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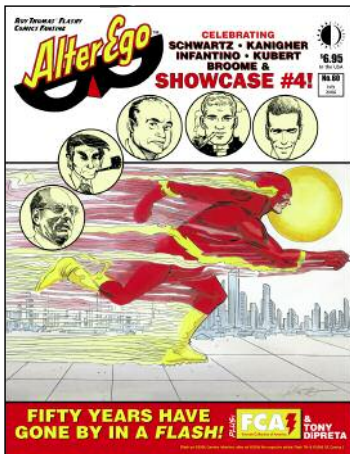


Edited by **ROY THOMAS** (former Marvel Comics editor-in-chief and top writer), **ALTER EGO**, the greatest 'zine of the 1960s, is back, all-new, and focused on Golden & Silver Age comics and creators with articles, interviews, unseen art, P.C. Hamerlinck's **FCA (FAWCETT COLLECTORS OF AMERICA**, featuring the archives of **C.C. BECK** and recollections by Fawcett artist **MARCUS SWAYZE**), Michael T. Gilbert's **MR. MONSTER**, and more! Issue #70 spotlights **ROY THOMAS** at Marvel in the 1970s, during his stint as Marvel's editor-in-chief and one of the company's major writers. Plus there's art and reminiscences of both **BUSCEMAS**, **GIL KANE**, **NEAL ADAMS**, **JOHN ROMITA**, **HOWARD CHAYKIN**, **FRANK BRUNNER**, **MIKE PLOOG**, **BERNIE WRIGHTSON**, **BILL EVERETT**, **GEORGE PÉREZ**, **FRANK ROBBINS**, **BARRY SMITH**, **FRANK THORNE**, **HERB TRIMPE**, and a passel of talented writers (including a guy named **LEE**)! Also, there's a salute to Golden Age artist **LILY RENEE**, plus regular features **FCA**, **MR. MONSTER**, and more, all behind a great Invaders cover by **GENE COLAN**!

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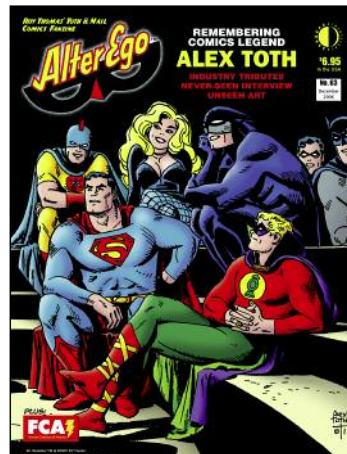
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# “Writing Comics Turned Out To Be What I Really Wanted To Do With My Life”

## ROY THOMAS Talks About Writing—And Editing—For Marvel During The 1970s

Interview Conducted by Jim Amash

Transcribed by Brian K. Morris

INTRODUCTION BY JIM AMASH:



“By The Middle Of 1970, I’d Been At Marvel For Five Years”

**JIM AMASH:** All right, so it’s 1970 and you’re the second “head writer” of Marvel Comics, with Stan [Lee] being #1. And you’re editing, so you’re the #2 editor, too.

**THOMAS:** That’s like saying you come in second in a horse race. You don’t get nearly as much money. [mutual laughter] Actually, it was a nice situation to be in. By the middle of 1970, I’d been at Marvel for five years, just picking up whatever little tidbits or reins Stan let fall, sometimes at his direction, sometimes at my own initiative. And I just became “#2 editor”—my real title was “associate editor”—by default.

Sol Brodsky was there—right before he left for Skywald and was succeeded by John Verpoorten. As production manager, Sol ranked me in certain ways, and I had no problem with that—but he wasn’t involved in editorial decisions except from a scheduling angle, so the three of us took care of things... well, in a sense maybe there were *four* of us, because Stan relied on John Romita in certain areas concerning Spider-Man and even art direction and corrections.

**JA:** Now, as you rise in the company, is your compensation rising that much?

**THOMAS:** I was doing okay. Is anybody ever really ever paid what they’d like? I was working, really, for [Marvel publisher] Martin Goodman, and he wasn’t somebody you could go to directly and say, “I’m worth more money.” Remember, Flo Steinberg quit in the late ’60s because she couldn’t get a \$5 raise, because Goodman felt secretarial positions paid a certain salary and not a penny over that. But, between Goodman and Stan, I got raises from time to time, when sales were fairly good. There were sometimes Christmas bonuses, too. And, unlike back in the ’40s or ’50s, they never had to *lower* my salary, although back around ’68 they probably came close to doing that across the board when sales went soft, right after they turned the three anthology titles into six solo hero titles.

**JA:** How did other people react to your rising in the company?

**THOMAS:** I probably had more friends than I’d had before. [mutual laughter]

**JA:** That’s what I figured.

**THOMAS:** Well, I had more people suddenly finding excuses to hang around with me. I’m not saying they were always doing that consciously. You naturally gravitate towards somebody in a situation like that, as I’m sure I’ve done myself. I never had to work hard at that, because when I was dealing with pros earlier, it was most just writing fan letters to Julie Schwartz or Gardner Fox or Otto Binder. And, with the exception of once or twice with Julie, I wasn’t really thinking in terms of getting into the field professionally.

Some people probably accepted what you call my “rise” in the company, and some people didn’t. I wasn’t handing out assignments directly at that stage, but I had some growing influence, and Stan often listened to my suggestions. Sometimes he’d ask who should do this or that. It was a case of a gradual evolution. If I’d looked from one year to the next, I was probably handling a little more and I was having to deal with a few other writers and a bit more with the art—less with the art than with the writers. But I wouldn’t have noticed from day-to-day or week-to-week.



### Roy The Beverly Hills Barbarian!

(Above:) One of the few photos of himself Roy really likes is this one, taken at the Polo Lounge at the Beverly Hills Hotel, circa 1977. He and friend Alan Waite, a producer of TV commercials, were waiting to interview comedy legend Phil (*Sgt. Bilko*) Silvers about his latest—and sadly, as it turned out, last—role, in the movie *The Chicken Chronicles*, for Marvel's new magazine *Celebrity*. (The latter was a well-named but under-funded *People*-style brainchild of Stan Lee's.) Right after Alan snapped this pic, the Lounge's personnel descended on them to inform them that photo-taking was *verboten* in the fabled watering-hole. Silvers soon arrived and kept his interviewers in stitches for an hour—and the guys took photos of the comedian in his Century City digs a few days later—but alas, *Celebrity* died after only an issue or two, as that piece was literally on the presses. [©2007 Alan Waite.]

(Right:) Barry Smith's powerful pencils for the cover of 1970's *Conan the Barbarian* #1 as they first appeared in print—on the cover of *Marvelmania Magazine* #2, the Marvel-published fan club mag, that same year. [©2007 Paradox Entertainment.]

**JA:** In the early '70s, I know Stan was often only coming in like two days a week.

**THOMAS:** Two, three days tops, even back when I started in 1965. He'd already worked things out with Goodman so he could work at least two days a week at home. And soon I worked it out with Stan so I could work a couple of days a week at home, and still get paid freelance for pages I wrote there, just as he did. It was like a de facto raise. You'd think Stan would've wanted to stagger it so I was there three days when he wasn't, but Stan preferred me to be there the same days he was, for conferences and the like. So the days we weren't there, Sol and Flo kept things moving.

Sometimes they or some assistant editor made a phone call to me or to Stan, depending on what the situation was, and asked, "What do we do?" I don't even know who the assistant editor *was*, except when Gary Friedrich was there from 1966 to 1968. In 1970, Allyn Brodsky was on staff for a while, and was spelling me when [my first wife] Jeanie and I went to England that summer. But Sol—later Verpoorten—they were mostly just interested in getting the books out. They both knew what they could do without checking, and what they couldn't, just as I did.

### "[Readers] Were Mostly Saying 'Do Conan!'"

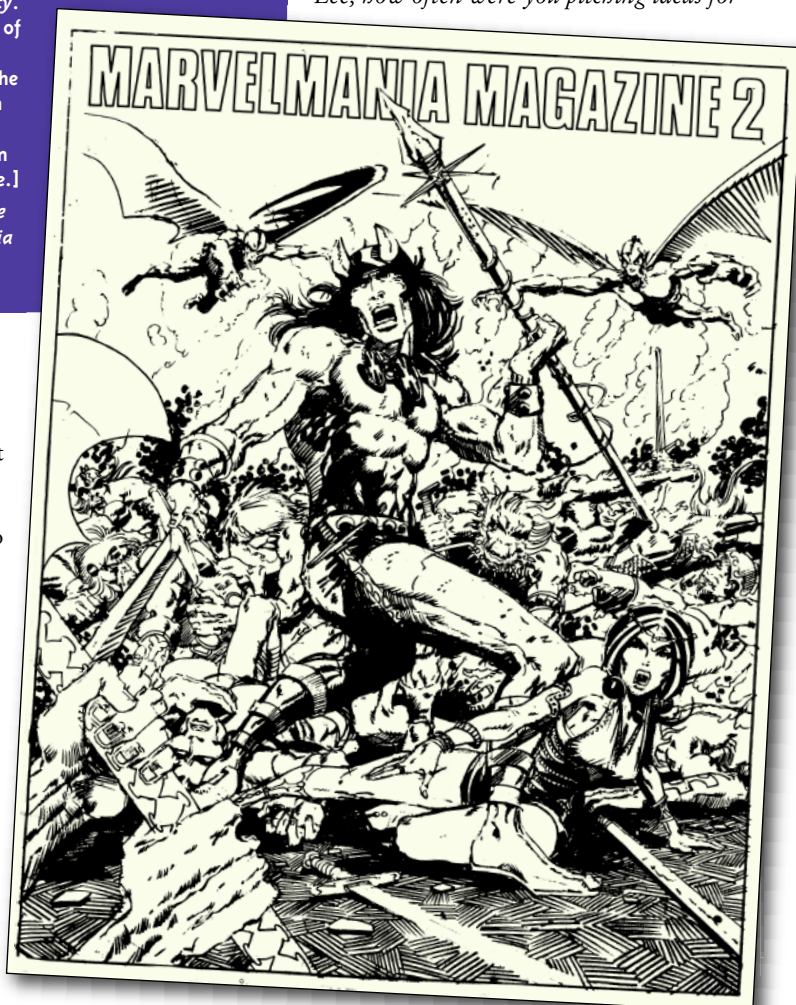
**JA:** Now, *Conan the Barbarian* starts in 1970, and I know you've talked about how you got Marvel to publish *Conan*.

**THOMAS:** I may have spoken about that somewhere once or twice, yeah. [laughs] I've written all those articles in the past few years for Dark Horse's *Chronicles of Conan* reprints, and before that for Marvel—and even something like 100 such articles that were printed only in Spanish, in Barcelona, back in the '90s. Of course, when I was writing such articles for Marvel, I was a bit more constrained about what I might say. Stan and Goodman wouldn't have liked it if I'd mentioned another company's comic books, or a policy of theirs I was unhappy with—that kind of thing. And I accepted that. But I never really had to lie. So I guess I can save most of the *Conan* talk for the upcoming *Alter Ego* issue on the history of sword-and-sorcery comics.

**JA:** Right. But I still have a couple of questions that I don't think I've seen in print.

**THOMAS:** Okay, shoot.

**JA:** By the time you pitched *Conan* to Stan Lee, how often were you pitching ideas for



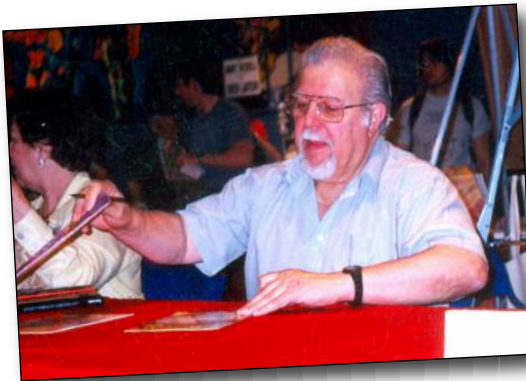
series?

**THOMAS:** Good question. Not that often, because Stan was really the guy who generated the ideas, and I don't think he pushed us to come up with new characters in the early days, except for villains. If something came up, he was open to it. As I've often said, I didn't like creating many characters for Marvel, because I knew I wouldn't own them... not that I advertised that feeling to Stan or Goodman! Besides, we already had a fair number of books. Marvel over-expanded in '68, the field got overcrowded, and there was a brief downturn in sales.

By 1970 or so, we started expanding again. Stan was very open to what readers wanted. So, when fans wrote asking us to pick up properties from outside the comics field—especially Edgar Rice Burroughs, the Conan/Robert E. Howard material, Doc Savage, and Tolkien—we were open to that. At one time or the other between 1970-75, we went after each one of those. And, except for Tolkien, whose people turned us down flat, Marvel did end up eventually doing all of them.

**JA:** *I had seen pages in Comic Book Artist where you and Barry Smith made up a team, I think it was Bucky and Quicksilver and Red Raven.*

**THOMAS:** I think that's something Barry and I were just kicking around. Maybe Barry was looking for some extra work. It wasn't Bucky, though; it was actually Rick Jones. Barry drew up a handful of pages, most of which have been reprinted somewhere-or-other, because, if we were going to talk Stan into it, it'd be better if he saw some pages. But whether we actually ever showed the pages to him and he said no, I don't recall.



**JA:** *Did you ever talk to Martin Goodman about Conan?*

**THOMAS:** I didn't talk; I wrote. When I think about things I wish I'd saved to document my career, such as it was, one of them is the memo Stan suggested I write to Goodman to see if he'd allow us to license an existing sword-and-sorcery hero, such as our readers were asking for. Not that readers were really saying, "Do sword-and-sorcery." They were mostly saying, "Do Conan," or "Do Robert E. Howard," or something like that. Just like they weren't saying, "Do jungle comics"; they were saying, "Get Tarzan or John Carter," and "Get Doc Savage," "Get Tolkien." It wasn't *all* just hype when Stan said Marvel's readers were the real editors. Maybe that's the reason why I don't believe Stan and I ever discussed the possibility of *making up* a new sword-and-sorcery hero. If we had, I suspect we'd have made it quite different from Robert E. Howard's. I don't think it would have worked out as well, so we were all winners on that one—Marvel, and myself, and the Robert E. Howard heirs.

So Stan suggested to me, while we were kicking around the sword-and-sorcery thing: "Why don't you write a memo to Martin Goodman, to explain why we ought to license one of these characters?" It was left up to me because I was collecting a lot of the paperbacks—mostly for their covers, then—to decide which one. I felt that bringing such heroes into Marvel would upgrade comics.

I wrote that memo, two or three pages, telling Goodman that sword-and-sorcery stories contained several elements in common with

our super-hero comics, elements which would appeal to the same readers. One was a strong, action-oriented hero—another was colorful villains and, I probably emphasized, monsters. The other thing I stressed was that there would be lots of beautiful women. I probably glossed over the fact that such a comic would look as if it were set in the ancient or medieval world, because that wouldn't have had an innate appeal to Martin Goodman. After all, *Black Knight* never went anywhere in the 1950s, nor did most other Timely/Marvel comics that were set in the real or imagined past, except for World War II or the American West.

Goodman liked the memo and authorized us to go after a character. I first went after Lin Carter's Thongor, who was a quasi-Conan with elements of John Carter of Mars, partly because Stan liked that *name* the most.



### Not To Mention Buscema The Barbarian!

It's well-known that the artist originally intended to launch *Conan the Barbarian* was Big John Buscema—seen above at the All Time Classic New York Comic Book Convention held in White Plains, NY, in summer of 2000. (Photo courtesy of host Joe Petrilak.)

The original Buscema/Montano art for the splash page of *Conan Annual* #2 (1976) headed an interview with Roy T. conducted by Ralph Macchio that year in the 4th issue of *FOOM*, the second Marvel-published fan club magazine. At that time or soon after, newcomer Ralph was assistant editor on such mags as *The Savage Sword of Conan*—and today he's a senior editor at Marvel, and has Roy happily adapting such classics as *The Last of the Mohicans*, *Treasure Island*, and *The Man in the Iron Mask* for him and the ambitious new Marvel Illustrated line. What goes around, comes around! (But Crom—didn't either of those geniuses notice that the word "under" is missing in the last line of Robert E. Howard's famous "Nemedian Chronicles" prologue? It got printed that way in the comic, too!) [©2007 Paradox Entertainment.]

JA: *He would.*

THOMAS: Well, it was a better comic book name than “Kull” or “Conan.” Stan even liked “Kull” better than “Conan,” because it has that “K,” and “Conan” is just another name, like in Arthur Conan Doyle, and “C” isn’t a strong letter. I wouldn’t have pushed for Conan, because I figured it’s Stan’s business. *Thongor and the City of Magicians* is the first sword-&-sorcery novel I ever read, and I later owned Frank Frazetta’s cover painting for that novel, the one with the hero riding on a giant pterodactyl above flowing lava on a black background, for ten or fifteen years.



Months, maybe a year, later, Martin Goodman threw a party—maybe it was at The Illustrators Club—to me it just looked like some big empty room—I think he was celebrating making an extra million bucks or something, [Jim chuckles] and thought maybe he’d cut us a tiny piece of cheese out of it. So he came up to me during this gathering and really raved over my memo. Of course, there was no offer of any extra monetary compensation. Hey, I was getting to write the comic—that was enough of a reward, right? And he mentioned that memo to me at least one other time we ran into each other—probably because he couldn’t think of anything else I’d ever done! [mutual chuckling] It made a big impression on him. And it was very important to my life, certainly—and to Conan and REH’s heirs, as well—because I soon got stalled by Lin Carter’s agent on Thongor (he was hoping I’d offer more than the \$150 per issue I was authorized to offer), and I got a sudden impulse to go after Conan—I contacted Glenn Lord from the address that L. Sprague de Camp put in his preface to the new paperback *Conan of Cimmeria*, and that was that.

## “Barry Smith [Was] Looking For Work”

JA: *I know the initial sales on Conan were not that strong.*

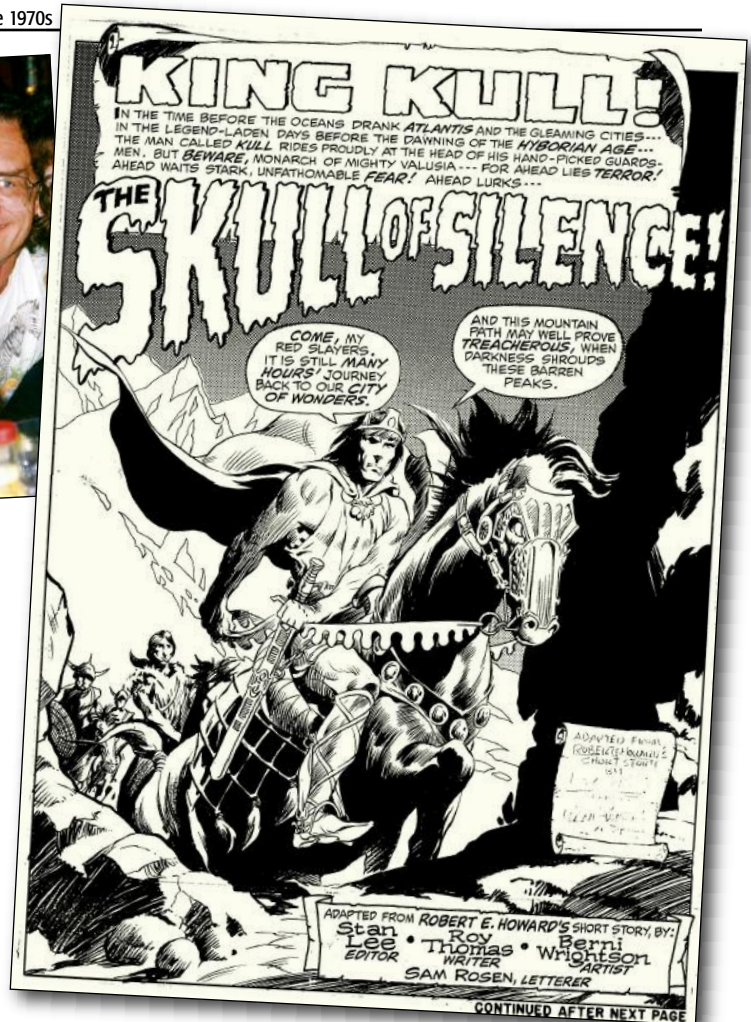
THOMAS: Well, #1 did very well. But then, each of the next six sold less well than the one before, nadiring out with #7—actually, one of Barry’s and my best issues, I think.

JA: *I know it was actually cancelled for a day.*

THOMAS: Yes. Based on the sales reports for #7. There’s no accounting for readers’ tastes.

JA: *Still, was there a buzz in comics fandom about Conan?*

THOMAS: To a great extent, it started right away. We got a fair amount of mail, mostly enthusiastic. Of course, there were people who hated the idea that Barry Smith was the artist, and felt it should’ve been someone like—if not Frazetta, then Bernie Wrightson in particular. A couple of people may have suggested Frank Brunner, who was just starting out, too. Bernie actually did up a couple of sample Conan drawings. He was just becoming a pro at that stage, and those drawings were very nice. I was more enthusiastic about his work than Stan was,



but it was Stan’s decision. So I figured I’d wait and do something with Bernie later; and, of course, we soon did that “King Kull” story, “The Skull of Silence,” which was lovely. I wish he and I would’ve had a chance to do even more together, though at the time I suspect Bernie thought I was down on him. I honestly don’t recall if we saw his Conan drawings before or after we decided on John Buscema as the original Conan artist.

JA: *And then Buscema didn’t work out, and you couldn’t get Gil Kane for the same reason.*

THOMAS: Yeah. Goodman said they were both too expensive. He wanted to get back that \$200 an issue I had over-enthusiastically offered Glenn Lord for the Conan rights, so we had to get somebody cheap.



### And Now—Bernie The Barbarian!

(Top center:) Photo taken at a Heroes Con in Charlotte, NC, some years back by Dann Thomas.

(Top right:) The splash of Bernie’s story in *Creatures on the Loose* #10 (March 1971)—repro’d from a scan of the original art, courtesy of Jim Amash. With thanks to Teresa R. Davidson.

[©2007 Paradox Entertainment.]

(Right:) A Wrightson Kull sketch from the program book for Creation Con 1974.

[Kull TM & ©2007 Paradox Entertainment.]

It didn't *have* to be a beginner. At least two other regular Marvel artists were pushed to me by Stan—I won't mention their names, but I told him I didn't think they'd bring *Conan* the singular quality I wanted, now that I had read all the Conan material. Stan said, okay, if I could find someone else acceptable, I wouldn't have to use one of them.

And here was Barry Smith—deported back to England because he'd been working in the States without a green card, and looking for work—the immigration people gave him 24 hours to leave the country or be locked up—so I lateraled *Conan the Barbarian* to him. It was one of the best decisions I ever made—for Marvel, for me, and for Barry.

JA: Did you get a lot of mail on the book?

THOMAS: Yeah, including some hate mail. Some people didn't like the way it was done, because, after all, it wasn't really Robert E. Howard. Or they excoriated us because they hated Barry's earliest work. But most of the mail was pretty favorable from the start.

JA: Frankly, Barry Smith drew a leaner Conan than what Frazetta represented in his paperbacks.

THOMAS: It wasn't exactly my idea of how Conan should look, I'll admit. I liked the face okay, but he was just too thin. He should've been bigger. But Barry was lean, and artists have a tendency to draw their own body types when they get a chance. Barry's artwork was so beautiful, though. Not so much in the first issue. There were good panels and bad panels in #1, but from #2 on, it was increasingly good work. Even #1 has a lot of good stuff in it. But we almost replaced him. [mutual laughter] If we'd had another good choice walk in the door, we might have done it. I'm glad we didn't. He is, too—or at least, he ought to be.

JA: He quit Conan two or three times.

THOMAS: Three. That was a year or two down the road, though. In the early days he was just happy to be working steady, just like I was.

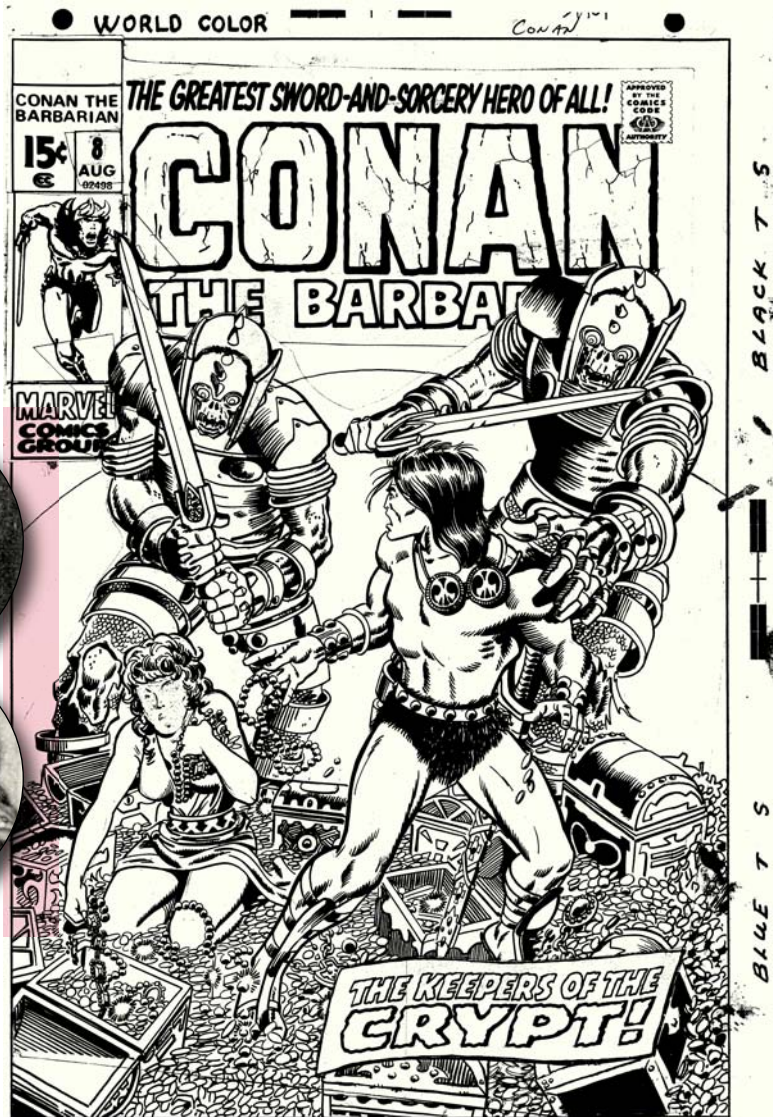
JA: Because you were working Marvel style, it seems to me you'd have had to do a little more than just a Marvel-style plot on Conan, since you were adapting stories.

THOMAS: Well, at the beginning. But Barry read all the Howard material, and I think we were in sync pretty much from the start. So, soon, I turned Barry loose on stories, though I know I did a several-page plot even on #4, "The Tower of the Elephant," as well as on the early non-adaptation stories, of course. Working on *Conan* kept Barry attached to Marvel, and I really liked him, in addition to liking his work. There wasn't much I could do, except gradually, about his page rate, but it worked in his favor for a while. He got raises when the book sold better, and he was up to a decent rate for those days, by the first time he quit.

## "Both [Buscema and Kane] Knew Enough About Conan"

JA: I'm going to skip ahead slightly here—to when Barry Smith leaves and Gil Kane does a couple of issues, and then, of course, Barry comes back and Barry leaves again and John Buscema becomes the regular Conan artist. Did you have to write a little more or spend a little more time talking to Kane or Buscema?

THOMAS: Not really. I'd sent some of the paperbacks to John



### Face-Off!

Collector Aaron Sultan provided us with a photocopy of Barry Smith's original art for the cover of *Conan the Barbarian* #8 (Aug. 1971)—the first issue that began the climb back up the sales charts. Note that the face of the heroine is missing—blotted with Whiteout, it would seem. Stan didn't think Barry drew Jenna pretty enough. On the printed cover, Jenna's visage was rendered by John Romita. Inks by Sal Buscema. [©2007 Paradox Entertainment.]

At left, Barry (top) and Roy, in photos printed in *Savage Tales* #3 (Feb. 1974). [©2007 Marvel Characters, Inc.]

Buscema when he was going to be the artist for #1. He may have even had the plot for #1 when Goodman nixed him as artist. John had read a lot of that material, so he was ready when the time came. As for Gil—he was familiar with Conan a decade or two before I was. He had all those Gnome Press hardcovers from the '50s and early '60s. In fact, I purchased his collection eventually.

There might've been something in particular I might have wanted to say, but both those guys and Barry, once they read the Howard material, knew enough about Conan to draw anything that came up. We fixed it in between issues, like between #1 and #2, and then between the next ones, etc. The second issue was pretty good, but was a little too much Edgar Rice Burroughs and not quite enough Howard—even though our pro peer group nominated it for an ACBA Shazam award.

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