

MYSTERY COMICS: Charlton Anthologies • Black Orchid •
Madame Xanadu • and 'Scooby-Doo!' featuring Aragonés • Evanier
Kaluta • Shoberg • Talaac • Wrightson • and more!

ATWOMORNING
October 2011
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BACK ISSUE!

TM

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This issue:

DC's **BRONZE AGE HORROR SERIES** &
HOSTS RISE FROM THE DEAD!



Volume 1,
Number 52
October 2011

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

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BACK ISSUE

The Retro Comics Experience!

DO YOU DARE ENTER THE

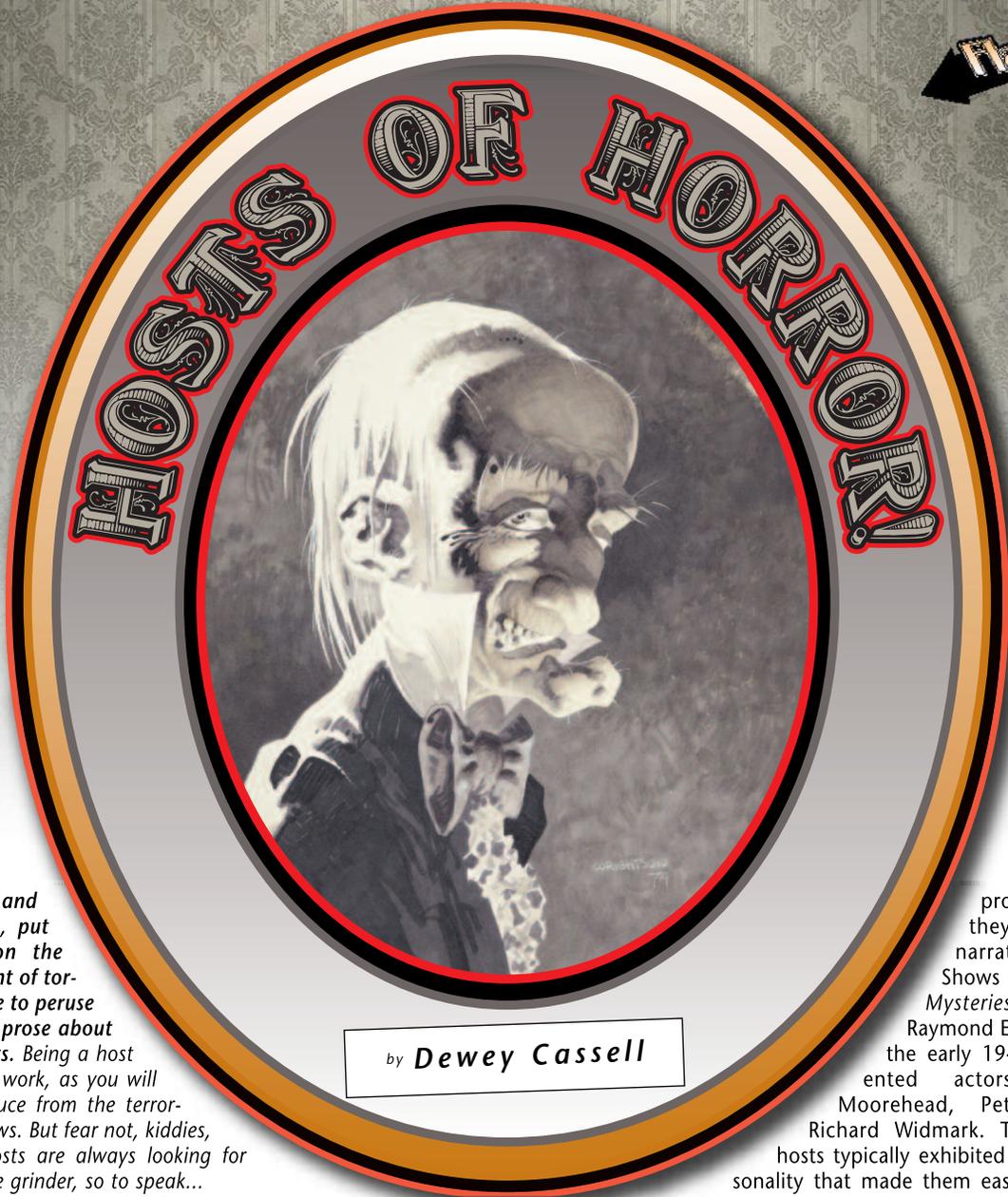
MYSTERY

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Art (from Nick Cardy's *The Witching Hour* #4 cover) is TM & © DC Comics



Greetings, guys and ghouls. Sit back, put your feet up on the nearest implement of torture, and prepare to peruse this penultimate prose about my kindred spirits. Being a host of horror is hard work, as you will undoubtedly deduce from the terrific tale that follows. But fear not, kiddies, for we horror hosts are always looking for fresh meat for the grinder, so to speak...

Why do you suppose it is that horror comics seem to demand a host, while other stories leave you all on your own? There always seemed to be something curiously contradictory about the extension of hospitality in a tale meant to terrify. Then again, who wouldn't want a hand to hold while walking through a haunted house? But was that the purpose behind these polite purveyors of fear?

To answer that question, we must first turn to their origins, and the original hosts of horror were found on the radio. Starting in the 1930s, radio was the perfect forum for dramatic horror and science-fiction stories because it fueled the imagination of the listeners. Imagining in your mind the horrors you were hearing described could be far more powerful than actually seeing them, as evidenced by the success of Orson Welles' *War of the Worlds* broadcast in 1938.

One of the common characteristics of the anthology radio horror

Cry Uncle!

(top) *Creepy* magazine's host, Uncle Creepy, as illustrated by this issue's cover artist, Bernie Wrightson.

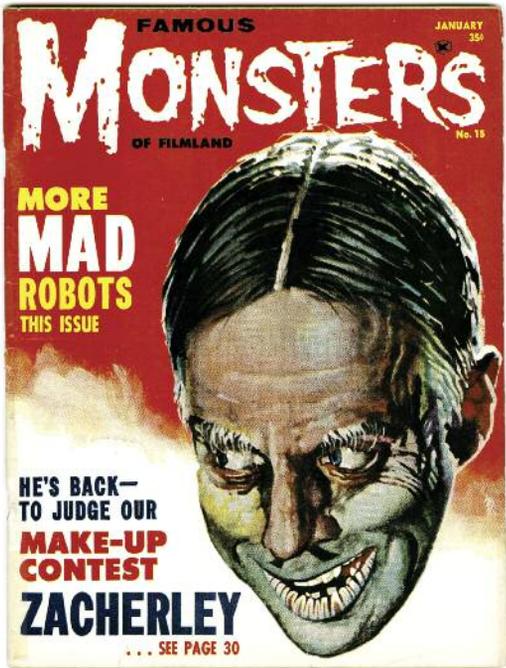
© 2011 Warren Publications.

programs was that they were typically narrated by a host. Shows like *Inner Sanctum Mysteries*, hosted by Raymond Edward Johnson in the early 1940s, featured talented actors like Agnes Moorehead, Peter Lorre, and Richard Widmark. The radio horror hosts typically exhibited a distinctive personality that made them easily identifiable to the listener.

With his morbid sense of humor and his ominous laugh, Raymond provided a welcome break in the tension of the story. Other radio horror hosts included Boris Karloff and Christopher Lee. The stories themselves were often violent and gory, and the programs were eventually challenged by censors, although the regulations imposed were difficult to enforce. Ironically, what brought about the demise of radio horror programs was television.

GHOULS RULE

One of the first, and arguably best, television horror hosts was Zacherley. In 1957, actor John Zacherle got a call from WCAU Channel 10 in Philadelphia to host *Shock Theater*, a collection of horror films from the 1930s and 1940s being released to television by Universal Pictures. Dressed in an undertaker's coat and sporting ghoulish make-up with his hair parted down the middle, Zacherle portrayed Roland, the "cool ghoul" who was host of the show and lived in a crypt. Roland introduced the late night movie, accompanied by the occasional severed head in a basket, and he also appeared in numerous "break-ins" or instances in which the cameraman would break to a shot of Roland wearing a curious expression and then back to the film in progress. This approach to hosting the show proved to be wildly popular and gained Roland thousands of fans. Numerous imitators fol-



lowed, including Ghoulardi, Moona Lisa, and Marvin the Near-Sighted Madman.

But by the time Zacherley and other television horror hosts made their debut, the tradition of hosting horror stories was already well entrenched in comic books. The use of a host for horror comics, however, was preceded by a comic book from another genre, *Crime Does Not Pay*. In 1942, starting with issue #24, editor Charles Biro introduced a host named Mr. Crime, who narrated the feature stories in *Crime Does Not Pay*. Mr. Crime was an ethereal host, whose top hat and flowing robe contrasted with his pointed ears and sharp teeth. In the stories in which he appeared, Mr. Crime typically popped up several times during the tale to provide a pithy



commentary on the characters or their predicament. Peak circulation for *Crime Does Not Pay* reached over one million copies a month.

When you think about the hosts of comic books in the Golden Age, though, one group comes to mind: the Old Witch, Crypt Keeper, and Vault Keeper of the EC anthology horror comics *The Haunt of Fear*, *Tales from the Crypt*, and *The Vault of Horror*. Arguably the most recognizable of all horror hosts even today, the EC ghouls were the brainchild of editor, writer, and artist Al Feldstein and his publisher, Bill Gaines. As for their inspiration, in an interview for issue #9 of the legendary EC fanzine *Squa Tront*, Feldstein explained, "We had come on to this thing of doing horror and scary stuff. Bill and I had remembered *The Witch's Tale* and *Lights Out* from radio—this is all old hat, I know—and we tried it out in the comics ... I first came up with the Crypt Keeper and the Vault Keeper, who were direct steals from the witch in *The Witch's Tale*. I don't remember the witch being as facetious, and with the puns, but she cackled." Although originally designed by Feldstein, other artists became identified with the EC hosts. "Ghastly" Graham Ingels rendered the definitive

Old Witch, Johnny Craig drew the Vault Keeper, and the Crypt Keeper was most famously illustrated by Jack Davis. Craig later created an attractive assistant for the Vault Keeper named Drusilla. Craig even served as the model in full makeup and costume for photographs of the EC hosts that were sold to fans through the comics letters pages. The EC hosts appeared in house ads and EC Fan Addict fan club materials as well.

The hosts contributed to the recognition and growing popularity of the EC horror comics. But the explicit violence and gore of the EC horror comics led to the unwanted attention of Dr. Fredric Wertham in his infamous treatise, *Seduction of the Innocent*, and the subse-

Star of Shock Theatre
 (above) TV's Zacherley, as seen on the cover of *Famous Monsters of Filmland* #15 (Jan. 1962).

Famous Monsters of Filmland
 TM & © 2011 Philip Kim.

Certainly No Samantha!
 (upper right) "Ghastly" Graham Ingels' Old Witch.

© EC Publications.

Uncle Creepy
 (right) Jack Davis' model sheets for Creepy's host. Courtesy of Jim Warden.

© EC Publications.



TERROR

IN THE MYSTERIOUS HOUSE OF

WRIGHTSON

Bernie Wrightson? Simply the best in the horror field from the late '60s to the mid-'80s.

Here he shares with us some recollections of the great day of DC mystery/horror and afterwards. Got the cold chills already? Good, kiddies ... heehee ... good!

(Most of the images provided came from Jerry Boyd and the Swamp Thing recollections were kept to a minimum due to its being covered already in BACK ISSUE #6.) – Jerry Boyd

by **Jerry Boyd**
conducted February 3 and March 11, 2011



It's a Weird Mystery!

(left) Detail from the much-coveted 100-Page Super-Spectacular #4, titled *Weird Mystery Tales*. While featuring just so-so '50s mystery book stories, this poorly distributed 1971 giant remains a lusted-after collectors' item, no doubt in part because it sports Wrightson's (ahem) spectacular cover art.

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BACKISSUE!

ARTIST DATACARD



**BERNIE
WRIGHTSON**

Beginnings:

First sale: DC's "Nightmaster" in *Showcase* #83 (June 1969) / First published art: "The Man Who Murdered Himself" in *House of Mystery* #179 (Mar.-Apr. 1969)

Milestones:

Nightmaster in *Showcase* / *Swamp Thing* / numerous covers and title pages for *House of Mystery* and other DC titles / *Tower of Shadows* and *Chamber of Darkness* / *Creepy*, *Eerie*, and *Vampirella* stories / *Badtime Stories* / *PLOP!* / *Frankenstein* / *Creepshow* / *Spider-Man: Hooky* and *The Thing/The Hulk: The Big Change* Marvel Graphic Novels / *Batman: The Cult* / *Captain Sternn* / *Batman/Aliens* / *Toe Tags* / Production designs for the film *Serenity* / *City of Others* / *Dead, She Said*

Cyberspace:

www.wrightsonart.com

the train there and I met people like Jeff Jones, Mike Kaluta, and we just hung out. My first love has always been horror, graveyards, scary houses, and so on. I came into sci-fi late. The "science" part scared me! [laughs] I had the assumption that you had to be "smart" to get sci-fi. In my teens and twenties, I got over it and did some sci-fi. There's not much science in it once you look into it! [laughter]

BOYD: *There really isn't!* [laughter continues] *Some authors, of course, really delve into scientific theory, but a lot of the most acclaimed sci-fi is just human drama with wild scientific possibilities thrown in.*

WRIGHTSON: That's it. Exactly!

BOYD: *How did you become a "resident" of The House of Mystery and The House of Secrets?*

WRIGHTSON: At that con in '67, I also met a lot of people in comics. I met Carmine Infantino and Joe Orlando and others ... like Dick Giordano. Then I went home. A few months came and went. [Michael Wm.] Kaluta called me and said, "Listen, I heard, through the grapevine and roundabout—these guys at National [DC Comics] want you to work for them." That knocked me on the floor! At a con in 1968 that I attended with my new buddies, I met up with the DC guys again. The *Baltimore Sun* was the newspaper where I was working, but I hit this summer con and they told me, "If you lived here, we'd give you work." By August, after thinking it over, I moved to New York. Shortly after that, Kaluta became my roommate.

BOYD: *What was Joe Orlando like to work with? What did you learn from him?*

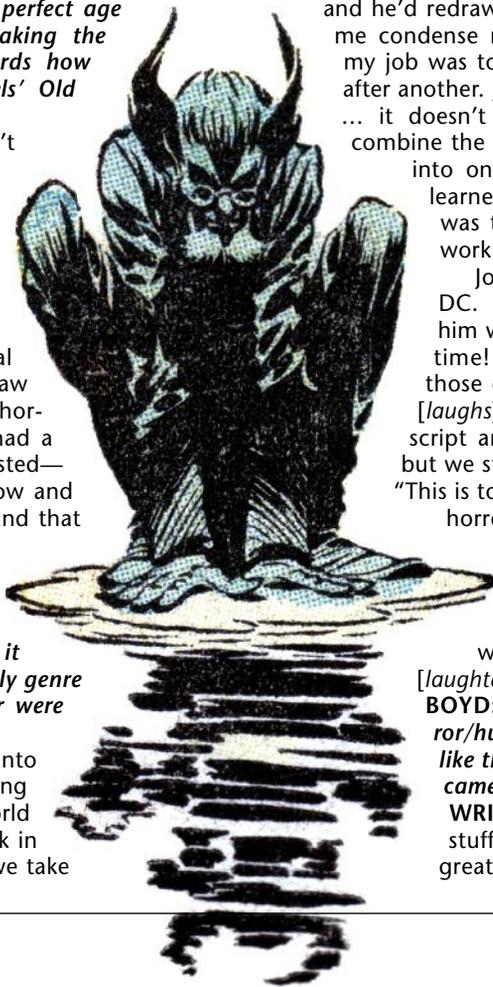
WRIGHTSON: Joe was great. He was a teacher ... informally. He kept a pad of tracing paper and he'd redraw panels I'd done and help me condense my storytelling. I thought my job was to draw pretty pictures one after another. Joe would say, "No, no, no ... it doesn't work like that—you can combine the action in these two panels into one" and things like that. I learned an awful lot from Joe. He was the guy I most wanted to work with.

Joe edited my first stuff at DC. My strongest memory of him was us just laughing all the time! Everything we saw in those comics struck us as funny! [laughs] I read some ridiculous script and he had to clean it up, but we still laughed a lot. He'd say, "This is too bad—too funny to be in horror!" Eventually, those bad scripts ended up in *PLOP!* They weren't scary enough to make the *House* books, but they were perfect for *PLOP!*

[laughter]

BOYD: *Sergio Aragonés did horror/humor one-pagers. Did you like those? What stories of yours came out especially well to you?*

WRIGHTSON: I loved Sergio's stuff! I thought those were great! Of my stuff, I liked the



JERRY BOYD: *You were at the perfect age when the EC Comics were making the rounds. Can you put into words how strong an effect Graham Ingels' Old Witch strips had on you?*

BERNIE WRIGHTSON: I wouldn't be doing this today if it weren't for those comics ... or even be the person I am, I believe. They were a huge part of my life then and shaped my artistic future.

In the late '50s, they released all the old Universal monster movies to TV and I saw them all. The time was right for horror, y'know. In Baltimore, we had a guy named Dr. Lucifer who hosted—and interrupted—the movies now and then with jokes, late at night, and that added to the fun. He was on Friday nights, 11:15.

BOYD: *When I look over your early fanzine work, it mostly leans toward mystery/horror. Is it safe to say that that was the only genre in comics that grabbed you, or were there others?*

WRIGHTSON: I wanted to get into comics. I didn't know anything about fanzines. I went to the World Science Fiction Con in New York in 1967. A friend suggested that we take

It's Not Easy Being Cain
(right) The proprietor of the *House of Mystery* ponders "The Gourmet" in the classic *PLOP!* #1 story written by Steve Skeates and drawn by our man Wrightson. Word is that the macabre tale was inspired by an infamous S. Gross cartoon in *National Lampoon*, where Bernie also contributed his artistry in the '70s.

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THE SCARY/FUNNY WORLDS OF

SERGIO ARAGONÉS



1970: It was a great time for horror.

ABC-TV's *Dark Shadows* was going as strong as ever, and a horrific vampire movie culled from some of its earliest, greatest storylines came out that year. Hammer Films and its British cousin, Amicus Productions, brought *The Vampire Lovers* and *The House That Dripped Blood* to audiences worldwide. Marvel Comics had jumped into the arena with *Tower of Shadows* and *Chamber of Darkness*, blowing eyeballs out with work by Steranko, Tom Sutton, Don Heck, John Romita, Neal Adams, Marie Severin, and the Buscema brothers. Charlton, Warren, and *Castle of Frankenstein* magazine added to the nocturnal chills.

But it was DC's revamp of *House of Mystery* and *House of Secrets*, eschewing "Dial H for Hero" and "Eclipse" (respectively), that turned a lot of heads in the publisher's direction. I was one of those fans. DC had these two new guys, Bernie Wrightson and Neal Adams, who were doing things with a pencil I didn't think were possible! And even more, they had Alex Toth, Jack Sparling, Gil Kane, and ... Sergio Aragonés, that *MAD* magazine guy, who came in once in a while with those whimsical, twisted humor/horror one-pagers that none of the competition was able to mimic! His brand of hilarious black humor continued on into the '70s, of course. Mr. Aragonés speaks to us about those great days.

— Jerry Boyd

JERRY BOYD: Who contacted you to do those great cartoons for *House of Mystery* and the other titles at DC? Was it Joe Orlando, and if so, what were his reasons for wanting humor pages between the stories?

SERGIO ARAGONÉS: I just arrived from Europe in '68. When I got back, [*MAD* publisher] Bill Gaines told me Joe Orlando wanted to see me. He needed two scripts for *Young Romance*. [*DC* art director] Vince Colletta was there in his office waiting for some scripts. I suggested that they go to lunch and I wrote the scripts. They went along with it. [*laughs*] Someone cleaned up the language because I was still learning English! [*laughs*] Joe

came back, looked them over, and said, "I didn't know you wrote!" "Neither did I!" I said. [*laughter*] It was the basic boy-meets-girl, boy-loses-girl—and a little twist.

BOYD: So you were thinking about writing. What made you feel you were ready?

ARAGONÉS: It wasn't that complicated. I was a fan of comics, so I didn't really write it for Vince, I drew it out in layouts, and made it really loose. I went to the library at DC and looked over a few comics before that. One story I came up with was how I met my first wife. That was the basis. [*The male story character*] was a musician instead of a cartoonist, though. It was very basic, very innocent stuff—it wasn't that difficult.

by Jerry Boyd

conducted November 13, 2010 and January 19, 2011

Brotherly "Love"

Cain and Abel came to half-dead life in this convention illo done for the interviewer in 2006.

TM & © DC Comics.

FROM THE

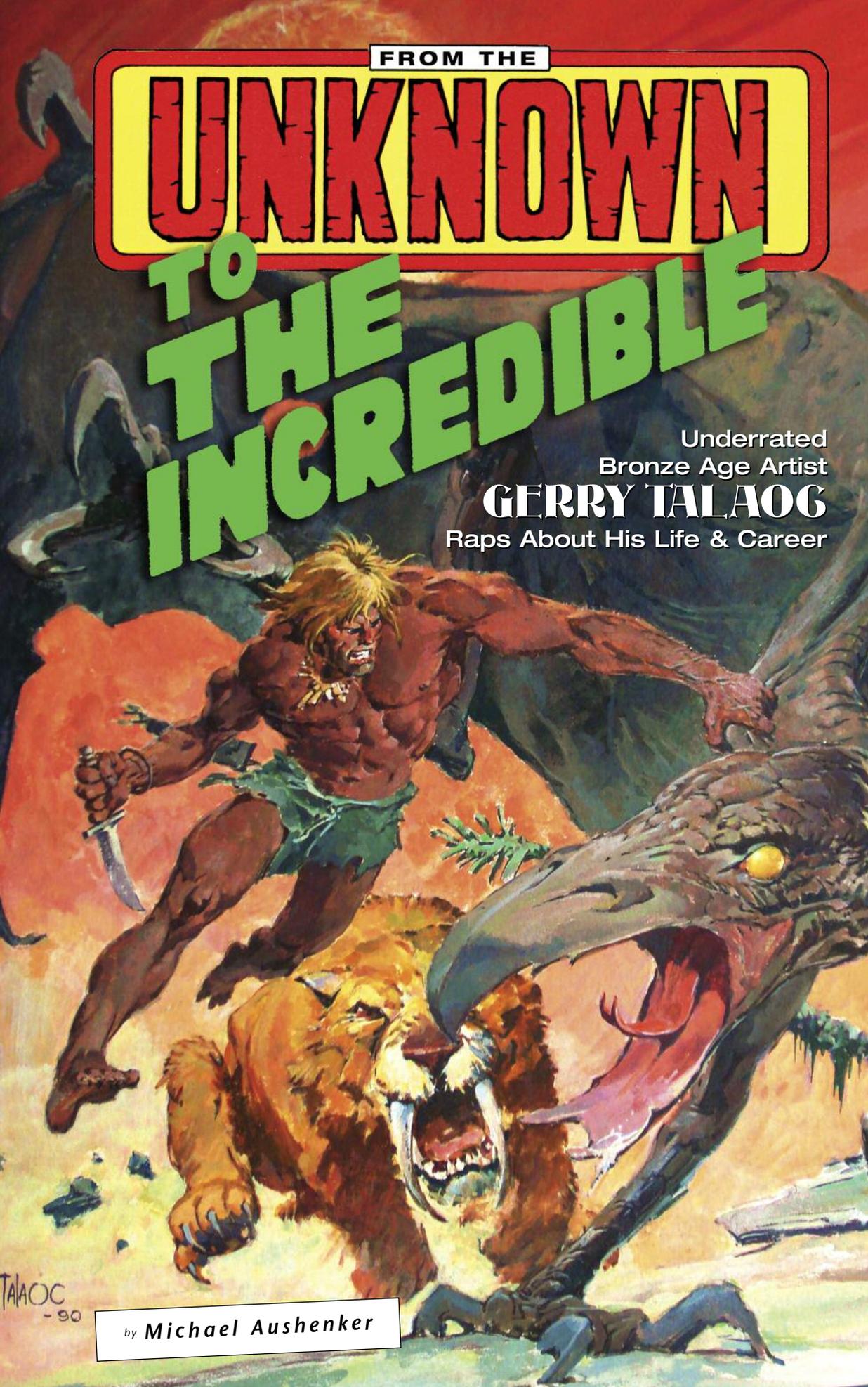
UNKNOWN

TO THE INCREDIBLE

Underrated
Bronze Age Artist

GERRY TALAOC

Raps About His Life & Career



by **Michael Aushenker**

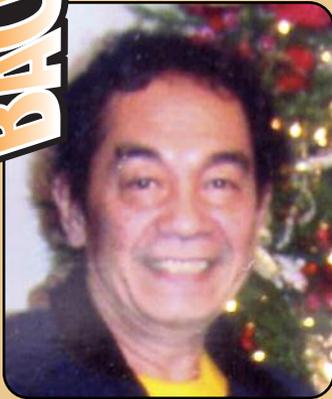
*A Tantalizing
Taste of the
Tremendous
Talent of Talaoc!*

Ka-Zar and his kitty, Zabú, take on a pesky Pterosaur in this dynamic painting by our interview subject, Gerry Talaoc! Courtesy of the artist. Wow, indeed.

TM & © Marvel Characters, Inc.

ARTIST

DATA CARD



GERRY TALAOC

Beginnings:
Filipino "komiks" work in 1960s / First work published in US: "Phony Face!" in *House of Mystery* #205 (Aug. 1972)

Milestones:
House of Mystery / *Ghosts* / *The Phantom Stranger* / *The Unknown Soldier* / *G.I. Combat* / *Incredible Hulk* / *Alpha Flight* / *Comet Man*

Works in Progress:
Paintings and commissions

Every BACK ISSUE piece has a backstory, and the one behind finding the artist Gerry Talaoc for my article on *The Unknown Soldier* for BACK ISSUE #37 is a real doozy.

Among the artists of the so-called "Filipino Invasion," Talaoc was never as big a name as Alfredo Alcalá, Nestor Redondo, or Tony DeZuñiga, who—with editors Joe Orlando and Carmine Infantino—led the charge to travel to the Philippines in the early 1970s and enlist the South Pacific island nation's top talents to work for DC Comics for lower page rates than their American counterparts. And yet Talaoc, as a penciler and/or inker, created handsome art for DC Comics (and later Marvel), most notably *The Phantom Stranger*, various DC horror anthologies, *The Incredible Hulk*, and, above all, his lengthy run on *The Unknown*

The Real Deal
Filipino artist Gerry Talaoc's US debut was in the pages of *House of Mystery* #205 (Aug. 1972), starting off spectacularly with this epic, suspenseful splash page depicting E. Nelson Bridwell's tale of terror! From the collection of Benton Jew.

TM & © DC Comics.

Soldier (originally penciling and inking, but later embellishing Dick Ayers' breakdowns).

"Gerry is a very nice guy," recalls Tony DeZuñiga (who has not been in touch with Talaoc for decades). He tells *BACK ISSUE*: "Gerry's a very good craftsman. He was very dependable. You give him a deadline and you don't have to worry on getting the work. He's a real pro."

I didn't know much about Talaoc when I went on a quest to find the artist in early 2007. Even the thorough Filipino Invasion issue of *Comic Book Artist*, edited by Jon B. Cooke, had little to say biographically on the artist or his whereabouts. To find him, I had to travel all over the world (by Internet, of course). And so, my journey took me from the Philippines—where Elmer cartoonist Gerry Alanguilan led me to Talaoc's son, Jeremy, who led me back to America—Alaska—where Talaoc lives today as an employee of the City of Juneau. After a phone-number mix-up, I left a voice message on Talaoc's landline. And then—nothing...

...Until several months later, on a radiant August 2007 afternoon, I was at my then-girlfriend's house in verdant, suburban



The Many Lives of the BLACK ORCHID

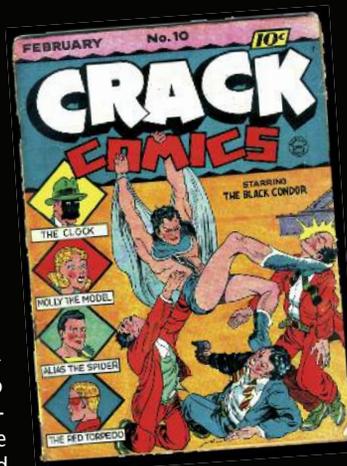
FlashBack!



by **Shannon E. Riley**

"It was midnight ... a man ... a good man ... was in trouble ... and she appeared! It was as simple as that! She showed a strength that was impossible to believe ... removed the man from danger ... and then vanished! Nothing more was known about her, except that everyone who saw her agreed that she looked like a huge flower—an orchid—a Black Orchid!"

So began the escapades of the mysterious Black Orchid. Bob Oksner's moody cover for *Adventure Comics* #428 (Aug. 1973) depicts our heroine perched on a Gothic rooftop, set against the backdrop of a full moon and a bat-filled sky. Below her, a gang of gun-toting criminals peer out a window—unaware that they are about to become her prey. While it's prominently touted as an origin issue, the true identity of the Black Orchid would remain a puzzler for another 15 years. She was a malleable cypher, with DC seemingly content to let the character shift in and out of stories with no attempt to define her. That is, until a newcomer named Neil Gaiman turned that idea on its head and crafted a new mythology. But before Gaiman could do that—the *Black Orchid* would have to die.



TAKING ROOT IN ADVENTURE

Under the guidance of editor Joe Orlando, DC's long-running *Adventure Comics* took a brief detour away from traditional superheroics in the early '70s. Beginning with issue #425 (Dec. 1972), the focus shifted to fantasy and supernatural adventure tales. It likely made good business sense to Orlando, given the success of the company's other mystery titles following the loosening of the Comics Code. Non-costumed protagonists—like Robert Kanigher's and Alex Niño's "Captain Fear," and John Albano's and Jim Aparo's "The Adventurers' Club"—appeared in the series through issue #427 (May 1973).

Making her debut in issues #428–430 (Aug.–Dec. 1973), the Black Orchid brought the costumes back to *Adventure*, but with a twist of mystery: she was a master of disguise and, in effect, a blank slate. Unique in DC's stable of characters, her powers were unexplained and even stranger, she left an aromatic orchid as her calling card. The first three stories—"Black Orchid," "Challenge to the Black Orchid," and "The Anger of the Black Orchid"—all followed similar arcs in that the heroine would mysteriously

Night Flight

We photo manipulated the proportions of this, Gaspar Saladino's "Black Orchid" logo and Bob Oksner's bodacious cover image from *Adventure Comics* #430 (Dec. 1973).

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A Fine Inspiration

(left) Black Orchid designer Tony DeZuñiga explains that the costume was inspired by another "black" character, Quality Comics' the Black Condor, Lou Fine's Golden Age superhero.

TM & © DC Comics.



appear, save a protagonist, and then shake down crooks by masquerading as an assortment of dancers, waitresses, or femme fatales. As

co-creator
T o n y

DeZuñiga relates to *BACK ISSUE*, the Orchid was essentially Orlando's brainchild—and it was DeZuñiga and longtime DC editor/writer/cartoonist Sheldon Mayer who executed the idea.

This was the first and only collaboration between Mayer and DeZuñiga, and it was Mayer's health issues that would indirectly lead to the partnership. Failing eyesight had forced Mayer to abandon his first love of cartooning, and begin scripting stories for DC's mystery titles. He wrote such tales as "This Evil Demon Loves People!" for *House of Mystery* #207 (Oct. 1972), "Small Invasion" in *House of Secrets* #101 (Oct. 1972), and "Death Laughed Last!" for *Forbidden Tales of Dark Mansion* #12 (Sept. 1973).

Flower Child

(above) Tony DeZuñiga recently created this lyrical image of the sublime Black Orchid

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Who's That Girl?

(right) The true identity of our hero is pondered in this nice DeZuñiga panel from *Adventure Comics* #428 (Aug. 1973).

TM & © DC Comics.

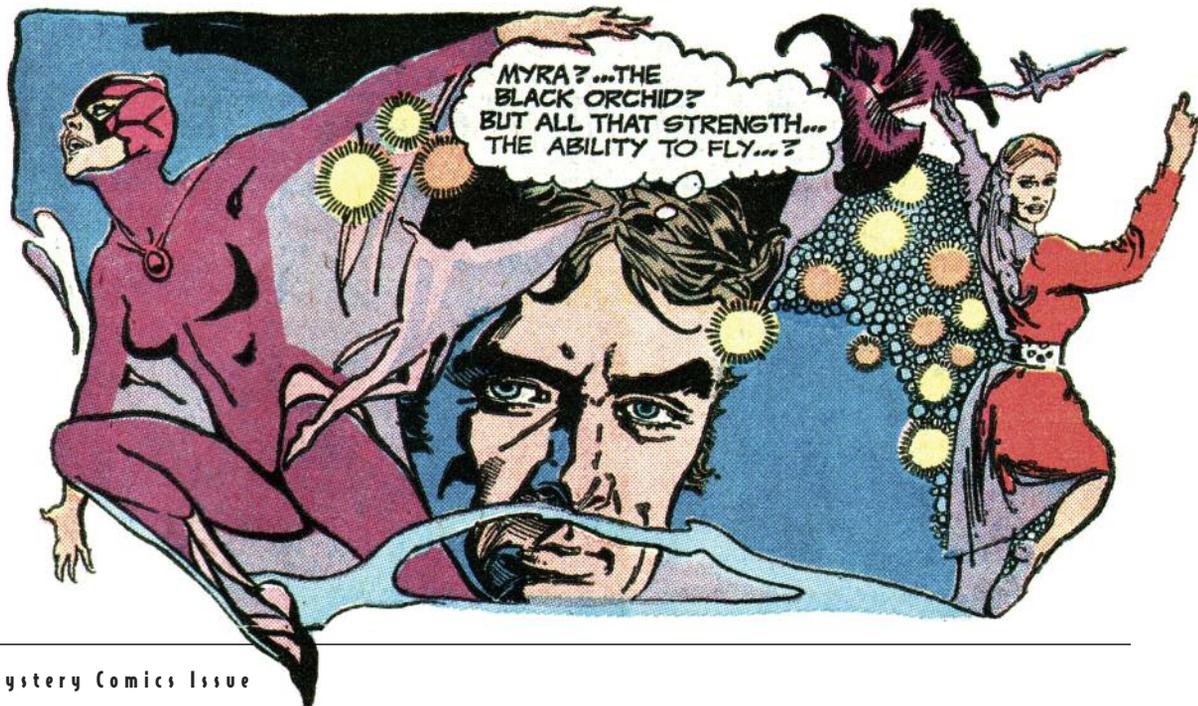
DeZuñiga had left his home in the Philippines in 1969 and ventured to New York City, where he began working for DC under Orlando's guidance. His first job was as Ric Estrada's inker on the story "For Love or Money" in *Girls' Love Stories* #153 (Aug. 1970), and his first American penciling gig appeared in "Dark City of Doom" in *House of Mystery* #188 (Oct. 1970).

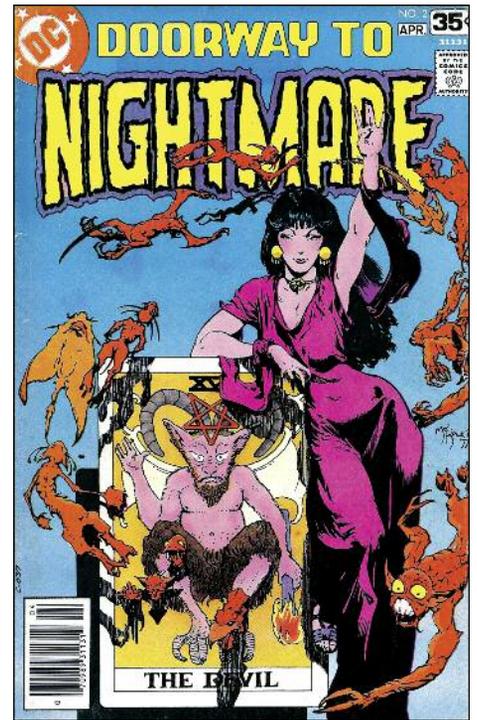
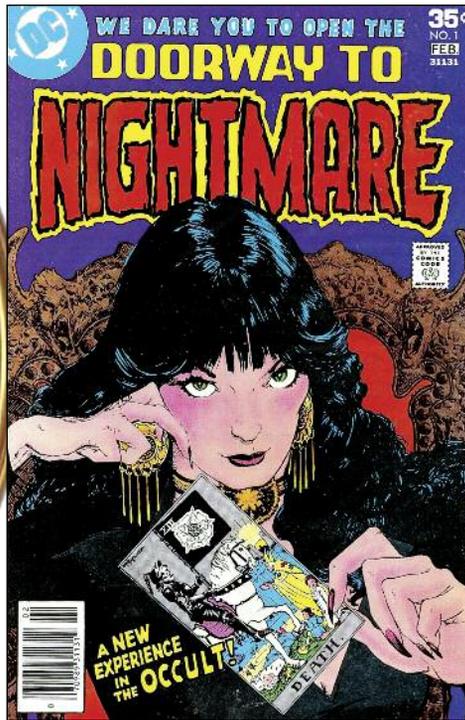
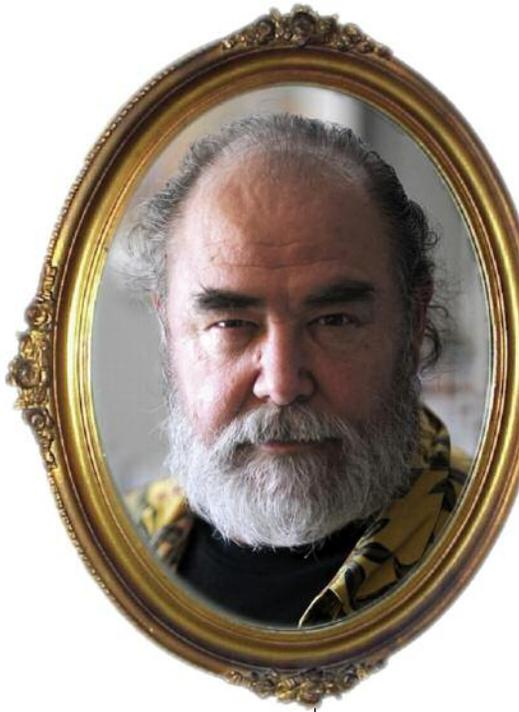
DeZuñiga says, "Joe Orlando, for me—he's the best editor DC ever had. He gave artists free rein and he recognized every artist's [strengths]." Anyone familiar with DeZuñiga's work knows that it exhibits a stunning realism and a strong command of the human form (as evidenced by the pen and ink commissions he did for this article). These traits would be put on full display in his visual interpretation of Mayer's scripts.

DeZuñiga found the most obvious inspiration for the Orchid's garb from her flower namesake—*Cymbidium canaliculatum sparkesii*—a plant resplendent with dark black-purple petals and sepals. It was a Golden Age Quality Comics hero that would further serve as a muse for the artist. DeZuñiga tells *BI* that in brainstorming the design concept, he "read the character description and [recalled that] in the '40s there was this character called the Black Condor, but [since] that was a male superhero, I took some ideas and revised [it] to a female form. I had fun working on it—I love the character because [she] was beautifully, elegantly designed." DeZuñiga acknowledges that while the issues didn't sell that well, she's fondly remembered by collectors to this day. "Even now, I get a lot of commissions and people still ask me a lot of questions about Black Orchid."

THINGS GET STRANGER

While not successful enough to graduate to her own title, Black Orchid was awarded the backup feature in *The Phantom Stranger*, starting with issue #31 (July 1974). Mayer and DeZuñiga stayed on as the creative team for the story "Island of Fear," but this would be their final joint effort on the character. With issue #32 (Sept. 1974), Michael Fleisher and Russell Carley took the scripting reins, with Nestor Redondo handing pencils and inks for "The Crime of the Black Orchid." The tale sees the Orchid framed by a young couple leading a life of crime. The woman, Myrna, pulls a bank heist in





Artist and Model

Perhaps second only to The Shadow, Madame Xanadu is a character forever associated specifically with the singular artistry of one Michael William Kaluta, certainly one of the finest creators ever to share his illustrative talents with a comic-book audience.

Did you know the hostess is based on a real person? Check out the sidebar near the end of this article, "The Once & Future Madame Xanadu."

The above photo portrait of the artist is by and courtesy of Kyle Cassidy.

In the 1970s it was *de rigueur* for each mystery comic to have a host. With its 1978 debut, *Doorway to Nightmare* featured a host who didn't simply introduce the stories but participated in each tale. The issues followed a formula: each wholly independent full-length story featured lovers beset by occult forces seeking advice from an enigmatic fortune-teller—whose otherwise-locked door always seemed open for those genuinely in need. Guided by the Tarot, Madame Xanadu would advise, but allow her visitors to tread their own paths, reappearing for the denouement to ensnare that issue's supernatural antagonist in one of her Soul Jars.

Artist Michael Wm. Kaluta remembers being approached by DC editor Joe Orlando: "Joe's exact words were, 'We're developing a hostess for a book called *Doorway to Nightmare*—she'll act as a way to introduce the stories, though, other than appearing at the beginning, she won't take part in the actual stories. I want a witchy, Gypsy-type woman; she'll live in Greenwich Village where she has a fortune-telling shop.'" Somewhere in development, Madame Xanadu's role expanded from host to participant. However, Orlando had approached the right person, for Kaluta had drawn a mystery hostess for seven issues of *Forbidden Tales of Dark Mansion*. "I adapted the nameless hostess from *FToDM* into Madame Xanadu, but Joe O. never asked me to do that specifically," recalls Kaluta. "The woman who graced the indicia page of *FToDM* was tall, dark, mysterious, and un-edited; I drew the pieces as evocative mood images and the editor had the words added afterward—it was as close as I'd come to self-expression at that time. The agreement between me and the editor was she'd never be named and she'd never act like the other, EC Comics-based hosts: never putting on funny hats and acting like a carnival barker (until the final issue, where I believe Mr. Chaykin put her in a Santa suit). She naturally morphed into the template for Madame Xanadu." [Writer's note: This character was eventually named "Charity" in *Starman* #2 (Dec. 1994).]

Joe Orlando edited the first two issues of *Doorway*

before Jack C. Harris took over. "The title was, from the beginning, going to be a showcase for both new and established artists and writers," reveals Harris. "The thought was to combine new writers with established artists and new artists with established writers. I don't recall the specific incidents leading up to the creation of *Doorway* or Madame Xanadu, except for the Tarot cards. They were at the very heart of the idea from the beginning. The Soul Jars were added to the character and her 'look' was 100% the work of Mike Kaluta."

ENTER FREELY, UNAFRAID

Kaluta states, "The cover for *Doorway to Nightmare* #1 (Feb.–Mar. 1978) was certainly suggested by Joe O: 'Have her holding a Tarot Card.' Whether he asked specifically for the Death card from the Major Arcana, I don't recall."

The debut issue was written by David Michelinie. "I do remember that I was asked to write the first *Doorway to Nightmare*; it wasn't a project I brought to DC," offers Michelinie. "I worked most closely with Paul Levitz, I believe, who was Joe Orlando's assistant at the time. [Mr Levitz declined to answer *BACK ISSUE*'s questions.] I'm pretty sure that the character, names, and general concept were there before I was brought in. I think the idea was to have sort of a female Phantom Stranger, a mysterious character who was more than she appeared to be, who took a more active role than other hosts but let the individual characters from the separate stories take center stage. So I basically constructed a story that would establish things for other writers to follow, expanding on the specifics I was given."

And follow they did. Michelinie's introductory story showed a young woman seeking to save her boyfriend from an Egyptian succubus, but also established concepts that have remained with Madame Xanadu over her 33-year history. The writer says, "I'm pretty sure Christy Street (a play on Christopher Street, an actual address in the Village), 'Enter Freely, Unafraid' (the sign on her door), and the bit about the door being



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by Bruce Buchanan



PAT BOYETTE

non-superhero-comics



Host Ghosts

Steve Ditko's renderings of the host character icons that appeared on Charlton's mystery comics. On the left is *Haunted's* Impy o and, right, Mr. Bones of *Ghost Manor*. Courtesy of Heritage.

© 1973 Charlton Comics.

While published under a wide range of titles—notably *The Many Ghosts of Dr. Graves*, *Scary Tales*, *Haunted*, and *Ghost Manor*—the Charlton books were largely interchangeable in format. Each issue featured two to four short stories, generally ranging from 8–12 pages each. The stories were entirely self-contained—none of the characters in these stories had appeared before, nor would they appear later. And each title generally had a unique, otherworldly host who introduced the stories and perhaps served as a narrator. Some of these hosts included Dr. Graves, Winnie the Witch (*Ghostly Haunts*), Baron Weirwolf (*Haunted*), Countess Von Bludd (*Scary Tales*), Mr. Bones (*Ghost Manor*), and Mr. Dedd (*Ghostly Tales*).

Unlike the infamous EC horror comics of the 1950s, the Charlton titles were light on actual violence and gore. Instead, they relied on suspenseful setups and twist endings to deliver chills and thrills to readers.

THE BIRTH OF THE CHARLTON MYSTERY LINE

The mystery line started in 1966, with the publication of *Ghostly Tales*. The first issue actually was numbered #55, taking over the numbering from a previous Charlton title [*Editor's note*: oddly enough, *Blue Beetle*]. *The Many Ghosts of Dr. Graves* was added the subsequent year, and *Ghost Manor* came on board in 1968.

One of the early writers to work on the Charlton horror line was Steve Skeates.

"What I liked most about working for Charlton was the vast variety of genres I had the pleasure there to work within—that and the fact that I'd get assigned as many pages as I could possibly handle," Skeates recalls. "Sure, the pay was less than half of what the big com-

panies (and I do mean DC and Marvel) were shelling out per page, yet those guys tended to be downright stingy as to the number of pages they'd toss in your direction; not so with Charlton!

"I was writing Westerns (Captain Doom, Kid Montana, and the Sharpshooter); a forever-continuing, heavily captioned sword-and-sorcery period piece (The Thane of Bagarth); a private eye (Sarge Steel, in the back of the *Judomaster* comic as well as on his own in something called *Secret Agent*); humor pieces ("Far-Out Fairy Tales" for that teen-oriented comic called *Go-Go*, and the entirety of the *Abbott and Costello* comic book); I even got to create my own superhero group (the Tyro Team)," Skeates says. "And so it was that when editor Dick Giordano one day suddenly (seemingly out of the blue) asked if I'd like to try my hand at a bunch of spooky, ghostly, pseudo-horror-type stories, I of course leapt at the chance!"

Giordano's assignment to Skeates was the write two eight-page "slightly frightening mood pieces" for the second issue of *The Many Ghosts of Dr. Graves*. As was the case with most Charlton stories, Skeates said he was under tight time constraints, although he was grateful for the work and the artistic freedom he had at the company.

"More often than not I'd start pounding those keys with only a vague utterly bare-bones idea as to where I was going and then let the plot work itself out even as I was typing the tale up," Skeates says.

The grind-it-out schedule also made collaborating with artists impossible. Skeates said Giordano didn't assign an artist to the story until a completed script had been turned in and, sometimes, the writer didn't know which artist had drawn his story until he saw the finished comic on the newsstands. However, Skeates found Giordano's choice of artists to be close to perfect.

Skeates' favorite Charlton horror collaborations include "This Old Man," drawn by Pat Boyette for *The Many Ghosts of Dr. Graves* #8 (Aug. 1968). Skeates particularly likes the title panel of the story: "It's like that panel's the very definition of 'claustrophobic,' while furthermore you can almost smell the mustiness!"

Other Skeates favorites include "The Best of All Possible Worlds!," with Jim Aparo in *The Many Ghosts of Dr. Graves* #5 (Jan. 1968), and "Routine," with Steve Ditko, in *The Many Ghost of Dr. Graves* #7 (July 1968).

"The beauty of this genre (this ghostly anthology stuff) was that I wasn't boxed in by the constraints of continuity—outside of the narrator, there were no continuing characters here, and therefore I could do whatever I wanted with those who were involved," Skeates says.

MR. DITKO COMES TO DERBY

After leaving Marvel Comics in 1966, as well as the *Amazing Spider-Man* title he helped create, artist/writer Steve Ditko returned to Charlton, where he previously had worked on a variety of titles. While he helped launch the company's "Action Heroes" line with such superhero characters as the Blue Beetle (the Ted Kord version), the Question, and Captain Atom, he also became a regular contributor to Charlton's line of ghost-story comics. Ditko would remain a frequent artist on these books for more than a decade.

Ditko found artistic freedom at Charlton, something that had been a source of tension at Marvel. He also had the opportunity to work closely with Charlton's workhorse writer Joe Gill. Gill and Ditko had