THRILLING DAYS OF YESTERYEAR: Dominic Fortune • Justice, Inc. • Man-God • Miracle Squad • The Phantom • with Aparo, Chaykin, DeZuniga, Kirby, Verheiden, and more!

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BACK ISSUE!™

Featuring DAVE STEVENS' Final Interview

Also: BILSON and DeMEO discuss the ROCKETEER movie

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Volume 1,
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April 2011

Celebrating the Best Comics of the '70s, '80s, and Beyond!

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The Retro Comics Experience!

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BACK seat driver

by Michael Eury

MIKE ESPOSITO 1927–2010

It seems as if obituaries have become a regular feature of this magazine. Saying farewell to the comics creators that shaped the reading experiences of our youth is to be expected as most of *BACK ISSUE*'s readers, who witnessed the Bronze Age firsthand, journey into Middle Age.

Yet, it's always with a twinge of sadness that we must accept the passing of a writer, artist, or editor whose work imprinted our lives. And with this issue we pay our respects to artist **Mike Esposito**, who died on October 24, 2010.

Esposito was an inker and artist who at times simultaneously worked at multiple publishers using pseudonyms including Mickey Demeo and Joe Gaudioso. "Mighty Mike" was a Silver and Bronze Age mainstay most famous for his longtime collaboration with penciler Ross Andru. The Andru/Esposito team was best known for stints on *Wonder Woman*, *Metal Men*, late-Silver Age issues of *Superman* and *World's Finest Comics*, and *Amazing Spider-Man*.

A 2005 inductee into the Will Eisner Comic Book Hall of Fame, Esposito remained active drawing commissions and recreations up until the time of his death. Featured on this page, courtesy of Jerry Boyd and Mike Burkey, is Esposito's recreation of a splash page that he and Andru originally produced for *Giant-Size Spider-Man* #5 (July 1975).

We invite you to visit *www.mightymikeespo.net* to learn more about this beloved artist.

BACK ISSUE extends its condolences to the Esposito family, and to Mighty Mike's many fans.

FlashBack!

THE PHANTOM® at Charlton

by Michael Ambrose

Unlike most comic-book heroes, the Phantom began his life in the newspaper funny pages. The *Phantom* daily strip launched February 17, 1936, created and written by Lee Falk, following his successful *Mandrake the Magician* for King Features Syndicate. *Phantom* proved even more popular. A color Sunday page debuted in 1939, and the character soon graduated to other media: Columbia Pictures released a 15-part movie serial starring Tom Tyler in 1943 and Whitman published a *Phantom* novel the following year. Comic books reprinted the strips beginning with *Ace Comics* (David McKay Publications) in the 1940s and Harvey in the '50s. Comics with original continuity came later: Gold Key produced 17 issues of *The Phantom* from 1962 to 1966, and King Comics had another 11 from 1966 to 1967 (a twelfth King issue, #29, was released only overseas). In 1967, the *Phantom* license went to the Charlton Comics Group of Derby, Connecticut.

Comics historian and ACE Comics publisher Ron Frantz recently recalled a 1983 conversation with the late Dick Giordano, the Charlton comics editor when the King Features deal was brokered. "If it hadn't been for Dick, Charlton would never have had the contract," Frantz says. "The negotiations between Charlton and King were long and slow and very delicate. Dick did all the work from beginning to end. The contracts arrived when he was out of the office for a few days. One of the big shots at Charlton moved in and took all the credit, staging a news conference and contract-signing ceremony. Dick's hard work was not even mentioned. Naturally, this was a slap in his face and it left a very bad taste in his mouth. It certainly influenced his decision to

Aparo Makes a Splash

Fans started to notice future Batman artist Jim Aparo on Charlton's *The Phantom*. Original art to page 1 of issue #38 (June 1970), courtesy of Heritage Comics Auctions (*www.ha.com*).

leave Charlton for DC." Since Giordano passed away not long ago, in early 2010, it's appropriate that he receive some long-overdue credit.

Charlton was no stranger to adapting licensed properties. From 1948 on, Charlton published comics featuring B-movie Western stars like Tim McCoy and Sunset Carson, but its licensed line expanded after 1955, with strip reprints of *Bo*, *Brenda Starr*, *Terry and the Pirates*, and from TV and film, *My Little Margie*, *Gorgo*, and *Konga*. But none of these offerings was remotely in the top tier until the company inked its deal with King. New adaptations of *Beetle Bailey*, *Blondie*, *Popeye*, *The Phantom*, *Flash Gordon*, and *Jungle Jim* started with issues cover-dated February 1969. *Hi and Lois*, *Ponytail*, *Tiger*, and *Barney Google and Snuffy Smith* followed. Lucrative distribution and merchandising doors suddenly opened for Charlton. Further deals from 1970 on, chiefly with Hanna-Barbera, put the company at the top of American publishers of licensed comics properties.

The Phantom has a richly detailed backstory. The current Phantom is Kit Walker, 21st in a line from 1536, when half-dead British sailor Christopher Walker washed ashore on the coast of the African country Bengalla (or Bengali) after pirates attacked his ship and murdered his father. Walker was rescued and nursed to health by the gentle Bandar pygmies. Later, he found the corpse of the pirate who killed his father and vowed vengeance on the pirate's vulture-picked skull: "I swear to devote my life to the destruction of piracy, greed, cruelty, and injustice, in all their forms! My sons and their sons shall follow me." This is the Oath of the Skull, which every succeeding male Walker swears before assuming the Phantom's costume and mission. Because of this generational continuity, the Phantom is considered to be immortal and is known as "the Ghost Who Walks" and "the Man Who Cannot Die."

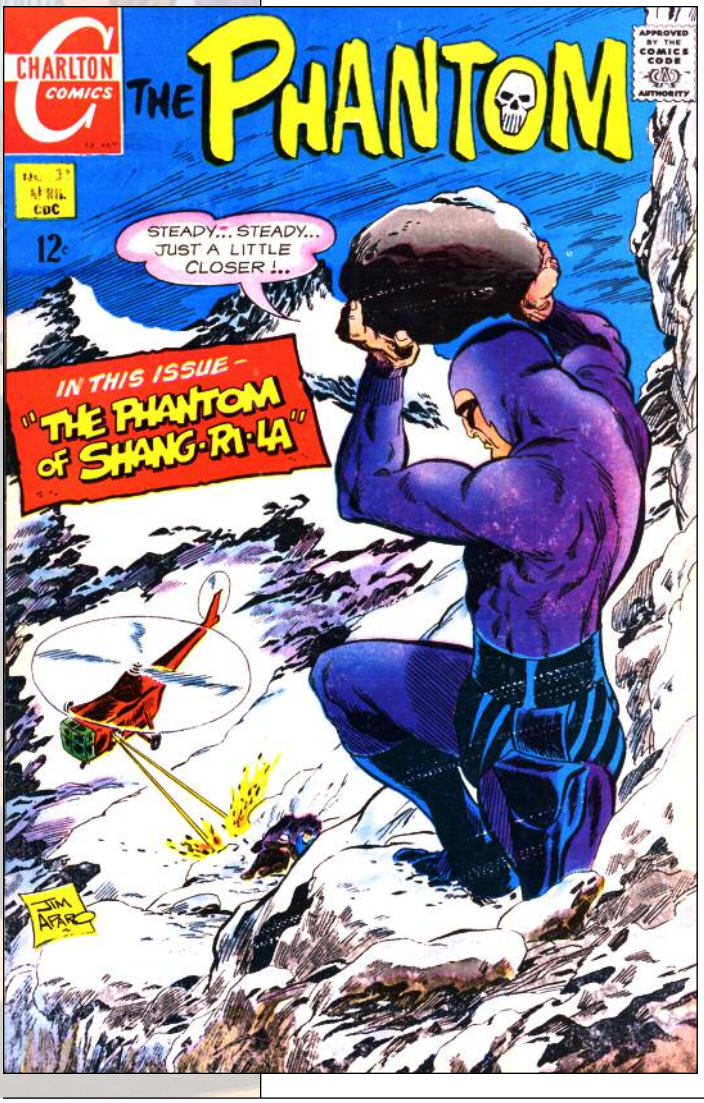
The Phantom lives in the Skull Cave, deep in the jungle, with a fabulous treasure horde. All previous Phantoms are buried there. Along with brains and brawn and a fearsome reputation, he totes a pair of .45 caliber pistols. A ring on his right hand bears a skull insignia to permanently mark his enemies, and one on his left has a design of crossed sabers to confer protection on friends. The Phantom's skin-tight purple suit and eyeless mask anticipate the colorful costumes of 20th-century superheroes.

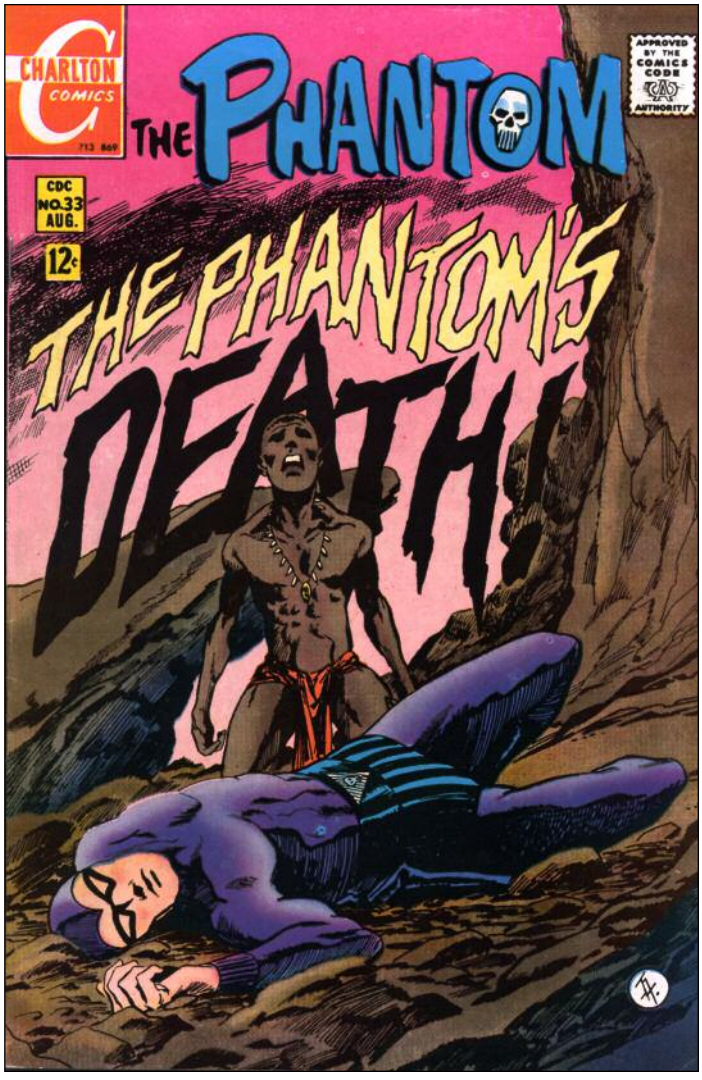
Aiding him are his white stallion Hero and trained wolf Devil. The Phantom has an American girlfriend, Diana Palmer; Bandar chief Guran is his best friend and confidant. Going abroad, Walker dons dark glasses, trench coat, and fedora. No one has ever seen him unmasked and lived to tell of it.

The Phantom came to Charlton firmly established. Creative teams had only to stay on model. The Charlton *Phantom* era is marked by three distinct lead artists: Jim Aparo, Pat Boyette, and Don Newton.

The Ghost with the Most

Aparo's eye-catching covers to (left) Charlton's *Phantom* #31 (Apr. 1969) and 33 (Aug. 1969).





Falk's Fighting Man

(below) Jim Aparo Phantom sketch, courtesy of Jim Main. Previously published in *Charlton Spotlight* #5 (Fall 2006). (bottom right) Aparo cover to *Phantom* #35 (Dec. 1969).

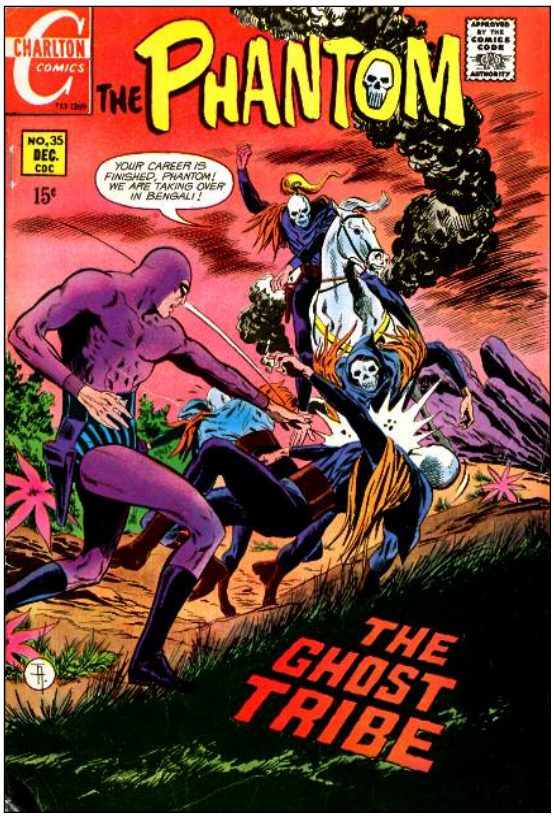
APARO ARRIVES

The first Charlton *Phantom*, #30 (Feb. 1969), was not an auspicious beginning, despite the presence of journeyman artists. Behind an oddly static Frank McLaughlin cover are four stories, only two of which star the Phantom. The lead story is set 100 years in the past, featuring then-Phantom's twin sister Julie Walker as Girl Phantom in an encounter with pirates. Pencils and inks are by Don Perlin and Sal Trapani. A rushed-looking six-page McLaughlin story rounds out the issue, which feels like a placeholder while Charlton revs its creative engines. Indeed, the series jumps from zero to 60 with the very next issue.

JIM APARO

Jim Aparo broke into comics in 1966 with sexy-teen feature "Miss Bikini Luv" in Charlton's *Go-Go*, but soon distinguished himself in backup series "Wander" in *Cheyenne Kid*, "Nightshade" in *Captain Atom*, and "Thane of Bagarth" in *Hercules*. Aparo was a prolific triple-threat penciler/inker/letterer. Regrettably for Charlton, he was too good to stay in the bush leagues. When Giordano left Charlton for DC in 1968, Aparo went with him. But to Charlton's good fortune, Aparo's initial DC workload was light enough to let him continue freelancing for his alma mater. He alternated between DC assignments and *Phantom* for just over a year, from #31 (Apr. 1969) to 38 (June 1970). "The books were bimonthly," Aparo told comics artist/historian Jim Amash in *Comic Book Artist* #9 (Aug. 2000), "so one month I was doing *Phantom* and the next month I did *Aquaman*."

Aparo's 13 stories and eight covers for *Phantom* are in tune with the bold, dramatic look of superhero comics of the period. His modern, fast-moving style sweeps away all previous versions of the character. The book-length "Phantom of Shang-Ri-La" in #31 takes place in the Bengali Mountains, where a gang of thieves posing as ageless denizens of a paradisiacal lost city plot to swindle the vain rich. "The Pharaoh Phantom" in #32 (June 1969) has the Phantom traveling to Egypt's Valley of Kings to answer the challenge of a rival Phantom resurrected from 2580 B.C. Scripts for both issues are by Golden Age veteran Dick Wood, whose career began in 1938 at Centaur and Funnies Inc. and continued with Lev Gleason, DC, and eventually Gold Key, where he had scripted *Phantom* in 1963 and '64.



DC'S GHOST WHO WALKS

A Look at The PHANTOM's Brief Stay at DC Comics

BEYOND Capes!

non-superhero comics

by Robert Greenberger

MIKE GOLD

While considered the first costumed adventure hero, Lee Falk's jungle hero the Phantom has had a checkered comic-book existence. Although the comic strip has run daily since 1935, there was a long gap in comic-book tales after Charlton ceased its *Phantom* run in 1977.

That all changed in 1987, not long after Mike Gold arrived at DC Comics as a senior editor. "I was approached by a friend of mine who worked at King Features Syndicate (KFS) at the time," he explains to *BACK ISSUE*. "He says the syndicate was interested in 'keeping their adventure strips alive' in a declining newspaper market—read 'for merchandising value'—and they thought we could do a good job. I took the idea to our boss, Mr. [Dick] Giordano, and his eyes lit up that cherubic face."

KFS was hoping DC Comics could freshen its major properties—the Phantom, Flash Gordon, and Prince Valiant—but DC opted to license only the first two with Gold set to develop them.

"We started our development work on *Flash Gordon*, and it turned into one of my worst nightmares in comics," Gold reveals. "We did a lot of negotiations, and then Dan Jurgens courageously stepped into the breech as storyteller." The problem stemmed from changing KFS representatives, none knowing exactly how the modernization process should work.

As Jurgens struggled to work within KFS's ever-changing guidelines for the nine issue miniseries he would write and pencil, work also began on *The Phantom*. "I knew Phantom fans were zealots—and I was one of them," Gold says. "So I walked onto that project determined to have more flexibility and more creative control than we had with the musical-chairs version of Flash Gordon."

The Force is with Luke

The Ghost Who Walks is about to become the Ghost Who Punches in the Face in this dynamite commission by and courtesy of Luke McDonnell.

Orlando's Phantom

(below) DC house ad announcing the David/Orlando/Janke *Phantom* miniseries. Dave Gibbons, however, inked Joe Orlando's covers on the series, including (right) issue #2 (June 1988).

THE WRITER WHO WALKS (FROM MARVEL TO DC)

Making his DC Comics debut as the miniseries' writer was Peter David, best known then for his imaginative work on *The Incredible Hulk*. Gold recalls, "Denny O'Neil and I wanted to bring Peter over from Marvel. So we put together a meeting at a beautiful Chinese restaurant that was a favorite of Denny's. It was about a half-mile northwest of DC's offices and a long way from Marvel, where Peter still held a day job in the marketing department, working for Carol Kalish. Peter, to his vast credit, was extremely sensitive of Carol's feelings and when the time was right, he wanted to tell Carol himself [about working for DC] before word got out.

PETER DAVID

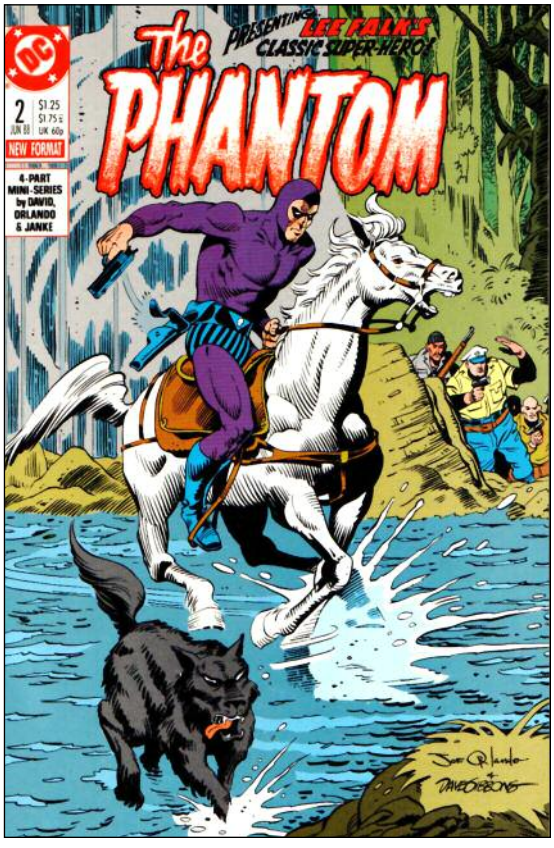
"After that lunch, we had a number of ideas as to projects for Peter. When *The Phantom* popped up, I thought he'd be perfect: He understood the character and was well versed in its background. I think he even read a bunch of the Phantom novels that had been published the decade before, a couple of which were quite good. So he was a natural."

David, at that point, was considering the leap into a full-time writing career and needed to hear from DC that there'd be work from them. "Mike said yes," David recalls. "The first thing DC would steer my way would be a *Phantom* limited series. It was one of the things that served to help me to decide to leave my day job behind and become a full-time writer."

Both David and I grew up on Long Island and read the Phantom's adventures in the *Long Island Press*, growing to become fans of the feature. When he accepted the assignment work began in earnest, starting with his borrowing my copy of Lee Falk's first *Phantom* novel from the 1970s, where the entire backstory was laid out.

"I read as many of the novels as I could get my hands on, and also consulted with Lee Falk on which earlier incarnation of the Phantom I could utilize for the purpose of the story," David adds. [***Editor's note:*** Cartoonist Lee Falk's Phantom is a legacy hero, with generations of sons following their fathers' footsteps, creating the myth of the hero's immortality.]

When one of the previous 20 Phantoms was selected, an artist was needed and Gold knew exactly where to turn, considering that Joe Orlando worked just down the hall and "because he begged for the gig,"

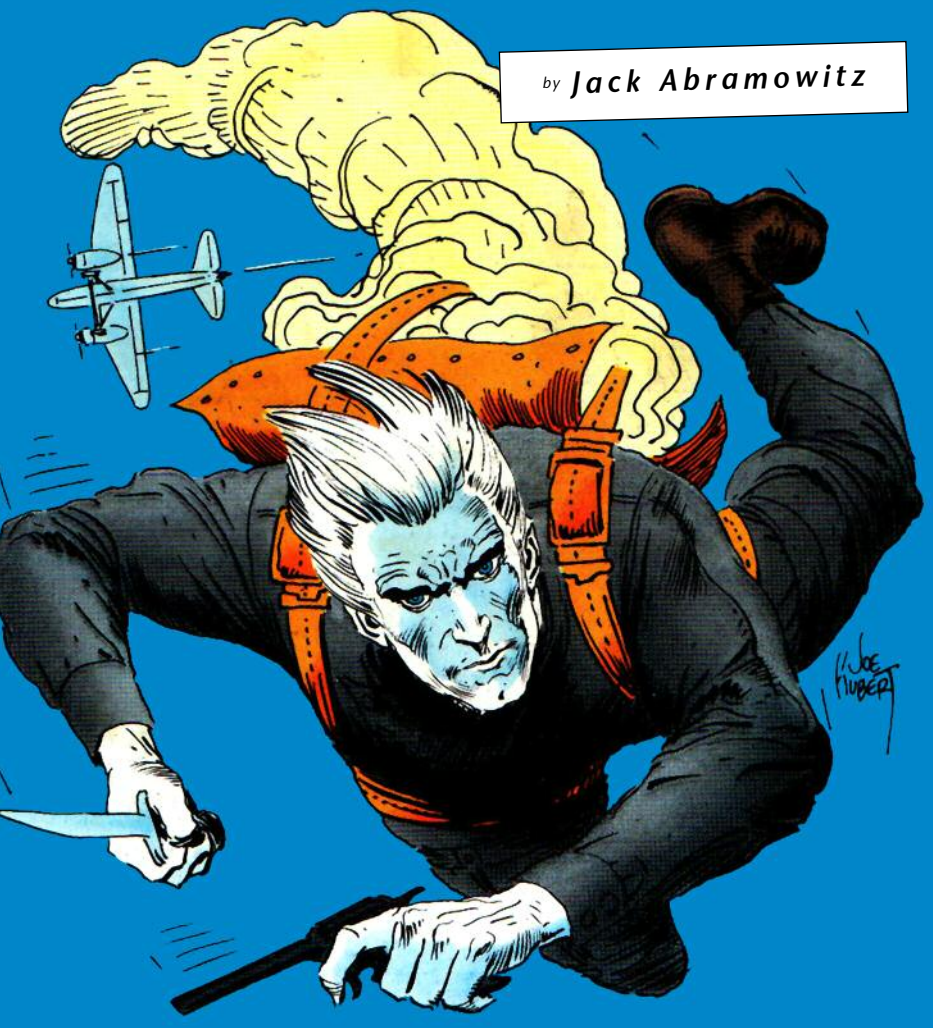


Justice, Inc.?

Not So Much

THE LONELY LIFE OF A PERENNIAL SECOND-STRINGER

by Jack Abramowitz



BEYOND Capes!

In 1975, the "DC Explosion" was in full swing, featuring a greatly expanded line at DC Comics. Full-page house ads introduced readers to DC's "all-new adventure line," including such diverse characters as Claw, Stalker, Beowulf, and the Warlord. One character didn't fit in among these bare-chested, sword-wielding barbarians: the pale-skinned, gray jump-suited, gun-toting Avenger.

Justice, Inc. #1 sported a May–June 1975 cover date, along with banners proclaiming it to be the "1st Sensational Issue!" and "by the creator of Doc Savage … Kenneth Robeson." That latter claim is only partially accurate. "Kenneth Robeson" was, in fact, a pseudonym. This house pen name was used by Street & Smith Publications for stories featuring both Doc Savage and the Avenger. In reality, Lester Dent was the principal writer of *Doc Savage*, while Paul Ernst penned *The Avenger*.

The Avenger never achieved the popularity enjoyed by Doc Savage or The Shadow. Compare the Avenger's fewer than 30 published adventures to Doc Savage's nearly 200 or The Shadow's over 300 tales. In terms of radio, film, and comics adaptations, the Avenger again fell short. In his occasional forays into comics, under the banner *Justice, Inc.*, the Avenger has likewise failed to take the world by storm.

NO NEED FOR CONTINUITY—THE 1970s

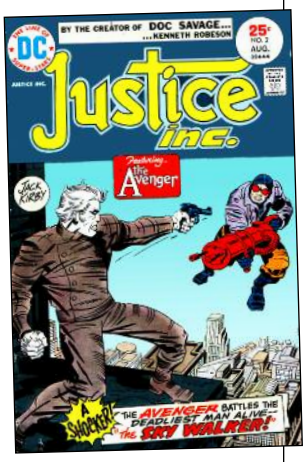
Presumably, the comics series was called *Justice, Inc.* rather than "The Avenger" to avoid conflict or confusion with Marvel's *The Avengers*. Says series writer Denny O'Neil, "It could have been just a marketing decision—'We don't want to look like we're ripping off Marvel'—or there could have been a copyright issue. Things were often confused in those days about stuff like that." No one was worried, however, about any potential confusion with DC's own *Justice League*.

O'Neil was not especially a fan of the Avenger prior to writing the series: "I became aware of the Avenger after the success of *The Shadow*. One of the paperback houses was reprinting the Avenger's stories then, so it was a natural place to go. I liked dealing with those kind of stories and those kind of characters."

The first issue of *Justice, Inc.* featured a passable reworking of the first Avenger story, "Justice, Inc.," albeit severely abridged to fit into a single-issue telling. In this tale, we are introduced to the Avenger, Ike and Mike (his knife and gun, respectively), and Algernon Heathcote Smith, a.k.a. "Smitty." The inaugural issue was written by O'Neil, with art by Al McWilliams. The cover, by Joe Kubert, is about as iconic an Avenger image as would be produced by DC. (Kubert would return

The Avenger Drops In

Detail from Joe Kubert's cover to DC Comics' *Justice, Inc.* #1 (May–June 1975).



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to do the cover of the fourth and final issue of the series.) The issue also boasted a text piece introducing readers to the Avenger and his crew.

The second issue (July–Aug. 1975) likewise retold a story from the pulps, this time the third *Avenger* tale, "The Sky Walker." (The original pulp was penned decades before *Star Wars*, which this comic likewise beat by two years. Nevertheless, "sky walker" was rendered "skywalker" throughout the issue.) This story introduced aides Josh and Rosabel Newton, an African-American couple who frequently feigned ignorant or submissive demeanors to conceal their great intelligence and competence.

Jack Kirby took over the art with this issue, providing both the cover and the interior, with inks by Mike Royer. O'Neil was thrilled with the artists assigned to the series. "Obviously, Kubert and Kirby—that was very lucky for me for a whole lot of reasons. They were probably two of the best artists the field has ever produced and, on top of that, they were pros. There was never any worry about deadlines or temperament or anything like that."

The text piece was more unusual than that in the first issue: Allan Asherman cast a speculative *Justice, Inc.* movie. Charles Bronson as the Avenger? Peter Boyle as Smitty? Bill Cosby and Diana Ross as Josh and Rosabel? This was one unlikely film!

The *Justice, Inc.* series took a departure with its third issue (Sept–Oct. 1975), which featured an original story by O'Neil rather than an adaptation of a classic *Avenger* pulp. Why the switch? "I have no idea," O'Neil laughs. "It may be that I couldn't find stuff from the original pulp material that was suitable, [or] it may have been that I had some ideas for stories of my own and decided to write those instead."

"The Monster Bug" introduced to the series Fergus MacMurdie, an associate of the Avenger squeezed out of the first issue's adaptation of the Justice, Inc. origin. In this story, the Avenger pursued a villain named Colonel Sodom (yes, "Colonel Sodom"), who escaped at the end of DC's *The Shadow* #5.

The final issue of the series (Nov–Dec. 1975) was another original story by O'Neil, with an assist by Paul Levitz. "Slay Ride in the Sky" is a fairly unremarkable tale. Kirby and Royer continued to provide the art, though, as previously noted, Kubert returned to supply the cover.

The Avenger made one additional appearance during his initial stay at DC, in *The Shadow* #11 (June–July 1975). This issue appeared between the first two installments of *Justice, Inc.*, but when it occurs is nebulous. On the one hand, Fergus MacMurdie did not appear until the third issue of

In The Shadow's Shadow

(left) George Gross' painted cover art to the paperback, *The Avenger*, courtesy of Heritage Comics Auctions (*www.ha.com*). (below) Promo art by Al McWilliams, taken from the splash page to DC's *Justice, Inc.* #1.

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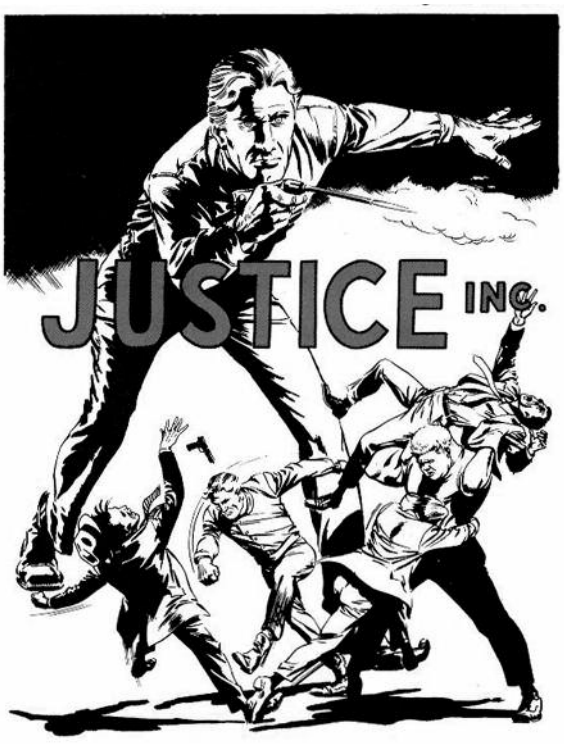
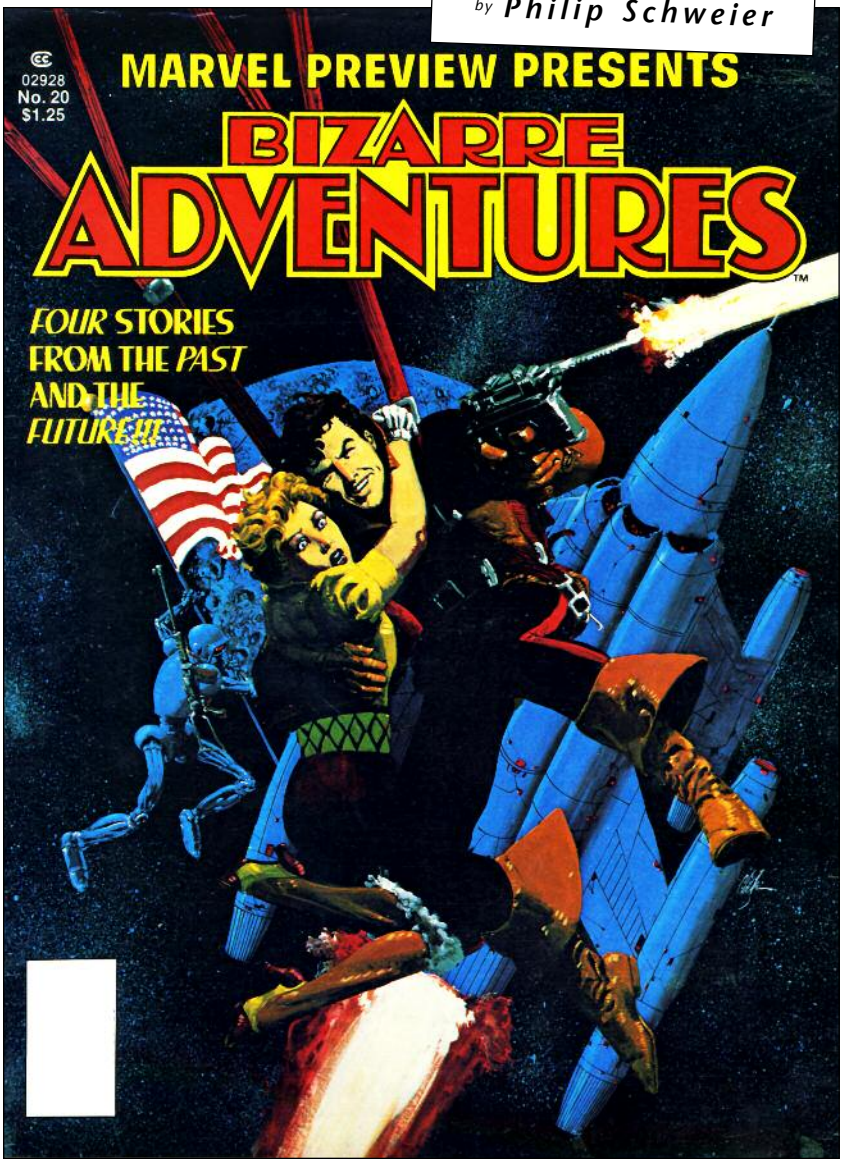


OUTRAGEOUS FORTUNE

by Philip Schweier



When Marvel Comics published* Marvel Preview Presents Bizarre Adventures *#20 (Winter 1980) in 1979, readers were (re-)introduced to its lead feature, "Dominic Fortune, Brigand for Hire," a new character Howard Chaykin created with the help of Len Wein.

New character? Well, perhaps not.

The two stories presented in *Marvel Preview* #20 were actually reprints from *Marvel Preview* #2 (1975) and *Marvel Super Action* #1 (Jan. 1976), a one-shot magazine. But let us go even further back, to February 1975, when the first issue of *The Scorpion* was published by Atlas Comics.

What's that, you say? What does another character published by an altogether different company have to do with Marvel's Dominic Fortune? Well, quite a bit, actually.

In 1968, owner/publisher Martin Goodman sold Marvel Comics to Perfect Film and Chemical Corporation, which later renamed itself Cadence Industries. Goodman stayed on as publisher at first, but in 1974, he launched his own publishing company, today commonly referred to as Atlas/Seaboard. At this time, most comics creators worked under a "work-for-hire" environment. That is, they were hired to provide stories or art, and such creative work, including original characters, became the property of the publisher.

Goodman was able to recruit top names such as Neal Adams, Mike Grell, and Howard Chaykin with promises of returned artwork, shared royalties, and other creators' rights. Chaykin's contribution to the new line of heroes was Moro Frost, a.k.a. the Scorpion.

"As I recall," says Chaykin, "they were looking to do a 1930s pulp character along the lines of The Shadow. They had the title; they wanted something called the Scorpion. I came in with my franchise and they liked it, they embraced it, and that's where my troubles began."

"The Death's Gemini Commission," (*Scorpion* #1, Feb. 1975), in which the Scorpion faces off against corrupt tycoons in the fledgling airways business, was written and drawn by Chaykin. It is explained that the Scorpion is a mysterious, seemingly immortal figure whose history dates back as far as the Civil War. Currently known as Moro Frost, he is a 1930s-era adventurer-for-hire, aided and abetted by his lovely girl Friday, Ruby.

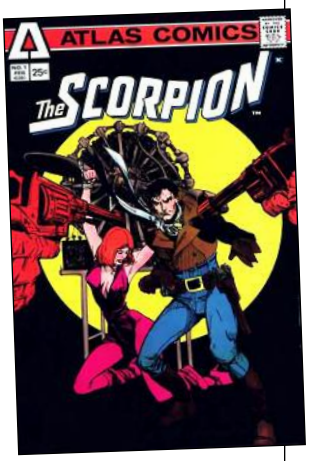
"The Devil Doll Commission" (*Scorpion* #2, May 1975), a tale of zombified gangsters, was written and penciled by Chaykin, with inks by Ed Davis, Michael Kaluta, Walt Simonson, and Bernie Wrightson.

But something funny happened on the way to the newsstand.

According to Chaykin, "I did an issue, we were running late, and they [Atlas] didn't quite know how to convey deadlines and ultimately I was dumped off the book with the third issue."

Fortune Favors the Bold

Howard Chaykin's painted cover to *Marvel Preview Presents Bizarre Adventures* #20 (Winter 1980), featuring his Brigand for Hire, Dominic Fortune.



With Chaykin's departure, the third and final story, "Night of the Golden Fuhrer," (*Scorpion* #3, July 1975) was written by Gabriel Levy and drawn by Jim Craig. In a three-panel sequence, the story details how Moro Frost was "killed" by the German Luftwaffe during World War II. Now, 30 years later, the immortal Scorpion is known as David Harper, a newspaper publisher who battles crime as a more traditional masked superhero in blue and orange tights.

According to the introduction in *Marvel Preview* #20, a disgusted and angry Chaykin headed over to the offices of Marvel Comics. Atlas was near the intersection of Fifth Avenue and 56th Street, and Marvel was about three blocks away on Madison, around 59th Street. Taking a seat with then-editor Marv Wolfman and writer Len Wein, Chaykin offered his talents to Marvel. Wolfman asked him what he might like to do.

Mentioning his pulpish effort of the past few months, Chaykin suggested, "How about the other side of that character? The light side. The Spirit, Plastic Man-type side. The TA-DA!! California side?"

Wolfman and Wein were intrigued, and Chaykin continued to shovel, offering this new character's backstory as an overextended gambler who took on dangerous trouble-shooting jobs to meet his debts. Wolfman instructed Chaykin to go home, write up a pitch, and bring it back to submit to then editor-in-chief Archie Goodwin. Overnight, the best name Chaykin could invent was Dominic Fortune. Wolfman liked it and Wein contributed the elements of Sabbath Raven, Fortune's landlady, with whom he lives aboard the *Mississippi Queen*, a gambling ship off the coast of Los Angeles.

According to Chaykin, he took the grim seriousness of the Scorpion and replaced it with the same sort of sensibility Woody van Dyke used in the *Thin Man* movies: "A jazzy, funny, glib sort of character, as opposed to a grim, earnest one. I lost the supernatural element of it and made it a laughing, cavalier crimefighter along the lines of, 'What would happen if Gene Kelly had been a costumed hero?'"

The idea was perhaps inspired by an incident when Chaykin was working with Gil Kane in the late 1960s and early '70s. One day they took an afternoon off to watch *Cover Girl*, a 1944 film starring Gene Kelly, Rita Hayworth, and Phil Silvers. "Most of the picture was taken up with Gil's running commentary on Gene Kelly as an urban version of Errol Flynn, that sort a laughing cavalier," Chaykin relates. "Then, years later, I saw Kelly in *The Three Musketeers* (1948), and it confirmed everything."

Dominic Fortune owes a lot to the Scorpion—his costume (double-breasted tunic over a black turtleneck, jodhpurs tucked into boots) and his look, which fits the archetypal Howard Chaykin hero. "I love this guy," Chaykin said in *Marvel Preview* #20. "Fortune is everything a good comic book character is—tough, heroic, good looking—and a bit of a butthead. It is the butthead part I like best."

Which may very well have set the mold for many of Chaykin's creations that followed, such as Cody Starbuck and Reuben Flagg. "Common decency with a sidewinder's sensibility" is how he once described it, citing James Garner as Bret Maverick being one of the ingredients in a common Chaykin formula of what heroes should look and act like: "Think Yiddish, go British."

According to Chaykin, Neil Simon and Carl Reiner had the idea that they could write Jewish characters as long as they were played by Gentile actors. "The fact that Robert Redford is the lead in *Barefoot in the Park* and Dick van Dyke ended up being successful playing a character created by Carl Reiner for himself to play is the perfect expression of that idea. So to a great extent, my characters are the classic example, in comics at least, of thinking Yiddish and going British."

Wein scripted Fortune's debut adventure, "The Power Broker Resolution." Its follow-up, "The Messiah in the Saddle Resolution," was written and drawn by Chaykin.

"I abhor talking about myself as if I was unworthy of doing it, which is nonsense. I recognize in later years that I was responsible for this, that I didn't feel I was up to the job. I consider myself a better writer than most of the guys writing comics back then because for

The Silhouette Knows…

(opposite) Unlettered splash to the O'Neil/Chaykin "Slay Bells," from *Hulk* magazine #25 (Feb. 1981), featuring the Silhouette, a Shadow homage. (left) Chaykin original art from *Marvel Super Action* #1 (Jan. 1976); this story was republished in *Marvel Preview* #20. Courtesy of Heritage Comics Auctions (*www.ha.com*).

Dave Stevens

ONE LAST CONVERSATION

by **Kelvin Mao**
conducted on January 8, 2007

Stevens in His Studio
A photo of Dave in his North Hollywood studio taken by Greg Preston. From the book *The Artist Within* (Dark Horse Books, 2007). Unless otherwise noted, all images in this article are courtesy of Kelvin Mao and the Rocketeer Trust.

Editor's note: *Dave Stevens (1955–2008), creator of the Rocketeer, died from hairy cell leukemia complications on March 11, 2008 at the age of 52. While his loss is still felt three years later, fortunately for* BACK ISSUE *readers, Stevens' friend, Kelvin Mao—who, with David Mandel, helped produce the books* The Rocketeer: Artist's Edition *and* The Rocketeer: The Complete Adventures *(both from IDW Publishing)—conducted this marvelously in-depth discussion with Dave just over a year before his death. It is our great privilege to share this interview and its accompanying imagery with you.*

DEALING WITH EARLY ARTISTIC INFLUENCES

KELVIN MAO: ***All right, Dave. Who were your earliest influences, artistically?***

DAVE STEVENS: Let's see. From about age five or thereabouts, it was almost entirely cartoon images. TV cartoons and reading comics as well.

MAO: ***What kind of stuff were you watching at that point?***

STEVENS: Anything that was on Saturday morning at 7:00 a.m. Mostly old cartoons, because that's what they had plenty of.

MAO: ***We're talking, like,*** **Popeye** ***at this point?***

STEVENS: Yeah, we're talking *Popeye*, *Betty Boop*, all the early, early sound cartoons, and some of them were actually silent—they would still play those. This was like 1959, 1960. Just anything that was—that had any kind of style to it. *Tom Terrific*, all the UPA stuff that was sort of cutting edge at that time, and all the early Fleischer stuff that used rotoscope. You know, with humans underneath these dancing skeletons and whatever it was. It was a great sort of treasure trove of images to overdose on, and then it would sort of flow out of you onto paper or the walls.

MAO: ***I can't remember what else was on TV back then. Does Harvey go back that far?***

STEVENS: Yeah, the early ones. They were made in probably the late '40s to—I think *Casper* was around 1950. I loved the early ones, hated the later ones. Whenever they would dumb down the style and turn it into absolute formula, it was just—ugh! It was terrible.

MAO: ***Any particular favorite, or just whatever was on?***

STEVENS: I liked *Popeye* a lot, but I preferred the really old ones. They just felt more "wiggly," you know? And I loved *Colonel Bleep*. That was probably the most stylized cartoon of the 1950s. It was just a bizarre, ultra-modern-styled character, and it was one guy. One guy did everything. He animated it, did the backgrounds, and styled all the characters. And it was very basic in terms of—the stories were nothing, but the graphics were just astounding. And that was one of my most profound stylistic discoveries, because it looked like no other cartoon on TV. Also *Space Angel*.

MAO: ***Wow,*** **Space Angel**. ***Talking lips and stuff. [Editor's note:*** *The cartoon series* Space Angel *(1962– 1964) featured stilted animation and a lip-movement technique called "Synchro-Vox."]*

STEVENS: Yeah, yeah. It wasn't my favorite, but I remember it because it

The Young Artist

A photo of Dave Stevens at age five, and two 1967 Spider-Man drawings by the budding artist, at age 12.

looked so strange with the talking—just limited animation and really heavily rendered scenes.

MAO: ***That was Alex Toth [as character designer], right?***

STEVENS: Yeah. And also *Clutch Cargo*, which I didn't care for as much, because they would use human mouths that they put lipstick on, even for the dog. It was just—really kind of queasy.

MAO: ***Is this the one that they were showing in* Pulp Fiction*? The kid's watching and Christopher Walken comes in with the watch. It's like the same thing that they do on* Conan O'Brien*. The writers just sort of stole that bit. Whenever I see that I always think of* Space Angel*.***

STEVENS: Yeah, yeah.

Probably two or three years after that I started clipping and saving *Prince Valiant* Sunday pages.

MAO: ***So comic-strip art before comics?***

STEVENS: Oh, yeah. I mean, the comics came along probably when I was about seven. That was my earliest memory of actively going after comics, but it was standard kid stuff. I think I had a couple of *Gorgo*s and maybe a smattering of other *[80-Page Giant] Superman* or *Batman* and things like that, but nothing that really had a lasting impression on me.

MAO: ***Were you aware enough at the time to tell the different art styles, that one was better than the other or one seemed prettier?***

STEVENS: Definitely. I could tell styles. That was never a problem. I liked Al Capp, but what I was actually liking was Frazetta doing Al Capp, because he ghosted for him in that ten-year period.

MAO: ***Did you find yourself at a certain point where you learned who was doing what? You know, going back and looking at some of the things that you read back then?***

STEVENS: Yeah. And realizing why it affected me so much, because it was so lively and so well done. Also a big influence in terms of just art by itself, separate from any genre, was Lawson Wood, the guy that did all the monkey calendars in the 1940s and '50s for Brown and Bigelow. He had this brilliant watercolor

San Diego Comic-Con Memories

(below) Silver Surfer pinup by Kirby, inked by Stevens over Kirby's pencils, for the 1975 SDCC program book. (bottom left) Shadow drawing by Dave for a 1970s convention badge (special thanks to Jerry Boyd). (bottom right) Dave with *Famous Monsters of Filmland*'s Forrest "Forry" J. Ackerman, 1973.

becoming professionals. In fact, I think within a year, two or three of them were doing stories for Joe Orlando at DC.

But our little core of art guys, we did that on a regular basis—these all-night jam sessions, getting each other all worked up about what we were going to do.

MAO: ***So you were planning it out as a career at that point. I mean, you were serious about aspiring.***

STEVENS: Oh, we definitely aspired. I don't think any of us really had a plan, per se, but I know that Chris Warner was doing sort of a "Savage Earth" kind of adventure strip in his high-school paper, and I was occasionally doing these little gag strips in my high school paper but nothing at all ambitious. Randy Emberlin, I think he was the first of us who actually attended San Diego [Comic-Con]. I think it was the year before I moved down to California. He took a bus all the way from Portland to San Diego with this giant painting he'd done. It was like, five feet by five feet—it was *huge*. And he dragged this thing all the way down there on the bus with him and attended the show. I don't know where he slept. He was the only one of us to make the trek, all by himself, on whatever tiny budget he had. But the following year, or two years later when I moved down there, it became like a lightning rod for all of these guys to come down from Portland.

MAO: ***The floodgates opened.***

STEVENS: Oh, brother! And my folks weren't really thrilled about it because we would literally take over their house. These guys would drive down, all of them, in a VW van that barely got them there, and they would show up at my folks' house. The doors would open and … AHHGG! You know, all these hairy, hairy guys. Because this was '69, '70, or thereabouts, and everybody had hair for miles.

MAO: ***It sounds like you were a popular guy.***

STEVENS: Well, it was mainly the logistics. My folks would endure it for the three days that they were at the show, but they would be so glad when everybody would leave to go home. They would be pretty good hosts for my idiot friends. I think it just a case of one of us finally moving down there so that the rest of us could experience the show.

MAO: ***And have a staging area.***

STEVENS: Yeah, and then I think one of my parents would load us up and either drop us off at the show, or, if the van was operable, we would drive down to the El Cortez and just park it for a day or two. There was—I'm thinking—well, it was the very first convention at the El Cortez, 1972. Before that it had been at a junior college.

MAO: ***When did San Diego start?***

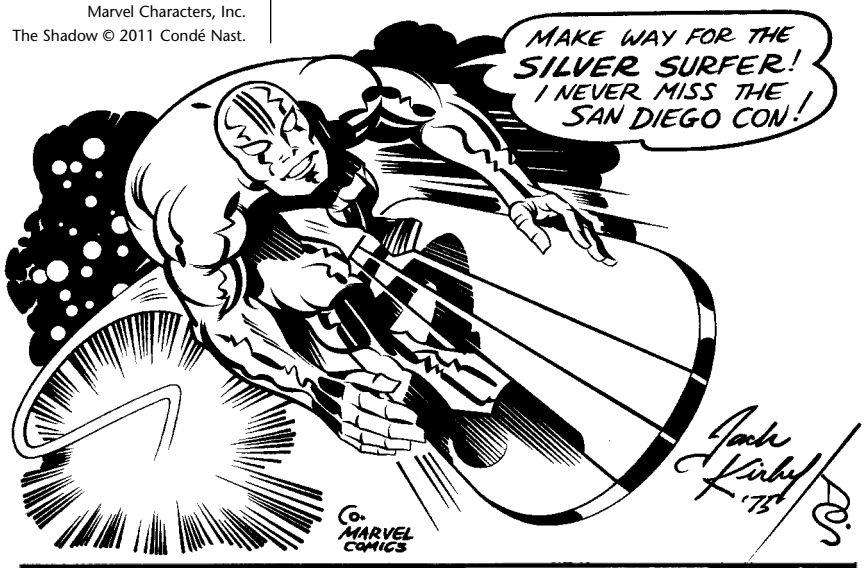
STEVENS: I think they put on a mini-con in 1970, and then '71 was the first sort of official one—and it was held at a junior-college rec center or something like that. The first one held at an actual hotel was the El Cortez, and that was in '72; so that was basically the first official show. I remember Forry Ackerman, Jack Kirby, and Mike Royer were guests. And it was huge for those of us that had only been to these little Portland mini-cons. For most of us, this was our first official comics exhibition. It was pretty amazing because it took over the whole hotel, the ballrooms, and the exhibit hall on the other side of the hotel across the street. It was literally a who's who of fandom. Everybody came to that show, so you'd meet guys from back east like Phil Seuling. Guys like [William] Stout would come and set up.

During the time I was living in San Diego, Scott Shaw, John Pound, Richard Alf, Barry Alfonso, and the rest of the Five-String Mob and the other kids that were forming an association with Kirby via the Con—I kind of fell into that bunch. I think my first visit to Jack's was the following year, '73. I think I got involved with the convention as a committee member. I don't remember what I did. I think I ran the art show one year, but I was more or less involved with the show from that point on.

MAO: ***It sounds like the show facilitated a lot of lasting friendships and acquaintances.***

STEVENS: And beyond that it was great for me to show my portfolio. I mean, I got access to everybody from Edgar Rice Burroughs to Chuck Jones. You name it.

MAO: ***At this point, were the publishers there, or was it all just fans?***



STEVENS: There were no publishers [in attendance] in those days.

MAO: ***So you were meeting all of these professionals who were there because they loved it.***

STEVENS: Yeah. And it was one-on-one, which was unheard of in those days. You didn't have access to any of these people. But on behalf of the Con, if two or three of you were representing a show, they would make time to sit down and talk. Then I would figure out some innocuous way of showing my samples in the course of it. And boy! I got a lot of feedback from a lot of people over probably a three-year period before actually getting professional work. Kirby was very candid with me the first time he looked at my stuff, but he liked us and, you know, Jack was never going to say anything that would sort of take you down a peg. He was always very positive with us. The first time we went up to Jack's for the afternoon I had my portfolio with me and asked him if he could take a look at some of my samples. Most of it was illustration-oriented.

MAO: ***Non-comic.***

STEVENS: Yeah, there were a lot of samples that I had lightboxed from other artists and then inked in my own sort of faux style. It was really dreadful stuff, but functional. Jack, after he looked through everything—I mean, he took his time. He didn't just zip through it—he held up a colored illustration of a sports car, a real sleek kind of Jaguar thing, and he said, "You know, you should be doing work for the NFL or *Time* or *Newsweek*. Comics, it's just not for you." He said, "You're an illustrator. You're not cut out for [comics]. What I see here is full-blown illustration. You're not doing comics."

MAO: ***Clearly, you took that advice to heart.***

STEVENS: You would think I would have, because that was the career I'd sort of unconsciously thrown together, and that was the only kind of work that I could have gotten, being on the west coast, because comics were all back east. Everything was in New York. There was nothing out here other than, I think, Whitman or Western, and their rates were awful. Plus it was kind of a locked—a closed shop.

MAO: ***But you were undeterred.***

STEVENS: Well, I just figured there was some way that at some point I could get some work out here or God forbid, I would have to move to New York, which I really didn't want to do.

But [Kirby] really was adamant about saying, "Don't get into comics, you don't need to." And I said I wanted to at least try it. He said, "If you think you have to, if you feel like you're never going to be satisfied until you try it, then go ahead. Maybe you got something that I don't see here." He said that's the only reason to get into it—if you just can't stand the thought of not trying.

The funny thing is, that same year at the '73 Con, Neal Adams was one of the guests and he was doing these informal portfolio reviews in a suite apart from the Con. It was real loosey-goosey, mostly just a bunch of us sitting around listening to Neal tell stories about other artists—and the air in the room was just blue. It was really fun, but I was so cowed by being in the room with this guy, because I'd followed his work in *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* and all the other cutting-edge things that he was doing at the time. He was trying to whittle free of the [Comics] Code, the restrictions on subject matter. Plus he rendered the most realistic representation of humanity I'd ever seen on a comics page.

MAO: ***Obviously a departure from the early DC stuff—and just his perspective.***

STEVENS: Yeah. Total drama, big faces and body language. It was something completely different than we'd seen before, and here he was just kicking back with a Coke and talking to a bunch of snot-noses that didn't know anything. We were all around 18 or older and one guy after another would show him a few samples and then hang around. I think we had been there for like an hour or more and it was kind of winding down. I got up to leave, and he stopped me. He said, "What you got there?" And I had this big, gigantic paper portfolio; it was like bigger than me. And I said, "Oh, it's nothing." I was kind of embarrassed. I just—I didn't want to have to open it in front of all these guys.

In the Beginning…

(left) Photo of Dave taken at the 1977 Comic-Con. He's holding a color guide for a page from the *Aurora* story, his first published comic-book work that he wrote/penciled/inked. (above) Very early Stevens art on the feature Teran!, written by Dave Chamberlain. From the 1972 fanzine *Nuff Said?* #2. Courtesy of Heritage.

THE OPTIONING OF THE *ROCKETEER* FILM

MAO: ***At what point was* The Rocketeer *optioned?***
STEVENS: It was optioned first by director Steve Miner at the end of '83, I think.
MAO: ***So pretty early on.***
STEVENS: Yeah. But it was kind of a friendly option, and I think he renewed it for another year, but by '85 we hadn't come up with a story either one of us liked. In fact, Doug Wildey went in and helped me pitch one to Steve, which actually I wish I could remember it because it was really good. And even though I don't know how good a movie it would have made, it would have made a great little two-part or three-part miniseries, because it had elements of what we wanted for the film as well as elements from the comic and things that I hadn't gotten to yet.
MAO: ***It's not written down anywhere? Just sort of pitched off the comic?***
STEVENS: We had notes, just a legal pad with a few notes on it, but it was all just sheer enthusiasm because Doug was really into it and if it was going to be turned into a film, he wanted to take an active part in either producing or writing or whatever. I think the next incarnation—like an entity producing or a production house entity optioning it really didn't happen. What did happen was, I met up with Danny Bilson and Paul DeMeo in '85, I believe through Jessie Horsting, and just immediately hit it off because we were trying to come up with the same type of material just with different scenarios, different characters, but it all had the same sort of retro-tone to it.
MAO: ***I didn't realize your association with them went so far back.***
STEVENS: Yeah, back as far as *Trancers* or *Zone Troopers*. *Zone Troopers* was—I think they had just finished that, and it was actually the first thing Danny had directed. It was pure 1940s jargon and really funny and smartly done.

So we started compiling together a plot, a pitch, and then I was contacted by a director named William Dear, who was just getting started doing a film called *Harry and the Hendersons* for Amblin. Bill wanted to throw in, but I told him I already had two writers that I was really happy with, and I wanted to bring them in rather than just go with him. So we kind of formed a little team between the four of us. Bill would direct, and he wanted to help co-write. I think we started actively pitching it while he was still shooting *Harry*, so I think '86 would have been when we started making the rounds to every studio. Within a matter of a few months, we'd gone everywhere, every place that was still in existence at the time.
MAO: ***Was Doug Wildey still with you at this point?***
STEVENS: No. Doug was only involved as far as it was with Steve Miner, and because we didn't really make any headway, I think he just kind of figured it was kind of a useless effort.

I just went with gut instinct and the fact that the stuff felt like we were on the right track. Story elements that I hadn't gotten to yet got thrown in, and partial plots from issues that I had discarded, as well as new stuff from the other guys.
MAO: ***So it wasn't a foregone conclusion that any kind of movie story would follow—***
STEVENS: —Straight from the comic? No, because from the get-go there was never any great villain. All there was was the rivalry between Cliff and this—what do you call it?—a Svengali photographer, and that doesn't make for a big adventure, you know? So we had to come up with a really suitable villain, and that was where Neville Sinclair came from. We just took the old speculation that somebody had put out there years ago that Errol Flynn was possibly involved with secret support of the Nazis,

Fastest Man Alive (left) Stevens' final costume design for CBS-TV's *The Flash* (1990–1991). John Wesley Shipp (interviewed in *BACK ISSUE* #23 and seen in the border background) wore the suit. (above) Left to right: Dave Stevens, unidentified (in background), and Stevens' mentor Doug Wildey in 1978.

Doug Wildey (above) Jonny Quest creator Wildey drew this pinup of the Rocketeer cast in 1984 for Eclipse Comics' *The Rocketeer Special Edition* #1. (right) A photo of Stevens and Wildey taken in 1982.

which is completely bogus, but it was an idea that could be worked. By the end of '86, we had a pretty good pitch going, but everybody in the business at the time just roundly declined. Everybody passed on it. They knew what it was the minute we started talking it through, but it was just too risky a proposition in those days.

MAO: ***It was pre-Tim Burton*** **Batman.**

STEVENS: Oh, yeah. There was just nothing for anybody to hang anything on. It just smelled like it would be too costly and would not perform for them. And everybody was tied up in other thing, rather than juvenile pulp material. We saved Disney for the last because, you know, we wouldn't make any money there. It would be sort of, "Okay, well if we go to Disney, we're just going to have to all bite the bullet if we want to get the thing made." There just wouldn't be any take-home. The Disney austerity program kind of ruled that out.

At least going in, they got it right away and were enthusiastic. But mainly because of the name, Rocketeer—"Mouseketeer," and the fact that they looked at it and said, "Toys!"

MAO: ***Unfortunately, there weren't any great toys.***

STEVENS: Yeah.

There we were. There were several points when we had just gotten into talks with them that I just said, "No, absolutely no; this is just never going to work." It's just an intolerable way to do business, and I just walked away a couple of different times.

In the interim, Steven Spielberg contacted somebody. I don't know if it was Danny and Paul's agent. Somehow, word got back to us that Steven said, "Look, I'll take it. If Disney doesn't want the thing or they're not going to give you a good deal, I'll take it. I'll take it right now." We had been to Universal, but Universal wouldn't commit to anything unless it went by Steven first because it was action/adventure. In those days with anything of that ilk, they had an agreement with Steven and Amblin that he got first look as it came in. The only reason we didn't opt for that was because Bill was already knee-deep in *Harry and the Hendersons* with Amblin, and he wanted to do the next film somewhere else. It was just a personal thing, a favor to Bill, that we didn't end up at Amblin right on top of *Harry and the Hendersons*.

In retrospect, I kind of wished we had, but the minute word got back to Disney that Spielberg had tossed his hat in the ring, things got kind of nasty for a split-second.

MAO: ***Nasty in terms of what?***

STEVENS: [Disney studio chairman Jeffrey] Katzenberg. He got on the horn and said, "I will sue you, I will sue Steven, I will sue everybody collectively, individually."

MAO: ***But you guys were still working it out.***

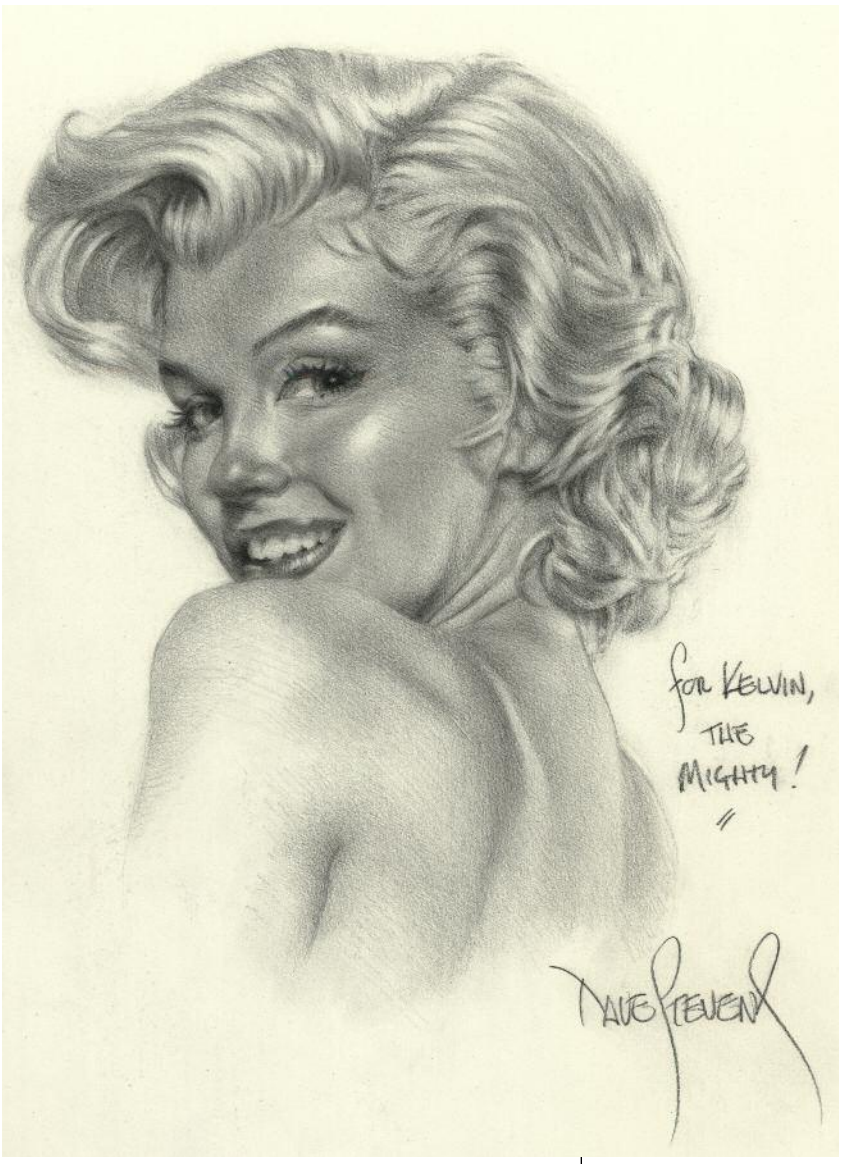
STEVENS: He cited "implied contract" or whatever. It never would have stuck if we'd had to arbitrate, but Tom Pollock, who at the time was the head of Universal, said, "In spite of Steven's enthusiasm about it, we're going to have to pass on this thing because we already have a coproduction with Disney that we do not want to go wrong," and that was *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*. I don't know how far along they were on it, but it was a major piece of business for both studios.

So we lost the whole Spielberg umbrella of protection right then and there.

MAO: ***I'm sure that sort of spurred Disney to act a little bit quicker. You know, if someone else wants something…***

STEVENS: Not really. Once they knew that we had been cowed and backed off, the negotiation went on for the next year.

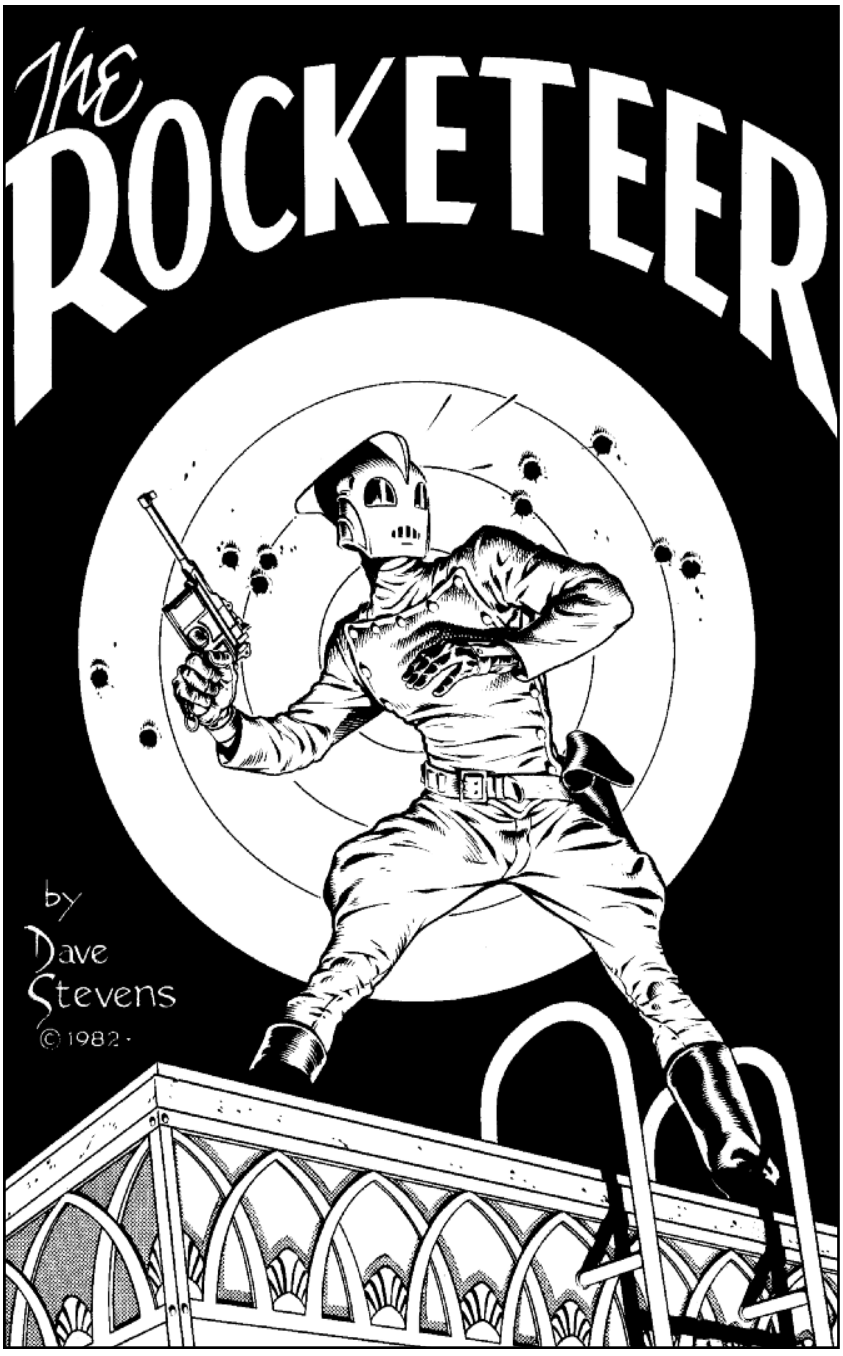
MAO: ***You're obviously a big art deco fan.***
STEVENS: Yeah, and Spanish style and craftsman style—from the homes, the bungalows to the commercial edifices on Main Streets. It was really beautifully thought out and executed in every way, even the cheap houses. And the cars were beautiful, gorgeous, gigantic hunks of metal. It was just something that I've always kind of held on to because it was so aesthetically pleasing to the eye. Once cars started getting boxy, they started losing their character. To me that was really the end of any kind of imaginative sculptural and aerodynamic work being done. The minute the cars started to lose that, then the buildings started to lose it, and everything else that had that sort of teardrop style—streamline locomotives, all that stuff—started disappearing pretty much some time during the '60s.
MAO: ***Your artwork also portrays that sort of architecture and design setting that doesn't reflect I guess what we'd call—***
STEVENS: —Modern-day.
MAO: ***Yeah.***
STEVENS: But again, it's only because I have such a lack of respect for modern architecture.
MAO: ***[laughs]***
STEVENS: Well, I'm just being honest. I have no respect for most modern architecture. It's just badly thought through, and it's planned for cheap rather than—"Let's build a really beautiful building." It's just empty with no personality, no flair, no mark of excellence to any of it. The little—like Rococo on the outside of a building—little touches, sculptural or relief, it's basically all gone and it's too bad because that was what made buildings a treat to go into. Their lobbies were just gorgeous bits of art deco splendor, whether it was the stonework or the woodwork or a great mural from the WPA. You know, L.A.'s library is filled with murals by Dean Cornwell. It's stuff that you can't duplicate because there are no artists doing that kind of work anymore. None of it was handed down. People didn't train under people like that for very long.
MAO: ***It's difficult to find any information on it now from the point of view of trying to study it or just seeing examples.***
STEVENS: At one time, it was commonplace—it was everywhere. So that's the reason that I don't draw anything of the here and now, whether it's cars or fashions or anything, because to me it just holds nothing of interest. It's got a real lack of substance. It's tough to explain. Either you get a good feeling from it or you don't, and mostly I don't. I see a lot of just quick and dirty stuff that really just doesn't work.
MAO: ***No exceptions at all?***



STEVENS: There are, sure. Occasionally I will find a jacket that's just beautiful, or a painting done by somebody contemporary that's breathtaking. There are examples in everything that cut against the norm in any movement or any decade. But by and large, the really tasty, elegant stuff is long gone, and my stylings, personally, are to preserve that look and feel just for myself, for my own enjoyment. It really doesn't matter to me if anybody else even notices it. *I* notice it, so I put it in there. And plus, I think it does kind of help in an overall statement artistically, because I think it segregates me from other people who are totally contemporary in what they do. I just have nothing contemporary to say about the here and now that would be of any interest to anybody. I just would much rather examine history and news stories of the past and characters that are long since forgotten, as well as accomplishments in all the arts, things, and people that unfortunately are not in the history books. For the current generation, they're never going to know about it unless somebody like me puts it on paper and at least plants the seed so that they will go online and do a search, if it strikes a chord at all. If it doesn't, that's okay, because I had fun doing it. And if a few people get it, I did my job.

Hello, Norma Jeane

(left) Following his mother's footsteps, Stevens with his own 1940 Ford in a mid-1980s photo. (above) Dave drew this Marilyn Monroe portrait in Kelvin Mao's sketchbook in 2003.



Rocketeer and Thriller

(right) The back cover to *Pacific Presents* #1 (Oct. 1982). (below and opposite bottom) Four storyboard frames by Stevens done in 1983 for Michael Jackson's *Thriller* music video, directed by John Landis.

professional from back East was—that was the real thing, because they were brand new and didn't really have a clue how any of this worked. It was just like, "My dad's got a barn. Let's put on a show. Let's be publishers."

MAO: ***At what point did you realize that you might have to do more than two installments?***

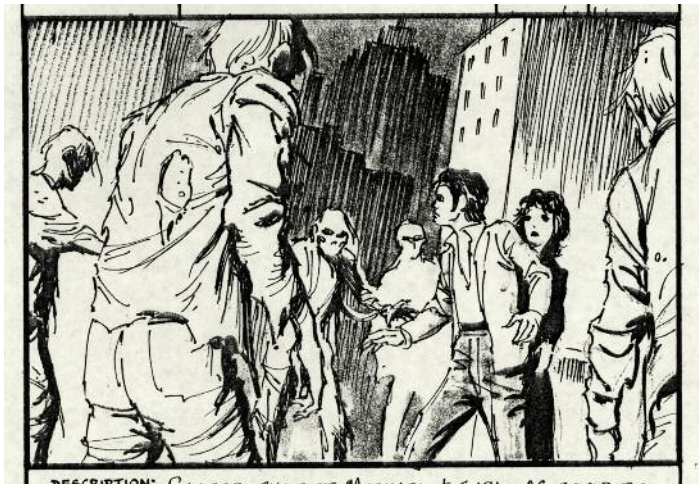
STEVENS: When Steve Schanes called me and said, "We have a lot of mail here." Apparently, he got, after the second one appeared, a whole bunch of fan mail. I saw a lot of it, and it was nice to see that somebody noticed that there was something out of the norm being done. But when he told me that these people are all assuming that there's going to be follow-up, and they're telling us, "Give it its own title right now on a monthly basis." I wasn't prepared to do that, even for one more. I'd written it off as just an experiment and wanted to leave it that way.

MAO: ***So it wasn't something you enjoyed well enough on its own to prompt you to continue to do it for yourself.***

STEVENS: Not on a regular basis. The only way I would have done it would have been occasionally as a sort of a fill-in thing, not by any stretch as a regular feature.

MAO: ***So truly, the fans had spoken at this point.***

STEVENS: Well, to the *Schaneses*. I mean, they smelled profit. If they could convince me to do it they figured they had a flagship title, and it took a while to get me to commit because I knew I just wouldn't be up for it. I did my best to suck it up and draw that first issue, chapter three of *The Rocketeer*, but it was the first issue of *Pacific Presents*. It wasn't that many pages, probably only about 12 or 14 pages, and it was just hellish work because I hadn't any direction planned out. I hadn't pre-written anything. I was writing it, literally, a page at a time. There was no plot, just a bunch of strung-together sequences and a lot of it didn't make any sense. It was a hell of a way to write, but I wasn't a writer. I did not write comic books. I had never really written anything. And Pacific, they didn't have any kind of a staff. They didn't have anything in place to sort of take part of the load off of me in terms of, "Well,



so-and-so can help pencil; so-and-so can help ink. This guy can draw one chapter to help you get caught up."

Nothing like that existed because they were such a small shop and had no staff. They had a camera guy, a production guy, a couple editors, and that was basically it. There was no in-house art staff. So it was basically on my shoulders and all my friends were busy. They had real jobs, or they were doing, like Stout, full-time gigs constantly. I had nobody to help me produce this thing, and for somebody that didn't have any real expertise in a practical day-to-day production sense, it just was a complete nightmare. I just did not know how I was going to do a regular book like that. And I was telling them from that first issue of *Pacific Presents*, "Guys, this is going to take a long time if I'm just doing this by myself," writing it, lettering it, coloring it, drawing it, inking it, the whole thing, one right after another. I said, "I'm not up to this." I tried to get it to them as quickly as I could, but I still had advertising gigs coming in every week or two, and I was still doing some character designs and storyboards. There were just other things that paid the bills, and the comics never did. I think for everything it was $150 a page—or all that the writing, the penciling, the inking, the coloring, all of it.

MAO: ***So what was the final thing that ended up pushing you over the edge to make the attempt?***

STEVENS: Well, just the fact that they had all these people writing in constantly with these expectations of this series.

MAO: ***The fans.***

STEVENS: I don't think it was that so much as feeling some sense of responsibility. I'd put this out there not realizing that it was setting people up with a appetite that—they wouldn't understand if I just said, "No, I'd rather not." I know how Kaluta would have felt. I know how I would have felt if some guy displayed something of interest and then just went away and said, "No, I don't want to play." None of us would have understood that. So I just felt like I had some kind of obligation to at least do my best to deliver something, even if it was only sporadically put out, which it was. I kept begging Schanes not to solicit for the book until it was in, or at least mostly in, but I didn't understand about distribution and direct sales. I had no clue that they had to prime the pump and take solicitations to know what their print run was going to be.

So they were on the hook no matter what and wanted it to be a monthly book. I kept telling them, "Look, at best it's going to be bimonthly and maybe not even that. It may be every three or four months; because I have regular jobs to do as well." They didn't understand why I didn't just quit all my other freelance gigs and do nothing but this strip, and I kept thinking it's simple economics. I would starve.

Basically, whenever I would have to put everything aside and go for like a week or two to finish up, there would be bills that would go unpaid. It was just something that I could not let go of. I had to keep commercial accounts, at least a handful each month, or I wouldn't have been able to pay my rent. Plus, even after you did the job, comics—they took a long time to pay. Whatever the pittance was, it was usually two months before you got your check. Sometimes not that long, but it was never enough when it finally showed up to really make a whole lot of difference.

But I did the first issue of *Pacific Presents*, then another, and finally a third issue. And I was trying to up the ante on each one. I was trying to force myself to take more time and to do more research and make the art as—

MAO: ***—To top yourself each time.***

STEVENS: Well, just to make sure that I was doing my best, each one. And from the simple act of doing it, I did get better by leaps each chapter. I could notice that there was a real difference from issue one to issue three, a big difference, stylistically and just dynamically in everything. So I was enjoying seeing, "Well, how much further can I go on this? How much better can I make this?"

In the interim, Pacific had taken on a bunch of new

A Meeting of Masters

Dave with Will Eisner, 1987, at the Lucca Comics and Games Festival in Lucca, Italy.

Pro 2 Pro

ROCKETEER-ING

ITS WAY TO A THEATER NEAR YOU!

A CONVERSATION ABOUT DAVE STEVENS AND THE ROCKETEER MOVIE WITH SCREENWRITERS DANNY BILSON AND PAUL DEMEO

by **Jerry Boyd**
conducted by e-mail in May and August 2010

It only makes sense that some of the early San Diego Comic-Con volunteers or talented attendees would make a big name for themselves in our beloved industry. *After all, those youngsters who made the trek to the old El Cortez Hotel and the other sites met and shared unforgettable experiences with Kirk Alyn (the first live-action Superman), Jock Mahoney (Tarzan), Buster Crabbe (Buck Rogers and Flash Gordon), and other "thrill-makers of yesteryear" when they converged in the special-guest areas and their wonderful films were shown as part of the overall program.*

Dave Stevens was one of those talented volunteers. He was there and he met some, if not all, of those gents, and took that wonder and awe with him and incorporated them into his 1980s hero, Cliff Secord, the high-flying Rocketeer, whose adventures were set in Los Angeles during the late 1930s. Stevens also got in a nod to George Wallace, the actor who brought Commando Cody, a Rocketeer-like precursor from the 1952 serial Radar Men from the Moon, *into his creative spectrum.*

***Paul DeMeo** and **Danny Bilson** were bringing the Flash to the small screen in admirable fashion in the early '90s through their collective imagination and work—and here they talk about the days of when the late-'30s-era* Rocketeer *came into the '90s, and what it was like when the comic's characters and concepts met on film.*

– Jerry Boyd

JERRY BOYD: ***While you gentlemen were pursuing your filmmaking dreams, a small company called Pacific Comics put out something called* Pacific Comics Presents *#1 (July 1982) that introduced Dave Stevens' The Rocketeer. Did either of you discover that title at the time it was causing a sensation in comicdom? And if not, when did you discover the works of Stevens or the Rocketeer?***

PAUL DeMEO: We were buying a lot of comic books at the time, particularly the new indie comics that were being published. We saw one of the Rocketeer issues on the racks at Golden Apple [Comics], a well-known shop on Melrose in L.A., looked at the cover, and inside art. We're big fans of period-adventure pulp, and Dave got it just right. Right away we thought, "This is a movie."

DANNY BILSON: That's true. We were both raised watching movies from the '30s on TV, loved the period, and were blown away by the art.

BOYD: ***To your knowledge, how did the project get green-lighted? Who was it at the Disney offices that got interested first? Did you, as the writers, come up with the screenplay on your own first?***

BILSON: Actually, Lloyd Levin, the young development exec for Larry Gordon, was interested in the project when we pitched it to him. We then took it all over town until David Hoberman, who was at Disney at the

Blast from the Past

The advance one-sheet teasing audiences for the 1991 theatrical release, *The Rocketeer*. Courtesy of Heritage Hollywood Auctions (*www.ha.com*).