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BACK ISSUE
Comics' Bronze Age and Beyond!

Greatest Stories Never Told Issue!

PLEASE NOTE: *Due to ongoing international trade issues, to remain economically viable, we were forced to raise the cover price of* Back Issue. *Thanks for your understanding, and continued support of this magazine!*

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Greatest Stories Never Told

Alex Ross and the Fantastic Four that wasn't

interview by **Michael Eury**
conducted by phone on April 25, 2019,
and transcribed by Rose Rummel-Eury

*"**The World's Greatest Comic Magazine.**" For most* BACK ISSUE *readers,* Fantastic Four *was just that, one of the first Marvel superhero titles we read during our youth and one we followed loyally for years, even decades.*

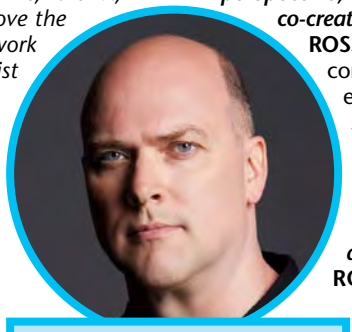
Yet in the mid-2010s, what was once the flagship title of the Marvel Universe fell out of favor with many readers, and after a conga line of creative teams paraded through the book and its reboots, Fantastic Four *was cancelled.*

*Enter **Alex Ross**.*

The superstar creator known for Marvels, Kingdom Come, Earth X, *and photorealistic cover art had an idea of how to move the FF forward by looking backward, to the explosive artwork of the World's Greatest Comic Magazine's original artist and co-creator, Jack "King" Kirby.*

Yet Alex Ross' imaginative version of Fantastic Four *was not meant to be. Why? Alex—one of* BI*'s most dedicated readers, we're proud to say—sits down with ye ed to share the details behind this colorful, heartfelt "Greatest Story Never Told."*

– Michael Eury



ALEX ROSS

Courtesy of Alex Ross.

MICHAEL EURY: ***Where did your FF concept start?***

ALEX ROSS: For me, it started in early 2017, and I had two key influences from where I was drawing this *Fantastic Four* pitch. It wasn't called a "pitch," because it didn't have a storyline attached to it. If [the FF] were coming back in the near future, in what way could I represent it graphically that would be kind of a bold new take or something that would link back to this original type of comic?

So, two people have credits I'd like to give here: a friend of mine, Ron Murphy, had sent me a *Fantastic Four* full-color comic album, printed in England, which was made in the late '60s. It was recolored with these bizarre Day-Glo colors and it created a whole impression in my mind of how you could sort of break up the pop iconography of the '60s comic with this incredibly weird representation.

Then there was an artist named Aco, who was doing a pop-art retro-'60s *Nick Fury* series. This series, which came out in 2017, was a prototype for the way I thought you could do the FF.

I was picturing the best way to depict the FF for a modern generation was to translate Kirby's work into a '60s pop-art graphic, combined with my realistic rendering, thinking that it's impossible to fully de-code Kirby, especially with my style, but you could apply abstract elements like the coloring being flat and vibrant like black-light posters with an interpretation of his faces that matches. With that, you could hopefully find the spirit of Jack's FF in there.

EURY: ***I think you can. Yours is certainly an out-of-the-ordinary perspective, but it circles back to the era in which Jack and Stan co-created these characters. It certainly has that "retro" feel to it.***

ROSS: The thing is, "retro" can feel like a negative unless you come up with a way to make it fresh and new to modern eyes so it's not just about an aesthetic of clothing and retro styles. It's about something intellectually from that '60s era that you can identify and sort of pull out and getting to the soul of what was the '60s, what was there, going on.

EURY: ***Things that come to mind that were going on in the '60s were the Cold War and the Space Race—at least when I think of the Fantastic Four.***

ROSS: Right, in terms of the topics of the stories and narratives. The key thing is, what will work for people today that will hold on to an almost subliminal aspect of the '60s that people will be entranced with? That's where I felt this artist Aco had really connected that successfully, which, by the way, is about the Sam Jackson version of Nick Fury, not the old one we grew up with.

EURY: ***Let's talk about the casting of your* Fantastic Four*…***

ROSS: Basically, it's one of the biggest influences on the whole idea in getting it going. The original way I did it for several years was to use the likeness of Russell Johnson from *Gilligan's Island* as Reed Richards. Certainly as a child, I thought the Professor on *Gilligan's Island* reminded me of Mister Fantastic. And now that I was an adult, nobody was telling me "no" when I was doing it in Marvel Comics, probably because he also wasn't having his face plastered on covers. I got to do it within the issues of *Marvels*.

But, some years ago, a fellow TwoMorrows' contributor, George Khoury, had given me a book on science-fiction television where I first saw a picture of Gary Conway, from the *Land of the Giants* TV series.

Color Me Spy

One of Ross' influences for his Fantastic Four palette was Marvel's 2017 *Nick Fury: Deep-Cover Capers* six-issue limited series, written by James Robinson, illustrated by Aco and Hugo Petrus, and colored by Rachelle Robinson.

Giant-Size Reed and Sue

(above and opposite) Alex was inspired by *Land of the Giants* actors Gary Conway and Deanna Lund for his interpretations of Mr. Fantastic and the Invisible Woman.

EURY: ***…Which was one of my favorite TV shows when I was a kid! When I saw your drawings, it was clear to me that your Reed Richards was based upon Gary Conway.***

ROSS: Well, I think that Gary's resemblance to Kirby's face of Reed was a revelation. It's the face. I had previously thought of Jack's leading men as ciphers… and the women in many cases, too. That's true of other artists. The male and female leads have repeated facial structures that are of a certain type.

But the thing is, it wasn't true. As an example, the way Jack drew Ikaris from the *Eternals* is different from his other blond, long-haired heroes. His unaltered Superman faces didn't look like anything he had been drawing at Marvel. Looking at Gary Conway, I felt like I understood Reed as a very specific person with distinctive, intense features, and this inspired me to think I could capture the real guy as Kirby had designed him.

EURY: ***You did, from what I've seen from these illustrations. It's not a generic face. It's a face with intelligence and integrity, and Conway did have that as well.***

On* Land of the Giants*, even though the special effects one-upped the actors, Gary Conway was the anchor of the show; he was the glue and certainly embodied the characteristics of a strong leader. I think you captured that pretty well.

ROSS: Thank you.

EURY: ***You're welcome.***

If you were going to cast Reed today because Gary Conway wasn't an inspiration for whatever reason, whom would you cast?

ROSS: I'd say Anson Mount, who has been playing Captain Pike on *Star Trek: Discovery*. He would be perfect. Even though he would possibly be discounted because he played Black Bolt on the *Inhumans* show. But that same situation didn't prevent Chris Evans from going into playing Captain America after playing the Human Torch in separate films…

EURY: ***Evans was in a third comic-inspired movie,* The Losers*, based on the Vertigo version.***

ROSS: Yes. And Josh Brolin, who's now Cable and Thanos. He got held back because he was Jonah Hex in a movie that didn't do well. We've got Affleck with Daredevil and Batman…

EURY: ***…And Superman, as far as* Hollywoodland *is concerned.***

ROSS: Right! [*chuckles*]

EURY: ***Essentially, he can fight himself if you combine footage from* Hollywoodland *and* Batman v Superman *for an "all-Affleck" version. I'll let someone else spend time putting that together.* [*laughs*]

Back to* FF*, what were your inspirations for the other characters?

ROSS: Ironically, from even the same book and the same photo of Gary Conway, I looked at the actors next to him and thought, "That's the facial structure of Kirby females." Since going to back to *Marvels* as well, I've always tried to draw the Jack Kirby prototype face where it's Sue Richard's.

Since I saw the pictures from *Land of the Giants*, I've been using Deanna Lund as the basis for my Sue Storm.

EURY: ***That's very clear to me, too. Deanna Lund… a lot of boys had crushes on her back in the day.***

Have you had a chance to actually watch* Land of the Giants *since you discovered it in that book?

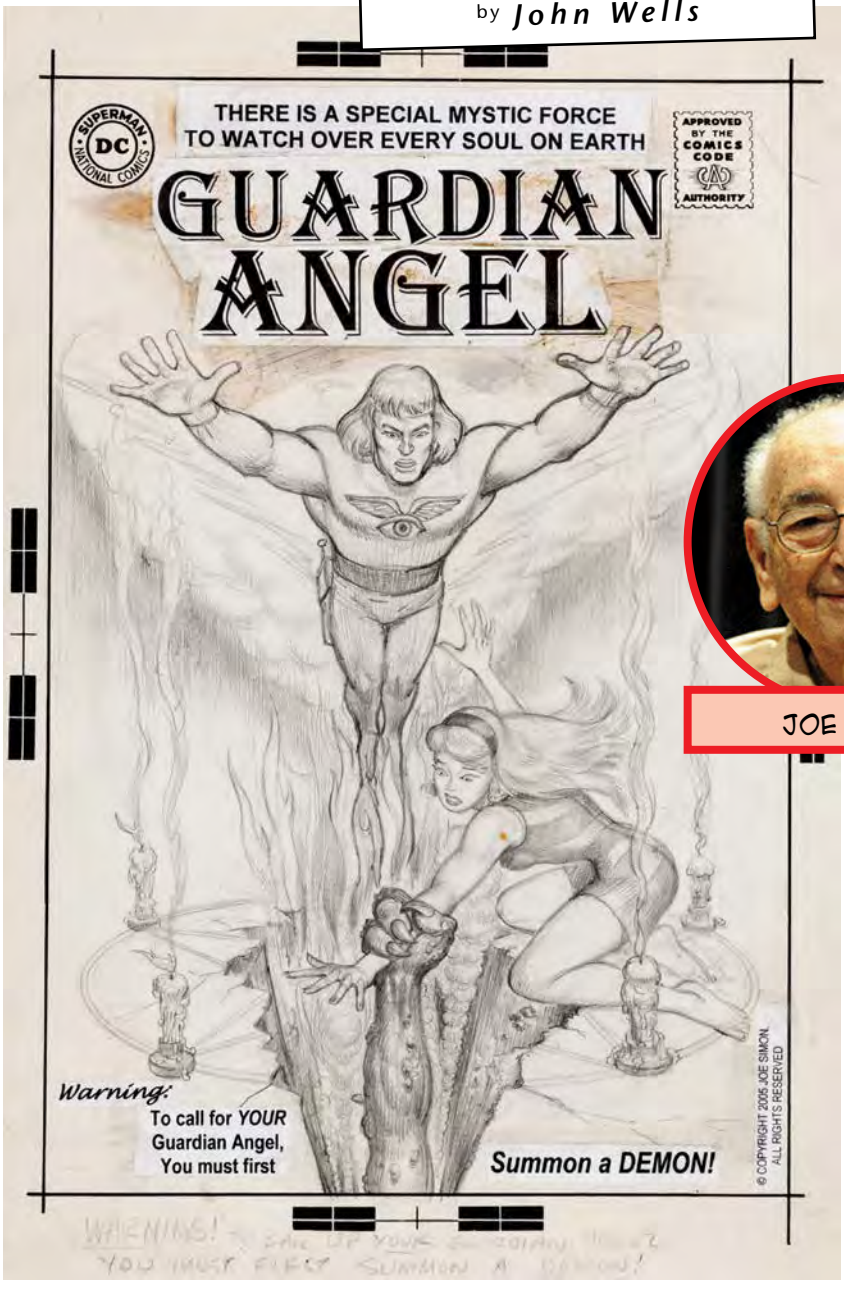
ROSS: Oh, yeah.

EURY: ***Did you ever see* Land of the Giants *reruns when you were a kid?***

ROSS: No, and there are a lot of series like that and *Time Tunnel* that just did not get featured in syndication across the United States.

The "Lost" Stories of the 1970s

by John Wells



Superman had to prove himself. Batman did, too. For over three decades, DC Comics exercised caution in giving an action hero their own book. Only after Superman, Batman, and even backup characters like Congo Bill had established themselves in anthology titles were they awarded their own titles.

Although there were several humor and media tie-in first issues released during DC's first decades, only five non-licensed adventure characters (and one group) were awarded their own books without preliminaries. *The Adventures of Rex, the Wonder Dog* (1952), *Capt. Storm* (1964), *Secret Six* (1968), and *Brother Power, the Geek* (1968) featured original characters, while *Superman's Pal, Jimmy Olsen* (1954) marked the first spotlight on the Superman supporting cast member and *Plastic Man* (1966) revived the Golden Age Quality Comics hero.

In 1956, DC introduced *Showcase*, a comic book that made it possible for DC to avoid the expense of producing several issues of an ongoing title before sales figures came in. In *Showcase*, DC produced mock issues of new titles and, if the character or concept was a dud, the publisher had risked little. The idea worked so well that *The Brave and the Bold* was converted to a companion tryout title from 1959 to the early 1960s.

KIRBY IS COMING... AND SIMON, TOO

By 1968, an appearance in *Showcase* had become a mere formality. Characters like the Creeper and Bat Lash, whom DC had already committed to releasing in ongoing titles, first made token appearances in the tryout book. Such was the case with Jack Kirby's *New Gods* in 1970. DC fully intended to release the title and its companions as ongoing series, but nonetheless began to go through the motions of preparing *Showcase* #94 to introduce the series.

JOE SIMON

© Kendall Whitehouse.

At some point, DC came to realize that, if they weren't going to use *Showcase* to gauge a title's sales potential, they might as well not use it as all. Consequently, Kirby's *New Gods* and *Forever People* became the first un-established superheroes in DC's history to win titles without any kind of preview.

The downside of *Showcase*'s cancellation was that it had eliminated DC's early warning system for unsuccessful concepts. The end result was a succession of short-run titles from the 1970s to the present, comic books that were often cancelled so abruptly that completed issues were left unpublished. The proliferation

This One Flew Away

Uninked cover for *Guardian Angel*, via Joe Simon's archives. Artist unknown. Original art courtesy of Heritage Comics Auctions (*www.ha.com*). Most art scans accompanying this article are courtesy of John Wells.

© Joe Simon estate.

That Sinking Feeling

DC's superfluous Bronze Age soft-horror books like *Weird Mystery Tales* provided a home for cancelled work, including (top left) issue #2's cover artist Howard Purcell and (bottom) Jack Kirby's *Spirit World* #2.

TM & © DC Comics.

You've Lost That Loving Feeling

Kirby's unfinished cover for *Soul Love* #1. (See TwoMorrows' new book *Jack Kirby's Dingbat Love* for more unpublished Kirby work.)

TM & © DC Comics.

True-Life Divorce and *Soul Love* seemed doomed to obscurity until articles and art reproductions in issues of *The Jack Kirby Collector* finally brought them into fan consciousness. In 2019, the two issues were finally published by TwoMorrows—in cooperation with DC—in the hardback *Jack Kirby's Dingbat Love*, which detailed the full saga of the lost magazines. Also included in the book were two complete episodes of "The Dingbats of Danger Street." Part of a trio of stories created by Kirby in the fall of 1973, only the first adventure of the kid gang was ever published by DC in 1975's *1st Issue Special* #6.

Like the magazines, digests were also a non-starter for DC. Taking note of Gold Key's success with the format, DC released the first and only issue of *Tarzan Digest* in July 1972. As seen in advertisements in *Adventure Comics* #423 and *Weird Western Tales* #14, it was supposed to have accompanied *Larry Harmon's Laurel and Hardy Digest*. Like the 32-page comic book released in June, the 160-page digest would have primarily reprinted stories first published in the United Kingdom. Unfortunately, DC discovered that they didn't have the licensing rights to Laurel and Hardy and were forced to cancel both titles immediately. The art for both the digest and *L&H* #2 survived as part of the collection of renowned DC production man Jack Adler.

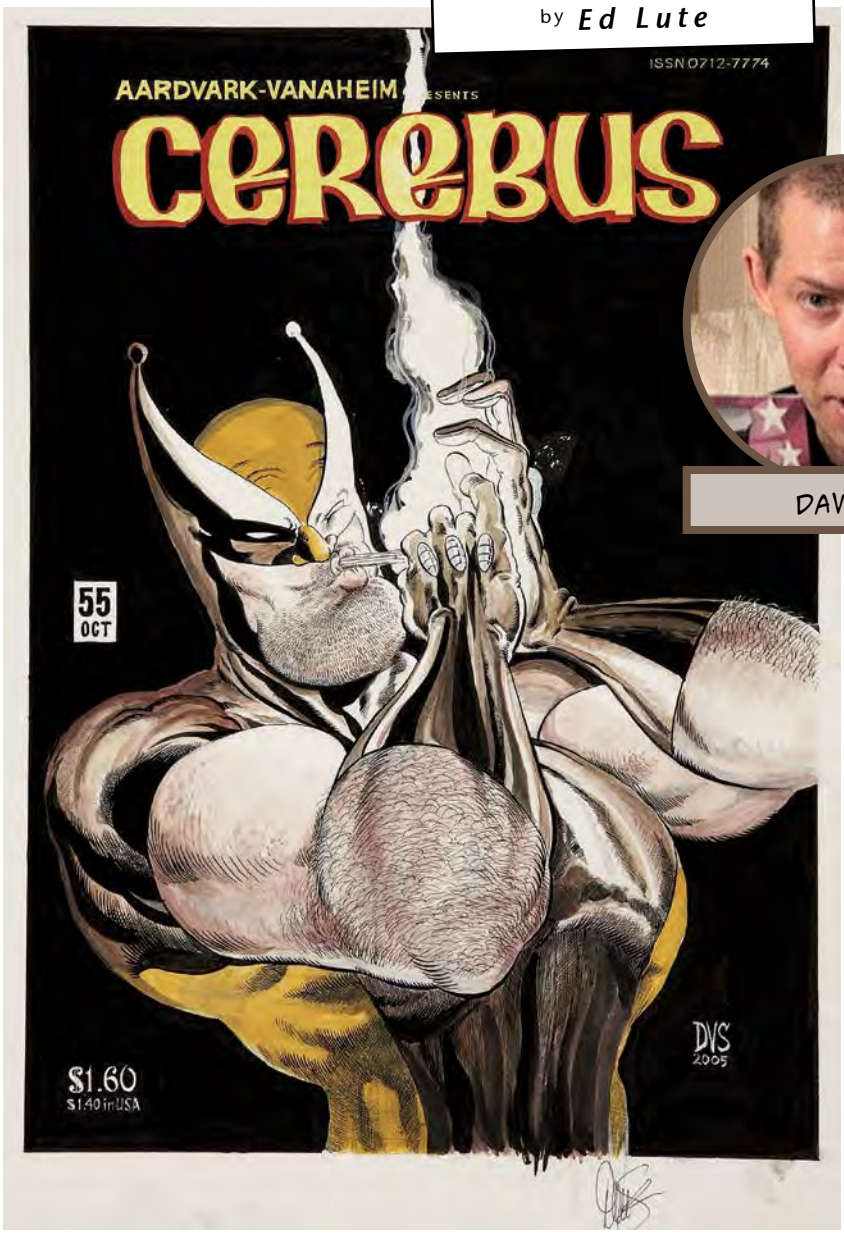
Also left unrealized was Sheldon Mayer's proposal for a digest for his beloved baby creations Sugar and Spike or, as he dubbed it, a "pocket treasury."

Greatest Stories Never Told

CANCELLED CROSSOVER CAVALCADE

TWO INTERCOMPANY CROSSOVERS THAT NEVER SAW PRINT

by Ed Lute



DAVE SIM

In 1975, rival comic-book publishers DC Comics and Marvel Comics did something unexpected: The Big Two got together to produce their first intercompany (or cross-company) comic book.

However, the comic they published didn't feature any of their iconic superheroes. It was instead the treasury-sized adaptation of MGM's *Marvelous Wizard of Oz*. Both companies had been working on their own adaptions of the story, with Marvel using L. Frank Baum's first Wizard of Oz novel, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, as the basis for their comic, and DC basing their version on the classic 1939 film. Then, Marvel publisher and editor Stan Lee and DC publisher Carmine Infantino got together and decided the two companies should collaborate on an adaption. The comic, written by Roy Thomas and illustrated by John Buscema, was a well-regarded adaption of the movie… but this initial Marvel/DC collaboration is what has made this edition a lasting comic-book legacy.

Soon, the two companies were collaborating again, using some of the most popular and beloved comics of the Bronze Age. One year later, their most popular characters faced off in *Superman vs. the Amazing Spider-Man* (Jan. 1976). This "Battle of the Century" was written by Gerry Conway, penciled by Ross Andru, and inked by Dick Giordano, with some uncredited assistance from pencilers Neal Adams and John Romita, Sr. and inkers Terry Austin and Bob Wiacek [as revealed way back in *BACK ISSUE* #13—***ed.***]. While this was the first superhero intercompany crossover of the Bronze Age, it wasn't the first intercompany crossover featuring superheroes. That distinction goes to All-American Publications' *All Star Comics* #3 (Winter 1940), which featured All-American Comics' Hawkman, the Flash, the Atom, and Green Lantern alongside National Allied Publications' the Sandman, Hour-Man (later Hourman), Doctor Fate, and the Spectre, teaming up for the first appearance of the Justice Society of America. These two companies would later merge to become DC Comics.

During the early 1980s, there were several other outstanding cross-company crossovers, such as a repeat meeting between DC's big blue boy scout and Marvel's web-headed superhero in *Marvel Treasury Edition* #28's *Superman and Spider-Man* (July 1981), a Batman and Hulk crossover in *DC Special Series* #27 (Fall 1981), and Marvel's

Hey, Bub!

Dave Sim's "Wolveroach" lampoon in the pages of his long-running opus *Cerebus the Aardvark* led to a brainstorming session about a Cerebus/X-Men crossover that went south. Original art scan of Sim's autographed 2005 recreation of his cover for *Cerebus* #55 (Oct. 1983), courtesy of Heritage Comics Auctions (*www.ha.com*).

merry mutants and DC's teen superheroes in *The Uncanny X-Men and the New Teen Titans* #1 (Jan. 1982). These crossovers were a comic-book fan's dream. Not only did they feature some of the biggest characters in superhero comics, but they were written and illustrated by some of the top talent in the field at the time including Jim Shooter, Marv Wolfman, Len Wein, Chris Claremont, José Luis García-López, John Buscema, Walt Simonson, Terry Austin, Klaus Janson, and Bob Layton. [***Editor's note:*** For the full details behind these epics, see *BACK ISSUE* #61.]

While a crossover between DC's Justice League of America and Marvel's Avengers and a sequel to the X-Men/Titans crossover were discussed, they never saw print, although the George Pérez-penciled JLA/Avengers book was well underway before being shelved due to creative disagreements between the two houses [see *BI* #1's inaugural "Greatest Stories Never Told" for the scoop—and for unpublished Pérez art!—***ed.***]. Yet the next crossover between DC Comics and Marvel Comics wouldn't take place until over a decade later, when Batman and the Punisher butted heads in 1994.

CHRIS CLAREMONT

© Luigi Novi / Wikimedia Commons.

Independent publishers were willing to pick up on the idea of intercompany crossovers (and new intercompany crossovers are still being published and remain popular because they feature fan-favorite characters interacting with other characters that they wouldn't normally interact with). With the popularity of Mirage Studios' Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles in the 1980s, the Heroes in a Half-Shell made crossover appearances, including one with Aardvark-Vanaheim's Cerebus the Aardvark in *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* #8 (July 1986). As the 1990s dawned, these crossovers remained popular with fans. It was during this period when one of the major publishers released another intercompany crossover—although it wouldn't be with the *other* major publisher. In 1991, DC Comics and Fleetway teamed to co-publish *Batman/Judge Dredd: Judgment on Gotham*. This comic was the first intercompany crossover between one of the Big Two and an independent publisher.

It almost wasn't the first, though… in fact, if fate had not intervened, it might have been preceded by *two* others: Mike Grell's proposed Batman/Jon Sable crossover and Chris Claremont and Dave Sim's Uncanny X-Men/Cerebus team-up. Both of these ideas featured popular characters and interesting concepts, so why didn't they happen? Let's find out!

UNCANNY X-MEN/CEREBUS THE AARDVARK

Uncanny X-Men was one of Marvel Comics' biggest-selling titles during the 1980s. Prior to 1975, though, *X-Men* had been a bimonthly reprint title that faced cancellation. Fortunately, 1975's *Giant-Size X-Men* #1 by Len Wein and Dave Cockrum set the world on fire, but it was writer Chris Claremont, who started writing the regular *X-Men* series with issue #94 (Aug. 1975), that helped guide the X-Men from its bimonthly status to a monthly one and into one of the biggest comic-book series from the Bronze and Copper Ages. Along with Claremont, a succession of talented artists such as Cockrum, John Byrne, John Romita, Jr., and Paul Smith, and many others, wove together some of the most celebrated Marvel comics.

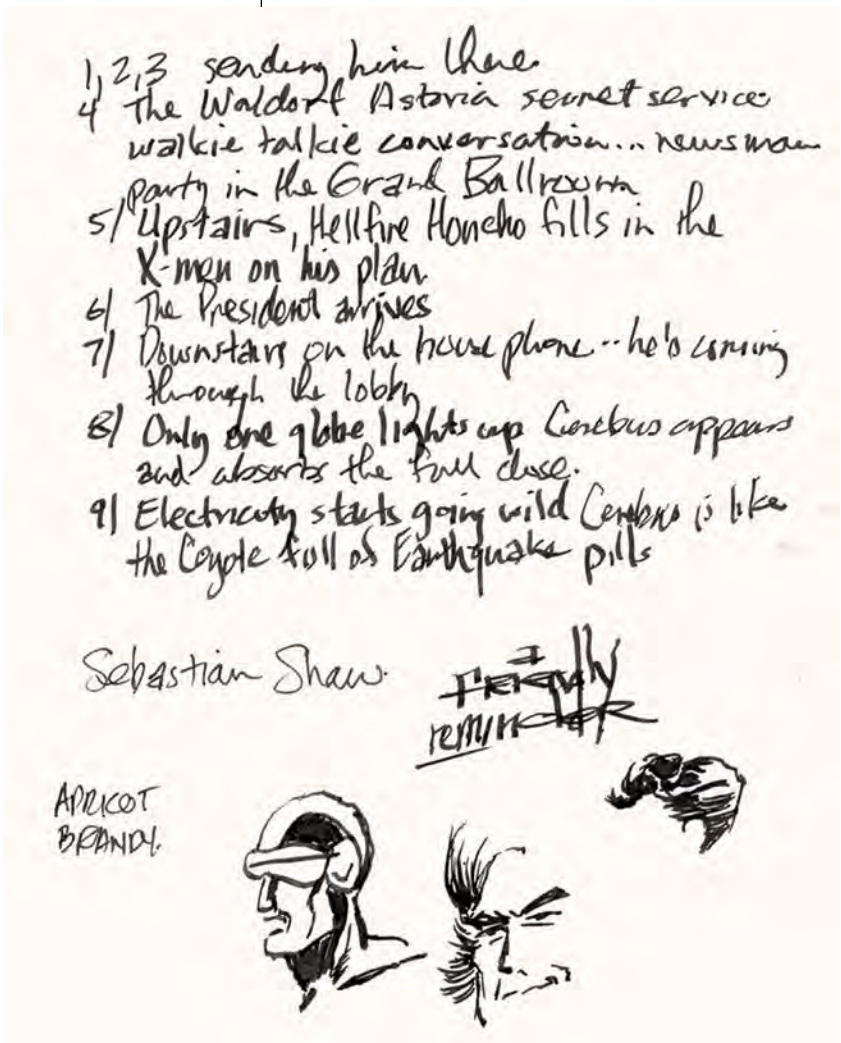
Writer/Artist Dave Sim first brought Cerebus the Aardvark to readers in 1977 in a self-published black-and-white comic book [see *BACK ISSUE* #75—***ed.***]. *Cerebus the Aardvark* #1 (Dec. 1977) was published by Aardvark-Vanaheim. The series was initially a parody of Marvel's *Conan the Barbarian* series but became a long-running title featuring social commentary. In a 2016 interview on *Jamiecoville.com*, Sim recounted, "The decision to do Cerebus was based on my insight that what had made Howard the Duck successful was the 'funny animal in the world of humans' motif, whereas everyone doing work for [the indie anthology] *Quack!* (my intended market) was doing all funny-animal strips. Since Howard had modern-day sown up, that, to me, left the possibility of a science-fiction 'funny animal in the world of humans' or a sword 'n' sorcery 'funny animal in the world of humans.' Science fiction required drawing a lot of straight edges and learning how to use French curves properly, so that left only one possibility. The fact that it was successful was a very hard lesson in what happens when you do something, because you think it's commercially viable rather than being what you want to do. I was stuck going through the checklist of sword 'n' sorcery clichés and was quickly running out of them."

While one comic featured a band of outcast mutant superheroes, the other had a sentient aardvark. How did a crossover between these two disparate comic-book properties come to be? On Brian Michael Bendis' message board, Sim recalled the genesis of this project: "Chris Claremont and I both got invited to a store signing in Prince George, British Columbia, so we

Meet Scribbly

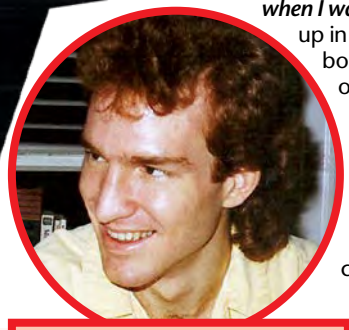
A page of random notes by Dave Sim regarding the proposed X-Men/Cerebus crossover. Scan courtesy of Ed Lute.

© Dave Sim.



THE TARGET

by Brian Augustyn



MIKE PAROBECK

It's hard to believe that after 30-some years in the comics business that there was a time in the dim mists of memory when I was merely a determined wannabe. Growing up in Chicago, a big city to be sure, the comic-book business seemed a million miles out of reach; comics professionals lived near or in New York City, where the then few publishers were located. It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.

But the 1980s is where the ice began to crack to allow dreamers from outside of the East Coast to glimpse their dreams coming true. At the end of the '70s, Jack Kirby moved from Long Island way across the country to settle in Pasadena, California—this while at the top of his form and in demand; and thus, requiring cross-country shipping. Thank goodness for DHL, UPS, and FedEx. Suddenly, creators could live anywhere—even Europe or South America—and (hopefully) meet deadlines. In the mid-'80s, thanks to self-publishing innovators, Dave Sim (*Cerebus*) and Wendy and Richard Pini (*ElfQuest*), the black-and-white comics era began.

After some early attempts to enter the business—contributing to fanzines, pitching proposals to publishers (especially First Comics in Chicago, etc.)—I didn't gain much ground, but did garner a wider range of contacts. Still Chicago-bound, I focused my efforts on building a local creative community. First stroke of luck was meeting Paul Fricke and Scott Beaderstadt, as they were in the early stages of creating/developing what would become *TrolLords*, an early entry in the black-and-white independent comics boom—briskly on the heels of a little title known as *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. Thankfully, *TrolLords* was a hit and it launched us closer to legit comics success. In 1986 or so, I organized a pair of benefit comics for Literacy Volunteers of America, which went on to raise quite an impressive return for the worthy charity (sadly, I have no memory of how impressive).

Several generous creators from the B&W boom volunteered to lend their work and their characters to the cause. For one anthology slot, I turned to a young artist we had just met. A very talented 22-year-old guy, who loved and wanted to work in comics, but was laboring unhappily in the advertising biz. I had been blown away by the guy's samples—just incredible!

In other words, enough about me, let's talk about that brilliant young artist: Mike Parobeck. Mike was born somewhere in Ohio, went on to earn an art degree, and moved to Chicago to pursue a career in the soul-destroying business of advertising to specialize in the selling of canned tuna and sports cars—and who knows what-all. Mike was perhaps the sweetest and warmest person I ever knew—and easily the most naturally talented artist I ever knew (and I have known many). Mike was a tall, thin redhead with a million freckles and the brightest smile I have ever known.

Revived from the Golden Age

The Target, as re-imagined by writer Brian Augustyn and artist Mike Parobeck.

The Batman™ Movie and Me

by Steve Englehart

STEVE ENGLEHART

steveenglehart.com.

I don't like blowing my own horn. I do it when I have to, but I prefer to let the work speak for itself. Under "when I have to," I thought I'd made it clear over time that I was the backbone of the *Batman* movie in 1989. Whenever I'd hear some alternate attribution, I'd step right up and correct it. So *BACK ISSUE* #113 was like a thunderbolt for me. A whole issue about the movie that barely mentioned my comics story, let alone my movie work, and contained this quote from Sam Hamm: "I don't think we borrowed much from it."

So here's a horn, which Michael Eury has generously provided. It's gonna be loud because I'd like it to be heard. And for the record, I stand behind every word of it. But if you want to check, the comic run, *Detective Comics* #469–476, is available as a digital bootleg at *steveenglehart.com*, along with the second and unpublished third runs. The movie is all over the internet.

Afterward, I hope I never have to do this again.

Okay. In 1976, Jenette Kahn brought me to a DC that was rapidly losing ground to Marvel, to write the *Justice League* "like the Avengers." DC's heroes were avatars, not people, and Jenette knew, if she was going to save the company, that she needed to make them people, and she needed some Marvel heat. I was down with all that, but I also wanted to do the Batman on his own, because he'd always been my favorite. She agreed, but the trick there, she said, was that people still thought of Batman as the campy TV show.

So I thought about the Batman—the essence of the Batman. And my thinking was as follows: (1) We need to know Bruce Wayne to really appreciate what it means to be the Batman. (2) Bruce is an adult man, and it has always bugged me that adult heroes blush and stammer when a pretty girl comes onto them. So Bruce should be recognizably adult, and that means a sex life. (3) The woman involved should be a strong woman, and a player on the Gotham scene, to be able to hang with Bruce Wayne. (In 1976, the Comics Code still forbade sex lives, so I had to be creative. The Code was the main reason no one else had thought of it before; it was deemed unthinkable.)

"The Definitive Batman"

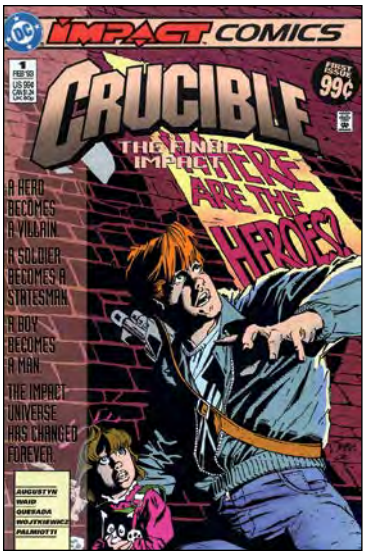
Among writer Steve Englehart's many accomplishments as a Bat-scribe: adding more depth to Bruce Wayne's personality and introducing love interest Silver St. Cloud. Signed original Marshall Rogers/Terry Austin art page from *Detective Comics* #474 (Dec. 1977), courtesy of Heritage Comics Auctions (*www.ha.com*).

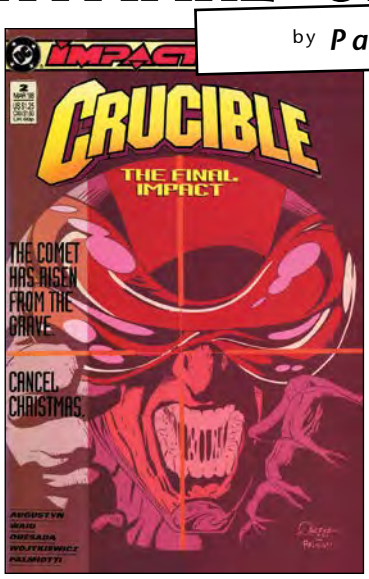
IMPACT COMICS: THE LITTLE IMPRINT THAT WAS LEFT OUT IN THE COLD

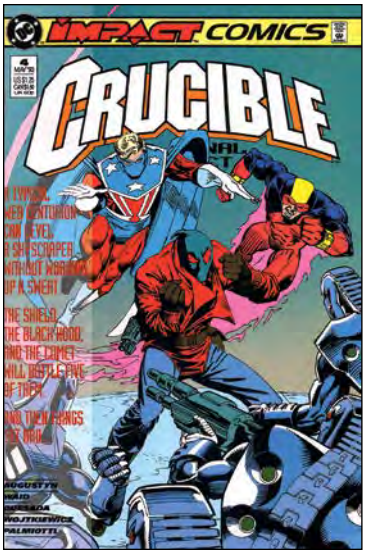
Greatest Stories Never Told

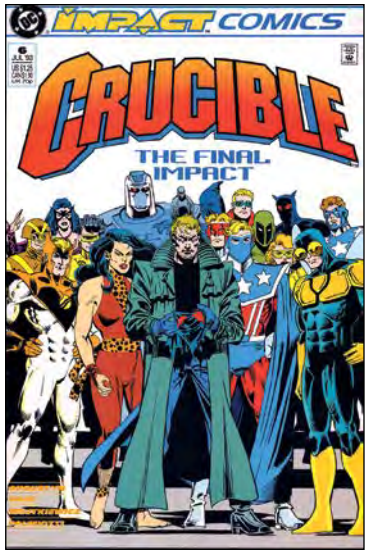
PART 1: NIGHTMARE-ON-WHEELS

by Paul Kupperberg









Archie Heroes in Crisis

In late 1992 the once-hopeful Impact! Comics imprint attempted a dramatic reinvention including this six-issue miniseries, *Crucible*. Cover art by Joe Quesada and Joe Rubinstein (#1–2) and Dick Giordano (#3–6). Unless otherwise stated, all images accompanying this article are courtesy of Paul Kupperberg.

[***Editor's note:*** *Paul Kupperberg originally pitched this Impact Comics article as a two-part feature, serialized in two consecutive editions of* BACK ISSUE. *Once this issue's "Greatest Stories Never Told" theme availed itself as the perfect vehicle for this feature, I opted to bundle both parts into one issue, but have maintained Paul's two-part story structure. Enjoy this insider's view of a relaunch that could have been.*]

"Why bother?"

Let me start by offering this Pro Tip: When you're an editor writing a proposal to pitch a new multi-title project to your publisher, it's usually not a good idea to lead with "Why bother?" You should also avoid such information, even buried in the proposal's sixth paragraph, that the project "…isn't going to sell. Let me say that again. [It] will not, even in the long term, be a major commercial hit. The industry as it presently exists will not support efforts with as many negatives as [this project has]."

CHRISTOPHER PRIEST (JAMES OWSLEY)

Gage Skidmore / Wikimedia Commons.

Posing such questions and making bold statements of defeat right off the bat aren't usually the way to a project go-ahead. But in the case of DC Comics editor Jim Owsley's proposal for the relaunch of the revamped Impact Comics line, he knew he was dealing with a hostile audience and couldn't afford to be accused of "wishful thinking" in his pitch for *The American Shield*, *The Mark of the Black Hood*, and *The Wrath of the Comet* by confidently predicting great, or even moderate, sales success.

The need for a relaunch after only about a year and a half of the original six Impact! titles made that claim impossible. He mentions some of the reasons he believed the line failed, including the lack of "a consistent editorial point of view and voice" that

IMPACT COMICS: THE LITTLE IMPRINT THAT WAS LEFT OUT IN THE COLD

Greatest Stories Never Told

PART 2: LOW IMPACT RELAUNCH

by Paul Kupperberg

Direct Currents

Retailer sell-sheet for *Wrath of the Comet*, featuring art by Michael Netzer.

On the face of it, it didn't seem that complicated: revamp and relaunch DC Comics' failed Impact! Comics imprint. In fact, considering all the individual elements of the relaunch, it probably should have been a slam-dunk. It was being overseen by James Owsley (who now goes by the name Christopher J. Priest), an experienced editor and talented writer in his own right, plotted and written by Mark Waid and Brian Augustyn, and featured art by veterans Steve Carr, Chuck Wojtkiewicz, newcomer Gene Ha, and industry legend Dave Cockrum, creating what Owsley had earlier described in a project memo as "three or four titles, off in a corner somewhere, existing quietly and without hype" starring a lineup of known and beloved characters.

DC's first attempt at the Impact! Comics line (distinguished here by the exclamation point in the name) had been exhaustively researched and methodically planned to appeal to younger, entry-level readers who would grow into readers of the more "mature" DC Comics line. Impact! launched in July of 1991, but the seven titles (*The Fly*, *The Comet*, *The Legend of the Shield*, *Jaguar*, *The Web*, *The Black Hood*, and *The Crusaders*) struggled to find a place in the marketplace and by the end of 1992 were on their way to cancellation, as detailed in Part 1 of this feature.

The superheroes anchoring the Impact! line were, in effect, rentals, on license from their owners, Archie Comics. In the years before the red-headed, freckle-faced teen icon took over the company's corporate and public identity, Archie Comics had been known as MLJ Comics and, like the rest of the industry in the early 1940s, focused its publishing efforts on superheroes like the Shield (whose first appearance in *Pep* #1 in January 1940 pre-dated Timely' Captain America as comics' first star-spangled hero by almost a year), the Hangman, the Black Hood, the Comet, the Web, and others; the Fly and Jaguar debuted in the 1950s, during one of Archie's several attempts at reviving the superhero characters.

DC still had time to left on its contract with Archie, so it was agreed that editor Owsley would relaunch a reduced line of titles following the six-issue *Crucible* miniseries that would reset the Impact Comics universe. But the initial reception of Impact! Comics had somewhat soured the company's administrative and marketing sides on the imprint, which, coupled with creative and personnel difficulties, made the entire year and a half experience an ordeal for almost everyone involved.

EARNING ITS PLACE ON THE RACKS

"I'm saddened by the overall lack of confidence exhibited from nearly every quarter of DC with regard to Impact. It seems most everyone around here remains predisposed towards regarding Impact as substandard work and a commercial failure," Owsley wrote in a February 9, 1993 memo outlining the troubled relaunch timeline. "Certainly the failure of Impact has created inestimable negatives within DC, as well as in the marketplace. My experience, however, is the market has high hopes DC will improve its entry-level line, while, within DC, Impact is typically the subject of ridicule."

Greatest Stories Never Told

THE LOST CURT SWAN PAGES OF SKULL & BONES

by Ed Catto

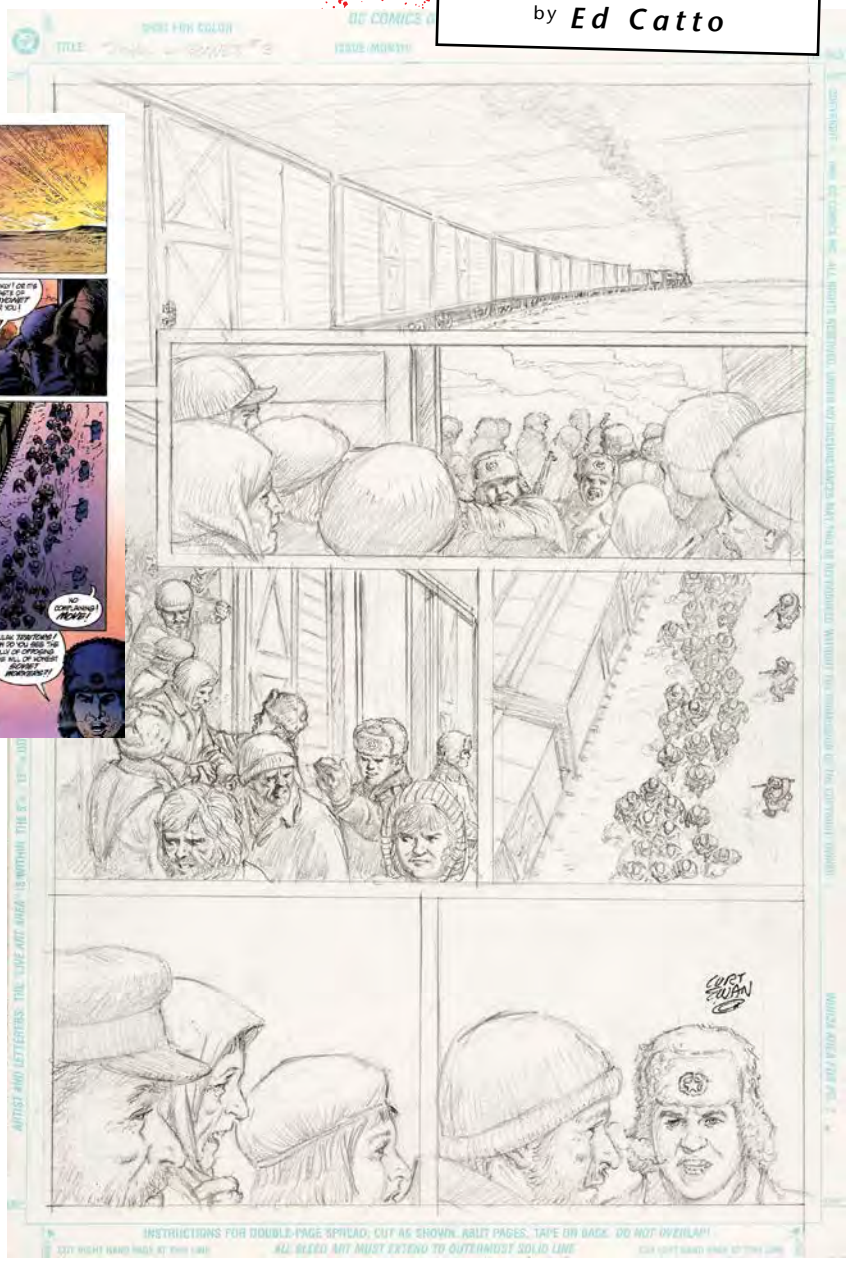
What happened to Ed Hannigan's 1992 magnum opus, Skull & Bones? Why do some readers love it? Why is it only a '90s comics trivia question for so many others? And what if there was a sequel planned to make everything right?

The solution may lie in these mysterious Curt Swan pages accompanying this article, which have surfaced in recent years on Heritage Auctions and with art dealer Anthony Snyder. It all begins with the simple, and obvious, observation: these pages are gorgeous.

But the full story behind these enthralling pages involve a hot Bronze Age artist (fresh off two big, successful comics), a specialized format that signaled "big hit" to the industry, one of the most prolific artists to ever work in American comics, and an international thriller that a sales department left to fizzle with retailers.

But could these pages have been the spark that would have lit an explosive sequel? Might these pages have been the next adventure for a character that deserved a second chance?

We all love a mystery! Let's investigate these mysterious Curt Swan *Skull*



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enjoyed just before it, and the tragic shuffling offstage of another beloved artist.

Superman (Artist) to the Rescue!

The unpublished Curt Swan pencil art to page 1 of *Skull & Bones* #3 and (inset) Ed Hannigan's published version of same. Pencil scan courtesy of Heritage (*www.ha.com*).