

'INSIDE COMICS'

STAN LEE: BLINDED BY THE HYPE

an affectionate character assassination. **PART 2**

by alan moore

As Marvel began to grow into a bigger and bigger concern, Lee seemed to find most of his time taken up in the day to day editorial decisions implicit in such a large enterprise, and less and less time available for the actual writing.



Other writers began to appear. Some of them, like Roy Thomas, were very very competent indeed. Others were less so. The one thing that all of these newer writers had in common was that they had by and large cut their teeth upon the writing of Stan Lee.

This was good in as much as it lent a pleasing continuity to the books. Roy Thomas following Stan Lee with a style very much like Lee's own... but bad in that what we were getting was a kind of Stan-Lee-Once-Removed situation. It was a sort of watering down process.

Eventually, writers began to appear who had cut their teeth upon Roy Thomas and the original idea was diluted still further. Writers who had less idea about plotting and characterization than a common earthworm came to believe that all one needed to write a good solid StanLee type story was to have *Dr Doom* or *Galactus* turn up and the heroes to spend a couple of obligatory frames arguing amongst themselves.

But, through Lee's genius for publicity, the Marvel Machine had gathered a certain momentum. Each successive cover boasted that *this issue* was destined to be "The Greatest Super Heroic Slugfeast in the Mighty Marvel Age of Comics!" And, like the ninnies we were, we believed it. After all, when had Stan ever lied to us?

No matter that the issue in question featured the same old mindless fight scenes that we'd been through a hundred times before. No matter that the characters had degenerated into shallow parodies of their former selves. We

sent off for our MMMS membership kits and erected fiery crosses in the gardens of people suspected of reading D.C comics or Brand Ecch as our fearless leader suggested we refer to his distinguished competition.

We were wild-eyed fanatics to rival the loopyest thuggee cultist or member of the Manson family. We were True Believers.

The worst thing was that everything had ground to a halt. The books had



The X-Men, drawn by Byrne and written by the Lee-influenced Chris Claremont.

stopped developing. If you take a look at a current Spider-Man comic, you'll find that he's maybe twenty years old, he worries a lot about what's right and what's wrong, and he has a lot of trouble with his girlfriends.

Do you know what Spiderman was doing fifteen years ago? Well, he was about nineteen years old, he worried a lot about what was right and what was wrong and he had a lot of trouble with his girlfriends.

On the benign side, nearly everyone working in the medium today, especially those of us who are writers, owe Stan Lee a very great debt. I'd be the first to admit that any flair which my own writing might possess probably originates back on that Thursday afternoon when I was eight years old, sitting and boggling at the strange-looking comic that was as far removed from *Blackhawk* as Mother Theresa is

from Hugh Hefner. That's a debt that I don't take lightly, and if I wore a hat it would certainly be doffed to Mr Lee for providing me with the inspiration that is currently helping to pay my rent.

Also, as I said in the opening paragraphs of this article, without the revitalising spark that Lee brought to the industry way back then, comics today would be vastly different and might not even exist at all.

A number of todays most clearly Lee-influenced writers . . . Chris Claremont, Marv Wolfman, Jim Shooter . . . would almost certainly not be with us. Whether that is a good thing or a bad thing depends upon your opinion of their individual talents. Stan Lee has done a hell of a lot for the industry and there's no getting away from it.

But it's a thing that cuts both ways. I've often noticed that the most sparkling examples of the industry at the

peak of it's form seem to have an ultimately deleterious effect upon the medium as a whole. As a for instance, the original *E C Mad* comic, undeniably brilliant in it's own right, has doomed us to a situation where any new humour magazine that appears is almost forced by law to have a title associated with mental illness (Cracked, Sick, Crazy, Frantic, Panic, Madhouse, etc. etc.) and features a pale imitation of *Mad's* stock in trade genre parodies without reflecting any of the wonderful drive and imagination of the original. The same is true of Stan Lee.

Stan Lee became a name that was synonymous with comic-book success. His competitors had either to copy what he was doing or go out of business. The largest of these competitors D C comics, opted for the former course of action and today have a product which is largely interchangeable with that of their Marvel counterparts.

You see, somewhere along the line, one of the newer breed of Marvel editors . . . maybe it was Marv Wolfman, maybe it was someone else, had come up with one of those incredibly snappy sounding and utterly stupid little pieces of folk-wisdom that some editors seem to like pulling out of the hat from time to time.

This particular little gem went something as follows; "*Readers don't want change. Readers only want the illusion of change.*" Like I said, it sounds perceptive and well-reasoned on first listening. It is also, in my opinion, one of the most specious and retarded theories that it has ever been my misfortune to come across.

Who says readers don't want change? Did they do a survey or something? Why wasn't I consulted?

If readers are that averse to change then how come Marvel ever got to be so popular in the first place, back when constant change and innovation was the order of the day? Frankly, it beats the hell out of me.

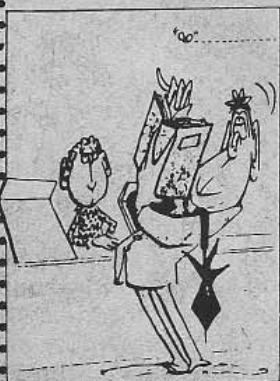
Perhaps I could have a little more sympathy for pronouncements like this if there was some solid commercial reasoning behind them. If, for example, Marvel's books had suddenly started selling significantly more during the period when this "Let's-Not-Rock-The-Boat" policy was introduced, then I might have reluctantly been forced to agree with it.

This is not the case. Marvel's best selling title today is the X Men, or it was when last I saw any figures. It sells

DON MARTIN DEPT. PART II

Being both a member of the literati and the illiterati, Don Martin is familiar with the soul-searching torment

ON CHOOSING A BOOK



1955 by E.C. Publications, Inc.



Above: Firestorm from DC Comics Below: Captain Victory from Pacific Comics.

something like 300,000 copies, and it is regarded as a staggering success.

Listen, in a country the size of America, 300,000 copies is absolutely pathetic. Back in the early fifties it was not unknown for even a comparatively minor-league publication like Lev Gleason's original *Daredevil* (no relation) to clear *six million* copies every month. Even in the early days of the Marvel empire, any comic that was selling only 300,000 copies would have probably been cause for grave concern amongst those in charge of it's production, and indeed it would have most likely been cancelled. These days, it's the best we've got.

Now, I don't want to cause too much alarm and despondency by talking about Marvel's imminent downfall. Some of the recent developments over there in the home of the hamburger look very promising indeed and it looks as if it might just be possible to save the day at the last minute, the way it always happens in the comics. But, and it's a big but, it's been left awfully late. Maybe too late. We'll have to wait and see.

As for Stan Lee, to read the man's increasingly infrequent pronouncements you would assume that everything was brighter and better than it had ever been before. Gradually,

however, it became clear that Stan Lee was no longer even marginally associated with the line of comics that had made him a very rich man. Oh sure, you get "Stan Lee presents..." at the top of every splash page and the odd guest-spot of embarrassing geriatric gibberings from the man himself turning up in the Bullpen Bulletin pages from time to time, but I have my doubts as to whether Mr Lee has actually bothered to read a Marvel comic since sometime during the early seventies.

As far as I know he occupies some sort of executive position out on the sunny west coast of America and is thoroughly immersed in a world of gold ingots and grey chest-hairs. In short, he's out of the picture.

So, finally getting round to the initial purpose of this article, what sort of legacy has he left behind him? In comic book history, is he a Hero or a Villain?

Well, to borrow a concept that Mr Lee himself made popular during the early sixties, he's a Hero/Villain, just like the *Submariner* or *Hawkeye*. He has had an influence upon the medium which is as benign as it is poisonous.



In the *Justice League*, *Green Arrow* and *Hawkman* argue together in a pale echo of those original *Thing/Torch* dust-ups of yesteryear. *Firestorm* is about twenty years old, has lots of teenage problems and trouble with his girlfriends. In effect we have two big companies who are both Marvel comics to all intents and purposes but merely have different names.

All the other companies of the mid sixties... Charlton, ACG, Tower and so on... opted not to follow Marvel's lead and subsequently went bust, leaving the comic field populated solely by the pale ghosts of Lee's former glories.

Even the independent publishers that have recently sprung up seem largely unable to do anything more radical than tinker feebly with Lee's basic formulas. *Captain Victory* is little more than *The Eternals* playing at the wrong speed and *Ditko's Missing Man* would not have looked out of place as a sub-plot in *Dr Strange*.

Oddly enough, in imitating the superficial stylistics of Mr Lee's 'Marvel Renaissance', most of these imitators seem unable to recognise the single most important quality that he brought to the comic medium.

Stan Lee, in his heyday, did something wildly and radically different.

And as far as I'm concerned, his vacant throne will remain empty until we come up with someone who has the guts and imagination to do the same.

Any offers? ●