

MATT BAKER

The

Art of Glamour

Edited by Jim Amash and
Eric Nolen-Weathington



A N C

PHANTOM Lady

10c

APRIL



PHANTOM LADY

THIS ISSUE!
PHANTOM Lady
"THE SODA MINT KILLER!" "THE STINGING WHIP!"
Also
A TRUE CRIME STORY
Narrated by
PHANTOM LADY.

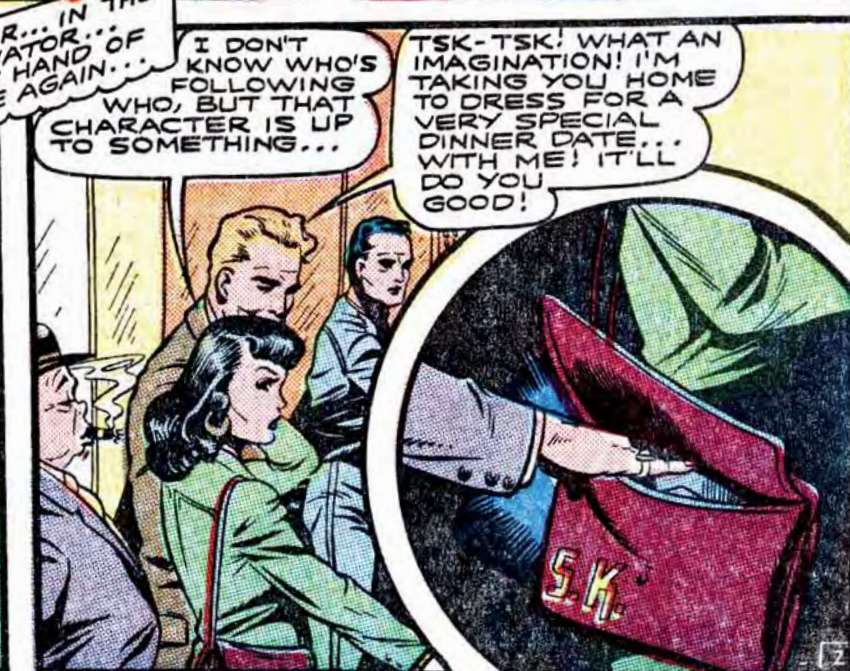
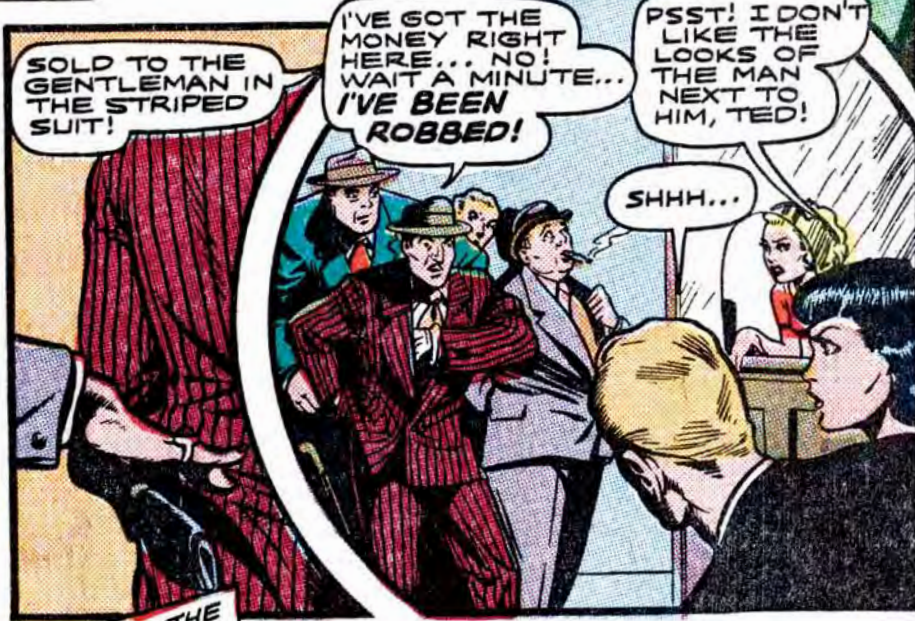
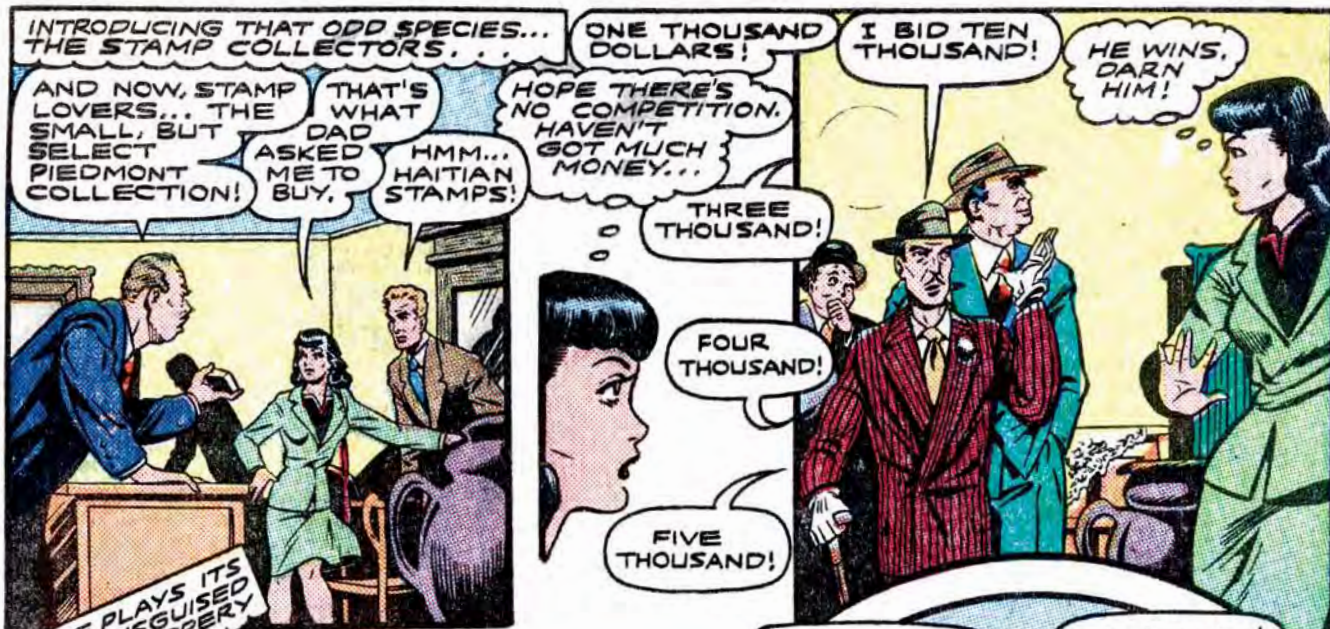


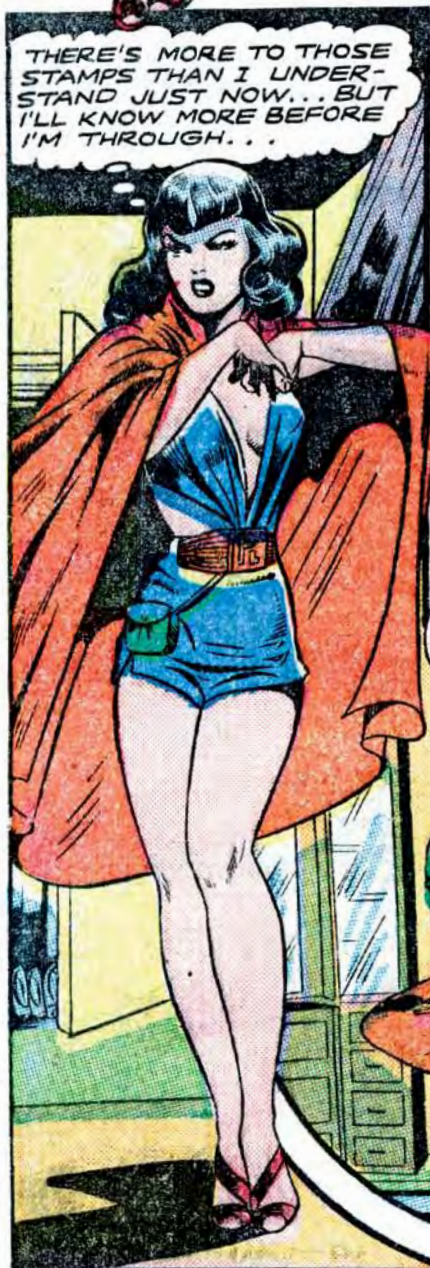
PHANTOM Lady

IN
THE
VORTEX OF
SCOUNDRELS
AND
SCANDAL!

"SANDRA KNIGHT, DAUGHTER OF THE FAMOUS SENATOR KNIGHT, AND WASHINGTON SOCIETY'S PAMPERED DARLING, IS NONE OTHER THAN PHANTOM LADY, CHALLENGER AND TERROR OF LAWBREAKERS EVERYWHERE! NOT EVEN HER BOY FRIEND, DON BORDEN, IS AWARE OF THIS... SO LET'S KEEP HER SECRET SAFE AS WE FOLLOW HER BREATHTAKING ADVENTURES!"

Editor.

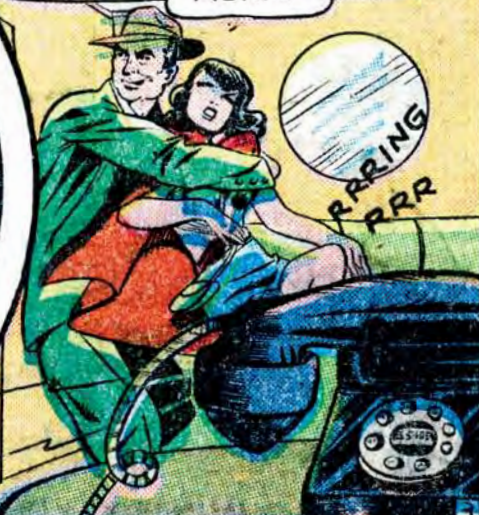
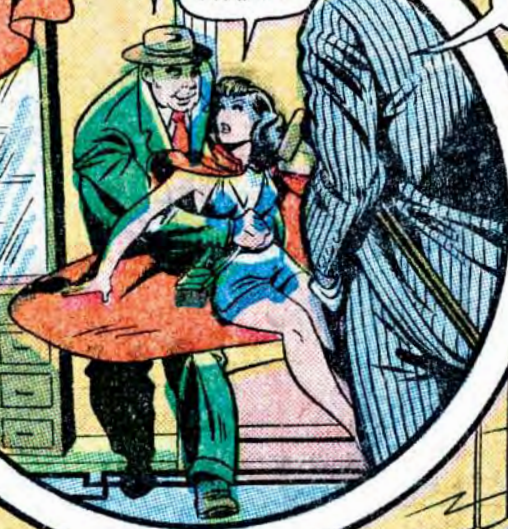




HOLY SMOKE! WE'VE GOT THE PHANTOM LADY!

WHA...

THIS BABY MUST HAVE THE STAMPS! CURSE THAT PHONE! SOMEONE WILL BE COMING TO INVESTIGATE... GET A LAUNDRY BAG, MONK!



PHANTOM *Lady*



JUNE

10c

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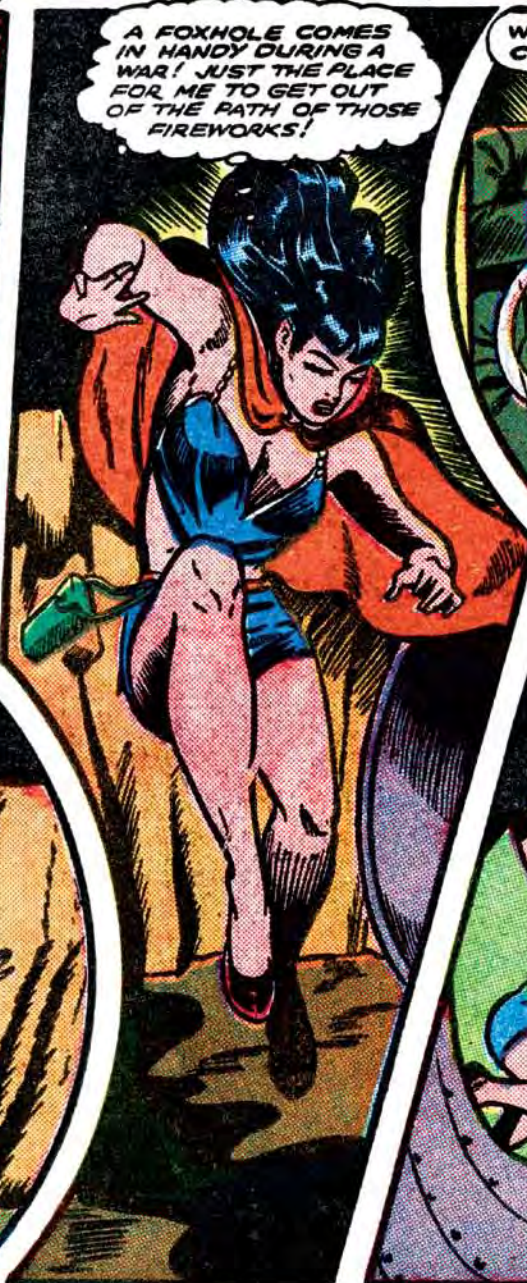
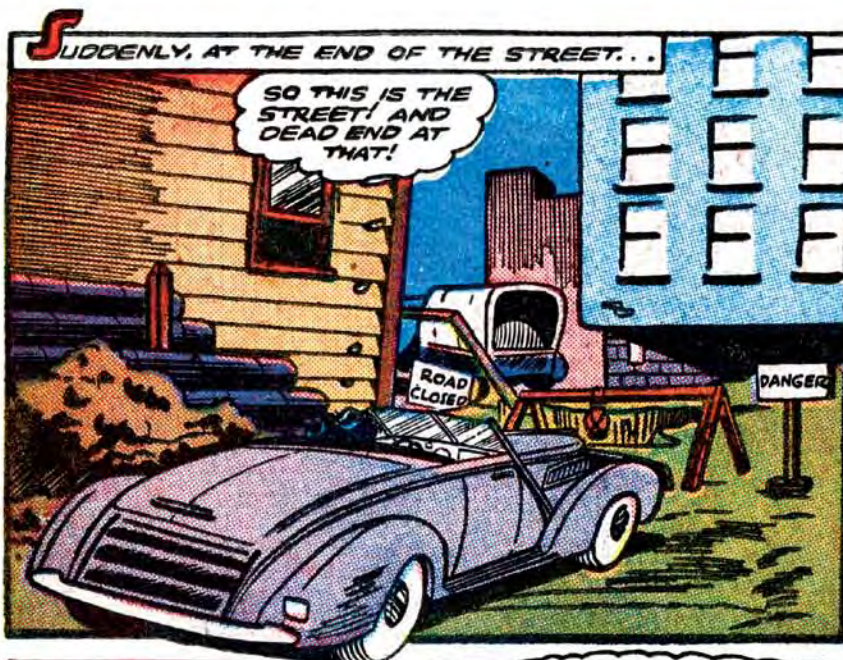
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FEATURED IN THIS ISSUE

The Case of "IRENE SHROEDER"
"A TRUE CRIME STORY!"

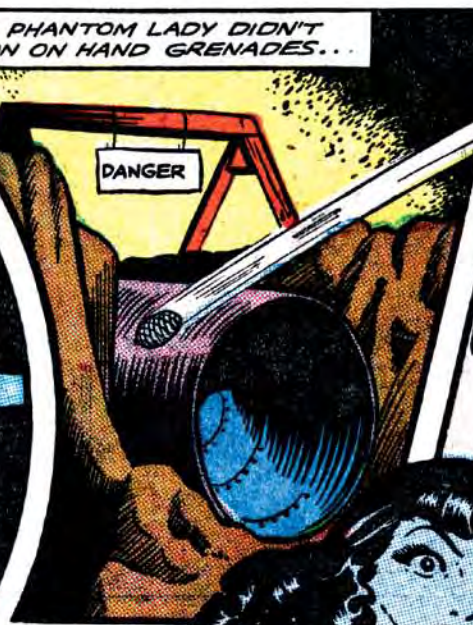
NARRATED BY PHANTOM LADY





THIS IS MORE LIKE IT! THOSE BULLETS CAN'T GET IN HERE!

BUT PHANTOM LADY DIDN'T RECKON ON HAND GRENADES...



A CAVE-IN! I'M TRAPPED! GOT TO KEEP GOING FORWARD! BUT WHERE?



LIGH!
SEWER
RATS!



I'LL JUST FOLLOW MISTER RAT... MAYBE HE KNOWS A WAY OUT OF THIS IRON LUNG!



WELL, HOW DO YOU LIKE THAT. A BASEMENT! LOOKS LIKE A LOFT BUILDING!

4-7-7819

PHANTOM Lady



AUG

10¢

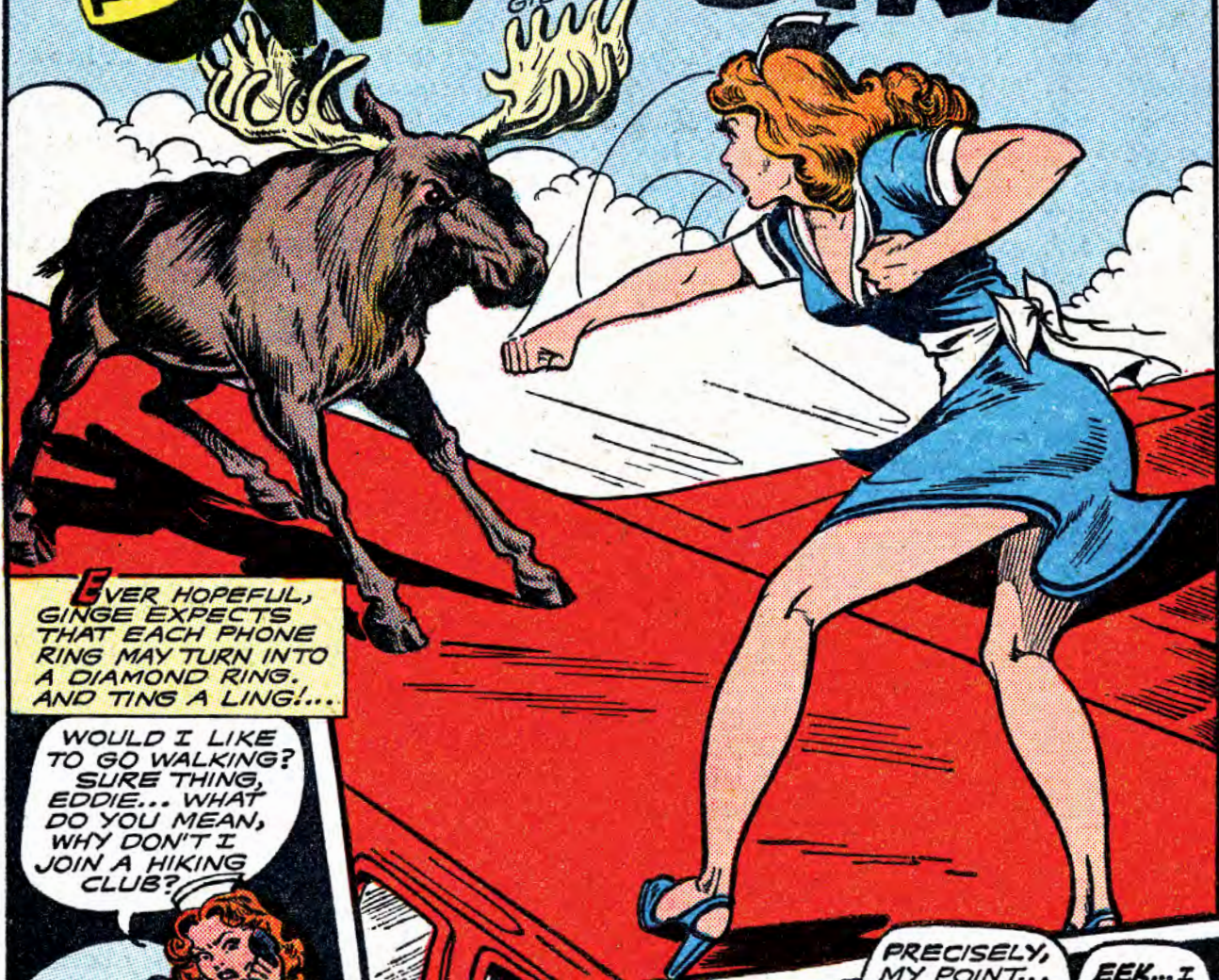
PHANTOM LADY

CRIME
NEVER
PAYS!

This issue
PHANTOM Lady
IN "SUDDEN DEATH!"
"CASE of the MURDEROUS MODEL!"
AND A TRUE CRIME STORY
NARRATED BY THE PHANTOM LADY.
Peter Ironadway Cleveland's
"BRUTAL KILLER!"

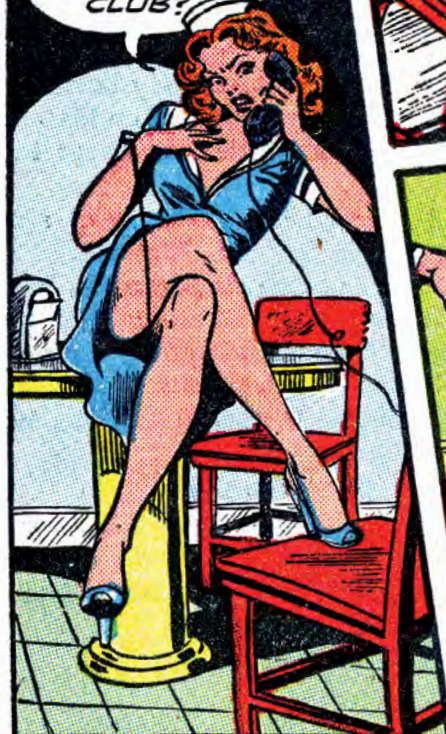
SKY GIRL

BY
BILL
GIBSON

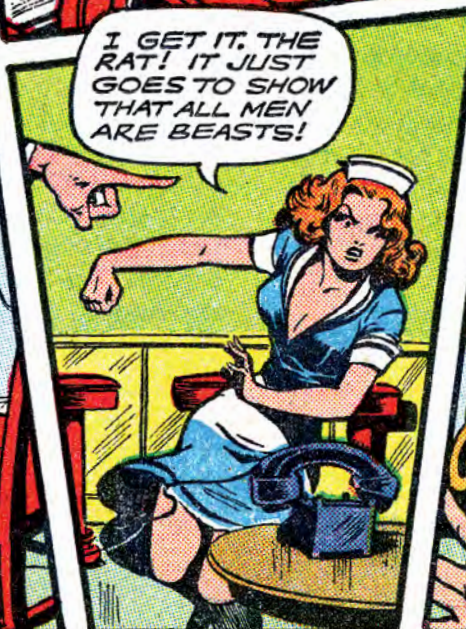


EVER HOPEFUL,
GINGE EXPECTS
THAT EACH PHONE
RING MAY TURN INTO
A DIAMOND RING.
AND TING A LING!...

WOULD I LIKE
TO GO WALKING?
SURE THING,
EDDIE... WHAT
DO YOU MEAN,
WHY DON'T I
JOIN A HIKING
CLUB?

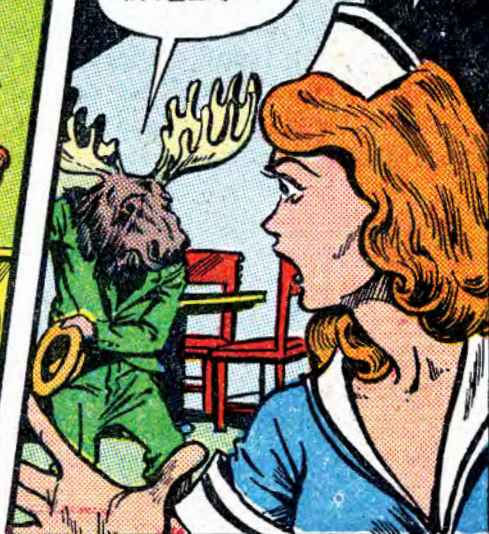


I GET IT, THE
RAT! IT JUST
GOES TO SHOW
THAT ALL MEN
ARE BEASTS!



PRECISELY,
MY POINT...
OR PERHAPS,
I SHOULD
SAY, MY
ANTLERS.

EEK... I
MEAN
ELK!



DEDICATION

To Joan Schenkar, whose journalistic integrity, sage advice, and friendship has guided me through many projects.

And to Jim Vadeboncoeur Jr., whose many years of tireless research and analysis are the foundation on which this book was built.



MATT BAKER

The Art of Glamour



edited by
Jim Amash and Eric Nolen-Weathington

designed by
Eric Nolen-Weathington

text by
Jim Amash • Michael Ambrose
Alberto Becattini • Shaun Clancy
Dan O'Brien • Ken Quattro • Steven Rowe
Jim Vadeboncoeur Jr. and VW Inc.
Joanna van Ritbergen

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PART ONE: *Meet Matt Baker*

BAKER OF CHEESECAKE

AN APPRECIATION OF MATT BAKER, GOOD GIRL ARTIST SUPREME

by Alberto Becattini

This is an extended, mended version of the essay which originally appeared in Alter Ego #47 (April 2005). My aim was to put some order in what had been hitherto written about Baker, scattered here and there, often incorrectly, as well as making my own points about his works. The result is a sort of cavalcade through three decades, along which I have deliberately taken the liberty of writing about people and facts connected to Baker that I thought deserved some attention too. Whereas I've triple-checked each and every piece of information, errors and omissions are still possible, so I expect feedback from whoever can provide further data. For helping me build up the present essay I must primarily thank Jim Vadeboncoeur Jr. for his enlightening insights, and Jim Amash for his invaluable tips. I am also grateful to all those who provided information, either directly or indirectly: Jim Amash, Lee Ames, Jerry Bails, John Benson, the Baker family, Bill Black, Shaun Clancy, Bill Devine, Jay Disbrow, Steve Duin, Michael Feldman, Al Feldstein, Jeff Gelb, Stephen H. Gentner, Frank Giusto, Bob Lubbers, Michelle Nolan, Ken Quattro, Mike Richardson, Joanna van Ritbergen, Antonio Vianovi, Hames Ware, Steve Whitaker, and Les Zakarin, as well as the late Jerry Iger and Ray Osrin, and—of course—Roy Thomas, for making it happen! —Alberto

BEGINNINGS

Forsyth County, North Carolina, December 10, 1921. It was there and then that one of the most talented artists that ever graced the comics field was born, an African-American kid called Clarence Matthew Baker, who would soon move with his family to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where he did most of his growing up.

Whereas nature had bestowed an outstanding talent on Matt, the rheumatic fever he suffered from as a child left him with a weak heart. One can imagine that Baker's precarious heart condition, preventing him from doing sports or other physical activities, in a way favored his "addiction" to the drawing board, i.e., his career as a comic artist and illustrator. On the other hand, it was that very condition that would eventually (much too soon, in fact) steal him from his family and friends, as well as from all those who admired his craftsmanship and who had the privilege to publish his artwork.



This 1944 self-portrait shows Baker around the time his first comics work appeared in print. Courtesy Matthew D. Baker and ©2005 Estate of Matt Baker. Image not be reproduced in any form.

GREENER PASTURES

Shortly after finishing high school, around 1940, Baker left Pittsburgh and went to Washington, where he apparently found a job with one of the government agencies. His ambition was to draw, though, and as he was not to be drafted due to his heart condition, he soon moved to New York, where he attended art courses at the Cooper Union. Reportedly, his favorite artists included such great magazine illustrators as

Andrew Loomis as well as such prominent comic-book artists like Will Eisner, Reed Crandall, and Lou Fine. Although he never managed to work together with the latter ones, Baker started his comics career at the studio run by the man who had been Eisner's partner, as well as Crandall's and Fine's co-employer, up until late 1939, Samuel Maxwell ("Jerry") Iger (1903–1990). As Iger himself recalled, "[Baker] came to my studio in the early '40s; handsome and nattily dressed, 'looking for a job', as he put it. His only sample was a color sketch of—naturally—a beautiful gal! On the strength of that and a nod from my associate editor Ruth Roche, he was hired as a background artist. ... When given his first script, he showed originality and faithfully executed its story line. His drawing was superb. His women were gorgeous!"¹

Although in *The Iger Comics Kingdom* (1985) Jay Disbrow writes that Baker joined the Iger studio "early in 1946," it is evident that he was already working on staff at the office located at 250 West Broadway in 1944. In fact Baker's earliest documented art appeared in *Jumbo Comics* #69 (November 1944), published by Thurman T. Scott's Fiction House, which was Iger's best client from 1938–53.

THE EARLY IGER YEARS

As other "comic shops" of the time, the Iger Studio provided story and artwork to different comic-book titles issued by different publishers, including Crown, Fiction House, Fox, Green, and Gilberton, to name a few. As in other comic shops, art chores on the same story were often shared by different artists, and at the start Baker apparently penciled backgrounds and female characters for other studio staffers. Thus, his earliest efforts are often hidden within somebody else's artwork—namely Alex Blum's and Robert Hayward (Bob) Webb's—mostly in the "Sheena, Queen of the Jungle" stories published by Fiction House in *Jumbo Comics* during 1944–45. Blum—a former painter/muralist who was twice Baker's age, having been born in 1889—was kind of the dean at the Iger Studio. Acting as an art director during the early 1940s, Blum was an early inspiration for Baker, who also occasionally teamed with him on "Wambi the Jungle Boy," which appeared in *Jungle Comics*.

In fact, Baker's apprenticeship did not last long. By mid-1944 he was able to stand on his own feet and had become the resident artist on "Sky Girl," a regular feature in Fiction House's *Jumbo Comics*. Script-wise, "Sky Girl" was attributed to "Bill Gibson," one of the many bylines used at the Iger Studio behind which hid different writers, including Iger himself. The titular character, whose real name was Ginger Maguire, was a curvaceous, red-haired Irish girl (reportedly based on actress Ann Sheridan) whose early, semi-serious adventures took place mostly in the Pacific theater, where she acted as a ferry pilot, often helping out Air Force aviators on missions against the Japanese.

The evolution of Baker's style from his early phase to a more personal post-war approach somewhat paralleled the



A sample of Baker's "Sky Girl" work from 1945.

evolution of "Sky Girl." The splash-page caption to the "Sky Girl" story in *Jumbo* #87 (May 1946) read: "They mustered Ginger Maguire out of uniform, but they couldn't muster her away from flying... Yet the nearest she can get to flying now is an airfield cafeteria, serving mustard to the better class of pilots!" With Ginger demoted and working as a waitress, the strip now decidedly veered towards comedy. Ever wishing she could go back to her previous pilot status, Ginger did manage to fly again, yet she was more often seen hanging from planes' wings rather than holding the control stick, in a whole series of predicaments whose ill-concealed purpose was to allow Baker to highlight the girl's long legs, regularly uncovered by pitiless turbulence to the delight of male readers.

Ginger's legs were the real plus in these stories. Baker drew them from every conceivable angle, in positions that were often ungainly. Deliberately so. In fact, Baker was the first comic artist who had the courage to draw a beautiful pair of legs in an unaesthetic if natural way to increase the general humorous effect. Needless to say, he was hugely successful. Baker's last "Sky Girl" story appeared in the August 1948 issue of *Jumbo*.

THE IGER SHOP

by Jim Vadeboncoeur Jr.

William Eisner and Samuel Maxwell “Jerry” Iger’s first comic book collaboration began in earnest in *Wow: What a Magazine!*, published by Henle Publications and lasting four issues from May 1936 to November 1936. If one considers this to be the beginnings of the Eisner-Iger Shop, then it has the distinction of being the first company to mass-produce comic-book art (Harry A Chesler’s Shop would start functioning in February 1937). Eisner was the creative director of the two, and Iger the business manager (though Iger also did some cartooning as seen in *Wow*). They began providing comic material to foreign markets and soon other New York-based comic publishing houses accounts, including Quality Comics in 1937, Fiction House in 1938, and Fox in 1939.

The prime years for the Eisner-Iger enterprise would be the pre-World War II years. When Eisner departed in December 1939 to pursue independent projects (continuing his *Spirit* feature, as well as strips for Quality) he took along much of the shop’s top talent. And though Iger still had a number of talented artists, the war left him with a much scaled down shop that from circa 1944 on would take on a more assembly line approach.

Iger lost the Fox outlet soon after Eisner left. Shop work was being phased out at Quality as owner Everett Arnold hired away many of Iger’s better artists. The shop’s main outlet through the ‘40s and the early ‘50s were Fiction House titles, for which Iger is listed as art director; *Classics Illustrated*, which allowed Matt Baker and other artists rare bylines; and the multitude of companies published by Robert Farrell. Canada’s Superior Comics was one of the shop’s last venues in the American comic book market, although the shop continued to produce material for the foreign markets until possibly the early ‘60s.

IGER STUDIO MEMORIES

“Sky Girl,” as well as other features Baker drew at Iger’s from 1945–47, were often inked by Al Feldstein, who kindly provided an interesting insight to his and Baker’s Iger Studio days:

“When I was discharged from the Air Force in 1945 after World War II, I returned to the S. M. Iger Studio (where I had worked prior to being called up for service), and Jerry Iger immediately offered me a job. My drawing board was located right next to Matt Baker’s... and it might have afforded me an opportunity to get to know the guy... but that was not to be the case. Matt was a very withdrawn, quiet type. He rarely participated in the banter and joking that went on in the large room that housed the Iger artists. Although he was friendly when approached, Matt shyly kept to himself. Most of us brought bagged lunches or went out to local diners in small groups for our lunch breaks. I do not ever remember having lunch with Matt Baker. He would go off on his own and literally disappear.



“Tiger Girl” splash panel from *Fight Comics* #39 (August 1945).

“Part of Matt’s problem, I feel, in retrospect, was due to a basic and despicable problem prevalent in America during the early post-war period—racial bias and racial inequality! Matt was a black man. He was a rare phenomenon in an industry almost totally dominated by white males. However, he was extremely talented, and it was his talent that overcame any resistance to his presence based on racial bias. But I feel that Matt, personally, was acutely aware of the perceived chasm that separated him from the rest of us. And it may be that because of that perceived problem there is little known about Matt Baker, aside from his stunning artwork that speaks for himself.

“It must be said to his credit that if Jerry Iger suffered from any innate racial bias, he was smart enough as a business man to bury it... to hire Matt... and to give him the opportunity his immense talent so richly deserved. And what a talent Matt had! He could draw women... white women!... like nobody else. With my board next to his, I could observe his pencils and his inking... and learn from it... absorbing it like a sponge. I was also privileged to be given the opportunity to ink Matt’s pencils on countless stories, which afforded me a priceless art education and further influenced my own style of drawing women... which I came to use successfully in my ‘headlight’ teenage comics for Fox Publications: *Junior*, *Sunny*, and *Corliss Archer*. Not long after I had accepted the job at Jerry Iger’s, I decided to freelance... and so I left the S. M. Iger Studio... and Matt Baker... and his influence. But I will always remember him and his silent and withdrawn immense talent.”²

MORE JUNGLE GIRLS

For a while Baker teamed up with Alex Blum on another jungle girl strip, "Tiger Girl," which regularly appeared in Fiction House's *Fight Comics*. At about the same time Baker took over "Sky Girl" in *Jumbo*, "Tiger Girl" became another regular assignment of his, and such it would remain until early 1948. Baker's style greatly progressed during his three-and-a-half-year tenure on the jungle strip. In the first few "Tiger Girl" stories he drew, his depiction of wild animals was not on a par with his already proficient treatment of the human figure. Aided by a turbaned Hindu named Abdola, the statuesque blonde was very much an alternative version of Sheena, although she differed from the Queen of the Jungle in at least two ways: she derived her exceptional strength from a magic amulet (which she would often lose), and—more importantly—she spoke in an impressive Shakespearean idiom ("Tis done! Now must we speed to Danbessi, and speed as the wind, for there lies the danger!" is how she would address her pet tiger, Togara). Bylined "Allan O'Hara," "Tiger Girl" was one of the few Iger Studio strips Baker occasionally managed to sign (e.g., in *Fight Comics* #39, August 1945, and #43, April 1946).

Yet another Sheena clone the Iger Studio developed for Fiction House was "Camilla," who starred in *Jungle Comics*, written mainly by Ruth Ann Roche (1921–1983). "Camilla" started out in 1940 as a Viking queen/She-type with a lost kingdom. In *Jungle* #27 (March 1942) she morphed into the zebra-skin jungle girl that Baker would draw so well. The beautiful Queen of the Jungle Empire, who had a blond mane rather than blond hair, was accompanied by her canine friend, Fang, and "Mayombal" (whatever it meant) was her favorite exclamation. Her idiom was similar to Tiger Girl's in that it sounded very lofty and theatrical—which probably justified the "Victor Ibsen" byline. Baker drew her in *Jungle Comics* #69 (September 1945), but—as we shall see—would later have a longer stint on the character.

BAKER THE UBIQUITOUS

Although "Sky Girl" and "Tiger Girl" represented Baker's main efforts for Fiction House, he worked on several other characters and series for T. T. Scott's publishing house while



A "Tiger Girl" page from *Fight Comics* #50 (June 1947).

at Iger's. For *Wings Comics*, during 1944–45, he drew "The Skull Squad" ("by Ace Atkins"), telling the adventures of a RAF team formed by Jimmy Jones (an American), Sandy McGregor (a Scotsman), and Kent Douglas (an Englishman). For *Fight Comics*, in 1946–48, Baker depicted the boxing feats of "Kayo Kirby" (bylined "Chuck Walker," albeit its actual writer was Ruth Roche).

Although the aforementioned strips regularly featured charming female characters alongside their respective male

ST. JOHN PUBLISHING

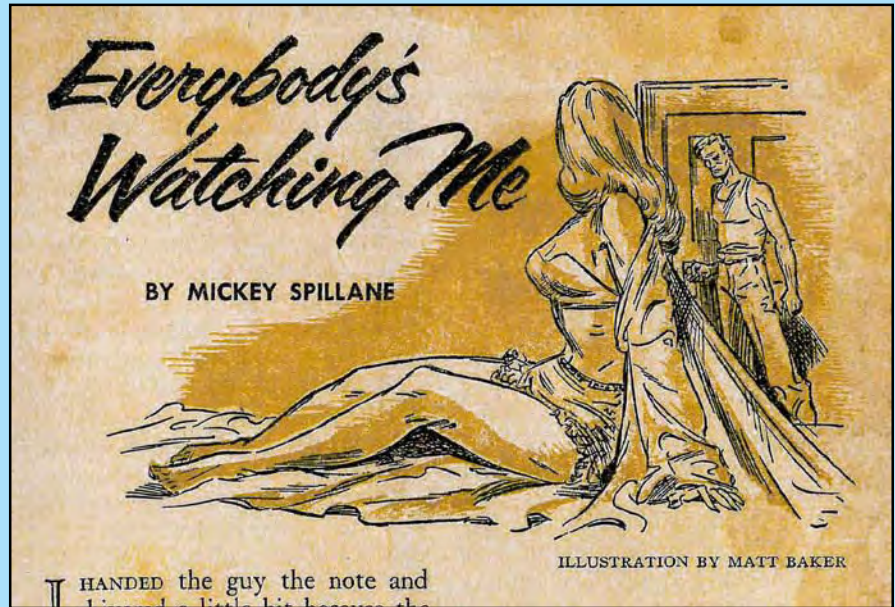
by Ken Quattro

With the end of WWII, like many potential entrepreneurs drawn by the sudden availability of paper and a cheap entry into publishing, Archer St. John published *Comics Revue* #1. Although undated, it is speculated that this debuted sometime in 1947 and was comprised of reprinted *Ella Cinder* comic strips. Several strip reprint comics followed until the publication of *Mighty Mouse* #5, with a cover date of August 1947. Acquiring the Terrytoons license and numbering from Timely resulted in St. John's first comic containing new material. While moonlighting animators from Terrytoons supplied the artwork for those properties, it was evident that he would also need his own artists to expand his line further. Along with the team of Joe Kubert and Norman Maurer, Matt Baker would soon form part of a potent creative triumvirate for St. John.

In early 1950, St. John purchased *Magazine Digest* as the publisher sought to expand his company beyond comic books. St. John was attempting to move his publications onto the more adult portion of the newsstand. Like so many of his business decisions, though, this plan failed.

By 1953 the meteoric 3-D movie fad had captured the attention of the American public. Inspired and hoping to jump on the bandwagon, Joe Kubert, Norman Maurer, and Norman's brother, Leon, developed a process by which they could add an apparent third dimension to normal comic artwork. Archer St. John formed a partnership with Kubert and the Maurers to license the process to other publishers and poured considerable money into purchasing the special paper required for its printing. The first issue was officially entitled *Three Dimension Comics*, but was essentially just another *Mighty Mouse* comic. Priced at 25 cents, it sold over 1,200,000 copies. Overjoyed, St. John ordered that his entire comic line be converted to 3-D, but it very quickly became obvious that the success of the first comic wouldn't be duplicated.

A number of other publishers had rushed their own 3-D comics onto the stands, diluting the novelty of the original. Then, William Gaines of EC Publishing instigated a copyright infringement lawsuit against St. John and all other publishers of 3-D comics. It seems Gaines had purchased the rights to an old copyright that was similar to St. John's 3-D process. Even though Gaines' suit was apparently dismissed, the damage was done. St. John,



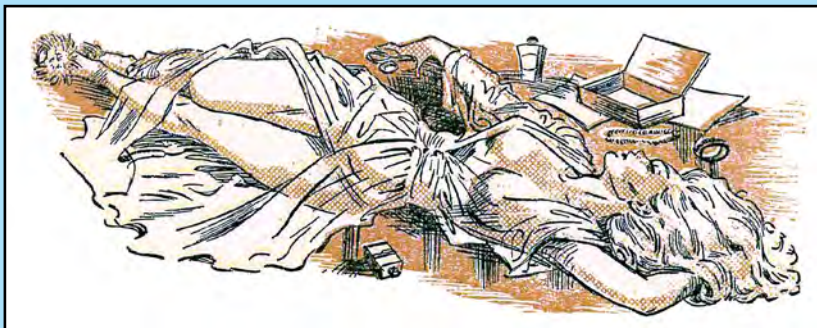
(above and below) Illustrations from *Manhunt* #1.

who was stuck with a warehouse filled with unusable paper, was financially devastated.

But he wasn't done yet. St. John was already taking his publishing company in a lucrative new direction. The digest-sized crime magazine, *Manhunt* debuted with a January 1953 cover date, and the sole artist of each text illustration was Matt Baker. This was a new Baker: looser lines, more realistic. And more adult. Baker's artwork was growing up and out of comic books. Comic books would still be part of St. John, but a smaller part. St. John was transitioning into a magazine publisher.

Manhunt spawned several other detective and Western digests, but none approached the success of the first title. Then came the scandal magazine, *Secret Life*, a tepid effort in an overcrowded field. The final step and likeliest biggest financial gamble came when St. John premiered the men's magazine *Nugget*, cover-dated November 1955. A clone of the phenomenally popular *Playboy*, *Nugget*'s premiere issue contained several Baker illustrations, including a full page of nudes. His dream of becoming an illustrator was finally achieved, but fate was about to deal him a bad hand.

On August 13, 1955, Archer St. John was found dead in the apartment of a female friend, apparently from an overdose of sleeping pills. The company was now in the hands of St. John's young son, Michael, and most of the decisions were turned over to others. Under the guidance of general manager Richard E. Decker, the company acquired the use of Alfred Hitchcock's name in 1956 and published the director's eponymous mystery magazine for a year before Decker bought the title from St. John and published it himself. Meanwhile, the comic book division became a shadow of its former self, with most of the content consisting of reprinted material or the pedestrian product of Al Fago's shop. It was a weak and quiet end when St. John ceased publishing comic books late in 1957.



THE MATT BAKER CHECKLIST

AN ANNOTATED INDEX OF MATT BAKER'S PROFESSIONAL WORK

by Alberto Becattini
and Jim Vadeboncoeur Jr.

[AUTHORS' NOTE: Although in compiling this index we have tried to leave out all the stories we have found out not to have been drawn by Matt Baker, there still are a few question marks and, we're sure, some blanks. Nevertheless, the present list is the most complete so far, thanks mostly to Jim Vadeboncoeur Jr. and to his unparalleled expertise. Thanks, also, to the late great Jerry Bails, to Ger Apeldoorn, John Benson, the Grand Comics Database, Bill Black, Shaun Clancy, Phil Stephensen-Payne, the Mad Peck, Joanna van Ritbergen, Antonio Vianovi, and Hames Ware who have, in different ways, made it possible — A.B., J.V.]

A) COMIC BOOKS AND COMIC MAGAZINES — ORIGINAL EDITIONS AND REPRINTS [R]

Note: Although a good deal of the stories Baker drew were not inked by him, inkers are only listed when known to have worked on specific series or issues.

ALARMING TALES (Harvey)

- 5 (9/1958) "Half Man--Half What?" (5) [inks: Al Williamson]

ALL-FAMOUS POLICE CASES (Star Publications)

- 6 (2/1952) [Title?] [pencils only]
7 (4/1952) "Death Is Its Only Reward" (6) [pencils only]

ALL-PICTURE ADVENTURE (St. John)

[NOTE: This is a 100-page rebound collection of three coverless regular 10¢ comics. Contents vary]

- 1 (10/1952) Cover; [Titles?] [R *Fightin' Marines*]



ALL-PICTURE ADVENTURES (St. John)

[NOTE: This is a 100-page rebound collection of three coverless regular 10¢ comics. Contents vary]

- 2 (11/1952) [Titles?] [R]

ALL-PICTURE ALL-TRUE LOVE STORY (St. John)

[NOTE: These are 100-page rebound collections of three coverless regular 10¢ comics. Contents vary]

- 1 (10/1952) Cover; Canteen Kate [Titles?] [R *Canteen Kate*]
2 (11/1952) Cover; "Off Duty and Out of Bounds" (9) [R *Wartime Romances* #2]; "No Rules for Me" (7) [R *Wartime Romances* #2]; "I Had to Pay the Piper" (8) [R *Wartime Romances* #2]; "I Was a Medal Chaser" (8) [R *Wartime Romances* #2]

ALL-PICTURE COMEDY CARNIVAL (St. John)

[NOTE: These are 100-page rebound collections of three coverless regular 10¢ comics. Contents vary]

- 1 (10/1952) "Love or Money" (10) [R *Teen-Age Romances* #27]

ALL-TOP COMICS (Fox Features)

- 9 (1/1948) Phantom Lady: "The Killer Clown!" (7) [with John Forte and Iger Shop]
10 (3/1948) Phantom Lady: "The Television Spies" (7) [Baker and/or Iger Shop]
11 (5/1948) Phantom Lady: "The Case of the Swindling Eye" (7) [Baker and/or Iger Shop]
12 (7/1948) Phantom Lady: "The Subway Slayer!" (7) [with Jack Kamen and Iger Shop]
13 (9/1948) Phantom Lady: "The Fire Fiend!" (7)
14 (11/1948) Phantom Lady: "The Copy-Cat Killers" (9) [Baker and/or Iger Shop]
16 (3/1949) Phantom Lady: "The Man Who Lost His Stuff" (7) [Baker and/or Iger Shop]
17 (5/1949) Phantom Lady: "The Mystery of the Monkey Cult" (7) [Baker and/or Iger Shop]

ALL-TRUE ALL PICTURE POLICE CASES (St. John)

- 1 (10/1952) [Titles?] [R *Authentic Police Cases*]
2 (11/1952) Cover; [Titles?] [R *Authentic Police Cases*]

ALMANAC OF CRIME (Fox Features)

- nn [1] (1948) Phantom Lady: "Wine, Women and Sudden Death!" (10) [Baker and/or Iger Shop — R *Phantom Lady* #19]; Phantom Lady: "The Case of the Murderous Model!" (10) [Baker and/or Iger Shop — R *Phantom Lady* #19]

ALTER EGO (TwoMorrows)

- V3#21 (2/2003) Cover R [Seven Seas Comics #5]; Selected comic-book pages and panels [R *Jerry Iger's Famous Features* #1, *Vooda* #22]; Two *Flamingo* promotional drawings



- 9 (9/1951) Cover [signed]; "Dishonest Love" (8); "Double-Purpose Date" (1); "The Road to Ruin" (9½) [R "I Threw Away My Reputation on a Worthless Love" from *Pictorial Confessions* #1 with title change]
- 10 (11/1951) Cover [signed]; "I Was 'The Other Woman'" (9); "I Bought Favors with Kisses" (10) [R "I Took the Road to Stardom Via Love" from *Hollywood Confessions* #2 with title change]; "Dishonest Maid of Honor" (4) [R "Hope Chest Calamity" from *Pictorial Confessions* #2 with title change]; "I Wanted New Experiences" (7½) [R "Two-Timing Taught Me to Love" from *Pictorial Confessions* #1 with title change]
- 11 (1/1952) Cover [signed]; "The Worst Mistake a Wife Can Make" (11); "Crazy for Love" (6) [R "I Liked Older Men" from *Teen-Age Diary Secrets* #5 with title change]; "Playgirl at Work" (7) [R "They Caught Me Cheating at Love" from *Pictorial Confessions* #3 with title change]
- 12 (3/1952) Cover [signed]; "Love Urchin" (8); "Turbulent Love" (10) [Splash page only by Baker, rest by Chuck Miller?]; "Party Wife" (6)
- 13 (5/1952) Cover; "Truant Wife" (8) [pen-

- cils only]; "They Said I Was a Bad Influence" (7) [R *Teen-Age Diary Secrets* #7 – Originally in digest size, relaid out for standard page size]
- 14 (7/1952) Cover; "Decoy Girl" (7) [Baker?]
- 15 (9/1952) Cover; "Twice Guilty" (9)
- 16 (11/1952) Cover; "Love Me... Love My Boss" (7); "Too Impatient for Love" (5) [inks: "Tal"?]; "Coal Town Girl" (5)
- 17 (1/1953) Cover; "Sharecropper's Daughter" (8); "Strange Relationship" (8); "Love Demon" (7); "They Caught Me Cheating at Love" (7) [R *Pictorial Confessions* #3]; "I Played at Love" (8) [R *Pictorial Confessions* #3]; "Black-Balled" (7) [inks: Ray Osrin]
- 18 (3/1953) Cover; "My Hidden Past" (17); "A Will of My Own" (8); "I Loved a Goddess" (8)
- 19 (5/1953) Cover; "Elopement Hid Our Sins" (16) [inks: Mike Peppe?]; "I Was a Toy of Love" (12) [NOTE: Variant edition with contents of *Wartime Romances* #10, 11 and *Pictorial Romances* #10 exists]
- 20 (7/1953) Cover; "Roadhouse Sparrow" (16) [Baker and/or Ric Estrada?]
- 21 (9/1953) Cover; "A Lesson for Bored Wives" (7)

- 22 (11/1953) Cover; "What My Husband Didn't Know" (10)
- 23 (1/1954) Cover; "Menace to Marriage" (16) [inks: Mike Peppe?]; "Love-Starved" [text story with Baker illustrations]
- 24 (3/1954) Cover; "I Hired a Gigolo" (8)

PICTURE NOVELS (St. John)

- nn (1950) Cover [inks: Ray Osrin]; "It Rhymes with Lust" (126) [inks: Ray Osrin]; Back Cover [inks: Ray Osrin]

PLANET COMICS (Fiction House)

- 53 (3/1948) *Mysta of the Moon*: [Alone in the Mist-Shrouded Moon Lab, Bron Heard...] (8)
- 54 (5/1948) *Mysta of the Moon*: ["That Mighty Bulwark – the Science Council..."] (8)
- 55 (7/1948) *Mysta of the Moon*: ["Shakeup in the Safety Council! Rip Out the..."] (8)
- 56 (9/1948) *Mysta of the Moon*: ["Warning! Safety Council Take Heed! Mysterious Blips..."] (5)
- 57 (11/1948) *Mysta of the Moon*: ["Notice! Changeling Mutants from Planets of Outer Void"] (7½)

PART TWO: *Family*

THE TALENT RUNS DEEP

AN INTERVIEW WITH MATT D. BAKER AND FRED ROBINSON

Interview conducted in 2004 by Jim Amash
Transcribed by Tom Wimbish

The Matt Baker story has always been a short and sweet one, but that was due to the lack of biographical information and not because of the material that he created. Matt Baker was a prodigious worker who was almost always at the top of his game, and while his countless admirers (pros and fans alike) may have been frustrated at the lack of insight into his life, they have rarely been disappointed by the quality of his work.

Matt Baker is one of the most historically important comic book artists ever—not just because he was one of the earliest African-Americans to break through into the comic book industry, though that was a significant achievement, considering the times in which he worked. Baker is just as important because of his drawing style. He didn't just illustrate a story—he kept the action moving at a brisk pace with varying camera angles, compelling compositions, and expressive body positioning. And he drew the sexiest women in comics! “The Matt Baker Girl,” once seen, is not easily forgotten, as evidenced by the many reprintings of his Phantom Lady covers, among other examples—and not just by Dr. Frederic Wertham.

It is my pleasure and honor to present an interview with Matt Baker's half-brother Fred Robinson, and Matt's nephew Matt D. Baker, which originally ran in Alter Ego Vol. 3, #47. Between the two of them, we get a good look into not just Matt Baker, but the Baker/Robinson family itself. Strong, proud, and successful people, raised by their remarkable mother Ethel, the family history of the Baker/Robinson sons makes a compelling story. All photos accompanying this article are ©2005 Fred Robinson and/or Matthew D. Baker and may not be reproduced in any form. —Jim.

JIM AMASH: Matt, since you have your grandmother's family Bible with you, let's start out with some information about your family.

MATT D. BAKER: My Uncle Matt Baker, whose full name was Clarence Matthew Baker, was born on December 10, 1921, in Forsyth County, North Carolina, and died on August 11, 1959, in New York City. My Uncle John Franklin Baker [Matt's older brother] was born in Forsyth County on November 16, 1919, and died in 1980. My dad, Charles Robert Baker



Matt Baker's mother, Ethel, in the early 1950s, and his father, Clarence, who died in 1925, four years after Matt was born. Photos may not be reproduced in any form.

[Matt's younger brother], was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, on April 29, 1924, and died on April 17, 2003.

Their mother, Ethel, was born in Kernersville, N.C., on March 15, 1896; she passed away on February 14, 1968. Their father was Clarence Matthew Baker. He went by the name “Clarence,” and was born in Abbott's Creek, N.C., on December 5, 1895. He died on December 15, 1925.

FRED ROBINSON: Matt Baker and I had the same mother; her maiden name was Ethel Viola Lash. I don't know what year she married Matt's father Clarence, who was also known as “Mac.” After Clarence died, I believe she married my father in 1930. I was born June 23, 1938, and I was really a big sur-



(clockwise from left) The Baker boys: John, Robert, and Matt; their half-brother, Fred Robinson; and Matt's nephew—Robert's son—Matt D. Baker. Photos may not be reproduced in any form.

prise, needless to say. My full name is Fredrick Leander Robinson. My father, Matthew Porterfield Robinson, was born in Newberry, South Carolina. When I was a child, he worked in a steel mill in Pittsburgh. He died in 1948.

I was the only child that my parents had together. My father already had a family from a previous marriage when I was born, and they were all much older. There were six boys and one girl that were all living at the time. There was also an older sister to Matt and the brothers, but she died very early, maybe before Matt was born.

MB: That's right. The sister was named Ethel Viola, and she was born in 1918, and died in 1922.

FR: We lived in Pittsburgh, and grew up in the Homewood-Brushton area in the eastern part of the city. The reason we call it that is because those were two main streets—Homewood Avenue and Brushton Avenue—and we lived in between them. They were several blocks apart, but people referred to the area as Homewood-Brushton.

JA: Matt was named after his father, Clarence, but he never went by his first name, did he?

FR: He never used the name Clarence; he always used the initial, "C."

JA: I understand that Matt had rheumatic fever as a child.

FR: Yes, he did. As far as I know, that caused the heart problems he had throughout his life.

JA: Fred, what do you remember about Matt, John, and Robert from your childhood?

FR: Robert and his future wife Cynthia were, for all intents and purposes, together from their youth. You couldn't call it dating; they were only teenagers. I don't think they were even in high school yet, but they called themselves boyfriend and girlfriend. Cynthia lived maybe two houses down from my family. The story goes that when I was born, I kept Cynthia from getting a very bad spanking. She was late coming home from school, and her mother was just getting ready to really light into her for it when she told her mother that she'd better get up to the house because Mrs. Robinson was having her baby. She was lying about that—she had no way of knowing—but it just so happened that it was true. I've always said that I spared her a beating because I arrived on time.

The boys were young when Mac died, and my mother virtually raised them herself. I don't know when she met my father, but they knew each other for a while before they married. I have no idea how they met.

She supported the boys by working as a seamstress. She made and altered clothes, and she was very good at it. She had a little grocery store in Pittsburgh at one time too, and I think she

horn—they all had to move aside, and they were just freaked because I was driving this car. It was a brand new car, because that was a year when comic book sales were at their highest. Matt was doing quite well, so he was able to afford a brand new car.

JA: According to Jerry Bails, Matt Baker seems to have started as an inker at Jerry Iger's shop in 1942, but I think 1944 is probably more accurate, partly because we know he signed his first story then.

FR: That's possible. I don't know what year he left Washington and went to New York, but it's quite possible that it was in the early '40s. I don't know who got him into comics; it might have been Jerry Iger. I remember that name.

JA: I wonder what made him want to get into comics.

FR: Probably money. I think he was working for one of the government agencies in D.C. Tons of blacks moved to Washington, because World War II created plenty of government jobs. That's the reason that today there are more women in

Washington than men: black women in Washington could get jobs, and didn't have to work as domestics. If they knew how to type or file, they could get government jobs. They were lower-echelon jobs, but at least they were able to work.

JA: Do you have any idea if comic books were the first art jobs that Matt had?

FR: My guess would be yes, because I can't think of any other commercial art that he would have gone into. It definitely wasn't advertising—like I did—and it wasn't illustrating for magazines or other art directors, because that didn't happen until the late stages of his career, which wasn't a particularly good time for him. My guess would be that the comic books needed guys who could draw quickly, because they were literally cranking them out. I can remember that even during the year that I lived with him, comics were on the decline, but he would still get three or four stories at a time to draw. I'm sure that he got even more comics work back in the '40s, probably as much as he had time to do. He was able to turn the things out so fast that he was in big demand.

JA: Where did Matt go to school?

FR: He went to the Cooper Union School of Engineering, Art, and Design in New York City. I graduated from there too. Matt went there for a short time, and so did John. I don't know what years they went there, or for how long, but I don't think it was very long. I don't think it was prior to World War II, because they were living in Washington, and they wouldn't have known about Cooper Union until they moved to New York.



Page 4 of "Tugboat Tessie" from Seven Seas Comics #1 (April 1946). Scanned from the original art courtesy of Jeff Singh.



These illustrations from Matt Baker's portfolio show his versatility, with one version done in pen-and-ink and the other done with an ink wash finish. Presumably, they were done during the time Baker was seeking out magazine illustration work in the 1950s. Artwork courtesy of Matt D. Baker and ©2012 Estate of Matt Baker. Images may not be reproduced in any form.

FURTHER RUMINATIONS

AN INTERVIEW WITH MATT BAKER'S BROTHER FRED ROBINSON

Interview conducted October 19, 2009
by Joanna van Ritbergen

JOANNA VAN RITBERGEN: From what I understand, Matt was born in North Carolina then moved to Pittsburgh. Why did the family move to Pittsburgh?

FRED ROBINSON: Why did anybody who was born in the South move north? I don't know. I never went there or to my mother's home. I didn't even know my relatives were in the South. I was born in Pittsburgh, and from there I went to New York. I went there to go to school.

JVR: That must have been a big change for you going to the "big city" from Pittsburgh?

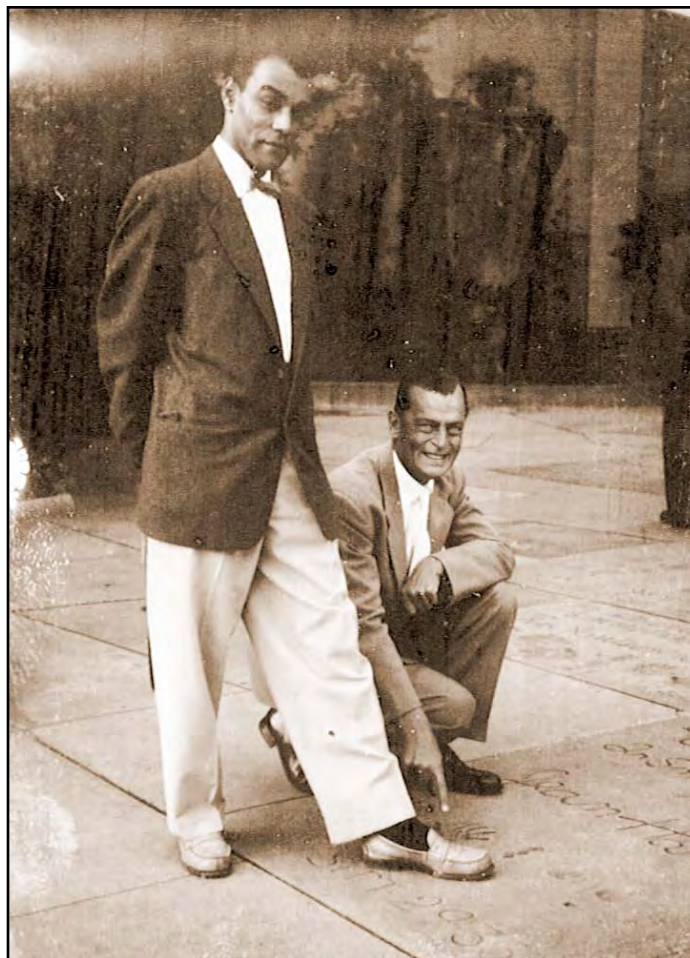
FR: No, [Matt and John] had lived in New York for quite awhile; he and our oldest brother, John, were living there. So, I made quite a few trips there when I was growing up. My mother would go and visit them, and I would go with her, of course. So, New York was almost like a second home to me. By the time I got there, I pretty much felt very at home there.

JVR: Did Matt always live in the same place in New York City?

FR: I can remember basically two places. He lived on 104 E. 116th Street. Then, when I went to New York and lived with him for a year, he was living on 45th Street right down in the heart of Manhattan. I stayed with him for my first year of school when I was going to Cooper Union, which is where he went for a short time also.

JVR: Did he live in a one-bedroom apartment?

FR: Yes, one-bedroom apartment, and I slept on the couch for a whole year. It was great because he was still freelancing and, of course, by that time the era of the comic book was over. So, he was doing illustrations for different folks. As a matter of fact, there was one he illustrated: *It Rhymes with Lust*. I remember quite well when he was working on that. As I look at some of the pictures, I can remember when he was drawing them, and it made it nice because we had drawing boards that faced each other. I was doing my homework when he was sometimes working on this or some other piece of work.



Matt Baker and Archer St. John in front of Grauman's—now Mann's—Chinese Restaurant in Hollywood in the mid-'50s. Courtesy of Fred Robinson and ©2005 Estate of Matt Baker. Photo may not be reproduced in any form.

JVR: When he was working on *It Rhymes with Lust*, did he have a script, and was he coming up with all the illustrations himself?

FR: I'm pretty sure he had a script, and he would pencil them out and then send it in, and then sometimes he did some of the inking and sometimes his friend Ray Osrin [did the inking].

JVR: Did you talk about anything as he was going through the script?

FR: We didn't talk about what he was working on with the script at all. It was mainly about our life together and growing up, and, like I said, there was such a big difference in our age, and he was just filling me in on things that I had missed that the other two brothers had gone through. It was really just filling me in on the history of our family. A lot of times we would go to movies together, and I was of course emulating him as much as I could. I was going to be just like him.

I remember when he worked for [Archer] St. John, and I did meet him one time when I went to New York as a kid. St. John told me that when I graduated from high-school to come and see him, and he would give me a job. He died before that happened.

JVR: What was their relationship like... Matt and St. John?

FR: They had a very close relationship. I don't know exactly what it was.

JVR: It seems like they had a friendship that went beyond the doors of work.

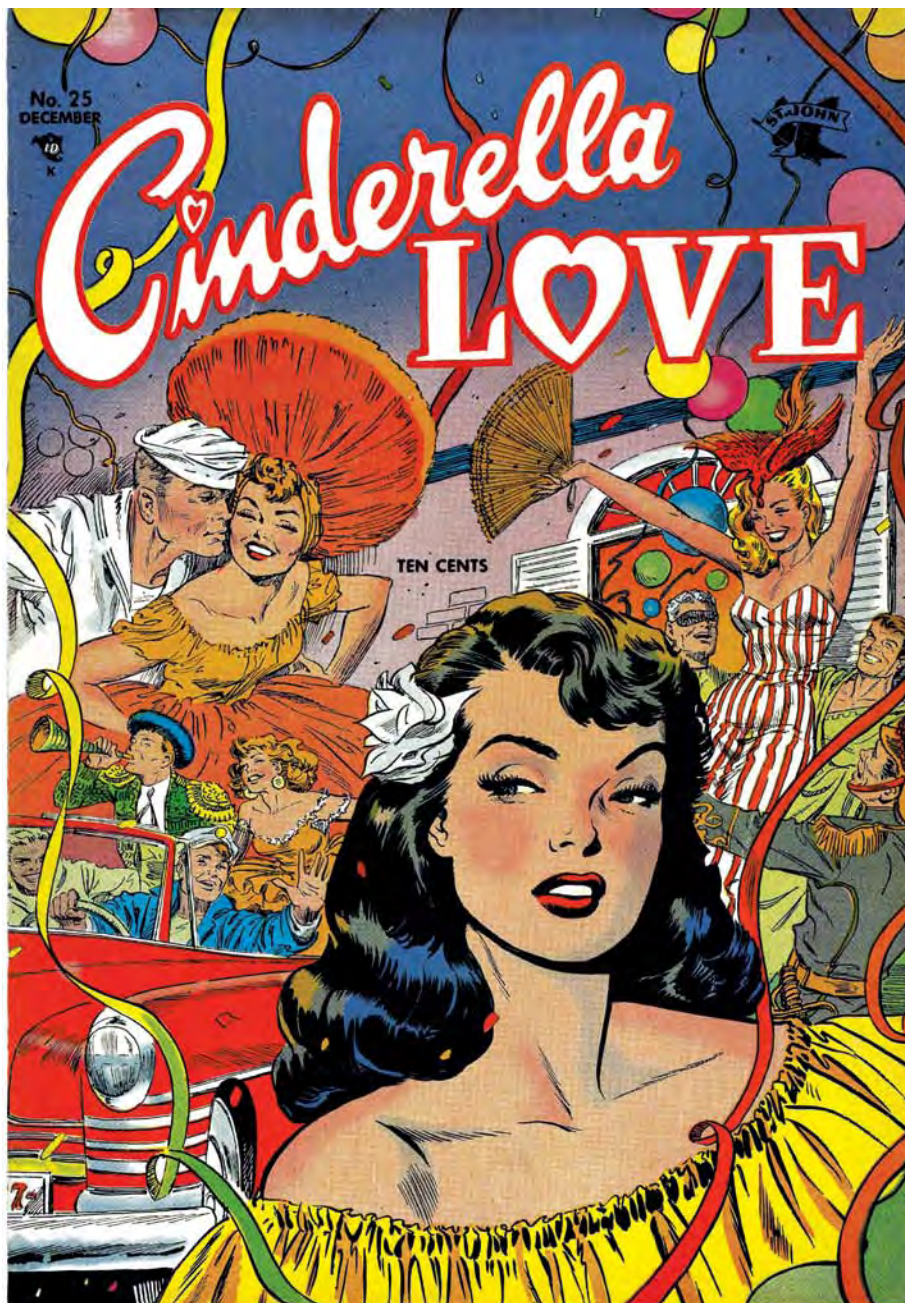
FR: Yes, I believe they did. I know one time they went to California, because one of the pictures I have is in front of [Grauman's—now Mann's—Chinese Theatre] and St. John [and Matt are posing with] somebody's footprint in the sidewalk.

JVR: Do you know the source of inspiration for some of his covers? For instance, *Cinderella Love* #25, considered the "holy grail" of romance books, has this beautiful, exotic woman on the front, and in the background is a carnival. Do you know who he could have modeled this woman after? Were you aware of any particular muses?

FR: No, they usually just came out of his head. He didn't have a movie star in mind; I don't think he modeled them after anyone [in particular]. I would just sit and watch him draw a woman, and whatever position, whether she was laying down, running, standing, sitting, whatever, he could do that.

JVR: It was also his great ability to give them "life," to make them their own individual.

FR: I'm looking at that cover of *Cinderella Love*, and there's a brunette on the cover who reminds me of Dorothy Lamour. There is another one down here that looks more like Madonna than a Marilyn Monroe. Marilyn Monroe to me never



Cover art for St. John's *Cinderella Love* #25 (December 1954).

looked sultry. My brother would make a lot of his women look really sultry. That's why I say a lot of them he would create right out of his head.

JVR: Could you tell me what a typical day would have been like for Matt when you were living with him?

FR: It depended. When he was working, he would virtually work all night sometimes, and then all of the sudden it would catch up with him, and then he would sleep for a week. Sit up and go back to bed. Get up and maybe have dinner and work a little bit, but he would be just too tired, and he'd go back to bed. Then this would pass, and he would start all over again where he could go 24 hours.

JVR: What kinds of things would he draw for fun?

PART THREE: *Friends & Colleagues*

A GREAT FRIENDSHIP

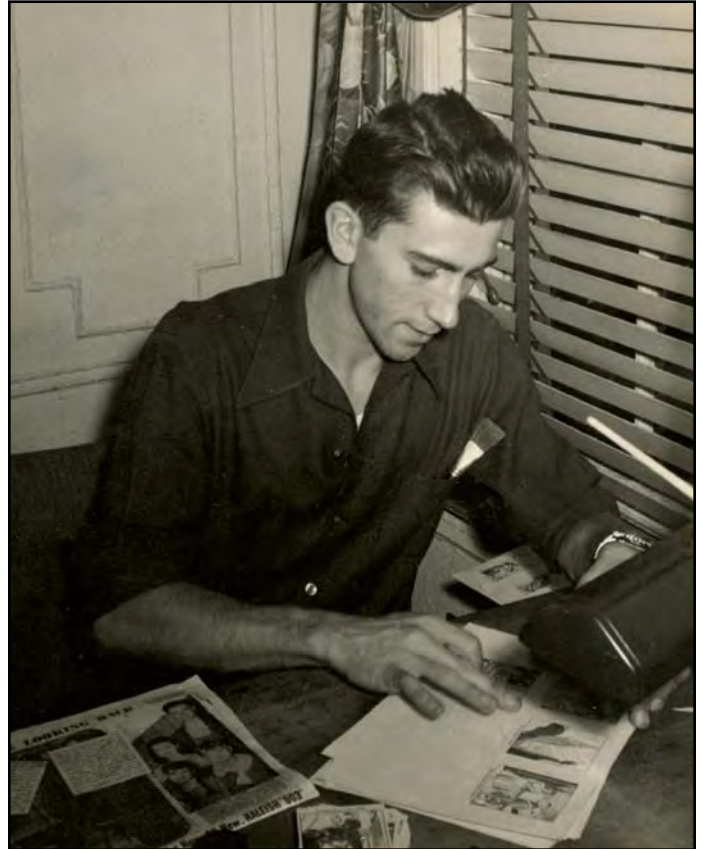
AN INTERVIEW WITH FRIEND AND ARTIST FRANK GIUSTO

Interview conducted in February 2011 by Shaun Clancy

SHAUN CLANCY: Can you tell me how you got into comics?

FRANK GIUSTO: My first job before I went into the Navy was at Jerry Iger's studio, and there was a guy there by the name of Matt Baker. He was a terrific illustrator at the time. I lost track of all those guys, but we had great friendship. When I got out of the service, I looked up Matt. I used to go up to his apartment on 116th Street in Manhattan. We worked together at his apartment for a couple of years actually. He and I were very good friends. In fact, I had asked him to be my best man when I got married. This was in 1951. He turned me down. He was no dummy. He was really sharp. He tells me, "No, as much as I'd love to...." He thought that the relatives and the people that would be coming to the wedding would look down on the fact that he was black. He didn't want to start any animosity, so reluctantly I accepted his turndown. He came to the wedding, of course, and so did his brother and his friend Connie.

I got back into comics [because of] an illustrator by the name of Jo Kotula. He did the covers for *Model Airplane News*, which was a magazine, for about 15 years. He was *the* aviation illustrator and did some fantastic covers. When I got out of the service in 1946, I went up to see him because I had done a cover for a magazine called *Air Trails*. I've always loved airplanes and drawing planes. I managed to get a cover done one time, and I brought it up to his studio in the city. He was so tired of drawing just airplanes, and this guy was really well known. All the agencies at that time that had anything to do with [aircraft] advertising, like Cessna, used his illustrations for their ads and their catalogs. What really impressed me about him was that he took me to a part of his studio and said, "I want you to take a look at this." It was just a beach scene with a couple walking down the beach, and he says, "I've been trying to do this work for the last five years and every time I go to an agency and tell them, 'I'm Jo Kotula,' they always say, 'Oh, you're the aviation artist.'" [laughter] In other words, he was pigeon-holed. As much as he wanted to do illustrations, the only reason he was making a living was because he was an aviation artist. Anyway, he said, "You're good at drawing planes, but you have to learn how to draw



Frank Giusto hard at work in Baker's apartment in 1948.

Courtesy of Frank Giusto.

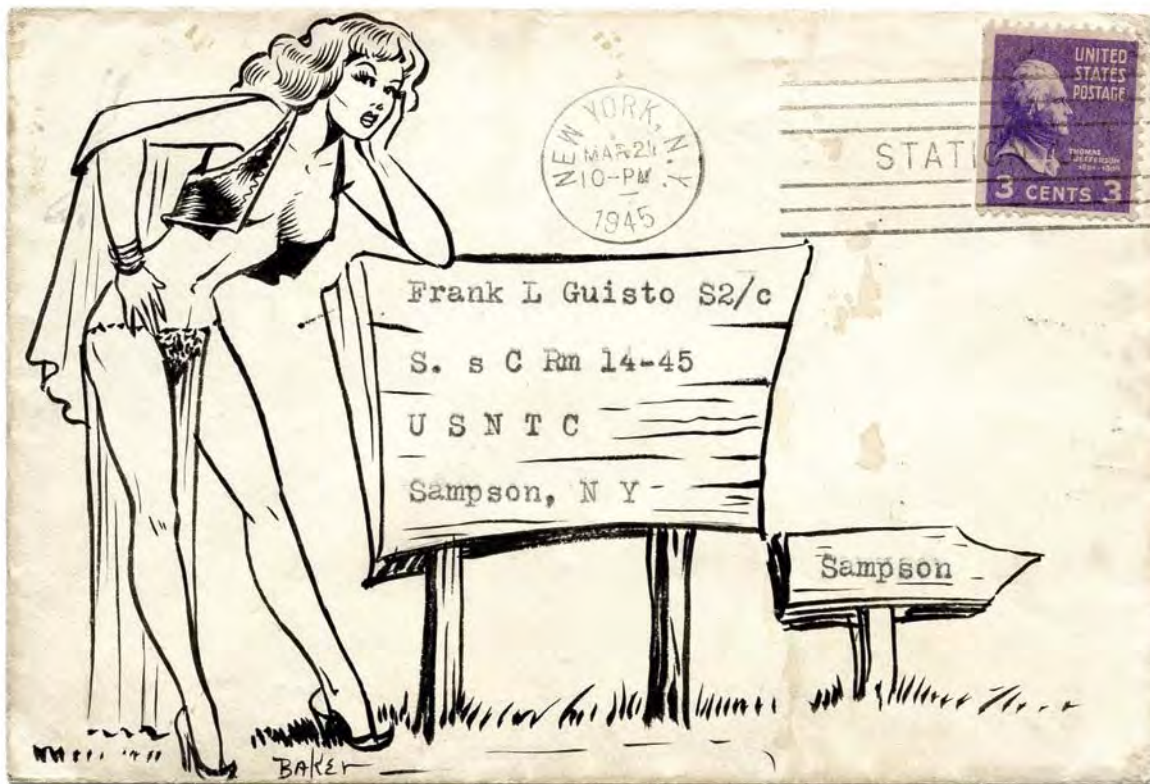
clouds, people, trees, and cars. If I were you, I would get into comics." [laughs]

SC: At Iger's Matt was doing stuff like "Sky Girl," "Tiger Girl"... Jerry Iger said that Matt didn't start at Jerry's studio until 1945 or 1946, but you're telling me you met Matt before World War II? You went into the war late if you were only in it for two years.

FG: Oh yeah. I graduated from high school in 1944, and then that summer I got a job at Jerry Iger's and Matt was already there.

SC: Was he going by Clarence when you met him?

FG: Oh no. It was strictly Matt. He didn't like Clarence so much.



While Giusto was away in the Navy, he and Baker would correspond with one another. Baker's letters always came with illustrations on the envelopes and inside as evidenced by these letters from March 1945 (left) and October 1944 (below). Courtesy of Frank Giusto. Images ©2012 Estate of Matt Baker.

SC: Ruth Roche was the editor and writer at Jerry Iger's and a partner. Do you remember Ruth at all?

FG: No, not really. I graduated in June, and I worked there from July to September. Then I went into the Navy for two years. When I came out, I of course looked up Matt. I freelanced with Matt for about a year and a half to two years. With Matt's help, I got a job doing comics for Ace Publishing. At that time I was able to do my own drawing. I always could draw, but I learned how to draw and ink with Matt. I was doing freelance comics myself, but I don't remember the titles.

SC: Were you Matt's inker?

FG: I used to help him draw some of the panels. We worked together at the apartment. When I got married, I was working for Ace Publishing, and I asked the editor [Al Sulman]... I always wanted to travel, so when I got married in 1951 in June, I planned a trip around the country. My bride and myself went and took a Pontiac I had at the time, took off, and I was on the road. The first stop I made was in Chicago. I figured I'd go to Chicago because if we had an argument while we were on the road it wouldn't be too far to turn back. [laughter] I saw every National Park west of the Mississippi. Every big city. Up in the mountains, down in the desert, and every place. I'd park my butt anywhere along the way and sit down and do a whole story. Pencil it, letter it, ink it, wrap it up, and send it to Ace Publications. Then Ace Publications would send a check to my father in Corona, New York. He would get a bank check, and I'd inform him on where I was going to be on my next stop, and he would mail me





A 1950 Matt Baker portrait of Frank Giusto. Courtesy of Frank Giusto. Image ©2012 Estate of Matt Baker.

jazz groups. One of the things we really loved was Billie Holiday records. She was one of the biggest singers in the 1940s. We'd listen to her records while working. [Note: *Billie Holiday died on July 18, 1959, at the age of 44 of heart failure three weeks before Matt.*] He loved her singing voice and he loved her sad songs.

SC: How about radio shows?

FG: Not so much radio shows. There was a guy by the name of Symphony Sid. He was *the* jazz radio guy and disc jockey. He'd come on at midnight. When I was doing comics at home and not at Matt's place, I would sit down at ten o'clock at night and work through till four in the morning because it was so quiet and no distractions. I was living with my folks, and I got into that routine. I'm still a night person. I don't go to sleep until one or two o'clock in the morning.

SC: Did Matt ever discuss what he wanted to do with his future? Did he want to be an illustrator?

FG: No, not really. Not in the time that we were together. After I got married, we only saw each other occasionally. I was more interested in going into advertising, illustration, and design. I wound up doing a lot of design work like annual reports and folders. That was my *forté*, and I went into that. At the same time, occasionally I would do an illustration here or there for places like *Argosy* magazine or a plane cover for *Air World* magazine.

SC: Did he ever talk about how much he was making?

FG: He was making about \$35–40 a page, but I think it was \$35 a page. I'm not sure. We never really got into that so much, or if we did I can't honestly recall.

SC: Was he getting paid from the publishers and then paying you from that because you were his assistant?

FG: I think there was that type of arrangement, but I'm not 100% sure. I know when I was working for Ace, I was working for them for four or five years at the most and I was getting \$35 a page, but that was with lettering, penciling, and inking included.

SC: Did either you or Matt ever write a script?

FG: No. Never!

SC: Did Matt ever get any fan mail or compliments from his peers?

FG: Not that I recall. Just the fact that he could get work anytime he needed was a testimony of his ability.

SC: I noticed from the original Baker art that I own that Matt used a lot of White Out.

FG: We used Pro White. It came in a small glass jar and was water soluble. White Out wasn't around in those days.

SC: I've also seen paste-ons over his original art to move or hide a figure he had originally drawn. Do you think he would do that often?

FG: I never saw Matt do that, so maybe it was the editor.

SC: Was Matt critical of his own work? Meaning, if he didn't like the way a drawing was going, he'd crumble it up and throw it away?

FG: I never saw him do that. [*laughs*] Everything was pristine and everything went out. With penciling it's not too bad, because you could always erase. The inker could also correct some of the pencils.

SC: Matt had heart trouble. Did you witness that?

FG: Oh, yeah. He had a congenital heart trouble.

SC: Did you ever see him taking any pills?

FG: Not taking pills so much. It's unfortunate, because he lived in a five-story building on 116th Street in Manhattan, and when the elevator was out he climbed the five stories. I always used to say, "Can't you find something a little lower than five floors?" but that was the way it was.

SC: Did Matt ever talk about his own mortality because of his heart issues? Something along the lines of dying young?

FG: No. It never entered his mind. He brushed it aside and did what he had to do. He was good that way. He never dwelled on the fact that he had a bad heart. He was never looking for sympathy.

THE BEST MAN FOR THE JOB

INTERVIEWS AND CORRESPONDENCE WITH RAY OSRIN

by Shaun Clancy

I first called Ray at his home in Florida in late 1997 and wish I could recall what we talked about, but unfortunately I was new at this sort of thing, so I never took notes. I did switch from phone calls to letter writing and created a 20-question sheet that I also mailed to Jack Kamen, Lee Ames, Bob Lubbers, Art Saaf, etc. Ray's health declined rapidly, which slowed down our correspondence and eventually stopped it entirely in January, 2001. Ray passed away in April of 2001 and had affected me in ways I could not describe. Even writing this piece on Ray brings back sad memories, and in 2001 I completely shut down from corresponding with other great comic talents, but did help others from the sidelines. I followed Alter Ego's monthly articles on these great talents and was in awe when Jim Amash (co-editor of this book) came forth with the Matt Baker biography via the remaining relatives in 2005. It wasn't until Joanna van Ritbergen called me in January of 2010 about Matt Baker that I finally started to try and reconnect with people in comics. I now present you with what I have collected over the past 15 years.

We'll start off with excerpts from Dan O'Brien's 1992 interview with Ray Osrin for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, as it covers Ray's career in comics very well. The original interview ventured into Ray's political cartooning career, which has been edited out for the purposes of this book. Dan O'Brien is a political cartoonist himself, and has allowed us to reprint this never before published interview.

INTERVIEW WITH RAY OSRIN

Conducted on March 4, 1992, by Dan O'Brien

DAN O'BRIEN: You can just...

RAY OSRIN: Well, it all began in Brooklyn, New York, on October 5, 1928. I was working in comic books while I was still in high school at 17, 17½. I dropped out of high school because I got a permanent job in the comic book business.

DO: Which comic books were you doing?

RO: What it was, was a studio that was like an art service, so it did books for many publishing houses. But the biggest publishing house at that time was Fiction House, and they



John Ridd and Lorna Doone say adieu in this panel from *Classic Comics #32's* adaptation of *Lorna Doone* by Baker and Osrin.

did things like *Wings*; *Kaänga*... The shop was [owned and] run by a guy named Jerry Iger. He provided a service. We also did the artwork for a lot of *Classics* [*Illustrated*]. I worked on *Lorna Doone*, and was it—I never remember—*20,000 Leagues under the Sea* and *Two Years before the Mast*. I sometimes get those backwards. *Treasure Island* and stuff like that. I was primarily an inker. I learned how to do inking, and I think I became a good inker. Inking today is one of my favorite parts of drawing.

Anyway, I was in the comic book business and was doing rather well for the times. Considering we are talking about a period from 1945—I graduated in 1945—through 1949, I worked for Jerry Iger in his shop. Met a fantastic man there named Matt Baker. I identify him as being black only because this was very uncommon in 1949, number one, for there to be a really top notch, black cartoonist in New York; I mean a really good one of the illustrative style.



(left) The opening splash panel from "Lassie and Down to the Sea" from MGM's *Lassie* #20, inked by Ray Osrin. (below) One of the many studio photos Baker had taken of himself, this one from 1951 was personalized to Ray Osrin. Courtesy of William Bush.

...

LETTER FROM RAY OSRIN, FEBRUARY 13, 1999

...I'll do what I can about remembering those wonderful days, but the old brain is not working so well. About Matt Baker, this may not be as difficult as you think. Get a Brooklyn phone book and look up John Baker. If you luck out on this one he can fill in all the gaps, and please say hello for me. Matt had a sister-in-law and a younger brother, but I don't know their first names. If John Baker is alive now, he'd have to be in his 80s....

...I don't think I inked that *Seven Seas* #4 cover. By the time I got there Bob Webb was drawing it and a little creep by the name of Dave [Heames]...?

...

LETTER FROM RAY OSRIN, OCTOBER 27, 1999

...I was primarily an inker and inked until I became a political cartoonist and did it all. I was not drafted and was too young for World War II. I received my draft status of 3A for the Korean War because my wife was seven months pregnant with our first child.

I decided to leave comics and part with Matt Baker. We remained close friends, and I couldn't stand what the new laws were doing to the comic book business....

...I mentioned two other guys who worked with Matt: Frank Guisto and Lou Morales, but since I may be the last living to know much about him, here goes:

Matt Baker was extremely good looking. I envied the way he wore clothes. He was kind, generous, and loyal. He was godfather to my first born. It was always a pleasure to be around him, and we burned up telephone lines while burning the midnight oil. Slowly, when I moved to Pittsburgh we grew apart, but always kept in touch.



There was talk of him being gay. I can't say one way or the other. I never thought so. He had a flare for the dramatic as many New York people do. He had a bad heart, which I can vouch for. I had always heard he died of a heart attack until some yo-yo came forward that Matt died in a knife fight in a Harlem dance hall.

Matt had the epitome of taste and class in clothing, theatre, and everything. He would come out to Long Island, where I lived, and take me, my wife, and child for a spin in his canary yellow convertible Oldsmobile. It was always a highlight of our dull days... what a joy! I had no car then. I recall a lot of



As far as we know, this illustration was not published when Matt Baker gave it to Frank Giusto. Courtesy of Frank Giusto and ©2012 Estate of Matt Baker.

Every night there was the phone conversation with Matt Baker, usually about race issues. Then there was the radio I would enjoy all night long. Next morning I would drop the pages off at the publishers and head for the beach....

...I'm surprised now that I look on Matt Baker's work. I see inconsistency, but I suspect that was the result of all the

inkers having a hand in one story.

Sheena, Queen of the Jungle was done mostly by Bob Webb. Matt might have done a couple of issues....

...



St. John's 1950 (not 1947) Christmas party with Baker and Osrin front and center. Courtesy of Stephanie Osrin.

LETTER FROM RAY OSRIN, DECEMBER 13, 2000

...I always get nostalgic about now. New York is wonderful during Christmas, and Matt and I used to walk the streets and look at the windows. FAO Schwartz was something else, and, oh, those chestnuts roasting on an open fire... six for 25 cents. Light up a cigarette and into the automat for a great cup of coffee. Subway ride home, me to Brooklyn, Matt to Manhattan. I wish the world could have stayed like that... 1947.

...

In January 2010, I contacted Ray Osrin's widow, Stephanie Osrin in Florida, whom to my surprise was actually Ray's second wife, having married in the mid-1970s. Stephanie gave me contact information for Ray's first wife, Lea, who had never remarried. I conducted my interview with Lea in several phone conversations over the course of many months. Her memory of those days was spot on. She met Ray at a very young age in 1947. Lea and Ray were married in 1949, had three children, and were together 27 years.

INTERVIEW WITH LEA OSRIN

Conducted on January 21, 2010, by Shaun Clancy

SHAUN CLANCY: While married to Ray, did you meet Matt Baker?

LEA OSRIN: Oh yes. He use to come over to the house with work for Ray to ink and would sometimes stay and draw in Ray's office so that Ray could ink them right away if they were late with a job.

SC: Did they listen to radio while working?

LO: They loved to listen to the radio as they worked, and one of their favorite shows was *Bob and Ray*.

SC: They were definitely ahead of their time.

LO: As usual with most brilliant people. I adored them and they were truly brilliant and intelligent guys.

SC: I had read in a previous article that Matt liked to listen to jazz. Is that true, and did Ray also like jazz?

...ON MATT BAKER

A FEW WORDS FROM HIS PEERS AND COLLEAGUES

The following excerpts come from interviews conducted by Jim Amash over many years of working for Alter Ego magazine, as well as some conducted specifically for this book, and from written correspondence to Hames Ware. First up is Burt Frohman, who started in comics as an inker, but soon switched to writing.

BURT FROHMAN ON MATT BAKER

From a December 19, 1981, letter to Hames Ware

BURT FROHMAN: I don't know what month I started with Iger... but it had to be 1944. A freelance artist named Mort Lawrence ... sent me to Iger with the suggestion that it would be a good place to get some experience. ... I became a background inker—no figures—that would take special brush handling. ... Matt Baker had just started shortly before me, but hadn't started doing his own drawing yet.

After I had been at Iger's for some months, Matt Baker was permitted to start "Tiger Girl" and did so well that he was on his way. His girls were shapely and sexy. A young Italian fellow named Frank [Giusto] became a very close buddy of Matt's, and they became inseparable. I had been close with Matt... but not that close.

In answer to your question about David Heames, you'd have to understand how Iger worked. He threw pages at you, and you inked them. Sure, he inked other than [Bob] Webb. He inked Alex Blum or maybe some of Matt Baker's stuff or anything else that was in the house.

...

Lee Ames began his career in 1939 with Walt Disney Studios before moving on to comic books, advertising art, design, and illustration. He is best known for his Draw 50... book series.

LEE AMES ON MATT BAKER

Interview conducted by Jim Amash for *Alter Ego* #28

JIM AMASH: Matt Baker's work has become very popular among collectors, and we know very little about him.

LEE AMES: Matt was a handsome, charming, clever guy who had a heart condition. He was about 5' 10", tall, well-



Baker's first work on "Tiger Girl" was assisting and inking Alex Blum on this story from *Fight Comics* #36 (February 1945).

built, and a light-skinned African-American.

One time, while we were discussing the construction steps I use in my *Draw 50...* books, I asked him to show me how he went about constructing a figure. Matt put the pencil to the paper at a point and went from there to draw a finished eye, then to the other eye, nose, the whole face, and then went on detail to detail to a complete figure, with *no* basic construction. And it all fit neatly into the page instead of falling off. But he was one of those people who could start from

the get-go and finish up without construction other than what existed in his mind. He did beautiful stuff.

When I introduced my wife to Matt and Burt [Frohman], they decided to greet her with a mock Brooklynese accent, like, "Pleased to meetcha, I'm sure." Why she didn't throw them at me, I don't know.

JA: What else can you tell me about Matt Baker?

LA: Only that he was gay.

JA: How do you know that?

LA: There are some things you just know about people. It wasn't a secret [to me].

...

Jack Katz worked for a number of publishers and studios during the Golden Age of comics. But he is best known for his creator-owned work The First Kingdom, which began in 1974.

JACK KATZ ON MATT BAKER

Interview conducted by Jim Amash
for *Alter Ego* #91

JACK KATZ: In 1944 I worked for Jerry Iger on salary for about \$30 a week in cash. There were a number of stories he was turning out. He took old stories... and they needed some details on the uniforms. I would put in the details. I did quite a bit of work there. I did some pencils. That's when I met Matt Baker, and I really affiliated with him.

Matt, I thought, was one of the most wonderful gentlemen—he reminded me of Nat "King" Cole. His voice was very beautiful; he was a very good-looking man. He had a bad, bad heart. In fact, when we used to walk down the stairs to go to a place to eat, he had a difficult time breathing, and his eyes looked like they were popping out. He'd get tired from walking too much, though it wasn't *that* obvious.

The reason I got fired from Jerry Iger's is that I looked at Baker's stuff and said, "Your stuff is so beautiful. If you can just show your stuff to places like *The Saturday Evening Post* and some of these other places, you really should. You're better than the rest of us." I figured Matt was afraid that if he were to jump into that he might not make it, and he knew the tension that was going on with the illustration market. They were bringing more and more photography into the set. Unfortunately, a guy whom we were walking behind overheard



Original art for "South Seas Girl" from *Seven Seas Comics* #3 (August 1946).

me. He told Jerry Iger about it, and Iger asked me, "Did you tell Matt to quit this job?" I said, "No, I said he didn't have to quit to do illustration." He said, "Well, you're fired." Frankly, I was about to go anyway. I was there six or seven months.

JA: How did Iger treat you and the others?

JK: You know how they used to make up these imitation countries in the movies? Iger was like a sergeant in one of those imitation countries; he was kind of a buffoon, and at the same time you had to take him seriously. He would strut around like he was somebody special.

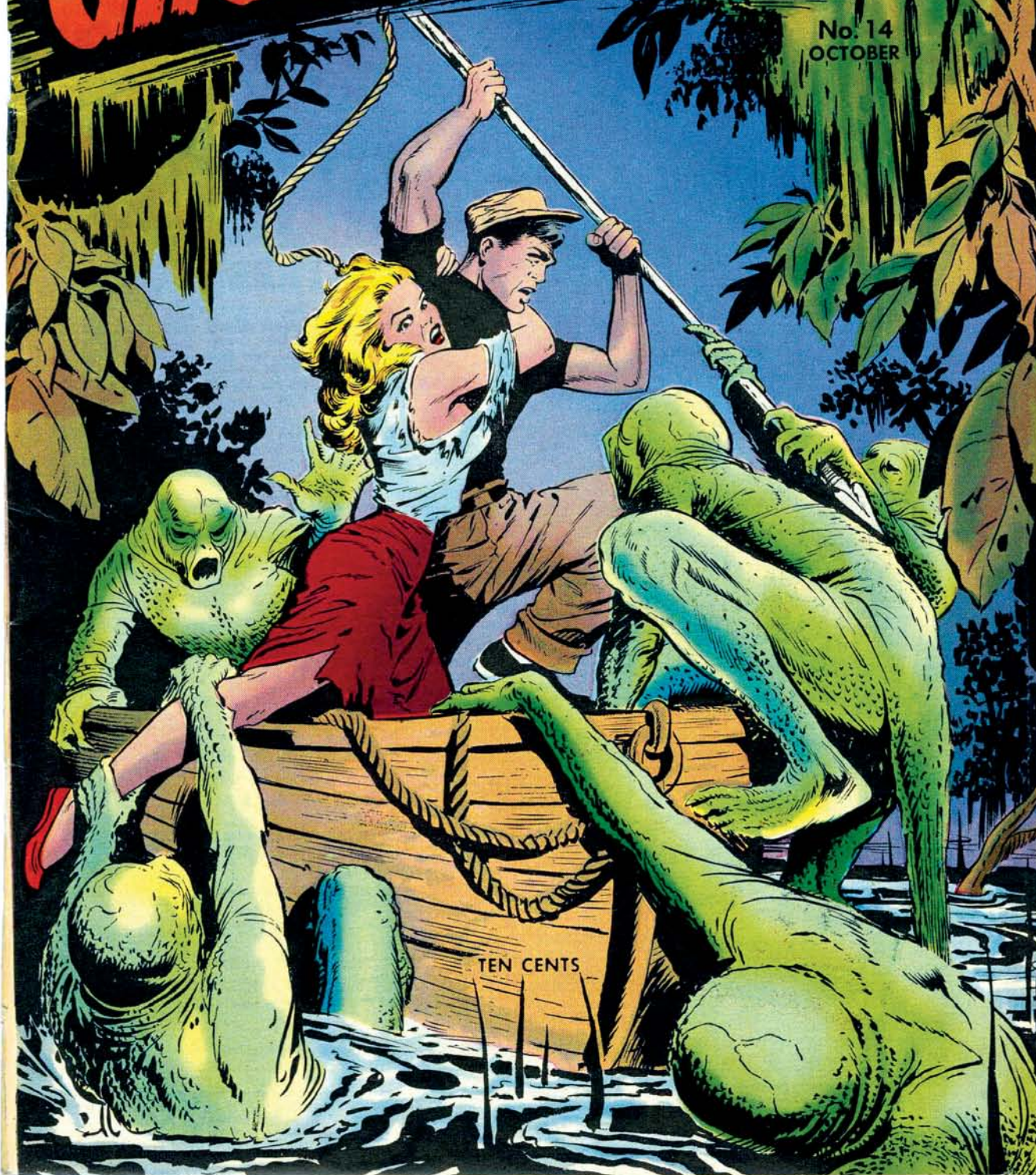
JA: Do you think Matt Baker was accepted there, considering the prejudice of the times?

JK: Matt was accepted, at least to his face. I don't know what all went on there, but, really, Matt and I got along beautifully.

AMAZING

GHOST STORIES

No. 14
OCTOBER



KAYO KIRBY

By
Chuck
Walker

ON SOCKO TRADITION, MANNY IS OUT TO PROVE THE OLD SAYING THAT THE FEMALE OF THE SPECIES IS MORE DEADLY THAN THE MALE—HE'S GOT A **LADY WRESTLER!** MUSCLE MARY'S THE TAG AND SHE'S ALL READY TO SWING INTO ACTION...



MARY'S A SWELL KID, KAYO, AN' SHE'S GOT A DOUBLE ARM-LOCK LIKE A GORILLA. SHE'LL HAVE DIS KILLER KAY ON HER SPINE BEFORE DA GONG STOPS RINGIN'!

GREAT, MANNY. BUT DID YOU SAY KILLER KAY? ISN'T SHE...

...MANAGED BY THOSE TWO RACKET BUMS, BOLSKY AND SLINK?

YEAH, THEY'RE IN HER CORNER RIGHT NOW. BUT I GOT ME EYES PEELED FER ANY FAST STUFF!

AS ACROSS THE RING...

DON'T WORRY, KAY, BABY. DIS THING IS RIGGED SO YA **CAN'T** LOSE, AND WE'LL CLEAN UP PLENTY IN PRIZE CABBAGE.

SWELL, BOLSKY, I'LL JUST PLAY IT STRAIGHT. BUT THERE'S THE BELL...





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MATT BAKER The Art of Glamour

In the early 1940s, Matt Baker became one of the earliest African-American comic book artists. But it wasn't the color of his skin which made him such a significant figure in the history of the medium—it was his innate ability to draw gorgeous, exciting women and handsome, dynamic men in a fluid, graceful style. Imagine Dave Stevens or Adam Hughes working in the '40s, drawing a new story every month, and you'll have a good idea of Matt Baker's place in the industry throughout his career. Yet few of today's comic book fans know of the artist or his work, because he died in 1959 at the young age of 38, just as the Silver Age of Comics was blossoming and bringing in a new generation of readers. *Matt Baker: The Art of Glamour* (192-page hardcover with 96 pages of full-color), edited by Jim Amash and Eric Nolen-Weathington, presents an impressive career cut tragically short. It features a wealth of essays; interviews with Baker's friends, family, and co-workers; and a treasure trove of his finest artwork, including several complete stories, at last giving the wonderfully talented artist his full due.



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