client through his office door (a scene that would be repeated decades later, to equally dramatic effect, by Jessica Jones).

For $5,000, Cage agrees to track down Spider-Man, who's depressed because he's just attended the funeral of Gwen Stacy.

The heroes prove to be evenly matched, with Spidey dismissing Cage as "…the clown who sells his powers like some cheap, third-rate thug." Their first battle ends in a stalemate, with Cage explaining defensively, "Some dudes have to do this for a livin'—we ain't all rich playboys like Bruce Wayne."

The battle between Spidey and Cage finishes, surprisingly enough, in reasoned discourse and an apology from the Web-Slinger.

"Maybe I have made a few mistakes, Cage," he says. "Should have remembered—I started out in this game asking for pay, too."

IRREVERENT PANELS: THE COMICS CAREER OF BILLY GRAHAM

by James Heath Lantz

There have been a great number of African-American artists in every medium that have greatly influenced our world and its culture. Ernie Barnes, Maya Angelou, Alice Walker, and Prince Rogers Nelson are just a few of the names that have made an impact on people of all races.

However, one person that belongs among those mentioned is comic-book artist William Henderson Graham, better known as Billy Graham, or the Irreverent Billy Graham, as he was credited in his Marvel work. Artists such as Matt Baker and E. B. Stoner opened doors for other African Americans such as Graham to work in comics, but Graham himself blazed trails for those that followed him.

BACK ISSUE will take a look at Billy Graham as we explore the career of a man who paved the way for the likes of Christopher Priest, Reginald Hudlin, Jamal Igle, Denys Cowan, and so many other African-American comic-book writers and artists who followed in his footsteps.

BILLY GRAHAM

AN IRREVERENT LIFE

Art, especially comics, had been a part of Billy Graham's life from a very young age. According to an interview published in *Shazam/The Wonderful World of Comix* #7, Graham, born on July 1, 1935, became interested in comics thanks to a cousin who read them regularly. This led to Billy tracing the panels.

Graham's interest in drawing grew through his youth. While still in elementary school, Billy participated in a "Keep Your City Clean" drawing contest in which he won $25 for his advertisement. This was the first time the Irreverent One was paid for his artwork, but it would not be the last.

After attending New York City's High School of Music and Art and the School of Visual Art, where he learned under *Tarzan* artist Burne Hogarth, Graham went into commercial art before applying his unique visual style in the comic pages.

According to the *Shazam* interview, Graham got his start in comics by working in the mailroom at EC Comics. He'd show his artwork to the artists whenever they were in the office. "Al Williamson used to help me a lot," Graham stated. "So did Johnny Craig, Marie Severin, and Bill Gaines."

Moving forward to 1969, the Irreverent One became influenced by fanzines and underground comix, producing adult-oriented strips. One piece of Graham artwork recently uncovered predates the October 1969 cover-dated *Vampirella* #1, one of Billy's earliest mainstream comics. Page 16 of the June 6, 1969 *Screw*, issue #16, features a sequential serial that combines Graham's style with one possibly inspired by Richard "Grass" Green.

Meanwhile, one day before *Apollo 11* lifted off for its historic trip to the Moon, Warren Publishing's *Vampirella* #1 was released, on July 1, 1969. The 64-page magazine was not only the debut of the title character, it also served as Graham's first outing as a mainstream comic-book artist. "Death Boat," a vampire tale inspired by the film *Lifeboat*, features eerie images that seem to be influenced by Al Williamson, one of Graham's idols, and many of the others who had

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No Sex, Please, We're British!

CENSORING "Panther's Rage"

UnKnown Marvel

by Robert Menzies

Black Panther in Black and White

While UnKnown Marvel's Robert Menzies rightly contends that Marvel UK's reprinting of "Panther's Rage" minus its color was unfortunate, this original art to a Billy Graham-drawn T'Challa pinup from the mid-1970s shows a sleek example of the illustrator's linework. Courtesy of Jason Schachter.

In the 21st Century, British fans experience the Marvel Universe like everyone else. We have dedicated comic shops, mail order, and digital subscriptions so that no one with money to their name will miss out on any American titles.

That was not, however, the case in the 1970s.

Back then, British fans were mainly exposed to Marvel through the reprint weeklies that the House of Ideas launched in late 1972, starting with *The Mighty World of Marvel* (*MWOM*). And that could mean a quite different reading experience of muddled continuity and sometimes even doctored stories. One of the most intriguing examples of the latter is the epic "Panther's Rage" by Don McGregor, Rich Buckler, Billy Graham, Klaus Janson, and others.

"Panther's Rage" was the classic Black Panther story arc that ran in the bimonthly *Jungle Action* (*JA*) #6–18 (Sept. 1973–Nov. 1975). This lengthy storyline had not long reached its conclusion when its serialization began as a backup feature in Britain's *Planet of the Apes* (*POTA*) weekly #58–83 (Nov. 29, 1975–May 22, 1976). In my opinion, it was the greatest series to appear in that title's 123-issue lifespan, beating out worthy contenders like Thomas and Kane's *Warlock* and Starlin's *Captain Marvel*.

For reasons that will become clear, few series in the British weeklies differed so much from the original in their presentation as did "Panther's Rage." While some of those differences are positive, most, however, are assuredly not. The central problem is, of course, the censorship.

THE POSITIVES

Firstly, let me deal with the pluses for the British fans. British continuity operated at a faster speed than was found in the US editions. The original "Panther's Rage" story took 26 months to run its course: in Britain, it was only six. For fans over here brought up on a traditional diet of weekly comics, a month's wait between issues was alien and ridiculously long. *Jungle Action* wasn't even that frequent: It ran on a bimonthly status—and a delay meant that there were *four* months between #8 and 9! Don McGregor himself has spoken about how he had to ensure that his rotating cast be featured regularly, so that he wasn't expecting readers to maintain an emotional connection after a gap in appearances of four or six months. So, the British comics definitely had a massive advantage in that respect.

The other positive, I would argue, is the extra art, even if it didn't quite match the stellar heights of the original. The UK weeklies saw nine new splash pages. As each issue was bisected, a new splash was needed every fortnight. On occasion, the editor would repurpose the *JA* covers, but they switched to using entirely new splashes every fortnight for the final eight weeks. Thanks to researcher Jason Schacter, we now know that most of this art was created by regular British Department contributor David Wenzel, with the final one created by Mike Nasser/Netzer.

These pluses notwithstanding, the British version was undeniably less satisfying, as we will see.

AND NOW, THE NEGATIVES

Few Covers

As was normal, we missed a lot of covers. Under normal circumstances this is not ideal, and considering that we are talking classic covers by Gil Kane and Rich Buckler—the figure on #8 is an iconic Panther image—it's an even greater loss. Although some were repurposed

FlashBack!

BRAINS AND BRAWN

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF BILL FOSTER, BLACK GOLIATH/ GIANT-MAN II/GOLIATH III

by Dan Tandarich

The Black Panther made his first appearance in* Fantastic Four *#52 (July 1966), with the distinction of becoming the first African hero in Marvel Comics. Two months later, William (Bill) Barrett Foster would debut in the pages of *The Avengers*, significant because of the rarity of African-American supporting characters in comics at that time.

From scientist to superhero, Bill Foster went through the growing pains of becoming Black Goliath, a.k.a. Giant-Man, a.k.a. Goliath, hero at large. As the name suggests, Foster, in his many guises, could increase his size up to 25 feet, resulting in superhuman strength and the psychological advantage of towering over his opponents. Diversity had come to Marvel Comics, and Bill Foster helped lead the way.

BIG MAN ON CAMPUS

Henry "Hank" Pym started his career as a biochemist, one that studied the chemical substances and vital processes occurring in living organisms. Pym, a.k.a. the original Ant-Man, along with his partner-in-peril, Janet Van Dyne, the Wasp, were founding members of the Avengers. Pym's work as a scientist and his size-changing ability led him to become the original Giant-Man, and then Goliath. Complications arose when Hank became stuck at giant size. He needed help in the form of a lab assistant and went to Tony (Iron Man) Stark, who had money, knowledge, and resources. Tony knew just the right biochemist at Stark Industries in the plans and research division. Enter: Bill Foster!

Avengers #32 (Sept. 1966), by Stan Lee and Don Heck, featured the first appearance of Bill Foster. It also featured the first appearance of the Sons of the Serpent, a racist hate group that believed, "As the original serpent drove Adam and Eve from Eden—so shall we drive all foreigners from this land!"

In his introduction to these *Avengers* stories in *Marvel Masterworks* vol. 38 (2004), *Avengers* scribe Roy Thomas related, "Hard as it may be to imagine now, in 1966 it was rare to see matters of race and heritage handled in the pages of a 'mere' comic book, even obliquely. I say 'obliquely' because you'll note that the Supreme Serpent keeps talking about driving 'all foreigners' from the U.S.—but everybody knew that, by 'foreigners,' he also meant people who had been born in America but with the 'wrong' skin color. To push the point home, Stan and Don gave Hank Pym a new assistant—Bill Foster, one of the first African-Americans to be given a meaty and non-stereotypical supporting role in a U.S. comic."

In "The Sign of the Serpent," an attack on Bill by the hate group pulls the Avengers into the case. Foster demonstrated good-guy qualities in *Avengers* #33 and 34 and encountered his first real supervillain in the form of the Living Laser. *Avengers* #35 handed off the writing baton from Stan Lee to Roy Thomas, Roy's first issue as scripter. Thomas cemented the partnership between Pym and Foster with the following dialogue: Pym: "We've still got a million experiments to perform… as a team!"

Walking Tall

Cover to the Bronze Age classic, *Black Goliath* #1 (Feb. 1976). Cover art by Rich Buckler and Frank Giacoia.

THE UNSUNG LEGEND OF MAL DUNCAN

FlashBack!

by John Schwirian

Mal Makes the Scene

The first appearance of DC's first black superhero, Mal (whose last name had yet to be revealed), in *Teen Titans* #26 (Mar.–Apr. 1970). Written by Bob Kanigher and drawn by Nick Cardy.

Mal Duncan holds the honor of being DC Comics' first African-American superhero… well, not *super*, but DC's first *costumed* black hero… Um, actually, it's kind of complicated.

While Marvel Comics introduced Black Panther in 1966 and the Falcon in 1969, DC only had Jackie Johnson, an African-American G.I. in Sgt. Rock's Easy Company. Johnson debuted in 1961, making him DC's first recurring black hero. However, this was a war comic, not a superhero feature. Molo, the African Sea Devil, made a one-shot appearance in 1965, and August Durant debuted in 1968 as a member of the Secret Six espionage team. Still, none of those characters were superheroes.

THE TITANS' "BLACK STAR"

In 1970, Dick Giordano was the editor of *Teen Titans*, but he had not settled on a regular writer for the series. After experimenting with Marv Wolfman and Len Wein as scribes, he hired Robert Kanigher as part of a directive from publisher Carmine Infantino to "de-power" the Teen Titans and make them more relevant. Giordano felt that Kanigher was the best man for the job, as he had done the same thing with Wonder Woman the year before. Kanigher's first issue (*Teen Titans* #25, Jan.–Feb. 1970) delivered everything asked of him. In the story, following their failure to prevent an assassination, the Titans take a vow to give up using their powers and costumes in order to train with the mysterious Mr. Jupiter.

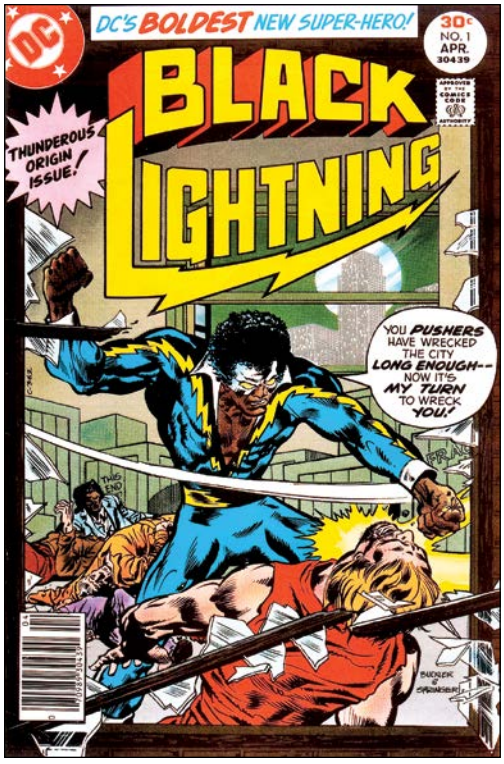
Teen Titans #26 ("A Penny for a Black Star") extends this idea as the heroes begin the new program. After a bizarre training exercise, Jupiter gives each Titan a penny and then leaves them to manage on their own in Hell's Corner, a poor neighborhood in an unnamed major city. As per instructions, they start looking for jobs and lodging when Lilith informs them that there is another task to fulfill—find a "black star." Confused by this cryptic message, they search the neighborhood for clues. They find a young black girl named Cindy selling lemonade for a penny and decide to buy a drink. However, an all-white gang called Hell's Hawks resents the outsiders invading their territory and pulls the old protection racket on Cindy. When the Titans refuse to respond violently, the gang members grab Lilith and Wonder Girl for some "fun." Suddenly, Mal leaps into the fray to defend his kid sister (Cindy), and the Titans fight back at last. Once the Hawks are driven off, Mal advises the Titans to head out, as they don't belong there.

Before long, the Titans find employment and a place to stay. Ten days later, at a boxing match at the local boys' club, they watch Mal deliver a beat-down to Storm Trooper, leader of the Hell's Hawks. Realizing the meaning of their mission to find a black star, they recruit Mal and take him to Mr. Jupiter for training. Despite his success in his initial testing, Mal still feels the need to prove himself and sneaks off to pilot a space probe destined for Venus with no return to Earth. Mal's idea was to be "the first guy to wing outta Hell's Corner—

Lightning Strikes Three Times (and Counting!)

TONY ISABELLA AND BLACK LIGHTNING™

by *John Trumbull*
transcribed by Rose Rummel-Eury



Meet the Creator of Black Lightning (left) It all started here—*Black Lightning* #1 (Apr. 1977)! Cover by Rich Buckler and Frank Springer. (right) As you'll read, this interview panel featured a surprise walk-in from this unidentified Black Lightning cosplayer, who took a moment to meet Tony Isabella.

"Justice, like lightning, should ever appear, to some men, hope, and to other men, fear!"

With that paraphrase from a Thomas Randolph poem, Black Lightning began. *Since creating Jefferson Pierce and his superpowered alter ego for DC Comics in 1976,* ***Tony Isabella*** *has had a fascinating journey with his signature character, from Black Lightning's original 1977–1978 series, to the title's short-lived revival in 1995–1996, to today, with a primetime* Black Lightning *TV series on the CW television network and Isabella's return to the character in the miniseries* Black Lightning: Cold Dead Hands. *The following is a transcript of my conversation with Tony Isabella at the East Coast Comicon on April 28, 2018. It has been copyedited by Mr. Isabella and myself for clarity.*

– John Trumbull

JOHN TRUMBULL: ***Welcome everybody. This is the Black Lightning panel. My name is John Trumbull. I write for*** **BACK ISSUE** ***magazine for TwoMorrows, and also for a website called*** **The Atomic Junk Shop.** ***We're very happy to be speaking today to the guy who created Black Lightning, along with Trevor Von Eeden, Mr. Tony Isabella.*** [*applause*]

TONY ISABELLA: Thank you everyone. Just to make this clear, I am the creator of Black Lightning, Trevor drew the first series. That does not make him a co-creator. However, the credits now read, and I wrote the current credit line: "Black Lightning, created by Tony Isabella, *with* Trevor Von Eeden," because "with" is nice and ambiguous, you can believe it means whatever you want it to mean. Also, the reason I did it that way is so Trevor can get money from Black Lightning, now that there is money to be made from Black Lightning. But yeah, my correct title on this character is "creator," not "co-creator." And it's the thing I'm most proud of, so I kind of insist upon that. I'm not really this much of a prick, really. Sorry, kids, I didn't say that, I said, "Rick."

TRUMBULL: ***You created Black Lightning over 40 years ago, back in 1976.***

ISABELLA: Yes, I created him in '76, and the first issue came out in '77.

TRUMBULL: ***There is some interesting backstory about the character. Could you tell us about the Black Bomber?***

ISABELLA: DC Comics hired me away from Marvel because I had written a lot of the black characters at Marvel. I had written Luke Cage. I had written Misty Knight. I had written the Falcon and the Living Mummy, although not everybody realized the Living Mummy was black, because he was covered in bandages.

But they called me, I went over to DC, and they handed me two scripts that had already been written of a character created by Gerry Conway and Bob Kanigher, called the Black Bomber. Now, the Black Bomber was a white racist who took part in chemical camouflage experiments while serving in Vietnam that would enable him to blend into the jungle better. And this gets worse and worse—

now, nothing ever happened to him while he was in Vietnam, but when he came back to the States, in times of stress, he would turn into a black superhero. He didn't know he turned into a black superhero; the black superhero didn't know he was really a white racist. In all fairness to Gerry and Bob, both of whom were friends of mine—well, Gerry still is because he's still alive, Bob was a friend of mine—they were trying to do their take on a movie called *Watermelon Man*, a great movie with Godfrey Cambridge, who plays this rich white guy who wakes up one morning and he is a black guy. And it was a pretty good movie, but it didn't translate well.

So we have this character, he's a black superhero, but he's really a white racist, and neither one of his identities knows about the other. They both have girlfriends, who witness the transformation, and never say anything about it.

TRUMBULL: ***Sure.*** [*laughter*]

ISABELLA: Now, maybe I'm just more traditional than a lot of people, [but] if my significant other goes through that big of a change in front of me, I at least ask a question about it. [*laughter*] "Gosh, dear, I didn't know you were a vampire." I would have asked something!

It gets worse. In each of the two stories, in his white racist identity, he saves somebody that he can't see clearly, and it ends up being a black person. And he gets really angry that he risked his life to save a black person. To the point in one case it's a child in a baby carriage and when he sees that he's risked his life to save this black child, he says—and this is in the script—"You mean, I risked my life for a jungle bunny?" [*Trumbull sighs*] And then, his uniform was essentially a basketball uniform.

DC wanted me to rewrite these two scripts. They said, "Just punch 'em up a little bit so they're better, and then take over the book with the third issue." I said, "No." They said, "What do you mean?" I replied, "I'm not doing this."

"Why?"

"These are the most offensive comic-book scripts I've ever read. You cannot publish this."

They said, "What do you mean? We paid for these scripts."

I said, "And you were foolish to do so. You cannot publish these scripts."

"Well, why can't we?"

"Because people will come to your offices with torches and pitchforks."

"How could you know that?"

"I will be leading them." [*laughter*]

It took me two weeks to boil down this argument we were having to: "Do you really want DC's first major black superhero to be a white racist?" And at that point, they said, "Oh, yeah, I guess you're right." And I basically had two weeks to create Black Lightning. I hope we can all agree that Black Lightning is a much better character than the Black Bomber would have been.

TRUMBULL: ***I think we can go with you there. Now, you got the name Black Lightning from a* Wonder Woman *cover.***

ISABELLA: Yes. I had gone back to Cleveland to visit my family and spent those two weeks creating not Black Lightning, but Jefferson Pierce. I knew everything about Jefferson Pierce. I knew what he was capable of, what he'd done, I knew his whole background. And I came back to New York, and I suddenly realize that I had not come up with a superhero identity for him, and it's less than two hours before the pitch meeting.

So I'm wandering around the DC offices and I go into Julie Schwartz's office, and there is a sketch for a *Wonder Woman* cover [#225] by Ernie Chua, and it's got Wonder Woman standing on her robot plane or the top of a building or something, and she's lassoing a black lightning bolt. She's saying, because apparently you need to explain this on the cover, "Hera, help me stop this black lightning bolt from destroying the city!" And I'm going, "Black Lightning, that's kinda catchy." Okay, Jefferson Pierce will be Black Lightning, and I then came up with all the superhero stuff. I already knew the villains. I knew Tobias Whale, but I didn't have a superhero identity for [Jefferson Pierce]. Literally the Black Lightning part was the last thing I created, and it was done just before the pitch meeting.

TRUMBULL: ***Had you decided at that point if he was going to have superpowers or not?***

ISABELLA: No, I hadn't. And in fact, he did not have superpowers in the initial issues, which quite frankly was a mistake on my part. He had an electric belt that could project a force field and shoot out electricity, and I did comic-book science, and those powers became internalized the more he used them, so he would have them naturally. Of course, in all the reboots, he's a metahuman. He always had the metahuman gene and when it got triggered, he has these natural powers.

TRUMBULL: ***That's certainly a simpler set up than doing the belt stuff.***

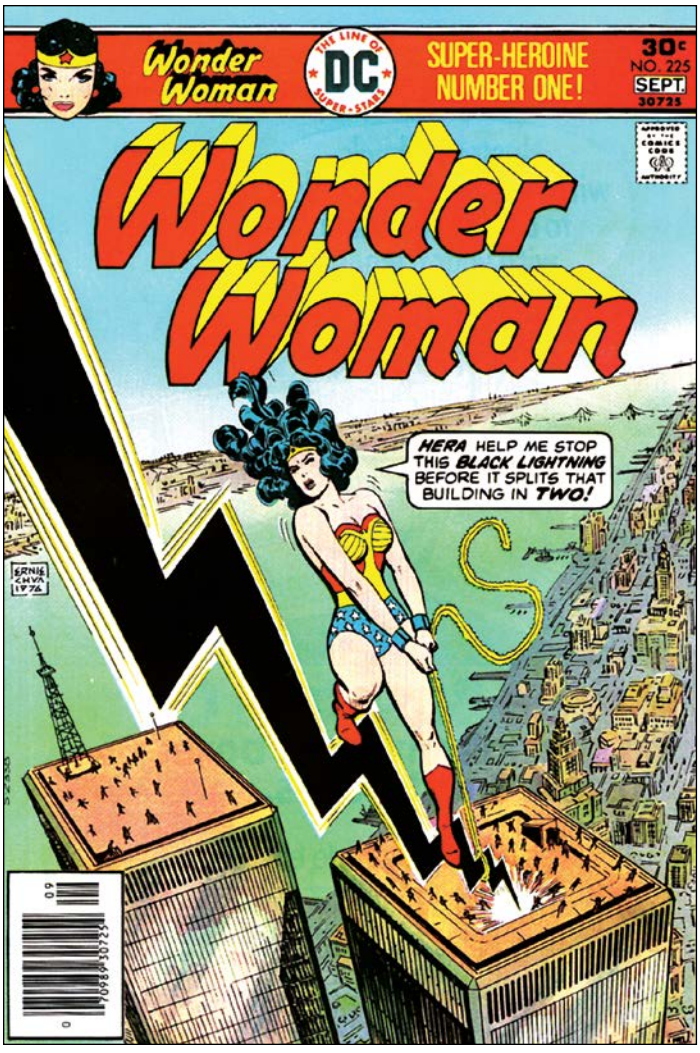
ISABELLA: I thank God for [whomever] at DC—I'm not sure who it was at DC—that came up with the concept of the metagene, but I really liked that.

TRUMBULL: ***It was Keith Giffen in the* Invasion! *miniseries.***

ISABELLA: Was he the writer of that?

TRUMBULL: ***He was the plotter. Bill Mantlo did the dialogue. And Keith has told me that when he introduced the concept of the metagene, there was resistance from DC editorial. But all those editors came back to him and asked him to do stuff with the metagene later.*** [***Author's note:*** See *BACK ISSUE* #82 for more information.]

ISABELLA: The metagene is so elegantly simple. Origin stories—unless your parents are shot down in an alley or your planet explodes—origin stories are pretty boring. And the metagene is a great shortcut for that.



Bolt of Inspiration

The Amazon Princess' word balloon on this Ernie Chua cover for *Wonder Woman* #225 (Aug.–Sept. 1976) provided Isabella with the name of Jefferson Pierce's costumed alter ego.

BLACK LIGHTNING™ BEYOND ISABELLA

by Ed Lute

Dark Night in Suicide Slum

Splash page to the first post-Isabella issue, *Black Lightning* #11 (Sept.–Oct. 1978), with Denny O'Neil as the new writer.

In the 1970s, while Marvel Comics was giving readers more diversity in its comics with characters such as the Black Panther, the Falcon, Luke Cage, Misty Knight, and Storm, DC Comics gave its readers the non-superpowered hero Mal Duncan, who first premiered in *Teen Titans* #26 (Apr. 1970), and John Stewart, who first took the oath in *Green Lantern* #87 (Dec. 1971). Otherwise, from the Golden Age forward, DC didn't offer much in the way of diversity where its superheroes were concerned. DC's offerings of Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, Flash, and others of their pantheon were not representative of the multicultural makeup of our country. But with a flash of lightning, Marvel's Distinguished Competition struck back with one of the finest African-American characters to enter the comic-book field: Black Lightning.

Although the House of Ideas' premier black superhero, Luke Cage, Hero for Hire, presented readers with an empowering depiction of an African American, DC Comics took its character Jefferson Pierce (Black Lightning's alter ego) to a new level by making him a schoolteacher. In doing so, DC provided African-American readers with a superhero that not only looked like them, but presented a positive role model who was successful in an important and life-changing career.

Writer Tony Isabella created Jefferson Pierce/Black Lightning in *Black Lightning* #1 (Apr. 1977), with artist Trevor Von Eeden. However, Isabella would leave the book after the first ten issues over a dispute discussed in this issue's interview with the Black Lightning creator.

The question then became, *Without Isabella's guiding vision, would the character of Black Lightning survive?* The answer was yes, but not without some growing pains, including a cancelled series, the loss of Black Lightning's powers, the loss of Von Eeden, and the character's lower-profile backup features in *World's Finest Comics* and *Detective Comics* before finding his home in a team book.

So let's look at Black Lightning's exploits beyond those originally chronicled by Isabella.

DENNY O'NEIL

BLACK LIGHTNING IMPLODES

When Isabella left *Black Lightning*, scripting of the series was put into the hands of legendary comic-book writer Denny O'Neil. At the time O'Neil took over writing duties on *Black Lightning*, he was best known for his work on DC Comics' Batman and, along with artist Neal Adams, for bringing social issues such as racism, ecology, urban decay, and most notably drug use into the groundbreaking Green Lantern/Green Arrow run which began in *Green Lantern* #76 (Apr. 1970).

For *Black Lightning* editor Jack C. Harris, no other writer at the time was better suited to follow Isabella. "Two of the writers I respected most for their professionalism and talent are Denny O'Neil and Tony Isabella," Harris tells *BACK ISSUE*. "It seemed a natural selection for me."

O'Neil took over writing *Black Lightning* with issue #11 (Oct. 1978). So, what drew him to the character of Black Lightning? "I imagine that my interest in the character reflected my desire to get more diversity into comics," O'Neil tells *BACK ISSUE*.

In O'Neil's first story, Jefferson Pierce as Black Lightning saved the life of one of his students from the villainous Major Corpo, who took advantage of illegal immigrants. Just like now, illegal immigration was an important, socially relevant topic when this issue was published. Although O'Neil layered the story with social commentary, the tale itself was a self-contained one that was the usual modus operandi for DC Comics at the time.

The pencils for the issue were provided by Black Lightning's defining artist, Trevor Von Eeden. Von Eeden recalls, "I'd penciled *BL* #11 in about three days (yep… seven pages a day, no kidding)—but I'm hard-pressed to remember why, to be perfectly honest. I was *never* the kind of artist to cut corners, or deliberately do a half-assed job (most especially at the very beginning of a dream-job career)—so I know that was neither a factor, nor the reason—but I definitely remember drawing that job in

UNSHEATHING SABRE

AN INTERVIEW WITH DON McGREGOR AND PAUL GULACY

by Ed Catto

DON McGREGOR

PAUL GULACY

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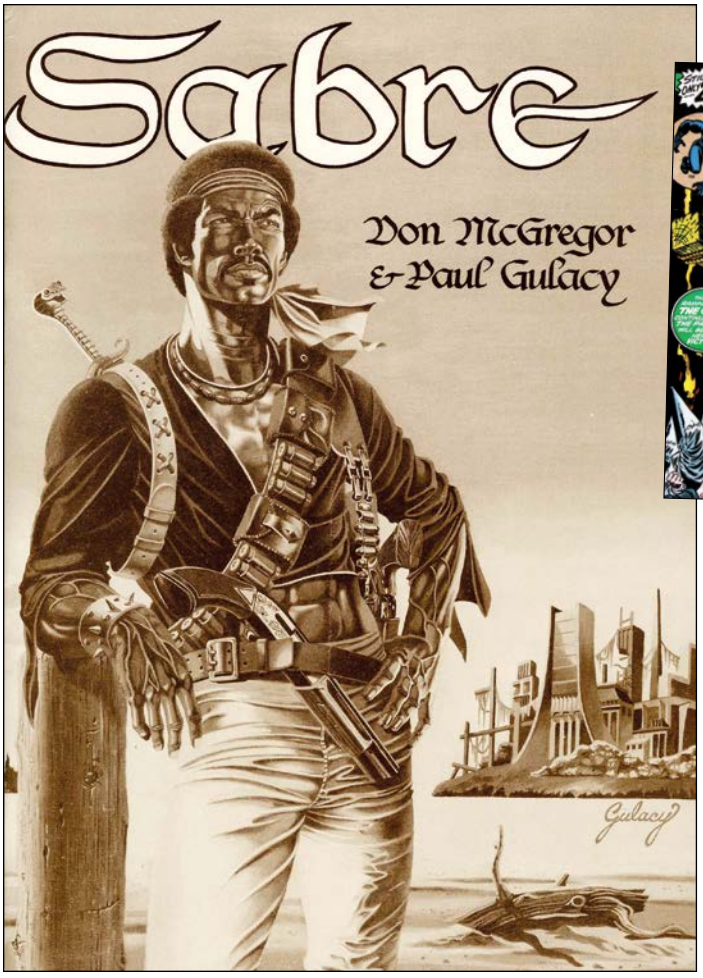

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[***Editor's note:*** *The final black hero of '70s comics to be spotlighted this issue is the sci-fi buccaneer Sabre. While he isn't a superhero like the other characters you've read about, Sabre is doubly significant, both as one of comicdom's first African-American stars and for the format in which he premiered—in the first graphic novel (or "graphic novelette," according to its author) to be produced for comic-shop distribution.*

The 1978 38-page Sabre *black-and-white graphic novel, featuring the story "Slow Fade of an Endangered Species," was written by* ***Don McGregor*** *and illustrated by* ***Paul Gulacy****. It pitted the swashbuckler and his allies against the mercenary Blackstar Blood in a topsy-turvy post-apocalyptic world.*

Following the graphic novel, publisher Eclipse Comics released 14 issues of a Sabre *comic book, cover-dated August 1982 (#1) through August 1985 (#14). Issues #1 and 2 reprinted the graphic novel in color, and McGregor penned new stories beginning in issue #3, mining story territory that was quite daring and groundbreaking for its day (as he had done the previous decade at Marvel). Our cover artist Billy Graham penciled* Sabre *#3–9, while artist Jose Ortiz completed the rest of the run.*

In this interview, McGregor and his original collaborator Paul Gulacy recall the early days of Sabre.]

ED CATTO: ***The first question is, to set the stage, can you give me, or remind me, a little bit of background about where you were in your careers when you started working on*** **Sabre*****?***

DON McGREGOR: Okay, none of these are short answers; it is all fairly complicated.

Sabre arose out of the fact that I was being taken off all the books I did at Marvel, including Killraven [McGregor's "Killraven" feature *Amazing Adventures*, herewith *Killraven*] and the Black Panther [McGregor's "Black Panther" feature in *Jungle Action*, herewith *Black Panther*]. Essentially when I was taken off the *Black Panther* after "The Panther vs. the Klan" [McGregor's controversial 1976 storyline in *Jungle Action* #19–22], work at Marvel was scarce and money was getting very tight. Doing those books, as exciting as they were to create, *The Black Panther* and *Killraven*, especially working with Rich Buckler and Billy Graham on the *Panther* and Craig Russell on *Killraven*, came at a cost. Working with them, that part was very stimulating and exciting, but it was also very traumatic because the books weren't believed in much by editorial.

For me, it was like having to keep blinders on while you were doing those books in terms of keeping your focus on what it is you hoped to do with the stories. To do a big project like "Panther's Rage," that was a two-and-a-half-year graphic novel or maxiseries (not sure what you want to call it). That meant that despite the fact that a lot of people didn't believe in it, you have to keep not just a belief, but the focus and intent of what you originally saw in your head and hoped you could achieve.

That part was very exciting because with the fans and the readers, they took much of those books to heart. They wrote about them and I met the people at conventions and that really showed me that there were people who cared and were affected by the stories, and they were reacting on a personal level to the different themes and levels I hoped I had successfully woven into the stories.

The Most Explosive Hero in Comics

October 1978's *Sabre*, the first graphic novel to be exclusively distributed in comic shops. Cover by Paul Gulacy.

© Don McGregor and Paul Gulacy.

Many of the readers didn't want Wakanda to go back to being just a "concept." They loved the idea of that place being unique and different from every other place, say, in the Marvel Universe mythos.

PAUL GULACY: I already had alerted Marvel that at the that time that I was leaving *Master of Kung Fu* [as its artist]. In fact, I actually received a personal phone call from Stan [Lee], who was a huge fan himself of the book. He was a little disappointed to hear the news. He wished me well and told me the door was always open at Marvel. He said that he really loved what Doug [Moench] and I were doing with the book.

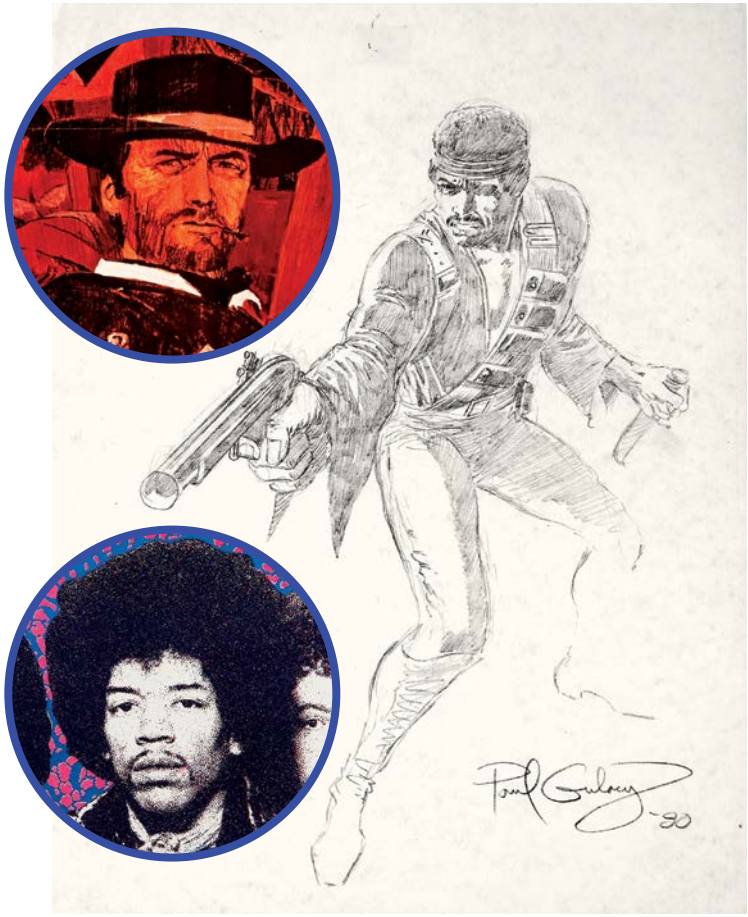
Later that night, I recall sitting in the dark of my apartment with a drink in one hand and a cigarette in the other and asking myself, "What the hell did I just do?"

McGREGOR: So, coming off of that and because now that work was very scarce, I realized during that time period that I was not a fast writer; I would probably never be a fast writer, it was all about telling the stories. What did the story need and what did it need next? Knowing that and realizing that about myself became—well, I just wanted more freedom to tell the stories I wanted to tell. That meant having to get out from underneath the companies like Marvel—I had not yet been to DC. Both the big companies had different rules. And so that feeling during that time period of creating those books was that you were kind of working in a cage and you had to keep trying to pick that lock. Their job was to put you in that cage, and my job as a storyteller was to pick that lock and try to explore different kinds of stories and make the stories richer in tone and purpose. I had no desire to do stories that had some vague boundaries that spoke of what was traditionally expected to be in comic-book stories.

I love the medium and I don't understand why we can't have a diversified cast of characters. That was a big deal in those days. It wasn't something that establishment and/or corporate people believed.

I didn't know why they didn't want gays in comics or people of different backgrounds. If bottom line for the suits was the color green, why would you not include or alienate vast groups of people who could buy comics?

CATTO: ***Yes, I understand.***



McGREGOR: That said, that background dictates the beginning of how *Sabre* came about—the long version we'll save for another time. But what I said earlier, this reflects the attitude I was facing when I created *Sabre*.

CATTO: ***That was the* short *version, Don?*** [*laughs*]

McGREGOR: Comic-book stores were just starting to exist at this time. There weren't a lot of them, idea that: Okay, if you took a them together on a project of comics could not get anyw

If people thought I was c in *Black Panther* and *Killrave* Is he crazy? Now this guy support a comic book?"… I'm not making this up) tha percentage of their audienc

Again, when I was shopp going to say who) said, "He a black guy with a lot of g the idea of *Sabre*.

So now, with this new ve could support a book, "Okay for that market. I'm going t to have final say." I didn't wa

I've been very fortunate severely changed from wha what the next story would wrote along, the more I wa

I wanted to own the ma tell stories I didn't feel comp and *Killraven* because it was expanding so rapidly that wh have time for a lot of scrutin in me and the vision I had fo and energy to bring the sto

work with that they gave me the positive energy and partnership that did not exist in the editorial halls.

Rich Buckler insisting on drawing those first three "Panther's Rage" issues helped establish the visual storytelling approach I wanted, and Rich made it pages all look so dynamic that it took awhile for the negativity to rise, and by that time I was well on my way!

Obviously, these scripts demanded a lot of extra work. It wasn't just, "We were going to knock this out," it was, everybody believed that we loved comics and wanted to try to bring something to the medium.

THE CREATION OF SABRE

CATTO: ***What are some of Sabre's inspirations?***

McGREGOR: One thing element that inspired the creation of *Sabre* was, I was up late one night watching television and I had Errol Flynn's *Captain Blood* on, and he's playing a character who was captured from his homeland and put in a galley as a slave, and then he's rowing the boats, and then he's on a plantation somewhere turning and being whipped and pushing some kind of churning wheel or something. I remember thinking, "Wait a minute, this should be about a *black* guy as the lead." Which is something Hollywood obviously wouldn't have *ever* have done in the 1930s. It was all about slavery, except the white guy is the slave. Okay, well, he's a pirate and there's never been a black swashbuckler, and that began the real creation of *Sabre*. Sabre will be a swashbuckler character.

Okay… I wasn't on staff at Marvel anymore and I was all freelance. In that time period, Steve Gerber and Dave Kraft and Jim Salicrup started a company called Mad Genius. I can't tell you the specifics about it, but they had an office up on 6th Avenue. I was hanging out there a

Master Blaster

A 1980 sketch of Sabre by Paul Gulacy, from the Heritage archives (*www.ha.com*). The artist drew inspiration from the fistful of dollars-grabbing Clint Eastwood and sky-kissing guitar-lord Jimi Hendrix for the swashbuckler's look.