

# **MARVEL COMICS IN THE 1970s:**

***AN ISSUE BY ISSUE FIELD GUIDE  
TO A POP CULTURE PHENOMENON***

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# Introduction: The Twilight Years

**I**n volume one, *Marvel Comics in the 1960s*, it was shown how the development of the company's new line of super-hero books introduced in that decade could be broken up into four distinct phases: the Formative Years, the Years of Consolidation, the Grandiose Years, and the Twilight Years. Led by editor Stan Lee, who was allied with some of the best artists in the business including Jack Kirby, Steve Ditko, Don Heck, John Romita, John Buscema, Jim Steranko, and Gene Colan, Marvel moved quickly from its early years when concepts involving continuity and characterization were introduced to new features with little thought given to their revolutionary impact on the industry to the Years of Consolidation when concepts of characterization, continuity, and realism began to be actively applied. In the Grandiose Years, Marvel's growing popularity among older readers and the counter culture, as well as some limited attempts at merchandising, spurred Lee and top writer Roy Thomas to incorporate contemporary concerns about race, the environment, the anti-war movement, and feminism into sprawling stories of outsized characters and concepts that frequently took the universe itself as their setting, rather than restrictive confines of Earth. Taken together, it was a heady

mix, vaulting Marvel Comics into a pop-culture movement that threatened to overwhelm established notions of art and its role in society. As a result, Lee came to be seen as Marvel's front man, and through a combination of speech making, magazine interviews, and his often inspiring comic book scripts, he became a sort of pop guru to many of his youthful readers. However, by 1968, Marvel Comics had reached its zenith in terms of its development and sheer creative power. Soon after came an expansion of the company's line of titles and a commensurate dilution of the



*BY THE LATE 1960S, STAN LEE'S SELF-TRANSFORMATION FROM A STUFFY OFFICE MANAGER TYPE TO POP-CULTURE GURU WAS COMPLETE. A BONA FIDE CELEBRITY, MARVEL'S MADISON AVENUE DIGS WOULD BECOME TOO SMALL FOR HIS AMBITIONS, LEAVING HIM VULNERABLE TO THE GLAMOR OF HOLLYWOOD.*

talent that had made its first years great. By then, it had lost the services of Ditko, and soon Kirby would leave as well; both artists who'd been instrumental in the creation of some of the company's most enduring characters. After 1970, Lee himself would begin a slow retreat from active scripting and day-to-day management of his comics. It was the beginning of the fourth phase of Marvel's development: the Twilight Years.

Characterized by a combination of a growing lethargy among the company's established titles and the rise of imaginative new features and professionals, the Twilight era was the longest and most drawn out of the four phases. Those looking for a clear line of demarcation between the Grandiose Years and the Twilight Years, however, will be disappointed. Like the previous phases, the change from one era to the next wasn't

obvious; it came gradually, almost imperceptibly, and unlike those earlier phases, the period of overlap between the Grandiose Years and the Twilight Years is a lengthy one. And despite the temptation to use Jack Kirby's departure from the company as marking the end of the Grandiose Years, the fact is, no era can be demarcated by a single event. In fact, it's the contention here that Marvel's exit from the Silver Age began almost two full years before Kirby left.

Begun in the triumphant glow of the Grandiose Years, this final era in Silver Age Marvel's development wound down slowly as the once vibrant dynamism of Lee, Kirby, Ditko, and Heck became spent; the visual skills of their successors Romita, Buscema, and Colan for a time held their ground; and new writers like Roy Thomas, Gerry Conway, and Doug Moench steered their most creative energies away from the books that had become the bedrock of the line. As the changeover from the old guard to the new was completed and the company entered fully into its final phase (a phase whose elements and style of storytelling became as different in their sensibilities from those of the three earlier phases, as those phases had been different from comics produced before Marvel's revolution), the Twilight Years became a kind of epilogue to what had gone before as the long night of mediocrity slowly settled over the company.

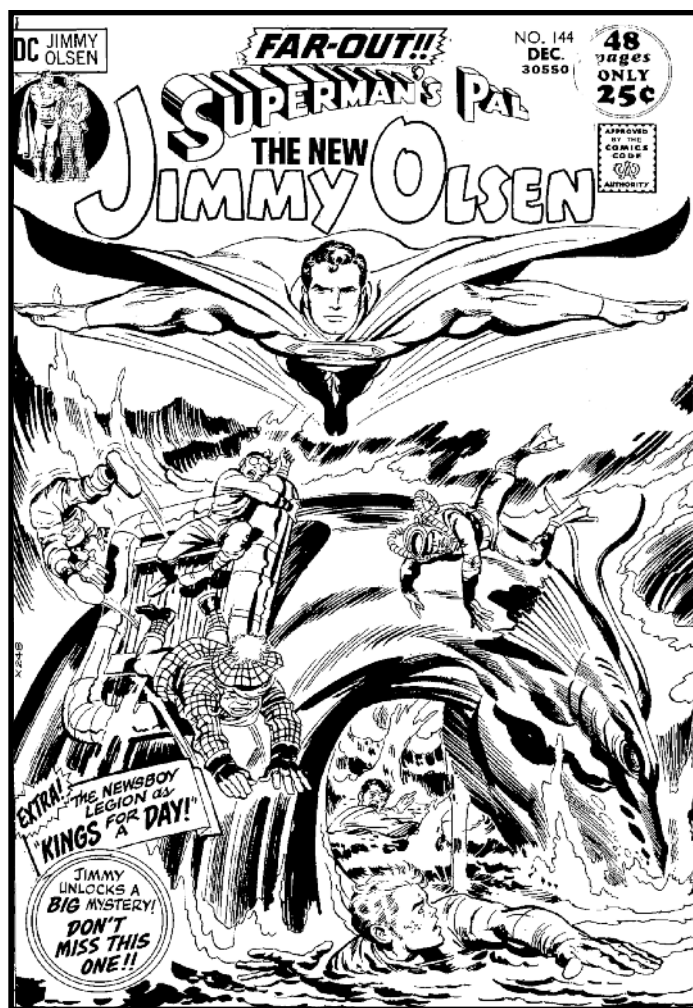
For his part, Stan Lee had always yearned for success outside the narrow confines of the comics industry, and with the success of Marvel Comics, he found an opening that allowed him scope for his ambitions. It began simply with college lecture tours during the Years of Consolidation and Grandiose Years culminating in the Carnegie Hall gig in 1972; then, as Marvel's super-heroes began to



*MARVEL'S CARNEGIE HALL EXTRAVAGANZA MARKED THE HIGH WATER MARK IN THE COMPANY'S DIZZING RISE TO THE TOP OF THE POP-CULTURE HEAP. AFTERWARDS, THOUGH ITS COMICS CONTINUED TO SELL, THE COMPANY SEEMED TO ABDICATE ITS LEADERSHIP ROLE CHOOSING TO FOLLOW TRENDS INSTEAD OF SETTING THEM.*

achieve iconic status, Hollywood beckoned and Lee became the company's spokesman and chief salesman with tinseltown's wheelers and dealers. When Marvel Comics passed out of the control of Martin Goodman and was acquired by a succession of corporations and Wall Street investors, Lee found himself promoted to publisher and eventually relinquished almost all of his writing and editorial chores to Roy Thomas, who'd been prepared to take over the job for some years. Except for the occasional special issue or his scripting on the long-running Spider-Man newspaper strip, Lee left the Marvel offices permanently in the 1980s and moved to California to become the company's deal maker in Hollywood.

Before Lee's departure however, Marvel had lost artist Jack Kirby, whose dissatisfaction with Lee's stardom, and his own loss of control over characters he had helped to create, prompted him to look for greener pastures. Kirby's frustration had begun to be apparent long before he actually announced his decision to depart when his art on the *Fantastic Four* and *Thor* strips began to flag. There was less energy there and the inventiveness that had defined the strips in the Years of Consolidation and Grandiose Years was noticeably absent even after he had been given more, if not complete, control over the plotting. Preceding Lee to the West Coast, Kirby had locked himself out of any chance for a permanent position within the company, and he began to consider the radical thought of leaving Marvel. By the early Seventies, the only real option was rival DC, with whom he signed an exclusive contract in 1970 that allowed him unprecedented freedom from editorial control. But even Kirby's personal store of energy wasn't limitless, and having already passed his creative peak while at Marvel, at DC he failed to duplicate the amazing successes of the previous ten years when his ambitious "Fourth World" concept involving a series of interconnected books fell short of expectations and were soon cancelled. Disappointed with his experience at DC, Kirby returned to Marvel in 1975 where he was given the same kind of editorial freedom. But for those readers who looked forward to seeing him back, Kirby proved a disappointment. If he wasn't working on new titles of his own invention, he was ignoring one of the most important aspects of Marvel's success with readers, the continuity among its titles. In taking over the books of two characters with whom he had been previously identified, Captain America and the Black Panther, Kirby defeated readers' expectations by ignoring previous storylines as if they'd never happened. Such an attitude toward the Marvel Universe and its characters didn't endear him either to the readers or his editors, and as the



**JIMMY OLSEN #144: DECLARING HIS INDEPENDENCE IN 1970, KIRBY LEFT MARVEL FOR DC WHERE HE ATTEMPTED TO SHOW WHAT HE COULD DO WITHOUT SUCH PARTNERS AS STAN LEE OR JOE SIMON. THE RESULT WAS A MIXED BAG WITH HIS UNEVEN WORK ON JIMMY OLSEN BEING A GOOD EXAMPLE. FANS INITIALLY GAVE HIM THE BENEFIT OF THE DOUBT, BUT SOON GAVE UP.**

years passed, Kirby became all but irrelevant. When his association with Marvel finally ended in 1979, he dabbled with smaller independent companies before leaving comics more or less for good in favor of the more lucrative animation industry.

In the meantime, Don Heck found work drying up at Marvel and also migrated to DC. Heck followed in the footsteps of Steve Ditko, who'd been the first of Marvel's trio of founding artists to leave the company in 1966. Ditko lingered at DC for only a short time before moving on to former employer Charlton Comics, and from there began working with a series of independent publishers to produce some of the most eclectic, idiosyncratic material of his career. Artists such as John Romita, John Buscema, and Gene



**ROY THOMAS, WHO TOOK OVER FROM LEE AS EDITOR-IN-CHIEF AT THE START OF THE TWILIGHT YEARS, ENCOURAGED NEW TALENT AND NEW IDEAS. BUT WITH AN EVER GROWING LINE OF BOOKS, THE WORK EVENTUALLY OVERWHELMED HIM.**

Colan, who had followed Kirby, Ditko, and Heck to Marvel during the Years of Consolidation, had since progressed beyond their early tutelage under Kirby to become hugely popular for their own distinctive styles. They became the bedrock upon which a new foundation would be raised made up of fans turned professional who joined the company in the 1970s. Younger artists such as Barry Smith and Jim Steranko would progress quickly and prove influential beyond the limited number of pages they produced and move on to other fields. Finally, as the 1970s passed mid-decade, the era of the old time professional writer and artist passed away and the comics industry was given over to the fan creator who had grown up reading, collecting, and enjoying comics and who was fired by a determination to turn what had been a passion into a career.

After Lee became publisher, Thomas was at last promoted to Editor-in-Chief at Marvel and began his tenure presiding over a new renaissance of creativity. Begun under Lee's guidance, greater freedom was made possible after the Comics Code Authority loosened some of its regulations allowing for, among other things, the reintroduction of the horror comic. Taking advantage of the opportunity, Marvel launched new features based on the old Universal Studios monsters and a plethora of try-out titles that hosted different, original characters every month, many of which graduated into their own titles. With the introduction of the horror books, the company's line of comics suddenly

became far too much for any single person to supervise. Swamped in work, Thomas was unable to keep up, and writers soon found themselves with a new freedom that resulted in a slew of eclectic features that included *Man-Thing*, *Howard the Duck*, *Jungle Action*, *War of the Worlds* and a host of black-and-white magazine titles. But with all the new, exciting features, came a concurrent loss of control over production. Deadlines were missed with increasing regularity, and reprints had to be substituted for work not submitted in time; some titles became half original material and half reprint. Shipping dates were missed, and some work was even printed directly from the artist's pencils without benefit of an inker's polish. In response, writers were allowed to become their own editors, further fragmenting editorial control. Under the increasing pressure and frustrated at not having the time to pursue his own writing projects, Thomas resigned as Editor-in-Chief and was replaced by a number of successors including Gerry Conway, but none of them remained on the job for long. The slide into editorial chaos was only stopped in 1978 with the arrival of Jim Shooter, who had begun his career in comics as a teenager writing scripts for DC. Shooter imposed much needed discipline at Marvel and restored order to the company, but his methods alienated a number of employees, including Thomas himself, who eventually quit and moved to DC.

Through all these changes, the Twilight Years moved on beyond the 1970s and into the 1980s as a kind of atrophy began to set in on the company's older, established titles that had once led the Marvel revolution. Although humor became stale, formula trumped originality, and elements such as characterization and realism began to fade from such former trendsetters as *Spider-Man* and *Fantastic Four*, the irony was that they continued to outsell the oddball books and new features that often showed the creativity that had originally set Marvel apart from its competitors. And so, as the Twilight era faded out, and memory of the glorious triumphs of the earlier phases dimmed, an air of somnambulism crept into Marvel, only to be jarred into wakefulness when, at intervals, rising creative stars occasionally shook it from its slumber. The years would stretch into decades and reach beyond the scope of this work as flashes of creativity, the last echoes of Marvel's fabled Silver Age (such as that of John Byrne's stint on the *X-Men* and *Fantastic Four*, Frank Miller's work on *Daredevil* and the Roger Stern, John Buscema, Tom Palmer team up on the *Avengers*), became more and more infrequent until flickering out completely.

# Part I: 1968-1970

## The Spectacular Spider-Man #2

*"The Spider-Man Saga"; Stan Lee (script), John Romita (pencils & inks)*

*"The Goblin Lives"; Stan Lee (script), John Romita (layouts), Jim Mooney (pencils), Frank Giacoia (inks)*

It was 1968, the year of the Tet Offensive, the Democratic National Convention, and the assassination of Robert Kennedy, and Marvel was experiencing the first major expansion of its line of comic book titles in over a decade. Sales were climbing and its characters sank deeper into the public consciousness. But even as artist Jack Kirby's tenure at the company was drawing to a close; the philosophically confused Silver Surfer was launched in his own book; Steranko reached a crescendo on *Nick Fury, Agent of SHIELD*; and new life was born to members of the Fantastic Four. Editor Stan Lee remained eager to escape the comic book spinner rack ("Hey, kids! Comics!") and reach out to the older readers he was increasingly identifying with at speaking engagements and visits to college campuses. But how to do it while retaining the comics format that seemed to have intrigued the counter-cultural element who were as likely to visit a head shop as they were to drop in at the corner tobacco store? Lee's solution was to create a comic book that didn't look like a comic book but a magazine. Capitalizing on Marvel's growing penetration of the market, he decided the new magazine should spotlight Spider-Man, the company's most popular character and presumably, the one with the most cache among college students. To further separate it from regular comics, the new magazine would be printed in black-and-white and due to its greater dimensions, sold on the magazine rack beside *Time* and *The New Yorker* instead of with its four-color peers. But first, Lee would have to convince publisher Martin Goodman who wasn't crazy about doing magazine-sized comics. At the time, black-and-white comic magazines were the province of fly-by-night outfits that exploited blood



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**SPECTACULAR SPIDER-MAN #2: MARVEL'S FIRST ATTEMPT TO BREAK OUT OF ITS FOUR-COLOR STRAIGHTJACKET AND CAPTURE THE NOTICE OF A WIDER ADULT AUDIENCE WAS SHORT LIVED BUT YIELDED TWO GREAT EXTRA-LENGTH TALES BY LEE AND ROMITA AT THE HEIGHT OF THEIR POWERS!**





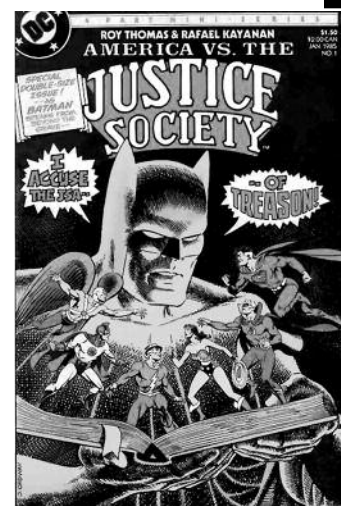
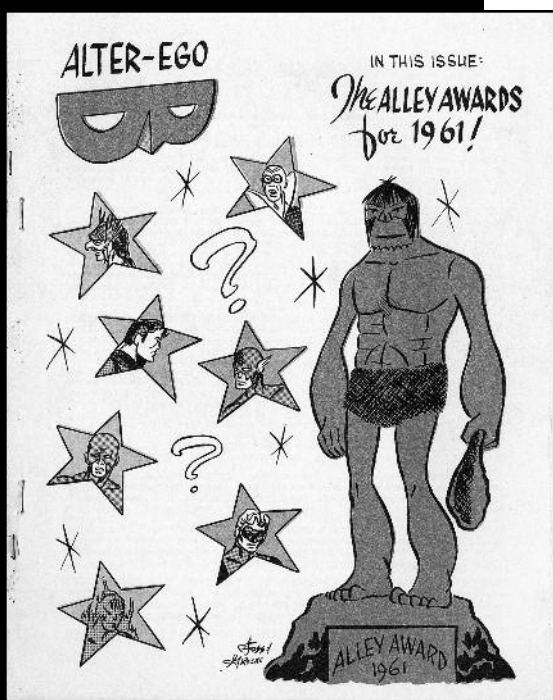
# Roy Thomas

One of the first comics fans to break into the business and turn professional, Roy Thomas had a rough start in 1965 when he was hired as an assistant to DC comics editor Mort Weisinger. If he had any illusions about the sweet life working in the comics industry however, he was quickly disabused by the tyrannical Weisinger and fled at the first opportunity. That opportunity came in the form of Marvel editor Stan Lee who took him on as an assistant and writer. It was the beginning of long and influential career that culminated in 1972 when

Thomas replaced Lee as Editor-in-Chief.

Born in 1940, Thomas fell in love with comics early attracted especially by DC's roster of super-heroes. Immersing himself in fan circles, he took over publishing *Alter Ego*, an early amateur magazine that he would revive decades later in a much more professional incarnation. A graduate from Southeast Missouri State University, Thomas taught high school English for a few years before being accepted at George Washington University in New York City. But he never attended, having accepted the assistant's job from Weisinger. At Marvel, he quickly climbed the ladder, mastering the individual styles of the company's growing line of titles while assuming editorial duties on the side. When he finally took over as Editor-in-Chief, he was instrumental in expanding

Marvel's line-up outside of traditional super-heroes led by *Conan the Barbarian*, a strip he had championed and scripted for over 100 issues. After giving up the role of Editor-in-Chief, Thomas continued to write for Marvel in the capacity of writer/editor but after clashing with Editor-in-Chief Jim Shooter, returned to DC where he continued to create new titles including *All Star Squadron* and *Arak, Son of Thunder*. Drifting from DC, Thomas tried his hand at film and television script writing and in the 1980s freelanced for Marvel. Some independent projects followed but by then it was clear his time in the comics industry had passed. In 1999, however, he revived *Alter Ego* and has been instrumental in preserving the history of comics with articles and in-depth interviews with professionals.





and gore and mild sex to seduce scarce quarters out of unwary teenagers. In addition, Goodman already had a line of men's magazines, holdovers from the glory days of the pulps, that filled that niche nicely enough. But Lee was persuasive and when he finally got the green light from Goodman, the first 52-page issue of *The Spectacular Spider-Man* duly appeared in July of 1968 under the "Non-Pareil Publishing Corp." label. For who knows what reason, the book was produced only "under the auspices of the Marvel Comics Group." Goodman, it seemed, was up to his old accounting tricks again! Keeping to his plan to gear the new book toward an older audience, Lee teamed with artist John Romita to tell a street-level story about a political campaign and corruption in high places...a subject frowned upon by the Comics Code which, as a magazine, *Spectacular Spider-Man* was able to ignore. Although the merciless demands of scheduling didn't permit time to find out how sales had been on the first issue of the book before production began on *Spectacular Spider-Man* #2 (Nov. 1968), some inkling of Goodman's nervousness might have been indicated with the introduction of color to a story written by Lee and once again penciled by Romita (and inked by Jim Mooney and Frank Giacoia). Other evidence of back pedaling included the use of a typical comic book supervillain like the Green Goblin, who was featured front and center. Be that as it may, beneath a painted cover by Romita, Lee pulls out all the stops in a 58-page tale filled with the tightly wound angst that Peter Parker was known for and scenes that shift easily from the university classroom to Peter's uptown pad to glam shots of Gwen and MJ. The action finally winds up with the Goblin becoming a victim of one of his own "psychedelic pumpkins," a clear drug reference made a full two years before Lee would challenge the Code directly on the subject in the regular *Amazing Spider-Man* book. Unfortunately, the writing was on the wall for Lee's bold excursion beyond the four-color world of Marvel Comics. Finding little encouragement in sales, Goodman chose to discontinue *The Spectacular Spider-*

*Man*, a set-back that would take a few years to overcome when Marvel once again tested the black-and-white magazine waters with a new concept far removed from the world of costumed heroes. In the meantime, Lee would return his attention to the regular comics but the idea of doing something specifically for college aged readers was never far from his mind. In 1974, he would team up with underground publisher Dennis Kitchen to produce *Comix Book* ("It's new, it's strange, it's subterranean!"), a short-lived title that went belly up with its third issue.

### Capt. Savage and His Leatherneck Raiders #5

"Mission: Destroy the Invisible Enemy"; Arnold Drake (script), Dick Ayers (pencils), Syd Shores (inks)



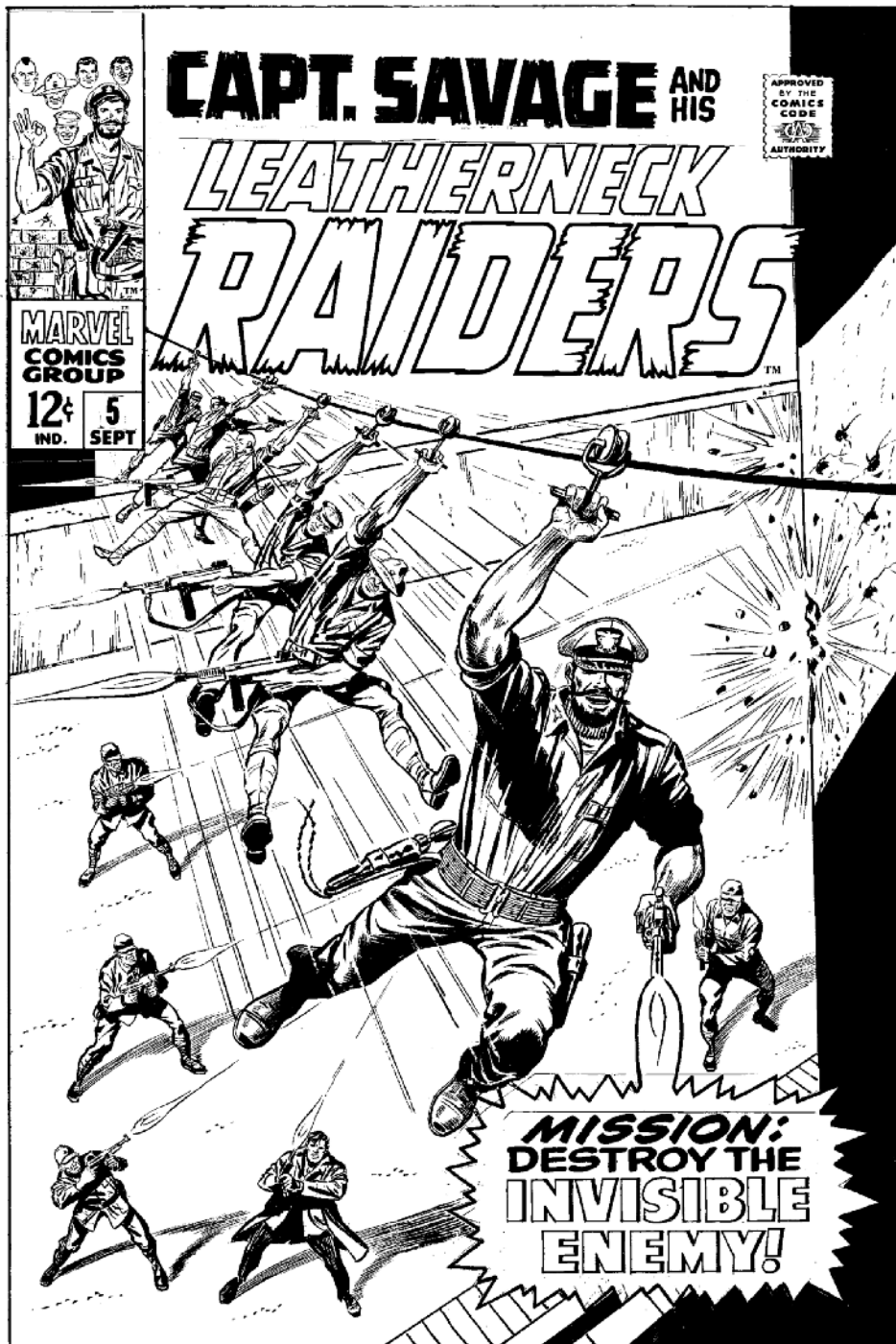
**TEAMED UP ON CAPT. SAVAGE AND HIS LEATHERNECK RAIDERS, PENCILER DICK AYERS (LEFT) AND INKER SYD SHORES' POWER PACKED ART LENT THIS LATE INNING WAR STRIP THE CHOPS TO GIVE MARVEL'S SUPER-HERO TITLES A RUN FOR THEIR MONEY!**

Wow! Was this the same Dick Ayers who penciled those less than stellar Human Torch and Giant-Man stories from the Formative Years and Years of Consolidation? Answer: it sure was, but this time he was partnered with inker Syd Shores (yup! the same guy who was transforming Jack Kirby's pencils on *Captain America* into things of beauty). Although Ayers had always been good on detail work (it was what made him such a great inker over Kirby in the pre-hero and early years) and when he had the time to lavish

attention on a particular illustration (take some of the covers he did for *Sgt. Fury* for instance), his weakness had always been the human figure itself. He seemed to have a penchant for positioning them across a panel in unnatural ways, often seeming as if they were about to fall into a split! But with a sturdy inker, his work could rise to more than acceptable, even exciting levels, as it does here in *Capt. Savage and His Leatherneck Raiders* #5 (Aug. 1968). The book was launched a few months earlier when Marvel was suddenly able to expand its line of titles. At a time when it had not been immediately apparent that super-heroes were to be the wave of the future, the sales of *Sgt. Fury and His Howling Commandos*

must have been encouraging enough for editor Stan Lee to take a chance on another war book patterned on *Fury's* successful formula. He probably didn't have to look far for the book's subject though as fans had been demanding for years to see and learn more about a character known only as "the Skipper." The submarine captain had been appearing infrequently in *Sgt. Fury* whenever the Howlers needed to be transported secretly to the Continent for one

of their impossible missions. Now, the Skipper had a name and rank: he was Captain Savage and not too surprisingly to readers, he came with his own Howlers-like squad of commandos: the Leatherneck Raiders. As the name implied, they were made up of US Marines (including one Little Bear, their very own Gabe Jones ethnic equivalent), a sailor, and an Australian. Over 19 issues, the Raiders would wage war in the Pacific against the Japanese Imperial Forces on missions every bit as impossible as the Howlers. But where the Howlers mostly stuck close to regular Nazis, the Raiders quickly left the expected path and veered into Marvel style fantasy. Soon after their debut, they tangled with Baron Strucker and an early version of Hydra, SHIELD's old nemesis from Marvel's current continuity. Although the Raiders are back on more familiar ground foiling a counterfeiting plot aimed at Australia this issue, the series featured an interesting, action-packed script provided this issue by DC veteran Arnold Drake, who seemed in much more comfortable surroundings here than he'd been over in the *X-Men*. Dialogue is smooth and natural sounding and the single-issue story moves quickly while leaving nothing dangling. All in all, it was too bad the series ended as soon as it did; but the writing was already on the wall, even if no one at the time could quite make it out. With young people throwing off the values of their elders and anti-war sentiments growing (not to mention the increasing popularity of super-heroes in a shrinking marketplace), war comics like Capt. Savage were doomed to extinction.



**CAPT. SAVAGE AND HIS LEATHERNECK RAIDERS #5: THE FEATURE'S STRONG COMBINATION OF ART BY AYERS AND SHORES AND OCCASIONAL TIE-INS WITH THE CONTEMPORARY MARVEL UNIVERSE MADE FOR AN ECLECTIC TAKE ON THE TRADITIONAL WAR COMIC.**

# Part II: 1970-1974

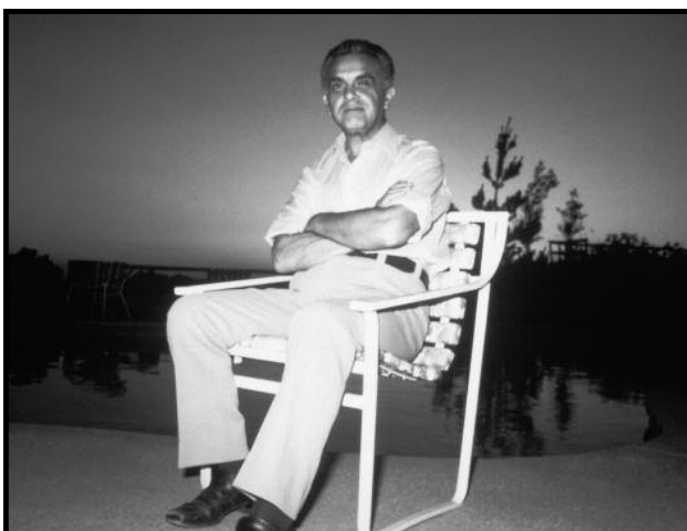
**T**he Twilight Years began with Lee and Kirby at the apex of their professional careers and the universe they created still basking in the afterglow of grandiosity. However, new influences and a weakened Comics Code Authority brought into being circumstances that encouraged the exploration of genres other than super-heroes and formats other than comics.

## **Fantastic Four #102**

*"The Strength of the Sub-Mariner"; Stan Lee (script), Jack Kirby (pencils), Joe Sinnott (inks)*

Just as the winds of change were beginning to shift, and the most innovative writing and interesting art was moving from the super-hero features to out of continuity science fiction, horror, and sword and sorcery, it was announced that Jack Kirby was leaving Marvel! Shocking as the news was to readers in 1970, in retrospect, it probably happened at just the right time. In contrast to Lee, who could still turn a tale of super-heroics into something more interesting and immediate by turning a plot around topical events or juggling personality quirks to create three-dimensional characters, Kirby's creative energies seemed to be winding down to a halt. The once mighty engine, primed in partnership with the unerring instincts of Lee that had driven Silver Age Marvel from the obscurity of its pre-hero days of the late 1950s, through three successive phases of development (each more creative, more innovative, more exciting than the last) to its position as the most important comic book company in the industry, now seemed to have run out of steam. Perhaps made up of equal parts frustration and anger, Kirby's enthusiasm for his work waned, ironically, beginning about the time he perhaps achieved almost complete control over the titles he worked on. Kirby's resentments may have arisen from a belief that he wasn't appreciated by the company, hadn't received

enough credit for his contributions in helping to create the Marvel Universe, and/or from simple envy over the attention Lee was getting outside comics. That said, the artist didn't help himself any by not taking advantage of his importance to the company early on, of not being a tougher negotiator, and of not starting up the corporate ladder. Adding to his difficulties was a decision to move from New York to California, 3,000 miles away from the Marvel offices. In the meantime, it had been almost two years since any really new concepts were introduced in *Thor* or the *FF* (instead, old characters returned and situations were recycled with obvious adaptations of movie and television plots filling in between), which may have been intentional (Kirby had been designing new characters for years but



*LITTLE DID ANYONE SUSPECT AT THE TIME THAT WHEN KIRBY DECIDED TO MOVE FROM THE EAST COAST TO CALIFORNIA, IT ALSO SIGNALLED HIS IMPENDING DEPARTURE FROM THE HOUSE OF IDEAS HE HELPED TO RAISE.*



keeping them to himself; they'd appear only after he left Marvel for rival DC where he created a handful of interconnected titles under the umbrella concept of the "Fourth World") or it may have simply reflected the exhaustion of a man who'd been in the business since the 1930s. Certainly his efforts at DC over the next five years were less than stellar; his interconnected New Gods titles were intended to have an instant, Marvel-style continuity, while their characters had their counterparts in his previous work for the company. Other features such as *Kamandi* and the *Demon* were wholly or in part based on ideas purloined from film and television. The process of decline in the *FF* book was most painful to watch

with stories still somewhat interesting around #76-79 and #84-87, then growing weaker through #89. The last twelve issues, in effect Kirby's final year at the company ending with *Fantastic Four* #102 (Sept. 1970), were, by the standards Kirby himself had helped to set, simply poor. Almost a complete reversal of everything that he and Lee had spent a decade building, they lacked real efforts at character development; continuity; the air of sophistication an expert combination of humor, seriousness, and self-deprecation created; but worst of all, they lacked the kind of spirit and verve that made Marvel comics must-reading for any fan. In comparison, Lee's work on *Captain America* and *Spider-Man* was still as immediate as it ever was. In fact, Kirby's last work for Marvel read more like the competition's product, nicely designed but empty suits servicing mostly silly plots intended for 7-to-11-year-olds (Magneto spends nearly all of #102 underwater with nary a breathing aid in sight; did Kirby forget that Atlantis was beneath the sea or did he figure the kiddies wouldn't notice?) Although Marvel's success certainly involved the dynamism, the sheer power-packed beauty of Kirby's art, in retrospect, its most important ingredient was the one thing the artist failed to learn and take with him to DC: Lee's humanism and obvious empathy for other people and his ability to infuse his own values in the form of characterization into his heroes. It was the reason why Marvel's success would continue long after Kirby's departure even though, at the time, there was speculation that the company wouldn't be able to survive without him. Instead, it was Kirby's projects at DC that failed. Without the topicality, the human emotions, the supporting cast of ordinary characters, even such a simple element as romantic interests, they were doomed to failure. The sophistication of the typical comic book reader had grown beyond the simple pleasure of reading the exploits of super-heroes, no matter how colorful their costumes. It was a lesson DC itself had to learn fast and adapt itself to or lose the sales race to its rapidly surging competition (a problem it solved by importing en masse, Marvel's most talented graduates). Kirby's sojourn at DC didn't last long, in a few years he'd be back at Marvel. By then, however, his creative fires were hardly more than glowing embers. But as the first and most important of the three artistic musketeers of Marvel (and the last to leave), nothing and no one could ever burn as hotly in the white heat of creation as he did when, together with Lee, he engineered a "big bang" that left in its wake a universe of wonder, imagination, and delight.



**FOREVER PEOPLE #6:** ALTHOUGH KIRBY'S LAST EFFORTS AT MARVEL WERE DEFINITELY SUB-PAR FOR THE KING, HIS INITIAL WORK AFTER MOVING TO DC SHOWED A MARKED ENTHUSIASM (*NEW GODS*, *MISTER MIRACLE*) DESPITE A SUB-STRATA OF CORNINESS ON DISPLAY IN SUCH TITLES AS *JIMMY OLSEN* AND *FOREVER PEOPLE*.

## Conan the Barbarian #1

*"The Coming of Conan";*  
Roy Thomas (script),  
Barry Windsor-Smith  
[as Barry Smith] (pencils),  
Dan Adkins (inks)

In retrospect, it almost seems as though Barry Smith's winding course through Marvel's stable of titles—entering the comics industry imitating his favorite artists and gradually improving from assignment to assignment—had been planned. A period of learning and adjustment was first necessary before he could graduate to a permanent monthly feature of his own. But at last, he was ready. Having developed a style all his own, in only a few short months he'd proceed to literally recreate himself into a bohemian artiste and proud flagbearer for an artistic renaissance in comics that would help raise the consciousness of his peers regarding the essential worth of their own work. No longer would the drawings an artist created for comics be considered disposable junk, but as legitimate as that of any other medium. Now, young artists would gather in studios to spend hours slaving over single pages making sure they came out just right. But inevitably, the time they spent on their work wasn't cost effective. The comic book industry hadn't caught up to them yet and was still unsympathetic to slowpokes. Deadlines still loomed and a ready product counted for far more than artistic integrity. It was an attitude that would give rise to a new phenomenon in comics: Artists who'd work on a single title (instead of two or three), usually missing deadlines or keeping a popular book on bi-monthly status, when it could sell better on a more frequent schedule; jumping from one feature to another and spending

only a few months on any one of them; and eventually, dropping out of comics completely to pursue opportunities in other media such as creating art for calendars, book covers, albums, or posters. (Sure, Steranko and Adams had left comics before for much the same reasons, but they were "compromised" by becoming publishers themselves.) It was the beginning of the age of the comic book artist as prima donna, and it all began with *Conan the Barbarian* #1 (Oct. 1970). Not that anyone could tell, as Smith's job on this issue appeared to be a regression from the promising work he'd been doing in the anthology titles. Made up of more conventional layouts and backgrounds devoid of detail, even the experienced inks of



*CONAN THE BARBARIAN #1: THIS PENCILED VERSION OF THE FIRST ISSUE'S COVER IS IN MARKED CONTRAST TO THE FINISHED COVER INKED BY JOHN VERPOORTEN THAT APPEARED ON NEWSSTANDS IN 1970. BARRY SMITH'S EVOLVING STYLE IS CLEARLY EVIDENT HERE IN ITS ATTENTION TO DETAIL AND THE OVERALL VERVE IN ITS RENDERING.*

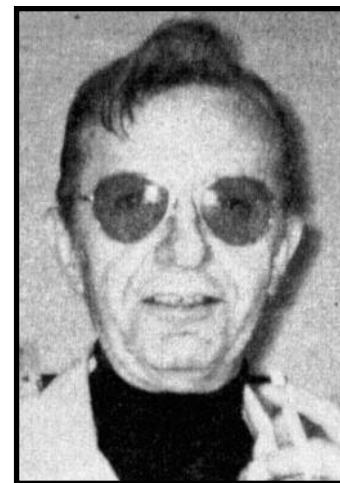
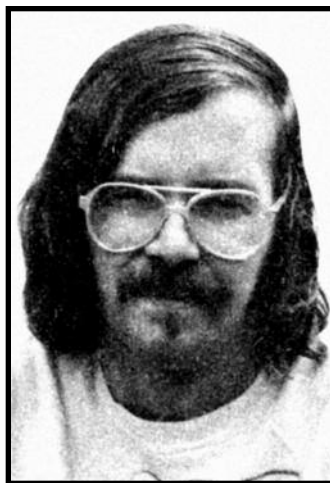
Dan Adkins failed to bring out the essentials of Smith's new style. It was hard to believe that from this first fumbling issue, Smith would become, almost overnight, the new darling of fandom with art that developed rapidly into a richly ornate and intricately detailed style that brought to vivid life Conan's Hyborian Age. But all the pretty pictures in the world wouldn't have made this title the success it became without good stories to compliment them—which is where Roy Thomas comes in. By no means the junior partner on the *Conan* book, Thomas' (unofficial) editorial judgment and his influence with editor Stan Lee, coupled with the skill he'd display in first capturing the spirit of Conan creator Robert E. Howard and later in adapting the author's original stories, made his contributions to the feature indispensable. As time went on, Thomas became so skillful at mimicking Howard's style that his stories, if adapted to prose, would've made fine additions to the Conan canon in their own right. In its way as important as the first issue of the *FF*, *Conan the Barbarian* #1 makes for a convenient marker dividing one era from another. Where the former signaled a shift in attitude in the way comics were perceived, the latter marked the point at which control of the comics industry passed from the hands of older professionals (to whom working in the industry was mostly just a job) to a younger generation of fans who loved the medium for what it was.

### Amazing Adventures #3

"Pawns of the Mandarin"; Jack Kirby (script & pencils), Chic Stone (inks)

"The Widow and the Militants"; Gary Friedrich (script), Gene Colan (pencils), Bill Everett (inks)

Following the successful launch of the weird menace and romance anthologies, editor Stan Lee returned to super-heroes for his next pair of new titles. Harking back to the Years of Consolidation, Lee divided the page count of *Amazing Adventures* and *Astonishing Tales* between two features, each boasting the efforts of some of the bullpen's best writers and pencilers. Although not successful in the long run (it seems readers had long since become accustomed to "feature length" stories), the two books did boast impressive efforts by artists like Neal Adams, Wally Wood, and John Buscema and writers like Roy Thomas and Gerry Conway. *Amazing Adventures* #3 (Nov. 1970) is a good example of a typical issue as Jack Kirby takes on his last assignments for the company (writing and drawing both the Inhumans here



*WRITER GARY FRIEDRICH (LEFT) MANAGED THE DIFFICULT ACT OF SETTING THE BLACK WIDOW'S ADVENTURES WITHIN A CONTEMPORARY MILIEU WHILE AT THE SAME TIME RETAINING A SENSE OF THE CHARACTER'S COLD WAR ORIGINS. BILL EVERETT (RIGHT) MEANWHILE, LENT GENE COLAN'S ART A LUSH SENSUALITY THAT IN PLACES WAS ALMOST TACTILE.*

along with Ka-Zar over in *Astonishing*) and Gene Colan swings into high gear on the Black Widow strip. Obviously completed before Kirby left the company, his work here on the Inhumans seemed almost a throwback to the company's early years. Contributing to the illusion were the inks of Chic Stone (who'd given the Years of Consolidation their definitive look). Returning to the fold after an absence of years, it was almost like Stone never left! His thick ink lines seemed to perfectly compliment Kirby's pencils (that had grown markedly looser by this time), holding and drawing out of them a measure of the vibrancy they once held. The plot by Kirby is characteristically devoid of any subtleties with only the heroes' powers to differentiate them. That might've been acceptable for a story that was only ten pages long, but then if Gary Friedrich and Gene Colan could do it with the Black Widow, why couldn't Kirby? In fact, the Widow feature had everything a Marvel strip should have by this time to spell success: well rounded, three-dimensional characters; an interesting supporting cast (which featured Ivan, the Widow's chauffeur; the Young Warriors, a group of Hispanic youth fighting for their dignity against evil slum lords; even J. Jonah Jameson!); and a plot based on topical issues. Even more, the strip had an intelligent script by Friedrich (who'd begun his career a few years before at rival Charlton on the



recommendation of Roy Thomas) filled with smooth, informative dialogue that keeps everything moving forward. And most of all, Friedrich knew when to stop. That was because Colan, beautifully inked by Bill Everett (the match-up was practically serendipitous) was, believe it or not, just entering the most creative point in his career. Beginning with this strip and going on to his future work on *Daredevil*, *Dr. Strange*, and the *Tomb of Dracula*, it seemed that all was but prologue for Colan, who'd turn out to be Marvel's star artist of the Twilight Years. And some of his very best work is on display here as he opens the story of the Widow's attempt to help the Young Warriors in their struggle against unscrupulous landlords with a wonderfully rendered series of panels showing Natasha arriving at her penthouse apartment (a sequence wisely left wordless by Friedrich). There, she's captured by a masked villain called "the Don" who intends on setting her up as the inspiration for illegal action taken by the Young Warriors. Meanwhile, the mayor refuses to meet the young people's demands and the scene is set for a street riot next issue! It sure was a lot of plot for only ten pages, but Friedrich and Colan pull it off effortlessly leaving the reader eager for the next chapter. And that almost voluptuous inking by Everett! It was like a match made in heaven when the two artists met in their rendering of the curvaceous Black Widow!

## Amazing Spider-Man #88

"The Arms of Doctor Octopus!"; Stan Lee (script), John Romita (pencils), Jim Mooney (inks)

Peter Parker's longest journey (to paraphrase the character of Scout from the film *To Kill a Mockingbird* [1962]) began deceptively enough in *Amazing Spider-Man* #88 (Sept. 1970) with the return of his



**AMAZING SPIDER-MAN #88:** AFTER A DISAPPOINTING HIATUS UNDER THE PEN OF JOHN BUSCEMA, THE SPIDER-MAN STRIP RETURNS TO GREATNESS THIS ISSUE BEGINNING A STRING OF GROUNDBREAKING STORIES THAT WOULD END WITH #99. STAN LEE'S FIRST BREAK FROM THE STRIP SINCE HE HELPED LAUNCH IT IN 1963.

# Part III: 1974-1976

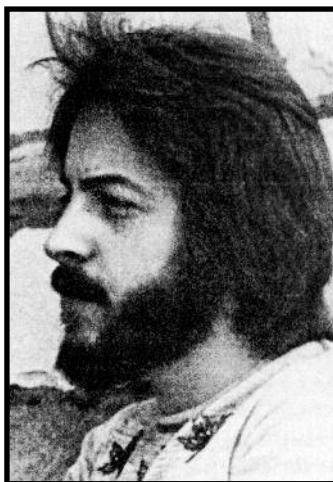
**I**n the interregnum between Kirby's departure from Marvel and his return at mid-decade, the landscape of Marvel's four-color universe had been altered almost beyond recognition. Aside from obvious changes such as new characters, new titles, and new formats, was the infusion of a new relativism that relied on an increased sophistication among readers.

## Adventure Into Fear #20

"*Morbius the Living Vampire!*"; Mike Friedrich (script), Paul Gulacy (pencils), Jack Abel (inks)

"*Midnight in the Wax Museum!*"; Jack Oleck (script), Richard Doxsee (pencils & inks)

Things were beginning to get out of hand. By the early-to mid-1970s, the expansion that had begun way back in the late Sixties with the first anthology titles and split feature books had exploded into seemingly dozens of new titles. And although many were single feature, standalone books (like *Tomb of Dracula*, *Marvel Team-Up*, and *Luke Cage, Hero for Hire*), many more were what could be classed as "try-out" books. *Marvel Premiere*, *Marvel Feature*, *Supernatural Thrillers*, *Amazing Adventures*, and *Astonishing Tales* were only a few and each required material every month to fill their 18 to 20 pages of space. To do it, and to meet ever looming deadlines, a legion of artists and writers



**PAUL GULACY ARRIVED AT MARVEL UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF STERANKO. BUT SOON EVOLVED HIS OWN STYLE THAT COULD SEEM BOTH STIFF AND FLUID AT THE SAME TIME.**

were hired to make it happen. First, barely competent would-be artists like Jim Starlin, Frank Brunner, Craig Russell, Mike Ploog, Rich Buckler, and Val Mayerik (all of whom would nevertheless improve rapidly) were brought in from the fan community, followed by a wholesale hiring of artists from shops in the Philippines of all places. In addition, not only were writers and artists needed to produce material for all the available books, but features were needed for them to work on, and plenty of them. To do it, editor Roy Thomas combed through the Marvel Universe looking for characters that could potentially be featured in their own series. He succeeded in coming up with plenty, and apparently, with such characters as Man-Wolf, Tigra, and even It, the Living Colossus (a monster from the company's pre-hero days), none were too minor not to consider! Anyway, all of these factors came home to roost (to mix a metaphor!) in *Adventure into Fear* #20 (Feb. 1974), which featured "The Man Called Morbius, the Living Vampire!" Not as contradictory a title as it sounded, Morbius was a vampire, but not one who was a reanimated corpse of east European legend. He was Michael Morbius, a scientist who tried to cure himself of a rare disease, but instead became a creature with vampire-like attributes. Created by Thomas when he was filling in for Stan Lee on *Spider-Man*, Morbius ended up roaming the country in stories appearing in the black-and-white magazine *Vampire Tales* feeling sorry for himself and wracked with guilt whenever his thirst for human blood drove him to kill. He graduated to *Fear* when the need for new material became acute and Mike Friedrich was assigned to write the strip. Perfunctory and by-the-book, Friedrich's script was merely serviceable in a tale about a devil-worshipping scientist named Daemond who gains mental control of Morbius with the intention of using him to (what else?) conquer the world. Pretty routine stuff that would show definite signs of improvement a few issues later when a new writer named Steve Gerber took over the scripting chores, sending the plot in a weird, less

predictable direction. But the main interest here is the art, produced by an insufficiently experienced Paul Gulacy. Although coming to comics as an assistant for Dan Adkins, Gulacy's influence was clearly more with Steranko than his immediate mentor. Filled with awkward figure work, inappropriate perspectives, and a lack of crucial detail, Gulacy's dynamism and layouts here were strong enough to overcome these weaknesses and hint at the introduction of still another exciting new artist to arrive on the Twilight scene. Unfortunately, readers wouldn't get a chance to watch his style develop on the "Morbius" strip (which was soon handed over to Gerber and Craig Russell) as he was transferred after this issue over to another new feature that was in even more desperate need of a penciler.



ADVENTURE INTO FEAR #20, PAGE 1: AS OPPOSED TO HIS LATER WORK, GULACY'S EARLIEST EFFORTS, AS CAN BE SEEN HERE, WERE MORE FLUID THAN STIFF OR MANNERED. FIGURES, FOR INSTANCE, PRACTICALLY FLING THEMSELVES OFF THE PAGE!

### Savage Tales #3

"The Lurker From the Catacombs"; Roy Thomas (script), Barry Windsor-Smith [as Barry Smith] (pencils & inks)

"The Crimson Bell"; Ray Capella (script), Al Williamson (pencils & inks), Frank Brunner (pencils & inks)

"The Fury of the Femizons"; Stan Lee (script), John Romita (pencils & inks)

"He Comes From the Dark"; Roy Thomas (script), Barry Windsor-Smith [as Barry Smith] (pencils & inks)

As incredible as Barry Smith's work was on the second part of the "Red Nails" adaptation featured in *Savage Tales* #3 (Feb. 1974), it would nevertheless become the zenith of his artistic development. Although his subsequent work over the next several years equaled the superb artistry on display here (in prints sold through his own Gorbliney Press and an unfinished Bran Mak Morn story that had been slated for a later issue of *Savage Tales*), he had in effect reached a plateau. In fact, if the apex of Smith's art could be narrowed down to a single illustration, then readers didn't have to look any farther than this issue's editorial by Roy Thomas

featuring a stunning full-page drawing of a victorious, blood-spattered Conan; there was no way Smith could top himself after that and he never did. (In fact, the artist seemed to do his best work on

standalone illustrations; witness the other two in this issue: the cover of *Conan the Barbarian Special* #1, a frontispiece on the contents page here, and another at the back dedicated to REH.) As time went on, his powers would begin to fade and though still exciting when



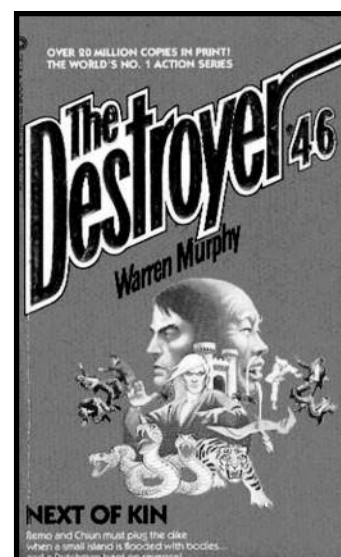
compared to younger artists entering the field, Smith's later work would only be a pale, watered-down version of his former achievements. But that fate was not yet known to the readers who eagerly snapped up this issue to find out how things turned out for Conan and Valeria in the city of Xuchotl. There, Thomas continued his close adaptation of the original Howard story, while Smith's art delivered on the promise it had shown in the previous issue. Over the course of 37 pages, the two followed the strange battle between factions still living within the deserted city. As Conan joins one faction against the other, he comes across violence, sadism, and the walking dead until in the end, only he and Valeria are left standing... living spectres literally drenched in the blood of their enemies. Although Thomas would later team with John Buscema to produce other adaptations and stories just as long in many subsequent issues, none would ever achieve the esoteric otherworldiness evoked by Smith in "Red Nails." Taking up nearly the whole issue, the story left hardly any room for a reprint of "The Fury of the Femizons" and some text pieces illustrated by the likes of Frank Brunner and Al Williamson.

### Amazing Spider-Man #129

"The Punisher Strikes Twice"; Gerry Conway (script), Ross Andru (pencils), Frank Giacoia & Dave Hunt (inks)

As the Twilight Years progressed, a strange phenomenon began to take place. Marvel's flagship titles that had once been the most vital in the comics industry, the breeding ground for every new trend, the gold standard of what was cool and hip, had begun to lose steam. The irony was that although books such as the *Fantastic Four*, *Avengers*, *Daredevil* and *Thor* were still the assignments every young writer or artist hoped to graduate to after learning the basics of storytelling, the truth was that while waiting for one of those coveted books to become available, the company's new recruits, while laboring on lesser titles, were actually doing the most creative and innovative work at Marvel. Take the transitional *Amazing Spider-Man* #129 (Feb. 1974) for example. By 1973, the title was over ten years old and with its web-swinging star, had become the sales leader of the Marvel line. That, unfortunately, didn't prevent the book from falling on hard times that began around issue #100 with a series of stories that undermined the realism that had always been a hallmark of the strip. First, Peter Parker had grown two extra pairs of arms (to make him more spider-like), then fought a vampire, and

finally traveled to a hidden jungle to battle dinosaurs and giant aliens reminiscent of those that roamed Marvel's pre-hero mystery titles. Sanity was restored when first Stan Lee, then Gerry Conway, returned to the writing chores for a string of stories drawn and later plotted by John Romita that harkened back to the character's Golden Age just after Steve Ditko had left the company. Those stories ended in a reprint taken from the pages of *Spectacular Spider-Man* #1, a black-and-white magazine-sized experiment that had appeared a few years before and failed due to distribution problems among other things. Romita returned briefly to ink Gil Kane through the deaths of Gwen Stacy and the Green Goblin in issues 121 and 122 before the art chores were taken over by DC veteran Ross Andru, who may have won the Spider-Man gig following an audition in *Marvel Super-Heroes* #14 in which he had an early opportunity to draw the character. Andru's reappearance now marked the beginning of the dry rot that would set in on the regular *Spider-Man* feature and later spread to the other flagship titles. Although sales on the strip would continue strong, artistically, Andru's style was far from satisfying with its awkward, unappealing figures with facial expressions more akin to wax dummies than real people. An old time professional, Andru had most recently been employed at DC doing such strips as "Gunner and Sarge" for war books like *GI Combat*, but was probably most well known for his work on the *Metal Men*, whose goofy



THE DESTROYER, A VERY DISTANT LITERARY DESCENDENT OF STREET & SMITH'S PULP HERO THE AVENGER, WAS LIKELY THE INSPIRATION FOR MARVEL'S PUNISHER.

adventures Andru's style was perhaps better suited to. What it was definitely not suited for was the *Spider-Man* strip which, due to its melodramatic elements, had always depended on a realistic approach to the artwork to make it work. So Andru wasn't well served when almost at the start of his tenure in #129, he was given the job of illustrating the first appearance of a new character who was destined to revolutionize the definition of a comic book hero over the next decade. But exploitation of the full potential of the Punisher (whom writer Gerry Conway based on the Destroyer, the star of a popular series of novels who specialized in fighting organized crime) would have to wait until other artists who were better able to portray the gritty, violent nature of the character had the chance to handle him. In the meantime, behind an eye catching Kane/Romita cover, Andru tried valiantly to bring some drama to Conway's story of a plot by the mysterious Jackal (actually one of Peter Parker's professors at school) to destroy Spider-Man. But the arrival on the scene of the uninspired Andru reflected the general state of lackluster artwork that had begun to fill the pages of Marvel's other flagship titles including the *Fantastic Four* and *Thor* where John Buscema, chastened from his experience on the long since cancelled *Silver Surfer* book, produced solid but uninspired work. His brother Sal, who'd graduated from inking John to penciling the *Avengers*, *Captain America* and the *Defenders* was workmanlike, while *Daredevil* was taken over by Bob Brown, another DC alumnus whose stiff, ill-proportioned figure work had been on display with the *Challengers of the Unknown*. Meanwhile, *Iron Man* was still the province of Golden Age stalwart George Tuska. Although such writers as Steve Englehart and Doug Moench managed to come up with some interesting plot devices, overall, Marvel's big guns largely began to run out of ammo. Even Conway himself, who had been one of the company's shining lights earlier in the Twilight era started to slip when he began to introduce more and more ridiculous elements to the *Spider-Man* strip, including the wedding of elderly Aunt May to the villainous Doctor Octopus (who had won her hand from underworld gangster Hammerhead!), the introduction of the Spider-Mobile, and the infamous clone of Gwen Stacey. With such increasing carelessness on the part of writers, the infusion of less than stellar artists from rival DC and a general shift in creative energy to less high profile books, the flagship titles, like burning wrecks on the high seas, slowly drifted into mediocrity and irrelevance.

## Marvel Premiere #14

"Sise-Neg Genesis"; Steve Englehart (co-plot & script), Frank Brunner (co-plot & pencils), Dick Giordano (inks)

Steve Englehart had never planned to be a comic book writer. In fact, he started out as an artist doing freelance jobs and working as an assistant to Neal Adams. Then one day, he received a call from Gary Friedrich, who'd become an assistant editor at Marvel since joining the company as a writer. According to Englehart, Friedrich asked him to fill-in for him while he was out of town for a few weeks. Englehart agreed, but ended up keeping the job permanently when Friedrich decided not to return. Asked by editor Roy Thomas to try his hand at writing, he did well enough to be assigned the scripting chores for *Captain America* and the *Avengers*. In no time, the former artist was writing stories for a half dozen of the company's most important characters, including Dr. Strange. Englehart took over the Strange feature at a difficult time for the strip. After a strong start under Stan Lee and Barry Smith, the strip veered into the horror domain of writer H. P. Lovecraft (appropriating ideas from the author's famous story "The Shadow over Innsmouth"), but not doing a very good job of it. Under various writers and artists, the strip lost direction and began floundering. That's when Englehart made the scene. Dropping the Lovecraftian elements, Englehart brought the strip more into line with precedents set by Lee and

Steve Ditko. While not completely jettisoning everything that'd been happening in previous issues, he managed to wind things up on a more or less satisfactory note. By that time, Englehart had been united with artist Frank Brunner, and soon the two men were working in a close partnership that yielded one of the most outrageous and



**ALTHOUGH STEVE ENGLEHART WORKED ON NUMEROUS TITLES WHILE AT MARVEL, LIKE WOLFMAN ON DRACULA, HIS WORK ON DR. STRANGE ROSE ABOVE THE OTHERS. HE PROVIDED SIMILAR SERVICES AT DC FOR A TIME WITH HIS WORK ON DETECTIVE COMICS WITH ARTIST MARSHALL ROGERS BEING THE STANDOUT.**

daring stories ever presented in comics. Begun in #12 and concluded here in *Marvel Premiere* #14 (March 1974), the story they came up with involved a time traveling magician from the future who has discovered how to absorb the universe' ambient magical energy. The catch is, the more magicians there are tapping into it, the less there is to go around. As a result, Sise-Neg decides that the only way he can get more of the energy is to go back in time where there would be fewer magicians. And so, the farther back he goes, the more energy he absorbs, and the more powerful he gets. Doctor Strange and Mordo catch up with him after he's reached the Middle Ages and becomes the magician known to history as Cagliostro, but he gives them the slip and escapes to pre-historic times.



There, Strange learns that Sise-Neg intends to go all the way back to the dawn of creation when he will have all the magical energy in the universe for himself. "And what is another term for an all powerful being at the dawn of creation?" he asks Strange. "It is God!" That's right, Sise-Neg (Genesis spelled backward!) intends to go back before the creation of the universe and, assuming the role of God, recreate it in his own image! But when he gets there and uncreates all reality, (an event witnessed only by Strange and Mordo), he discovers that "My plan to recreate the universe in my image was truly pitiable! I have achieved my godhood, but in doing so I have learned the truth! That everything is as it should be, if one can only see it!" Thus humbled,

the being called Genesis then recreates the universe exactly as it was before with the exception that Mordo (driven mad by the experience) and Strange are the only human beings to know that the world was destroyed and recreated! It was probably the most incredible, most audacious story Marvel (or any comics company for that matter) had ever done, and what's more, it called into question the existence of God: after all, if a human being, Sise-Neg, could go back in time, destroy the universe and recreate it again, what about the God that began the universe in the first place? Was he a similar time traveler?



**MARVEL PREMIERE #14, PAGE 27: FRANK BRUNNER LETS IT RIP IN THESE SCENES SETTING UP SISE-NEG AS THE GOD OF GENESIS.**



# Part IV: 1976-1979

**A**s the Twilight Years drew to a close, Marvel became less a trendsetter than a follower of the latest fad. Income from corporate product and movie tie-ins formed an increasing part of the bottom line, even as the company's own creative energies began to run dry. Ultimately, even Kirby himself became a casualty of the new reality.

## Captain America #193

*"The Madbomb Screamer In The Brain!"; Jack Kirby (script & pencils), Frank Giacoia & Mike Esposito (inks)*

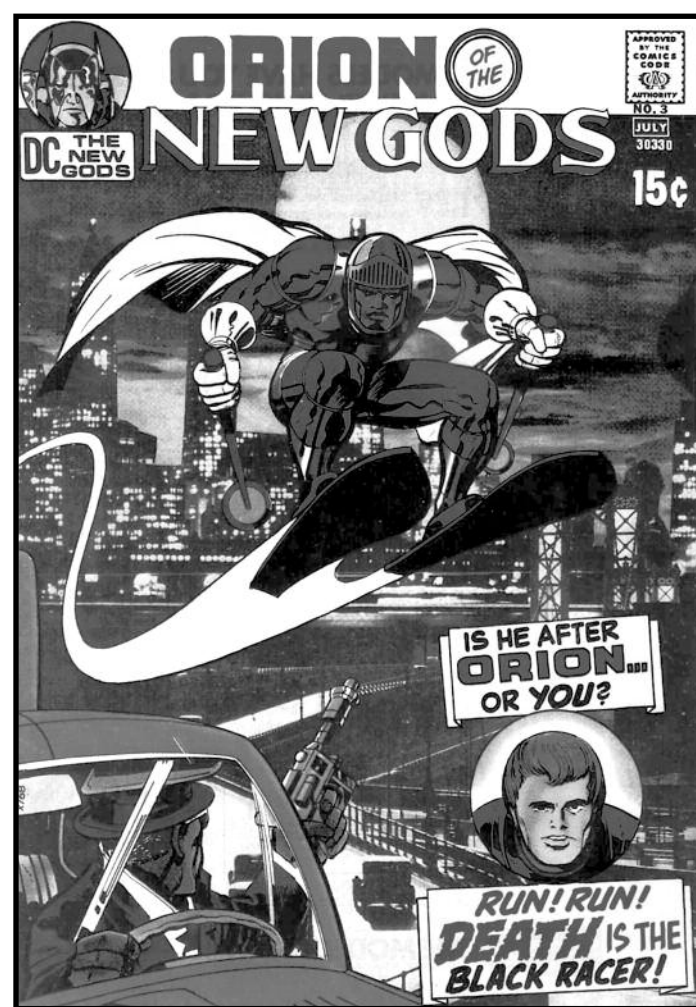
It had only been six years, but to longtime Marvel fans it felt more like twenty. "King Kirby is back!" screamed the blurb on the cover of *Captain America* #193 (Jan. 1976) and indeed the legendary Jack Kirby who, in partnership with Stan Lee, had helped lay the foundations of Marvel's Silver Age triumph, had returned to the company with an immense store of goodwill among its readers. Unfortunately, what he had in mind for his return to Marvel would prove to be a disappointment to fans who expected him to pick up where he'd left off in 1970: perhaps taking over on such classic characters as Thor and the Fantastic Four while working within the continuity he himself had helped to build. It was not to be. The personal factors that had driven Kirby from Marvel six years before were still operable and in agreeing to come back, the artist made clear that he would be his own man as he wanted to be at DC. He would write and draw his own features and outside of *Captain America* and the *Black Panther*, would concentrate on new concepts such as the *Eternals*. In addition, Kirby would eschew collaboration with inkers such as Joe Sinnott and Vince Colletta who had made his art so memorable at the height of his success during the Grandiose Years. His determination to separate his new work from the general run of the Marvel Universe became immediately apparent on the *Black Panther*, a strip that for the past several years had been written by Don McGregor in a complex, layered style



**CAPTAIN AMERICA #193: THE INITIAL EXCITEMENT OVER KIRBY'S RETURN TO MARVEL WAS QUICKLY DAMPENED WHEN IT BECAME APPARENT THAT NOT ONLY WOULD THE KING IGNORE ONGOING CONTINUITY IN HIS VARIOUS BOOKS, BUT THAT HE WOULD ALSO BE DOING HIS OWN SCRIPTING.**

that addressed many of the social issues of the day. To have Kirby take over the book and without a single reference to what McGregor had been doing only weeks before, throw the Panther into a simplistic, even goofy tale of straight super-hero action was jarring to say the least. Similarly, when Kirby took over the *Cap* strip this issue, what resulted had nothing to do with the evolution the character had undergone under the hand of writer Steve Englehart. In a single swoop, Kirby returns Cap to an era reminiscent of the Silver Age with a Madbomb plot resembling that of *Inferno 42* in *Tales of Suspense* #76 or the seismo bomb in *Cap* #105. And as if the events that shook our hero's faith in the establishment had never happened, he allows himself to be recruited by "big wig" Henry Kissinger: "If that's who I think it is, we should get some straight answers!" declares Cap. "Hah!" replies the secretary. "You dreamer you! The test isn't over yet: we'll have our chat...if you survive this final hurdle!" The combination of Kirby's decision to ignore continuity and the wider Marvel Universe, as well as scripting his own work, soon disappointed fans who had wanted so much to have his return to Marvel be a triumphant one. Instead, Kirby appeared to be a stranger displaying few signs of knowing what it was that made the company's books tick. In fact, in this issue's letters page, the rumblings had already begun with one fan openly expressing "regret" to see that Kirby would be scripting his own stories. Plainly, some fans had learned their lesson after following Kirby to DC hoping to enjoy the kind of stories that they had become used to when the artist was at Marvel. There, inker Vince Colletta succeeded in making the first issues of *New Gods* and other "Fourth World" titles look as sharp as Kirby's later Marvel work, but he was soon forced off the books (for cutting corners and not inking everything the artist drew). Some fans who had given Kirby the benefit of the doubt, left with him. Then there was Kirby's scripting with its quirky eccentricities and meandering, undisciplined plotting that succeeded in driving away the rest. So when the artist returned to Marvel, it was with a mix of hope and reservations on the part of fans but as the months passed, and Kirby stubbornly refused to bring his stories into the 1970s or to allow anyone else to script them, resistance began mount against him both among older fans and in Marvel's editorial offices. The problem was that, like Captain America, his own creation, Kirby had become an anachronism. The revolution in comics he helped to launch in 1961 had moved on without him. When Kirby had left Marvel in 1970 it was as if he'd taken himself out of the time stream or put himself into suspended animation. In his own pocket universe,

away from New York, he was cut off from the latest developments in comics, especially Marvel comics and as a result, he'd failed to keep up. Slowly, while acknowledging his greatness and the debt the comics industry owed to him, fans nevertheless grew to disdain his work. As happened at DC, Kirby's major new concept, the *Eternals*, would lose focus, founder, and be cancelled. After that, Kirby seemed to lose interest, letting go of such mainstream titles as *Captain America* and *Black Panther* and instead doing covers and picking up the oddball assignment like *Machine Man* and the frankly head scratching *Devil Dinosaur*. A last fling with former partner Stan Lee on a *Silver Surfer* graphic novel was equally disappointing, paving the way for Kirby's final departure from Marvel. But by then, hardly anyone noticed.



**NEW GODS #3: INKED BY VINCE COLLETTA. KIRBY'S FIRST FEW ISSUES OF SUCH FOURTH WORLD BOOKS AS NEW GODS AT LEAST HAD THE SHEEN OF A MARVEL PRODUCT. BUT THE ARTIST'S ECCENTRIC SCRIPTING AND MEANDERING PLOTS WOULD NOT BE ENOUGH TO HOLD MOST READERS AFTER COLLETTA WAS FORCED OFF THE BOOKS.**

### Astonishing Tales #33

"Reflections In a Crimson Eye!"; Bill Mantlo (script),  
Rich Buckler (co-plot & pencils),  
Klaus Janson (inks)

Wow! If only every installment of the "Deathlok" strip could've looked like this! It was late in the Twilight Years and the leadership at Marvel had become uncertain if not stormy. Editors came and went, deadlines were missed, and reprints and fill-ins peppered the line-up. Momentum at the company that had begun in earlier phases was slowing down and soon, many of the artists and writers that had managed to keep things going so far would begin to jump ship for rival DC. But there was still some life left at Marvel, still features that held promise, still creators with good intentions even if they sometimes failed to completely realize them. One of those features that still had promise and still managed to deliver on them at least on an uneven basis, was Deathlok (the Demolisher). Begun in *Astonishing* #25, the feature had suffered many ups and downs as creator Rich Buckler was able to put more or less time into it. Some issues had great art and moved the diverse elements of the ongoing plot forward while others suffered from pressing deadlines, too many hands trying to help finish late artwork, or revolving writers. But the weird thing about the strip is that every few issues, it would deliver a great installment where art and script came together. *Astonishing Tales* #33 (Jan. 1976) was that kind of issue. Sure, it had Buckler on full pencils and firing on all burners layout-wise, scripter Bill Mantlo doing the first person/computer interior dialogue bit in top notch form, and a book-length story without a reprint or hastily produced short subject to fill out unfinished pages, but the standout element that really puts this issue in the spotlight is the inking by newcomer Klaus Janson. Destined to become Marvel's most impressive and innovative inker since Tom Palmer, Janson hit the reader where he lived with a relatively sedate opening splash page of Deathlok in New York's subways before ratcheting things up a bit on page 2 where he impresses with a near full-page shot of Deathlok as he walks into a puddle with his blood red image reflected in the purplish water. As if having set up the reader for a visual one/two punch, Janson knocks 'em dead on page 3 with a killer full-page portrait of the cyborg in all his scarred, decomposing glory! The rest of the issue was only slightly less impressive as Janson enhances Buckler's unconventional layouts turning ordinary scenes into things of striking beauty. The

final panels on pages 7 and 30 for instance, the first showing the legs of a simple radio tower against a distant cityscape and a sky colored in sunset hues and the second another close up of Deathlok, are just plain eye candy! Where did this guy come from? From Connecticut actually, by way of Germany. Janson broke into comics as an assistant to artist and sometime DC editor Dick Giordano before moving quickly over to Marvel. There, he bounced around on different strips, enhancing the art of anyone he worked over. Unlike most other inkers, Janson, like Tom Palmer, was never afraid to put a lot of himself into his work. Thus, books inked by him usually looked darker than they otherwise would have under someone else. But where Palmer's work was smooth and flowing, Janson's was harder edged, giving his human figures a blockier feel. Extensive use of crosshatching on close ups and fine line detailing on backgrounds created a 3-D effect and an overall darker atmosphere to whatever strip he worked on. In the years beyond those of the Twilight Years, this quality would enhance the work of such artists as Gil Kane and Frank Miller when they drew the *Daredevil* strip. Unfortunately, Janson was only assigned to the "Deathlok" strip late in its run, but the couple examples that remain to us are choice; working over an artist at the top of his form, they have to be some the best, if not *the* best, work the inker has ever done!



**KLAUS JANSON'S INKS PUT A DARK, THREE-DIMENSIONAL EDGE TO RICH BUCKLER'S ART ON DEATHLOK BUT IT WOULD NOT BE UNTIL LATE IN THE DECADE WHEN HIS WORK OVER FRANK MILLER'S PENCILS ON DAREDEVIL THAT HIS WOULD BECOME A HOUSEHOLD NAME.**

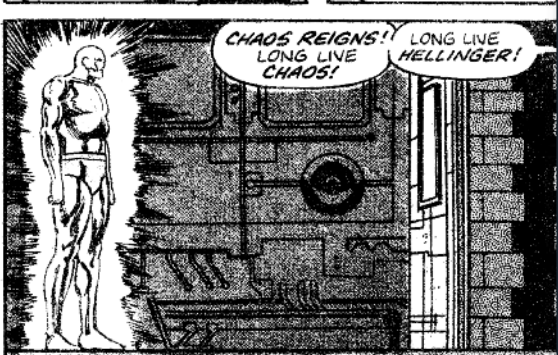
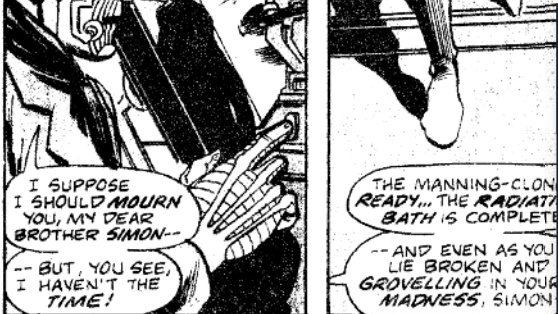


## Astonishing Tales #35

"...And Once Removed From Never"; Bill Mantlo (script),  
Rich Buckler (co-plot & pencils), Klaus Janson (inks)

The meandering plot of the "Deathlok" feature finally came to a conclusion in *Astonishing Tales* #35 (May 1976) in a way that was reminiscent of the Grandiose Years: it ended in the middle of the issue with the next storyline picking up immediately afterward.

HELLINGER TERMINAL-EYE READ-OUT: ENTITY-DESIGNATE 'SIMON RYKER' HAS BEEN NEUTRALIZED...FUNCTIONING OF MASTER COMPUTER DISRUPTED...REPAIR SYSTEMS SHUT DOWN...SUBJECT DESIGNATES 'DEATHLOK' AND 'WILCOX' STILL FUNCTIONING AND STILL IN CONTROL...



In a finale credited as having "concept, plot, and art" by Rich Buckler and inking and colors by Klaus Janson, could the results be anything but spectacular? The only element missing was having the strip's co-creator Doug Moench on hand to script, but as it was, the very capable Bill Mantlo had been doing a stand up job for the past few issues, and his work here was no less satisfying as Luther Manning and Gen. Ryker are reduced to "random

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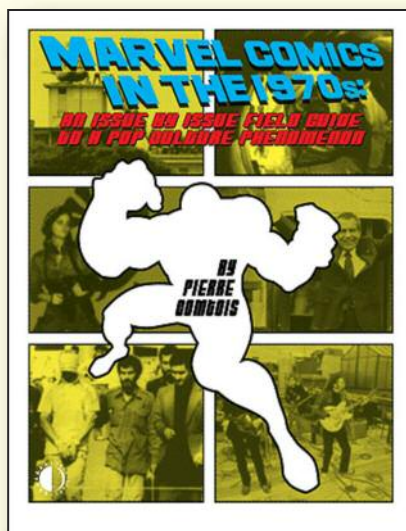
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calling him "Deathlok," but minutes before the two were to present the concept to editor Roy Thomas, Moench changed the name to "Deathlok." Besides Moench, another key element on the Deathlok strip turned out to be inker Klaus Janson, a talent Buckler discovered. At

**ASTONISHING TALES #35, PAGE 16: THE CLIMACTIC CHAPTER IN THE DEATHLOK SAGA WAS A COMBINATION OF SATISFACTION AND FRUSTRATION AS OUR ANTI-HERO DEFEATED THE MENACE OF GEN. RYKER EVEN AS HIS BOOK WAS CANCELLED FROM UNDER HIM.**