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BACK ISSUE
TM
Let's Get Small this issue with a Marvel MICRONAUTS History
plus these tiny titans: The Atom in the Bronze Age • Sword of the Atom
The Rocky Relationship of Ant-Man and the Wasp • The Microbots
Super Jrs. • DC Comics Digests • Marvel Value Stamps
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Celebrating the Best Comics of the '70s, '80s, '90s, and Beyond!

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The Atom, in detail from the cover of *Secret Origins* #2 (Apr.–May 1973). Art by Nick Cardy. TM & © DC Comics.

Hank and Janet: THE ROCKY RELATIONSHIP OF ANT-MAN & THE WASP

by Ian Millsted

At the time of writing, the Marvel character Ant-Man is set to reach the big screen in a Marvel Studios movie starring Michael Douglas as Henry Pym and Paul Rudd as Scott Lang [see inset photo]. However, the character has not always been so high profile.

When the Ant-Man series in *Marvel Feature* [see *BI* #71] ended with #10 (July 1973), the character was, in Marvel Comics terms, a two-time loser. He was the first of the Silver Age superhero characters from the House of Ideas to effectively be canceled *twice.* There was also the additional indignity of being the only one of the three series to run in the first volume of *Marvel Feature* not go on to have its own comic book, since both *MF*'s Defenders and Thing team-up features progressed to long-running, decade-spanning titles. In addition, despite having been founding members and longtime core characters of the Avengers, neither Ant-Man nor his partner the Wasp were being used in *The Avengers* at the time. All of which seems a shame for two characters with plenty of potential, especially since in their civilian identities of Henry Pym and Janet Pym (nee van Dyne) they were only the second married couple within the Marvel Universe (that marriage being the second for Henry Pym).

"I WILL STAND BESIDE YOU ALWAYS … TO AVENGE MY FATHER'S DEATH." (Janet)

Ant-Man had first appeared in the one-off story "The Man in the Ant Hill" in *Tales to Astonish* #27 (Jan. 1962). Seemingly intended as a complete science-fiction/monster story of the type Marvel specialized in at the time—and passed over by plotter Stan Lee to his brother Larry Lieber to script over Jack Kirby's art—the story contained no superhero costumes, no supervillain, and no indication that there would be any further tales featuring the character.

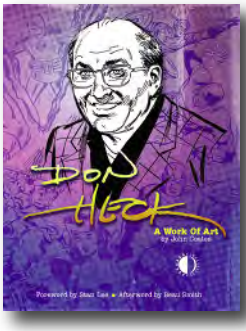
However, Ant-Man returned to star in his own series in *Tales to Astonish* starting with #35 (Sept. 1962). A detailed examination of that series is beyond the remit of this Bronze Age-based magazine, but regarding the ongoing development of the character, some points are relevant. Creatively, Ant-Man seems to have been a low priority for Stan Lee when compared to the likes of Spider-Man, the Hulk, Fantastic Four, and others. Lee contributed plots, but the scripts were done by Lieber (*Tales to Astonish* #35–43), and then Ernest Hart, under the pseudonym H. E. Huntley (*TtA* #44–48).

Character Growth

Dave Cockrum's 1974 rendition of Hank Pym's superheroic identities—in order of size: Ant-Man, Yellowjacket, Giant-Man, and Goliath—and his wife, Janet van Dyne Pym, the Wasp (who's had her share of costume changes as well). Submitted by this article's writer, Ian Millsted. Colors by *BI* designer Rich Fowlks.

Making a Series Out of an Anthill

Big moments in Hank and Janet's early career: (left to right) Pym's premiere in *Tales to Astonish* #27 (Jan. 1962); Henry's first outing as Ant-Man in #35; Pym's new role as Giant-Man in #49; and both Pyms imperiled at the close of Ant-Man's series in *Marvel Feature* #10 (July 1973).



Learn more about Don Heck's life and career (including early Ant-Man work) in TwoMorrows' new full-color hardcover *Don Heck: A Work of Art*, now shipping!

Only when Ant-Man transformed into Giant-Man in *Tales to Astonish* #49 (Nov. 1963) did Lee start to do all the writing. The prolific Jack Kirby penciled the Ant-Man stories in *Tales to Astonish* #35–40 and 44, with the others being drawn by Don Heck. Even after the commencement of the Giant-Man stories, the top team of Lee and Kirby lasted only to *Tales to Astonish* #51 (Jan. 1964), after which Dick Ayers took over on art, with one more issue by Don Heck (*Tales to Astonish* #54, Apr. 1964).

So far as the characters go, the main point of interest in *Tales to Astonish* #44 (June 1963) was the introduction of Janet van Dyne. In that issue, van Dyne becomes the Wasp, courtesy of Pym's science, and it should be noted that from the outset she was cover-featured and shared equal co-star status with Ant-Man, although the latter was reduced after the series' change to "Giant-Man." In that first story, it was clear that van Dyne is attracted to Pym as adventurer Ant-Man more than as scientist Henry Pym. Pym, however, has a more complex reason for noticing Janet: her resemblance to his first wife, Maria Trovaya, a Hungarian defector. While she and Hank were on honeymoon back in Hungary, Maria was seemingly killed by hard-line Communists as punishment for her leaving for the West. Janet has her own tragedy in the form of the death of her father. Although their working partnership as crimefighters was closely followed by a growing romance, the signs that such a relationship was built on less-than-sure foundations were likely to be picked up on by subsequent writers.

Married couples often seem to be difficult for comics companies dealing in long-running superhero titles; the temptation is there for lazy writers to contrive conflict where there had been none. In the case of Henry Pym and Janet van Dyne, however, the fault lines were there from the very beginning, and the dramatic fallout from this relationship has been felt in most corners of the Marvel Universe.

Also of note regarding the Ant-Man/Giant-Man series from *Tales to Astonish* is that when Pym gave Janet the ability to fly, in addition to all the powers he had as Ant-Man, he effectively made her more powerful than he, although this was never developed at the time and became moot when he gave himself the power to increase his size. Also easily overlooked are the Wasp solo stories that ran in 1964 in *Tales to Astonish* #51–58. While the first six of these are really just a framing sequence for Atlas-era-style stories, issues #57 and 58 are genuine solo adventures—meaning that, however briefly, the Wasp was the first female superhero of the Marvel Silver Age to have her own series.

Giant-Man and the Wasp were replaced in *Tales to Astonish* after #69 (July 1965) by the Sub-Mariner feature. Of their adversaries from *TtA*, only Egghead, the Human Top, and the villainous Black Knight arguably represented much of an ongoing rogues' gallery, and that, principally, took place in *The Avengers*.

Ant-Man and the Wasp were among the founders of the Avengers, although Janet was at first treated much like a junior member, not seeming to take a turn at being chairman and once being compared to Rick Jones as a mere partner to a more senior, "male" hero. Although Hank and Janet left the Avengers with #16 (May 1965), after they re-joined in #28 (May 1966) they started to become part of the spine of the team. As their own series had already ended, it was within the pages of *The Avengers* that Pym and van Dyne were developed further as characters. Henry Pym transitioned from Giant-Man to Goliath and then to Yellowjacket. As a scientist, he created, in an act of scientific genius but tragic consequence, a sentient robot called Ultron. [***Editor's note:*** See *BACK ISSUE* #38 for the history of Ultron.] It was after a nervous breakdown that Pym suffered amnesia, took on the Yellowjacket identity, and proposed to Janet. Van Dyne, fully aware of who Yellowjacket really was, accepted his proposal and a wedding followed. Before long, they once again drifted away from the group.

Special artistic credit should be given to the sometimes-underestimated Don Heck, who drew van Dyne as a beautiful society girl very much at home in expensive clothes, and to John Buscema, who transformed her into a modern-looking (for the time) woman.

Avengers #211 (Sept. 1981) was a man clearly on the edge. Desperate to prove himself a worthy Avenger, he became reckless and self-obsessed. More willing than before to use power against others, Pym faced a court hearing of his fellow Avengers for excessive use of force, putting him under even more pressure … which he released in an act of fury against his wife in *Avengers* #213 (Nov. 1981). In this issue, drawn by Bob Hall, Henry Pym was shown striking Janet with a full swing of the back of his hand. Jim Shooter, again on his own blog, has made the point that this was not how it was really intended: "Hank is supposed to have accidentally struck Jan while throwing his hands up in despair and frustration—making a sort of 'get away from me' gesture while not looking at her. Bob Hall, who had been trained by John Buscema to always go for the most extreme action, turned that into a right cross! There was no time to have it redrawn, which to this day has caused the tragic story of Hank Pym to be known as the 'wife-beater' story."

Separation and divorce followed. Janet, by now clearly the stronger of the two, moved on with her life. She became Avengers chairwoman while Pym was placed in prison. She had a brief affair with Tony Stark, highlighted in *Avengers* #224 (Oct. 1982), ended reluctantly by Stark after Captain America expressed disapproval.

Jim Shooter has indicated that he had always planned for Henry Pym to find redemption, and his replacement as writer, Roger Stern, completed the storyline satisfactorily. In *Avengers* #230 (Apr. 1983), Henry Pym recognized and overcame his own insecurities and defeated the vintage Ant-Man villain, the Egghead. In the final scene of that issue, he acknowledged to his former wife, "You can't base a marriage on just a few good times. I fell for the young lady who reminded me of my first wife … and you thought you'd found the strong, silent hero. But I was never that strong, Jan."

"I HADN'T REALIZED JUST HOW BAD IT WOULD BE TO SEE JAN AGAIN" (Henry)

Hank Pym relocated to the West Coast and led a largely civilian life while Janet van Dyne continued to lead the Avengers. On the occasions they did have contact, their shared history was always tangible, as shown in *Avengers* #240 (Feb. 1984). On the whole, however, they led separate lives. Janet had further romances with Dane Whitman (the Black Knight—another irony, given the Knight's uncle's role as another early Giant-Man enemy) and Paladin. She also seemed to have a run of terrible hairstyles—but, hey, it was the '80s!

With the launch of a second Avengers team, operating from the West Coast, it became possible for the two former partners to both be active members while still being apart. With the Wasp very much a mainstay of the New York-based team, there was a possible opening for Henry Pym, now just going by the professional name of Dr. Pym, to join the new West Coast Avengers. The writer of the ongoing series was Steve Englehart. "When I got *West Coast Avengers*, I didn't have any burning desire to use him [Pym]," says Englehart. "But Mark Gruenwald, the editor, decided after a while that he wanted him in the book, and Mark had an idea of what to change him into this time: [Marvel's answer to] Dr. Who. He described a Dr. Pym who would not be a costumed hero but would be a distinctively dressed scientist. This did not thrill me, but I had to do it—so I sat down and took a long look at him, and

came to the conclusion *he was a loser*, so maybe the storyline that could make him finally work required facing that problem head-on, rather than trying to ignore it. Thus, I brought him in as the character Mark wanted, but had a clear plan about running the character toward suicide. Obviously, he would not ultimately commit suicide, though I didn't have the exact reason for that when I started along that road; that's how I work, knowing that when it was time to solve that problem I would, and I'd have all the character development to that point in hand, which is the part that mostly interested me."

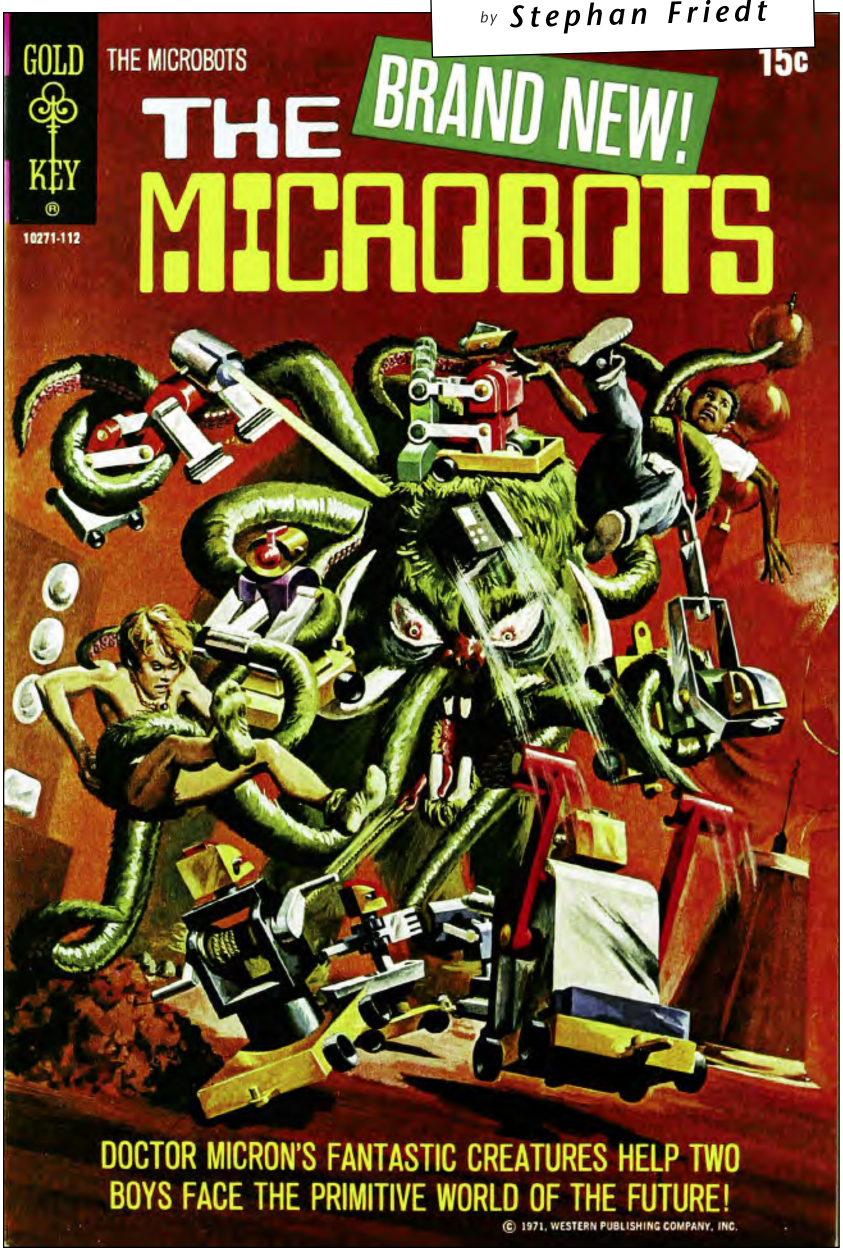
Englehart revisited Ultron's Oedipus complex in *West Coast Avengers* #7 (Apr. 1986), with a new approach. However, it was not until *West Coast Avengers* #21 (June 1987) that Pym resolved to become an Avenger again, as well as showing romantic inclinations toward teammate Espirita (a.k.a. Firebird). In *West Coast Avengers* #33 (June 1988), Englehart started a story arc entitled, knowingly, "Tales to Astonish," and with the individual story title "The Man in the Ant Hill," re-using the title of the very first Ant-Man story from *Tales to*

What'cha Gonna Do About Pym?

Brett Breeding's cover to *The Avengers* #224 (Oct. 1982), with an imprisoned Hank Pym and a mystery romance for Janet van Dyne.

HERE COME the MICROBOTS™

by Stephan Friedt



ONE-HIT WONDERS

In 1971, Kenner Toys (a division of General Mills Foods by that time) introduced a line of industrial-inspired robot toys called "The Microbots" … the first toy robot of its kind in the United States.

Kenner Products began in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1947 as the idea of the Steiner Brothers, Albert, Philip, and Joseph. The company was named after the street where the first office was located, Kenner Street. Kenner has had a long history of successful toys starting with their Bubble-matic Gun. In 1949, Kenner's Bubble Rocket sold one million units. In 1958, they led the way among toy companies with first nationwide television toy advertising, and were one of the first sponsors of *The Captain Kangaroo Show*. The next year, in 1959, they introduced the Give-A-Show Projector. In 1963, they gave the world the Easy-Bake Oven. In 1965, General Mills Foods marked their interest in toy manufacturers with their purchase of Rainbow Crafts, the originators of Play-Doh in 1956. In 1966 Kenner introduced the Spirograph, and in 1967 General Mills purchased the company. The next year General Mills bought Parker Brothers, and in 1970, Rainbow Crafts and Kenner were merged and Play-Doh became part of the toy line.

Robot toys had been around since the end of World War II, though mostly from toy manufacturers from Japan, and always as a solitary robot figure. Automation in industry had been around since the late 1930s, but the invention of the Stanford Arm in 1969 by Victor Scheinman of Stanford University, with its all-electric, six-axis articulation, brought robotics into the news and to the public's attention.

The designers at Kenner (the actual originator is lost to history and the purges of corporate mergers) decided to combine robotics and industrial construction machines, throw in miniaturization, add some magnets, and created the Microbots: "a die-cast metal mechanical action man" that's "Fun to play with and collect."

The Microbots and their abilities were as follows:

- **Fliptor:** Two spring-action arms hurl small objects forward into space.
- **Krushor:** Arms drive a hammer block to smooth out the treacherous path ahead of him.
- **Hooktor:** Hook swings back and forth; his arms move up and down.
- **Griptor:** Spring-action arms hold small objects and drop them in the tray below.

First (and Only) Issue

Kenner's robo-toys roll into a Len Wein-scripted one-shot, Gold Key's *Microbots* #1 (Dec. 1971). We're unsure of the cover painter (George Wilson, perhaps?). If you can identify this artist, please email the editor at *euryman@gmail.com* and we'll update this credit in a future issue.

FlashBack!

MARVEL VALUE STAMPS

HOW MARVEL CONVINCED FANDOM TO BUY MORE COMICS BY CUTTING THEM UP

by John "THE MEGO STRETCH HULK" Cimino

Back in 1974, comics were at an all-time low in total sales. Marvel Comics' then-head honcho Stan "The Man" Lee came up with a simple, offbeat, fun, and brilliant idea to get readers to purchase more of their comics—the infamous Marvel Value Stamps! Each month, pictures of Marvel's popular characters, both heroes and villains, were printed onto the letters pages (where Stan Lee/Bullpen printed comments, editorials, and fan mail) of its various comics from March of 1974 until November of 1975. These images appeared in the form of a numbered stamp and the readers were encouraged to both "clip 'em and collect 'em." There were 100 stamps in the set referred to as "Series A" (actually 102 if you include the unnumbered and later-numbered Hulk stamp Marvel used in the first few teasers to this event).

The whole thing was well-hyped, and I'm guessing the promotion was very compelling to the readers because they would basically have to ruin their "precious" comic books to get these stamps and stick them in their *Marvel Value Stamp Book* that they had to send away for.

A fellow collector named Richard Kolkman has a firsthand account of this book:

"I received an original 'Series A' stamp book back in the spring of 1974, and in addition to a book, an 18" x 26" poster and outer mailing envelope, there was a black-and-white offset letter from Stan Lee. The letter was one-color, had Marvel [character] heads lined up on the letterhead *a lá* old Marvelmania stationery. What I remember most was Stan's sign-off: 'Until Iron Man runs out of Rustoleum.' "

The overall plan was simple: get readers to purchase comics they didn't usually buy in order to complete the entire set. A reader would have to basically purchase everything Marvel was putting out during that particular month to get every stamp. The stamps were even reprinted in various issues at later dates to help fans get the ones that they might have missed. For example, stamp #1 was an image of Spider-Man, and it appeared in *Mighty Thor* #221 (Mar. 1974), *Power Man* #20 (Aug. 1974), and *Captain Marvel* #35 (Nov. 1974). Stamp #2 was an image of the Hulk, and that was located in the issues *Amazing Spider-Man* #130 (Mar. 1974), *Invincible Iron Man* #70 (Sept. 1974), *Giant-Size Fantastic Four* #4 (Feb. 1975), and *Captain Marvel* #41 (Nov. 1975).

Sure, it was a big-time marketing scheme to increase sales, but did it work? The editor-in-chief of Marvel at the time was Stan Lee's right-hand man, "Rascally" Roy Thomas, and this is what he has to say about it:

Clip 'Em and Collect 'Em…

…and diminish the value of your Bronze Age Marvel comic! Still, Marvel Value Stamps were a load of fun! "Series A" stamps of Iron Man (A-15), Iron Fist (A-39), Loki (A-40), and Man-Wolf (A-42).

THE CASE OF MARVEL'S FIRST WOLVERINE

A LOOK AT THE MYSTERIOUS CREATION OF MARVEL'S MOST POPULAR MUTANT!

by John "THE MEGO STRETCH HULK" Cimino

Little Man with a Big Future

Wolverine, the pint-sized powerhouse (that's why he's in this "Let's Get Small" issue, bub!), premiered in (left) the cliffhanger of *The Incredible Hulk* #180 (Oct. 1974), returning the next issue (right) for his first full appearance. (He also briefly appeared in #182.)

First appearing in the pages of* The Incredible Hulk *#180 (in the last panel), with his first full-blown appearance in* Hulk *#181 (Nov. 1974), Wolverine came out like a ferocious firecracker. No one knew anything about him other than the fact that he was Canadian, had these cool-looking claws, and was cocky enough to challenge the power of the Hulk.

VERY FEW OF US ARE WHAT WE SEEM

The origin of Wolverine, the character, was at first shrouded in mystery. There were constant questions that puzzled readers throughout the years. *How old is he? When did he get his claws? Can he die? How did he get his Adamantium skeleton? Were all his memories of his past true or implanted programs? What is his real name? Is Sabretooth his father, brother, cousin, or…? Did the Weapon X experiment really happen? Was he a mutant or a mutated wolverine?*

The questions just went on and on, as he was an enigma. Years later, Wolverine's beginnings were finally revealed in the six-issue limited series *Origin* (2001). But even after that revelation, there were still many unanswered questions. Even Wolverine himself is not sure of what is real or what has been made up.

As the readers know, this is all just comic-book fantasy rhetoric. All the mystery is fun and interesting, and it keeps the character fresh and exciting. Those are just a few reasons why this guy is so popular with fans.

But would you believe that the "real" origin of Wolverine is also as convoluted and shrouded in as much mystery as the comic stories themselves? Yes, my fellow readers, the creation and first appearance of this character has recently become an unsolved mystery unto itself in the annals of comic-collecting lore. Did you know that it *may* or *may not* have been discovered that Wolverine had appeared in an issue well before his appearance in *The Incredible Hulk*?

How can this be?, you might ask.

Well, after you read this article, you are going to have to come up with your own conclusions of where the Ol' Canuck-lehead originated.

So put on a hot pot of coffee, get your trench coat, top hat, and a pen and paper, because we have a little mystery to solve… (Where's the Scooby-Doo gang when you need 'em?)

JUST THE FACTS, MA'AM

The concept of Wolverine originally came from the mind of "Rascally" Roy Thomas. As the right-hand man and successor of Stan "The Man" Lee as the editor-in-chief of Marvel Comics, Roy had the perfect mind for the industry. First, he was a fan who loved reading comics as a kid, so when he later wrote them, his stories featured brilliant, sweeping storylines that captured the readers' imaginations and kept them coming back for more. But most importantly, he understood how the business worked.

Here is Mr. Thomas, in his own words, discussing the step-by-step process behind his creation of a character called "the Wolverine":

"As editor-in-chief of Marvel Comics in 1974, I was keenly aware that 5–10% of Marvel's sales were in Canada, and it seemed to me that we should have a Canadian hero.

"So I took Len Wein out to lunch and told him that I wanted him, in *The Incredible Hulk*, to at once introduce a character called the Wolverine. (I had had in mind possibly calling the character the Wolverine or the Badger, but I decided Wolverine was better. 'Badger' can have the unfortunate connection of simply complaining or annoying someone, while 'wolverine' even has the sound of 'wolf' in it to some extent. So Wolverine it was. Earlier, apparently, Dave Cockrum had showed me a sheet with a bunch of his space heroes, one of whom was named Wolverine … but I have no conscious memory if I was influenced by it. Anyway, nothing was done with

those characters at that time. Nor did I need anyone to tell me what a wolverine was … and Marvel had been naming heroes and villains after animals since at least Spider-Man in 1962, and that doesn't count anyone perhaps in the Golden Age.)

"I told Len I wanted him to write the character because I had liked the accent he had given Brother Voodoo earlier (Jamaican for a Haitian character, but at least it had character, and Len did it well). I gave it to him because he was a good writer, and because I was busy with plenty of other stuff just then.

"I had only three requirements of the Wolverine, all of which I gave to Len at that lunch: (1) He was Canadian, and announced as such right away. (2) He was short, because a wolverine is a small animal. (3) He had a quick temper, because wolverines are known for being fierce and taking on beasts far bigger than they are.

"I don't know if I contributed anything more to the character, or to Len's plot. That was his job. Well, since art director John Romita remembers me asking him to design a wolverine costume, I may have looked at it once or twice before Herb Trimpe drew it into the story … but I don't recall. Nor did I have any special truck with Len or Herb about the character after that. I had done my job—which included creating the general concept and name of a character called the Wolverine, who would be introduced as a villain (but, of course, at Marvel, that didn't mean he wouldn't be a hero any day now, and I wouldn't have bothered conceiving a Canadian super-character who was ONLY going to be a villain, would I? That might just annoy Canadians, when I was trying to give them an extra reason to buy Marvel comics). After that, Len did his, which included developing the Wolverine. I consider that I, Len Wein, John Romita, and Herb Trimpe are all the co-creators of the Wolverine, in that chronological order—no one else was involved, unless you want to count the colorist."

THE FURTHER ADVENTURES OF WOLVERINE

As you probably know, other writers and artists came along and had their take on Wolverine after the stories in *The Incredible Hulk* #180–182. These are the creators that further developed the character into a legend in the Marvel mythos:

- **Gil Kane:** Accidently changed Wolverine's mask on the cover of *Giant-Size X-Men* #1 (1975) from the original design that John Romita came up with and gave him that cool "Batman" look.
- **Dave Cockrum:** Came up with the idea of the claws being part of Wolverine's body and was the first to draw the mutant unmasked with his funky hairstyle and hairy chest (!).
- **John Byrne:** Modernized Wolverine and gave him the iconic look and feel that has become the standard for other artists.
- And last but certainly not least, **Chris Claremont:** Wrote and developed the heart and soul of Wolverine. He fleshed out and streamlined the past, present, and future of the character and gave him his Clint Eastwood/Dirty Harry/Outlaw Josie Wales attitude/personality/speech that comics fans adored. Claremont's work is the foundation and the benchmark of who Wolverine is, and all writers just expand on the concepts that he already laid out (he isn't called "the father of the X-Men" for nothing). Claremont's also the guy who gave Wolvie his real name: "Logan" (and that's a great name, bub).

Well, there you have it; the creation of Wolverine—this case is closed!! …Or *is* it?

THE WORLD IS FULL OF OBVIOUS THINGS WHICH NOBODY BY ANY CHANCE EVER OBSERVES

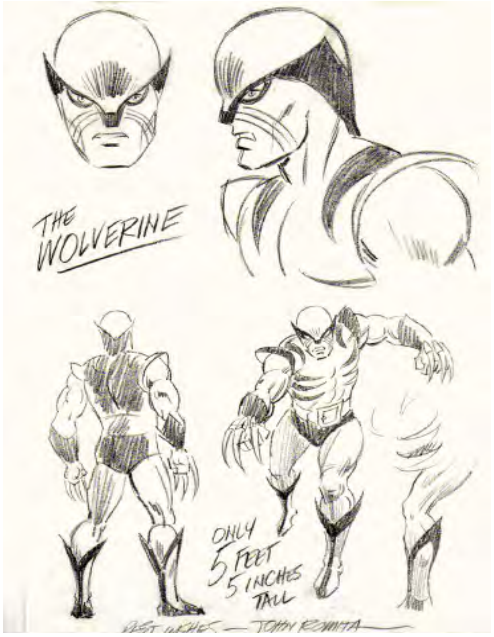
Enter *FOOM* magazine (also written as F.O.O.M. or Friends Of Ol' Marvel). Produced by Marvel Comics, *FOOM* started in 1973 and ran until 1978, for a total of 22 quarterly issues. It was initially designed and edited by superstar writer/artist Jim Steranko. *FOOM* was intended to represent a fan voice for Marvel and take it a step further from what Marvel originally did with the fanzine/catalog *Marvelmania* back in 1969 (that ran until 1971, for a total of six issues).

In *FOOM* #1 (Feb. 1973), there was a competition for readers to create their own character in the "Marvel style." Many fans who entered actually became future industry professionals such as artists Steve Rude, Hugh Haynes, Trevor von Eeden, and Tom Lyle; Marvel art director/writer/editor Mariano Nicieza; *Marvel Age* editor Steve Saffel; comic writer Stefan Petrucha; and a host of others. The winner of the contest was an artist named Michael A. Barreiro (who did some future work for Marvel and Dark Horse Comics). His "Humus Sapiens" character eventually appeared in *Thunderbolts* #55 (2001)—28 years later, due to Marvel forgetting about the contest entirely (!).

Before Marvel's first Canadian hero made his legendary debut, *FOOM* #2 (Summer 1973) presented the first of two double-page spreads of submitted fan art. While many concepts had interesting

First Looks

(left) John Romita, Sr.'s original character designs for Wolverine. Hulk artist Herb Trimpe worked from these designs. (right) Andy Olsen's "The Wolverine" submission from *FOOM* #2.



SHRINKING ROLES AND SHORTER FEATURES:

The Atom in the Bronze Age

FlashBack

by John Trumbull

The Wedding of Ray Palmer and Jean Loring (top) This double-page spread from *Justice League of America* #157 (Aug. 1978) depicted the Tiny Titan's wedding. Even the Phantom Stranger showed up! Art by Dick Dillin and Frank McLaughlin. In case those ghostly superhero images weren't enough to identify the JLAers' alter egos, this key (bottom), in the same issue, told readers who's who.

The Atom debuted in* Showcase *#34 (Sept.–Oct. 1961) in a story by Gardner Fox and Gil Kane. Like the Flash, Green Lantern, and Hawkman before him, the Atom was a revival of a Golden Age hero given a science-fiction spin by editor Julius "Julie" Schwartz. Ivy Town physicist Ray Palmer uncovers the secret of size reduction by combining the matter of a white dwarf star with ultraviolet light, but he cannot stabilize the reaction enough to keep the compressed objects from exploding. When caught in a cave-in on a nature hike, Ray desperately tries to find a way out for his students. Finding only a tiny opening in the cave wall, Ray shrinks himself to six inches, hoping to expand the opening enough for the others to escape. To his surprise, Ray survives his suicide mission, discovering that some unknown factor in his genetic makeup helps him withstand the shrinking process. Creating a costume of white-dwarf-star fibers to control his size changes, Ray Palmer becomes the crime-fighting Atom.

Named by editor Schwartz after science-fiction editor Raymond A. Palmer and modeled by artist Kane after actor Robert Taylor, the Atom quickly distinguished himself among DC's stable of superheroes. He captured criminals to aid his girlfriend Jean Loring's law career, in the hopes that she would someday accept one of his many marriage proposals. He fought supervillains such as Chronos the Time-Thief, Jason Woodrue the Floronic Man, and the Bug-Eyed Bandit. He took periodic time-trips in his friend Professor Alpheus Hyatt's Time Pool. He joined DC's preeminent superteam in *Justice League of America* #14 (Sept. 1962), headlined his own title, and made the leap to television in animated adventures from Filmation in 1967. Near the end of the Silver Age, slumping sales reduced the Atom into sharing space with his Justice League cohort Hawkman, as *The Atom* became *The Atom and Hawkman* from #39–45 (Nov. 1968–Nov. 1969). After the merged series was canceled, the Atom appropriately spent much of the '70s and the '80s in smaller roles and shorter features.

BRONZE AGE BEGINNINGS

For much of the Bronze Age, Atom fans could count on his semi-regular appearances in the pages of the *Justice League of America*. Since the *Atom and Hawkman* series ended with Ray Palmer's fiancée Jean Loring suffering a nervous breakdown, *JLA* was the logical place to tie up that loose end. In *Justice League of America* #80 (May 1970), "Night of the Soul-Stealer!" by Denny O'Neil and Dick Dillin, Hawkman and Hawkgirl determine that Jean is "beyond any Earth-type help" and try to cure her insanity on their home planet Thanagar. Unfortunately, their ship is intercepted en route by Norch Lor, a Thanagarian, who steals their souls in an ancient "Ghenna Box." As Norch Lor journeys to Earth, he manages to also capture the souls of Batman and Green Arrow. It all

The Many Faces of Ray Palmer

(left) Sci-fi editor and the Atom's namesake Raymond A. Palmer. (center) Actor Robert Taylor, upon whose looks artist Gil Kane patterned the face of (right) DC's Ray Palmer, seen here from the Atom's origin in *Showcase* #34.

Ray Palmer/the Atom TM & © DC Comics.

leads to a suspenseful climax where the Atom launches himself out of an airlock without a spacesuit to retrieve the Ghenna Box in the ten seconds before he succumbs to exposure.

Justice League of America #81 (June 1970), reveals that Norch Lor actually has noble intentions: He is stealing souls to protect Thanagar from the true villain, the Jest-Master, who is triggering bouts of insanity throughout the galaxy. When the JLAers enter the region of space under the Jest-Master's influence, they discover that Jean is becoming more rational while they go berserk. Using Jean's stability to lead them through the insanity field, the Leaguers reach the villain's headquarters. There, the Atom uses his size-changing powers to make the Jest-Master doubt his own sanity, resulting in his defeat and a permanent cure for Jean's insanity. When a sobbing Jean is asked what's wrong, she responds, "*Nothing* … and that's why I'm *crying!*—for *joy!* I'm *myself* again—I'm *cured!*"

JLA artist Dick Dillin also illustrated a story by Elliot S. Maggin in *World's Finest Comics* #213 (Aug.–Sept. 1972), as the Atom and Superman team up to save a sub-atomic world inside a telephone wire. At the end, as Superman muses on the life-and-death decisions he regularly has to make, an impressed Ray Palmer reflects: "I always thought *Superguy* was just a muscle-bound enforcer of *his* definition of *justice!* Never knew he was so … *sensitive!* I respect him a lot more now!"

DICK DILLIN

Photo by Alan Light.

The Atom often made vital contributions to the JLA's adventures. In *Justice League of America* #94 (Nov. 1971), when the archer Merlyn shoots Superman with an arrow that gradually increases the pull of gravity, the Atom saves the Man of Steel's life by enlarging the arrow with his size-changing belt until it explodes. *Justice League of America* #112 (Aug. 1974) shows the Atom having the brainstorm of using the League's android foe Amazo to regain the team's lost powers. And in *JLA* #115 (Feb. 1975), the Atom again wins the day when he has the JLA exchange powers with each other.

In *Detective Comics* #432 (Feb. 1973), when one of Jean Loring's clients vanishes on the witness stand, the Atom uses Professor Hyatt's Time Pool to follow him back to October 8, 1871. The time-travelling fugitive accidentally causes the Great Chicago Fire while trying to escape from the Mighty Mite. Artist Murphy Anderson provides a solid art job, spelling out "ATOM" in the panels of page one and giving Ray Palmer muttonchops that would put Monkee Mike Nesmith to shame.

Elliot Maggin went on to write several more Atom tales in alternating issues of *Action Comics*. With *JLA*'s Dick Dillin on art chores, these backups put new twists on several old plot devices from the Atom's solo series: Helping Jean Loring clear an innocent client in #425 (July 1973), fighting Chronos in #427 (Sept. 1973), being mistaken for his own action figure in #430 (Dec. 1973), discovering a creature from a sub-atomic world in #443 (Mar. 1974), and being tempted to tell Jean his secret identity in #435 (May 1974).

Martin Pasko took over writing the Atom's solo adventures with *Action Comics* #438–439 (Aug.–Sept. 1974). In #438's "The Man Who Tape-Recorded the Atom!," rival scientist Dr. Myles Adrian's own experiments in size-changing have trapped him at five feet tall. Adrian cleverly captures the Atom by turning his old telephone-travelling trick against him, trapping him on the cassette of an answering machine. In #439's "Danger in Two Dimensions!," Dr. Adrian gains the power to shrink horizontally, reducing himself to "a '*two-dimensional*' man with *height* and *depth* but no visible width." Pasko continued to write the Atom feature through *Action Comics* #454 (Dec. 1975), with various artists illustrating. The Atom guest-starred with Superman again in *Action Comics* #455 (Jan. 1976). In a full-length story by Maggin and Curt Swan, the Tiny Titan enters the bottle city of Kandor and compares notes on size-changing with the miniaturized Kryptonians inside.

One of the Atom's most memorable Bronze Age adventures occurred in a team-up with Batman in *The Brave and the Bold* #115 (Oct.–Nov. 1974). In Bob Haney and Jim Aparo's "The Corpse That Wouldn't Die!," Batman is left clinically dead by an electrical shock on page five, and the Atom devises a plan to shrink down and take a fantastic voyage straight to Batman's brain. Receiving signals from a camera on Batman's chest, the Atom operates Batman by remote control, stomping on the appropriate areas of his brain to implant ideas and stimulate motor responses. Together, the two heroes defeat the villains and rescue the damsel in distress. Despite writer Bob Haney's trademark distain for continuity (the normally six-foot Ray Palmer is boosted up to six-foot-two in one caption), there's no denying that this is one of the standout stories of the Atom's entire history.

TINY TITAN, TEAM PLAYER

As the 1970s rolled on, the Atom continued popping up in the DC Universe whenever a hero needed a hand. The Tiny Titan monitors the Amazing Amazon in *Wonder Woman* #220 (Oct.–Nov. 1975), as she strives to regain her JLA membership, defeating the Atom's old foe, Chronos. In Bob Haney and Dick Dillin's *World's Finest* #236 (Mar. 1976), the Atom guest stars in a Superman/Batman team-up as a little girl and a heroic cop are both stricken with a mysterious disease. The Mighty Mite fights off the microbes inside the body of the girl while an infected Batman struggles to find the disease carrier. Elliot S. Maggin's and José Luis García-López's "Seven-Foot-Two … and Still Growing!" from *Superman* #302 (Aug. 1976) displays the Atom's status as the DC Universe's go-to guy for size changes when he helps defeat Lex Luthor's scheme to make the Man of Steel grow uncontrollably.

A two-part team-up by Bob Haney and Jim Aparo begins in *The Brave and the Bold* #129 (Sept. 1976) and features the Atom with

ACTION COMICS AND TEAM-UPS

1977's *Five-Star Super-Hero Spectacular* saw the Atom once again use Professor Hyatt's Time Pool to solve a historical mystery, as the Tiny Titan journeys back in time to 1876 and saves the life of Alexander Graham Bell, just in time for the telephone's debut. And in *Showcase* #100 (May 1978), the Atom teams up with every other hero who debuted in the pages of that venerable anthology book. As co-writer Paul Kupperberg recently recalled: "We did *Crisis on Infinite Earths* in 38 pages AND left everybody alive and well at the end!" [***Editor's note:*** For more on *Showcase* #100, see *BACK ISSUE* #69's "Showcase Centenary" article.]

In *Action Comics* #487 (Sept. 1978), "Miniature War of the Bat-Knights!," Bob Rozakis became the first writer to explore the married life of Ray and Jean after their marriage in *JLA* #157. Newlyweds Ray and Jean Palmer return to the cavern where Ray first shrunk to tiny size, but she is soon captured by Atom's old foes, the Bat-Knights, who wish to learn the Atom's size-changing secrets. Rozakis enjoyed writing the Palmers as a married couple: "I saw [Ray and Jean's] relationship the same way I saw those of Ralph and Sue Dibny [Mr. and Mrs. Elongated Man] and Carter and Shiera Hall [Hawkman and Hawkgirl/Hawkwoman], that of a happily married couple. They would have problems from time to time, but they were in love with each other and worked together and supported one another. Unfortunately (for Ray and Jean, mostly), subsequent writers didn't agree."

The Batman/Atom team reunites in *The Brave and the Bold* #152 (July 1979) in another story by Bob Haney and Jim Aparo. While the Atom doesn't dance on Batman's medulla oblongata this time around, the heroes *do* beat up a bunch of henchmen in lederhosen, and really, isn't that enough? The Atom has another crisis of confidence during his team-up with Superman in *DC Comics Presents* #15 (Nov. 1979) when he develops a sudden fear of shrinking, but the Man of Steel helps him through it with a bit of well-intentioned Silver Age-style trickery in a tale by Cary Bates and Joe Staton. The Atom returns to the pages of *DCCP* in issue #51 (Nov. 1982), where he tries to prevent Superman's apparent death in the 1800s. This story is notable to longtime Atom readers for Professor Hyatt finally learning about the Atom's secret trips in his Time Pool [***Editor's note:*** Writer Dan Mishkin discusses this story further in *BACK ISSUE* #66].

Since Jean Loring's mental breakdown was resolved in the pages of *Justice League of America*, the Atom returned the favor by resolving an old *JLA* plot thread in *Detective Comics* #489 (Apr. 1980), as he rescues the offspring of the alien Dharlu from the JLA's computer banks in a five-pager by Bob Rozakis and Alex Saviuk.

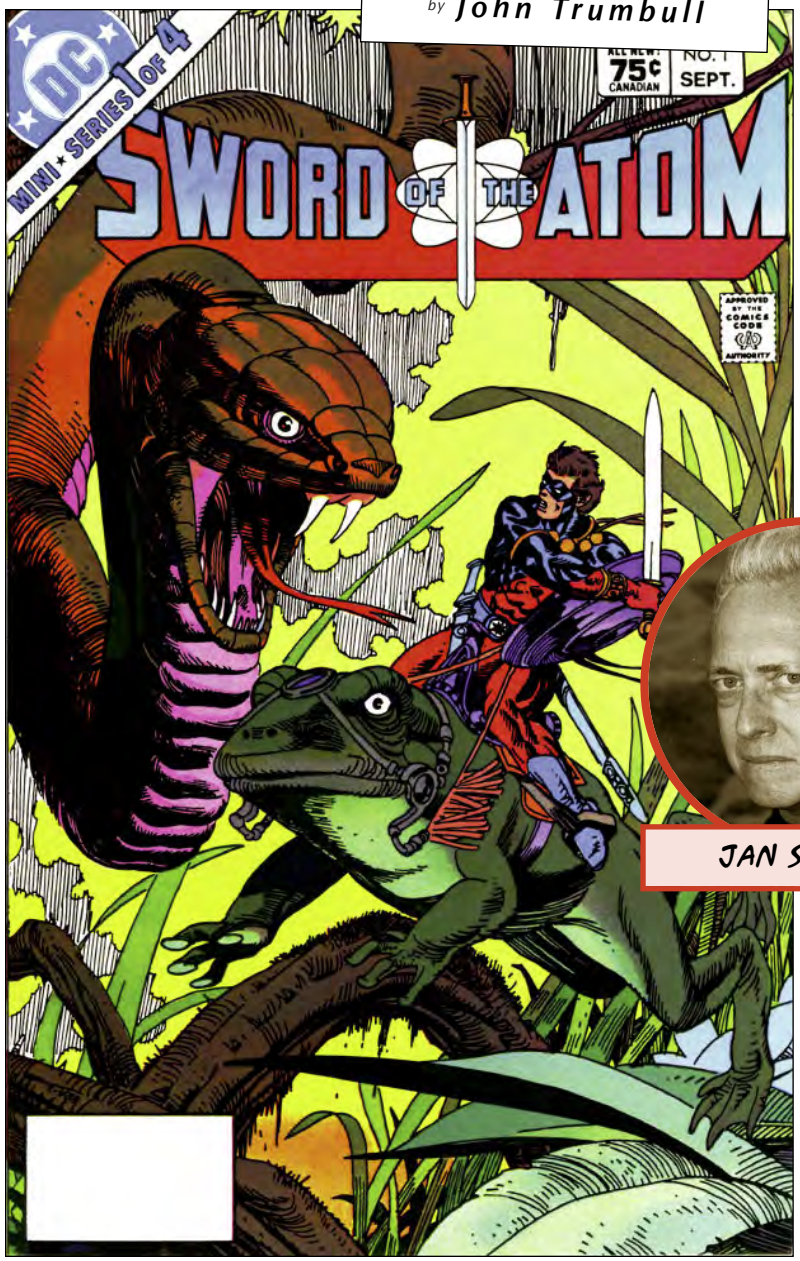
The Atom received another regular berth in the DC Universe in *Action Comics*, appearing in a backup feature by Rozakis and Saviuk, starting with #511 (Sept. 1980). Although he still wasn't appearing monthly, the Atom alternated appearances with fellow superheroes Aquaman and Air Wave. Rozakis says, "I don't recall

To Tell the Truth?

Writer Gerry Conway nicely conveys Ray Palmer's hesitancy to reveal his alter ego to his bride-to-be in this two-page opening sequence from *JLA* #155.

SWORDS, SORCERY, AND SIZE-CHANGING: SWORD OF THE ATOM™

by John Trumbull



FlashBacks

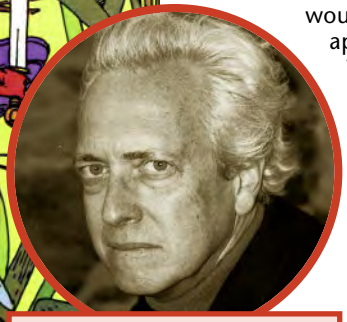
In 1983, the World's Smallest Superhero needed some big changes. Although he was still sporadically appearing in both *Justice League of America* and *Action Comics*, nothing huge had happened to the Atom in years. At the same time, DC Comics needed to publish a full-blown Atom comic in order to retain the trademark. While normally an appearance in *DC Comics Presents* or *The Brave and the Bold* would've done the trick, this time around a new approach was taken. The resulting four-issue *Sword of the Atom* miniseries not only took the Atom out of the mainstream DC Universe, but out of the superhero genre altogether!

Although you might expect that such a radical shift to come from someone brand new to the Atom, it instead came from one of the Mighty Mite's co-creators: Gil Kane (1926–2000). As Kane recalled in *Amazing Heroes* #28 (August 1, 1983): "What I decided was that we might resurrect him as a sword-and-sorcery character, and in effect we would have all his qualities except that he would be frozen at the six-inch size and would have to deal with all the dangers that a strip set in the Amazon could provide."

Sword of the Atom writer Jan Strnad remembers: "Gil pitched it to me in a hallway at a comic-book convention in Dallas. He said that DC needed to do something with the Atom in order to keep their trademark, and that he'd pitched them an idea casting the Atom as a barbarian hero, a miniseries called 'Sword of the Atom.' The Atom would be lost in the Florida Everglades, trapped at six inches, and the top of his cowl would be ripped off. He would find an alien civilization of people his same height and fall in love with an alien princess. And they would ride around on frogs and fight with swords.

"[Gil] asked if I'd like to write it and I said, 'Sure!' I'd grown up reading *The Atom* and loved it, mainly due to Gil's phenomenal artwork. The idea of being able to collaborate with one of my childhood idols was mind-blowing."

Kane was likewise an admirer of Jan Strnad's writing, as he said to *Amazing Heroes*: "At the convention I met Jan for the first time and I liked him right away. I felt his quality would be right, a turnaway from the standard approaches to writing superhero material. There was always a great deal of character and mood in his work, and very often an emphasis on stillness: his writing didn't always have characters in action, but there was always something happening to them.



JAN STRNAD

"Jan was a good guy [for the series] because his sensibility is not a comic-book sensibility. I have a comic-book sensibility, so it's good that somebody is free of it. My feeling is that what Jan brought in is a more worldlier conception. He has a point of view that I think is believable and compassionate; it's humane and at the same time, it's literate."

Strnad did make some adjustments to Kane's initial concept: "I moved the location to the Amazon because it's much bigger than the Everglades and I figured it would be easier for Ray to be lost there, given that various superheroes

Hopping into Action

Gil Kane's cover to the sleeper hit, *Sword of the Atom* #1 (Sept. 1983).

the alien princess, whom I named 'Laethwen,' having a boyfriend, but I couldn't imagine that a beautiful alien princess wouldn't already have someone in her life. I wanted *that* relationship to be interesting, so I made them star-crossed lovers from different stations in life. Her boyfriend, Taren, was essentially a slave to Laethwen's father, Caellich."

Of course, introducing a new love interest for the Atom in Princess Laethwen meant that something had to change between Ray Palmer and his wife, Jean. Strnad didn't find this very difficult to accomplish. In fact, he found the basis of the Palmers' split in the very thing that first brought them together: Ray's second career as a superhero.

"It was given if, according to Gil's pitch, Ray was going to fall in love with an alien princess," Strnad says. "I had to set Ray up for that, which meant breaking up Ray and Jean. It wasn't much of a challenge, actually. Even as a kid, I knew that Ray and Jean had a wonky relationship, and it was all Ray's fault.

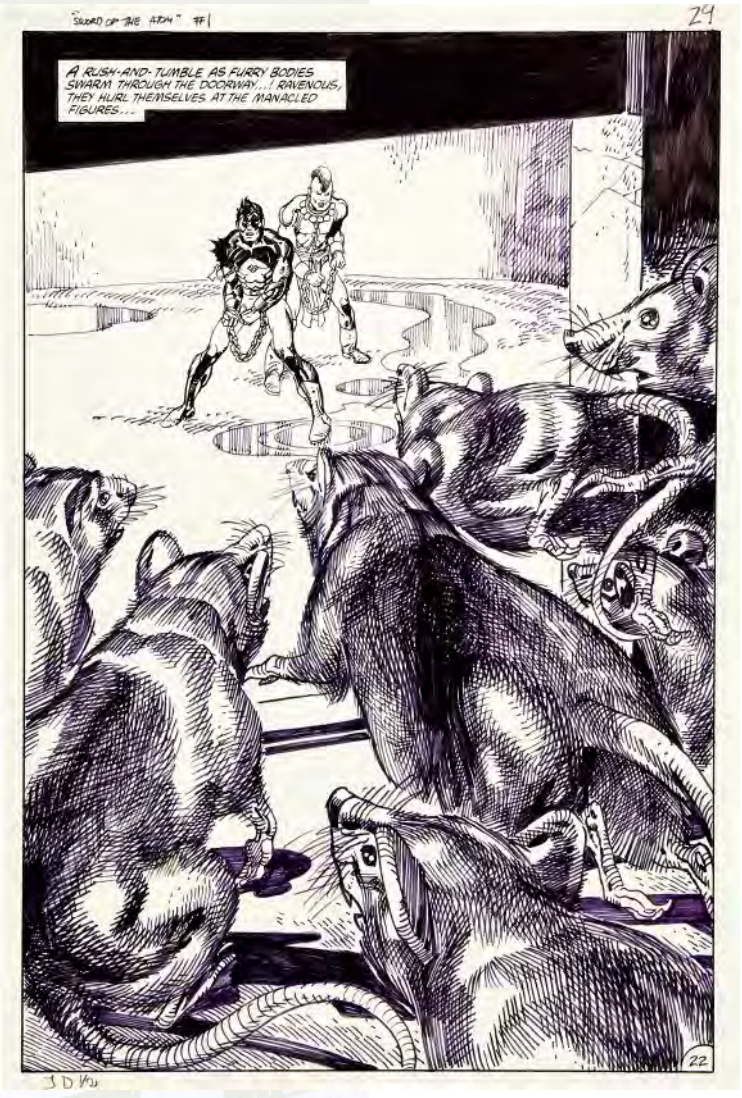
"First, he was wrapped up in his work and continually missing dates, even dates in which he planned to propose to her. I just continued this trait. More importantly, though, there was a black hole of secrecy between them. He was a *superhero*, for chris'sakes, but he didn't tell her for the longest time. Instead, he worked behind the scenes to solve her cases for her and let her establish a career as a brilliant attorney, while hiding from her the fact that he had superpowers and spent a good deal of his time fighting villains, traveling through time, and having adventures that he never told her about."

Strnad continues, "I'm married. I'm *very* married. I can't buy a pair of jeans without my wife knowing about it. I can't imagine the level of deception it would take to lead a double life as a superhero without my girlfriend having a clue.

"So eventually [in *Justice League of America* #157, Aug. 1978], Ray tells Jean the whole story (in the most shocking way possible, shrinking before her eyes, pretty much ensuring that she'll faint), they get married, and everything's supposed to be roses after that? I don't think so. This is a couple with problems and those problems aren't going away because they exchange wedding rings."

How did fans react to Jean's affair? "Some readers got pretty steamed that Jean would be tempted by another man, someone who actually paid attention to her," Strnad informs *BACK ISSUE*. "I saw it as virtually inevitable. Remember that, at this time, bringing a dose of reality into a superhero comic wasn't standard procedure. Not that I was the only person doing it or the first, not by a longshot, but it was still shocking enough to raise some hackles from people who thought, 'Jean would never cheat on Ray!'"

The Palmers separating wasn't the only shock that the *Sword of the Atom* miniseries had in store. The Atom also got a modified outfit for the jungle environment, losing the top of his mask, darkening the uniform's blue, and adding a loincloth, boots, neckpiece, and wristbands. While some longtime Atom fans protested the changes to the Atom's classic look, Kane was almost blasé about it: "They find that the desecration of the Atom's costume is like writing something terrible on a church wall. Listen, I figure that since I created the original costume, I giveth and I taketh away: I want to take off the top of this helmet, I take off the top of his helmet."



SWORD OF THE ATOM #2: A CHOICE OF DOOMS

In the second issue (Oct. 1983), Taren and the Atom are conscripted to become gladiators in Morlaidh's arenas, with their first match against each other. But Taren has been ensured to lose, having been blinded before the match. As the crowd rebels against this savagery, the Atom, Taren, and Princess Laethwen take advantage of the confusion and escape into the jungle.

On the run with his new allies, the Atom learns the history of the unusual culture of which he finds himself a part: Morlaidh was founded several decades before as an interstellar penal colony. Without technological support from its home planet, the Katarthan society has separated into warring tribes and fallen into barbarism. King Caellich is attempting to unite the warring factions, but his advisor Deraegis insists that this can only be done through conquest. Unknown to Caellich, Deraegis is plotting against him in a bid to seize power.

As Deraegis works to turn the people against their king, the Atom and his friends join Taren's band of rebels, including the archer, Voss. Taren, knowing that his blindness in the jungle is the equivalent of a death sentence, asks the Atom to assume leadership of the rebels. The Atom agrees, but both he and Laethwen are growing worried over the increasingly morose Taren.

Meanwhile, back in Ivy Town, Jean Loring attempts to adjust in the weeks following Ray Palmer's presumed death. Growing lonely in a large, silent house, she invites Paul Hoben over to console her.

SWORD OF THE ATOM #3: MOURNING'S END

Issue #3 (Nov. 1983) shows the Atom assuming command of Taren's men, despite the misgivings of Voss the archer. King Caellich's advisor Deraegis tries to persuade the king to energize the Katarthan's long-shut-down star drive, arguing that it would increase their power and make them the masters of the jungle. Back in Ivy Town, Jean harbors doubts over Ray's death and is compelled to go to South America to search for him.

Rats!

Big trouble for little fellas—*SOTA* #1's cliffhanger. Original Gil Kane art courtesy of Heritage Comics Auctions (*www.ha.com*).

INNER-SPACE OPERA

A LOOK AT MARVEL'S MICRONAUTS™ COMICS

by James Heath Lantz

It began as an American import of a Japanese toy line and blossomed into a comics saga that spanned two universes. The Micronauts went from plastic to the comic pages as a cult favorite among fans. This article will explore what the creative minds at Marvel Comics did with the mighty mini-heroes.

MICRO BEGINNINGS

To look at the Micronauts in comics, one must first know the story behind the toys that paved the way for the action-packed panels of the tiny space adventurers. In 1972, Takara (known as TOMY in English and K.K. Takara-Tomy in Japanese since 2006) released a futuristic variant of their Combat Joe line (their version of G.I. Joe they had licensed from Hasbro) called Henshin Cyborg, which means Transforming Cyborg. To cut expenses of making the eight- and 12-inch figures in this series, a smaller version called Microman was released in 1974. What made Microman unique was that the characters were marketed as being the actual size of the miniature bionic aliens from a fictional place called Micro Earth. The first group of toys were part of a kit that needed to be assembled. They proved to be so popular that Microman became a spin-off of Henshin Cyborg.

The Mego Corporation, a company founded in the early 1950s by David Abrams, had been known primarily for making dime-store toys until 1971. That was the year Abrams' son Martin had purchased the rights to do action figures of characters from popular media such as *Star Trek* and the Marvel and DC Comics properties. In 1976, Mego had imported the Takara Microman series to the United States under the name Micronauts to aid Takara in paying for the production of Microman in Japan, which was costly for them in spite of their popularity. The Micronauts were extremely lucrative for Mego, with a total of five series of action figures, vehicles, and play sets. Yet the company was forced to file bankruptcy in 1982 and ceased to exist a year later. This is perhaps due to competitor Kenner's success with its *Star Wars* action figures, a license Mego had turned down. While Mego's refusal to do toys of Luke Skywalker and friends had little effect on sales at first, their *Moonraker*, *The Black Hole*,

From Out of Inner Space

Detail from the cover of *Micronauts* #1 (Jan. 1979), by Dave Cockrum and Al Milgrom. (inset) The first and other early issues were bundled in three-packs and distributed to various outlets in polybags like this one.

and *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* dolls proved to be less successful than George Lucas' sci-fi icons' plastic counterparts.

We now move through time to the year 1977. The rings of Uranus are discovered. NASA's first space shuttle, *Enterprise*, named after the fictional vessel from *Star Trek*, is launched with the cast of the science-fiction television series present at lift-off. Elvis Presley performs his last concert less than two months before his death. The weekly comic *2000AD* releases its first issue in the United Kingdom. Fleetwood Mac's album *Rumours* comes out in record stores. *Annie Hall*, *Saturday Night Fever*, and *Star Wars* dominate the cinema box offices. The self-titled pilot episode of the live-action television series based on Marvel's *The Incredible Hulk*, starring Bill Bixby and Lou Ferrigno, makes its broadcast debut.

BILL MANTLO

MANTLO BEGINNINGS

Christmas of that year was like any other in Long Island, New York. There were lights and decorations all around. A snowman or two stood in front lawns to greet passersby. Family and friends gathered around brightly lit, colorful trees to sing the songs of the holiday. The home of William and Nancy Mantlo was no exception to these festive traditions. What made this Yuletide time different from any other was that their son Bill, a writer for Marvel Comics, had been struck with inspiration.

Born on November 9, 1951 (coincidentally, the same day as television's Incredible Hulk Lou Ferrigno), William Timothy "Bill" Mantlo had been a voracious reader and comics fan at a young age. This led to an interest in art, with Bill attending Manhattan's High School of Art and Design with a focus on painting and photography at Cooper Union School of Art. After graduation, Bill began doing various odd jobs, including portrait photographer. In 1974, college friend Annette Kawecki called Bill. Kawecki worked as a letterer—something Bill's wife Karen Mantlo (née Pocock) would later do from time to time—for Marvel Comics. They were looking for someone to do paste-ups and mechanicals for them. According to the book *Mantlo: A Life in Comics* by David Yurkovich and Michael Mantlo, Bill had described it as "the most mindless production work there is."

Having seen the goings-on behind the scenes at Marvel, Bill Mantlo had lost interest in drawing comics. Artists and writers were arguing and discussing the books, and some scribes could not make deadlines. This was something that Mantlo could not understand. To him, the work didn't seem that difficult, especially when he considered what Marvel was putting on newsstands in that period.

Editor Tony Isabella gave Mantlo his first writing job as scripter for a horror tale titled "The Fire Within." It was intended for the black-and-white magazine under Marvel's Curtis imprint (named for Curtis Circulation Company, LLC, a distributor and affiliated company of Marvel at the time) *Tales of the Zombie*, but it was never published due to the book's cancellation. Yet one day, Isabella was in a panic. He ran into production manager John Verpoorten's office needing someone to script overnight a "Sons of the Tiger" story he had plotted for *Deadly Hands of Kung Fu*. Isabella had been caught up in deadlines and could not do it himself. Verpoorten could not give him any writer at the time without interfering with other authors' schedules. This would have forced Isabella to pen it himself had Bill Mantlo not said, "Tony, I'll do it."

That phrase and some minor editorial changes led to Mantlo's first published work. In addition to the start of a noteworthy run on *Deadly Hands Of Kung Fu* with George Pérez, the 13-page "Tigers in the Mind Cage!" was the beginning of Mantlo's career as a comics writer for Marvel. His speed and reliability gave him the reputation of "fill-in king" for the House of Ideas. He would work on issues of such titles as *X-Men*, *Thor*, *Fantastic Four*, and *Avengers* before doing substantial cycles of tales on books like *Spectacular Spider-Man*, *Incredible Hulk*, and another cult favorite based on a popular toy, *ROM: Spaceknight*. Mantlo would also co-create the White Tiger, comics' first Puerto Rican superhero, with George Pérez; and *Swords of the Swashbucklers* with Jackson Guice, with whom Mantlo later worked on issues of *Micronauts*.

Returning to Christmas 1977, Bill's son Adam had opened his Christmas presents with the typical enthusiasm a child has when tearing open wrapping paper like the Incredible Hulk on a rampage. Four of the boy's gifts caught Bill's eye. The Micronauts figures Space Glider, Time Traveler, Acroyear, and Galactic Warrior began giving him ideas and concepts for a new series. One week later, Mantlo walked into new editor-in-chief Jim Shooter's office to convince him to get the rights from Mego to do a book. Shooter's first act as head honcho at Marvel was to ask for new ideas from creators. Mantlo then gave Shooter his *Micronauts* proposal and began working.

Golden Years

And you thought *your* backyard was a mess! Courtesy of Heritage (*www.ha.com*), signed Golden/Rubenstein original art page to *Micronauts* #2 (Feb. 1979).

The Kane Mutiny

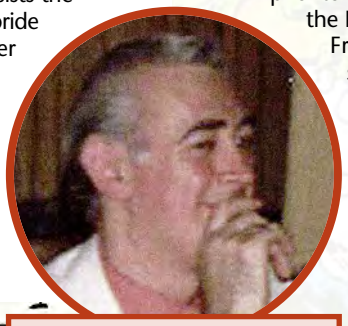
Despite his history drawing DC's Lilliputian Lawman, the Atom, artist Gil Kane never felt quite at home as the *Micronauts* artist. From Heritage, original art to the splash page of *Micronauts* #44 (Aug. 1982), with Kane breakdowns finished by several inkers (see credits).

RAISING KANE

Once again the Micronauts found their way back to the giant planet Earth as Keith Giffen (*Justice League*), Greg LaRocque (*Flash*), John Garcia (Warren's *Creepy* and *Eerie*), and Steve Ditko provided visuals for their adventures.

Not content to have the Micronauts still alive on Earth, Prince Argon uses Karza's Body Banks to make street urchin Iann-23 into a living adaptable weapon named Huntarr. Huntarr is sent to Earth to kill the Micronauts when the fearsome foursome the Death Squad fails to do so. Their battlegrounds included an elementary school and the X-Men's Danger Room, where the teleporting mutant Nightcrawler assists the Micronauts. Meanwhile, Argon's future bride Slug has joined the rebellion against her former beloved. This results in her being captured along with Prince Pharoid.

Issue #38 (Feb. 1982) marked a significant change in how the *Micronauts* series was released. It was among the first in Marvel's titles to experiment with a new format in the then-fledgling direct sales market for comic shops, with no advertisements and 32 pages of story. While that issue delved into Commander Rann's past with mentor Baron Karza, and Bug and Acroyear's first meeting, the next one, drawn by the aforementioned Steve Ditko, explained how readers can buy *Micronauts* while Commander Rann and his team try to fight Force Commander's new comrades, the Acroyear soldiers, and repair the *Endeavor* to return to the Microverse.



GIL KANE

After the series of fill-ins, Gil Kane (*Green Lantern*, *Amazing Spider-Man*) became regular artist on *Micronauts* for six issues beginning with #40 (Apr. 1982). Kane also drew the backup tale with Bug and Acroyear two issues prior to his first one. The Mantlo/Kane run found the Micronauts teaming up with the Thing, Franklin Richards, and the Wasp while seeking aid from the Fantastic Four and Avengers to return to the Microverse after losing the *Endeavor* in the gargantuan sewers of New York City. Foes at this point in the series included Dr. Doom, Arcade, Computrex, the undead Professor Prometheus, and Dr. Nemesis. Marionette, Acroyear, and Bug are sent back to the Microverse by Nemesis, while Commander Rann, believing the trio were killed by Nemesis, remains on Earth with Devil, Microtron, and Nanotron.

As Rann's group tries to return to the Microverse, Marionette's squad is in the midst of the rebellion against the princess' dictatorial brother. Slug and Pharoid are prisoners in the Pleasure Pit, with Argon's betrothed forced to switch minds with the aged sycophant Duchess Belladonna, a character first shown in the Mantlo/Golden run. However, when the newly young Belladonna realizes Argon, who is now more monster than man, merely wanted the marry the duchess in Slug's body to bring down the rebellion's morale, she and Slug join forces to aid Pharoid and the underground led by Princess Mari, Acroyear, and Bug.

Speaking of morale, Arcturus Rann's is low. He blames himself for the loss of his teammates. Devil, in the meantime, has gone from fun-loving Tropican to a raging savage. This aids the stranded Micronauts on occasion. Yet it gets increasingly difficult to calm Devil as he continues to be on Earth. Only a recording the song of Fireflyte stored in Microtron's database seems to soothe the animalistic Micronaut.

While Gil Kane loved the concepts and felt Bill Mantlo's ideas first rate, he found *Micronauts*, in his words from an article in the magazine *Amazing Heroes* #7, "The hardest book I ever drew." Kane spent his first week on *Micronauts* shuffling through material to find the characters. He noted that the series' success depended on it being true to Mantlo's ideas and instincts. Mantlo himself became frustrated because he felt Kane wasn't following the plots given to him. Issue #45 was the last *Micronauts* story for Gil Kane. Luke McDonnell and Mike Vosburg provided fill-in art for the next two issues which had Commander Rann, Devil, Microtron, and Nanotron's next adventure on an island inhabited by beings from the Microverse called the Soul Survivors, named for the fact that they are vampires who drink souls instead of blood. Commander Rann and Biotron had first encountered the Soul Survivors on their 1000-year mission exploring the Microverse. The pair from the *Endeavor* had an extremely pro-

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BURIED TREASURES IN DC'S REPRINT DIGESTS

by John Wells

Although remembered primarily as a vehicle for reprints, the DC Comics digest line also boasted a bit of new content beyond their original covers. That extended back to its first offering in the format *Tarzan Digest* #1, published in July of 1972.

Technically speaking, the stories in this 50-cent, 160-page issue weren't new but they *were* new to comic books. Specifically, the adventures encompassed a year's worth of *Tarzan* Sunday newspaper strips by Russ Manning that had originally run from January 14, 1968 to January 5, 1969. Abandoning the original layout of the strips, editor Marv Wolfman shrank or enlarged each panel to fit the digest format, typically using three panels to a page with occasional full-page images and two-page spreads.

Preparing a dummy of the digest, Wolfman detailed in *The Menomonee Falls Gazette* #39 (September 11, 1972) that he had shipped it off to DC's production department: "In the meantime, because there were many pictures shot up or down to certain sizes, I had the lettering on those pages and panels shot to the same size as the rest of the book so all the lettering would be one size only—nothing jumping up or down.

"The entire book was then pasted up by Glynis Wein [Len's wife], and given over to Steve Mitchell, who did extensions on all the panels. Since we were fitting into a certain size, where the art did not reach the border, we added drawings—sometimes as little as a tree—or as much as a figure being completed." Elizabeth Ann Safian and Jerry Serpe colored the comic.

The original plan had been to use Burne Hogarth *Tarzan* strips from the 1940s in the digest, but that idea was quickly abandoned. "We had a limited number of Hogarth stats that were in good condition, and it would have been more of a problem than it was worth to try to do a digest with them," Wolfman wrote. Instead, a 1942 Hogarth sequence was used to ostensibly help Joe Kubert catch up on the regular *Tarzan* comic book in issue #211. As Wolfman noted, the extensive reformatting process ultimately saved Kubert little time.

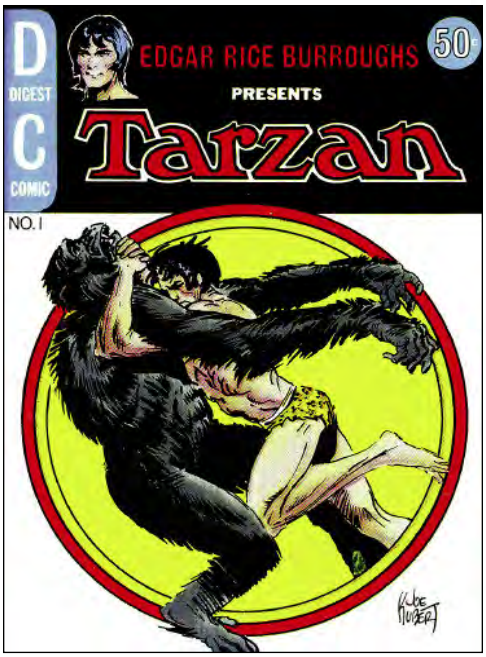
Courtesy of Tarzan copyright holder ERB, Inc., stats of Manning Sundays from 1968 to January 1972 were delivered to Wolfman. He chose the first year's worth because "they worked within a continuity and would be an ideal page number when broken down." The editor did depart from that continuity by running the third Sunday story to open the book. With much of the material taking place in hidden kingdoms, Wolfman wanted the issue to at least open in familiar jungle territory and the sequence in question fit the bill. Consequently, the final page of the digest led directly into its first.

Like the Tarzan book, *Laurel and Hardy Digest* #1 would have drawn on preexisting material, in this case comics prepared for the British *Laurel and Hardy Extra* title over the past four years. While DC managed to get the regular-sized *Larry Harmon's Laurel and Hardy* #1 (July–Aug. 1972) into print, its digest companion—and any further issues of the 20-cent comic—were grounded. According to *The Comic Reader* #192, "legal wrangling over who owned the rights to the characters" brought the project to an abrupt halt. The cover of the unpublished digest appeared in an ad in *Adventure Comics* #423 and *Weird Western Tales* #14.

Whether because of the added production costs or the legal headaches, DC publisher Carmine Infantino got cold feet on the digest

Deirub Erusaert

That's "Buried Treasure" for those of you who don't speak backwards like Zatanna! A new Zatara and Zatanna origin was produced in 1980 by Gerry Conway, Romeo Tanghal, and Vince Colletta for *DC Special Blue Ribbon Digest* #5. This original art page from that story is courtesy of Heritage Comics Auctions (*www.ha.com*).



DC's First Digests

(left) DC's first foray into the digest format, 1972's *Tarzan* one-shot. Cover by Joe Kubert. (right) The *Laurel and Hardy* digest went no further than this rarely seen house ad.

format and ceded the category to Gold Key and Fawcett, who'd been having success there since the late 1960s. They were joined in 1973 by Archie Comics, whose *Archie Digest* was the vanguard of an entire line of thick compact comics that are still thriving 40 years later.

The news wasn't as good for Gold Key, which abruptly got out of the digest business at the end of 1975. *The Comic Reader* #122 (Sept. 1975) reported that Whitman Books would be taking over distribution of the digests with an eye toward getting them into more venues, but the decision amounted to a virtual death knell. *Mystery Comics Digest* #26 (Oct. 1975), *Golden Comics Digest* #48 (Jan. 1976), and *Walt Disney Comics Digest* #57 (Feb. 1976) marked the end of the Gold Key digest line, which never came back under the Whitman imprint or anything else.

Fawcett's *Dennis the Menace Pocket Full of Fun* forged ahead as Archie aggressively expanded its own digest presence in 1977. Harvey Comics dived in the same year with three ongoing Richie Rich titles in the smaller format.

Self-portrait by Carl Gafford.

Inevitably, new DC publisher Jenette Kahn decided to try the format again as a 96-page package retailing for 95 cents. With an eye toward casual readers, the line looked at genres that had been marginalized in the superhero-centric mainstream. Given the enduring popularity of Western paperbacks, the ongoing *Jonah Hex and Other Western Tales* seemed like a good bet to tap that readership. Likewise, there were issues devoted to war comics ("Sgt. Rock's Prize Battle Tales" in *DC Special Series* #18) and funny animals ("Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" in *The Best of DC* #4) along with high-profile superhero properties like Superman, Batman, and Super Friends (*The Best of DC* #1–3).

"When DC started those digests in the late 1970s," Carl Gafford tells *BACK ISSUE*, "[production manager] Jack Adler felt that the lettering came out too small to be read, so he would have the lettering shot at a size slightly larger, and we had to paste them into place onto the reduced art, which often meant cutting the balloons apart, moving artwork, redoing panels. Lotta work. When Jack left fulltime in 1981, they stopped doing that."

Over time, Superman and funny animals (along with teen and kid humor) became the favored features of the checkout-stand audience. DC's annual "Year's Best Comics Stories" was another popular draw. Composed of tales from the preceding year that many diehard collectors had already read, the best-of collections were clearly aimed at an audience that wasn't buying the slimmer traditional comics.

For collectors, one had to dig for new material in the digests, but it was there. *The Best of DC* #1 from 1979 included a two-page feature illustrated by Kurt Schaffenberger (and presumably written by E. Nelson Bridwell) on the secrets of "Superman's Costume … and Clark Kent's Clothes." One month later, *DC Special Series* #19's "Secret Origins of Super-Heroes" opened with a brand-new ten-page version of Wonder Woman's origin, one that closely followed the events of *All-Star Comics* #8 and *Sensation Comics* #1. A Secret Origins sequel in 1980's *DC Special Blue Ribbon Digest* #5 featured the previously unrevealed history of Zatanna and Zatara and served as a prequel to the 1964–1966 storyline in which Zatanna searched for her father. It was later reprinted at full size in the 2004 trade paperback *JLA: Zatanna's Search*.

Like Zatara, 40-year-old Batman foe the Penguin had simply come to life without any hint as to his backstory. "Secret Origins of Super-Villains" in *Best of DC* #10 settled that question in a ten-page tale by *Batman Encyclopedia* writer Michael Fleisher that marked the last of the digest line's new origin stories. A few months later, one-page versions of that origin and those of Catwoman, the Joker, the Riddler, and Two-Face appeared in issue #14, with art by Denys Cowan and Dick Giordano.

Meanwhile, DC discovered that there apparently wasn't a market for *Jonah Hex and Other Western Tales* and sent it to Boot Hill with issue #3. It was replaced on the schedule with the ongoing *DC Special Blue Ribbon Digest* in late November, starting with a Legion of Super-Heroes spotlight. The cover painting of the Western digest's unpublished fourth issue appeared in a house ad in *Jonah Hex* #33 before being used on the front of *The Comics Journal* #56 (June 1980). Its back cover art ran (in black and white) in *TCJ* #59. Its contents were advertised in *Green Lantern* #125 and *Super Friends* #29 as featuring the following:

"Showdown with the Dangling Man" (reprinted from *Weird Western Tales* #25), "The Killer's Last Wish" (*WWT* #13), "Gunfight at Wolverine" (*WWT* #31), "Death Stalk" (*WWT* #42), "Call Him Satan—Call Him Saint" and "Death Deals the Cards" (both from *All-Star Western* #3),

SUPER JRS. VS. SUPERKIDS™

The Many Mysteries of DC's Romper Room JLA

by **Andy Mangels**

What the--?!

"What do you call a bunch of costumed kids with the powers and abilities of their favorite heroes? The Super Jrs., of course! There's only one word to describe these magically transformed kids—adorable!" That was the opening description for the 1982 DC Style Guide, providing licensors art and materials for use in their products. There is, however, another word that describes the Super Jrs.: "mysterious." Because even though dozens of items exist under the brand name, the evolution—and continued reinvention—of the concept remains a mystery. Until now…

Child versions of heroic characters are as old as the myth of Hercules strangling snakes in his crib, but preteen superhero sidekicks became the rage in the World War II-era comics where Robin, the Young Allies, Little Boy Blue and the Blue Boys, SuperSnipe, and DareDevil's Young Rascals appeared in dozens of comics and allowed young readers wish-fulfillment characters that were their own ages. But toddler and baby versions of the characters were a bit slower to gestate (though Little Archie appeared in his own comic from July 1956 to February 1983).

The first major hero to have a toddler version of himself was Superman, as the first story showing a young, costume-clad child that came to be known as "Superbaby" debuted in his own story in *Superboy* #8 (May–June 1950), in which Jonathan and Martha Kent uttered a variation on a familiar cry: "It's a fire siren! No, it's a steam-whistle! No, it's our Super-Baby!" Superbaby appeared regularly in several of the Super-titles, and proved popular enough to garner his own 80-Page Giant special in *Superman* #212 (Dec.–Jan. 1968)! On at least one other occasion, Superman even exposed himself to red kryptonite, purposely turning himself into a toddler to fight crime.

Sheldon Mayer's toddler characters Sugar and Spike had their own series from mid-1956 to late 1971, and in the back of almost every issue, the creator featured paper-doll costume designs for his lead characters and their friends. Given the crossover audience, it's no surprise that Wonder Baby and Bat-Baby costumes appeared in *Sugar and Spike* #16 (June 1958), with Batman repeating in #70 (Apr.–May 1967), Wonder Woman and Hawkman in #91 (Aug.–Sept. 1970), and Wonder Woman and Robin in #93 (Dec. 1970–Jan. 1971).

DC's leading heroine became the next preschool crimefighter in *Wonder Woman* #122 (May 1961), when Robert Kanigher introduced the regrettable Wonder Tot to the canon, working the character through multiple stories over the next six years. DC's second-most-popular male hero rarely appeared as a child—largely because his entire raison d'être was that his parents were killed when he was young—but Batman was reduced to preschool age in *Batman* #147 (May 1962) in "Batman Becomes Bat-Baby."

The December 1976 issue of *Action Comics* #466 featured a story in which Lex Luthor causes

SUPERBABY ASSORTMENT No. 1180
Delightful, 7" "bean bag" dolls, each having the authentic costume of a popular superhero. Amsco has taken Batman, Wonder Woman, Captain America, Superman, Spider Man, and Shazam, and clothed them in a style to enchant children of all ages. Each doll has a vinyl head and double bag protection for the safe, plastic-pellet bodies.

Who's Your Baby?

Super Baby/Baby Brigade advertisements. The top two illustrated ads were produced by Kubert School students for SuperHero Enterprises ads.

Batman, the Flash, and Superman to revert to grade-school versions of themselves. What readers wouldn't know was that behind the scenes, someone was actually planning on turning *all* of DC's heroes into infants!

BIRTH OF THE SUPER BABIES

In 1976, comic readers were shocked—and likely a bit dismayed—to see full-page ad for DC superhero merchandise that included "Super Baby Rag Dolls." Seated in the art (drawn by students of the Joe Kubert School) were Bat-Mite, Wonder Baby, Super-Baby, and Mini-Marvel (Shazam!). The word balloons beneath them said: "You've heard of the Super Friends and Teen Titans—well, we're the 'Baby Brigade!' We're the cutest most adorable babies—ever assembled (and you don't have to change us)! IF YOU DON'T BUY US—WE'LL CRY!"

The Super Babies were a new product from Amsco, a division of Milton Bradley. Each doll was approximately 7" tall and featured a double-layer bean-bag body filled with plastic pellets, a large vinyl head, rooted hair, and a cloth costume that was largely faithful to the comic counterparts (though Super Baby was blond, Bat-Mite was strawberry blond, and Mini-Marvel was a fiery redhead). Amsco also offered two Marvel Comics babies in the assortment—Cap America and Spider-Boy—though they were not advertised in DC Comics. Instead, if one got the *SuperHero Catalogue* from New Jersey's SuperHero

six characters with which Mini-Marvel was [illegible]." That ad promised [illegible] Donny and Marie [illegible]!"

[illegible]ntinued, but the line [illegible]Mexico by Plastimarx, [illegible]uper Bebes" and was [illegible]Although these dolls [illegible]he Amsco dolls, they [illegible]tance, Superman had [illegible]hirt, and chest decals

[illegible]ER JRS.

[illegible]o DC Comics Inc., the [illegible]a (LCA), DC's licensing [illegible] the toy and licensing [illegible]artist, depicted toddler [illegible]ers Superman, Batman, [illegible]aman, Flash, Green [illegible]eatured pudgy bodies, [illegible]y cute eyelashes, along [illegible]stumes.

[illegible]ring in late 1977 and [illegible]anging from reflective squeaky toys to a variety of fabrics, sleeping bags, shoes, sandals, bedding, and infant clothing. In 1979, the lines expanded, as Larami Corp. introduced a line of Super Jrs. Flash Cards, and multiple styles of wallpaper were also offered to consumers.

In 1979, the Italian company Furga released three "Super Baby" dolls: Superman Jr., Batman Jr., and Spider-Man Jr. The 5" vinyl figures were jointed at the shoulders, waists, crotch, and neck, and featured cloth costumes. The following year (1980), another Italian company, Galba (a division of Baravelli), released a line of 8" vinyl toys called "SuperEroi Jr." The dolls were similar to the Furga line, but were all vinyl and featured the exact same bodies and removable boots (only the head sculpts and belts were