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comic book CREATOR™

A TwoMorrows Publication

No. 1, Spring 2013

FIRST #1 TWOMORROWS ISSUE

THE NEW VOICE OF THE COMICS MEDIUM

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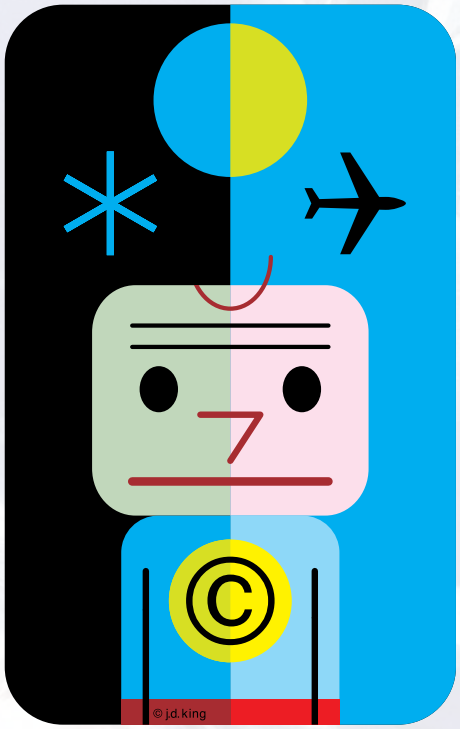

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CBC friend and comic book super-star artist **ALEX ROSS** depicts a confident and proud **JACK KIRBY** among his subjects, who sprang from his imagination, the piece a brilliant echo of Alex's work for his and Mark Waid's 1996 graphic novel *Kingdom Come*. Alex recently co-created (with his *Marvels* and *Astro City* cohort, Kurt Busiek) the Dynamite sub-imprint **KIRBY: GENESIS**, a line of comics which generously benefited the estate of Jack Kirby.

COMIC BOOK CREATOR
is a proud joint production of
Jon B. Cooke/TwoMorrows

Comic Book Creator™ is published quarterly by TwoMorrows Publishing, 10407 Bedfordtown Dr., Raleigh, NC 27614 USA. Phone: (919) 449-0344. Jon B. Cooke, editor. John Morrow, publisher. *Comic Book Creator* editorial offices: P.O. Box 204, West Kingston, RI 02892 USA. E-mail: jonbcooke@aol.com. ***Send subscription funds to TwoMorrows, NOT to the editorial offices.*** Four-issue subscriptions: $36 US, $50 Canada, $65 elsewhere. Printed in China. FIRST PRINTING.

comic book CREATOR™

Spring 2013 • The **New** Voice of the Comics Medium • Number 1

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Comic Book Creator is always in search of interviews, art and artifacts related to the field, and we encourage those interested to contact us at *jonbcooke@aol.com* or through snail-mail at *CBC*, P.O. Box 204, West Kingston RI 02892 or call (401) 932-1967

The Word is Dignity

Ye Ed's journey and the urgent mission of *Comic Book Creator*

You former readers of *Comic Book Artist*, this mag's two-volume predecessor (published for 25 issues by TwoMorrows and six by Top Shelf Productions): thanks for stopping by. And any newcomers, welcome! It's been quite awhile since *CBA* V.2 #6, and much has transpired in Ye Ed's personal life: Raising three sons to adulthood, making it through the recession (so far!), housefire*, flood, hurricane, and simply getting my head and heart in the right place. In the comics-related field, I scribed introductions for Marvel and Dark Horse collections; co-produced and wrote a full-length feature film, *Will Eisner: Portrait of a Sequential Artist*, directed by my favorite younger brother, Andrew D. Cooke, and also taught and lectured on comics at the Rhode Island School of Design. Not all that much for Ye Ed being seven years gone.

Much as I wanted to restart *CBA*, get back into the game, and do good for Chris Staros and Brett Warnock — two great guys who served as my publisher for V.2 — I'd been mired again in ambivalence and an ennui of isolation. Oh, I attempted *CBA*'s return a few times, but, well….

Jack "The King" Kirby
by **Ronn Sutton**

Illustration ©2013 Ronn Sutton.

Importantly, a few years ago, I started working again — in a production capacity — for my longtime buddy John Morrow. And, at near the end of my one-year stint as *Alter Ego*'s "layout guru" (hi, Roy!), I was talking with my one-time publisher about how much I missed the give-&-take, collaborative relationship we shared during the years I toiled with him, first on *The Jack Kirby Collector* as associate editor (hi, Pam!), and then the five-year run of *CBA* V1.

In your hands — or screen — you're viewing the results of that chat of less than a year ago. I couldn't be more grateful returning to Ye Ed mode, as I frantically finish our fabulous first ish. Boy, it is *great* to be back!

*Confined to the basement, so any and *all* loaned materials remain safe in my second floor office — they *will* be returned!

Another reason I wanted to return to the field so urgently was because of developments over the past few years which do not bode well for the rights and treatment of comic book creators. There was last year's decision against the estate of Jack Kirby (discussed in my cover-featured essay to come); also Gary Friedrich's loss to attain rights to his character Ghost Rider; and recently, the ruling against the heirs of Superman co-creator Jerry Siegel for ownership. These distressing judgements, combined with the fact comic book characters are generating billions of dollars at the box office — virtually none of which is shared with the creators of the lucrative properties — instill in me a desire to help. I hope for *CBC* to be of service, and play an advocate's role by informing and discussing the issues, and do what we can to support the artists and writers who have given so much.

But I'll also do what I believe I was meant to do: produce an engaging, informative, and entertaining magazine that celebrates and enlightens. Not too different than *CBA*, except now within a definite number of pages, all in color, and disciplined to strive to meet a precise schedule. Oh, different too is the double-size special we'll have every summer! And, oh yeah, we'll also be adding expanded "Director's Cut" Digital Edition PDFs (see bottom of our TOC for details) and, time permitting, website extras — because I can't resist indulging in at least another format or three!

Most of all though, this is all about dignity: Ye Ed attaining the virtues of being reliable, accountable and a man of his word. You, the reader, being treated with the grace of getting what you pay for: a quality publication on-time and delivered as promised. And I greatly wish to bestow the dignity deserved to so many comic book creators. May this be a venue to tell the stories of their lives, be shown our respect, and bask in appreciation for how they have so enriched our lives by sharing their dreams, imaginations and talents. May *CBC* be that place.

— ***Ye Crusading Editor***

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Derf's *Friend Dahmer*

Derf Backderf on the process behind his critically successful graphic novel

by DERF BACKDERF Guest Columnist

[*This following was derived from a lecture that occurred at the Rhode Island School of Design Chace Center, Providence, RI, on Jan. 28, 2013, the same day the American Library Association awarded* My Friend Dahmer *(the subject of discussion) with an Alex Award for one of the ten "Best Adult Books to Appeal to Teen Readers." The slideshow presentation was hosted by RISD's Illustration and Literary Arts + Studies Department, and introduced by Philip Eil, whom* CBC *thanks for an assist. The author discusses his storytelling approach and some insight into his relationship with the notorious multiple murderer. Text ©2013 Derf Backderf.]*

My Friend Dahmer is the true story of my teenage friendship with the strange boy who would grow up to be the most depraved serial killer since Jack the Ripper. The book itself follows Jeff and I through our time together in junior high and high school. Over the course of these six years, his actions became more and more bizarre as he marched inexorably toward the edge of the abyss.

Jeff had this whole shtick where he faked epileptic fits. He pretended he had cerebral palsy, just to get attention, and there was a group of us kids who ate this up. My friends Neal, Mike, Kent and I actually had something called the Dahmer Fan Club. For a time we took Jeff in and made him the mascot of our particular social circle, and we encouraged him to act up. What we didn't know was that his perverse sexuality was beginning to gurgle up from some horrible chamber in his psyche, and just took him over whole. He was fantasizing about dead bodies. This was his sexual ideal. The only way he could combat these terrible thoughts was by drinking. Heavy drinking, as in a fifth of liquor before the morning bell! He used to walk through the halls of the school with a cup full of scotch or whisky. He'd just walk by teachers with it; they thought it was a cup of coffee! One of the most amazing parts of the story is the adult indifference, the indifference of the school authorities. They just didn't care, didn't notice, or didn't want to notice. It's really a fascinating part of this tale.

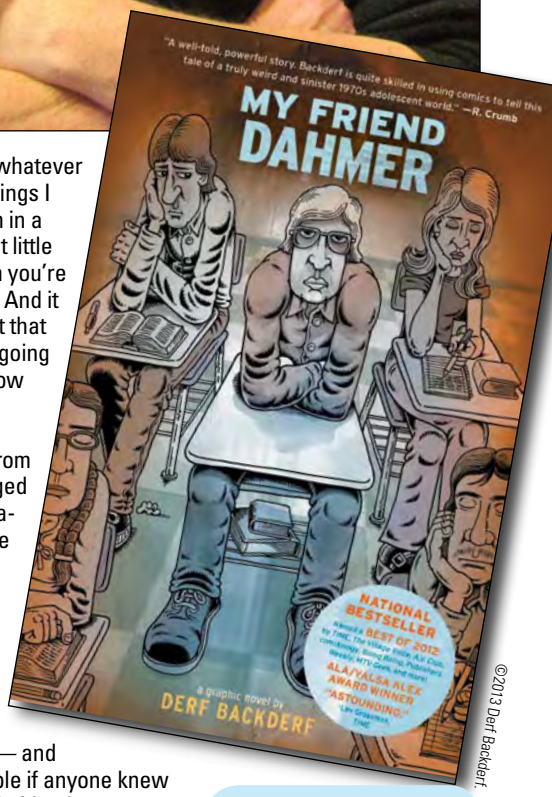
The Dahmer Fan Club, my friends and I, are a secondary storyline, our very mundane but happy lives contrasting with Dahmer's ever more dysfunctional life. So there's a lot going on in this book, which ends when he kills his first victim, a young hitchhiker Jeff picked up outside a local mall, two weeks after our high school graduation.

Needless to say, it's a creepy story, but it has gotten quite a bit of critical acclaim, which I'm very grateful for. The book has been twenty years in the making. The project started in July 1991, when Dahmer was finally captured in Milwaukee and the news *exploded* onto headlines everywhere. I can't even think of something comparable. Maybe the Newtown massacre. It was that big.

Now, put yourself in my shoes. At that point, it's 13 years after high school graduation. I'd come to terms with my teenage years. I can't say I enjoyed high school a whole lot. It was okay, and as I look back at it now, I probably had a better time than I thought I did while I was in the midst of it. I've made peace with it. There were fun times. I had great friends.

But then, in an instant, my entire teenage history was *completely* redefined. Suddenly, *everything* took on this utterly creepy, new definition, as this *monster* wound his way through my own personal story. It really messed with my head. Dahmer was on the cover of *every* news magazine, on *every* TV network. I remember walking into the grocery store and there was a magazine rack by the checkout counter, and Jeff's face was on *every single* magazine. This was a guy I used to give rides home from school. So, it was, for lack of a better term, a total mindf*ck.

Very shortly after the crimes broke, within a week, I got together with my friends, Mike and Neal, who were two members of the Dahmer Fan Club and are characters in the book, just to commiserate and to share stories about Jeff and what was happening to us and around us. And I heard some things I hadn't heard before, because, getting back to that redefinition, we kept many of our stories involving Jeff to ourselves. They didn't seem important, they didn't have a point, whatever — but *now* they had a point. So I heard things I hadn't heard before and jotted them down in a sketchbook. I knew right then, you get that little alarm bell that goes off in your head when you're a writer: Wow! This is an incredible story. And it was one that no one was really telling, not that I could see, even early on. I thought, "I'm going to do something with this." I just didn't know what at that point.



©2013 Derf Backderf.

It so happened that we met at Neal's house, and he lived just down the street from Jeff's boyhood home, which was now ringed by yellow police tape as forensic investigators sifted through the dirt looking for bone fragments of his first victim. They only found 100, the biggest of which was just half-an-inch big. Jeff had turned this poor kid to powder.

Up and down Bath Road, which goes by Jeff's house, there were probably, I would say, three miles in either direction, media — camera trucks, reporters' cars — and they were going door-to-door asking people if anyone knew Dahmer. If they had known that three of his friends were sitting in a house 100 yards away, it would have been like a school of piranha.

I didn't want to be involved in the whole sleazy, tabloid thing that was going on. I knew I was going to wait and

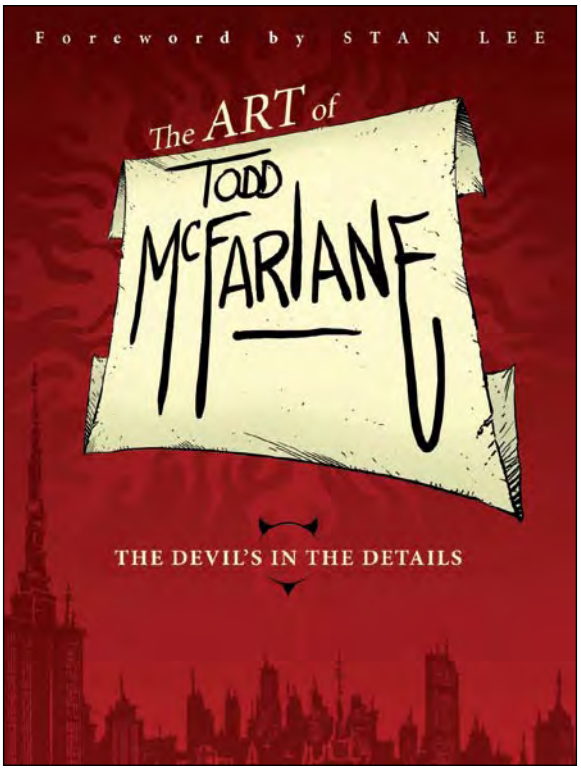
Top: *My friend Derf Backderf as snapped by Ye Ed.* **Above:** *Cover art of Derf's acclaimed graphic novel discussed herein.*

Todd McFarlane: "I Was a Stubborn S.O.B."

The Image artist/business mogul on his new show-all book, *The Art of Todd McFarlane*

by JORGE (GEORGE) KHOURY CBC Contributing Editor

With a comics career that began nearly thirty years ago, the time was more than right for Todd McFarlane to look back at his career within the retrospective coffee table book entitled *The Art of Todd McFarlane*, from Image Comics. From his humble beginnings in *Coyote* and *Infinity, Inc.,* to the heights of comics superstardom on *Spider-Man* and *Spawn*, it's all covered in this book with rich detail and frank honesty by the artist. For his old faithful fans, all the trademarks of that energetic artistic style you remember are in here in spades. For newer admirers, this book shows us the story of a fellow comics fan and dreamer who was determined to do things his way and find success by any means necessary.



Above: *Cover of Todd McFarlane's "visual biography,"* The Art of Todd McFarlane: The Devil's In the Details, *published by Image Comics, the company Todd help found, which is still going strong after more than two decades. View a video Q&A starring the artist at http://www.youtube.com/user/McFarlaneCompany/ ©2013 Todd McFarlane Productions.*

One would have assumed that an artist of McFarlane's popularity would have had a book about his art ages ago… but that wasn't the case until late 2012. In a recent conversation, McFarlane confessed, "I wanted to show my artwork, warts and all, from the beginning when I was trying to break into comic books to where I'm at now. To show people, especially any aspiring artists, you don't have to be an award-winning artist now—I wasn't when I broke in; I became, eventually, an award-winning artist, but I was far from that when I broke into the business. I'm hoping that the visuals will show people that the Todd McFarlane that they know wasn't nearly as polished when he broke into the industry or was trying to."

I had often read and heard about the staggering amount of rejection McFarlane suffered in his search to break into the industry. Although this book is mostly an art book, he documents the early chapters of his humble beginnings as seen in his early samples, journals, and rejection letters. With straightforwardness, Todd provides readers with a tour and a reexamination of his artwork. Wouldn't you think that this soul-searching task would have led the artist to rediscover something about him that would have totally been forgotten with the passage of time and life?

McFarlane replied, "I knew who I was: I was a stubborn S.O.B. Because people saw that my artwork wasn't good and I still insisted on trying out and that I got hundreds of no's and I still insisted on trying, on keeping going. I guess you could strike that up to maturity and not being a realist. But, again, I also was an athlete and played at a high level. In fact, I played Pac-10 baseball, so I was very competitive. And so, some of the things that I ended up doing in my career were just follow-ups of that sports-athletic competitiveness. So I was then able to shift it from sports to my career, *per se.* But it's interesting that because of all the amateur stuff that's in there… I've had that literally since I did it. So people have looked at the book both in my office and some of the signings that I'm at, and they're, 'Ohhh, you've got some cool stuff that I never saw before. All this stuff! And seeing it in chronological…' And it's the right answer that I was hoping for. But from my perspective there's no one image in there that's a surprise because I drew them all! So, I go, 'Everything that's in that book? I knew it in advance before any of you guys.' Because I was doing it, right?"

As you follow McFarlane's career within the narrative of this book, it becomes clear that his early success started with self-efficacy and taking charge in creating artwork that stayed true to his artistic instincts. That giant leap in maturity is evident when he started inking his own pencils in books like *Batman: Year Two* or *Amazing Spider-Man* in the late '80s; it's there you find a jump in quality, exuberance, and style that only continued to grow in later years

"Along the way in the book," explained McFarlane, "as part of the voice-over, if you will, I try to show what I believe are some of those marks, and you picked one that was a very salient moment for me because it was the moment where I got to begin the process of putting on paper what it was that was in my brain. Up to that point, I thought I was putting on paper what was in my brain but then different inkers would have different interpretations, so the public wasn't seeing what was in my brain. And I'd go, 'The only way I am going to get there is if I handle both pieces of that chore, both pencils and the inks, and though the inking was very rough and rugged at the beginning, like anything else, you do it over and over and over, and you start to figure out a method and you start to get a little bit better at it. It's like learning a language. Any one of these things—writing, coloring, lettering, penciling, inking—it's all just a creative language you're learning. And the more you do it, the better you get at the language. I had a head start in penciling, so the penciling was better than the inking, and the inking eventually got better. At some point, I decided I wanted to write so then that basically is now the novice part of my career. It's like, 'You're not a very good writer but he's a pretty good artist.' Because I had a five- to eight-year head start on the art over the writing. So, just trying to dissect some of this stuff to people, again, you don't have to be perfect to get into the business and you can actually get in as a penciler and eventually you can, maybe, have the opportunity which I had which was being a penciler, inker, writer, and eventually publisher/editor. I didn't know any of that was going to happen when I got my first penciling job. It just became the evolution of the opportunity in front of me."

There are many who confuse McFarlane's drive with ego, but his ability to see his vision to fruition is a key component

The Mexican Sunset of Frank Robbins

Fran Rowe Robbins and friends discuss the final years of the renowned artist/writer

by MICHAEL AUSHENKER CBC Associate Editor

In the 1970s, polarizing artist Frank Robbins simultaneously astounded and repelled mainstream comic book readers with his anatomically flipped-out work on such series as *Captain America* and *The Invaders* at Marvel, and DC's *The Shadow* and *Detective Comics* (in which he created Man-Bat). The late artist brought a cartoony flair he had developed while working on the syndicated comic strip *Johnny Hazard,* heavily inspired by mentor figure Milton Caniff, to such features as *The Human Fly* and "Legion of Monsters." Robbins even wrote classic stories for other artists, such as his famous *Batman* #250 campfire tale, "The Batman Nobody Knows," and a few "Unknown Soldier" missions, and as an artist, he took some throwaway licensed properties, such as Marvel's *Man From Atlantis*, and breathed animated life into these otherwise rote comic-book adaptations of B-level entertainment properties.

Above: *A self-caricature by cartoonist Franklin Robbins.*

But understand this: By the time Frank Robbins retired to Mexico in the late 1980s, where he spent his final five years, he was done with comics. *Done.* As in: *Never looking back again.*

"When he finally retired, he retired. That was it!" Fran Rowe Robbins, his widow, told *Comic Book Creator* in an exclusive interview this past October. "Frank very rarely talked about cartooning. I knew about *Batman* because the books were there. I knew about *Johnny Hazard* and *Scorchy Smith*. But I didn't know about any of the other stuff [such as *The Invaders, The Human Fly,* etc.]. I was so unaware about how popular he had been."

"The other painters down there knew [Frank] as a painter," said longtime Archie Comics artist Stan Goldberg. "He didn't stress it that much that he had a career in comics. He didn't make a big deal about it."

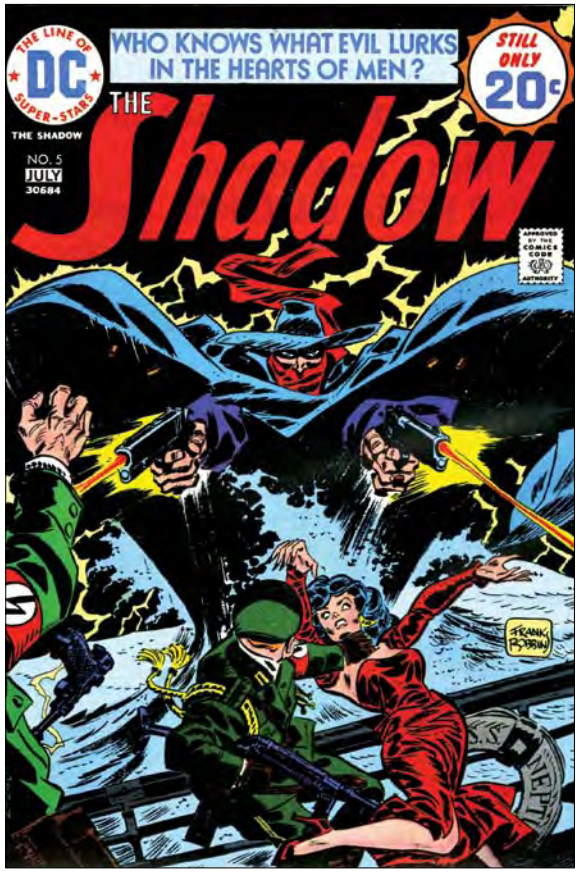
What Robbins was not through with, however, was the arts, with which the dynamic artist had a lifelong love affair. Depicting life as he saw it around his quaint Mexican village, Robbins took to the canvas with brushstrokes that remained unapologetically, unmistakably Robbins-style, even if his subject matter had switched from a pair of human torches combating Nazi man-monsters to the graceful, poetic grandiosity of a matador or a ballet dancer in motion.

If anyone writes a coffee table book about the man, it should be titled *Love It or Hate It: The Art of Frank Robbins.* Flamboyant and colorful, Robbins' late-period art, while more abstract than his Marvel or DC output, retains the figurative elastic-

Right top and middle: *Fran Rowe Robbins and Frank Robbins during their 1980s-90s Mexican romance and marriage (courtesy of Fran).* **Bottom right:** *Renowned Archie cartoonist Stan Goldberg and his friend Frank Robbins, Mexico, 1994 (courtesy of Stan and his son Bennett).*

ity that once spawned some crazy, *impossible* contortions in super-hero books such as *Power Man* and *Ghost Rider,* and stirred up Marvel's letter columns (pro and con). By all accounts, Robbins was always professional, albeit uneasy drawing the "Marvel Way." In an interview with Jim Shooter in *Back Issue* #20 (for this writer's piece on *The Human Fly*), the former Marvel editor-in-chief admitted that Robbins did not really fit in aesthetically with the Marvel house style. And yet, based on Robbins' reputation as a syndicated strip artist, Shooter was moved to make sure he continued to get work, as his eccentric brilliance pored through his super-hero work. Robbins had many high-powered fans within the Bullpen, including Marvel's art director, the legendary artist of *Amazing Spider-Man*, John Romita.

"He was just as much a fan as anybody else," Goldberg said.



The Shadow TM & ©2013 Condé Nast Publications.

TM & ©2013 DC Comics.

Located four and one-half miles northwest of Mexico City, the small town of San Miguel de Allende was, appropriately, something of an artist's colony when Frank Robbins settled down circa 1989.

"He was extremely happy in Mexico," Stan Goldberg said. "He was part of the community down there."

Still friends today with Fran Rowe Robbins, Goldberg remembers socializing with a very happy couple while visiting Mexico in February 1994.

"She was a teacher from upstate New York who had stopped teaching and moved down there," Goldberg said of Rowe.

When Robbins met Fran, she was staging play readings and directing theater in San Miguel.

"I taught English there," she said. "I met Frank while I was directing a play reading of *Amadeus*."

In the late 1980s, Robbins had been healing from the death of his longtime life partner when his path crossed Fran Rowe's.

"His wife had died two years before I met him," his second wife recalled. "We were together for about five years. We had a wonderful marriage. It was a big loss when he died, let me tell you."

It was only in 2011 when Fran Robbins finally packed it up and moved back to the United States, due to health reasons connected to atmospheric conditions in Mexico.

"I was there for 21 years," she said. "Unfortunately, at 6,500 feet, the air is very thin… I had to move back to sea level. I didn't want to leave, but I had to."

Now a resident of Vero Beach in Florida's West Palm Beach, Fran sounds misty-eyed for her previous life south of the border.

"We had a gorgeous Casa de los Padres, built in 1710. A Colonial house with a patio and garden, and 20–30 foot ceilings," she recalled. The house had a courtyard and shared the wall with the adjacent Oratorio of San Felipe Neri church. "When we looked out the bedroom, we saw these gorgeous towers."

The Robbins enjoyed San Miguel's laid-back pace.

"Everybody walked everwhere," Fran recalled. "We can go to all the restaurants and clubs within 10–15 minutes."

It seems natural that Robbins turned to painting in retirement. What may not be as expected is that Robbins was, in his widow's words, "the musical guru of the City of San Miguel." Robbins enjoyed jazz, pop, and opera, and he had myriad albums in the collection of the local library there, where they remain still. Music, after all, was an intrinsic part of his artistic process when creating comic books.

"When he was drawing, when he was cartooning, he

Above left: *With writer Denny O'Neil, Frank Robbins obviously had a ball drawing the adventures of* The Shadow *(here the cover of #5, June-July 1974).* **Above:** *Frank was also a fine comics writer, as evidenced by his creation of Man-Bat. Here's the splash to* Detective Comics *#429, Nov. '72, also drawn by Robbins.* **Below:** *As artist, Robbins had a memorable run on* The Invaders. *Here is his entry for* The Mighty Marvel Bicentennial Calendar *(1976) featuring that title's Golden Age heroes.*

TM & ©2013 Marvel Characters, Inc.

The Human Fly TM & ©2013 the respective owner. holder.

Above: *Yeah, if you're a dedicated Aushenker reader, you no doubt know he's an unabashed* Human Fly *freak and likely have already seen this treasure, Frank Robbins pencils for an unpublished* Human Fly *cover, which appeared in Michael's definitive article, "The Human Fly: Pretty Fly for a Real Guy," gracing our sister magazine* Back Issue*'s #20 (Feb. 2007) ish. We wanted to share not only to plug our Associate Editor's previous work, but also as an example of Frank Robbins' simultaneously charming and exasperating anatomy, with arms and legs akimbo, often bent at fantastical angles!*

Inset Right: *Frank Robbins contributed this hand-lettered mini-autobiography for a National Cartoonist Society annual. Courtesy of John Heebink*

Retiring in Mexico hardly came out of the blue for Frank Robbins. "He used to vacation in Mexico for many, many years," said Fran Robbins. When he finally settled down in San Miguel, he felt at home among the vibrant regulars at Mama Mia, a restaurant and music club in town which fed his imagination.

"There were a lot of artists there, photographers, a lot of ex-pats," she said of the mix of Americans, Canadians, French, and Germans living in town. "He did a really interesting painting of Mama Mia. He painted Don Clay playing the congas. He painted Peta Glen, with her blond hair, with a glass of scotch on top of the piano, a lot of musicians smoking… you can just feel the atmosphere. They were regulars. They were people who either were retired or that just sort of floated into San Miguel and never left. Guys who escaped the Vietnam draft. They sort of settled in and had a sympathetic community there."

Fran remembers watching her late husband attack the canvas with gusto.

"He was very fast," she said. "When he painted big pictures too, he worked on a grid. He could put it on a grid within ten or 15 minutes. What took time for him was just looking at it and deciding what he was going to do with it. The whole image was there already."

He also simultaneously worked on multiple paintings. "He'd get an idea for something else, so he'd put the other painting aside and work on another one," she said.

In San Miguel, Frank and Fran lived a good life together. "We used to go out and socialize with musicians a lot," she recalled.

Another little-known fact about Robbins: he was something of an electronics whiz.

"We had a sound system that was second to none," Fran Robbins recalled. "He created a single cone speaker that was astonishing. It was very pure sound, very clear. wonderful, wonderful. He knew a lot about sound. He had boxes and boxes of research about sound.

"He did a lot of recording for the library, tape to tape, CD to tape. People would donate their collections to the local library." As did Frank. He lent his collection to the librarian there, Theresa Malakoff.

"His real contribution to the town was a musical one," Robbins' wife said. "He always did my music, my sound effects. He also was the one with the expertise."

Fran can still picture the poster Robbins did for her charity production of the musical play *Guys and Dolls.*

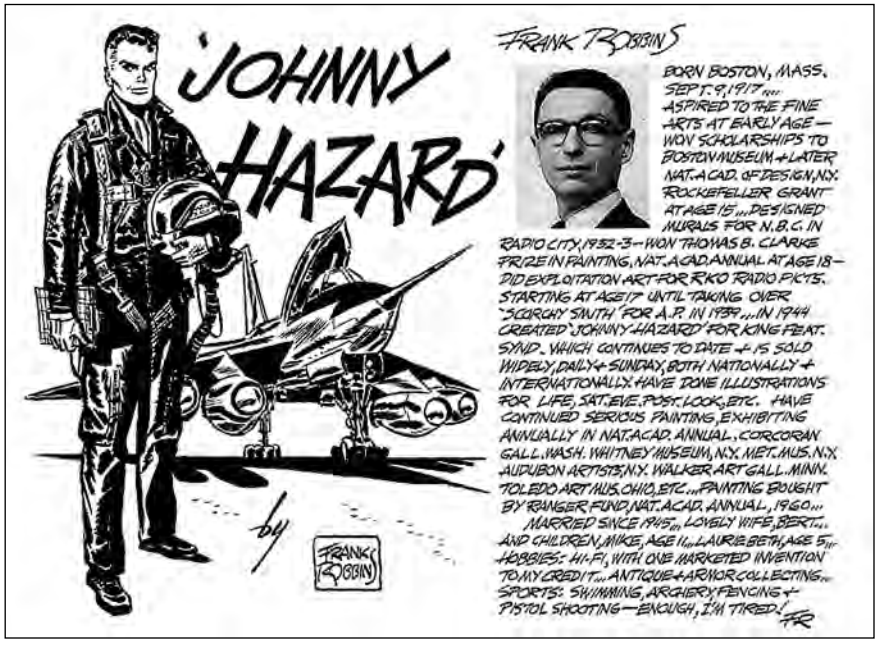
"He did a drawing for Ibsen's *The Ghosts,* a play that takes place in this isolated Scandinavian place. He created a big mountain on an icy blue field."

"I went to a party at his house when the production was over," Goldberg recalled. "[Fran] invited many people over to the house."

The Robbinses were an active couple. "We did a lot of walking there and swimming," she said. "There was a very good pool. We had a hot springs there. There were some tennis courts. He didn't play tennis. but mostly what people did was walk."

To the second and final Mrs. Robbins, Frank seemed to be just short of a super-hero. "He was an expert marksman," Fran said. "He had an air gun. He was a fencer. He could also shoot arrows. He was a good swimmer. He was truly a Renaissance man."

Frank Robbins passed away on November 28, 1994. Unfortunately, it was a death that could have been avoided. "He had a kidney stone," Fran Robbins said. "We went to the emergency room. He had an attack around 7 P.M. They



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An Evening With Denny & Neal

The legendary Adams-O'Neil comics team discuss social relevancy in their '70s work

Photo ©2013 Seth Kushner.

Above: *Dennis O'Neil, writer (left), and Neal Adams, artist, shake hands at the Big Event in this portrait by Seth Kushner. All photos of the talk are used with his kind permission.*

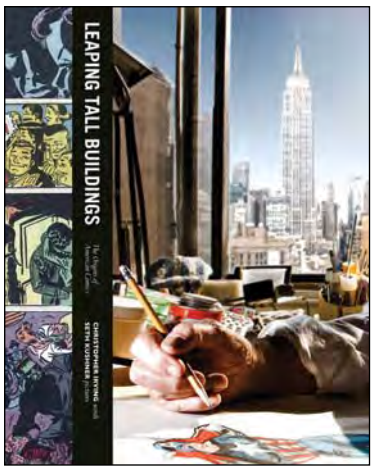
Moderated by CHRISTOPHER IRVING CBC Contributing Editor

When writer Dennis O'Neil and artist Neal Adams teamed up in the early 1970s, their take on Batman restored the Dark Knight to his brooding roots, and established the version that is reflected in the recent films. Just as importantly, they introduced social relevance into super-hero comics with Green Lantern/Green Arrow, *most famously with the drug abuse issues, in the process elevating super-heroes to a more adult, earthbound level. A former crime reporter, O'Neil brought real-world grit to the genre, while Adams' art style and design elicited both a breathtaking realism and dynamism rarely found in the super-hero comic book. O'Neil edited the Batman line at DC for a number of years. Adams continues to draw and write comics, most recently with DC's* Batman: Odyssey *series, and is currently drawing* The First X-Men *for Marvel, co-written with Christos Gage.* Leaping Tall Buildings: The Origins of American Comics *(Powerhouse Publishing) writer Christopher Irving and photographer Seth Kushner, and Housing Works Bookstore Café reunited O'Neil and Adams for a special benefit panel on social relevancy in comics. This talk took place before an audience on July 17, 2012, at the SoHo café.*

Christopher Irving: *Seth and I — Seth, say hello to the people.*
Seth Kushner: *Hello. Thanks for coming tonight.*
Neal Adams: Doesn't Seth get a chair?
Christopher: *No, he's going to be photographing because he's a shutterbug…*
Neal: Ohhh.
Seth: *He does the talking and I take the pictures.*
Christopher: *I do the writing and he creates the pictures. [*To Dennis and Neal*] You guys can relate, right? [*laughter*] Anyway, Seth and I started a website called GraphicNYC four or five years ago and the culmination of our artist-writer-creator profiles is* Leaping Tall Buildings: The Origins of American Comics, *which has about 50 or 60 creators, at least, including these two handsome gentlemen sitting right next to me: Denny O'Neil and Neal Adams. [*applause*] Let's get started. Do you want to try and make some time for questions? Then there's going to be a quick signing with Neal and Denny. Okay. They need no introduction but I am going to introduce them anyway. Dennis O'Neil was born in 1939, the same year that Batman first swooped over the rooftops of Gotham City in* Detective Comics *#27. While working as a newspaper reporter in Cape Girardeau, Michigan —*
Dennis O'Neil: Missouri.
Christopher: *Missouri? Oh! I'm ashamed! I'm sorry.*
Neal: Scratch that out.
Christopher: *I don't have a pen, unfortunately. I'll just use my fingernail. [*Neal hands him a pen*] Thank you. Okay: Cape Girardeau,* Missouri.

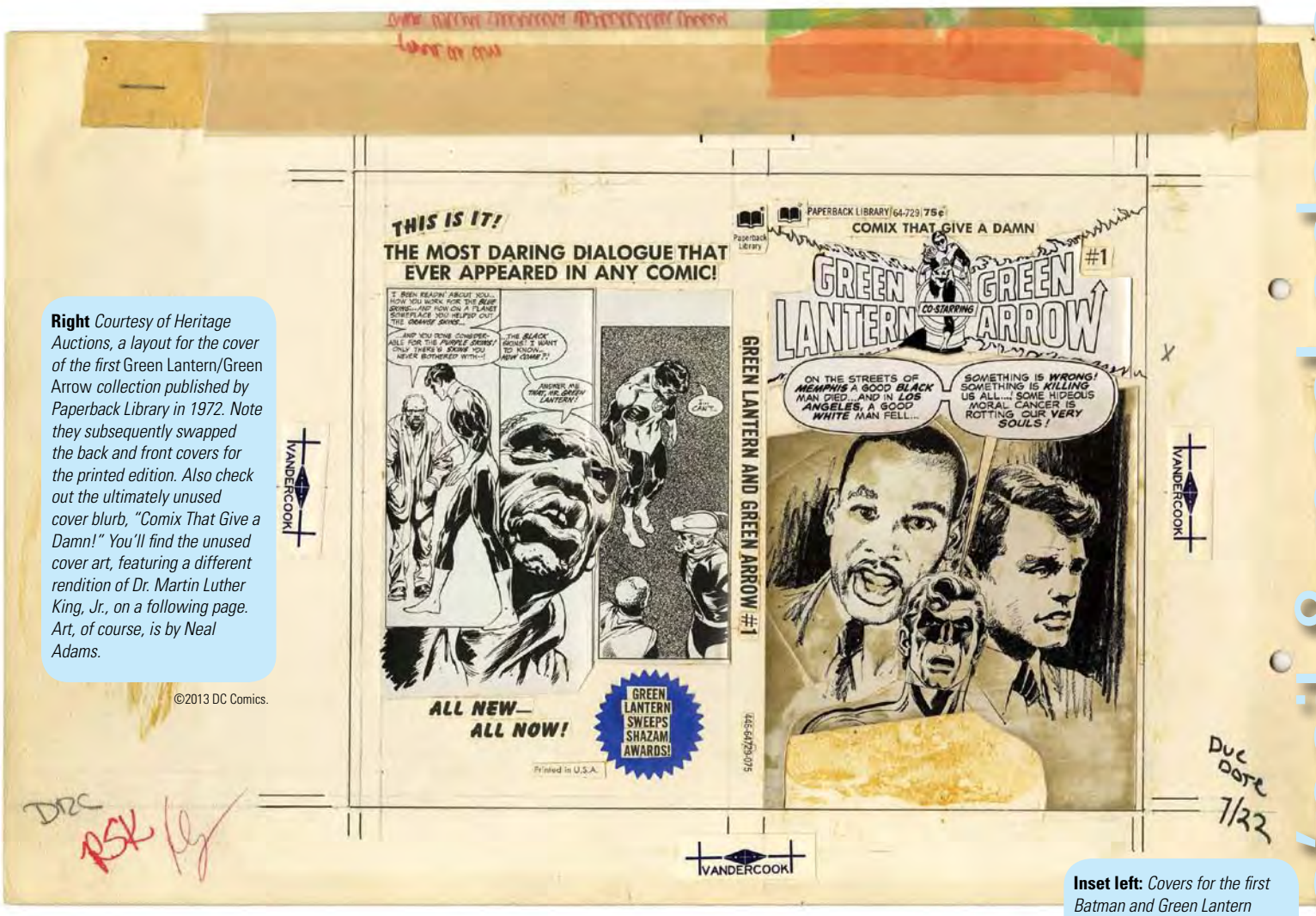
A meeting with upcoming comic book writer and editor Roy Thomas led Denny to move to New York to write comics. He started writing for Marvel and then became a mainstay at Charlton Comics. He later went to DC Comics in 1968 with his [Charlton] editor Dick Giordano.

Neal Adams brought an unprecedented sense of realism to super-hero art of the 1960s, stemming out of his prior work in advertising and also his artwork on the Ben Casey comic strip —
Neal: And Archie.
Christopher: *That's right. How many Archie stories did you do?*
Neal: Just some pages. Just a few.
Christopher: *Real quick: Just as an aside. Neal, who did you meet with when you first went to Archie?*
Neal: His name is Gorelick. Victor Gorelick.
Christopher: *There was someone else working there who first warned you away from comics.*
Neal: You're talking about Joe Simon? I didn't meet Joe Simon. They called him on the phone because they took pity on me because I was such a sad case. I went up there three or four times because Jack Kirby and Joe Simon were doing *The Adventures of the Fly* and "The Shield." I didn't go up there to work for Archie; I went there to see Jack Kirby. Joe Simon didn't come in though they said he would come in every Thursday, but he didn't come in. I came in every week to try to get work and I brought my

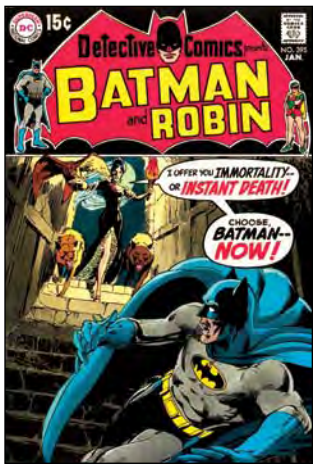


©2013 Christopher Irving & Seth Kushner.

Inset right: *Seth Kushner's photo of Joe Simon's drawing hand and a certain Big Apple landmark grace the cover of his and writer Christopher Irving's smash tome,* Leaping Tall Buildings: The Origins of the American Comics, *available in bookstores and comic shops and via their publisher at* www.powerhousebooks.com. *Many thanks to our chums for the words and pictures here!*



Right *Courtesy of Heritage Auctions, a layout for the cover of the first* Green Lantern/Green Arrow *collection published by Paperback Library in 1972. Note they subsequently swapped the back and front covers for the printed edition. Also check out the ultimately unused cover blurb, "Comix That Give a Damn!" You'll find the unused cover art, featuring a different rendition of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., on a following page. Art, of course, is by Neal Adams.*



samples — every week I had more samples — so they got him on the phone. And Joe Simon says, "Kid, I'm going to do you a big favor: I'm not going to use your work." [*laughter*] "It's good but get a real job doing something real. There won't be comic books in a year."

Christopher: *I actually asked about that because, besides being the hand on our cover [*of *Leaping Tall Buildings] — we have a very special guest. [*To audience member*] Emily? Can you please stand? Joe Simon's granddaughter Emily came here. Everyone give her a round of applause. C'mon, everybody! [*applause*]*

Neal: [*To Emily*] Your grandpa told me he was going to do me a favor by *not* giving me work and he said, 'Kid, you're not going to understand it now, but this is the biggest favor anybody could do for you. Comics will not exist in America in a year." [*laughter*] So the guys at Archie gave me *Archie* pages to do. Pitiful. "Comics are doomed!" [*laughter*] I *love* your grandpa! I just want you to understand that he didn't give me work.

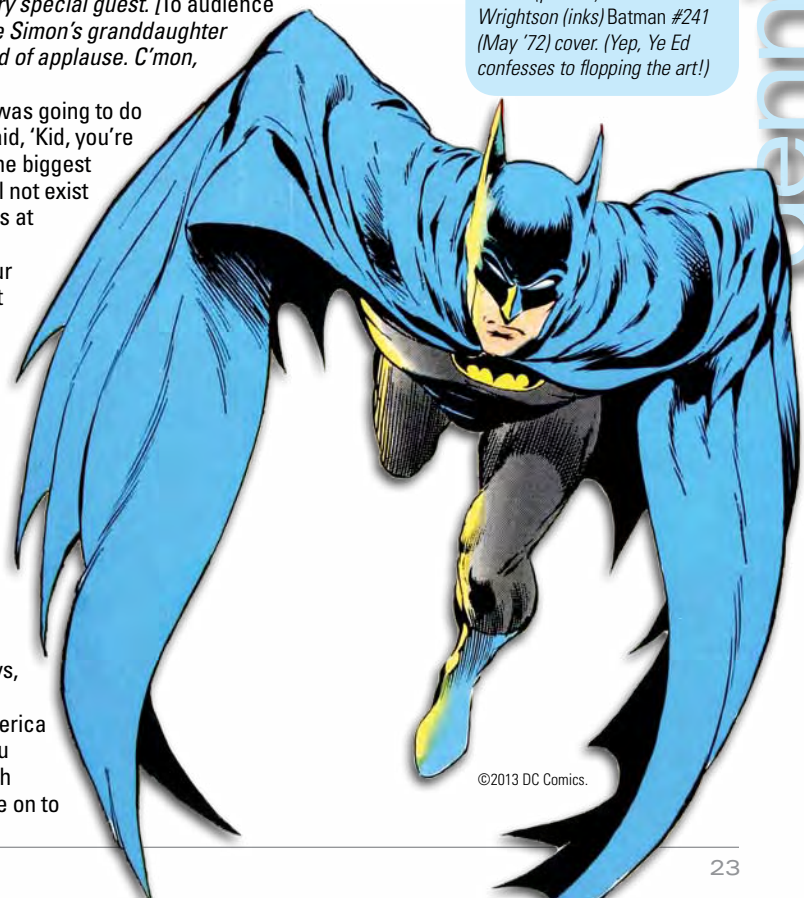
Christopher: *So, I —*

Neal: Wait a second! I have an end to the story! [*laughter*]

Christopher: *Please, Neal!*

Neal: It's a great story. [*To Emily*] You're hearing this for the first time, right? After awhile I became "Neal Adams." It took me a bunch of years. You know, the guy in the white hat on the horse who saved everybody's career and all the rest of it. So Joe Simon, your grandpa, comes up to DC Comics and he's heard of my reputation with original art and all the rest of it. He says, "Neal, I've got to talk to you about this. I'm trying to get the rights back for Captain America but I don't know what process to follow. You obviously know more than anybody on earth about it, so how do I do that?" I said, "Come on to

Inset left: *Covers for the first Batman and Green Lantern O'Neil/Adams collaborations,* Detective Comics *#395 (Jan. '70) and* GL *#76 (Apr. '70).*
Below: *Detail from the Neal Adams (pencils) and Berni Wrightson (inks)* Batman *#241 (May '72) cover. (Yep, Ye Ed confesses to flopping the art!)*



Above: *Unfinished and (obviously) unused cover for* The Brave and the Bold *#85 (Aug.-Sept. 1969), which featured Neal Adams's brilliant redesign of The Green Arrow. Art by (obviously) Neal Adams, who tells* CBC, *"I had the habit of rejecting my own covers, and doing them over. This one was a particularly stupid and meaningless cover." Courtesy of Heritage Auctions.*

stories about time travel and story after story after story about poor, numbskull, blind Lois Lane trying to find out who Superman really was. [*laughter*] She should have removed a little lock of hair. [*laughter*]

I'm not as down on that stuff as Neal is. I don't enjoy it but I kind of understand what they were trying to do was appropriate for what was the time and place. And *nobody* knew how to edit comics! I was a comic book editor for 27 years and I don't remember anybody giving me instruction. Dick Giordano was close to a genius in that he could suck good work out of me when I was working at Charlton for four bucks a page. Weezy [Louise] Simonson was like that. Some of them just had a way to do it. One poor woman was pulled off the street. She helped her husband write a couple of comic book stories and someone wanted her husband to relocate to New York and he brought his wife — it was sort of an old-fashioned marriage — and she had seven comic book titles plunked on her desk and was told, "You're editing these." And that was it! She had *no* editorial experience, damned little writing experience. (I had edited a news magazine, I had helped edit books and had edited lots of different kinds of things. Comics are the hardest by far.) So this poor woman was just off the deep end of the pier and trying to swim. By the time she realized she was sinking, she came to Mike Carlin and I and asked for help, but it was too late. That's the kind of business it was. Loosey-goosey.

Neal keeps talking about quality — as well he should — but [*chuckles*] was anyone really worried about that at the time? I don't remember anybody using that word.

Neal: They *might* have been worried about it if they had read the comic books but they did not. From editorial on up, they didn't read the comic books. That's why we got away with so much. I had a guy come to me with a letter from the governor of Florida saying — we had just done a *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* story ["And a Child Shall Destroy Them," *GL* #83 (April-May 1971)]— and the governor wrote, "You caricaturized Spiro Agnew, the Vice-President of the United States, in your comic book and made a fool of him! If you ever do this again, I will see to it that any DC Comics are not distributed in the state of Florida." [*laughter*]

Dennis: Oh, how things have changed!

Neal: We had already done it. We weren't going to do a second one. So, kind of an empty threat. But the people at DC above editorial, they are the people who came in to me with the letter and said, "What's this about?" "Ahhh, we made fun of Spiro Agnew in this comic book. Didn't you read it?" [*laughter*] "Oh!" They had no idea. That's how we got away with all that sh*t.

Dennis: Julius Schwartz didn't really feel that there was any obligation to let his boss know. One of the articles of faith is that you could not have a continued story and once a year he did a "Justice League Meets the Justice Society" [two-parter]. So I asked him, "One of the first things I was told is that I can't do continued stories." He said, "I didn't ask for permission." And I'm sure he didn't tell anybody where we were going with *Green Lantern/Green Arrow*. Our job was: save the book. It was floundering. "Do what you want." The first guy [from DC who] was interviewed [about *GL/GA*] by the *Village Voice* — Neal wasn't mentioned, I wasn't mentioned, Julie wasn't mentioned — I bet the son of a bitch had *no* idea *what* that reporter was talking about! [*laughter*] Then we began to actually get publicity. We got invited places and we became respectable.

Neal: Carmine got invited to tour all around the country to do radio interviews as if he did it. [*chuckles*]

Dennis: Do you think he knew?

Neal: He had *no* idea. Poor Carmine. I love Carmine.

Dennis: We just saw him three weeks ago. In Florida.

Neal: I love Carmine. Carmine is a great guy. He didn't read the comic books.

Dennis: It was the Peter Principle.

Christopher: *When Julie put you two together for* Green Lantern/Green Arrow*, whose idea was it to team the two heroes up? And why make it a book about America? Why make it socially relevant?*

Neal: Julie.

Dennis: Well, it was, "This book is in sales trouble." A lot of guys wanted to get the assignment for *Superman*; I wanted a book that was failing or iffy or needed help, because that meant that fewer people were going to be looking over your shoulder. So, with that, I had done some (my vocabulary falters here) relevant material in a story for Charlton, which people still sometimes mention, called "Children of Doom" ["Can This Be Tomorrow?" *Charlton Premiere* #2 (Nov. 1967)]. [I also did] something for Julie Schwartz based on that river in Ohio that caught fire ["Come Slowly Death, Come Slyly," *Justice League of America* #79 (Mar. 1970)]. And I was an active dude. I was married to a Catholic Worker at the time (and nobody knows what Catholic Workers are and that's okay; if you don't know who Alfred Bester is, you don't know Catholic Workers). Anyway, I was going on peace marches and stuff, and this was a chance to do that.

[*To Neal*] I don't know if you know this, but I wrote ["No Evil Shall Escape My Sight," *GL* #76 (Apr. 1970)] assuming Gil [Kane] would do the art.

Neal: Actually, Julie kept secrets.

Dennis: Yeah, he did. When I looked at the splash page from the proofs—

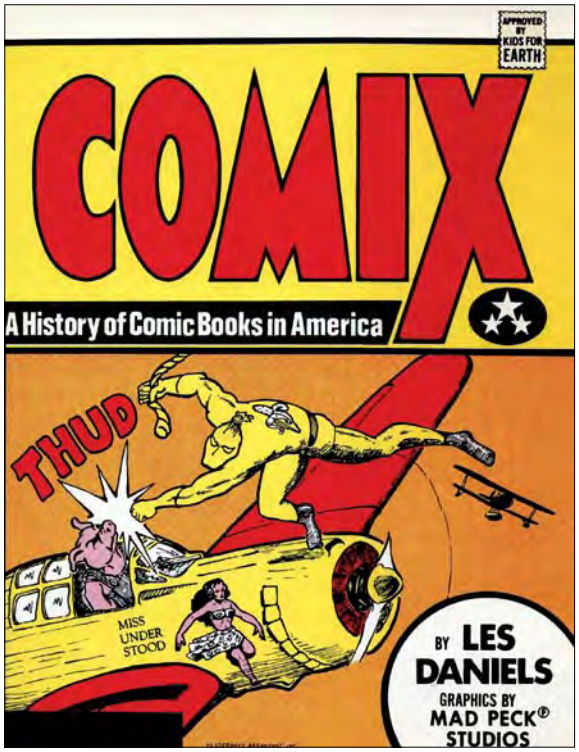
Neal: By the way, Gil had been off of that title for some time

Les Daniels
The Incomplete History

Celebrating the writer/historian who gave the world much more than he got

by JON B. COOKE CBC Editor

Let's get right to the point: Leslie Noel Daniels the Third was smart. Very smart. He laid waste to his opponents every year at the summer camp-like Northeast Writers Conference (NECON) "That Damned Game Show" trivia contest. He *smoked* them. He was smart about movies, literature, comics — really, the entire gamut of pop culture. By the end, he even knew baseball, irrational though he could be, expecting his beloved Red Sox to win every game. The Mad Peck, no slouch himself in the brains department, calls the man, "Not only the most towering intellect I ever encountered, but also the most educated person I have ever known."



Above: *The Mad Peck's cover art for his and Les Daniels' seminal comic book history,* Comix: A History of Comic Books in America, *which would eventually lead to an entire series of publisher and character retrospectives for Les. Though a familiar byline among comic fans, readers may not be aware of the exemplary achievements of the man in horror fiction (and non-fiction), and film criticism, as well as a singer/songwriter/musician who played "furious banjo."*

Les received that education, the formal part anyway, at Brown University, where he earned his bachelor's and master's degrees, the latter with his thesis on Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein*. He loved the Ivy League school's host city enough to reside here all of his days, where he became, according to writer Rudy Cheeks, "a central figure in Providence's creative community." For decades, Les would live in a delightfully creepy apartment on the East Side's Benefit Street, bat door-knocker and all. His phantasmagorical basement flat was situated not far from the setting of H.P. Lovecraft's "Shuttered House" or Edgar Allan Poe's ex-fiancée's home, both on the same gloomy colonial avenue, and Les fit snuggly in its Gothic ambiance.

Inside, in the subterranean apartment filled with bookcases brimming with EC Comics Library sets, Aurora model kits, and Uncle Scrooge figurines, amid walls plastered with monster movie posters and snapshots of scream queens, Les would invite friends down the ill-lit hallway into his sanctum sanctorum, the island counter bisecting his kitchen and living room. Here, with tabletop illuminated by a desklamp, guest and host would sit atop bar stools, and the night's entertainment would commence. Niceties done, the visitor would be regaled by the bachelor's wit and wisdom, and a repartee would engage, fueled by bourbon, cigarettes, and an infectious boyish enthusiasm for all things deliciously gruesome. Hours would pass like minutes in that nicotine-stained, dusty cavern, where often an old black-& white movie flickered in the background from a TV with sound turned down. The conversation might be freeform, Claude Rains, *Plastic Man*, and Ambrose Bierce being subjects of equal stature, and though the talk was often rambling from one emphatic point to the next, if Les was talking, the guest could learn a thing or two.

Y'see, while Les may not have been destined to be a professor, though he was more than capable — he was far too ornery and impatient to suffer any collegiate tomfoolery — he was a nearly unparalleled master in his multiple fields of knowledge. And virtually everything he learned of his subjects of expertise was gained outside the ivy-covered institutions of higher learning — aside comic-book spinner racks in the corner pharmacy, within darkened midnight screenings in second-run movie houses, and amidst hushed bookstacks in decrepit used bookstores. Okay, you get it: Les was a brainiac about the cool stuff, the material for which we share a passion. But let me get to the best part, patient reader: best of all, this cat could *write!*

If you read the Les Daniels byline before, chances are it was for his extremely well-researched, erudite, and beguiling books on comics history: *Comix, Marvel,* the *DC* book, or those super-hero *Complete History* collaborations with Chip Kidd. Yep, informed, good work, solid and impressive in detail. And if that's the extent of your knowledge of the writer's legacy, not too shabby. But let me, your humble scribe who came as close to being the man's Boswell as anyone on the planet, let me tell you of the mountain of achievements you don't know about Les Daniels, my friend who passed away around Halloween 2011, accolades that will take two issues of *CBC* to tell.

Les Daniels was born on Oct. 27, 1943, in Danbury, Conn., growing up in nearby Redding. His father, Leslie Daniels, Jr., "was a writer," said NECON mainstay and friend Bob Booth. "He wrote for radio, *Jack Armstrong, All American Boy.* They lived in a house either next to or across the street from one owned by Mark Twain." The growing boy was a bookworm. "I was the kind of kid who was reading a lot of stuff when he was very young," he told the Australian horror 'zine *Tabula Rasa* in a 1995 interview. "I was reading Poe when I was eight or nine, and Ambrose Bierce was another one — that was a little later — and he gave me some nightmares. And I discovered Lovecraft when I was about eleven or twelve, and that was a big thing. Because in addition to liking Lovecraft stories, he is very much a 'pied piper' kind of figure if you get into reading his non-fiction or reading about him, and the way he encouraged people around him to get into the field. I think a lot of people my age — even though he'd been dead for decades — sort of felt that they were also being encouraged in some way."

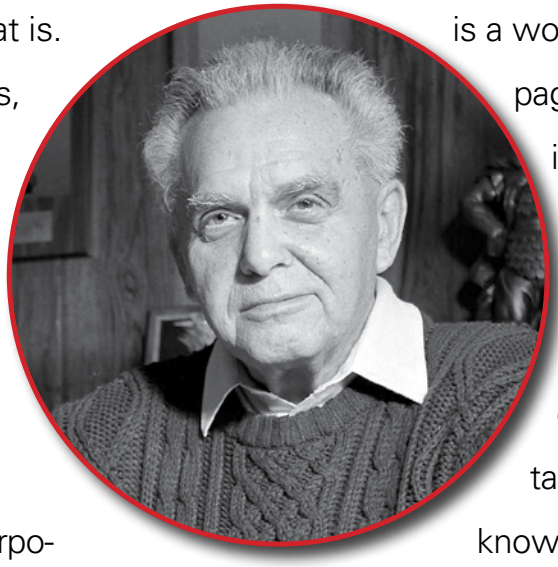
He added, "But I didn't do anything then. I wrote little stories when I was a small kid, but as a teenager and a college student I felt not smart enough to do what I wanted to do, but smart enough to know that I couldn't." Booth recalls, "His father gave him a book by Ambrose Bierce and that

Portrait by Cortney Skinner

KIRBY'S KINGDOM

The Commerce of Dreams

Comic book creators haven't always been the sharpest pencils in the drawer — when it comes to business, that is. Of course, there are exceptions, but by their nature, those writers and artists who spend their workdays and nights putting imaginations to paper are ill-equipped to match the wiles and stratagems of the publishers and their cadre of corporate lawyers. For those whose creativity have envisioned enduring universes of characters (with some creations making the leap from the comic book page to movie screen), their reward is a work-for-hire contract and a page rate, with maybe a promise of a "gratuity" if the work is deemed successful.



Jack Kirby portrait ©2013 Greg Preston.

Here is the cautionary tale of a single creator, albeit one of the most prolific and talented the field has ever known. His publishers called him "King," but often treated him like a knave. It is not, beloved reader, a pretty picture.

"It's the will to create that tells the truth." — **Jack Kirby**

Jack Kirby, likely the most prolific comic book artist of all time, single-handedly established the visual vernacular of the super-hero. His lithely muscled, earnest champions (whether of the earthbound or cosmic variety) are in perpetual motion, defying gravity as they swing weighty fists and clobber armies of opponents with panache, fearlessly lunging into the chaotic tumult to win the day. Such was the artist's template: one righteous man (with occasional sidekick) fearlessly doing battle against multitudinous hordes of evil-doers, risking all for truth and justice and, if not the American Way, then for what is eternally good. Kirby's singularly idiosyncratic approach epitomized the look of costumed crime-fighter stories from the genre's earliest years until the present day, as his dynamic style continues to be appropriated by generations of artists far removed from the Golden Age.

Ask most knowledgeable comics fans and they'll opine, yes, as supremely talented as he was regardless of the category — whether the subject is crime, romance, mystery, Westerns or even funny animals — Kirby's most lasting impact is the stories exploding from many thousands of super-hero pages he drew for Marvel and DC Comics. But he was more than an exquisitely gifted cartoonist, more than an exceptional writer, more than a great storyteller. Jack Kirby was — and remains — the most important creator the field of mainstream comic books has ever produced. Period.

Jack Kirby: Job Creator

Measured in dollars, the impact of his creations is tremendous. Motion pictures based on characters Jack Kirby created or co-created have generated $6.5 billion (so far) in worldwide box office grosses, a climbing tally that does not include DVD/Blu-ray/"agnostic platform" receipts, merchandising, or (lest we forget) comic book sales. *Marvel's The Avengers*, populated by his Captain America, Iron Man, Thor, and the Hulk, is the third highest-grossing movie to date. *Of all time*. Sequels and new releases starring other Kirby creations and co-creations are forthcoming, as the super-hero genre is as firmly ascendant as ever in Hollywood.

But there was one essential thing, alas, he wasn't: Jack Kirby weren't no businessman. By his own admission, he gave his *all* to the work and, perhaps too often, innocently trusted in the fairness of his publishers and his partners. "I didn't know how to do business," Kirby told *The Comics Journal*. "I didn't know where to begin to do business. I was a kid from the Lower East Side who'd never seen a lawyer, who'd never done business. I was from a family that, like millions of others where doing business was concerned, I was completely naive." Unlike his peers Will Eisner and Joe Kubert, who were better equipped to look after themselves in the world of comic-book commerce, Jack hadn't the mind or the interest to maximize his take in the ledger book. His job was to create, feed his family, and ensure there was always a next assignment coming after finishing the one on his drawing board.

by Jon B. Cooke • Portrait by Greg Preston • Intro art by Alex Ross

This is not to belittle Jack Kirby's meteoric success in the comics field. The "Simon & Kirby" brand was the most recognizable art credit amongst avid readers during the 1940s, perhaps second only to "Walt Disney," and certainly rivaled the *Superman* stamp of "Siegel & Shuster." During the Marvel '60s heyday, Kirby's was a name familiar on college campuses across the country. It seems fair to surmise that, as a partner or on his own, Kirby usually commanded top page rates and, despite sporadic financial hardship through the decades, the Kirby family mostly lived a comfortably middle-class existence, one far removed from his decrepit, poverty-stricken Lower East Side upbringing as a boy.

But the captains of the industry for which he so excelled, could be a repellent and vile lot in their dealings with Jack Kirby and his artist and writer peers, sometimes blatantly, at times obliquely. Unlike book publishing, few copyrights were retained by the creators of the material and little in the way of royalties was granted. Famously, Jerome Siegel and Joe Shuster were paid $130 for the rights to their creation, the first super-hero, Superman. It would take foresight for the few — consider Bob Kane and William Moulton Marston, respective creators of Batman and Wonder Woman — with the wherewithal and influence to negotiate terms aided by legal representation to strike

Above: *A Kirby family portrait from 1961. From left, Neal, Roz, Barbara (sitting), Susan, and Jack.* **Below inset:** *Young Jack Kurtzberg and Rosalind Goldstein out and about in the early '40s.* **Below right:** *Joe Simon and Jack Kirby in a '50s S&K publicity shot.* **Bottom right:** *A rare shot of Stan Lee and Jack Kirby together, this from a 1964 National Cartoonist Society function (courtesy of David Folkman).*

Above: *Dr. Fredric Wertham's* Seduction of the Innocent *gained wide notice with an excerpt in the* Ladies' Home Journal *of Nov. '53. Unfortunately the mag's opening spread featured a crime title produced by the Simon & Kirby studio,* Justice Traps the Guilty.

issues, as well. Kirby continues, "The whole trouble was we were undercapitalized. We published for a little while, but we didn't get many issues out."

Simon says that distribution — or lack thereof — doomed the venture. "Our distributor was Leader News Company," he tells *TCJ*. "We chose them because they were usually successful. And they had one major client. That was Bill Gaines — E.C. Comics. So E.C. Comics collapsed during the Kefauver investigation. Leader News went bankrupt and they put us out of business. They couldn't pay us. We were doing very well. *Bullseye* was a big hit."

"Then," Simon says, "we went to the graveyard. That was Charlton Publications… The last port of call." Selling off their remaining inventory, the team, the most successful in the brief history of American comic books, decides to call it quits.

Roz sees the end of S&K as simply, "Joe went his way, and Jack went his way. They both had families to support, so they did the best they could. It was just economics."

In his Mainline history in *TJKC* #25, Bob Beerbohm sums it up thusly:

> Soon, gone were the days when one in three periodicals sold in the U.S. was a comic book. The team of Simon & Kirby had successfully ridden the wave of success in the comic book business for 15 years before hitting the rocky shore of American public opinion, which had been swayed by major forces in the country bent on demonizing an easy victim — a victim that millions had been reading and now hastily swore they did not. Jack mentioned coming out of "the fog" in 1955. Perhaps that clouded his judgment in a lot of issues which crept up during 1956, and into the glory days of his work for Martin Goodman in the '60s.

(Charlton, bottom-rung comics publisher for most of its existence, do offer the team its own imprint. "They said they were going to start a new publishing company called Simon & Kirby Publications," Simon tells *TCJ*. "I still have the stationary. That's about all I have of it.")

Simon seems to land on his feet, purchasing an even more upscale Long Island home as he eases into lucrative advertising work for the New York State Republican Party and expands into humor magazines of the *Mad* ilk; Kirby does not land so smoothly as the pugnacious artist hit the bricks in a desperate scramble for work. Pretty soon there would be a surprising addition to the family, a new mouth to feed by the name of Lisa.


RETROSPECTIVE
KEY 1960s MOMENTS
by John Morrow
1961
1962
1963
1964
1965

Falling *Sky*/Rising Star

Kirby finds freelance work at DC Comics (as well as a brief stint at Atlas — formerly Timely Comics — before Goodman and Lee suffer their own distribution debacle), where he works for editor Jack Schiff producing *Challengers of the Unknown* with writer Dave Wood, and other features. Schiff hears tell that a newspaper strip packager is looking for an outer space strip property and brings in Kirby and Wood. *Sky Masters of the Space Force* is conceived and a deal carved out. "[The packager] was to get a cut off the top. Kirby and Dave Wood would split the rest, but with all the expenses — hiring an inker, paying the letterer, making stats, etc. — coming out of the artists' share," Evanier reports in *KKOC*. "It was a very poor deal for Kirby, but it got worse when Schiff began demanding a cut off the top as well." Because Kirby eventually refuses to pay what he feels is an extorted kick-back to his primary employer, the matter ends up in court. Ill at ease on the stand, the artist loses the case, and is humiliatingly still forced to pay Schiff. In the process, Kirby is blackballed at DC and *Sky Masters* crashes to earth less than 18 months after launching. With little option left, he calls on Stan Lee to see if the Atlas outfit could use some Kirby magic.

Martin Goodman's comics house barely survives the collapse of American News and is now restricted in how many titles it can release per month. Editor/writer Lee and plotter/artist Kirby hit the ground running and, by 1961, *The Fantastic Four* #1, commonly referred to as the beginning of Marvel Comics, revives the company despite the limited rack space restrictions.

The Kirby Age of Marvel

The Marvel super-heroes created by Kirby, Steve Ditko, and Lee result in a steady rise in circulation fueled, no doubt, by the interest of older readers, as well as those yawning at the bland DC line. The publisher's books enter the Zeitgeist of American popular culture and Marvel initiates a fan club, sells T-shirts, and signs licensing deals for animated TV shows, plastic model kits, bubble-gum cards — you name it. Lee hits the college lecture circuit and, with the aid of his jocular "Stan the Man" persona exuding from the comics' text pages, he attracts media attention, and far more publicity than his freelancers will ever garner. Only a few years since being on the brink of padlocking its doors for good and the arrival of a returning king, Marvel, once the copy-cat comics company, is suddenly the hip, innovative underdog.

"Marvel was still scrappier, with a faster growing-fan base [than DC]," writes Sean Howe [who will be interviewed in *CBC* #3 — **Y.E.**] in his recent *Marvel Comics: The Untold Story*. "Marvel was more Mets than Yankees, more Rolling Stones than Pat Boone… it was the Pepsi Generation challenger to DC's Coca-Cola giant."

Though Lee and his brother Larry Leiber fill in the word balloons after receiving the pencilled pages, the lion's share of storytelling is the burden of the artist, who pencils a plot, establishes pacing and fleshes out what might be the skimpiest of direction, if any. Kirby and Ditko, by their own admission, need no such guidance, more often than not delivering tightly penciled pages for Lee to dialogue (who is aided by the artist's margin notes clarifying the action and suggesting speech). This is deemed the "Marvel Method," established

Left: *Ye Ed suggests examining John Morrow's fine chronology of Jack Kirby's Marvel experiences, "Key 1960s Moments," recently published in* The Jack Kirby Collector *#60 [Winter '13]. It is an excellent accoutrement to this article, as it outlines major flash points Kirby had with the comics publisher and editor Stan Lee. Find* TJKC *at* www.twomorrows.com.

to ease the editor-writer's burden, with the onus placed on the artist, who becomes, in actuality, the artist-plotter.

Kirby's kinetic, idiosyncratic approach to super-hero action is adopted as the "house style" at Marvel, and incoming artists are often given Kirby's breakdowns — stories scantily rendered in pencil but with plots readily apparent (with notes added to margins, recommending dialogue and explaining scenes). Whether with his fully-rendered pages or loosely sketched stories for others to tighten the pencils, Kirby — and colleague Ditko — are assuredly more than mere plotters. They are also writers — only not being paid for it. That paycheck goes to those who fill in the balloons with snappy exclamations and scintillating retorts.

Nor do the artists receive remuneration for their work being exploited on merchandise and in the weekday *Marvel Super-Heroes* cartoon series, which utilizes the actual panels (albeit with minimal animation). Still, Kirby is making a decent living in the service of the increasingly popular Marvel Comics Group. But indignities mount and page rates don't reflect the growing popularity of the books.

Evanier writes in *KKOC*, "His value to the company was immense; his compensation was not." He receives promises from Goodman. "Kirby later said it was significant, but it was not on paper. Almost nothing about Jack's working relationship with Marvel was on paper — not even, at the time, any delineation of what rights he had or was giving up to the material."

A litany of events sours Kirby to the House of Ideas — the appropriation of his beloved creation The Silver Surfer, needless art corrections demanded of his work, publicity hogging by Lee, and humiliation in his hometown press. A notorious 1966 *Herald Tribune* article describes the artist: "[I]f you stood next to him on the subway you would peg him as an assistant foreman in a girdle factory"; Lee is the "rangly lookalike of Rex Harrison." Kirby has "baggy eyes" and "a baggy Robert Hall-ish suit"; Stan, "a deep suntan" and "the brightest-colored Ivy League wardrobe in captivity." The writer also notes the outfit has tripled circulation in 42 months to 35 million copies sold a year; the same span since Kirby's return.

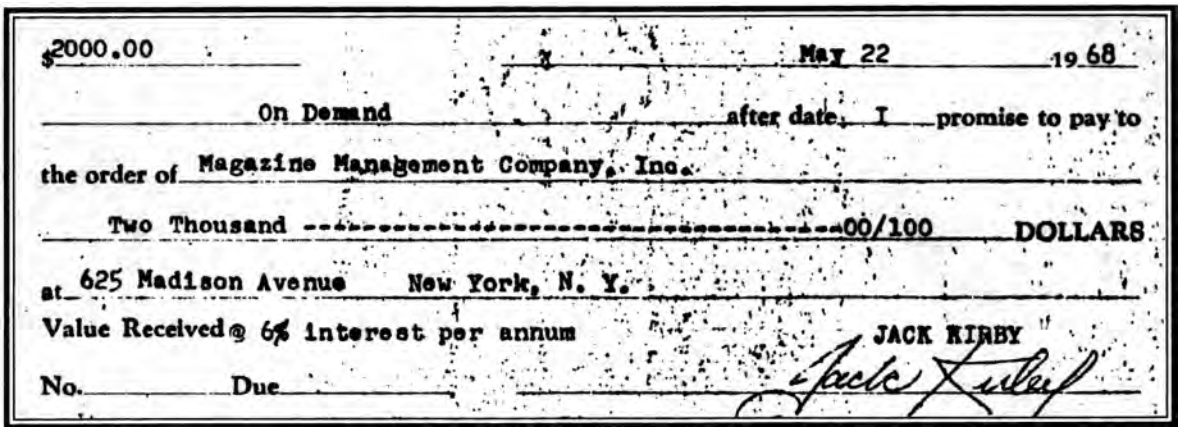
There is also the lack of writing credit and compensation. "Jack's plots and designs were on TV shows, his art on toys… and he wasn't seeing a nickel from any of it," writes Evanier, "just the occasional rate increase of a dollar or two per page. There was nothing for him to live on if he became unable to draw."

A Timely Favor

On May 22, 1968, less than a year before Kirby resettles his family to California, he borrows $2,000 from Marvel publisher Martin Goodman to help finance the cross-country move from his Long Island home. He repays half by Aug. 31.

The loan may not be as it appears. Roy Thomas (then Marvel staff writer) tells *TJKC* #18 that, at around the same time Kirby receives the lent money, Goodman makes a "loan" to artist Bill Everett. Thomas says it's actually an off-the-record agreement between Marvel and the Golden Age comic book artist/writer, with an understanding that no money would have to be repaid — "so [Everett] wouldn't sue" for ownership of his aquatic creation, the Sub-Mariner.

Top left: *Jack Kirby visits the Marvel Bullpen in 1966, probably Spring judging from the covers behind him. If so, Steve Ditko would have just resigned the company.* **Above:** *Kirby self-portrait, late '60s. Mike Royer inks (his first job on the King's pencils!).* **Below:** *Kirby's I.O.U. signed when he borrowed $2,000 from Marvel publisher Martin Goodman. Above and below courtesy of John Morrow.*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JACK KIRBY

Jack Kirby

ALEX ROSS

Coming into his third decade of comic book super-stardom, the artist reflects on the

Nelson Alexander Ross is in coasting mode. Though urged by frequent collaborator and friend Kurt Busiek, among others, to focus on creator-owned material — and nagged by his own desire to produce the Great American Graphic Novel — the artist is hesitant to risk all in the face of a sluggish economy and fickle comics medium, choosing, for the moment, to play it safe. But the examples of Kirby, Adams, and Ware continue to entice the ambitions of Alex Ross.

I had the pleasure of first interviewing Alex for the debut issue of Comic Book Artist *Vol. 2, the Top Shelf incarnation of my former magazine. That conversation took place just shy of a decade ago, in April 2003, and we talked about his youth, career in advertising, early success with* Marvels *— the breakthrough mini-series that catapulted writing collaborator Kurt Busiek and Ross to critical acclaim and mass acceptance — and we covered the artist's subsequent adventures in the comic-book trade up 'til then.*

Yours truly had a couple of minor regrets with CBA *V2 #1 (some unfortunate printing glitches and color fidelity issues), and much as I loved the Superman cover artist team-up of Neal Adams pencils and Alex Ross finishes, I've always had a hankering to have an all-Alex cover gracing my mag. I got my wish. Thanks, Mr. Ross. Once again, you make me look good.*

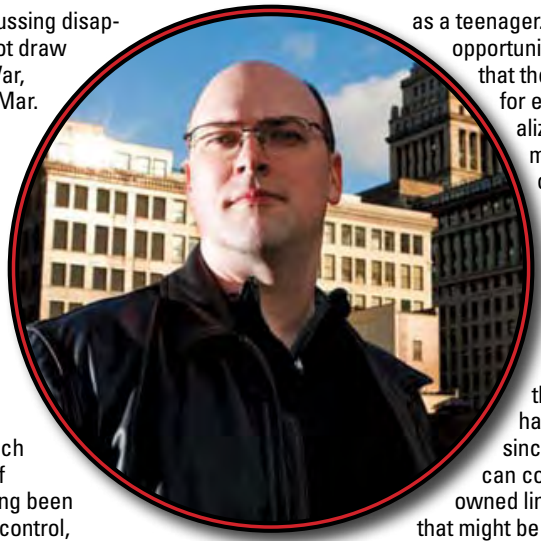
The following was conducted by phone on Dec. 5 and 10, 2012, and it was copy-edited by the artist for clarity and accuracy. We start the talk centered on Neal Adams.—**Ye Ed.**

Interview conducted by Jon B. Cooke

GETS REAL

illusion of realism, keeping old school in the digital age, and the call of independence

Comic Book Creator: *[*Discussing disappointment that Neal Adams did not draw the final chapter of Kree-Skrull War, *The Avengers* #89-97, June 1971-Mar. '72, due to deadline constraints*] Whether they realized it at the time or not, these things have a really long life to them when they're done well. They're worth waiting for.*



Alex: Well, I think Neal has made comments like this. I just saw a documentary about Steve Rude where both Neal and I comment separately on our friend Steve, and Neal says that people of Steve's generation (which includes me) came into a world of publishing much more open, having been broken open for greater creative control, involvement, and ambition because people like Neal and his generation of craftsmen really fought to bend it to that direction. And so somebody like me has never really fully experienced the struggle it was to get there, as well as the fragility of that, that it was always in a state of flux. That's what my entire career has kind of been in that bobbing and weaving of this time period that had been a new landscape for creative elaboration and creative ambition in comics, and seeing that rise and fall and go through high and low periods, and that any of that was achievable before. We're not the generation — guys who've been working in comics for the last 30 years — we're not the ones who grew up in the dark ages of comics where there was almost no freedom given.

CBC: *Right. "Creator" was just another cog in the machine.*

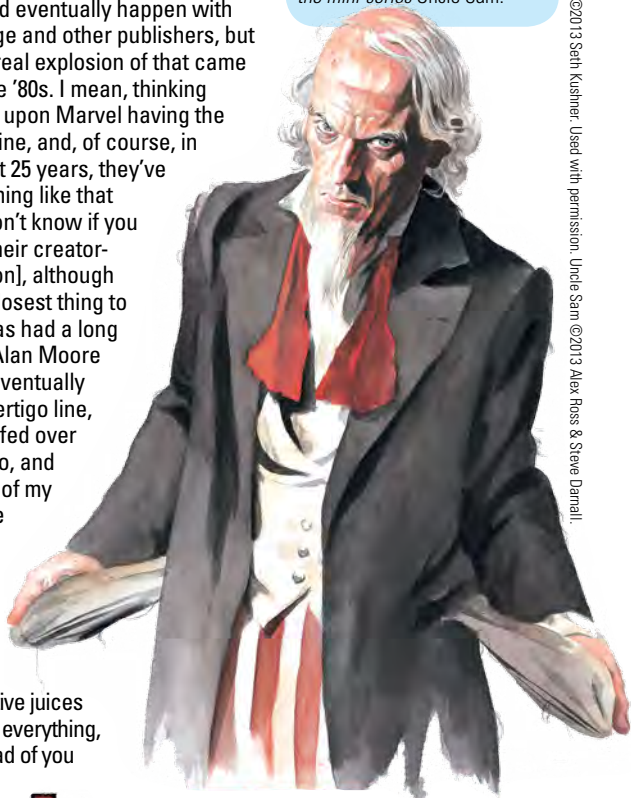
Alex: Or the idea of pitching a project, genuinely going forth into completely independent territories. Those were very slim corridors of opportunity back then, and certainly nobody was thinking along the lines of such incredibly uncommercial concepts as what people have been allowed to do more in the last 25 years.

CBC: *Where do you see it today? Do you see it as malleable, or was there a time when it was more pliant?*

Alex: Well, everything has been less pliant in the entirety of my career than the period when I was just reading comics as a teenager. The '80s was an explosion of opportunity and everybody sort of finding that there were new doors that allowed for everybody to get a more personalized voice out there. There was more business opportunity, and of course that would open up even bigger in the '90s with what would eventually happen with Image and other publishers, but the real explosion of that came in the '80s. I mean, thinking back upon Marvel having the Epic line, and, of course, in the last 25 years, they've had nothing like that since. I don't know if you can count their creator-owned line [Icon], although that might be the closest thing to be its stand-in. And DC has had a long period, beginning with the work Alan Moore did, opening up doors, and then eventually creating an entire sub-line, the Vertigo line, to foster creative ideas. And that fed over into the DC mainframe as well, too, and that's where you find a good part of my career. And those doorways have closed in recent years moreover, but I feel we're due a kind of reversal at some point here.

The biggest crime in the industry of the last decade is that they modified the system to become more one where the creative juices and direction, and the big ideas for everything, come from the top down. So, instead of you hiring talented people to craft and chart the course of where the creative community and characters go, you're really try to have the guys that are — or they made this happen — the men who hold those reins as publishers and

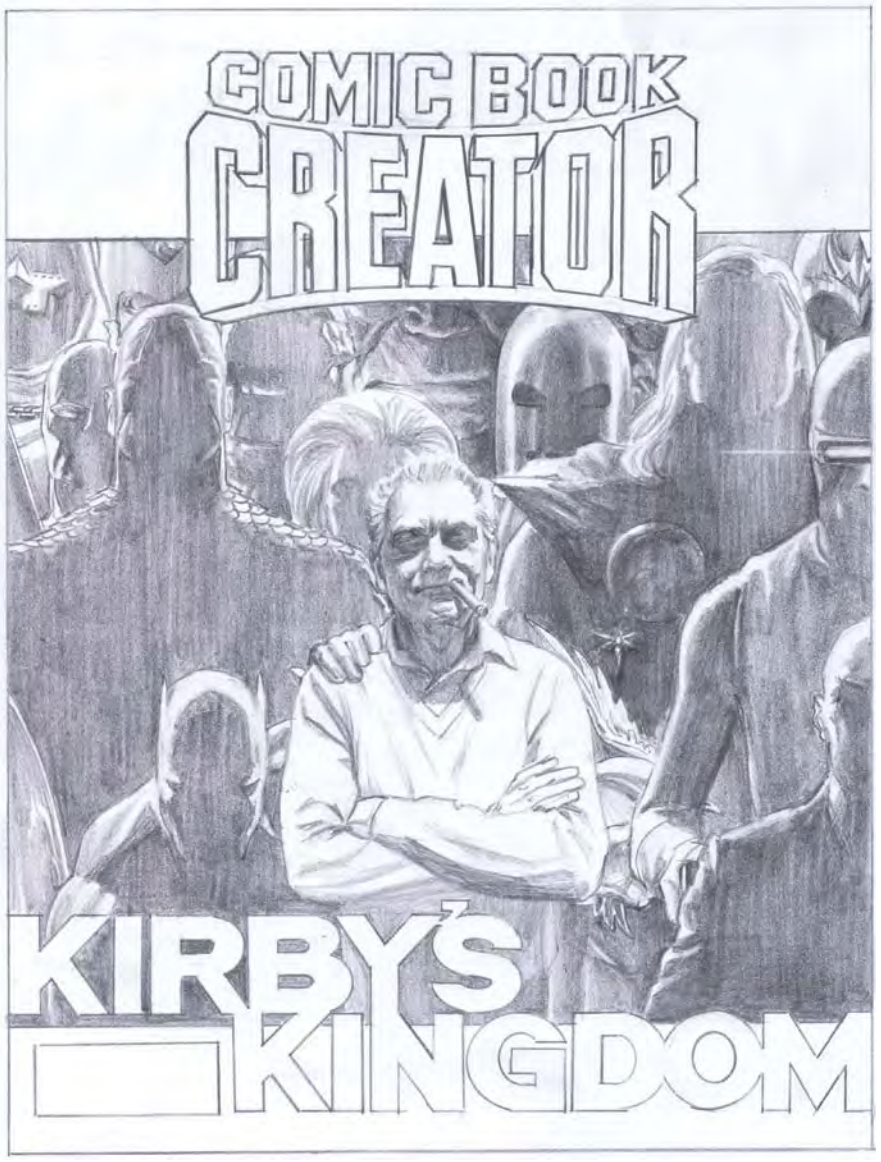
Next page: *Alex Ross' portrait of Norman Rockwell [2012], courtesy of A.R. and the Norman Rockwell Museum. Used with permission.* **Inset left:** *Alex in 2011 by Seth Kushner.* **Below:** *Promo illo by Alex for the mini-series* Uncle Sam.



I NEED YOU

Transcribed by Steven E. Tice & Steven Thompson

Photographic Portrait by Seth Kushner



Art ©2013 Alex Ross.

Above: *After receiving the August color rough [see opposite page] for Alex's* CBC *#1 cover, a few modifications were suggested by Ye Ed — tightening the focus on Jack, for instance — and the artist sent the above pencil sketch a month later. The piece included yet another thoughtful contribution beyond the revised art. "The logo is another stab at a way to approach the book," Alex wrote. And so, again, yours truly mulled over an attractive option. But, grateful as I am for Alex's generosity, Ye Ed opted to stay the course, though we* did *immediately adopt Alex's subtitle for the issue, changed from Y.E.'s "Kirby Lives!" to A.R.'s "Kirby's Kingdom," one resonant with multiple meaning, whether alluding to Jack's fabled nickname, his right to characters he co-created, and — again — an echo of Alex Ross'* Kingdom Come *masterwork. Bravo!*

presidents of the companies are getting to play like the fans that they are, turning the publishing sandbox into their own particular sandbox. So, everybody else is essentially hired to effectively realize the top guys' vision over anybody else's individual vision. And I know some people that would argue that's the same thing as what Stan Lee had to do in the early '60s, which I think was a different thing there, because that was just a Hail Mary pass in some ways, in Stan building a new form of that company. Where things were going, they had no idea it could turn into what it became. There they were just trying to keep the doors open.

I think right now you don't have a place where that kind of talent can be fostered and nurtured as much. Like the time when you had Alan Moore coming over to the States — not physically — but coming over to take over the *Swamp Thing* book and making it "The" book, just surreptitiously, on its own, becoming the book everybody was talking about, and that it would begin to affect the entire mainstream of American publishing. That same opportunity isn't there the same way, because the person who is working on *Swamp Thing* today is working from a more confined way in which that book is affected by the other books it ties into, and the way it's affected by the entire guide for the whole universe. So, things are a whole lot less individualized, allowing less opportunity for the next Alan Moore to emerge in quite the same way.

CBC: *Maybe the mainstream comics industry, DC and Marvel, there's a schizophrenic kind of thing that happens. There's the licensing, there's the characters, the road to the movies. Then there's the creative, where you get a* good *creative team to do a* good *story, and that, obviously, very often manifests itself to be story material for the movies, and yet that there's this conflict taking place within the publishers of… It doesn't seem often that the creative teams win out. The characters are more important, very often, than the creative teams of making good stories.*

Alex: The obvious answer to that is that the characters are owned by the company, and the creators are not. So the creators at some point have to be shown they're replaceable for the sake of the larger entity to maintain its complete, total control of power. But that, itself, is an excuse for not necessarily advancing into the broader world of fiction writing, of novels, the way there is greater creative control on the part of authors writing books, that they create what they create, they're given their participation in whatever they create. It's not a bunch of individuals all crafting characters to be then owned by Random House or whatever. So, in a way, we could have evolved in that direction, but we keep having these roadblocks that always stop it from completely getting that way. And, of course, you've got both companies owned by larger corporations that are never going to completely make that a possibility, but there's sort of middle ground there that can be achieved of a peace between a vibrant creative community and the characters always maintaining their ownership by the larger company.

But there's mainly the deep root of greed that always stumbles that up, and a lot of times that greed is — it's, again, subjective, not to the times as much as the individuals, key individuals making the choices that hold things in a certain pattern that they've been in.

CBC: *Do you think the decline of sales in the last 20 years is a permanent thing? It's just a continuing, steady decline? Or do you perceive shifts?*

Alex: I think there's going to be some unseen shifts. I mean, I hold onto too much (possibly false) hope that the business could right itself, in some ways find some new inspiration here and there, that there's always a chance that things could pick up in a much better way than they currently might be. I do feel like one of the biggest problems is not necessarily just a creative difference of getting better material out there, but there's just simply too much stuff, too much demanded of the audience that's addicted to it. And, for the audience outside of comics, too much thrust at them to even navigate for opening their eyes to this art form. So there's more published than what there's needed to be, more than there's an audience for, regularly, and that's one of the problems, I think, until that really changes. And the thing is, I'm told that takes really another crash like the kind that I guess was felt ten to 12 years ago. You have to have that happen again before there's kind of a self-reduction in the number of books. But that same self-reduction will take away jobs from countless creators. So, with that necessary adjustment that should be made, it's going to hurt so many people. And it just seems like there could be an adjustment of it — Well, I don't need to keep going on about it. I could make a real stink about how I don't think things are run well. I think if you're going to launch a line of books, maybe you don't start with a certain number over 50. Maybe see how well you can pull people into your plans, make it seem reasonable to buy into the entirety of the line you're doing, make it economically feasible, let alone intellectually feasible.

CBC: *What is it, $3.95 for a comic book?*

Alex: I think it's $3.99, yeah. And, when you think about how a majority of these books, they read pretty quickly. You'll be done with them in under ten minutes. You know, four dollars for an experience that's not that long. Well, that's not really where the value comes from. It still comes from physical possession, I think. There's a mindset about the owning of a piece of art, and the attachment to that, and that's where I find that the whole thing of the digital age still stuns me, that the price point there, which should be the same as a purchase for your iPad, but technically, when you think about how transitory it is, how we don't value things that only exist in cyberspace the same as we do a physical object that's

been completely burned into existence. It just, it doesn't seem like there's a sustainable kind of difference.

CBC: *What do you mean exactly? As far as the iPad comics, the expense of them? How much they are?*

Alex: Well, if you buy them directly, then it seems like eventually that would have to give way, that it can't stand.

CBC: *The physical comic book, you mean?*

Alex: Well, no, I would say that the price would have to rapidly go down on digital versions to broaden that base as much as they would like, and, of course, if that then completely outlasts and outlives the print version, you're going to have that much less money to be paid out to the people making the stuff. You know, that much less of a pie to share. Now, it would be a much better thing if we knew we could reach hundreds of thousands of readers who could afford almost, like, a quarter a book, because they had interest in comics through — Probably many, possibly millions of people, who would be interested in the content of comic books if it wasn't such a giant money suck.

CBC: *How much is a digital comic book?*

Alex: I believe it still is the same price, so when they release them same day to stores, you're paying $3.99 online, or $2.99. Actually, it looks like DC has a range of prices. They have $2.99 over a lot of their mainstream books, but then they, some of their key titles, the most popular titles, they bump up to the $3.99.

CBC: *Obviously, then, you want to increase the volume on that to be able to bring the price down, and then, like you said, to open it up.*

Alex: Yeah, I mean, if we were selling comics like there was back in the '40s, then that economy would work out. Selling six million comic books a month would be a lot to split up, then, a lot of shared accomplishment.

CBC: *You know, it's very strange how it just remains in flux. It doesn't seem to want to settle down. It's just that we've been talking the same talk for 15, going on 20 years now: What's the business model? What's going on? But we're also seeing, albeit contracted almost in a natural fashion, that the direct sales market still survives, that the physical comic book still gets distributed.*

Alex: Yeah, and to speak for those that I've talked to who have been through the last couple years, this year was better than the prior year. Just about a year-and-a-half ago it was a much worse time. Things had fallen a great deal, and a lot of these things that have happened, a lot of these things that I don't necessarily care for, have helped pick it up, helped pick up additional attention. And when the economy goes in a way that I don't necessarily understand why it's working that way, or I don't agree with the creative direction, you do start to have that terrible feeling of, like, wow, I really — What do I have in common with either the readers or the business in the way that I completely disagree with the path that's been taken, but look at how the proof is in the pudding.

CBC: *Well, can you be specific?*

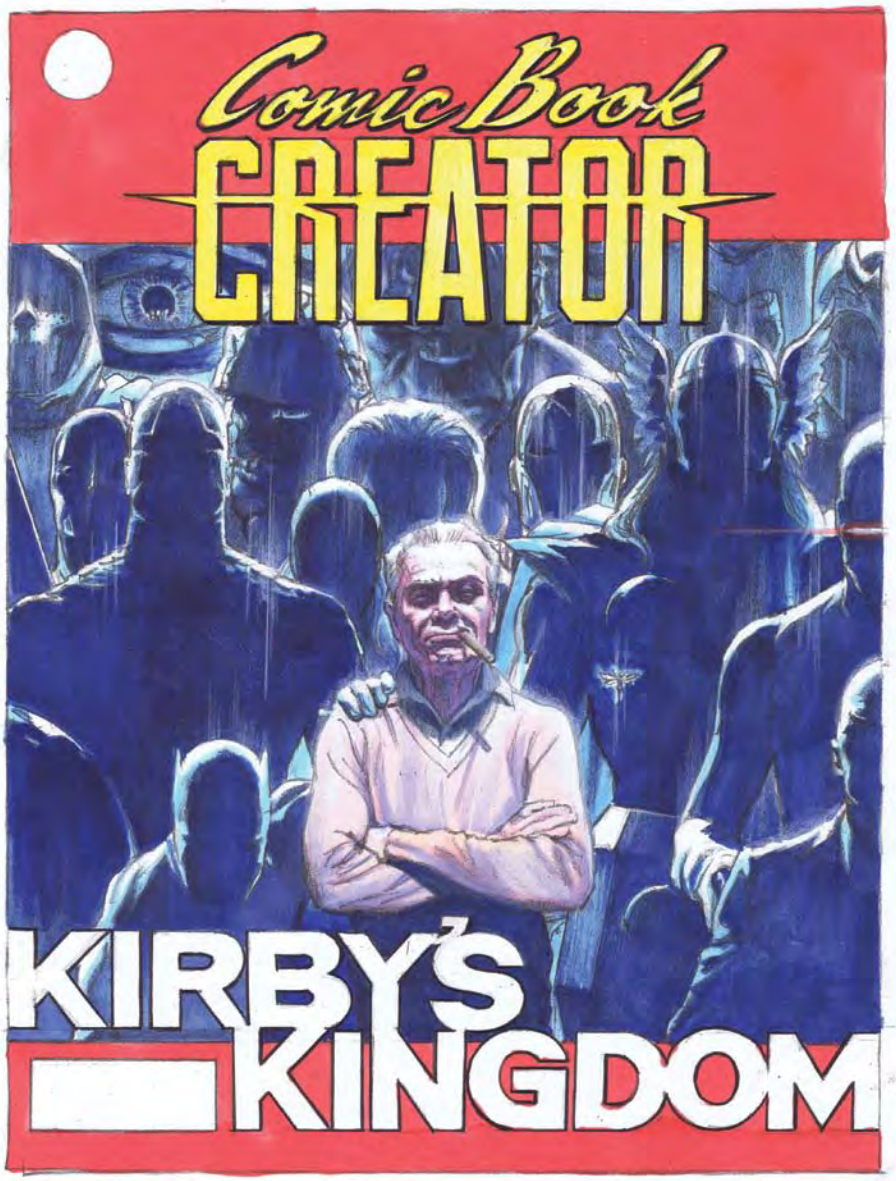
Alex: Well, say, the redirection, rework everything. Either redesign — Throw everything out in terms of either storyline or continuity, and basically trick your audience into buying a thing that is essentially the same as it was before, but now, look, it's got a new number one in front of it. Well, that's not necessarily honest, and both publishers have done that to death, and of course they've done that in big ways in the last couple years. But I find fault with that because I just think like, I've been reading this stuff for 40-some years, and I've seen this trick applied again, and again, and again. I would think that the rest of the audience would be as jaded or as critical of that as I am, and when you find that they're not, that they're actually responding wholeheartedly to it, then you kind of realize, "Oh, it may be a young man's game," or I may not have what it takes to really connect with the audience that dominates.

CBC: *Yeah. Look at the top ten TV shows and how many of those do you enjoy.*

Alex: Right. Well, I know Alan Moore had said a thing — It wasn't one of his best statements, but it was one from just a year ago that was something about how he perceived his audience, his faithful audience, as being one that he had such great respect for, that they were principled people exactly like him that valued the same things that he did. And it was a wonderful thought and statement, but it's one that I thought was, wow, that really might be a whole handful of naiveté, that you can't assume that the people you're reaching out to share quite the same things with you in common. I've definitely made that mistake, myself, time and again, and I felt like he made that mistake in that proclamation.

CBC: *When did you make that mistake? What happened?*

Alex: Oh, just simply putting all your heart and soul into things that wouldn't necessarily prove to be as popular as maybe you thought they were in your head. [*laughs*] A lot of the time I put into the *Earth X* trilogy series at Marvel was one that felt like it was something that it had gotten great sales at a certain point, and then it fell down like a lot of things do, and at a certain late stage of working on the third series, finding out that pretty much the audience had largely moved on to other things. So I might have been the belle of the ball at one point. There was no recapturing that. It was an audience that had moved on. I hadn't. And I was still adjusted to this idea of this thing as being this super-cool thing that I thought was doing such unique or original little storylines within the history of comics. And there are some that maybe still kept with it, but I felt I was tapped into the Zeitgeist at one point, and now I know you can definitely



Above: *This cover rough was sent by Alex last August, with which he corresponded, "[This is what] I had envisioned to make the best case I can for this design that was in my head. As you can see from the layout, it's corresponding to my own most popular work, putting Kirby in the center spot… This also shows a logo mock-up that was my best stab at how I thought the trade dress could look." Ye Ed confesses an immediate attraction to Alex's logo treatment — never mind downright swooning over the* Kingdom Come*-esque motif of the artwork! — but feeling A.R.'s logo design possessed a bit of a (albeit Golden Age) super-hero vibe, yours truly opted to retain the current logotype of* CBC. *Still, that logo* does *kick ass...*

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CBC: *So you've taken a lesson from that with your subsequent projects?*

Alex: I would say that I've been a part of things that have had offshoots, like *Kirby: Genesis* being a good example, where there's been tie-in books added to the schedule that have been too much for the marketplace to support. Any initial support just ultimately came and went, so we just didn't have the project the company was hoping would be the super-success it should have been. Maybe it appeared it didn't succeed because of things I wasn't implementing, but I wasn't putting those things in place. I was just a part of it all. Whereas my heart was completely wrapped up in how well this little corner of the Marvel Universe was that I'd set up. So I've been more of a participant in stuff where I've seen a planned line come into existence with — Currently, there's multiple books that'll launch out of the series I just worked on, the *Masks* series will have follow-ups featuring *Ms. Fury,* and a new *Green Hornet* series set in the 1930s, written by Mark Waid, of all people. They've already been announced in most cases, and they'll be within solicitation in a matter of weeks. But those things are happening on projects I'm a part of all the time. Like, there's a second *Shadow* book coming out that I'm doing covers for, with Matt Wagner writing it. Do I know that there's room for another *Shadow?* I have no idea. So I'm more of a stand-back-and-observe kind of participant at this point.

CBC: *Looking at the* X *books, and work you've been doing with Dynamite: it's not like you're a studio head, but almost that you're like a publisher within a publisher, certainly a project manager, right?*

Alex: To a limited degree, yeah. I mean, for the things I've had the strongest hand in, I get a chance to look at the art, the coloring, the lettering, and definitely comments I've made regarding not just the crafting of the scripts, but, of course, how that's finally conducted when it comes to final art. Like, when I was working on this long-running *Superpowers* series with Dynamite, we were reviving all these '40s characters, and in some cases they were revived exactly as they were; in some cases there's a redesign that I applied. And I'm kind of being the rough fact checker to make sure that things run consistent with whatever the direction given was intended to be. So I played somewhat that role. Basically, I'm working with a publisher that's allowed me to maintain as much involvement as I care to make. Which is much harder to do, obviously, when you're talking about the larger companies with the larger properties. So it's been a fun, and sometimes maddening, experience.

CBC: *You've been with Dynamite for a while, right?*

Alex: Yeah, I guess… I mean, I've worked with them from the very beginning launch of their entire publishing empire with *Red Sonja*, but when I mainly started working with them primarily goes back, I would say, at least four years ago, if not five years ago, when I started to do so much work with them. I still maintained a lot of commercial work with DC and Marvel at that time. So just, things have kind of flowed in this way because it's easy when you can get the publisher and president on the phone directly and bat around, not just ideas, but whatever you're looking to try and do, or whatever your complaints are, you can hash out directly. When you have a larger corporate structure, that's not as easy. Or it's just simply the person in charge


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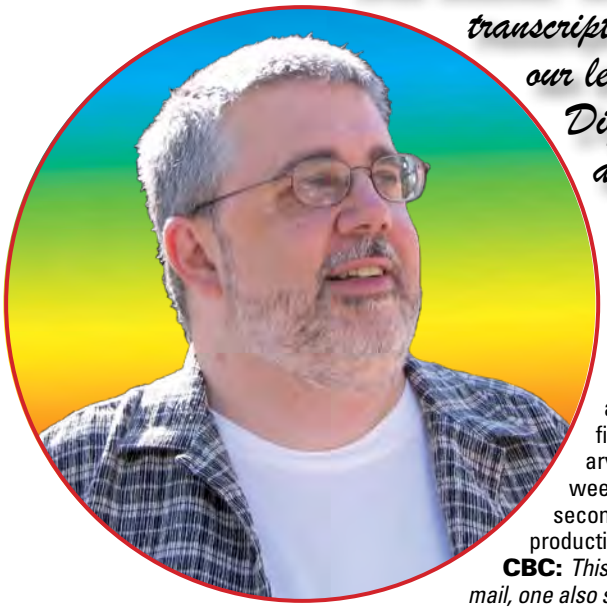
Astro City's KURT

The Art of Writing Comic Books

It's been 20 years since Kurt Busiek and Alex Ross made a breakthrough with their innovative mini-series Marvels. While Alex was relatively new to the field, Kurt had already been toiling in the industry for a decade, as fill-in scripter, assistant editor, literary agent, and Marvel sales manager, before becoming a freelance scribe in 1990. The well-regarded writer, who has suffered debilitating bouts of fatigue for decades, appears on the rebound, and is candid about his struggles. Kurt was interviewed via phone during three sessions, on Nov. 27 & 29, & Dec. 4, 2012, and he copyedited the transcript for clarity and accuracy. What follows are excerpts from our lengthy talk, more of which is available in the "Bonus Digital Edition" available online. Ye Ed strives to showcase a full-length transcript in the near future.



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

Comic Book Creator: *How's everything, Kurt? How's your health?*

Kurt: Jon, not what I'd like it to be, but better than it was. A couple of weeks ago, I turned in my first finished script since February [2012] and now, within a week or so, I'll be turning in the second one. So I'm clearly more productive.

CBC: *This summer, I sent you an e-mail, one also sent to any number of other comics creators about Jack Kirby and how he has been treated. The original pitch was asking for contributors to imagine a world where Jack Kirby was treated fairly. And you brought up an example that was really very much at the beginning of his career. What would be a perfect world for comic books?*

Kurt: The question of what would an ideal comic book industry be like, you know — I immediately go to the question of how do you, instead of treating the comic book creators as employees from the point of view of ownership and freelancers from the point of view of benefits, why not treat them the way, say, Random House treated the authors that worked for them? So you don't say, "Well, Carl Burgos created the Human Torch and when Carl Burgos leaves, we're going to have a whole bunch of other people write and draw Human Torch." Instead, say Carl Burgos creates the Human Torch much the way James Michener creates *Tales of the South Pacific,* and if you want to do a sequel, you stick with James Michener. [*chuckles*] And if you can't get him to do a sequel, you hire somebody else to do a tale of South Seas adventure, but they make up their own characters. They do their own story. If ownership in the material that they created accrued to the creator the way it does if you're writing short stories for *Analog Science Fiction* or even painting book covers, then the history of comics would be vastly, vastly different, but considerably more fair. Siegel and Shuster wouldn't have to fight over what kind of control they had over Superman any more than Stephen King has to fight over who owns *Carrie.* He owns it. He has a contract with Doubleday and Doubleday has to live up to that contract, but the contract doesn't give Doubleday the right to do sequels. It doesn't give them the right to do *Carrie: The Next Generation* or *The Legion of Super-Carries.* [chuckles] If there's going to be new *Carrie* material, Stephen

BUSIEK

and Revitalized Life in the Age of Marvels

King's going to write it.

CBC: *You grew up right outside of Boston?*

Kurt: Yeah. Yeah, I was growing up in Lexington, Massachusetts.

CBC: *Did you go to the Creation Cons? Did you encounter comic book professionals at all?*

Kurt: I had bought that issue of *Daredevil* at the Colonial Pharmacy in Lexington. The next issue of *Daredevil*, by the time it came out, I had found a comic book store, The Million Year Picnic, in Cambridge. So I'd found a source where I could regularly buy issues. And I'd begun my interaction with the professional making of comics, as it were. There's two different stories; one is that one of the guys working behind the counter at the Picnic was Richard Howell. He was either finishing up at Harvard or just out of Harvard, I don't really know, but he was working the cash register at the Picnic and his girlfriend, Carol Kalish, was in often and they were talkative. We would talk about the latest comics and this and that, and Richard was doing his *Portia Prinz* comic. So the first time I saw a page of comic book original art, it was this slow time at the Picnic, and Richard was drawing on this piece of Bristol board while he waited behind the counter for somebody to come up and pay for something. So that was the first time I saw anybody actually drawing a comic and I was interested in what — how — what was the craft of doing it? Richard sketched out what he told me was professional script format. It turned out that it wasn't really, but it was close enough that when I started writing scripts after that 60-page comic Scott [McCloud] and I did, I used that format for a while and it was certainly functional. But Richard was the first guy I saw drawing something that would later be printed out a comic. And sometime around then, I went to a convention in the Prudential Center Plaza, I guess it might have been a Creation con. It was in the hotel that's part of that complex. I'd never been to a comic book convention before, and the Prudential Plaza was kind of confusing. I was wandering around, looking for the ballroom that the convention was in and couldn't find it. And I was sort of getting lost, and then Red Sonja walked by. It was Wendy Pini, back before *Elfquest* existed, and she was dressed up as Red Sonja in chainmail bikini, cape, broadsword, and she walked right by me and I thought, "She's going to the convention." [*mutual chuckling*] She could've been going to the ladies room. But by following Wendy, I got to the convention itself. Jim Steranko was there and Neal Adams was there and there were other guys, and I was way too intimidated to actually talk to anybody, but that was my first exposure to comic book conventions. "Look, here's people selling sketches and original art and oh, my God, that's Jim Steranko!" That was a particular threshold for me.

CBC: *When you were making your home-made comics with Scott McCloud — was [renowned childrens book illustrator] Christopher Bing involved with that at all or was he just a comrade?*

Kurt: Chris was two houses down the street from Scott. Chris was our gateway into undergrounds and indie comics. [*Jon chuckles*] We were reading Marvel and branched out into DC Comics, but Chris had *Eerie* and *Creepy* and *Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers* and Crumb and all of this stuff. He was a friend of Scott's and at the time that Scott was figuring out how to draw comics, and very interested in guys like Jim Starlin,

Above: *Neighbors, schoolmates, friends, collaborators, colleagues. Scott McCloud (left) and Kurt Busiek have been there, done that. Here's the lifelong chums in a pic by Lori Matsumoto. Used with permission.*

Chris was heavily into Barry Windsor-Smith, Jeff Jones, guys like that. So Chris was exposing us to things that we hadn't seen. The point where we actually did some work with Chris wasn't with that 60-page monstrosity, *The Battle of Lexington*, but while we were working on it, Chris' mother was on the — I want to say — Junior Committee at the Boston Symphony Orchestra, which meant that she was part of a group that did fundraising. They were putting together plans for opening night for the Boston Pops season for, I guess, 1977 — '77 or '78, I forget which — and Chris said, "Why don't you do a comic book?" And his mother said, "Well, how do we get a comic book done?" Chris said, "Well, I'll do it." And so Chris' mom went and sold the Pops organization on the idea that part of the fundraising for that year was going to be — the opening day concert would be Comic Book Heroes Night and The Boston Pops would play the *Lone Ranger* theme and the *Superman* theme and all this stuff, and there'd be a comic book and it would be sold at the show and done as a slide show during intermission as part of the whole fundraising thing. And Chris was going to be the guy who was going to handle the comic. He was 18 years old at the time, maybe, and he immediately tapped me and Scott to work on it with him. Chris wanted to be the artist so I was going to write it and Scott was going to help out. What that meant was Scott did layouts for the whole comic and then Chris kind of drew it the way he felt he wanted to do it, using Scott's layouts where it was appropriate and ignoring them where he felt like doing something else. We didn't know anything about business or the politics or the legalities of it so we just said, "You know what would be cool? If we could do a comic where the whole Boston Pops Orchestra gets kidnapped by a super-villain and like, Superman, Batman, Robin, Wonder Woman, and a bunch of Marvel heroes all get together and save them." So the Pops organization contacted Marvel and DC and said, "Can we do this?" And Marvel and DC said, "*Ohh*-kay." [*Jon laughs*] You know, they set some rules — there could only be 150 copies of the comic printed, and any copies that weren't sold that night had to be destroyed. But with those restrictions, they were willing to be a part of the BSO charity thing for that year and I don't know if anybody told them that the people who were actually doing the comic were like 15-, 16-year-olds. I guess it was '78, we were 17-year-olds and Chris would have been, I don't know, 19 at that point. He would have been out of high school. But we did this comic and it was written by me, drawn by Scott and Chris, and lettered by Richard Howell because he was the only guy we knew who could letter. [*laughs*] And it was done as a slideshow during intermission. They invited us to come and we brought dates, feeling very important. Nobody from Marvel came. Sol Harrison, from DC, came to the concert, and he wouldn't talk to us. We were punk kids or something, and he was very surly and uncommunicative. But hey, we got to do this really cool thing.

CBC: *I knew Chris Bing when he lived in Providence. He was always busy meeting a deadline for* The Wall Street Journal. *It was just after Scott had moved out. He's a remarkable illustrator.*

Kurt: Yes, that's one of the things that flabbergasts me about it all. He just asked his mom, "Can we put together this comic book?" And the particular comic book, *everybody* who worked on that comic book, I mean — Chris is a Caldecott Medal nominee; Scott and I are Eisner Award winners and Harvey Award winners; Richard went on to become a comic book artist and writer and editor. And even the guy who did the slide show narration, Robert Desiderio, a Boston alternative radio DJ who had a group that did comedy radio spoofs, and they were roped in to doing the voices for the slide show — he went on and he had a Hollywood career where he had a couple of short-lived shows where he was the lead [*Heart of the City, Maximum Security*]. And it's just like *everybody* who worked on this weird little comic book went on to do much bigger, more important stuff. It's just very, very surprising to me.

CBC: *How does it stand up?*

Kurt: It's… not great. [*Jon chuckles*] We've actually been talking about doing a reprint of it for the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund, doing a new edition, maybe get Chris to do a new cover and publish it so CBLDF can sell it. Marvel and DC both agreed in principle and then DC said, "But you've gotta have the Boston Pops guys sign off on it." I said, "Well, we don't really need to because the copyright is in our names and Marvel and DC's. They had no legal right to it." And they said, "Yeah, but we don't — the charity stuff that we do, we're not going to give you permission to print this unless the BSO is okay with it." And it took quite a while to figure out who to talk to at the BSO and to get them to write us a letter. We've got the letter now that says, yeah, it's okay. And during that time that I was getting it, I got pretty sick, which slowed me down enormously, and Paul Levitz left DC so now we sort of have to start over. [*mutual chuckling*] But when I have some time and energy, we'll start that up again and see if we can't do a new edition to make some money for the CBLDF.

CBC: *Were you familiar with the Marvel method of writing?*

Kurt: Yeah. Yeah, when Scott and I did *The Battle of Lexington*, we did it Marvel style because we'd started reading Marvel comics and we'd read *How To Draw Comics the Marvel Way* and that was how it was done, as we understood it. And it wasn't until we were working on the "Vanguard" series for *Rising Stars* that Richard said, "No, write a script for this. This is what a script looks like, do this."

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Above: *Wraparound cover art for the hardback* stro City: Dark Age

was no "page 16 to 20, fight scene." I would plot the whole fight scene, and he'd feel free to rework it. In fact, to give another example of how this sort of thing can work, when I was doing *Thunderbolts* with Mark Bagley, I'd plot a fight scene, panel-by-panel, here's the whole fight scene. And I'd plot five-, six-panel pages and Mark would draw like nine-, ten-panel pages because he had his ideas of what could be going on in the fight scenes, so he'd draw everything I asked for and add his own ideas, too. And I thought, "This is getting kinda crowded. These are the action pages, these should be all the big splashy pictures and we're getting eight, nine, ten-panel pages." So I asked Mark, "What I care about in the fight scenes is that the stuff that serves the story happens. If you'd prefer, I can plot the fight scenes like this: pages six through ten is going to be a fight scene and we're going to need to establish this, this, this, and this; this character's going to need to do this, and this character's going to need to do this, and it's going to need to end this way." And Mark said, "That'd be great." So I started plotting the fight scenes not as a series of plot descriptions, but as a set of bullet points. "This is the skeleton of the fight scene, wrap around that skeleton whatever you want." And then we're back to doing five- and six-panel pages and big, exciting splashy moments, and it worked just great. But the reason why I adapted my approach to the plot was because doing a full plot was confining to Mark. He didn't have room to add the stuff he wanted to add. If I said, "Look, I'll loosen up on the plot," and if he said, "Okay, then I want to be paid more and you get paid less," I'd say, "No, no, no, I'm happy doing the full plot." [*laughs*] The reason I was doing it this way was as an accommodation, as a
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CBC: *Well, then these are*
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