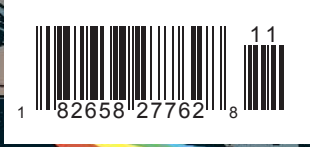


December 2011
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SIMONSON'S THOR
BRONZE AGE THOR
NEW GODS • ETERNALS
"PRO2PRO" interview
with DeFALCO & FRENZ
HERCULES • MOONDRAGON
exclusive **MOORCOCK**
interview!



BACKISSUE!

TM

Volume 1,
Number 53
December 2011

**Celebrating
the Best
Comics of
the '70s, '80s,
'90s, and Beyond!**

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BACKISSUE

The Retro Comics Experience!

GODS ISSUE!

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The Mighty Thor in an undated ink-and-watercolor portrait, by Big John Buscema. Courtesy of Heritage Comics Auctions. © 2011 Marvel Characters, Inc.



FlashBack!

by Karen Walker

**"The Man"
No More**

Gerry Conway took the reins of the chariot of the gods after the departure of writer Stan Lee and made Asgard his own! Detail from the cover to *Thor* #221 (Mar. 1974), by John Buscema and John Romita, Sr.

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Gather thee 'round and hear now the tale of how Thor didst travel from the Age of Silver unto the Age of Bronze! Come with us, through the mystic veil of time and space, to that far-off realm known as New York City, where marvels didst abound...

The year was 1971, and things were changing at Marvel Comics. Stan Lee had been the head writer at the company for the past decade, only slowly relinquishing titles to others. Now the time had come to let go of another book: *Thor*, home to Marvel's Norse God of Thunder and his colorful cast. Lee, along with artist Jack Kirby, had created a fully realized universe for Thor. The book was perhaps second only to *Fantastic Four* when it came to grand epics and world-building. On writing *Thor*, Lee says, "The fun thing about Thor was the fact that he, and the other main characters, were gods—not the normal type of comic-book superheroes. The thing I most enjoyed was writing somewhat archaic dialogue for Odin and his cast of characters."

But even though Lee enjoyed writing the title his increased responsibilities at the company required him to let it go. Enter young (he was only 18!) Gerry Conway, who would become Lee's successor to

the title of Scribe of Asgard. Conway would stay on the book for an impressive four years, from 1971 to 1975 (issues #193–238). He actually wrote more issues of *Thor* than of *Amazing Spider-Man*, the Marvel title with which he is most often associated. Conway's run would form the bridge that would take the son of Odin from one era to the next.

Conway describes what he found appealing about the character: "I think the essence of Thor for me was always a contrast between this character of godlike power that becomes human, whether he becomes human in a sense of becoming Don Blake or just becomes empathetic with humans. It's the same kind of coming down to Earth. I was raised Catholic, and am now very much a lapsed Catholic, but the mythology still speaks to me. The idea of the god made flesh, the god within us, that potentially has its moment." He mentions that many of the Marvel characters have a messianic streak; the concept of 'with great power comes great responsibility' applies to more than just Spider-Man. "Certainly Thor speaks to that in a sense," Conway says. "Here's this enormously powerful being who sort of has to restrain himself and become human in order to be a part of our world, and take responsibility for our world."

Hammer and Board

Published during Marvel's one-month-only page-count expansion to 52 pages, writer Gerry Conway's first issue of *Thor*, #193 (Nov. 1971), featured guest-star Norrin Radd (that's the Silver Surfer to you non-cosmic types) in a 34-page epic drawn by the Buscema Bros., John and Sal.

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FOLLOWING THE MAN

Conway was eager to take on the book. But how did the assignment become his? "Marvel was a fairly small company when I joined it. It was publishing about 12-15 titles a month, and Stan was writing four of them, Roy [Thomas] was writing another three or four of them, and I was brought in to write three or four of them. So that was basically the staff! There were a couple of people who did one title or two titles—I think Gary Friedrich was writing *Sgt. Fury*, and like that. But it was a very small staff, so when Stan became the publisher, and started having more responsibilities and at the same time the company was beginning to expand, he wanted to step away from some of the writing he'd been doing. But he wanted to hold on to *Spider-Man* and *Fantastic Four* as long as he possibly



GERRY CONWAY

could. I think the four books he was writing at that time were *Spider-Man*, *FF*, *Thor*, and I believe *Silver Surfer*, which was probably near the end of its run by that point. So I think *Silver Surfer* was canceled, and with *Thor*, he realized he couldn't continue doing [all] three titles. So I was next in line because Roy really didn't want to do *Thor*. I don't think Roy ever felt any connection with that character, because unlike a lot of the Marvel characters, he didn't have a precursor in the Golden Age. And Roy's greatest affinity was for characters that had a precursor in the comics of the '40s. Because just like me, he wanted to write the comics that he read when he was a kid! The comics I read when I was a

kid were *Thor*, *Spider-Man*, and the like."

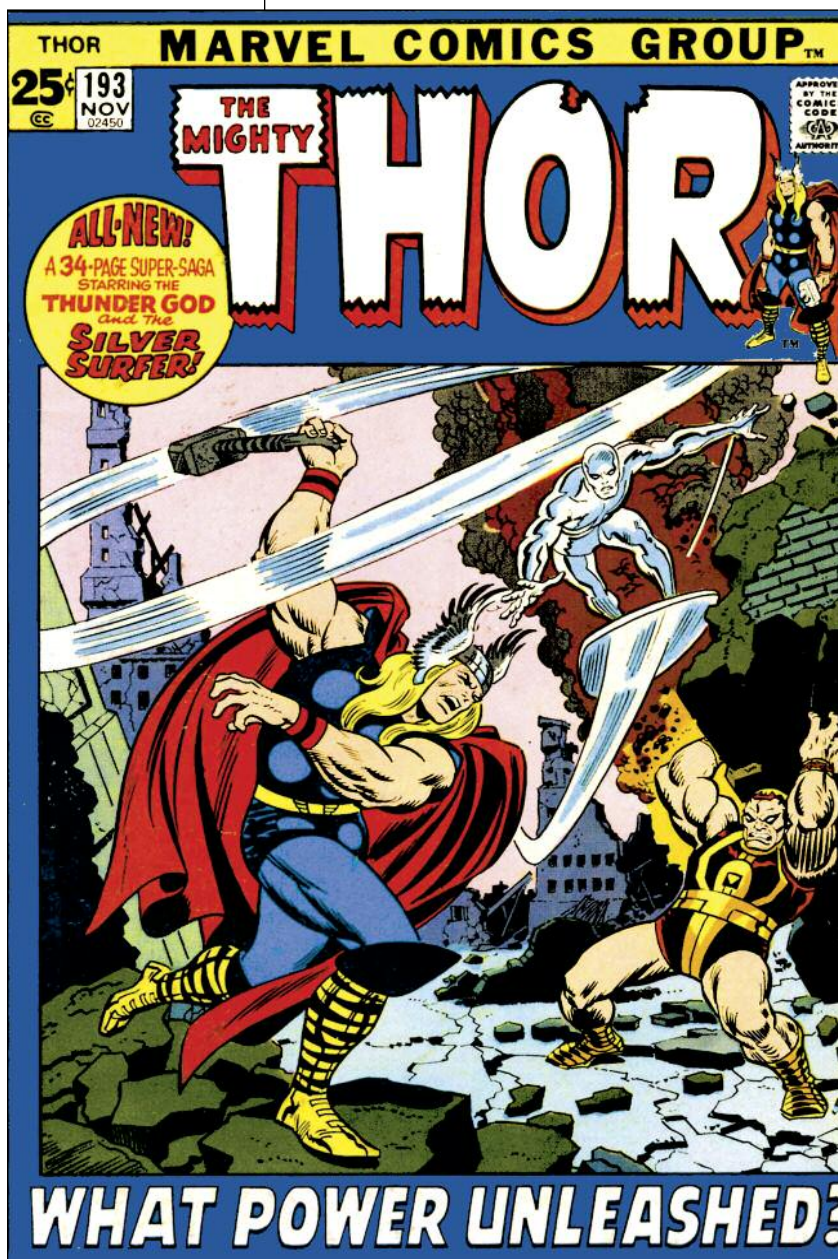
Thomas was asked if this was an accurate assessment of the situation. "There may well be something to what Gerry says, despite *Thor*'s similarity in certain ways to Superman and Captain Marvel, and despite the fact that I very much enjoyed my runs on *Thor* near the end of my first tenure at Marvel," Thomas says.

Conway was thrilled to get to work on the title. *Thor* was one of his favorite characters as a youngster and he vividly recalled when Lee and Kirby first introduced Hercules and the Olympian gods. He also greatly enjoyed the "Tales of Asgard" short features that ran in the back of the title from *Journey into Mystery* #97 (Oct. 1963) through *Thor* #145 (Oct. 1967). "When Jack [Kirby] started doing these little backup features, in *Journey into Mystery*, where he would do Marvel versions of the myths, the Norse mythos, it became very rich to me, and I really enjoyed that," Conway says. "So it was a great opportunity to write a character that I really really liked, with an artist that you couldn't beat, John Buscema."

No discussion of *Thor* in the Bronze Age would be complete without acknowledging the tremendous contribution of artist John Buscema. Buscema joined the book when Lee was still writing it, with issue #178 (July 1970)—he would not become the regular artist, however, until #182. He was the artist on the title for the majority of Conway's run; brother Sal Buscema would step in to pencil issue #214 (Aug. 1973), and Rich Buckler would handle four issues later in the run (#227-230, Sept.-Dec. 1974). Of Buscema, Lee says, "John Buscema was one of the greatest illustrators in comics. He brought a great sense of majesty and power to his illustrations. He also, like the great Jack Kirby, was a masterful storyteller in pictures."

Conway echoes Lee's sentiment: "John was probably the finest draftsman I ever worked with in comics. And by that I mean he had the greatest grasp of making a comic-book story look as real as a comic-book story should look. He was also a terrific storyteller. You could talk to him about a story for maybe 20, 30 minutes, and he would be able to go off and draw an entire issue based on that conversation, which is what Stan liked about him, and what Roy liked about him, too. He was really good at telling stories and at developing scenes, and making the whole thing look really solid."

Indeed, Buscema's gift for depicting grand spectacles, whether in fantasy realms such as Asgard or Olympus, or in the far-off reaches of space, was uniquely suited to *Thor*. It's well known that Buscema had stated that he didn't enjoy working on superhero titles, but he did say in an interview with Mark Evanier published in *Alter Ego*



THREE WAYS TO END THE NEW GODS SAGA



by Jack Abramowitz



Fourth World Forever

From the archives of Heritage Comics Auctions (www.ha.com), this Jack Kirby tribute was inked in 1994 by David Roach, working from a lightboxed photocopy of Kirby New Gods pencils from 1978.

New Gods TM & © DC Comics.

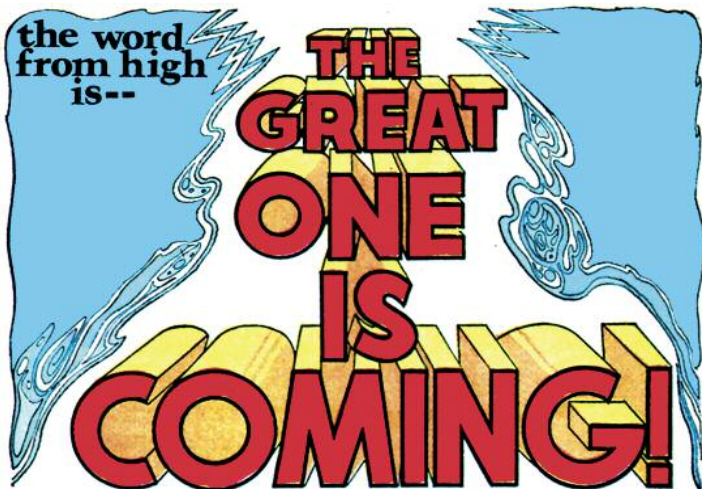
Just imagine. In the 1960s, the name "Jack Kirby" was synonymous with Marvel Comics to a degree rivaled only by Stan Lee himself. Kirby had created or co-created such Marvel mainstays as Captain America, Thor, the Hulk, the Fantastic Four, the X-Men, the Silver Surfer, and literally scores of others.

But the Lee/Kirby relationship was strained and in 1970, Kirby left Marvel for DC, where he had previously originated such characters as Manhunter, the Boy Commandos, the Newsboy Legion, and the Challengers of the Unknown. If you weren't around in those pre-Internet days, you can scarcely comprehend the excitement generated by Kirby's departure for DC after more than a decade. "Kirby's Coming," we were informed, but it was anybody's guess what he would do when he arrived.

In typical Kirby fashion, what the King did was truly unexpected. He created from scratch an entire self-contained mythos with one foot in the DC Universe. This mythos has come to be known as Kirby's "Fourth World." (This name came from an enigmatic banner

on DC's *New Gods* #4 (Aug.–Sept. 1971), the exact meaning of which is still debated today. Since it appeared on the fourth issue, perhaps it was meant to refer to the issue itself.)

There were, appropriately enough, four series under the aegis of the "Fourth World" saga. *New Gods* was the flagship title, chronicling the struggles between two races of hyper-advanced "gods," our heroes of New Genesis and their antagonists from Apokolips. *Forever People* told the tale of several young, hippie-like "gods" on Earth. *Mister Miracle* was the story of escape artist Scott Free, the son of Highfather Izaya, ruler of New Genesis. *Superman's Pal, Jimmy Olsen* was the odd man out; firmly grounded in the DC Universe, this series featured the return of Kirby creations the Guardian and the Newsboy Legion, but also introduced such key components in the Fourth World mythos as the ultimate villain, Darkseid (in *Jimmy Olsen* #134, Dec. 1970). Here, we will deal primarily with the core title, *New Gods*, and its heirs apparent once Kirby and DC parted ways.



Shout It from the Rooftops...

...Kirby is coming! A DC house ad touts Jack Kirby's 1970 jump from Marvel to DC.

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EVERYTHING OLD IS NEW AGAIN

The original *New Gods* series begins with a brief lesson in the history of the gods. "There came a time when the Old Gods died," we are told. Who are these Old Gods? Might they be the gods of Marvel's Asgard, whose adventures Kirby had previously chronicled in *Thor*? From the fact that the first two pages are entitled "Epilogue," it certainly seems that this sequence was intended as a postscript to something else. The text continues, "The brave died with the cunning." Might that refer to Balder (known in Marvel's *Thor* as "Balder the Brave") and Loki, the trickster god? Sure enough, according to the title page of *New Gods* #7 (Feb.-Mar. 1972), there was a noble Old God named "Balduur" as well as a "cunning and evil ... sorceress." (Amora the Enchantress, perhaps?)

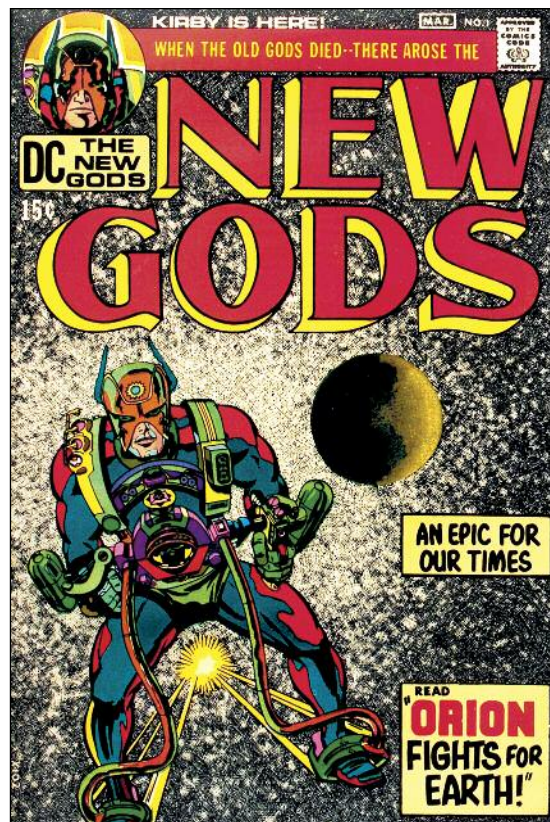
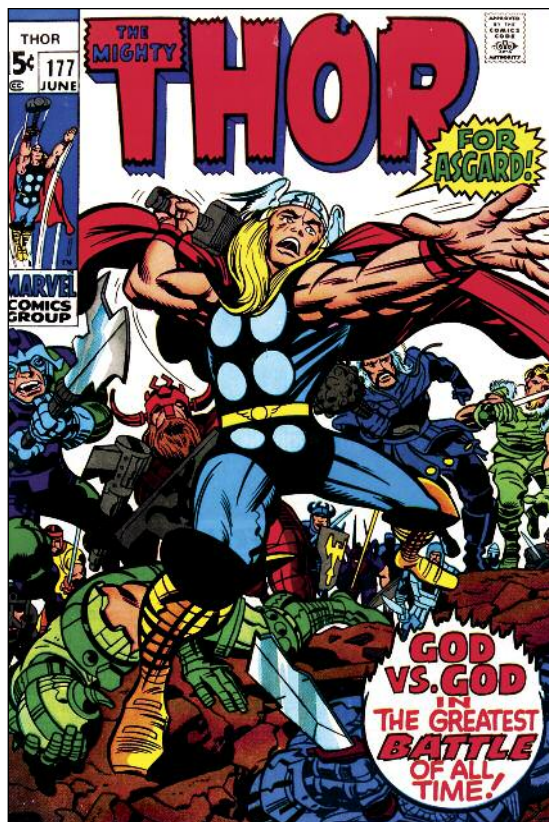
The ensuing description details the fall of the Old Gods and how the final combat led to their homeworld being torn asunder. From the ashes of the old world, there arose two new ones: Apokolips, a world of darkness and despair, and New Genesis, a planet of light and hope. The downfall of the Old Gods was presumably Ragnarok, long feared by Marvel's Norse pantheon. In fact, on the text page of the first issue of 1984's *New Gods* reprint series, Mark Evanier stated outright that "it began with the day the Old Gods died ... Ragnarok."

To bolster the theory that *New Gods* picks up where *Thor* leaves off, we need turn no further than the backup tale in *Forever People* #5 (Oct.-Nov. 1971). In this story, introducing a minor New God named Lonar, we are taken to one of the few places in New Genesis where one might find relics left from the Old Gods. Lonar examines the remains of this once-proud race and laments, "Born and bred to violence! Thus, they died!" As he makes this declaration, he holds in his hand a winged helmet not unlike one worn by a certain God of Thunder.



Were DC's "Old Gods" Marvel's Asgardians? (left) There was a godly ruckus in *Thor* #177 (June 1970) as Kirby was packing his bags to vacate the House of Ideas. (right) Writer Jack Abromowitz wonders if *New Gods* #1's "Old Gods" were *Thor*'s Norse deities.

Thor © Marvel Characters, Inc.
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MOONDRAGON

GODDESS IN HER OWN MIND

by Jonathan Miller



FlashBack!

Superheroes are often said to be modern myths, our society's equivalent of the legends, folklore, tall tales, and even religious beliefs that mankind has created and fostered throughout its history. Both classical mythology and religion have been sources for myriad comic-book characters and story concepts, from the Ancient Greek gods and heroes that gave rise to modern interpretations and derivations such as Marvel's Hercules and DC's Wonder Woman, to the innumerable Faustian villains taken from the Judeo-Christian tradition—Marvel's Mephisto, DC's Lord Saturnus, and, well, Satan, who's reared his horned head many a time in many a comic.

So, too, thanks especially to Jack Kirby, there have been many "gods" that sprang almost whole cloth from the fertile imaginations of their creators, often based as much in the tradition of science fiction as in that of any religion. Often the term "god" was rather loosely applied, some of them less powerful than the many superpowered mortals that populate comics, but there is one in particular who stands out for her divinity being mainly a product of her own contention: Moondragon.

THE AVENGERS' "NON-MANTIS"

Mostly associated with Marvel's *Avengers* and *Defenders* series, Moondragon made her first striking appearance in *Iron Man* #54 (Jan. 1973), by the legendary Bill Everett, with Mike Friedrich and artists George Tuska and Vince Colletta. Her origin, first told in *Daredevil* #105 (Nov. 1973), "Menace From the Moons of Saturn," relates how she was born Heather Douglas, apparently orphaned as a child by the mad god Thanos (actually an alien) and subsequently taken to the moon Titan by Thanos' father, Mentor, where she was raised by the monks of Shao-Lom. Here she developed her mind and body to perfection, thereafter not only a formidable martial artist and advanced geneticist, but also possessing superhuman mental powers including telepathy and the ability to deliver crippling mental pain to opponents with her "brain blasts."

In her early appearances, her principal motivation was to oppose Thanos, who worshiped death, and she pursued that agenda in her guest appearances in *Captain Marvel* and *The Avengers*. Moondragon joined the cast of the *Avengers* unofficially in #133 (Mar. 1975), during the "Celestial Madonna" saga, and was formally offered membership with #137 (July 1975). She replaced the iconoclastic Mantis, the focus of the "Celestial Madonna" storyline and ultimately named as such.

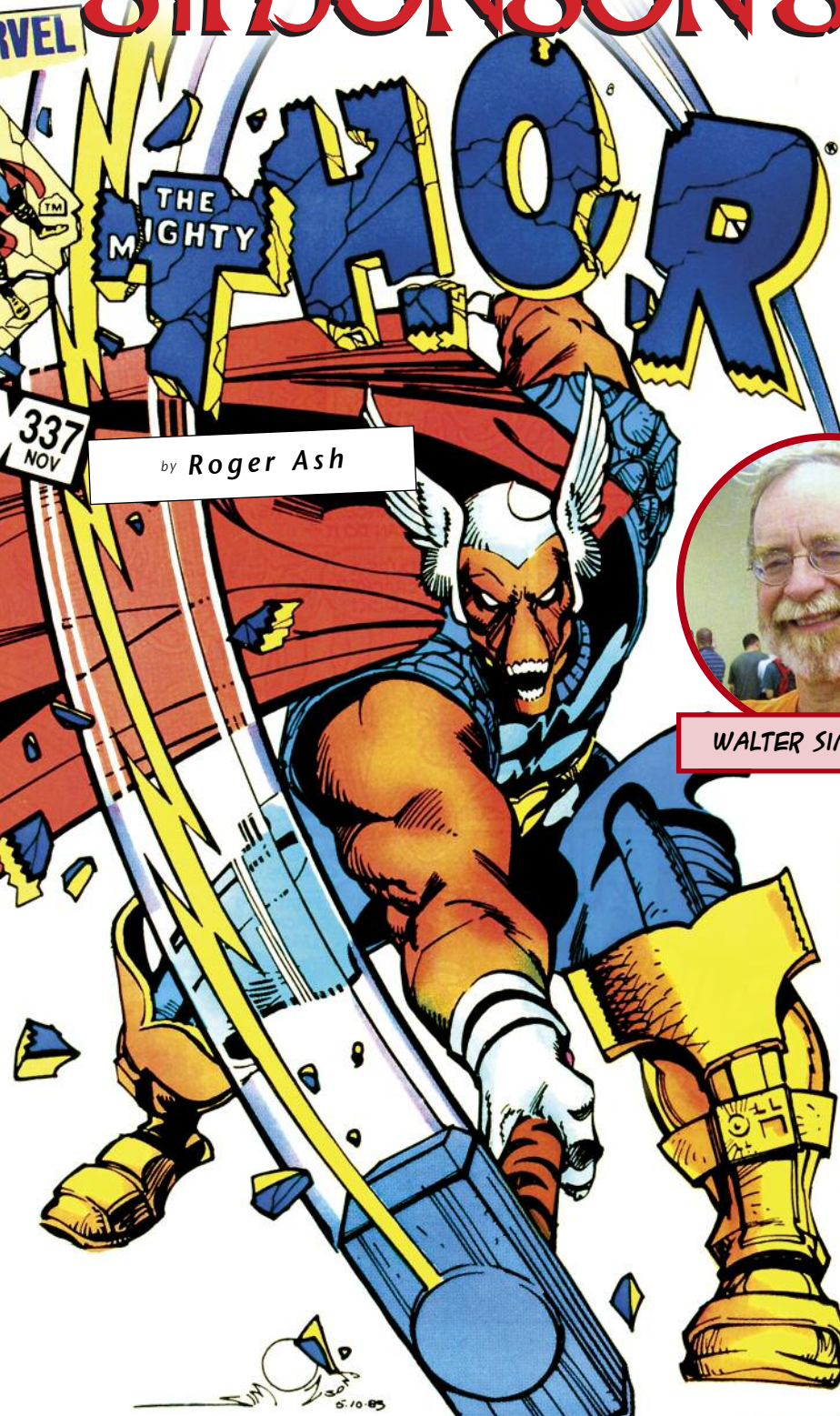
It had been revealed in *Giant-Size Avengers* #4 that the two women had strikingly similar backgrounds, both products of attempts by renegade religious sects of the alien Kree to produce a candidate for Celestial Madonna and so raised to be goddesses. The end of a long story that had also offered the Scarlet Witch and dark-horse candidate Agatha Harkness as possibilities,

Mind Games

Detail from the cover of *Marvel Two-in-One* #62 (Apr. 1980), with Moondragon's mental-mashing of the ever-lovin', blue-eyed Thing. Art by George Pérez and Joe Sinnott.

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THE TAPESTRY OF WALTER SIMONSON'S



by Roger Ash



WALTER SIMONSON

The Marvel Comics version of Thor was created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, who endowed the denizens of Norse myth with superheroic trappings. However, if you ask fans and comics professionals which creator they most closely associate with Thor, the name of Walter Simonson will in all likelihood top the list. Simonson's classic run on *Thor*, beginning with issue #337, tied Thor more closely to his mythic roots than ever before, introduced the popular character Beta Ray Bill, and defined Thor and the denizens of Asgard for a generation of readers.

RAINBOW BRIDGE TO THE BRONZE AGE

But that is not where Simonson first encountered Thor (and, no, I don't mean the partial Annual he drew in college, although we will get to that). Simonson's first published work on *Thor* was in issues #260–271, which were written and edited by Len Wein, with inks mostly by Tony DeZuniga (with Joe Sinnott on a few issues).

What made Simonson the right artist to take over the book? "His energy," says Len Wein. "Walter went from one kind of artist to a second kind. When he first started out, his work was extremely meticulous and very slow. By the time he was doing *Thor*, he could pencil the entire book in four days. He was always a great artist, but he changed his style and with it, changed his capacity for production. He was a buddy of mine—we were neighbors. I loved the idea of working with him on *Thor*."

According to Simonson, "At that time, I was doing layouts rather than full pencils. It was being done Marvel-style, so Len would give me a plot and I would do layouts. John Buscema had been drawing the book before I took over as the layout guy. I tried to do some kind of John Buscema-esque thing, which was probably an abject failure, but you do what you can trying to keep the look of the book somewhat consistent. I did my own stuff after awhile. Len and I had a lot of fun doing it. We were trying to do a classic Stan Lee/Jack Kirby *Thor* in a lot of ways. I thought we did a pretty good job of it."

His first four comics, issues #260–263 (June–Sept. 1977), were the conclusion of a favorite story of Wein's, the quest for Odin (the father of Thor), Loki, and the leader of the Norse gods. Odin has disappeared and Thor and crew, including the Warriors Three—Hogun the Grim,

If I Had a Hammer...

Walter Simonson's cover to his first issue of *Thor*—#337 (Nov. 1983), introducing Beta Ray Bill—has become one of comicdom's iconic images. And deservedly so!

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Fandral the Dashing, and Volstagg the Voluminous—Sif, and the Recorder sail the stars in a spaceship that looks strangely like a Viking ship. They track Odin to the Doomsday Star, where they must fight through the Wall Around the World to reach Odin. Odin has been captured by aliens known as the Soul-Survivors, who were using his power to keep their world alive. After a battle against the Odin-Force in human form, Thor rescues his father and they head back to Asgard.

Wein found something odd and inexplicable when Simonson stepped in as penciler: "When I was



LEN WEIN

working with John Buscema, whose work I love and with whom I worked on other things as well, *Thor* was the hardest strip for me to write. When it switched over to Walter, I could script an issue in two days. I'm not sure what it was exactly, but something changed and the job went from my most difficult to my easiest."

While *Thor* and the others were searching for Odin, things were not quiet in Asgard as Balder the Brave and the Norn Queen Karnilla battle the forces of the trickster Loki, the evil Enchantress, and her companion, the Executioner, to keep them from taking over Asgard in Odin's absence. They fail. Issues #264-266 (Oct.-Dec. 1977) tell the tale of Thor trying to take back the throne of Asgard. Unfortunately, Odin can't help as he's deep in the Odin-Sleep trying to recover the energy that



Simonson on Thor, Phase One

(left) John Buscema penciled the cover to *Thor* #263 (Sept. 1977), which featured Walter Simonson breakdowns and Tony DeZuniga finishes over Len Wein's script. Courtesy of Heritage Comics Auctions (www.ha.com). (right) One of Walt's early *Thor* covers, #264. Both covers were inked by Joe Sinnott.

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was drained from him. And he is hidden away by the Enchantress and the Executioner, so the heroes can't find him. To make matters worse, Loki sends the Destroyer after Thor. Little does Thor know that the Destroyer is being controlled by his friend Balder. Just when things seem their most dire, Odin appears, having awakened from the Odin-Sleep, and puts things right.

Issues #267-268 (Jan.-Feb 1978) bring things back down to Midgard (that's Earth, in case you didn't know), where Thor faces Damocles, who has plans to build a Cobalt Cannon that will destroy New York City unless his demands are met. Damocles' brother helps Thor defeat him in a very moving, very human story.

Simonson's initial run on *Thor* concluded with a superhero extravaganza in issues #269-271 (Mar.-May 1978). Thor battles the Stilt-Man and Blastaar, who are working for FAUST (Fully Automated Unit of Structural Technology), an automated factory. FAUST has become self-aware and blasts into orbit around the Earth, threatening to cause devastation

unless humanity meets its demands. It takes the might of Thor, Nick Fury, and the Avengers to stop FAUST, but stop it they do.

"Walter was great fun to work with," says Wein. "We had the best possible time. It was one of those dream assignments."

Simonson next drew Thor in *Thor Annual* #7 (1978), written and edited by Roy Thomas with inks by Ernie Chan. This issue tells a previously untold story in which Thor met Jack Kirby's creation, the Eternals. In fact, the memory of the encounter had been wiped from Thor's mind. Thor helps the Eternals defeat the evil Dromedan and his forces. This issue was the first part of a storyline that would make the Eternals more a part of the Marvel Universe. "With Jack gone and the ongoing [*Eternals*] title canceled, there seemed no longer any overriding reason to keep the Eternals separate from the rest of the Marvel Universe," says Thomas.

"I got to draw Thor. I got to draw the Eternals. It was great," says Simonson.



ROY THOMAS

Thor Team-Ups

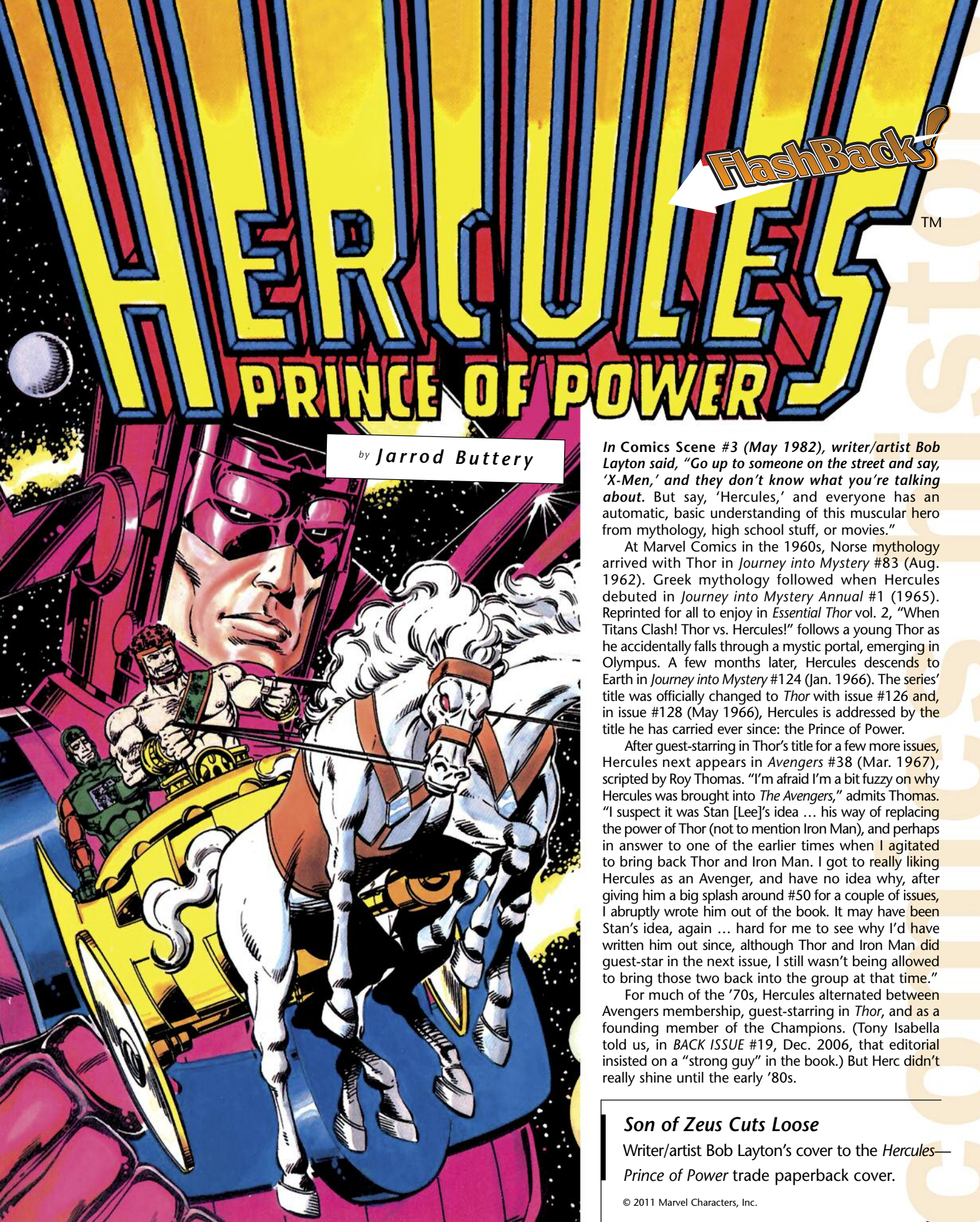
(left) The Thunder God and Iron Man fly into action on *Thor* #271's (May 1978) Simonson-drawn cover Marvelized by inker Sinnott. (right) The cover to 1978's *Thor Annual* #7 is pure Simonson and offers a glimpse of the book's look to come. Guest-starring the Eternals.

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FlashBack!

TM



by Jarrod Buttery

In Comics Scene #3 (May 1982), writer/artist Bob Layton said, "Go up to someone on the street and say, 'X-Men,' and they don't know what you're talking about. But say, 'Hercules,' and everyone has an automatic, basic understanding of this muscular hero from mythology, high school stuff, or movies."

At Marvel Comics in the 1960s, Norse mythology arrived with Thor in *Journey into Mystery* #83 (Aug. 1962). Greek mythology followed when Hercules debuted in *Journey into Mystery Annual* #1 (1965). Reprinted for all to enjoy in *Essential Thor* vol. 2, "When Titans Clash! Thor vs. Hercules!" follows a young Thor as he accidentally falls through a mystic portal, emerging in Olympus. A few months later, Hercules descends to Earth in *Journey into Mystery* #124 (Jan. 1966). The series' title was officially changed to *Thor* with issue #126 and, in issue #128 (May 1966), Hercules is addressed by the title he has carried ever since: the Prince of Power.

After guest-starring in Thor's title for a few more issues, Hercules next appears in *Avengers* #38 (Mar. 1967), scripted by Roy Thomas. "I'm afraid I'm a bit fuzzy on why Hercules was brought into *The Avengers*," admits Thomas. "I suspect it was Stan [Lee]'s idea ... his way of replacing the power of Thor (not to mention Iron Man), and perhaps in answer to one of the earlier times when I agitated to bring back Thor and Iron Man. I got to really liking Hercules as an Avenger, and have no idea why, after giving him a big splash around #50 for a couple of issues, I abruptly wrote him out of the book. It may have been Stan's idea, again ... hard for me to see why I'd have written him out since, although Thor and Iron Man did guest-star in the next issue, I still wasn't being allowed to bring those two back into the group at that time."

For much of the '70s, Hercules alternated between Avengers membership, guest-starring in *Thor*, and as a founding member of the Champions. (Tony Isabella told us, in *BACK ISSUE* #19, Dec. 2006, that editorial insisted on a "strong guy" in the book.) But Herc didn't really shine until the early '80s.

Son of Zeus Cuts Loose

Writer/artist Bob Layton's cover to the *Hercules—Prince of Power* trade paperback cover.

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And I Won't Back Down

Early Hercules appearances in the Marvel Universe: (left)

Gods go at it in *Journey into Mystery Annual* #1 (1965), with its rollicking Kirby/Colletta cover.

(right) Herc as a team player, as seen on the Gil Kane-drawn cover of *Avengers* #38 (Mar. 1967).

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THE PRINCE OF POWER

With an inaugural issue cover-dated June 1982, Marvel published its first limited series, *Marvel Super Hero Contest of Champions*. [Author's note: See *BACK ISSUE* #41 (July 2010) for a great discussion of this series.]

A success, Marvel continued the experiment with two more limited series: one, a gritty rite of passage starring the X-Men breakout character called Wolverine, and, on the other end of the spectrum, a futuristic sci-fi comedy starring Hercules. Both titles debuted with Aug. 1982 cover dates, to enormous critical and commercial success. Wolverine was an obvious choice for a showcase miniseries, but how did Hercules obtain his first-ever solo outing?

Hercules: Prince of Power writer/artist Bob Layton politely declined an interview with *BACK ISSUE* but previously spoke to Steve Ringgenberg in *Marvel Age* #4 (July 1983). Layton stated that *Hercules* was his first writing assignment, "although I had co-plotted the 38 or so issues of *Iron Man* that I did with Dave [Michelinie]. Dave was a tremendous learning experience; I think he is a really good writer. And he knows the technical aspects of writing better than anybody. And through the years of co-plotting with him, I got a little more confident as I went along and I felt that the

time was right. I always wanted to write but I waited until such time that I felt comfortable with the notion. Then I went to Jim [Shooter, Marvel editor-in-chief] with the *Hercules* concept and he said, 'Take a chance, go out and do it.'"

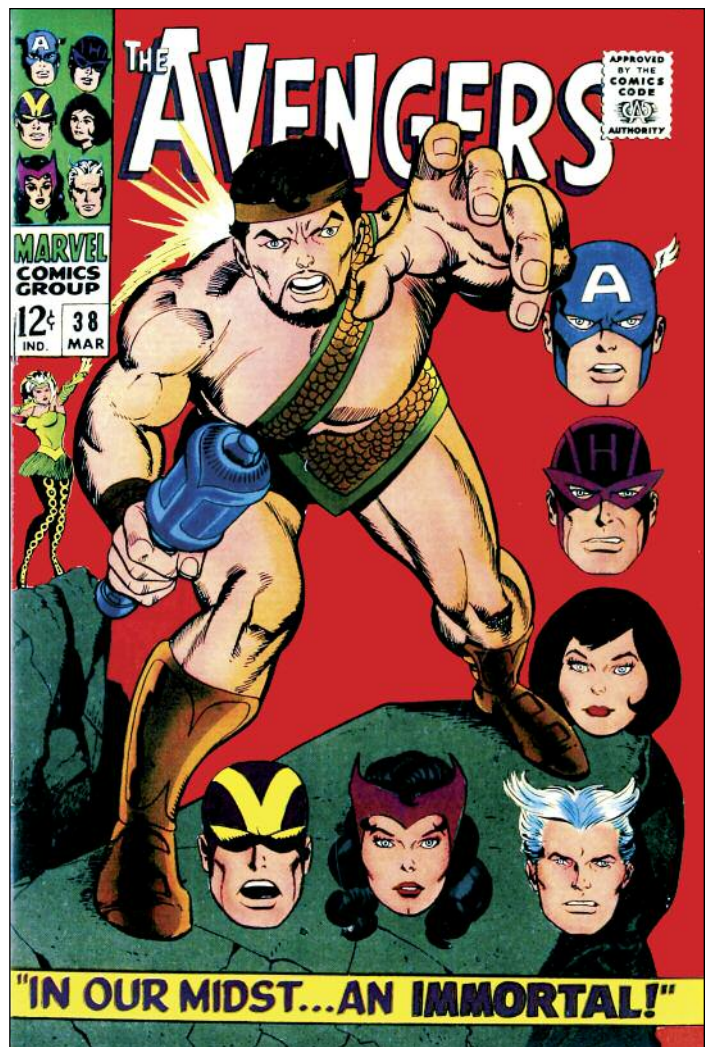
Layton also talked about Herc in April 2010 for the iFanboy website (www.ifanboy.com).

(*BACK ISSUE* thanks Matt Adler and editor Josh Flanagan for their kind permission to reprint excerpts from Matt's interview.) When asked about his interest in Hercules, Layton stated: "I always had a soft spot for secondary characters. Keep in mind that the *Star Wars* craze was in full swing in the early eighties and it got me thinking about creating a similar venue for Hercules to romp in. Since Hercules was an immortal, I decided to take the character out of the current continuity and place him in a time and place that

wouldn't have immediate repercussions to the monthly books or his appearances in the Avengers. At that particular time, Marvel was looking to experiment with concepts that had a finite beginning and end. When I heard that, the notion of doing Hercules as that limited series popped into my head. I've always loved tongue-in-cheek adventure movies like *The Three Musketeers* or *The Adventures of Robin Hood*. My take was to place him in a



BOB LAYTON



Sexton Blake to Elric and Beyond...

Talking Comics with Michael Moorcock

by Alan J. Porter



Michael Moorcock. Science-fiction grand master, creator of the multiverse concept and iconic characters such as Elric, the albino warrior, and the eternal champion Jerry Cornelius, among many others. Yet not many people who read his vast output of science-fiction, fantasy, and literary works realize that he started out as a teenager writing strips in the competitive world of the British boys' adventure comics of the late 1950s and early 1960s, or that he briefly shared office space with the creator of Superman.

Moorcock was kind enough to share an afternoon with me at his Texas home to talk about both his career in comics and his views on the various comic-book adaptations of his more famous literary creations.

— Alan J. Porter

ALAN J. PORTER: First, thank you for agreeing to spend some time this afternoon. From the research I read, I got the impression that your first professional writing gig was writing comics. Is that correct?

MICHAEL MOORCOCK: No, not really. I started off doing text stuff for *Tarzan Adventures*, which was one of the last of the text-based juvenile papers at the time, in the mid-50s, and it had as much text as comics, and at the time I really didn't have much interest in the comics at all. I was just doing articles, stories, and so on for it.

My introduction to doing comics was translating some *Tarzan* strips. I wanted to reprint some of the Hogarth and Foster strips that had been published pre-war, but it had all been destroyed in a big warehouse fire in the blitz. So the only plates they had that were still intact were the Spanish-language plates, which had gone to Franco's Spain, so they hadn't actually been involved in World War II! They did very clear pulls of the art for us that were basically photographs, and I said to my boss, "I want to run this stuff," and when he asked why, I said that there wasn't anything else good enough (I was lying, really), and he said, "Okay, but it's all in Spanish, we can't possibly use it." I said, "Don't worry, I speak Spanish," when in fact I didn't know a word. I just wrote the comic according to the pictures. So it varies quite a lot from the original.

PORTER: Did you ever go back and compare what you had done with a translation of the original?

MOORCOCK: Some people have done that on the Web, but I haven't done it myself. I gave all those comics away. I didn't really put any stock in it at the time—this was old-fashioned, first-journalism efforts, when you didn't put any value at all on what you did.

PORTER: So did that experience build an appreciation of the comics medium for you?

MOORCOCK: No, not really. I'm sorry I guess I'm not giving the right answers.

PORTER: It's fine, it's all fascinating stuff.

MOORCOCK: Well, I started out in fanzines, really. I did a Burroughs' fanzine, and that's what got me my job on *Tarzan*. I also wrote for a *Sexton Blake* fanzine, and people in that were bemoaning that [fictional British detective] Sexton Blake had had a revamp in

Moorcock's Most Famous Creation

Elric of Melniboné as rendered—quite remarkably, we must add!—by Frank Brunner. Plate 1 from a 1979 Elric portfolio. Scan courtesy of Heritage Comics Auctions (www.ha.com).

© 1979 Looking Glass Productions.

New Worlds Order

(top) Teenage Michael Moorcock at work on *Tarzan Adventures* in 1957. Photo courtesy of Mr. Moorcock and Alan J. Porter.
(bottom) The British sci-fi magazine *New Worlds* started in 1946 and by 1964 found itself under Moorcock's watch. (Can anyone help us identify this issue's number and cover date?)

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the current adventure story papers, its first serious revamp since 1892; and they'd given him a glamorous secretary and all kinds of stuff—that they now had sex in the stories, when the truth was the sex was always there. Anyway, I wrote a piece in my own magazine defending the new Sexton Blake, and started a war that got me drummed out of the old boys' club [of Sexton Blake fans] and was never allowed back in.

PORTER: *How old were you ... 16, 17?*

MOORCOCK: Yeah, I was 16. I was the youngest member, the rest of them were ancient, at least 40! Through that I got a job offered to me by the guy who was running the Sexton Blake Library at Amalgamated Press [which later became part of Fleetway], which was, of course, mostly publishing comics. In fact, everything else in that department was comics, except for Sexton Blake. There was a rule that said that you couldn't write for the magazine that you were editing, so essentially everybody wrote for everybody else's comic within the group. So that's how I started writing comics.

PORTER: *It was all kept in-house?*

MOORCOCK: Essentially it was in-house, but it wasn't to exclude anybody. It was just [that] the wages were so low at that time that it was expected as a way of making a decent wage. In fact, what happened was that everyone was sending down fake pay sheets and getting paid for recycled stuff. Everything went 'round every five years anyway, so they would just claim it was a new piece of work and write it off against that week's pay sheet. All the auditor ever did was look at the title, so you just changed the title. I only found this out by looking at the pay sheets over a couple of weeks and started to notice that some of the names were fake, too. There were names of previous writers who had died. When I found out I revealed it to my boss, who told me to keep quiet. It took me 24 hours for me to realize why he told me to keep quiet, because I was the only one in the office who wasn't involved.

Anyway, that's where I started writing comics, and found I had a talent for it.

It's odd how few people do actually have a talent for writing comics.

PORTER: *Is there something extra that you think you need to be able to bring to the game to write comics?*

MOORCOCK: Not so much then, other than the ability to think up a new storyline. There was no conception at that time, in England, at any rate, that comics were any kind of form you could do much with in terms of, let's say, putting a moral perspective. The nearest thing to a moral perspective was the traditional stiff upper-lip, Battle of Britain stuff. And I wouldn't write that stuff anyway. I began to argue with the people at Fleetway that I wouldn't write what I thought was racist stuff. I would write First World War flying stories, knights-of-the-air stuff, as they just involved people saluting one another and doing very brave things in a chivalrous way. Of course, [the war] wasn't really like that, but you could depict it that way.

PORTER: *Were there certain ideas and themes you tried to get in?*

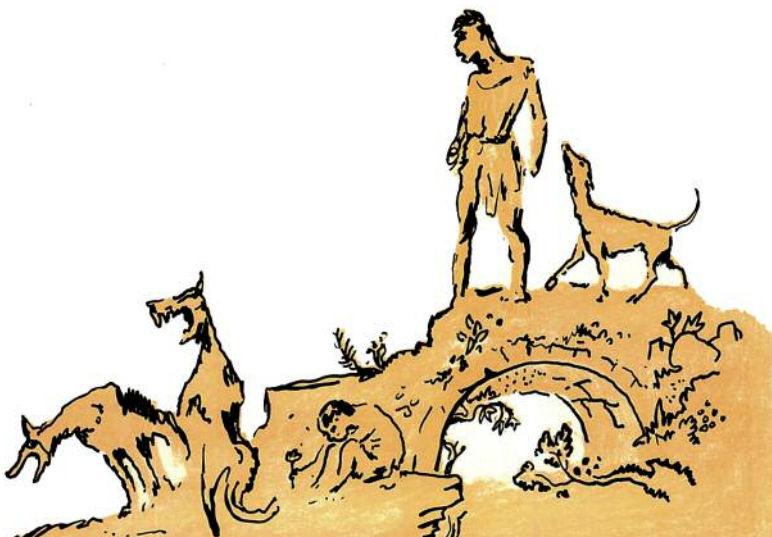
MOORCOCK: Yeah, just ordinary stuff. Just moral stories, as it were, which were a bit more complicated than the norm. The only Sexton Blake I ever wrote, when I delivered it, to Bill Baker, who was my boss—and I'd seen this scam working many times, and then he worked it on me. He said, "I'm afraid it's not quite up to scratch and we can't pay you the whole amount, but we'll pay you two-thirds, but we'll rewrite it."

new worlds

HARLAN ELLISON: A Boy and his Dog ■ **J. G. BALLARD:** The Beach Murders ■ **M. JOHN HARRISON:** The Ash Circus

Five Shillings or One Dollar

PLUS Aldiss, Hayden-Guest, MacBeth, Moorcock, Mundis, Thomas



While Tom DeFalco and Ron Frenz may have followed Walt Simonson's memorable tenure, they actually had the longest creative run ever on *The Mighty Thor*, spanning from 1987 until 1993. Hot off their success on *Amazing Spider-Man*, their fast-paced and entertaining storytelling demonstrated what a serial comic could really accomplish with a sense of energy and momentum. Their brand of storytelling had a strong retro-1960s feel with DeFalco channeling Stan Lee with snappy dialogue and epic storylines, and Frenz paying homage to Jack Kirby and John Buscema.

— Jason Shayer

THUNDERSTRUCK!

AN INTERVIEW WITH TOM DEFALCO AND RON FRENZ

JASON SHAYER: Let's start with something nice and easy: Do you recall how you got the creative reins on *The Mighty Thor*?

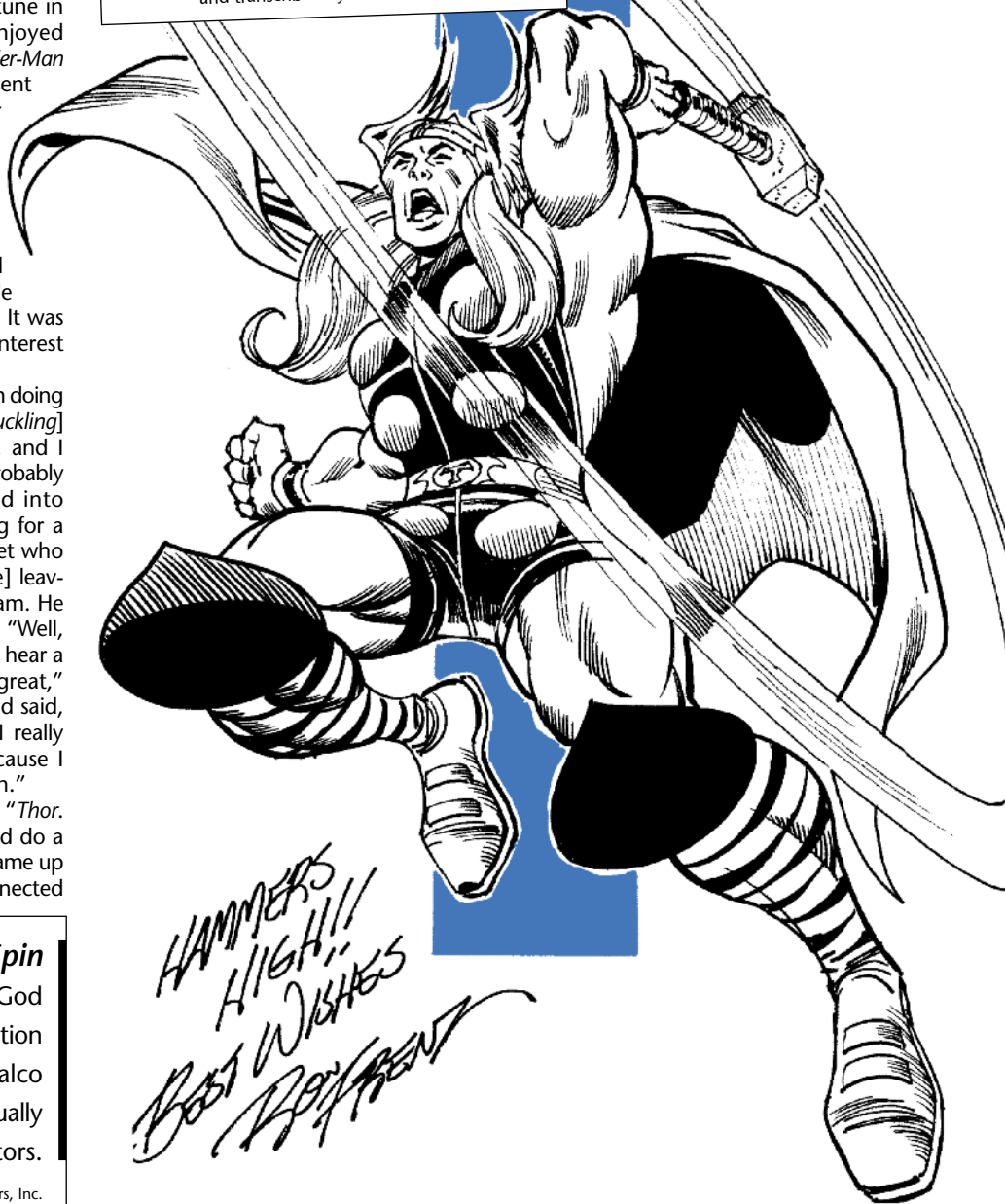
RON FRENZ: There you go, Tom. There's your opening—tell the story.

TOM DEFALCO: [chuckles] We got it by mistake. It was an accident. Ron and I had worked on *Amazing Spider-Man* together and we had a great time working together. And we found out that we were somewhat in tune in terms of the kind of material that we both enjoyed working on. Ron and I were taken off *Amazing Spider-Man* and a couple months later, I ended up getting sent to England—Marvel US lent me to Marvel UK for a period of time—so I went off into the ozone and Ron worked on a couple of other projects. And then, somewhere along the line, I came back to the States and was walking around the office. I figured, "Hey, it would be great to start writing a comic book again." So I checked around the office to find out what was available and [editor] Ralph Macchio had a title available. It was *Daredevil*. So I called Ron, I said, "You got any interest in doing *Daredevil*?" And Ron said—

FRENZ: [dramatically] —"Of course I'm interested in doing *Daredevil*. It's one of my favorite characters." [chuckling] **DEFALCO:** It was something along those lines, and I thought, "Okay, you know, *Daredevil*, we could probably have a lot of fun with *Daredevil*." So I walked into Ralph's office and I said, "I heard you're looking for a team for *Daredevil*." And he said, "Yeah." I forget who was on the book at the time, but [they were] leaving and Ralph was looking for a new creative team. He said, "I'm going to need some guys." And I said, "Well, Ron and I would be interested. Would you like to hear a proposal?" And he said, "That would be great," because he actually liked our *Spider-Man* stuff and said, "You guys would be terrific on *Daredevil*. But I really don't have time to look at proposals now because I have this book that's very late and needs a fill-in."

So I said, "What book is that?" And he goes, "*Thor*. Hey, how about you and Ron do me a favor and do a fill-in for *Thor*?" So Ron and I discussed it and we came up with an idea to do something that had been connected

by **Jason Shayer**
 conducted on February 15, 2011
 and transcribed by Brian K. Morris



Giving Thor a Spin

Ron Frenz—artist of this undated Thunder God commission courtesy of Heritage Comics Auction (www.ha.com)—and writer Tom DeFalco reluctantly took on Marvel's *Thor* ... but eventually became the series' most enduring creators.

Thor TM & © 2011 Marvel Characters, Inc.

to *Secret Wars*, an untold battle or something like that, and we did a *Thor* filler. And we were kind of doing it just to get on Ralph's good side and that sort of stuff, figuring, "Yeah, this way, he can see how we work together and everything and consider us for *Daredevil*." So anyway, we did our *Thor* fill-in and I said, "Well, you ready to talk about *Daredevil* yet?" Ralph said, "No, I still need *Thor* fill-ins because this book is very late." So in terms of the rule of fill-ins, you used to have to come up with something that didn't affect any continuity—

FRENZ: Fill the month with an exciting story without impacting on whatever continuity the regular team was doing.

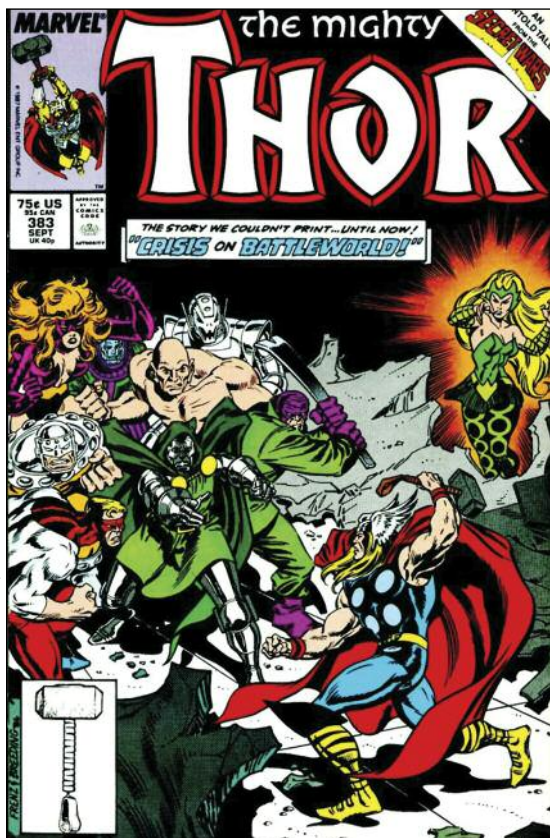
DeFALCO: So Ron and I came up with another story—that was the "Future Thor" story. So we did that story and Ralph was very happy with that. And then Ralph said to me, "Hey, you know what? I thought about it, I got a book for you guys." And I said, "*Daredevil*." And he goes, "Nope, *Thor*."

And I said, "*Thor*? But Ron and I do street-level stuff. We don't do cosmic. We can't do *Thor*!" And Ralph said, "You just did two issues." I said, "But those are fill-ins."

If I think I'm going to have a problem with something, I jump in with both feet. And Ralph said to me, "Well, what story are you going to try?" And I said, "Well, if I don't know if we can do cosmic, we're going to try to do cosmic right away because if we find out we can't do it, this way we can get off the book and you can put it on somebody else right away. We'll do the Celestials because they're the most cosmic thing I can think of at the time." And Ralph said, "Oh, right, the Celestials. Good luck with that."

SHAYER: *It was such an interesting story because Thor, this Norse god, this historical warrior, was suddenly the underdog.*

FRENZ: I think that's one of the reasons Ralph liked it, too, is because Ralph and Mark Gruenwald had



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BACKISSUE!
WRITER / EDITOR
DATA CARD

Beginnings:
 Assorted one-page gags for various Archie Comics (mid-1970s)

Milestones:
 Writer: *Amazing Spider-Man* / *Fantastic Four* / *The Mighty Thor* / *Thunderstrike* / *Spider-Girl*
 Editor-in-chief of Marvel Comics (1987–1994)

Works in Progress:
Superman Beyond / *Jughead Double Digest* / *Richie Rich* / *Archie Comics*



TOM DEFALCO

Courtesy of Luigi Novi.


BACKISSUE!
ARTIST
DATA CARD

Beginnings:
Ka-Zar the Savage #16 (July 1982)

Milestones:
Ka-Zar the Savage / *Star Wars* / *Amazing Spider-Man* / *The Mighty Thor* / *Thunderstrike* / *Spider-Girl*

Works in Progress:
Superman Beyond / *Jughead Double Digest* / *Green Lantern: Emerald Warriors*

Cyberspace:
www.catskillcomics.com



RON FRENZ

Courtesy of Gemstone Publishing.