
COMIC BOOK
FEVER
A Celebration of Comics
1976 to 1986
by George Khoury
Snyderman © Snyder Ventures.

Welcome (or welcome back) to the pivotal comics era of 1976–1986. Contained herein are the people, comics, and artifacts that made our childhood feel larger than life, and shaped the comics industry into the pop culture staple that stands tall today. Each chapter and sidebar in this book tells a story, and together they form a much larger story about the evolution and maturation of the comics medium. The book is designed to look and feel as close to an actual comic book as possible—from the stories about the comics themselves, to the stories about the biggest comic book ads, on down to the letters' page.

Above all, this book is written for everyone—the lifelong fans and the comic book novices alike. And it's meant to be shared. If you ever wanted someone—your spouse, your child, a friend—to understand your affection for this medium, this book is the place to start.

TwoMorrows Presents

COMIC BOOK FEVER!

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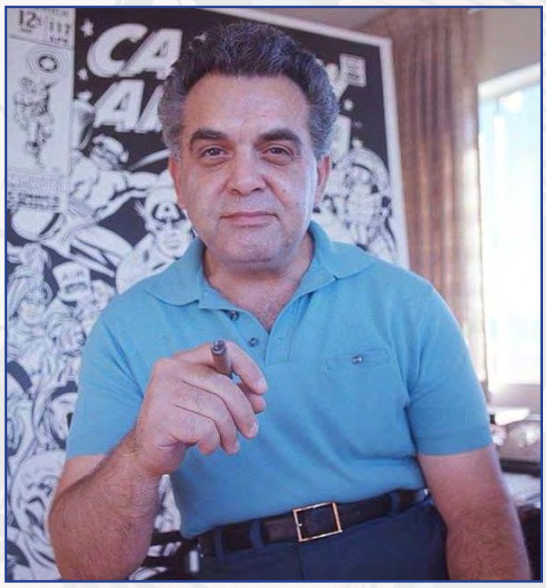
CELEBRATE! THE SPIRIT OF 1976

From sea to shining sea, 1976 was a year best remembered for the gigantic fashion in which America as a nation celebrated the bicentennial of their independence. The hopeful juncture provided Americans with a wave of much-needed optimism that ushered a return to national pride after the dark days of the Vietnam War, Watergate, and other crises of the era. It reminded the young country of its heritage and commitment to excellence, freedom, and liberty for all—without exceptions. In just two hundred years, our diverse nation united to triumph over many obstacles and accomplish the seemingly impossible through force of will and ingenuity. In 1976, all looked up to the United States as a stellar example of perseverance and progress.



Jack "The King" Kirby.
Photo © The Jack Kirby Estate

Being that comic books came of age as an art form during World War II, it was only fitting that the industry distinguished the bicentennial with a multitude of special issues and patriotic covers honoring the occasion with a touch of pomp and circumstance. And, really, there are few things more native and true to the United States than apple pie, jazz, baseball, and, of course, comics and superheroes. What better time, then, for Jack "The King" Kirby's return to Marvel Comics and the universe of characters that he helped mold—and in particular, the most recognizable patriotic hero of them all, a character he co-created with Joe Simon at the onset of World War II, Captain America!

Kirby, a World War II veteran and a cornerstone of the industry, authored tales of sheer power and spirituality while defining the dynamic visual storytelling of action-laced superhero comics. From his boundless artistry spun arresting characters, indescribable wonderful new worlds, and epic stories that were full of determination and nobility. The staggering amount of books collecting his memorable comics and the staying power of classic figures like the Fantastic Four, the Avengers, the New Gods, and a thousand others stand as a testament to his ability. For the bicentennial, Kirby produced two patriotic classics starring his co-creation Captain America: "The Madbomb" and *Bicentennial Battles*.

In a time when multi-issue story arcs and 200-page superhero graphic novels were not yet commonplace, Kirby reclaimed the reins of the monthly *Captain America* series with the saga entitled "Madbomb," his longest sequential story for the character. With impeccable timing the tale unraveled in *Captain America*

BIG JIM'S P.A.C.K.

DOUBLE TROUBLE

Mattel's Big Jim toy line was inspired by the success of Hasbro's original 12" G.I. Joe. Big Jim and his adventure- and sports-themed accessories debuted in 1972, becoming one of the first toys to have a line of dedicated playsets (sold separately, of course), including the infamous sports camper, "The Beast." To showcase their goods to boys, Mattel created a special eight-page *Big Jim: All-Star* mini-comic book featuring the character demonstrating his athletic prowess.

In 1976, Mattel added a new series to Big Jim called P.A.C.K. (an acronym for Professional Agents/Crime Killers), which turned the characters into a team of international operatives. P.A.C.K.'s designers crafted these toys to embrace the spirit of comics and recruited the services of the biggest names in the industry. Because the figures and their ads had such a heavy Jack Kirby influence, Mattel hired the King himself to illustrate the packaging.

"I know that there were a lot of Kirby fans at Mattel," says Steve Sherman, Kirby's assistant during the time. "A lot of the He-Man stuff was based on Jack's Marvel work. He had an association with Mattel because he had done the series of card games with Tarzan, Superman, and the Lone Ranger. [I know] for sure he didn't design the Big Jim dolls. Oddly enough, Jack really didn't care too much for these jobs. The money was good—better than comics—but Jack really liked doing stories. Advertising art was kind of a cramp for him because he didn't like to re-do stuff."

This time around Mattel raised the ante for their giveaway comic book by contracting Marvel to put it together. The artists who took on this high profile assignment were John Buscema and Joe Sinnott, Marvel's top penciler and top inker. [Note: No writer is credited in the book.]

"Whatever [Marvel] sent me I did," says Joltin' Joe Sinnott. "John Buscema had penciled it. I got it in the mail, of course. It was no big deal. I inked it and sent it back to Marvel.

"I don't know who [assigned the book]. I'm sure [it was]

Original art for the opening page of the *Big Jim's P.A.C.K.* giveaway comic.

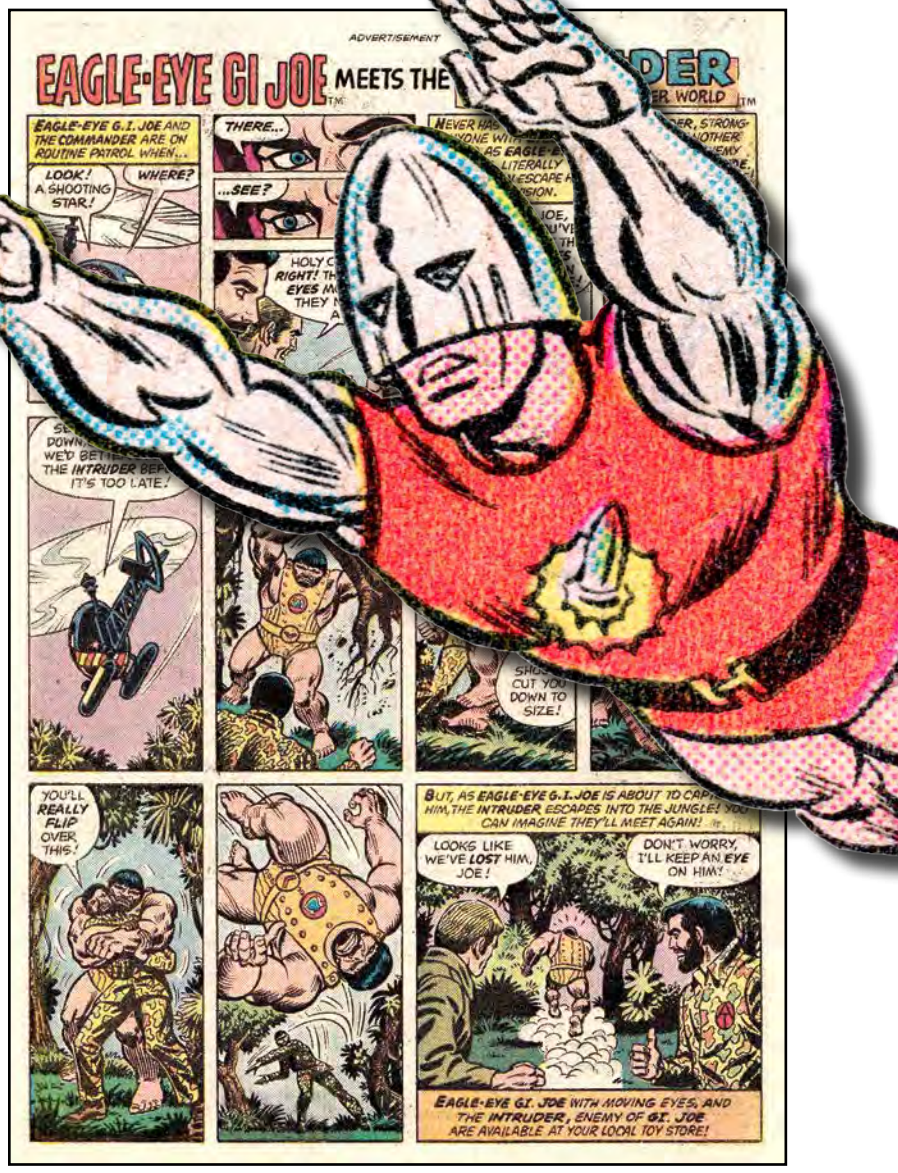
THE BALLAD OF THE GI JOE ADVENTURE TEAM

As the Vietnam War came to a close in the early '70s, Hasbro moved its once almighty G.I. Joe line away from its military beginnings. Rebranded as the G.I. Joe Adventure Team, the 12" action toys were the first to feature their infamous (and patented) Kung-Fu Grip. To further demilitarize the line and cash in on other successful toy fads, 1975 saw Eagle Eye Joe (the figure with the creepy moveable eyes) recruit two colorful superhumans: Bulletman, the Human Bullet; and Mike Power, the Atomic Man.

In the same vein of Mego's already famous superhero dolls, Hasbro created their own champion and named him Bulletman—not to be confused with identically named (and similarly clad) Fawcett comic book hero of the 1940s. This shiny hero had a "metal" (chrome) helmet and arms, and wore a costume made out of red fabric. With a little elbow grease and imagination, kids could even make the figure "fly" by placing a thread through the metal hoops on the back of his uniform, and tying each end of the string (at an angle) to something solid. Thanks to Hasbro's constant commercials on children's television, the ludicrous Bulletman became an unforgettable toy.

Atomic Mike was Hasbro's apparent response to losing out on the toy license to the *Six Million Dollar Man* (which ended up being the top toy of 1975) to Kenner. Mike Power's backstory was that of a man dissatisfied with being disabled, who built himself atomic body parts and an atomic eye. The toy was a dead ringer for the aforementioned bionic television star. He featured a transparent plastic leg and arm, flashing eye, and an atomic hand that could rotate a propeller (to achieve the illusion of flight). While not as successful as the *Six Million Dollar Man*, Atomic Mike was a popular Christmas item in 1975.

In 1977, Hasbro retired the far-out Adventure Team to make way for an ill-fated, futuristic Super Joe. In another change, the 12" figures were shrunken down to Mego proportions (8–8½"). These blunders proved fatal; the new Joes bore little resemblance to the popular comrades-in-arms who preceded them. The killing blow was dealt by Kenner's *Star Wars* line released the same year, and the toy of choice in the boy's market for years to come. Rightly so, Super Joe was a super flop and the line quietly faded away until its 1982 revival.



Atomic Mike and Bulletman join Eagly-Eye G.I. Joe's Adventure Team!

G.I. Joe © Hasbro

SMILE AWAY the HARVEY Funny Books

No boy or girl was meant to live on superhero comics alone. There was once a time where real funny books, ones filled with laughs, roamed the spinner rack side by side with fantasy, adventure, horror, romance, western, war, drama, and superheroes titles. For many of us, the journey into comics began with beloved characters such as Casper, Richie Rich, and Hot Stuff, who delivered the good times like no one else.

Founded in 1941 by impresario Albert Harvey, Harvey Comics became known for its licensed comics and horror line in its formative years. By 1952, the company began restructuring itself when it entered an arrangement with Famous Studios (Paramount Cartoon Characters) to publish a treasure trove of kids' titles featuring characters like Casper the Friendly Ghost and Little Audrey. The New York outfit went on to produce an eye-appealing line of wholesome children's comics. The company splendidly captured the lushness of high-quality cartoons and placed it inside a ten-cent comic.

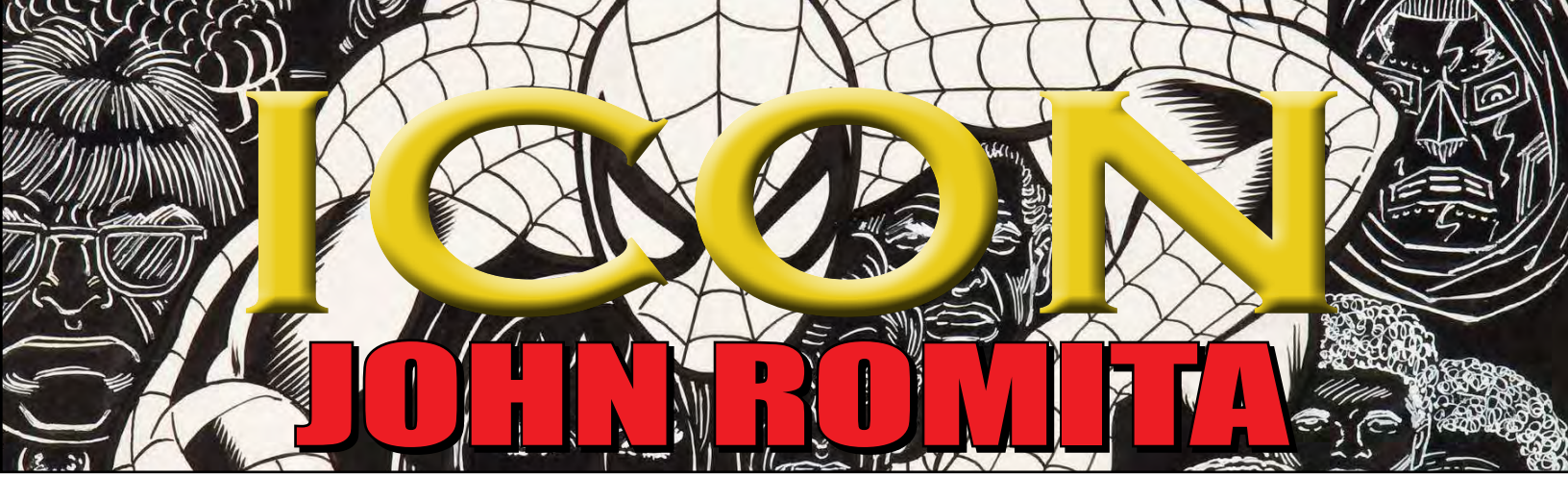
As fate would have it, humor is where Harvey found its calling. Prompted by its good fortune, the publisher acquires the rights to Casper and the rest of the Paramount Cartoon Characters stable in 1959. Afterward, Harvey stood tall as the predominant publisher of kids' comics, thanks to their vibrant characters, guiltless humor, and everyday kindness.

Just as the deal with Famous Studios went through, a young man named Sid Jacobson began earning his editorial stripes as an assistant to Perry Antoshak at Harvey. Within a couple of years, the New York University graduate and former journalist became the company's sole editor for the next four decades. He would help set and oversee the tone for the highly successful line, and took naturally to assuming responsibility and leadership. Right from the start, Sid worked alongside the crème de la crème in the industry, from Joe Simon and Jack Kirby on *Captain 3-D*, to Harvey all-stars Ernie Colón and Howard Post. Jacobson realized he had found his calling in comics, and it was a job that he loved.

The father of the then-new "Harvey World" look was Steve Muffatti (1910–68), a former animator at the legendary Fleischer Studios and Paramount's Famous Cartoon Studios. The illustrator came to the company and established an appealing artistic house style—one that magically infused an animated cartoon look into the humor books and their kid stars. The drawings looked deceptively simple, but they were highly stylized and energetic. The other Harvey artists would follow his lead. Immediately upon his arrival at company in 1952, the master animator worked his magic on *Little Audrey*, *Casper the Friendly Ghost*, *Paramount Animated Comics*, and, later, many of *Richie Rich*'s earliest stories. His influence ran full circle in the Harveytoons cartoon shows that brought these exciting characters to the rapidly growing television market.

A Warren Kremer-drawn Richie Rich proudly displays Steve Muffatti's original art for the cover of *Little Audrey* #29 (1953).

Richie Rich, Little Audrey © Classic Media



ICON
JOHN ROMITA

Comic books have shown that only the true masters, the icons, of this craft leave an everlasting lasting mark on it. John Romita's glorious body of work is a testament to this sentiment. Shortly after joining Marvel's staff full-time in 1965, the Brooklyn native began rendering his now-classic run on *The Amazing Spider-Man*. As an indispensable member of editor Stan Lee's small crew, the versatile illustrator also provided art corrections, paste-ups, and most noteworthy, indoctrinated newer artists to Marvel's method of storytelling during their expansion years. By 1973, he deservedly became the company's official art director, a position from which he oversaw that the quality of all interior art and covers remained true to the standards of the House of Ideas. Alongside his duties as their principal character designer, his indelible influence and stamp (and touch-ups) can be viewed throughout Marvel's output during his tenure.

The good-natured Romita looks at the mid-1970s as a benchmark in his long illustrious career, a period of true personal satisfaction. Working alongside his lovely wife Virginia and their youngest son John Romita Jr. in the Marvel offices, he practically had the whole world in his hands. "I never thought I was making enough money," states the affable artist, "but that was a personal thing. [*laughs*] The thing is [because I was on staff] I never did a lot of jumping around to popular books. I was like Stan's ace-in-the-hole. I was like a bullpen guy, and whenever he needed help on a book, I would jump on it. It didn't make a lot of money for me, but I certainly got exposure, and I got a chance to show off my versatility. So I was lucky.

John Romita at his drawing board in his office at Marvel.

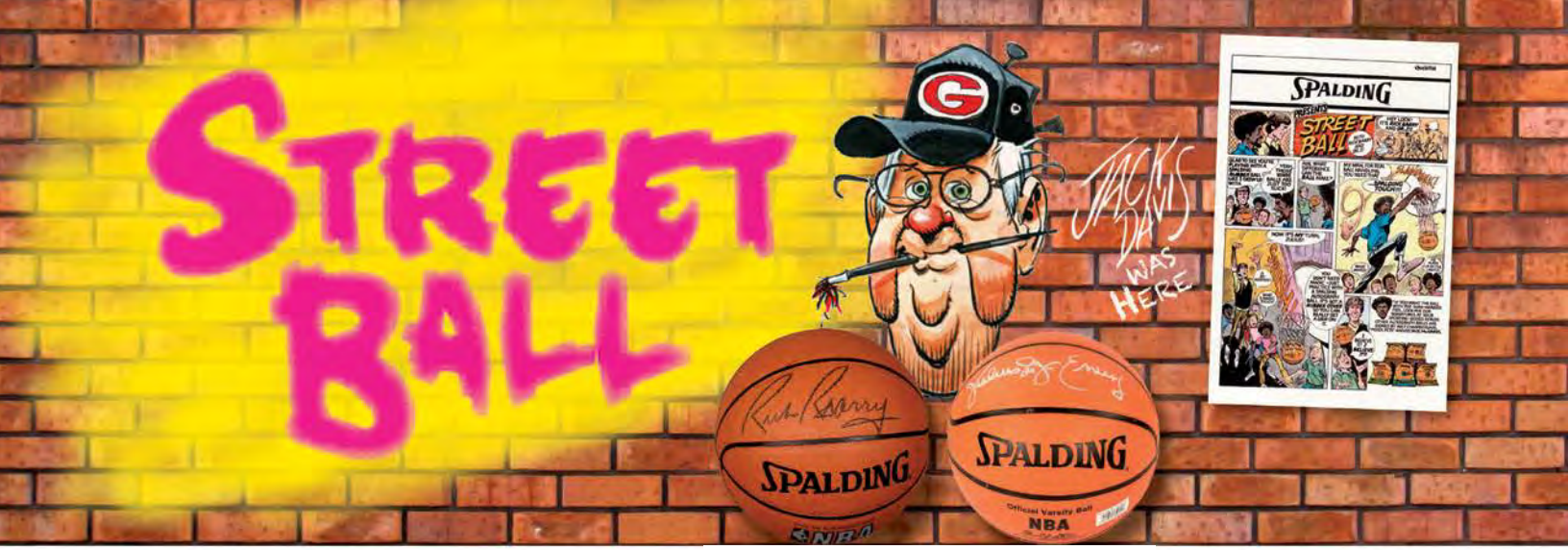
"It was also the time that I realized that a good comic artist is not an artist as much as he's a storyteller, and when I realized I was a storyteller, I stopped worrying about doing beautiful work. The first ten years I was in the business, I was trying to become Milton Caniff and Carmine Infantino and everybody else. Stan led me to realize that I was a storyteller, and it didn't matter what my artwork looked like because the stories were carrying the books. And I believed that, because I always thought I was without a style, a nondescript guy. I thought I was generic, you know? And when I realized I was a storyteller, I didn't have to worry about my artwork anymore. All I had to do was tell a damn good story."

THE MUTANTS!

To a young and impressionable '80s kid, there was something irresistible about the X-Men. But during the Silver Age of the 1960s, that wasn't the case. Despite the best efforts of creators Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, the X-Men seemed to be nothing more than a hiccup in the Marvel Universe, and they barely limped into the 1970s. For the X-Men nothing came easy; they didn't receive the instant accolades and widespread approval given to the Fantastic Four, the Avengers, and Spider-Man. But their time eventually came, thanks to the legendary run of stories that began with their rebirth in *Giant-Size X-Men* #1 (May 1975) by writer Len Wein and artist Dave Cockrum. From there, and into the mid-1980s the *X-Men* title was guided by the vision of writer Chris Claremont and his artistic collaborators Cockrum, John Byrne, Paul Smith, and John Romita Jr., who together finally turned the *X-Men* into a perennial best-selling comic book series.

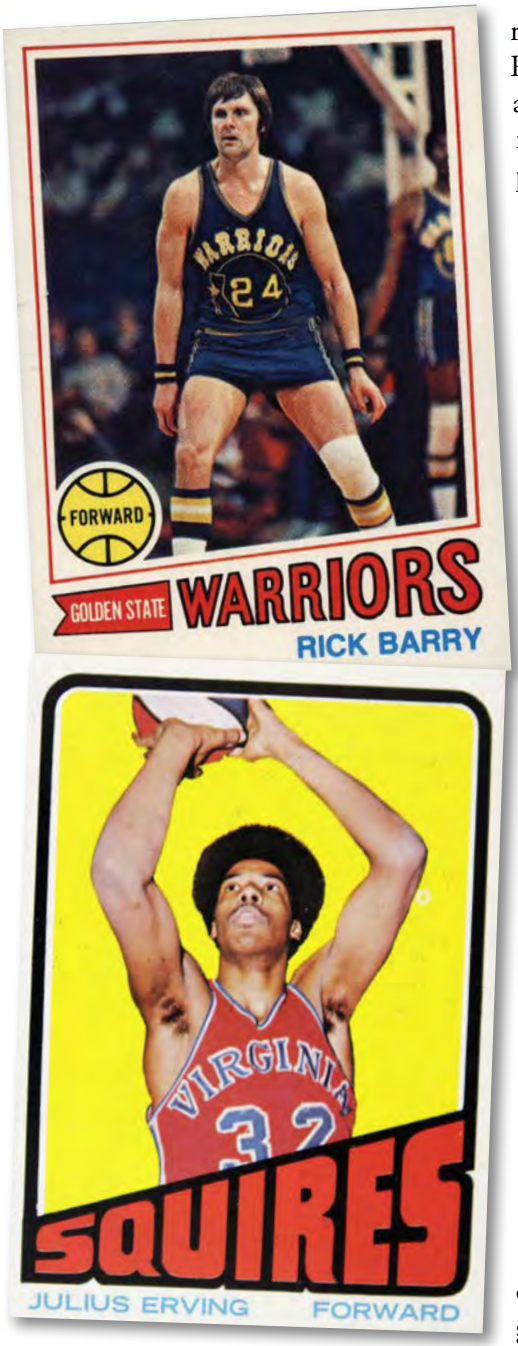
It all began when then-Marvel President Al Landau expressed the notion of wanting to see an international superhero team to Publisher Stan Lee and then-Editor-in-Chief Roy Thomas in a meeting. Thomas, a former *X-Men* writer with a soft spot for the mutants, right away envisioned the *X-Men* as a perfect platform to grant Landau his wish. Bringing in writer Len Wein and artist Dave Cockrum to helm the revival, Thomas directed them to form an X-Men roster that stood radically different and colorful next to their predecessors. To this new team, Wein brought a Canadian mutant character named Wolverine whom he had just introduced the year prior in the pages of *Hulk*; the Irish mutant Banshee and Japanese mutant Sunfire, both Roy Thomas co-creations and early X-Men acquaintances/one-time adversaries, were also brought into the mix. The rest of Professor Charles Xavier's new team were composed of striking, original characters that included the beautiful African weather-powered Storm, the steel-skinned Russian Colossus, the acrobatic German teleporter Nightcrawler, and the Native American powerhouse Thunderbird. The group's leader was the original X-Man called Cyclops, who served as bridge between the past and present teams. No one, not even Marvel Comics, expected this to be the book that would set the comic world afire.

Right in the thick of the well regarded Roy Thomas and Neal Adams run on *X-Men*, a teenage Chris Claremont began working in Marvel's small office as a gofer in 1969. Claremont recalls, "When Roy and Neal did their run on the *X-Men*, the sales jumped tremendously. The problem was the reporting system was so limited and antiquated that Marvel didn't find out about it for eight months. So, by the time in the fall of 1969 when Marvel realized they had a potential hit on their hands, Neal had gone back to DC, Roy had gone on to other books, the *X-Men* as we know it had been cancelled. But that's why they rescinded the cancellation and kept it going as a reprint for the next four years until they could figure out how to restart it. And that led to Roy and Len basically brainstorming with Dave and coming up with the new team, because the idea in 1974 was, 'We've already done the five white kids from the Upper West Side kind of situation. Let's try and introduce some international flavor to the series so that if we have any foreign markets, we'll have characters that might appeal to them.' Like Storm, like Nightcrawler, like Colossus, like Banshee."



Before all the bling and the tats, before the Air Jordans, the ESPNs, and the razzle dazzle, before everyone (and anyone) was all in your face… basketball was a game—the same game brought into being by YMCA gym teacher James Naismith in 1891. In the glory days, it was solely about the hoops. The men let their game do their talking, and their skills was the show. That was classic old school basketball. To the kids of the 1970s, nothing epitomized the sport better than master cartoonist Jack Davis' memorable "Street Ball" strip, a glorious full-page comic ad for Spalding, starring ABA and NBA gods Rick Barry and Julius "Dr. J" Erving.

During the mid-1970s, sports equipment maker Spalding ran their "Street Ball" advertisement prominently on the back cover of many comics. It was such a colorful sight that no one ever forgot it, and thus has become one of the most memorable comic book ads of all time. Although the ad was written by an advertising agency, its undeniable charm comes from Jack Davis' gift for storytelling. In the 1970s, the veteran EC comics artist was one of the most in-demand, prolific, and recognizable superstar illustrators in the United States; his art was a staple on popular publications [*TV Guide*, *Time*, *Sports Illustrated*] and gigantic marketing campaigns of the era. The "Street Ball" assignment came to the artist courtesy of his then-representative at Gerald & Cullen Rapp, one of the premiere illustration agencies. Jack Davis remembers, "My rep handles all of that [and particular photo reference], but he knows that I like to draw sports, and so, when something comes in like that, they turn it over to me."



Trading cards for the stars of "Street Ball."
Trading cards © respective owners

For a sports fan like Davis, "Street Ball" is characteristic of the exuberance that he's always been known for, but it also captures the inviting nature of the game of basketball. "I played basketball in high school. I was captain of the basketball team—not very good at it. I've always loved sports, and I enjoy drawing it. It changes now; I'm not up on that [or the sneakers], but back then I was."

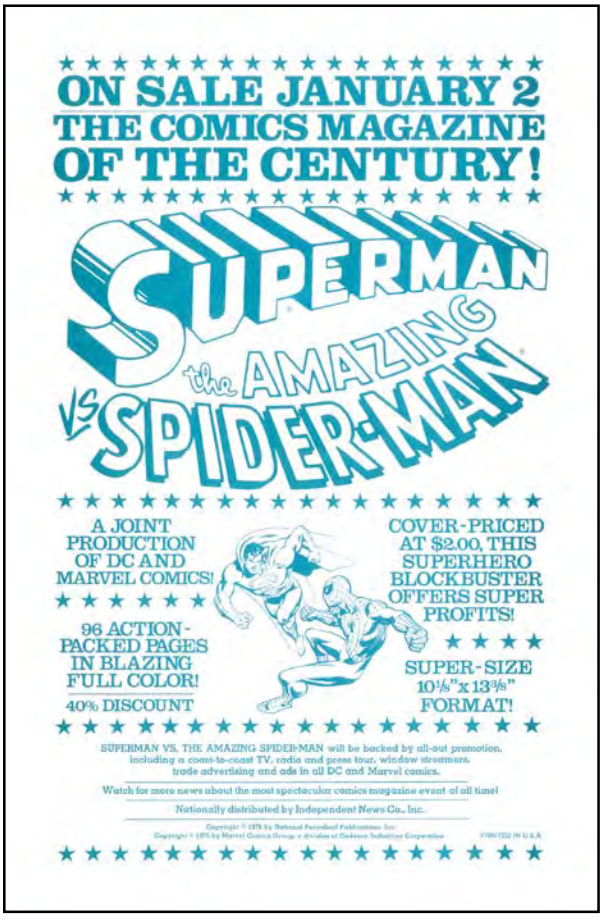
The approval process behind the strip was relatively simple according to Davis. He explains, "Back then I had a fax machine, and they called it an Exxon Qwip, and it was on a roll, and I would put it on a roll and send [sketches] to the rep, and the rep would then send it back to me, 'Okay, go ahead and do it,' and that's how we worked." Although the behind-the-scenes process of creating comics is pretty unglamorous, the proof of the pudding is in the results of the fine work that this Davis strip delivers in spades.

For NBA Hall of Famer Rick Barry, one of our protagonists and one of the game's best shooters ever, the strip was something that he remembers all these years later. The New Jersey native and

THE CLASH OF THE CENTURY

SUPERMAN VS. SPIDER-MAN

The impossible happened in 1976 when Superman and Spider-Man went toe-to-toe in one of the most magnificent comic books the world has ever seen. Nowadays every season brings a so-called "event" in the comics industry, but this disco-era dance was the real deal. Not only did it serve as a peace pipe between bitter rivals DC Comics and Marvel Comics, where each placed their most prominent character on the marquee, but to sweeten the pot, this gigantic 92-page story was published in a treasury edition [an oversized 10" x 13" book], comics' most glorious format. Delivering the goods with undeniable zest were the stellar talents of writer Gerry Conway, penciler Ross Andru, and inker Dick Giordano.



Promo ad for the Superman Vs. Spider-Man book.

If timing is everything in life, then a young 20-something Gerry Conway arrived at DC Comics just in time for the whopper of all assignments. Having been courted away for his formidable talents and accomplishments at Marvel, where among many things he succeeded Stan Lee as the writer of *Amazing Spider-Man*, and ultimately became Marvel's editor-in-chief (in 1976), the talented wünderkind became a fount of creativity at DC Comics and an undeniable asset in stemming the tide of the company's dwindling sales.

Gerry Conway remembers, "I was in a very advantageous position because I had just come over to DC like a month or so before, and [DC publisher] Carmine [Infantino] didn't operate from a straightforward business point of view. He operated from a schoolyard point of view. [*laughter*] For example, I think the main reason he hired Jack Kirby was not because he thought Jack Kirby was going to do great material that was going to turn DC around, but because he wanted to put a finger in the eye of Marvel, and he figured that he was going to get away from Marvel somebody that in his mind was crucially important to Marvel and that, without Jack, Marvel would not be able to continue. How he was going to use Jack, he didn't necessarily know. He didn't necessarily have a strategy in mind. In the same way, when I came over, he saw me and he was looking at, 'Oh, Gerry's writing *Spider-Man*, *Thor*, and *Fantastic*

SNYDERMAN

For a lot of kids in the '70s, heaven opened its pearly gates the day that Ivan Snyder launched his Superhero Merchandise mail order business in 1975. To say the New Jersey businessman was ahead of his time is an understatement. He believed in the power and commerce of comics when most dismissed them. The entrepreneur understood that children—and children in spirit—loved superheroes and all their related merchandise. Snyder wanted to make childhood dreams come true by delivering wonderful superhero goodies right to the doorsteps of his customers. With Snyderman, every day could be Christmas Day.

It all began in the early 1970s when Snyder, a certified public accountant, was executive vice-president at Marvel Comics. The budding executive felt the House of Ideas was missing out on the merchandising potential of their characters, so in 1972 he initiated a licensing division to explore additional revenue streams. As a result, Marvel discovered a bevy of licensees, among them the Mego Corporation, ready to produce toys and wares based on their properties. To support these new ventures and business associates, Snyder had Marvel devote a promotional page within their magazines, which spotlighted and offered most of these goods by way of their mail order division. Unfortunately, James Galton, the company's then-new chief executive, felt the mail order venture had no place in his vision for the company in 1975. The ambitious Snyder took a leap of faith and purchased Marvel's mail order division to start his venture, the biggest gamble of his life.

The New Jersey family man founded Superhero Enterprises, Inc., a mail order company, and started advertising regularly within the pages

Ad for a Spider-Man "web shooter" dart gun, along with the actual toy.

of Marvel comics in 1975. The astute merchant marketed his goods straight at the consumers who wanted them: comic book readers. The company also produced the Superhero Merchandise Catalog, a comic-sized magazine that brilliantly paraded the products with content provided by Marvel staffers. The voluminous response to the early listings made Snyder realize that he was going to need a much larger facility to process orders.

"I actually started the business in the basement of my house,"

ROCK SHOW

THE COMIC THAT ROCKED THE WORLD

The 1970s were the golden age of American rock-and-roll magazines. Everywhere you looked there was a titillating periodical championing the energy and spirit of the music: *Creem*, *Circus*, *Hit Parader*, and all their high-flying competitors. And in this decade, no band was more visible in these publications than Kiss.

The original Kiss lineup consisted of the Demon (Gene Simmons), the Catman (Peter Criss), the Space Ace (Ace Frehley), and the Starchild (Paul Stanley). The New York band withstood a shaky debut to become a multi-platinum selling powerhouse in the mid-1970s. Their sell-out rock shows and thrilling antics became the stuff of legend in schoolyards. With their astounding painted faces, shiny costumes, fire-breathing pyrotechnics, smoking guitar solos, and blood-spitting theatrics, the hard-rocking foursome were tailor-made for comic books.

Marvel Comics understood that music magazines and Kiss were a lucrative business; it was clear the public's appetite for them was insatiable. But when the band's management pitched Stan Lee the notion of producing a comic book featuring the band at the height of their popularity, the House of Ideas got cold feet. The powers-that-be at Marvel simply felt out of their comfort zone with this rock 'n' roll business.

As the details of the deal were hammered out, Marvel Publisher Stan Lee selected Steve Gerber as the writer and editor of this Kiss project. The ambitious comics creator took great delight in taking on this assignment despite knowing next to nothing about the band or their music. In typical Gerber fashion, the passionate Marvel staffer was all in emotionally, and absorbed everything related to Kiss during his research. He learned to admire their showmanship, their tenacity, and even their music.

Alan Weiss and Gray Morrow's cover for *Marvel Comics Super Special* #1, released June 30, 1977.
Dr. Doom © Marvel Characters, Inc. Kiss © Kiss

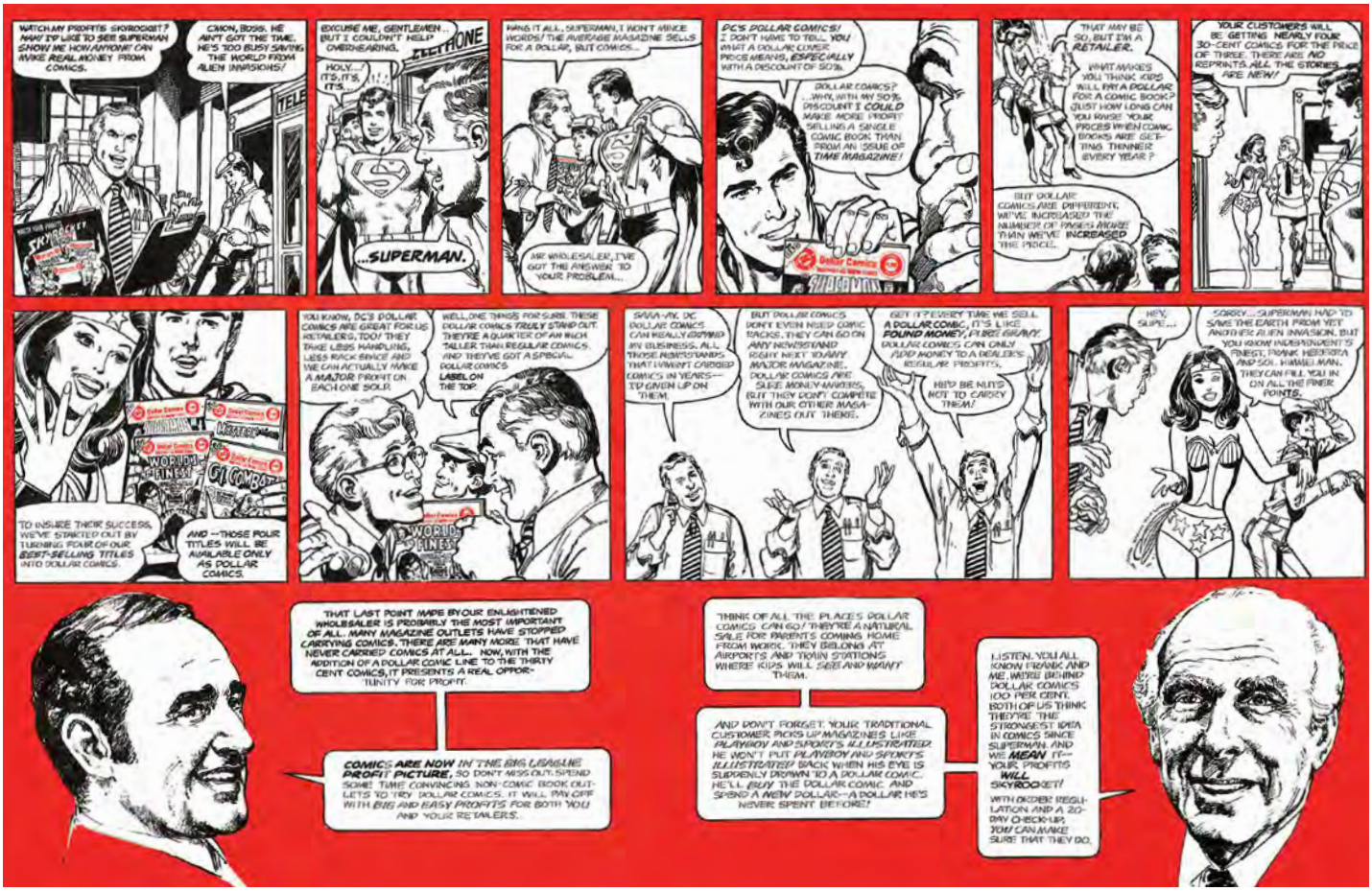
To illustrate *Marvel Comics Super Special #1*, Gerber recruited the supremely talented Alan Weiss. Both writer and artist, co-plotters of this rock and roll odyssey, were given

Dollar-Sized Delight

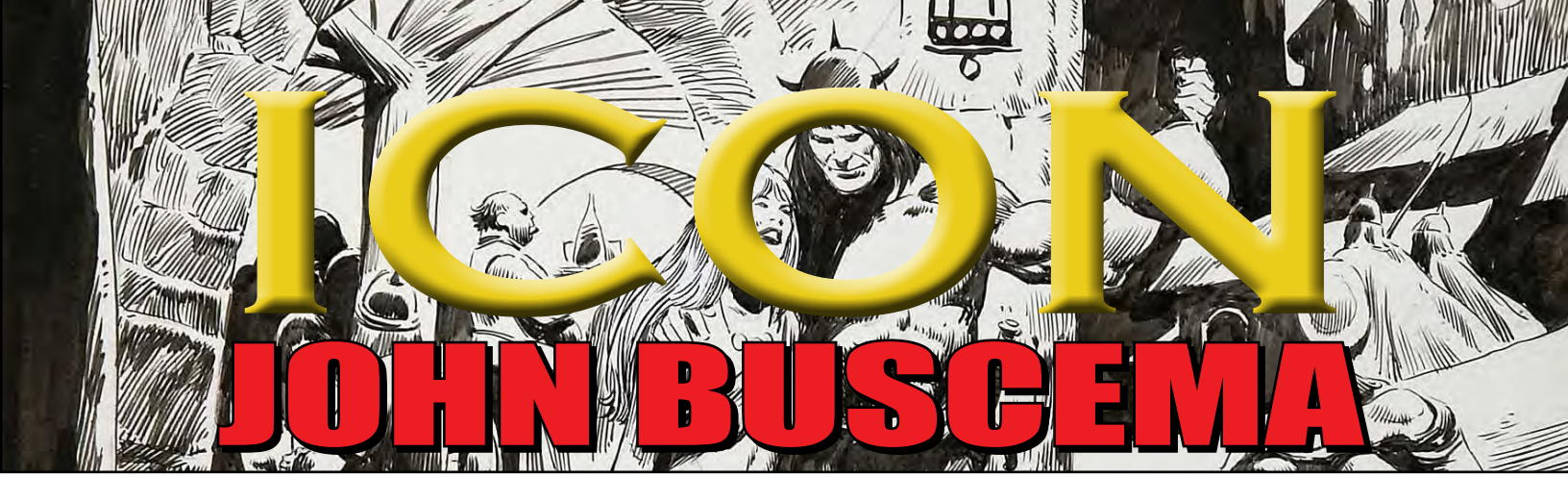
ALL NEW STORIES, AND ALL FOR A DOLLAR

In the days of Slurpees and Twinkies, when 30-cent 17-page comic stories were the norm, DC publisher Jenette Kahn launched a new line of 80-page publications called Dollar Comics, which, naturally, sold for a buck. Instead of raising the prices on DC's regular monthlies, a well-meaning Ms. Kahn had the novel notion of creating a higher price point by increasing the page counts on selected books to increase profit margins for DC and retailers. In 1977, the line originally consisted of long-running titles such as *World's Finest*, *G.I. Combat*, *The House of Mystery*, and *Superman Family*. These thick books stood a quarter-inch taller than the standard monthly and bore an enormous DC banner to clearly emphasize the new price point. To properly set sail to the Dollar Comics program within Kahn's "DC Explosion" campaign, superstar Neal Adams provided the brilliant cover art to the early wave of new releases featuring all-new interiors done by other DC creators.

Over time more titles, including some special anniversary issues and annuals, would be incorporated under the Dollar Comics banner. Despite its modest success, the concept and the "DC Explosion" push weren't strong enough to save the comics publisher from the "DC Implosion" of 1978.



Neal Adams and Continuity Studios produced this promotional strip targeted at the comic distributors and retailers.



ICON
JOHN BUSCEMA

If the walls at Marvel Comics could talk, they would happily admit that the company would not be where it is today without the artistic gifts and prowess of four cornerstones: Jack Kirby, Steve Ditko, John Romita, and John Buscema, the man who wrote the book (with co-writer Stan Lee) on *How to Draw Comics the Marvel Way* in 1978.

Born in 1927, the Brooklyn-born John Natale Buscema was an artistic wunderkind enamored with drawing and the illustration of the old masters. He broke into the still primitive comics industry in 1948, and steadily worked for a multitude of publishers through the '50s before succumbing to the grim financial realities of an industry in freefall. The ambitious illustrator entered the field of commercial art and advertising where he acquired a whole new set of techniques to add to his repertoire.

While his early comics work may have been invisible to most, it was not so to Stan Lee, the editor who gave Buscema his first staff position back in '48. Naturally the craftsman had reservations about reentering the comics field, but in 1966 a surging Marvel Comics pleaded with him to come back, and the allure of working at home ultimately sealed the deal. Not having kept up with the comics scene during his absence, Buscema had to figure out how to give readers the dazzling storytelling to which they had grown accustomed at Marvel—but just how was he going to do that?

"I learned everything about comics from the books that Jack [Kirby] did," said the late "Big John" Buscema to this humble writer in 2000. "I devoured them. They were all so fabulous."

In *Strange Tales* #150, Buscema's maiden voyage, Kirby set the story's pace by breaking it down for Buscema to finish, so "the newbie" could get his feet wet and see his process up-close. After a short trial and error period on *Tales to Astonish*, the Brooklyn native began to grasp the dynamic tones of Kirby's mythmaking work, and he used the King's comics as a travel guide to how far his own stories could soar.

By 1967, Buscema was ready, which he demonstrated with his exquisite line work on *The Avengers* (with writer Roy Thomas), his first signature series. "What really stood out about John Buscema to me was his figure work, and way with expressions," recalls Jerry Ordway, an extraordinary comic book artist in his own right. "I recall taking a chance on buying *Avengers*—a dollar only went so far in 1968—because of that great bickering shot between Hawkeye and Goliath on the splash page. I also noticed that he had both pencilled and inked the issue, and that it looked so much better than previous issues I had looked at and not purchased. That opened my eyes to his work, and made me realize how much the inkers could ruin his pencils. I became a huge *Avengers* fan, and followed John's work after that, whether he inked it himself or not. Lucky for me, Tom Palmer became the inker, and they quickly became my favorite art team."

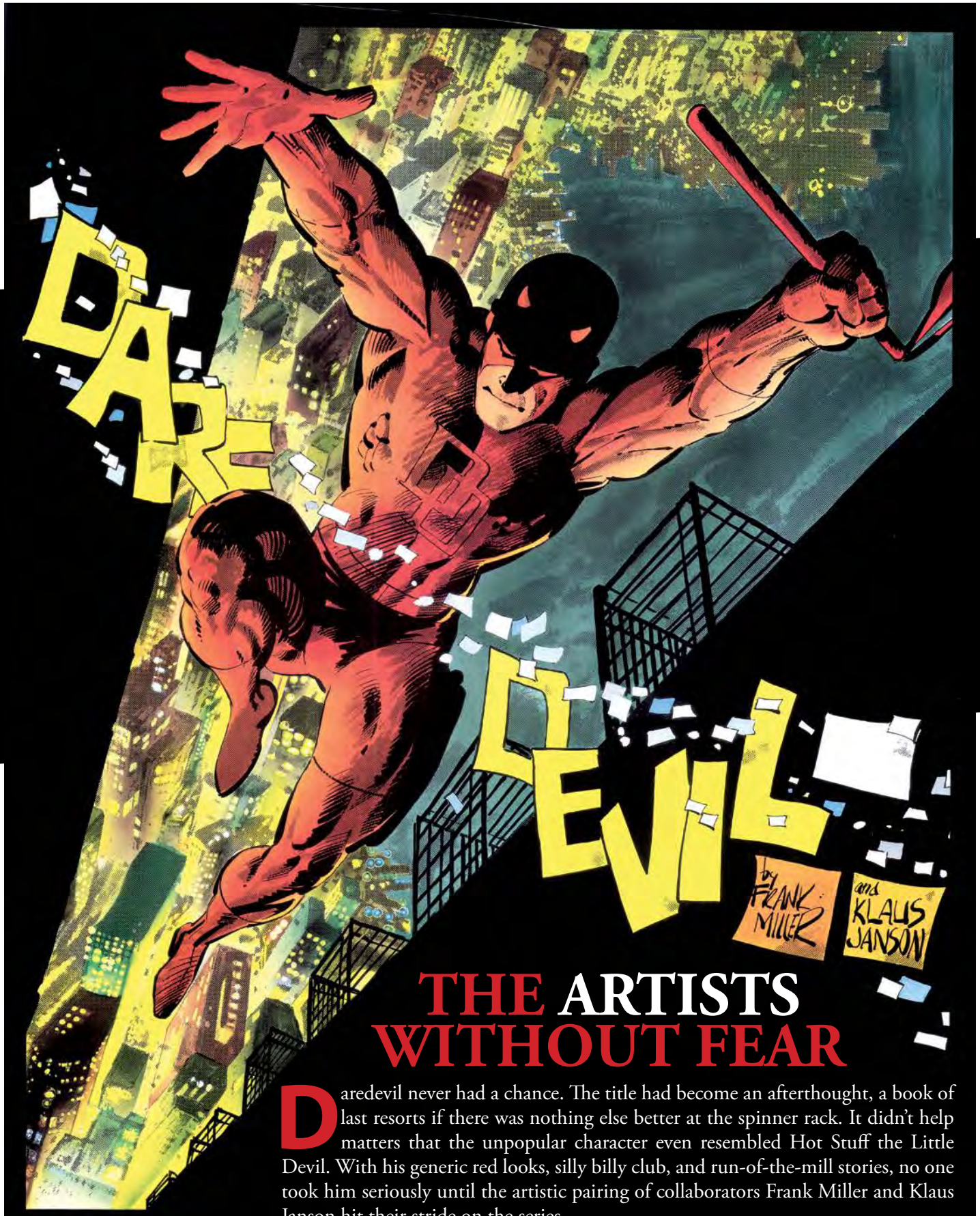
(above) John Buscema, 1978. (next page) A 1975 Buscema poster.
photo © Jackie Estrada

Acting Their Age

Teen Titans, a concept straight out of the pages of *The Brave and the Bold*, became a moderately successful 1966 title under DC stalwarts writer Bob Haney and artist Nick Cardy. The founding members of this super-team were Robin, Kid Flash, Aqualad, and Wonder Girl, all junior sidekicks to top-tier DC characters. The kid-friendly funny book ran until 1973, and then was resurrected for a short-lived comeback that lasted from 1976 to 1978, once and for all canceled with issue #53 when the group disbanded. One of the notable highlights of the series was issue #18, featuring early work by a spunky Marv Wolfman (with friend and fellow future comics legend Len Wein). What no one foresaw in that 1968 issue was that it would prove to be the beginning of a beautiful relationship.

"I read and enjoyed the Titans from the early *Brave and the Bold*s, but no, with rare exceptions I wasn't a big fan of them," says the influential wordsmith Marv Wolfman. "I loved Nick Cardy's art but never felt the characters talked or acted like their age, which I think was closer to twelve than the 18, 19, George [Pérez] and I had them be. But I had written some of the early *Titans*, including the original origin of Wonder Girl story, so I had a fondness for the characters if not the stories. But I wanted something to write that I could control as I had *Tomb of Dracula* at Marvel. Hence, I suggested doing *Titans*, whose previous incarnation had been cancelled a year or so earlier, so I could come in and redesign them as I saw fit."

While Wolfman, a lifelong devotee of the comics medium, made his earliest professional impressions at DC Comics, it was Marvel Comics where he would make his reputation. As one of the top writers and editors at the House of Ideas, this man wrote it all: *Amazing Spider-Man*, *Fantastic Four*, *Incredible Hulk*, *Daredevil*, *Marvel Two-in-One*, and more. *Tomb of Dracula*, with artists Gene Colan and Tom Palmer, became the centerpiece of his Marvel work, an extensive run regarded as one of the era's greatest creative works. As



THE ARTISTS WITHOUT FEAR

Daredevil never had a chance. The title had become an afterthought, a book of last resorts if there was nothing else better at the spinner rack. It didn't help matters that the unpopular character even resembled Hot Stuff the Little Devil. With his generic red looks, silly billy club, and run-of-the-mill stories, no one took him seriously until the artistic pairing of collaborators Frank Miller and Klaus Janson hit their stride on the series.

"It was a perfect storm in that I think I was the editor Frank [Miller] needed at the time," states *Daredevil* Editor Denny O'Neil. "There was eventually some conflict between him and [writer] Roger [McKenzie], and I didn't know who was right. I just

YO JOE! HOW G.I. JOE GOT HIS GROOVE BACK

G.I. Joe had their heyday as the most popular playthings for boys in the swinging '60s. But anything that goes up must come down, and the action-hero line was deep-sixed in 1977. It wasn't long before the Hasbro think tank was back at the drawing board staging a comeback for their soldier boys. The company planned to turn G.I. Joe into a major brand again by spearheading a massive marketing, media, and product campaign in 1982 centered on toys, an animated show, and a comic book starring a new team of diverse characters. To say the plan worked is an understatement.

The resurgence of the G.I. Joe team toy line proved to be a financial success for all parties involved. With over 500 different action figures, the toys dominated store shelves. The cartoons became a staple of children's television throughout the decade. But the comics series was where it was at; the stories by writer Larry Hama gave the toy line a soul.

"I was an editor at Marvel, and before that [Hasbro] meeting happened, they were trying to get somebody to commit to writing that book," says Hama. "I had been trying to get writing work. I was a full editor at Marvel. I couldn't get writing work from any of the editors. I had gone to every single editor, and they all said I couldn't write, that I was a guy who drew."

(above) Herb Trimpe's cover to *G.I. Joe* #1, and (left) Larry Hama signing at Jim Hanley's Universe in New York.

G.I. Joe © Hasbro. Photo courtesy JHU Comic Books.

At Marvel and DC Comics, creators are often pigeonholed creatively for one thing or another. For someone who came up the ranks as an artist like Hama, it could prove next to impossible to get a reluctant editor to even consider their other talents. This creative roadblock led Hama to seek opportunities outside of Marvel to fulfill his ambitions.

"It was to the point that I could actually prove to the editor-in-chief, Jim Shooter, that I had asked every single editor, and I had been turned down," recalls the writer. "There was a rule that you couldn't write or draw for another company if you were employed at Marvel but since I was able to prove that nobody at Marvel was going to give me any work, I had dispensation. So I started writing for Weezie Jones [now Louise Simonson] at Warren Publishing.

"I was writing for *Eerie* when Hasbro first came to Marvel about doing a G.I. Joe comic. They asked every single writer and editor at Marvel, and they got turned down by every single one because nobody wanted to do a toy license book."

While licensed titles were a valuable source of revenue for comic book companies, few major creators wanted to work on what most considered second-tier material at the time. Many veteran writers and artists flat-out refused these media-type assignments. The projects also carried a stigma

UNTIL THE END OF THE WORLDS

CRISIS ON INFINITE EARTHS

"Progress is impossible without change, and those who cannot change their minds cannot change anything."
—George Bernard Shaw

At the beleaguered offices of DC Comics, the reality had finally sunk in that the only way to make everything right was to embrace change and start all over again… to being anew by rattling the foundation. The facts were the facts: the decades of multiple worlds, burdensome continuity, and blandly mass-produced stories had taken a toll on the company's characters, books, and image. In spite of their better-known iconic properties, competitor Marvel Comics had consistently trumped DC in sales, year after year, for over a decade. To the general readership of the early 1980s, DC had become old hat, and their perceived reputation was of a company losing touch with modern day audiences. To turn things around the outfit looked to the man with the Midas touch: Marv Wolfman, the highly dignified writer of their best-selling title, *The New Teen Titans*, at the height of his influence at the company.

Crisis on Infinite Earths was intended to "write over" DC's muddled continuity.

Flash © DC Comics

"Today, DC and Marvel's sales are pretty much in the same ballpark," says the illustrious writer-editor Marv Wolfman, the progenitor of *Crisis on Infinite Earths*. "One month DC's up, the next Marvel, etc. Back in the '80s that wasn't the case. Except for George [Pérez] and my *New Teen Titans* book, Marvel was regularly outselling DC. If the average Marvel book was selling 400,000 copies, DC's were averaging 50,000. *Titans* was selling in the same numbers as a good selling Marvel book. So when I came in with the *Crisis* idea, it was exactly the right thing to do at the right time. DC needed something special and different and something that would tell every fan that this was no longer your father's DC Comics."

The confident Wolfman was a man with a plan. He had seen the facts for himself and instinctively knew that the only way to move things forward was to go back to the basics by wiping clean the slate of DC continuity. If successful, the writer understood that the rewards of this gamble would allow for clearer and more concise storytelling within future DC books. Much to the dismay of the loyal diehards, this effort became very much about second chances for the distinguished comics company, an opportunity to bring in new readers, to raise public awareness, and to change their perceived bland reputation. For the chief mastermind of this daunting project, the time had come to make things right at DC.

"I wanted to get rid of continuity, not strengthen it," states Wolfman. "DC was suffering from being held in the grip of some ridiculous continuity and, again, except for *Titans*, Marvel readers were not giving the company a chance. One thing I felt at the time was we needed to say something huge, to indicate everything you knew or thought you knew was no longer true. Although eleven DC fans understood it, I also felt the multiverse was confusing to the Marvel readers, and we needed to get them to try DC and to realize DC had great characters too. Getting rid of the multiverse would shout to the readers that this was new. Because the DCU [DC Comics Universe] was simplified, it was a great starting off point for Marvel readers to try a DC comic for the first time, and since nothing like *Crisis* had ever been done before, it would say that DC could take the lead in innovation."

In a project of this magnitude and importance, the practical Wolfman couldn't afford sentimentality or self-doubt. For the betterment of DC and the integrity of this bold story, he intrinsically learned to let go. Wolfman explains, "As much as I liked the multiverse when it was first introduced, I didn't think it added anything two decades later."

For years the DC multiverse served as a favorite story device that allowed for infinite variations of planets and characters, as well as alternate futures to all of the possible