image® comics

THE ROAD TO INDEPENDENCE

by George Khoury

IMAGE COMICS:

THE ROAD TO INDEPENDENCE

Table of Contents

Scene From A Comic Shop

The Spirit of Independence

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In 1986, Marvel Comics celebrated the 25th anniversary of their rebirth since the debut of *Fantastic Four #*1 by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby. What should have been a joyous occasion in their history instead became the year that DC Comics took the spotlight with their monumental sales, mainstream acceptance and massive critical acclaim on books like Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* and John Byrne's *Superman* relaunch. Ironically, Miller and Byrne were part of a recent mass exodus of top talent that departed from Marvel due to issues with Jim Shooter's editorial regime. Soon the Mighty Marvel momentum was subsided as big projects like the "New Universe" and Star Comics had little audience and unfavorable sales. Worse than the reinvigorated state of the "Distinguished Competition" was the mediocre quality of the writing and art in Marvel books, which appeared dated and uninspired next to that of DC. With Shooter's exit in 1987, his successor Tom DeFalco would start ushering in a new wave of creators that would rebuild the "House of Ideas" from the ground up. Among this crop of diverse artists were Erik Larsen, Jim Lee, Rob Liefeld, Todd McFarlane, Whilce Portacio, Marc Silvestri, and Jim Valentino — the seven young men who would band together to found Image Comics.

The Image "I" Spawn corner box art by Todd McFarlane. ©2007 Todd McFarlane Productions.

In DeFalco's administration, Marvel was now welcoming new ideas and cultivating youthful talent with a place to hone their craft and build a following. Although this new troupe had grown fully devoted to and influenced by a diet of Marvel Comics, they were also prepared to bring an aura of change throughout the books. So strong were the influence and teachings of John Romita Sr. and John Buscema during the '70s and '80s, that their artistic style and approach became the predominant "house style" for practically the entire line. It also became painfully transparent how little had really progressed since the days that Stan Lee, Jack Kirby and Steve Ditko helmed the stories, because now the books were littered with tales that were endlessly derivative in appearance and texture. The Marvel super-heroes were in need of a makeover that would aid them into the '90s and beyond. "These shouldn't be your father's heroes; they should be your heroes!" said Marv Wolfman in a recent interview about writing modern super-hero tales — the exact approach that Image's architects would take to heart from Day One of their respective careers.

The Marvel metamorphoses started quite quietly. While most of the rookies initiated on illustrating lower-tier books and random fill-in assignments, it was their enthusiasm, professionalism and hunger that earned them the pivotal loyalty of prominent editors like Bob Harras, Carl Potts and Jim Salicrup. They would seize future opportunities and rock the very foundation of Marvel, not only by tapping into their artistic inspirations and imaginations, but by fusing trendy elements of popular culture and comics like never before. Suddenly they all hit their stride at relatively the same time: Todd McFarlane would radically rejuvenate Spider-Man's appearance by making the character this highly poseable, bug-like figure that could shoot the most manic webbing you've ever seen; Whilce Portacio and Jim Lee recharged the X-Men franchise with the sort of sleekness and electricity seen only in anime and video games; Rob Liefeld's Cable was a character that could go toe-to-toe with the Terminator and his gigantic arsenal of guns; others like Dale Keown (on *The Incredible Hulk*), Erik Larsen (on *Amazing Spider-Man*), Marc Silvestri (on *Wolverine*), Larry Stroman (on *X-Factor*) and Jim Valentino (on *Guardians of the Galaxy*) left their indelible sense of style unto their books, as well.

To the mainstream, this period represented the last time that a generation found the level of excitement
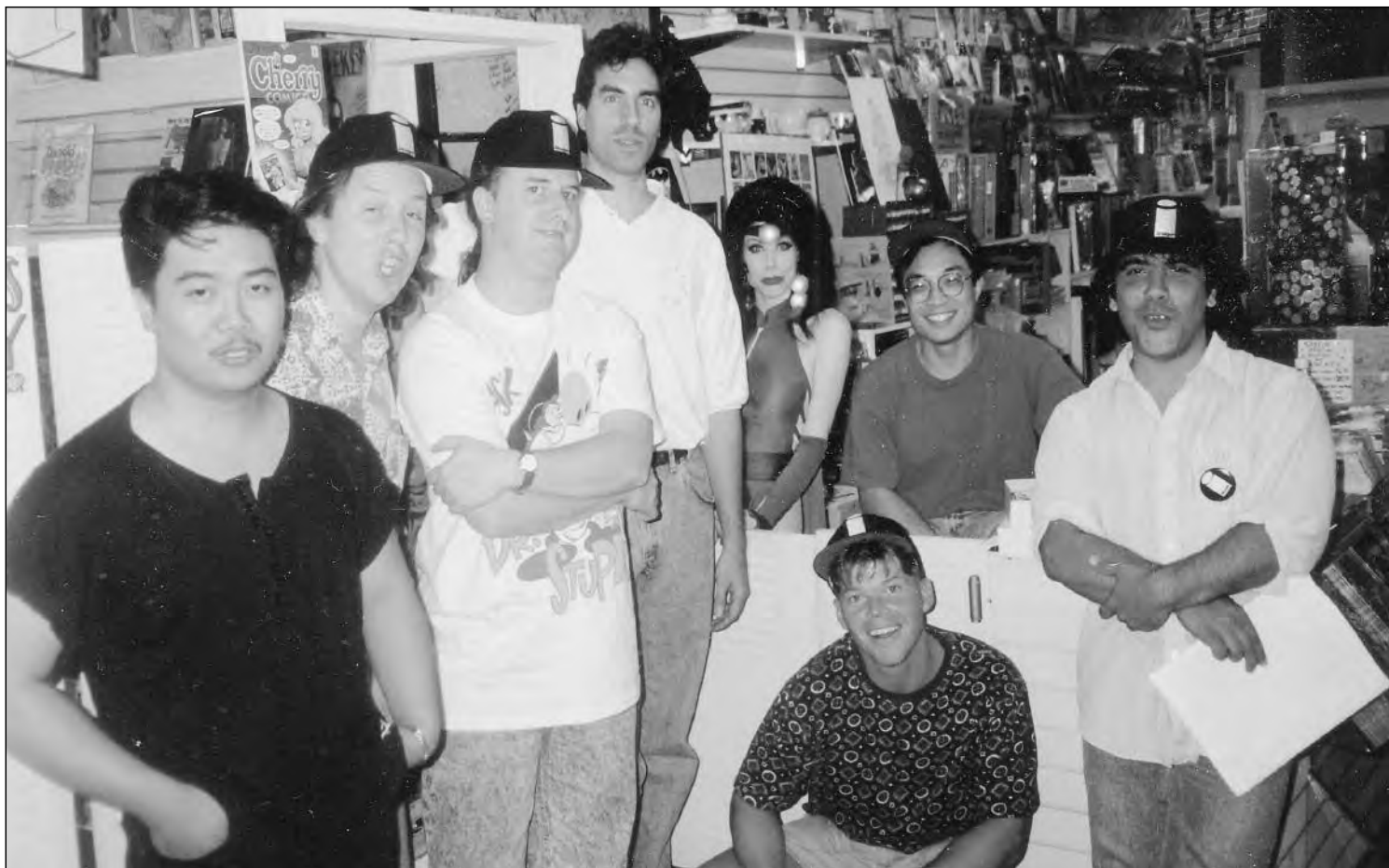
that they craved for in comics. These new creators ushered in a level of diverting wonderment because they, too, were part of the same audience as the readers. Their "in-your-face" visuals spoke to audiences impressed by the different array of styles and detail in the artwork. The heroes were now ripped out of Venice Beach, boiling in testosterone; the big-haired heroines were totally curvy chicks straight from any boy's active imagination. Finally, the old mold had been broken; these Marvel heroes were hip, lively and contemporary again! The fanboys ate it up and loved this renaissance. While most of the artists began to gain notoriety on their own, Marvel would witness a surge in sales that the establishment had never experienced. The great majority of Marvel books with talent from future Image founders and colleagues easily experienced their greatest peak of profitability and popularity during the early '90s.

A reinvigorated Marvel would expand their roster of books by seeking any opportunity to commence a new series to satisfy an audience that constantly craved more and more product. At their peak, the company put out over 80 titles a month and 85 percent of their profits came via the publishing of comics; they ruled practically half of the entire comics industry. This gold rush era allowed the company the luxury (and necessity) of bestowing new titles to their star artists. The new releases became enormous events that seemingly capitalized more on the bank-

able strength of the artists' names than the characters themselves. It started in 1990, when McFarlane's *Spider-Man* #1 sold close to three million copies, which was bested in 1991 with five million copies of Liefeld's *X-Force* #1, and eclipsed later that year by the staggering eight million copies of Jim Lee's *X-Men* #1. Sales were never like that in Golden Age!

The bliss between management and talent would not last forever. Soon there were editorial clashes over content and the direction of the books. Scores of products started emerging using their artwork without any financial compensation or art credit. And forget foreign royalties, Marvel doesn't share that with anyone. All of these things began to bring other grievances to light; the artists began to question their part in Marvel's big picture. Sick of it all, Todd McFarlane would announce his "retirement." And when Rob tried to branch out with a new title called *The Executioners* at Malibu Comics, his Marvel superiors reined him in by voicing their displeasure. Although all of these artists had received their accolades and earned generous royalties, they were beginning to get frustrated with their superiors and the developing exploitive nature of the corporate culture that came as Marvel's stock went public in July of 1991. At the height of their successes, they decided that it was time to confront the brass head-on.

On December 17, 1991, Todd McFarlane (with his wife and child), Jim Lee and Rob Liefeld had an impromptu meeting with an appalled Terry Stewart,

Penciled page from Greg Capullo's Spawn *debut in issue #16. ©2007 T.M.P.*

Todd McFarlane and Rob Liefeld at Image's first official meeting, in 1992. ©2007 Tom Mason.

restoring Marvel's stature in the business, they were just replaceable "help" and insignificant to the future of the company; the characters were far more important than the creators. The attitude, tone and impression that they received from the man at the very top of the company made it crystal clear that the time had come to take a stand.

In the months prior to the big meeting, Liefeld had already spoken with his friends, Erik Larsen and Jim Valentino, about joining him in a self-publishing opportunity at Malibu Comics after *The Executioners* debacle. Just the year prior the trio had been pre-sented with an open invitation to publish anything they wanted from Dave Olbrich, Malibu's publisher. The idea was to continue producing work for Marvel while developing characters and comics for Malibu that were entirely owned by them. Fresh off his run on *Amazing Spider-Man,* Erik Larsen became the first to join into Rob's idea; Jim Valentino would soon follow. When Liefeld called McFarlane, the offer was exactly the idea to lure him out of his self-imposed retirement. Immediately, Todd became determined to recruit Jim Lee in the days prior to an upcoming Sotheby's auction (featuring the sale of original art from *Spider-Man* #1, *X-Force* #1, and *X-Men* #1). Fresh off the success of his *X-Men* launch, Jim wasn't entirely sure if the timing was right for him to leave a sure thing. But after Todd and Rob convinced Jim to come along to their meeting with Terry Stewart, Jim began to see the light (and weeks later announced his commitment publicly). On the day of the auction, Todd and Rob not only recruited Marc Silvestri but began to hint to the press about their eminent self-publishing ventures and the eminent group forming of Marvel's top artists.

After a month of planning and the additional recruitment of Whilce Portacio (which finalized the number of founding members at seven), Image Comics was formally introduced to the world during their first organized meeting in Marc Silvestri's home on February 1, 1992. Some of them still had a degree of cold feet about leaving Marvel, but the confidence and enthusiasm of the naïve ones became very infectious. During the course of that day, they started discussions about the breed of books that they were going to create for their company. Image also solidified their one-year direct market distribution and printing plan agreement with Malibu; interacted with Gareb Shamus of *Wizard* magazine about mar-keting ideas; and lastly, began talks with Harold Anderson of Anderson News concerning newsstand distribution.

When the six founders were amongst themselves (Portacio was absent that first meeting and never became a shareholder), they agreed to the principals that would guide their company, first and foremost: No one would ever really own Image. The company would be a freestanding collective brand that would house all their creator-owned books and allow the artists to keep virtually all of their profits (with a minor percentage of the profits going to Image Central for the traffic and administrative duties of the books). No one besides the creator(s) had ownership of their

the president of Marvel Comics, and Tom DeFalco in New York City. At the gathering, the three creators began by presenting most of their disappointments and misgivings with the way things were going with the current man-agement. Stewart would meet their points by trying to accommodate them with possible lucrative scenarios where they might have more creative control. Although all the parties seemed unprepared for the discussion, the artists now saw that for all their successes and accomplishments in

character, nor would there ever be any editorial interference from any of the founders. And if any creator or founder ever wanted to leave Image, they could do so without any repercussion and the uncontested full ownership of their properties. What Image essentially provided was an umbrella whose greatest asset was strength in the numbers: the more top artists that banded together, the more powerful their company would become. And so the founders quietly invited Dale Keown, Larry Stroman, Sam Kieth, and any major creator willing to join Image to create new comics with them.

By mid-February 1992, the news of Image Comics spread like wildfire as every major newspaper and news station picked up the story of a group of popular comic book artists that were living the American Dream by standing up for themselves. With the outbreak of the report, from *The New York Times* to CNN, Marvel's then-soaring stock plummeted (a regular occurrence over the next five years); on February 17 of that year, the *Los Angeles Daily News* reported that the stock had dropped $11.37 a share to close at $54.62. So as the artists started to prep their Image comics, the men gave their final notices to their Marvel editors. The company was happy to continue publishing Jim Lee and Marc Silvestri books into the summer of 1992, but others, like Jim Valentino and Dale Keown, were bumped off their books and witnessed Marvel's discontent close-up.

No one had ever done anything like Image before. The comic book business was full of freelancers that barely communicated with one another; there had never been a united front or a successful union in the history of the industry amongst creators. With Image, the defiant artists not only became better acquainted but were also able to share their opinions and mistakes, which helped, in many ways, overcome their idealism and lack of business know-how. And when it came time to create their books, the Image artists gravitated to the type of books that they did best: books full of heroes and wall-to-wall action. Some were bursting with new ideas and characters; others took great pride in bringing creations from their adolescence by developing them even further. The initial launch of titles would be the same brand of adventures and artwork that made their Marvel works famous, now free of any type of censorship or restraints.

There was great nervousness and anticipation at Image about how the fans would react to their work without the Marvel Comics logo in the corner. Was the world ready for an entire new world of super-heroes? On April 16, 1992, with the release of Rob Liefeld's *Youngblood* #1, the answer was absolutely positive. The initial order was very successful with over 325,000 copies, but that wasn't the final count by any stretch; the book became a euphoric sensation rarely seen in comics. Retailers did everything in their power to keep the book in stock as fans, new and old, kept buying the "hot" book — eventually the book sold over a million copies. The Image Age had begun. All their reservations and fears subsided as everyone was now in a frenzy to release their books.

As each creator's book came out, the media and fan frenzy continued into the summer. The premiere of *Spawn* and *WildC.A.T.s* led the charge of a handful of Image books that passed the million-selling bench mark. In fact, every Image creator had a taste of economic success in their effort because practically everything that debuted would sell 500,000 copies or more. The gamble with their careers, family, future and hard work had paid off, for now.

The year 1993 had success, headaches and criticism collide full-on. Retailers and fans were frustrated by the increasing amount of late-shipping books that continued to grow on a weekly basis. Many of Image's founders were in over their heads in soliciting comics and way behind (and overworked) working on their books. And, from Day One, Image became the target of various veteran creators that constantly criticized the company in public. They would question Image's purpose and violent books, critique their inexperience as writers, relentlessly comment on their art, accuse them of exploiting the

1963 *heralded the return of Alan Moore to mainstream comics with its release in 1993. Together with Rick Veitch and Stephen Bissette as his co-plotters and artists, the three creators brought a little light and humor to an industry that was in dire need of a wake-up call.* Mystery Incorporated *cover art by Rick Veitch (pencils) and Dave Gibbons (inks). 1963 ©2007 Alan Moore and Rick Veitch.*
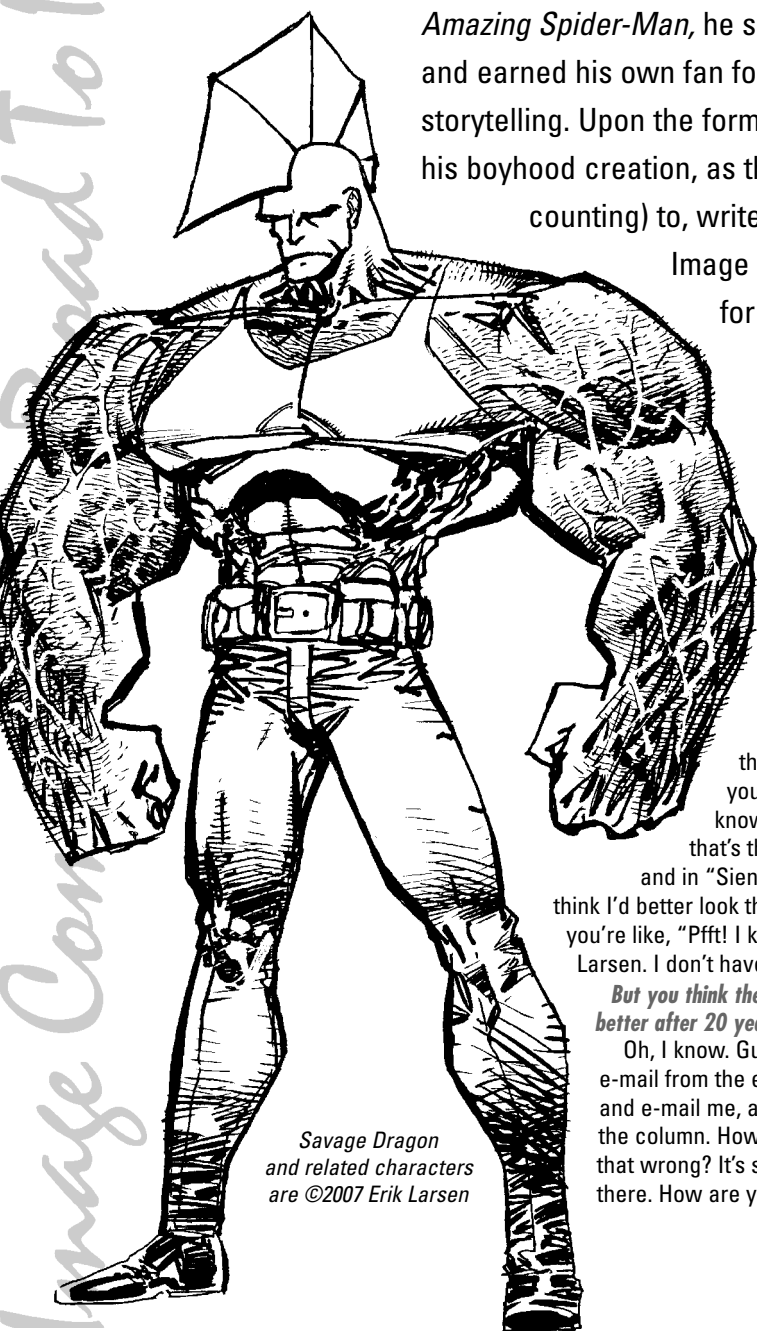
Erik Larsen

Erik Larsen photo by Tom Mason at Image's first formal meeting. ©2007 Tom Mason.

If there was ever a person born to be a comic book artist, Erik Jon Larsen would certainly fit that bill. As a teenager he started writing and drawing his own strips in his fanzine *Graphic Fantasy*. By 1983, the self-taught artist made his professional debut in *Megaton* #1 and worked his way through the independent circuit before finally getting a freelance offer from Jim Shooter, then editor-in-chief of Marvel Comics. Soon other editors took notice of his talents that earned him strings on titles like *Punisher, Doom Patrol,* and *The Outsiders.* When Larsen was given the impossible job of following Todd McFarlane's memorable work on *Amazing Spider-Man,* he successfully maintained the title's highly acclaimed status and earned his own fan following with his overly enthusiastic renderings and storytelling. Upon the formation of Image Comics, Erik resurrected *Savage Dragon,* his boyhood creation, as the title that he would, and continues (for 130 issues-and-counting) to, write and illustrate. In 2004, Erik became the publisher of Image Central, as he hopes to usher in a new era of renaissance for the company that he helped co-found.

Savage Dragon and related characters are ©2007 Erik Larsen

I wanted to ask you something. Does it still bother you a little bit that they constantly misspell your name in comics press circles? It's not the hardest name to spell.

But it's one of those names that you assume you know how to spell, that's the thing about it, and in "Sienkiewicz" you go "I think I'd better look that up." "Larsen" you're like, "Pfft! I know how to spell Larsen. I don't have to look that up."

But you think they would know better after 20 years in the biz?

Oh, I know. Guys will get the e-mail from the end of my column and e-mail me, and my name is on the column. How are you getting that wrong? It's spelled right in there. How are you getting it

screwed up? How are you doing that?

So your dad was a college professor?

Uh, yeah. I'm going to stick with that.

But you dropped out of high school somehow.

Yeah, but my kids don't know that.

Okay.

I'd just as soon to keep that out of the public record.

That's mentioned in a lot of your interviews.

You can do that when you're young and foolish, but when you get older and responsible and want your kids to finish school, you go, "Well, wait a minute. Maybe that's not something I should necessarily be going out there and advertising."

Why'd you dropout?

I was going to a school that I really liked down in Northern California, and we moved up to Bellingham, Washington; the new school was very cliqué-ish. If you had gone to school with those guys since kindergarten you could be part of their group. I was entering into their world in 11th grade and it was just like, man, you are not breaking into this group.

So that whole time you were by yourself. That was part of the reason that made you leave?

Yeah, it was just an unfriendly environment, and it's school stuff I just don't want to be doing. I'm just not happy here. And my dad at that point was teaching workshops in self-reliance, and he was like,

Image Comics: The Road To Independence

The cover art of Savage Dragon *#1, the regular series. ©2007 Erik Larsen.*

screwed, since I had no skills whatsoever in anything else; it's like, if this doesn't happen for you, you're just f*cked. Y'know? You're going to spend the rest of your life peeling potatoes or something, because you've got nothin'. And although it could have been an unfortunate thing for me, it just happened that it worked out and that I was able to do this, but in terms of actual education stuff, yeah, there's not a whole hell of a lot. But it worked out fine because I'm a relatively bright guy and I was able to make a go with this funny book deal.

When you were in high school you were a big time reader?

I wasn't really — I was really, really into comic books much more than anything else. For me it was really comics and nothing else. It was like, "What other books do you read?" I read *Wizard of Oz,* but it wasn't like — I read some things, but I wouldn't call myself a voracious reader by any stretch. There were a couple of things here and there, Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend* or whatever, just a few little things that I was just checking out and reading. But I was not a huge reader.

You didn't do band, nothing?

No, none of that.

So you did everything you could to stay hidden.

Yeah. Well, I would do writing related stuff in that I would participate in the school newspaper, very actively in that. And I was active in any kind of creative writing stuff, so I was always doing that. But in terms of any other proper extracurricular stuff: no. I didn't do a whole lot of junk, it just didn't interest me. I just wanted to do comic books. Nothing in particular, I just wanted to draw comics. I saw in the comics that there was a list of guys who would work on them, that there was an artist and stuff like that, and "I'm going to be like Herb Trimpe. I'm going to draw stuff that other people write."

Was that your epiphany? Like, seeing an issue of Hulk *or something?*

Yeah, that was it. I mean, that's what I wanted.

Herb Trimpe?

Herb Trimpe was the man. "It can't get any better than this. Look at Herb; he's working on *Hulk* — ." Why wouldn't you stay on that for 78 issues? That's the dream job, right?

In a way, that's a lot like you and the run on Savage Dragon*?*

Yeah. I wanted to get kids in my school to write stories for me but none of them would do it. So I thought, "Well, I'm just going to write it myself. Screw you guys."

Herb Trimpe was the first guy? No Kirby?

No. When I started reading comics at that age, Jack was at DC, and DC sucked. It was, like, it's either Marvel or nothin'. That's it for comics. If you didn't read Marvel comics, what the hell was wrong with you? There was really nothing else but — what were you going to read, *Archie*? *Archie* sucks. You're not going to read *Archie…* what the hell is wrong with you?

Were there other artists who were drawing you in as well, like John Buscema?

"Whatever, you're a smart kid. Just drop out."

He was that easy-going. Wow.

I know, whoa!

Did he tell you to get a job?

No, he didn't tell me to get a job. He didn't tell me any of that stuff. He was just like, "Yeah, whatever. You're going to figure this stuff out. I have confidence in you." Well, that's good for you, man, but, damn. That's kind of harsh. And my mom was not real taken with that idea. You could say that.

Your mom was a housewife?

Yeah. She did value education and all that, and so my dad saying "just drop out," that didn't sit too well with her.

Did they come to a decision to do something sooner or later?

Not really. No, the idea was that I had something that I wanted to do. If this didn't work out, I was

mouth was, instead. So it was this green mask with a fin on his head instead of the two big ears. And he had this big green cape, and then he had Speed Racer's pants and shoes. It was just really a kid creation, an amalgam of everything that was cool. "I'm going to drive around in a Mach 5, and I'm going to have Batman's utility belt, and I'm going to have the Batman cape, mask, and say a magic word like Captain Marvel, and I'm going to have a Captain Marvel cape," and just a bunch of dumb things all together. And as time went on, I just wasn't that into drawing this cape all the time, and all this other junk. "Ah, I'll just lose that and have it be that he's a guy." I wasn't thinking, "This guy is the Hulk." It's just the way that worked out. I was just going, "Oh, I guess this guy, once his clothes get ripped up, he's got some similarities to that other guy." But that certainly wasn't the agenda going into it. It wasn't "I want this guy to look like the Hulk."

I thought it might have been an influence since you had such a thing for Hulk.

It's weird, but it didn't. I created the Dragon before I discovered Hulk. I wasn't really aware that my dad didn't buy Marvel comics, my dad bought comics in the '40s and '50s, so those weren't the comics that I had around the house growing up. And we weren't getting into the new comics; we just had his old comics. So we had a huge pile of old comics, hundreds and hundreds of all these things, and the key issues of just a lot of them. He had most of the EC comics, almost all of them. And it was like, "These are great."

Were you already making the rounds of conventions around the time Megaton came out, like going to San Diego?

No. No. By that time I was back up in Bellingham, and by that time there was a comic book store I was going to. Up until we moved up, though, up through tenth grade, there was no comic book store. If you wanted comics, you had to go to Fort Bragg and go to the Rexall Drugs. And that was a haul. It wasn't like you could just go there. You had to either, if you were old enough, hitch-hike to Fort Bragg, or wait till laundry day and have the parents pack up the crap and go to Fort Bragg, and I happened to wander over to get comics.

When you started going to cons, that's when you started getting gigs, right?

My first real big convention was when I went to Chicago.

That must have been a big trip for you, back then? I don't know if you went with your parents or what.

I went by myself.

By plane or car?

Plane, yeah.

That must have left some impression.

The thing was, some years before, I had gone to New York, and my granddad gave me the money to go to New York and I'd shown Sal Amendola my stuff over at DC, and he was in charge of this "new talent" program, and he was supposed to be getting in kids and show them the ropes and all that kind of stuff, so he said, "Hey, come on out." And I came on out, and when I got there they were like, "Sh*t, we don't know what to do with you." I don't think they were expecting me actually to show up for some reason, so when I was there they just said, "Try your hand at drawing this *Batman* comic," a comic that was already being done. It was a real script from a real issue of *Batman*. But they just wanted to see that I knew what I was doing, so I ended up drawing this whole issue of *Batman* that had already been drawn by somebody else. And then, I just sent it in, and I didn't know what I was supposed to do. And so I made copies of it, but I sent in the original art, and never heard a thing. I also drew a Batgirl story which was awful; my work on it was awful. And the *Batman* thing is pretty pitiful. I wouldn't have given me the time of day.

This is in the mid-'80s. I'm surprised you didn't go to Marvel.

I didn't think about it. It didn't even occur to me — that's how dumb I was.

When I was at Marvel, most people just went with their portfolio and that's it. No appointment, no nothin'.

Well, I didn't know. I didn't know the rituals; I didn't know what you were supposed to do. All I knew was that I was there.

You didn't do the Marvel Tryout thing? That came out around that time.

You know, I didn't do it. That didn't stop them from applying me to that, because they would say, "Yeah, you were runner-up in the *Marvel Tryout* book!"

You were on there?

I was one of them, and I didn't even try out. I didn't even draw the story that we were supposed to draw. But they just took my samples and decided I was the runner-up. Mark Bagley won that thing. And he was bitching the whole time, "Hey, why did they pick me, they don't call me back and they're not giving me any work. There's a bunch of us who

SuperPatriot action figure produced by McFarlane Toys.

Jim Lee

Jim Lee. Photograph
courtesy of DC Comics.

Since his penciling debut with *Alpha Flight* #51, Jim Lee made his presence immediately known on his way to the top of the industry. Lee worked vigorously on perfecting his art by blending his influences with elements of modern pop culture into his own God-given passion for detail and high-powered heroism. He rapidly found himself ushering *X-Men*, his childhood favorites, to levels of unprecedented success with the eight million copies sold of *X-Men* #1. Upon joining Image Comics, Jim co-created *WildC.A.T.s* (with longtime friend Brandon Choi) and a plethora of popular characters for his own outfit, WildStorm. On August 27th of 1998, Jim left the Image family and sold WildStorm and their titles to DC Comics. Today, as an executive for DC Comics, Jim serves as the editorial director of WildStorm, where he recently had an eventful relaunch of his line. And on the art front, the influential artist currently collaborates with premiere comics writers like Grant Morrison (on the new *WildC.A.T.s*) and Frank Miller (on *All-Star Batman and Robin*).

Grifter ©2007 WildStorm Productions, a division of DC Comics.

When you were in Princeton, New Jersey [in the mid-'80s], did you have an epiphany that you wanted to get into comics? You've mentioned in the past that your parents wanted you to be a doctor.
Yeah.

Was that something you didn't want? Could you see yourself being a disgruntled doctor?
Well, I don't think I would have been disgruntled, but I think in terms of what I loved at the time was comics, and it wasn't the first time I thought about it. I think anyone, a kid that's reading comics, they dream about being a comic book creator. Yeah, so I remember when I was ten or 12 I sent some drawings in to Marvel looking for a job, I think, so I certainly had the notion earlier. I don't think I gave it real serious thought until I was in college and I had to decide what I was going to do after I graduated.

Was there a particular thing that made you take that thought seriously? Was it

really **The Dark Knight Returns?**
Yeah, I think it was a number of different factors all happening at the same time. 1986, that was my senior year at Princeton, and you need to write a thesis to graduate, so a lot of seniors take "easy classes," what are called "gut classes," slang of the time, like Music 101, Clapping for Credit, or Studio Art, to ease up their academic workloads so they could spend hours writing their theses. So I took Studio Art, and it was taught by this teacher named Fontaine Dunn, who I've actually reconnected with in the years since. She was an abstract expressionist artist that commuted down from New York City, and she was very involved in the art scene in New York from the '50s, '60s and on, and she taught a studio class. So we did life drawing, painting, and whatnot, and she really inspired me to consider a career in art, whether it's fine art, commercial art, whatever, but the passion she had for art, the way she talked about it. We went up to her loft in New York City and got to see a little bit of how she lived, and just that kind of lifestyle was very romantic, very appealing at the time. And then also *Dark Knight Returns* came out that year, and at the time Princeton was a very small town, there were no comic book stores.

There are still no comic book stores here.
That year, '86, a freshman, some girl who was really into comics, started up a comic book club. At Princeton they have all these basically student-run businesses. You can sell, like, I remember beach

Early Gen13 *pin-up featured originally in* The Art of Homage Studios, *in 1993. In the book, Jim says, "Everyone in the studio was doing a dinosaur piece, so I decided to take a stab at it, as well... especially after all the young punks gave me a hard time about the dinosaurs I drew in* Punisher War Journal *and* The X-Men.*"*
©2007 WildStorm Productions.

stuff up on their wall. It was a very different kind of attitude towards all things geeky. It's much more a part of mainstream culture than it was back in 1986.

So [DC Comics editor] Archie Goodwin actually evaluated your portfolio? He was the first person that opened the door a little bit?

Yeah, after I graduated from college I put together all sorts of pages over the summer and mailed them off, with really no positive response. I got form letters from Marvel and DC. I had befriended a couple of comic book creators in St. Louis. Probably the most prominent was Rick Burchett, who still works at DC. I heard that you have to meet these people in person to get a real response to your work. So I put together a portfolio and I opened up a comic book and it said, "New York Convention, biggest convention of the year." I didn't realize it was for that particular organizer, not in general. But it was a con up at the Roosevelt Hotel, and I flew up there, stayed with an old college roommate of mine who was working in New York City, went to the con, and, yeah, Archie Goodwin was the guy that I convinced to look at my work, and he's the one that told me to come in to Marvel that Monday, and I think this was, what, a Saturday? Yeah.

Then he referred you right away to Carl Potts, right?

Yeah, Carl Potts worked with a lot of new artists, and so basically, Archie looked at it and said, "Well, it looks as good as I remember it looking" — him being very, very kind, because it wasn't that great, at all. Yeah, and then he pulled Carl Potts in, and then Carl really took me under his wing and worked with me and gave me a tryout story, and then after I did that on time and to his [specifications], he gave me a fill-in issue of *Alpha Flight,* and then another one, and then I got the regular book.

Do you know what Carl liked about your art, or what they both liked about it?

Probably 'cause I followed his instructions. [*laughs*] I don't know. My stuff was pretty weak, John Byrne-*cum*-Neal Adams kind of influenced.

But there was clean storytelling. That's what I remember, picking it up as a kid, that first Alpha Flight, *it had a clean sense to it. The figure work was very clean, it wasn't cluttered.*

Yeah, I tried to keep it clean, but what I could do with my hand was not quite what I could do in my head, hadn't quite caught up, and I don't think anyone really took note of it other than the fact that I made my deadline.

*When you saw Terry Austin inking that Wolverine cover [*Alpha Flight #53*] you did, were you like, "Wow, I think I made it"?*

Yeah, because he changed things, he fixed a lot of the mistakes. So, yeah, I really started seeing how influential the inkers were in giving my work some polish.

So you weren't into, like, The X-Men *when Austin and Byrne were working on it?*

Oh, no, huge! That was my favorite comic. *X-Men* and *Daredevil*, when Frank Miller was on it.

So seeing him ink that, did it mean something to you at

shorts being real big, or pizza delivery, and you essentially would get a monopoly if you put an application in, and she had started up a comic book club; she sold comic books out of her dorm room, and I remember that's where I bought *Dark Knight Returns.* So I think otherwise I might have missed it until I got back to St. Louis. I was still getting my subscriptions to various Marvel comics, but I wasn't really following them very closely. The material really didn't move me like it did when I was a kid, and I was just collecting out of inertia. So it was all those things, *Dark Knight Returns,* me taking this art class, this girl starting up this comic club, so that's how I got a copy of *Dark Knight Returns* — .

You weren't even into the party scene, I guess, if you were into comics at that point?

Princeton's a pretty academic school. We would go out Thursday through Sunday, but comics was very much a closet hobby, much more then than it is now. And so, if people collected comics, you would never know it. No one would hang posters of the

the time? Having been this big X-Men fan, it's like, "Wow, I'm right there."

Oh, well, my goal at Marvel was always to work on *The X-Men*. It was my favorite comic. Even before Byrne and Claremont were on the book, I collected a lot of the old issues. Yeah, when Stan and Jack worked on it, and Werner Roth, and Steranko, and Barry Windsor-Smith, and Neal Adams. I had a lot of those. I never had a complete collection of anything, but if I had one run on anything, *X-Men* was the one I had the most number of issues of, and I just loved the concept, I loved the characters. And so when Dave Cockrum and Len Wein worked on the relaunch, that just completely blew me away. And then when Byrne and Claremont worked on it, it took it to another level for me. Yeah, they were my favorite characters. I was dying to work on those characters.

Do you remember how you got introduced to Whilce Portacio and Scott Williams?

Let's see. Whilce was the very first inker on my work at Marvel. He inked *Alpha Flight* #51, and me being very enthusiastic and wide-eyed and bushy-tailed, I got his number and I called him up and really made an attempt to talk to him just so he knew the person behind the pencils, so he'd maybe give me a little extra effort. And we talked, he was very easy-going, a very nice guy, and we hit it off. And that's what led to the formation of Homage Studios and me moving out to California to work with him and Scott later.

Was that a particularly good period for you, when it was just you three guys? Because they're very fond of that period. I think for Whilce, that's the best period that he had in comics.

Yeah, it's a very romantic period because all of us were hungry and just starting out. And the industry was different back then, too. This was before *Wizard*, this was before big, big conventions and any sort of media attention to comics, and so you're really doing it because you love comics, and it's a very small, diehard group of people that collect comics. Yeah, a very cool period. We rented a one-bedroom apartment, converted that into a studio, chipped in for a fax machine, and we'd just basically get together every day and draw and try to make our deadlines. We were very, very focused on deadlines and trying to do our best. We were just really, really into the characters and the storylines and really didn't have to worry about a lot of the other stuff that crept into the industry, like art sales. Even though there were some back then, it wasn't to the same degree it is now. It was much simpler. You just focused on pencils and inks. And now you've got to really have the right colorist, the right paper, the right writer, the right marketing, and all that stuff. And back then, if you did get stuck, people took note.

But back then you felt, you guys would push each other in terms of art to where you wanted it to get, right? Because I think Whilce said you guys kept pushing each other, like if something wasn't right, you'd redraw it again until you got it right.

Oh, yeah. I mean, we worked together for a reason. We did want to just slap each other on the back and

say, "Great job." We were really trying to improve what we were doing, and we were very much influencing each other in terms of storytelling and style. And I think actually Whilce was influencing me more than I was influencing him partially because he was more advanced in his skills. When I was just starting out, he had already been drawing quite a bit in high school and later, and had been working professionally longer than [me], so he was teaching me all sorts of things.

But getting the X-Men book was your goal? I read somewhere, where you said you would have been happy to have done 50 issues of X-Men. Where could you have gone once you got the X-Men book? Did you see yourself staying there forever?

I tend to be impatient, and I think I did as many issues as I could before I got burned out on the deadlines. Working on deadlines, you're talking about just working crazy hours for, like, two or three weeks, and then doing nothing for a week to recover, and then jumping back on the train and working hard

Divine Right: The Adventures of Max Faraday #1, page 1: Jim's debut as writer! Art by Lee & Williams. ©2007 WildStorm Productions.

Image Makers: The Founders

Image-era promotional art. ©2007 WildStorm Productions.

lot of really crappy issues and then get kicked off, I guess.

So it wasn't anything like seeing your art on T-shirts and you're not getting royalties?

No, that was definitely — now you're starting to get into the origins of Image, and I think right around that time comics was going through this huge boom. There was a lot of speculation in comics, but also there was a lot attention on comics because they were selling so well, so you start having these video game deals and T-shirts, and movies were just starting to get going, so a lot of our art that we had been creating was used for ancillary product, like T-shirts and video game covers and manuals and whatnot. Yeah, there was no compensation for that, much less a free T-shirt. So, yeah, that irked a lot of us, and I think it had to do with… not that we were asking for a lot, it was just like, well, we produced this art, a human being produced this art. Is this necessarily a fair situation? And I think rather than stay there and work with management to come to some solution, we decided, well, we're just going to leave and do our own thing.

But Todd was the first one to approach you about this, right?

I would say… y'know, you're talking about something that happened, what…?

Fifteen years ago, but you would think that you would remember. That was a pretty big decision. I think it would take a lot to leave that security at Marvel.

You know what? It didn't take as much as you would think, partially because I had one kid at the time, but I was still pretty young, and when you're that age, you can take the chances. I never really felt like, "Oh, man, I can't leave the security." I definitely didn't want to do something foolish and fail. I think I was more scared of failure rather than, oh, I'll leave this really cushy thing behind and what if I can't get it again. I don't think that was an issue. It was more, like, if I was going to make this big move, I want it to be successful, and that meant having the right people involved. And, yeah, it was Todd, I think, that was spearheading it emotionally for me, and his involvement is really what brought me on board. I think every Image partner has a different recollection or story to tell, but for me, personally, it was because of Rob and Todd. We had kind of grown tight, we had seen each other at the cons, we talked a lot, and I think we were all competing against one another at the same time we were befriending one another in terms of success and sales and whatnot. And I think it was definitely Todd's passion for it, actually, both their passion for it that really got me going, as well.

Did it surprise you when they came up to you to talk about this, or did you expect it a little bit?

It's not so much a surprise, because it's not like something where it came out of the blue. We had talked about doing things even before then, because we were always, I think, dissatisfied. Maybe we were dissatisfied with marketing and promotion, and dissatisfied with some of the restrictions on the art that we could draw, or some of the compensation from the use of our art in various packaging and

again, and it's grueling. So it was something that we could do because we were both young and none of us had any kids at the time, so we could really put our energies into just the art. Yeah, it's hard to say how many issues I would have lasted. I think I did as many as I probably could, and I think, more importantly, there were certain characters I wanted to draw and tell stories with, and fortunately I got to do a lot of that.

Were you ever dissatisfied at Marvel by anything?

Dissatisfied? I left, so there must have been some level of dissatisfaction I think, or maybe it was just that Image represented something bigger and better, and I think I liked the idea of challenges and I liked the idea of doing new things. And I just hated, like, I just never wanted to be complacent in life, never mind just art, but it was the kind of thing where you always want to leave the audience to want more, and I think toward the end of my *X-Men* run I was starting to get burnt, and I didn't want to produce a

Rob Liefeld

There is no Image Comics without Rob Liefeld. The seeds that would eventually grow to become the juggernaut that we know today as Image started with Mr. Liefeld's vision. Bursting with a plethora of his own characters and ideas, he was searching for a venue where he wouldn't have to worry about editorial restraints and the ownership of his creations and stories. Now the idea of a creator-owned title wasn't anything entirely new… except that there had never been a full-fledged superstar artist, fresh off a multi-million selling comic to ever make the leap to the independents. Rather quickly he found kindred feelings with other top artists of like minds and together they started a revolution of a magnitude which the industry will probably never see again.

Rob Liefeld. Photo ©2007 Tom Mason.

Youngblood. ©2007 Rob Liefeld.

Born in Fullerton, California in 1967, Rob Liefeld was the son of a Baptist minister, raised in a very nurturing home throughout his formative years. Although enamored with the *Star Wars* movies in his youth, he discovered that comics were his true calling when enraptured by the books of Byrne, Miller, Simonson, Pérez and later, Arthur Adams. By the time he graduated high school, the constant doodler had taken some art classes and set his sights on breaking into the comics industry by parading a finely tuned portfolio. Rather quickly, he met independent publisher Gary Carlson, who published his first work in the pages of *Megaton*.

Opportunity really knocked in an offer to the big leagues from DC editor Mike Carlin for the spunky artist to pencil a new *Hawk and Dove* mini-series. Despite some developing friction between editor and artist — mostly when the youngster got too experimental as he illustrated some pages sideways in the final issue — the book became a fan favorite and a decent success that earned Hawk and Dove their own ongoing series. The wünderkind was now a full-fledged comic book artist. According to Karl Kesel, co-writer and inker of the title, at the time, "Mike Carlin once said of Rob, 'He has it. He just doesn't have it yet.'"[1]

Soon copies of Rob's published pencils made the rounds at Marvel Comics where they landed on the desk of Bob Harras, the new editor of the mighty *X-Men* books. Always a good judge of artistic talent, Harras perhaps saw the purity in Rob's art, along with the tenacity in his imagination… maybe even someone that could add a different spice to the new direction that the X-books were heading in. Like all rookies, Harras gave him a chance to realize his potential and become acquainted with the demanding Marvel fans on various X-book fill-ins. In a matter of months, his dedication was rewarded with the art task on the fledgling *New Mutants* series, beginning with #86.

Paired with writer Louise Simonson, the artist's arrival went below the public radar, yet month by month, his contributions to the book lured fans intrigued by Cable, the latest gritty, mysterious mutant from the distant future. The jovial nature of his overall art and panel work was ingratiated by readers of books. With Simonson's departure on #97, Liefeld made his pitch for total control of plots in a
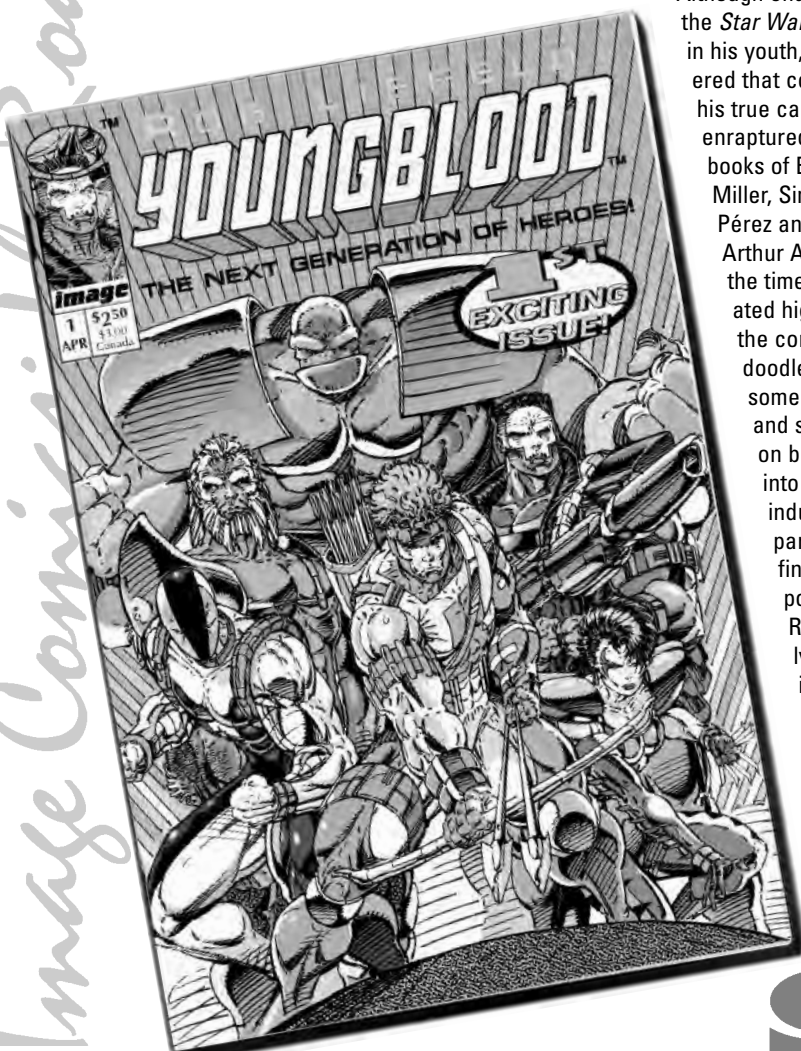
Todd McFarlane

Recent publicity photo of Todd McFarlane.

No matter where Todd McFarlane goes, he always seems to have to do things his own way. And it's exactly that attitude and tenacity that has given this artist the ability to remain fiercely independent and create an empire from his character Spawn. From his humble beginnings in lowly selling titles at Marvel and DC Comics to his great successes on *Amazing Spider-Man* and *Incredible Hulk,* he's always left his stamp and flair on anything he touches. Todd's elastic visualization of Spider-Man radically transformed that character's appearance and remains influential at Marvel today. Dissatisfied with Marvel's constant editorial interference and attitude towards creators, he quit and entered a self-imposed retirement from the *Spider-Man* title that he successfully premiered with sales in the millions. Soon he reemerged to help found Image Comics and made Spawn and himself into household names. The first issue of *Spawn* sold over 1,800,000 copies and remains the best-selling independent comic title ever. Today the immensely popular artist is president of Image Comics and owner of both McFarlane Toys and McFarlane Productions; he's also highly sought after for his artistic vision in mainstream film, television and other mediums.

● ●

Spawn is TM & ©2007 Todd McFarlane Productions.

When you were growing up you were a rabid comic book fan, right? You used to write letters and all sorts of things.

It depends on your definition of "growing up." I started collecting comic books probably when I was 16. I'm actually a late-bloomer. Once I started collecting, I became a freak. I think most people when they collect are a little more reasonable about their collecting. I've always been sort of an obsessive kind of guy. Like, when I get into something, I dive in completely. When I started collecting, I started buying Marvel first, started practically buying every single title, and then when I ran out of those titles, I started buying DCs. And when I ran out of those, then it was the independent comic books. And then there was, "I'm going to read them, and now I'm going to try and draw them, then write letters to them." I just fell in love with the industry as a whole.

You actually worked in a comic book store, right?

Yeah. That was in Spokane, Washington.

When did you start taking the art seriously?

Probably, I would say, the beginning of my senior year of high school.

But you already had a scholarship in sports? The last thing on your mind was being a comic book artist?

No, not really. I was always doodling, so what ends up happening, then, is I start collecting the comic books, right? Then the comics become a focus of my artwork. I go, "Hey, you know what? Instead of just doodling, I'll actually put it to a constructive use." And I go, "These comic books are pretty cool. Why don't I start training myself to draw comic books instead of just trying — because at that point I was doing 15 different styles, y'know, in my notebooks? There was no rhyme or reason to my artwork. So the comic books then became a focal point. I'd go, "I'm gonna teach myself to draw comic books." And then, I started doing that in high school, especially my senior year, so by the time I graduated from high school and then I end up going to college and playing baseball, I was very realistic about the chances of being a pro athlete. Although I had delusional friends, I knew that the odds were against me. So I knew I had to get an education, and at the same time "I'll continue teaching myself these comic books and sending off samples." And at some point I'm going to have to make a living. So if it was baseball, if it was

comic books, if it was being a commercial artist or whatever, go into the printing business, I didn't care. If you give me my druthers, I would have put them in order, but I also knew that as a young kid, whoever was going to give me a job, I was going to take it coming out of college as soon as I got it. And even in college I was also sending off the samples. I ended up getting somebody to say "yes" in the comic book world about three weeks before I graduated, so I never really went for any real job thereafter.

Were your parents supportive of your career choice, of going into comics?

Yeah. Even when I was younger, they bought me, like, drawing tables, and they bought my tools and stuff like that. If they were at art supply places, they'd come and bring me stuff. So I don't think that they ever imagined, nor did I, that I'd be able to have as good a career as I have, but they figured, "Hey, if he's enjoying himself and he likes it, he could be doing worse things. And so the art, we should be encouraging him to do something he likes." So, yeah, they were always supportive. They weren't one of those ones that you read about, where they say,

While in high school, 16-year-old Todd drew this cover of Spawn *for his own fanzine effort.*

"Why don't you go get a real job, son?" They were never like that. They were just like, "Do something you like to do. I don't know if you can make a living in drawing, but you know what? God bless your effort."

And what did your dad do, in terms of work?

He was in the printing business.

Oh, okay.

It was more of, like, putting books together and running printing presses and stuff, but… and to me, I thought I'd either go into the printing business with him or I'd become a commercial artist. I had figured that would be the reality of life.

Did your dad help you do a portfolio early in your career, on The X-Men*?*

No, but I did that when we were in Spokane, so we just got a local one. But again, not to jump too fast forward, but what my dad did was expose me enough to printing over the course of my life that by the time we ended up quitting Marvel to start Image, one of the concepts, which was, "Oh, you poor little artist boys, this is going to be so hard, printing books." Like, to me, printing was going to be the easiest part, y'know? I'm going, "Drawing and printing, I've got both those bases covered. What are you talking about?" So I think that God inadvertently put me in a good position to help make that break away years later. I didn't have any fear of getting stuff printed, because I had seen the magic trick of printing and it wasn't that big of a deal.

What were your influences on your style?

Early on, when I first started collecting, it was guys who were drawing at that point, probably the first two big influences would have been George Pérez and John Byrne. To me, they were at the top of the heap for me at that point. Later on I discovered guys like Neal Adams, and then Walt Simonson, Frank Miller came a little bit later, and then Art Adams came on the scene. He had a short little burst there that was pretty cool. Mike Golden, who was terrific. Then, as I became entrenched with comic books, I got involved in, sort of, again, the history of comics, so all of a sudden I started following and reading up on the past careers of guys like Gil Kane, who I think is amazing, and Jack Kirby and Steve Ditko and these guys, and fell in love with…. At the beginning, when I started collecting comics, I didn't appreciate their work because I didn't understand it — because it wasn't "contemporary." As I got a little bit older and a little bit more mature, I was able to actually look at their artwork and get stuff out of it and put it into a 1990 version years later as a professional. So when people go, "Oh, Todd, your story-telling," I attribute a lot of it to Gil Kane and Kirby. It's weird when you say stuff like that. I don't draw like Gil Kane or Jack Kirby, but their mindset of doing big, dynamic pages and giving you big melodrama with your fantasy comic books, a lot of that was derived from them.

But you pushed yourself, too. You didn't want to be just another John Buscema clone that was common at Marvel at that point.

Well, yeah. So once I start sending off my samples and I end up getting the first job, then the reality at

that point is not only trying to have a steady gig, but how do you separate yourself somewhat from the sea of artists that are going on at any given day, right? Maybe it was just me, but I assume most other people who have read a decent amount of comic books, when you looked at a George Pérez book, you knew it was George. When you looked at a Kirby book, you knew it was Jack. When you looked at a Gil Kane book, you knew it was Gil. When you looked at a Frank Miller book, it was Frank. Each one of them, given that the rules are the same, "we need you to draw pictures to these comic book words," you still were able to define who each one of the guys were. While I could actually argue that John Buscema was awesome in his own right, doing a watered-down John Buscema doesn't work. But John Buscema being John Buscema was awesome. So I think what had happened to a lot of guys, they just were doing a water-down version of somebody else, and I think what ended up happening in my career is I ended up taking little nuggets from about 10, 12, 15 different artists and putting it into a big pot, stirring it up, and calling it my style. But I can point to stuff going, "Those capes were influenced by Byrne." And there's another guy, named Marshall Rogers that did a run on "Batman" that did the best capes I ever saw. And then you go, "Oh, okay," and the way the body swings, that's these three guys, and the way this guy does machinery, and the way that that guy does aliens, the way that guy does… and it

just became a hodgepodge so that I just cobbled it together and went, "Yeah, okay, this is how I'm going to spill it out, and I'm going to call it the McFarlane look." It ended up, luckily, having its own unique style, so years later, the things I admired about other people, which you could recognize in your artwork, I was able to pull that trick out of the bag and have people go, "Ah, yeah, that's Todd's stuff. Nobody draws like Todd."

When you started, what book did you aspire the most to do? Were you just hopeful that you'd get a shot at X-Men *one day, and sit at home drawing for Marvel or something?*

You know what? I get that question even with my own company, "Where do you see yourself in five years?" I don't know; wherever the opportunity is. So I love comic books, and if comic books had maintained a steady business, I'd probably still be doing it. But, because I started collecting at such a late age, at 16, there weren't really one or two characters that I had grown up with that I just go, "Oh, my God, it'd be the end of my days if I could only draw this guy." I've run into guys like that. So, to me, I found, on some level, every character I drew was interesting at that moment, because I was going, "How can I make this interesting for myself to draw?" So when I was doing *Spider-Man*, I did the stuff I did on *Spider-Man*, more than anything else really to entertain myself while I was drawing. Because I'd go, "I hope to draw it for a hundred issues." When I was doing *The*

Image Comics: The Road To Independence

[*Incredible*] *Hulk*, I came up with a way of making him look and move and feel in a way that was interesting to me so that I'd go, "Oh, maybe I'll draw him for a hundred issues." It never happens, but you have to go in with the mindset that you'll be drawing this guy for a long time so you actually get interested in it. Although I wasn't ever a big fan, *per se*, at any given time, of Iron Man, but if I had taken over the *Iron Man* book, Iron Man would have instantly become my favorite hero at that moment. Because I would have gone, "Ohh, Iron Man, now he's the coolest! How can I make him look cool? And how do I entertain myself drawing?" Because if you're drawing a book and you begrudge the character you're pushing the pencil on, it becomes labor. It's tough to get those pages done when you're going, "Aw, I'd rather be doing *Superman*." You can't have that mindset. You have to go, at least for me, every character I'm working on is the best character that's in the comic book field at that moment. Otherwise you drive yourself crazy.

When you were working at Marvel, you pushed yourself hard, because there were was a time when the books were even bi-weekly or something?

Yeah. It was bi-weekly, because they had been doing the bi-weeklies, and I remember when I came I go, "Hey, I hate bi-weeklies because you've got to take the regular artist off it. So if we're going to go bi-weekly, then I'm going to stay on the book." Now, I found that it was a little bit a foolish endeavor because I was penciling and inking at that time, and then trying to pencil and ink two books at the same time; that was very difficult. Some of the bi-week-lies had some inkers that came on, and because of that the style shifts a little bit, because I was normally inking my own stuff. So I did to myself what I didn't like, which was shifting the style somewhat. But again, they never asked me whether we just wanted to do a monthly book. If it was up to me, I'd have kept the book monthly and have me pencil and ink every page. But they put those styles on me. But, yeah, you just get the deadlines done. Did I have a lot of all-nighters back then? Absolutely.

You also tried to impress the fans by not letting fill-in artists do issues during your run. You always kept in mind this public persona. You didn't want to let down your fans. You did lot of conventions, and I'm sure Marvel didn't send you to these shows. You were in charge of your own career, right?

Well, you know what? At some level I don't think there's any magic to the success that I was able to get. It goes something like this: Keep your deadlines. Come up with a little bit of a style that is a little bit different than everybody else. Be friendly to the consumer. And stay on a book for more than five f*ckin' issues. I mean, there's no magic. Here's the problem: During my entire career, I never had a hankering to want to do an *X-Men* book, and at some point I actually got to the point where I go, "I will never do an *X-Men* book," because I wanted to be one of those guys to prove to the young kid that you can have a huge career and never do *The X-Men*. And if you don't believe me, then you're not looking at me, because I'm the example. You don't have to do

The X-Men. So would Jim Lee's career have been bigger or less if he hadn't? I don't know, but Jim Lee's a hell of an artist, and he didn't have to draw *The X-Men*. So did he shortcut his way to being popular via the fast route? Maybe, I don't know. At some point I felt that doing *The X-Men* as an artist was like becoming a Yankees baseball player. It's too easy. I've always been like an underdog guy. I just don't like the easy route. I never wanted to play on the winningest team when I played in sports. I always wanted to be the mediocre team that beat the winningest team because to me there was more satisfaction. So drawing *The X-Men,* drawing Wolverine, whatever, that's just too easy. What's more impressive to me was stuff like John Byrne taking over stuff like *Iron Fist* and making it interesting to me. And Frank Miller taking a character that had been around forever, Daredevil, that most people didn't care about, and reinventing it. And to me those were bigger moments than going, oh, to be doing the number one book that's been number one for 20 years. If it stays number one, it has nothing to do with you. I would rather be on a book that's #20 and bring the sales up to #8 than to be on the #1 book and not be the guy who took it to #2. Forget it. And if you stay at number one, they're like, "Yeah? So what? It's been number one for 20 years." There's nothing there for you that will build your career. Take *Captain America*. I always tell kids, take *Captain America* and take him to #1. Oh my gosh, you'll be a saint, y'know? Go get *Batman*, put him to be the biggest comic book ever. Take *Wonder Woman, Flash,* take *Green Lantern,* get another book, another mid-level character and drive them to the top like Frank did with *Daredevil* and they will basically name awards after you.

When they gave you your own title, the self-titled Spider-Man, was it because you wanted to tell your own stories? Were you starting to get frustrated already at Marvel?

Not really. Well, I was always frustrated, but I wanted to draw… remember I said earlier that I'd come up with a style that would entertain me? Again, this is maybe all part of my ego: that the easiest way to entertain you, is to actually draw the stuff you like. So what I was drawing was the characters and the bad guys in the situation that the writers liked. So I'm going, "Oh, darn it." They'd give me the bill and "How come you can't have this? Oh, I love this guy." And I'm going, "I don't like it; it's dumb!" I mean I draw, I'm going to do the best I could, but I wasn't necessarily a fan of Sandman; what did I care, y'know? So I go "Ah, if I were writing the book, here's what I'd put in." It was the same mindset as the writer except now I go, "Cool!" I think it's too easy for a writer to put stuff on paper that he doesn't have to draw. So, in other words, if I'm writing and I don't have to draw it… well, I wouldn't ever actually write this, because I know somebody would have to draw it. But if I were a
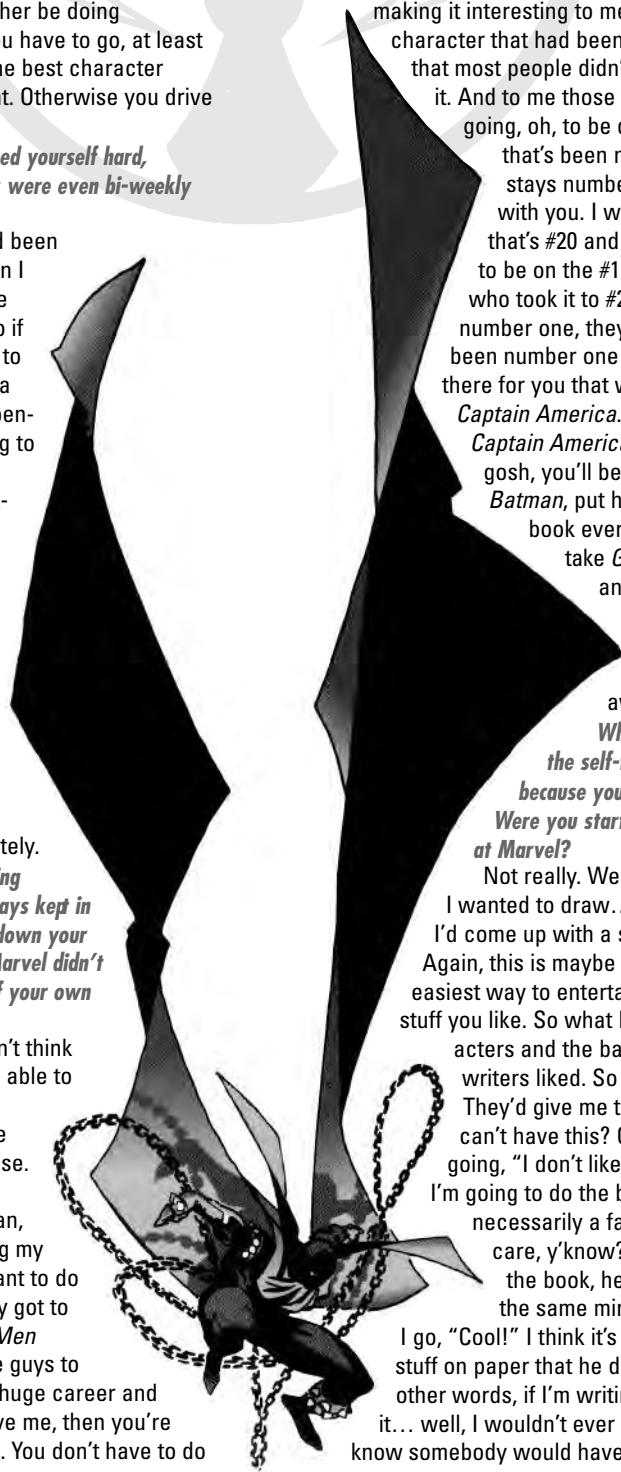
writer and I never drew, then I would go, "Oh! Let's do a fleet of aliens coming down from 12 planets, about a thousand of them, and then heads are floating over the Capitol Building, make about 18,000 of them dropping down, and then we're going to have, like, The Avengers and The Defenders coming," and you're starting to get into *Independence Day.* Well, you know what? For me to describe that scene, I can type that in about two-and-half minutes. It takes four days to draw that damn picture. Three minutes to think it up, four days to draw the double-page spread. It's just painful. God bless — I mean, some guys are just better at it, George Pérez, God bless him, but I didn't have it in me. I didn't have it in me. And so even after I'd left *Infinity Inc.* with Roy Thomas, I'd just go, "I will never ever do a team book again." It's probably why I didn't ever want to do *X-Men*. I had been burnt out on a team book which is a bunch of talking heads, and each guy maybe gets nine panels, and you don't ever get to fall in love with any of the characters.

Yet somehow they talked you into Invasion?

Oh, yeah, but a lot of the thumbnails on that were done by Keith Giffen, he'd laid some of the ground-work for me. Because, again, that was during bi-weeklies, too. But anyway, so for me, I just wanted to do, like, one hero, one bad guy, and I wanted it to be the bad guy of my choice. That was it. So it wasn't that I needed to do *Spider-Man*, because when I quit, I was willing to take any book. But then I'd have to have control of that character, and I looked at all the 50 bad guys they had, and I picked the ones that I thought were visually appealing.

When you did that first "Torment" story, you really blossomed artwise. In terms of art, it might be some of your best work.

Well, what I was trying to do — and again, I succeeded only to the level that it was my first writing assignment; I know over the years people have looked at that story and poked fun at it a little bit, but it was the first story I wrote. Their expecta-tion was out of whack. They were taking Todd the veteran artist and not seeing that he was being hooked up with Todd the rookie novice writer. They somehow thought that Todd the writer was going to be as skilled as Todd the artist. No! Todd the writer had zero days under his belt, and Todd the artist had years and years under his belt. Of course they weren't going to be the same skill level. I think I'm a better writer today than I was when I wrote that first "Torment."

That first storyline was pretty good. There's a lot of stuff that would later show up in Spawn*. It's basically a love story of Spider-Man trying to get back to Mary Jane, y'know?*

So here's the thing with that book, I tried to make it more storytelling, more movie-esque, if you will… I did put captions in it. So later I actually wrote a couple of stories where I actually took all the captions out, and I did that, like, in some of the Sam and

Twitch stuff. But, y'know, the sound effects that I use, I'm not a big fan of sound effects, but the sound effects that I used in that one were used as a sound-track, like in a movie. If you actually just look at the sound effect, which was this Doom-Doom-Doom thing I did, if you look at it as a soundtrack, not as a sound effect, because people got confused. They were reading it different than I was writing it. It was that it was just this noise that was thumping in his head and the bigger the word "Doom," the louder the noise was getting in his head. Blah, blah, blah, blah. So I had all these theories in my head. But again, being unskilled at writing and not knowing how to project it, it confused people or wasn't as eloquent as it could have been, but at least it was an effort, y'know? I thought it's better to try something and fail than to not try at all, which is again why I admire a guy like Keith Giffen, too. He's had about five different styles. They haven't all been successful, but at least he tried, which is better than just picking one style and sitting on it for the rest of your natural life; which, again, is why a guy like Frank always reinvented his style. You take a look at what he does now compared to what he did when he first broke in, it's dramatically different. Guys that are able to have the confidence to walk away from some of their earlier work to try things — that's all I was trying to do. What you will see that, to me, was very obvious in my writ-ing — if you look at all of it other than the last story I wrote, because that was sort of pushed upon me — was that I like monsters and I like dark stuff. So if you take a look at the checklist, it was Kraven's daughter and the Lizard, and the Lizard acted like a monster at night. And the next story was Ghost

Violator. ©2007 Todd McFarlane Productions.
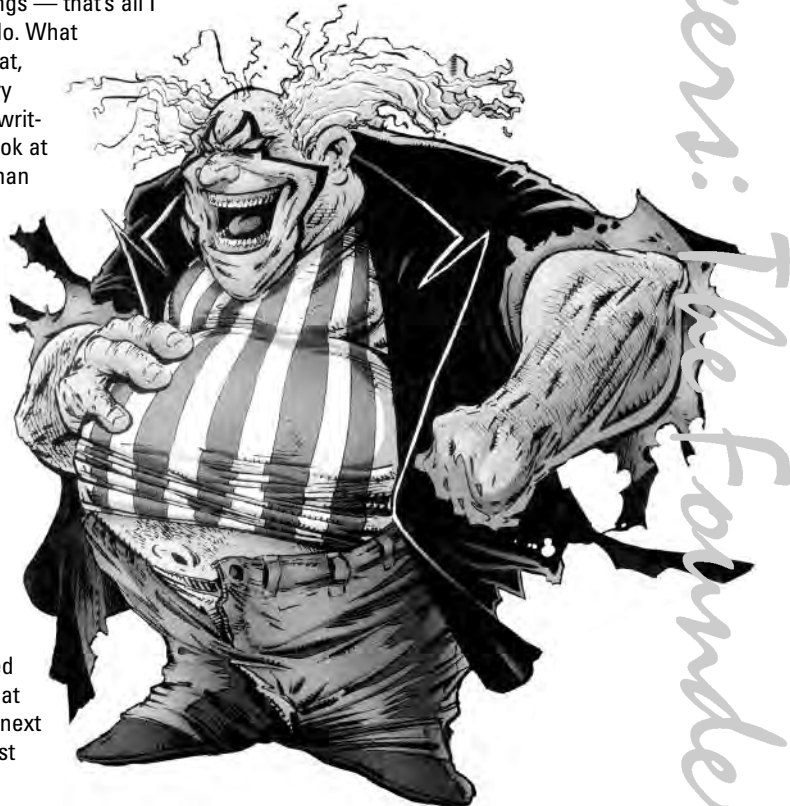
Image Makers: The Founders

The first meeting between Spawn and Violator, from Spawn #2. ©2007 Todd McFarlane Productions.

Rider and Hobgoblin, Monster-Monster, and then the next one was Wolverine, but again it was in the context of Wendigo and child-killing at night. And the next one I think was like Morbius the Vampire and the underground people. I don't even know what came after that, but until we did that, did the X-Force crossover, it was all just creepy crawly nighttime stuff.

It was a prelude to Spawn.

Not really. Spawn was always there, because of, again, my fascination of Batman. I thought Batman was the coolest character to draw, because he was a creature of the night. So Spider-Man sure as heck wasn't. Did I put him in those situations? Yeah. Did I make him more bug-like? Hanging around at night rather than hanging around when the day's out. So I treated Spider-Man, again, as sort of a bug-cockroach. He could perform better at night. But ultimately Spawn, it was just my love affair with, and frustration at not being able to draw enough Batman.

So Marvel had boxed you editorial-wise? Like, they

would censor panels and suggest things that you didn't want to hear?

From time to time. You know, they'd get you to redraw stuff. My frustration was: if everybody knew their job, you wouldn't have to redraw what you were redrawing. The do's and don't's would have already been on paper, and the writer wouldn't have to put it on paper and I wouldn't have to draw it, and then spend four hours redrawing it. I wouldn't have to erase or redraw it. It was just such a frustrating, inefficient way to get to the end result. Didn't everybody know what the rules were? "Well, yeah." "Well, f*cking write them down!" Y'know? Why am I drawing? And you guys are getting me to fix it after the fact? It's not a fun way to spend my time when I'm already busting my hump getting it done. So it wasn't really any one event that led to me leaving Marvel. It was a culmination of all the events during my comic career. They just wore me out. And eventually one of the events became the straw that broke the camel's back.

Was it anything in particular or you were just tired of everything?

No, no, no. There was a particular one. It was the panel in #16. It was the *Spider-Man/X-Force* crossover. There was a character named Juggernaut that was in there.

That's the one with the Juggernaut's eye?

Yeah. But I was writing the story, and again, to me Juggernaut was this immovable force. I had to come up with a clever way of beating him. Okay, well, I didn't want to use the same ten ways we've seen before. I went, "Ah, I know. There's actually a chink in his armor, which is he's got an opening in the eyes, right? So I go good, we'll take him out there. There's a weakness. That cracked the gates open a little bit. So when I put the sword in his eye from one of the X-Force guys, that was it. They just came in and I remember having the conversations, and it went something like, "You can't stab him in the eye." And I was like, "What are you talking about? I can't stab him in the eye?" They're like, "Well, it can't be…". I remember having these conversations with Tom DeFalco, and I'm like, "So explain this one to me?" "You can't inflict an orbital injury." I go, "Do you remember that cool scene of Elektra getting stabbed by Bullseye? Remember, he put the weapon right through her and it was coming out her back?" He was going, "Yeah, yeah, yeah. But you can't do, also you can't do rear penetration." Right? So you can put the sword into somebody, but you can't puncture the cloth from behind. This is why if you look at the drawing, the famous drawing he did, her costume was stretching. I don't know if you remember it.

I remember it. It's in silhouette.

It was stretching. And so I found it sort of amusing. So it's not that kids will be harmed by the effect of stabbing somebody, it's that they will be harmed by the fact of them getting stabbed and their clothes torn. Yeah, wow. So it's actually more about clothes tearing than stabbing. That doesn't make any f*ckin' sense. That doesn't make any sense. But anyway, it was, "No, no, no, that's okay, Todd. But you can't

Whilce Portacio

*Whilce Portacio.
Photo ©2007 Golden
Apple Comics.*

During his quiet childhood, Whilce Portacio was an artistic *wünderkind* that let his drawings do his talking. Seeking a career in art, he broke into the comics industry by embellishing the tight pencils of Arthur Adams' debut on the classic *Longshot* limited series for Marvel. Quickly he became a sought-after inker at the House of Ideas but instead proved that he was more than ready to headline as a penciler on *The Punisher* in 1988. His distinctive intricate style fuses together many classical artistic influences, like European and Asian, with contemporary cultural expression. In 1990, Portacio's artwork and popularity would reach a new stratosphere with his triumphant work on *X-Factor* and his smash follow-up on *Uncanny X-Men*. With the formation of Image, Whilce created *Wetworks* (with writer Brandon Choi) and helped to develop WildStorm Studios' revolutionary digital coloring team. He moved to the Philippines in the mid-'90s for several years where he found himself teaching and mentoring a new wave of Filipino artists into professional comics. In 2006, a reenergized Portacio returned to the mainstream with his artwork more viable than ever on his new *Wetworks* book and the launch of *Batman Confidential*.

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*Wetworks. ©2007
WildStorm Productions.*

Did you always have an inclination towards art?

Oh, I've always been drawing. In fact, there used to be a Nationwide Scholastic Arts Institute that would solicit artwork from high school students all around the country, and try to track them and try to give them awards so that art institutes and universities could keep track of who's up-and-coming. And I've been winning awards in that since I was in sixth grade, so I've always, always been drawing. The only thing close to it was comics. When I was in my preteen years, I was living on an island called Midway Island, which was the site of the Battle of Midway. It's a small island, two miles by one mile, and only about an eighth or a fifth of the island is covered with cement, and that's where all the military people live with their families. So the rest of the island was just forest and beaches. And obviously the rest of the island, since it used to be the site of a battle, was restricted area. But you can't say "restricted" to 12-year-olds. So we used to just go exploring all over the place looking, finding bullets and bayonets and shovels and old bunkers. And that's when I started drawing battles, making up military teams and stuff.

Did your dad want you to get into the military?

No, no. It is a typical minority story where, Dad wanted…

He wanted better for you guys.

He just wanted us to get a career. Just like Jim [Lee] was always supposed to be the doctor or the architect.

So what exactly happened that you got into comics?

Again, like I said, since I was in sixth grade I'd been winning national art contests all over the place, and every kind of poster contest there was, I'd enter it, and I've been winning money for it, too. So these art teachers started tracking me and trying to place me. In fact, when I went into the second year of high school, I was already considered too advanced for high school art, so I spent a whole two years after that taking art classes in colleges while I was still in

Page from Wetworks #2, *Vol. 1, by Whilce. ©2007 WildStorm Productions.*

ended up being so advanced over there in terms of art that, from the first semester, all of the teachers would just send their kids my way, and I'd be tutoring everybody instead of learning anything. So I did my only rebellious thing when I was a kid: in my second year of art school I purposely just failed the whole course, not doing anything. And so I went from an honor student from grade one to total failure in art in college, of all places. So my parents sent me back here. Fortunately, they sent me back to San Diego.

Who did you stay with in San Diego?

My dad's sister — four months before San Diego Con.

This was in the early '80s?

Yeah. At that very first huge talent search that they did, that was the San Diego Con where all the Marvel editors were sent there to look for artists. So I was fortunate that they were actually looking for people, so I didn't have to try very hard to figure out how to get in. And fortunately Carl Potts liked my portfolio. And then I got *Longshot* a little bit after that.

You always managed to keep in touch with Scott [Williams], or were you able buy comics in the Philippines?

See, I did something I guess you could say was unique in comics in that, go back to when I was in high school, when I met Scott; that's when I really got into comics. So he showed me Neal Adams, he showed me Gil Kane, showed me Gene Colan, showed me Kirby, Steranko. So I started studying these guys, and I guess even back then I was analytical, and I started noticing that if a Neal Adams comic came out that month, all my drawings would kind of look like Neal. You know, I'd do Neal ciphers. Or if that week Jack Kirby came out, all of a sudden I'd be doing Jack Kirby squiggles. And I didn't like that. I liked being able to mimic them and being able to be myself. Everybody, all my friends would go crazy, "Wow, that's pretty cool!" But I was unhappy for myself because I was too chameleon-ish. I didn't have any identity.

And so, when we went back to the Philippines, because the Philippines at the time had very little economy at the time, there were no comics at all over there. All the comics I had were the comics I had brought with me. So I don't know how I came to the decision, but for the four years that I was in the Philippines, I actually put all my comic books in suitcases, locked them up in a closet, and made myself not look at them at all. And so, for the four years I was in the Philippines, I would bang my head against the wall every day just trying to relearn how to draw on my own, with no influences. The only influence I had at the time was what I could remember of Neal Adams, what I could remember of Jack Kirby. So I guess that's how I was able to develop a style that's been sort of unique in the industry.

When you were over there in the Philippines, you didn't find out about their rich history in comics?

No. Because all those guys were now over here in the United States struggling, and the people that were left over in the Philippines, the industry over there was taking this total nosedive. Even if I did go out looking for these guys, these guys would be

high school. So my track has always been towards art. But then again, my family's traditional, so when it became high school time, they would go, "Well, okay, become an architect."

Then you went to college for architecture?

Actually, what happened was that my dad retired, and it was hard to raise four kids that were about to go into college. So we went back to the Philippines. We'd never been there before, so I didn't even know the language or anything.

I'm sure that was a giant cultural shock?

I mean, here I was, like, 16 years old. I'd been for four years at Hawaii, and we're going to the Philippines, which I heard was a third world country. Didn't know the language, didn't know anything about it. No, I don't want to, as a guy, leave Hawaii. But my dad took us to the Philippines, and I somehow convinced him to let me go to art college, and I went to one of the big universities in the Philippines. And I

Wetworks. ©2007 WildStorm Productions.

nowhere to be found because the local industry was such that people were buying comic books just to wrap fish in the market with.

But do you remember what was in your samples that Carl liked? Were you able to show it to Scott before you prepared your portfolio?

Actually, no. When I left for the Philippines, Scott and I corresponded for just a little bit, and then we fell out. And then I didn't get into contact with Scott, believe it or not, until that convention where I met Art Adams, where he handed me the pages to the first issue of *Longshot*. This guy comes up to the tables and it turns out it was Scott. It turned out he went to the convention every year, from Hawaii. So we met again only there. And there after that I said, "Hey, they're going to let me ink this *Longshot* thing and I have no idea what I'm doing, so why don't you come over?" So he decided he could come over to San Diego from Hawaii and be "my assistant" for a while just so that he could start getting himself known directly to the editors at the time, and we'd be able to keep our ears out for any other jobs that he could maybe get.

Had you seen Scott's development as an artist, yet?

No, again. Remember, from my high school days, Scott was "Mister Comics." Here I was, coming from four years in the Philippines, not knowing anything about comics. The only comics knowledge I had was from the '70s and '60s, the comics I had before I went to the Philippines. So I didn't even know who Art Adams was when I got back to the States.

But your style was influenced by European artists, right? I see even a little Patrick Nagel in some of it?

Oh, yeah. I've got to backtrack a little bit, there. The only comic book type thing I was able to find in the Philippines anywhere rarely, maybe once a year or something, was a *Heavy Metal* compilation or something. And so that's when I started realizing about Moebius and stuff like that.

Anime wasn't an influence on you at that point either, right? There's a fluidity to your artwork that reminds me of it.

The word "anime" was not coined until recently, but way back when, when I was a kid, before I went to the Philippines, I came from Hawaii, remember. Now, Hawaii had Channel 13, which was almost all Japanese, and at the time they not only started rerunning *Astro Boy* and stuff like that in the '70s, but they had showed live-action team shows that were the forerunners to *Mighty Morphin' Power Rangers* and so it was the same kind of stuff. And so that's what I saw, Japanese cutting, and a lot of it was heavily borrowed from samurai movies. So that's where I got involved in all that stuff. And then again, being a teenager growing up, I wanted to be a ninja or something, and Japan was all around me in Hawaii, so I guess I just sucked that up.

You'd think that would be truer in the Philippines, too. They're kind of closer to Japan? But there's a resentment of that sort of Japanese thing.

No, no. Anime is a big thing in the Philippines. It's a whole other story; maybe I could get into this later on. The Philippines basically has no identity, because just real quickly, because the Philippines has been invaded by the Spanish, Japanese, and then America. And if you remember any of your empire stories,

Wetworks. ©2007 WildStorm Productions.

especially from Britain, what they do is they try to wipe out all the culture. Well, it was successful in the Philippines, so much so that there really is no Filipino style. In the Philippines there's a huge debate whether you're super-hero or you're anime, but there is no Filipino. If you get a chance to watch Filipino shows, especially fantasy shows, which are popular right now, they look like *Lord of the Rings.* They look like Disney. They look like anything but a Filipino show, because, again, it's not defined. But anyway, that's another story. That's when I was growing up, I fell into the Japanese thing — because there was nothing Filipino for me to grab onto.

So Carl Potts is the guy who discovered you, and he gave you work on some of the smaller Epic stories?

No. Terry Austin needed a little help on an *Alien Legion* story, which was Carl Potts' book. So that's where Carl figured out that I could ink. So he called up ['80s Marvel editor/writer] Ann Nocenti, who he knew needed an inker, they couldn't find one. And I guess Ann and Art agreed to let me ink that.

But did they try you out first? Because there was an inker, Bill Anderson, beforehand, and I don't know what happened to him.

All I knew was Carl gave me Ann's number, said, "Hey, give her a call." I call up Ann and she goes, "Hi. Yeah, Carl told me about you, so do you want to ink it?" I go, "Yeah!" I didn't say, "Yeah, I need the money," but that's what I was thinking.

When you saw Art Adams's first batch of Longshot pages with all this detail in the pencils, what did you think, how were you going to ink that?

Well, remember, I was stupid. Meaning that,

remember, four years in [the Philippines] with no comics at all. I didn't know what the new guys were doing nowadays, so when I saw Art's pages, I go, "I guess this is typical of what's happening right now, I need the money, so if I want to get in, I'd better suck it up." And I just did it. And no thought… no preconceptions about it at all.

But you didn't think to yourself, "Man, I thought this stuff should be a little looser"? Because I'm sure it has tons of lines. He was starting off himself, and I'm sure he didn't know if he could cut corners sometimes, let the inker finish certain things.

Well, actually, that helped me, because, see, I took the inking jobs only for money. I've always wanted to be a penciler. And very soon after doing *Longshot* I started getting known as the inker guy who actually might become an artist pretty soon, so I started getting these jobs where, y'know, "Hey, help me out here." The worst job I got, which I turned back, was… with the hamsters, what was that?

Adolescent Radioactive Black Belt Hamsters?

Yeah. I was given the chance to do the first *Three-D Annual*, but the pages — I couldn't believe, I got these pages, on 11" x 16" pages in FedEx, in a box. They basically had little funny shapes with names written in the shapes: "This is this hamster, this is that hamster, and this square over here, okay, and that's the Winnebago." So I was expected to redraw everything and then ink it. And so for me, being a penciler, wanting to be a penciler, and only taking inking gigs just for money, it was kind of like — every time I took a job like that I got a lot of kudos. A lot of people started really liking me and calling me up, but,

because I wanted to be an artist, I was going, like, if I spent time reworking this other guy's stuff and making him look good, that's time I could be doing my own pencils. The only thing he was proving to me, personally, was, "Gee, I should be penciling right now." And so I started bitching a lot about, "I need to pencil."

So you talked to Carl?

Well, then I came up with that brilliant idea of, "Hey, I'll draw The Punisher on the back of all these pages." And Carl gave me *The Punisher* job.

That was a big opportunity at the time, because the Punisher was a huge character when his series started in the late '80s.

It just fit in real well with what we were. Well, Scott, and especially me, because, again, I had a very big military background. I guess I said a lot of things to Carl probably in that vein, so when he needed somebody new for *Punisher* — at the time he had a writer who was heavily into doing a real-time thing, with real reference for everything — we were an obvious choice for him at the time.

Once you start being a penciler and people start seeing what you can do with The Punisher, *it's like, "Whoa! All of a sudden he looks very cool." Your Frank Castle was a lot sleeker-looking than previous versions — the fans dug it, I'm sure. Did you like the stories?*

For me it was a good time, because I was learning about the industry. Actually, looking back, I'm glad that I came up at the time that I did, because coming now is kind of scary. Imagine if it was this way, the exact same timeline, but nowadays, and let's say I was doing *Punisher* and *Punisher* became popular. I'd be invited to conventions and then I'd have to face people. I'd have to put up this persona. I'd have to be the cool guy, because, again, I'd be known as Mr. Punisher at the time, so I'd be expected to be heavy into fighting, wrestling, weapons, tactics, and how could I draw the book if I wasn't into all that kind of stuff? In fact, actually, that's one of the reasons that I rallied hard to get out of the *Punisher* books, because I had to go to conventions and people would be talking about, "Oh, hey, how come the Punisher doesn't bust people's kneecaps? I've done it four times, it really works." They'd feel that I'd think that was cool. And I really had to get out of it.

But Carl was the perfect editor for you at that time, too. I think you were telling me before you didn't have a lot of confidence yet in your storytelling at this point. Did you have to redraw stuff a lot, or did you just talk it out?

Oh, that was the great thing, too. See, he would send me books, like cinematography books and storytelling books, and they could give me these little short stories and he'd say, "Draw them." And he would use that as a test to see if I sucked up any of the stuff from the books, and that's how he would gauge whether he would let me pencil something after that. He was the only one who did that.

Were you in a position where you could help Scott and bring him in as your inker?

When there's a popular style, all the inkers start to become masters at that style. So when a new style comes in, a lot of inkers can't adjust. So when I came

in, it was like, Carl was going, "Oh, man, how am I going to find somebody to ink this?" So then we showed him some of Scott's stuff. "Scott's been living with me for a while now and he knows exactly what I do." So I don't think it was that hard of a decision, because, again, the other option was, "Okay, let's try these big names on you." And that was still a time of, it was either Terry Austin doing quill stuff, or Dan Green and everybody still doing brush stuff. And my stuff was so fine that it needed something thinner. It didn't need it, but it needed something a little more fluid, like a brush, but something thinner.

How did Scott work, with a brush or a pen?

We got reintroduced into inks because of Terry Austin, so we were trying to mimic Terry Austin. So we started talking with Terry a lot, and he started giving us a lot of his pointers, and so we started using the quill. So, for the first half of Scott's career, he was a quill guy, but before that, he was a brush guy. Nowadays, I think the last time I talked to Scott was a couple of months ago, and he was almost

Wetworks *preview page from the Image years.* ©2007 WildStorm Productions.

Image Makers: The Founders

50/50, using 50 percent brush and 50 percent quill. It's kind of funny, because he's still known as Mr. Quill.

Along this time is when Carl Potts introduced you to Jim Lee, or got you two guys together?

Yes.

What was the premise? He said, "You guys share similar interests," he thought you guys should work together?

I have no idea. If you remember, maybe you don't know, but Carl actually had some Asian blood in him, himself, and I think at the time I was the only Asian except a couple of the older inkers, so when Jim came in, we were the same age, Carl goes, "Hey, there's this new guy that I just found. Why don't you give him a call and show him around, show him how the industry runs." And then Jim says, "Hey, I live in Berkeley. Why don't I come down and see you guys?" So he came down and met me and Scott, and from the very first day we were talking about setting up a studio.

And Jim rightaway moved to southern San Diego to work with you?

No, there was a big debate. If you know Jim, there's always a debate. He was trying to convince us to move to Berkeley because it's so cool. Me and Scott were trying to convince him to move down to San Diego because of the convention and because that's where we lived. We didn't want to move. And I guess because of the San Diego Con, we won. So the year after that, Jim came down and got himself an apartment. Scott was in an apartment. I was renting out a house. And then we all three rented out this little apartment, this little one-bedroom apartment which became the first studio.

Ashe. ©2007 WildStorm Productions.

Between your time on Punisher and X-Factor, there was some time off, right?

Oh no, that's right. I did the *Legion of Night* thing.

Oh, you took a year to do that?

Because, remember, at the time what they were doing was, they were telling us that these are open-ended contracts.

They were paying you while working on this, right?

Right. And I got a raise for that, for doing all that *Punisher* for them. Okay, so now I'm going to do one of their new types of books that should make some money. So they gave me a raise for that, then, too, and I took a year for that. But it was always considered that I would go to *The X-Men* after that.

So you weren't worried that you were taking a year off, you didn't think they were going to forget about you?

Oh, no, no, no. See, because, again, remember, we were close with Carl Potts, who was close with Ann Nocenti, so we were always considered for *X-Men*. Remember, Jim did an issue of *X-Men*? Okay, that issue was offered to me before that but I got this *Legion of Night* thing. And then, a little bit after that, we did the Homage one that all three of us worked on.

When Jim, Scott and yourself were given the assignment to X-Men #267; wasn't there like, 14 days or something, to hand in the book and you guys drew

the issue in half the time?

But my point is that throughout that whole period we were in and out of the *X-Men* office, and we were considered that we were going to go into the *X-Men* office. Jim was all business, and he knew that Wolverine and Storm were the number one characters. My whole thing was that Neal Adams did the original X-Men with Cyclops and Marvel Girl, and that was *The X-Men* that I wanted to do. The first issue that Jim did wasn't that *X-Men*, so that's why I turned that down. So then Ann wanted me in the office somehow, and so she figured, okay, hey, let's rearrange the teams. And, in this case, it was Bob coming at the time, which rearranged the team and give Whilce most of the old *X-Men*. So then we can get Whilce into the *X-Men* office permanently. But, again, even before that, while I was on the *Legion of Night* stuff, I was always in and out of that office considered doing stuff for them.

So they were planning this major X-Men push.

Oh, yeah. Imagine that, splitting up the team and having their two top artists at the time drop in on both of those books at the same time, y'know? And, again, I think Shooter proved it through *Secret Wars*, that if you plan these things out, pre-advertise all this stuff, that's the road map. Let people know and they'll come. And so that's what they did with *X-Men*.

The three of you guys must have been very happy, I guess, at this time, when you were starting X-Factor, and Jim was starting Uncanny X-Men, and Scott was inking both of you guys often. This was a high energy type of period, right?

For me at least, personally, that was the best period in my comics career, because all three of us were there. And when you get heavy into comics, you've really got to make an effort to see what everybody else was doing. And so here we didn't have to make an effort, because I could see what Jim's doing, I could see what Scott's doing.

You were all 100 percent Marvel mode, let's do this, let's kick ass?

Yeah. Nothing else at all. It was just, how far can we get here? And because of Jim's admission through Bob, all this stuff came in. I think it was Art Adams first. Art Adams did this big stand-up that they would put in the stores.

The infamous Wolverine pose.

Yeah. And also those kind of jobs, and then doing a cover here and there for some kind of advertisement or blah, blah, blah. That's when we started to realize there's a bigger business than just doing the comic books.

How were you guys able to contribute to the storylines? That's something I've always wondered. Was it something that Claremont helped you guys out with, or was it Harras? Who was receptive to you guys, the idea?

It was Harras, and it was all just lucky coincidence. It just happened that Bob hated anything that Chris said, and anything that we said 50 percent of the time was a match-up with what Bob was thinking. So here we were already proving that we could draw the stories, and now we had kind of the same ideas. So it wasn't too much of a leap for him to say, "Hey, do it."
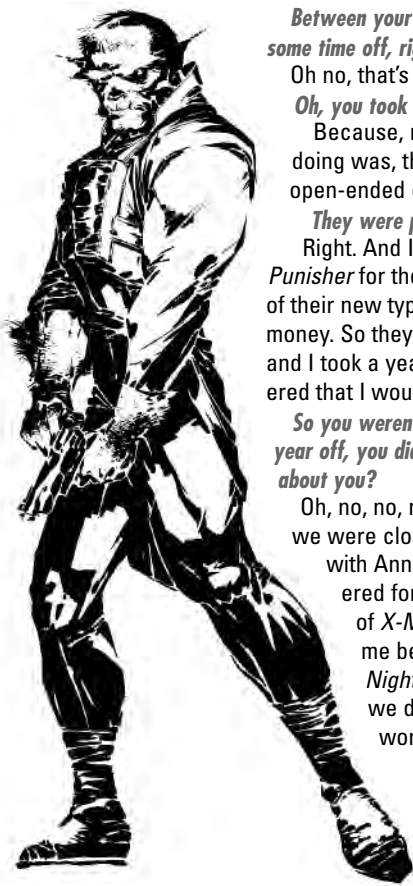
Marc Silvestri

Marc Silvestri. Courtesy of Top Cow Productions.

Ripclaw. ©2007 Top Cow Productions.

The always energetic Marc Silvestri was the first of the Image co-founders to ever experience a degree of major success when he became the regular penciler of *The Uncanny X-Men* in 1987. The Floridian self-taught artist broke into comics in the early '80s via short stories in DC's dying horror line; among the influences in his art style are Bernie Wrightson and John Buscema. After his pivotal runs on *Uncanny* and *Wolverine*, he went on to help build Image and develop his own properties. The launch of *Cyberforce*, his signature book, sold over 850,000 copies and gave Marc a taste that independence would be very sweet. In the mid-'90s, Silvestri moved his offices to Hollywood just as his Top Cow Studios experienced their greatest surge with the creation of *Witchblade* and *Darkness*, both among the best known Image properties. Gradually, Marc turned *Witchblade* into a popular TV show and successfully negotiated an enterprising deal with Marvel Comics where he and his Top Cow artists provide art for selected Marvel special events. Recently, Marc illustrated the popular *Hunter-Killer* (with writer Mark Waid) and continues to have his sunny disposition as he oversees the future of Image as their acting CEO.

You were originally from Florida?

I was born there. I was raised in Chicago, but I was born in West Palm Beach. Until I was four we lived there, then we moved up to Chicago, and up until '87, early '88, is when I moved out to California. Just before that I spent a year in Detroit.

Your family, they're originally from Italy?

No, my mom and dad, first-generation French, moved over here from there. Grew up during World War II. I think my dad actually served in the Army over there for a little while. Probably some cushy assignment. I think it was just after the war that he went into the service. But, yeah, they grew up there, and my brother, my sister and I were all born here.

You're the youngest, right?

I'm the kid. By eight years. My sister is eight years older than me, and my brother is 11 years older. So,

yeah, I was kind of late in life.

So were they into your comic book ambitions from early on, or not?

No. I didn't really read comics much when I was younger. My exposure to comics came from my cousin Fred, who was a huge comic book collector back when we were kids. Even today, he's still in the collecting biz. But even back then he had a few thousand comics, which was, to me, an incredible amount. I didn't know anyone else who was really in that hobby. And he was putting things in boxes and bags long before it became fashionable. So that's where my exposure to comics came from. I would go to his house and just pick up a few books that I thought looked pretty cool, stuff from Kirby and Buscema… Wrightson, when he was doing comics, *Swamp Thing,* stuff like that. Consequently, I never really read a whole lot of full story arcs, because I would just pick up one book, and if it was continued next issue, well, too bad.

So you weren't like most comic book guys are, you were into athletics and working out and that kind of stuff, right? Didn't you work at a gym or something?

I worked at a gym just before I got into comics, and that was pretty much just because I had nothing else to do and they gave me a free membership.

Image Comics: The Road To Independence

Marc Silvestri at work
(in Los Angeles).
Photo courtesy of
Top Cow Productions.

Yeah, but you see most comic book artists, they're not the most physical-type guys. They never did sports or lifted weights.

No, I wasn't really built for sports. I was built for basketball. I didn't really have the love for it. I really loved football when I was younger, but in high school, my height, which is 6' 7", and I weighed 165 pounds — that's not exactly a football physique. They would have broken me in half. So, y'know, aside from just goofing around with my friends and playing unorganized sports — I mean, I was active that way. I liked competition and such. And I wasn't good at anything; my coordination wasn't what it should be. They called me "W.H." in high school, which is "wasted height." Yeah, it was a travesty that I wasn't on a basketball team, but I just didn't have the coordination. And, again, football is my sport, but I would have been killed.

What happened? You were always into drawing and doodling and sketching?

I always kind of had a knack for it, and I was one of those guys that during math class was doodling pictures of cars and stuff. I had no aptitude for math whatsoever, but I always enjoyed doodling around. I didn't really take it seriously and I never considered it as an actual career choice until later in life. When I was younger I thought, oh, I was going to be an architect, or at one point a doctor, until I realized you actually had to be smart for those professions. That kicked me out of that idea, so I went to various small jobs, retail, I was a bouncer for a little while in a bar. I was in the health club business for about a year or two. Finally my cousin brought to my attention that DC Comics was running a talent search. This was in '80 or '81, something like that, and they were running it all across the country, and Chicago was one of the major conventions. This was before San Diego really took off, but anyone that was not living on the West Coast at that time didn't really travel to San Diego to go to the shows unless you were a diehard fan. But Chicago was a big show, and DC was running a contest, and I started drawing about six months before that came around. Put together a portfolio, four or five pages of a comic book story that my brother had written, and a bunch of pinups, and I went there.

Were you confident that you were good enough already to work professionally in comics?

I had no confidence whatsoever. In fact, I wanted to get out of that convention as soon as possible. I was actually relieved that they closed down the portfolio review before I got in there. Y'know, I was, like, next in line and they shut it down because they had already seen too many people, they were done. But my brother forced me to stick to it, and we found Joe Orlando in his hotel room and kind of looking at the stuff. My brother said, "Look at this stuff, you're going to love it." At that point, I was going, I'll try to do something else for a living, maybe go back to the health club business. DC hired me that very next week, and again, I think that was 1981, something like that, and I've been with comics ever since.

You didn't do much for DC; you did a few short horror stories, right?

I was doing those anthology books that they were running at that time, like House of Mystery and Ghosts and Weird War [Tales] and things that nobody ever bought, but were a great training ground. Five- to eight-page stories, and nobody noticed when you screwed up. So I did about six or seven of those.

But Orlando was a mentor to some; did he encourage you to do more work for him?

No, there was no real mentor. I had encouragement from my brother because he thought it would be a cool thing. I think he always wanted to do comics, as well, as a writer, which I was able to help him out when Image started. But for me it was like, wow, this seems like a really easy gig. You sit at home all day long and you draw pictures, and somebody sends you a paycheck. Wow, what could be easier than that? Well, as it turns out, it's not as easy as I had thought it was.

But at DC, they weren't going to give you a book anytime soon. You had to go to Marvel.

I was kind of stuck with the anthology stuff over at DC. And back in those days, really, the Holy Grail was Marvel, anyway. That's when Marvel was just really kicking ass, and they were the hip company, and they had The X-Men, and they had Chris Claremont, and they had Spider-Man. They had all these cool characters that, when you were younger, that's the kind of stuff you wanted to draw. Batman had not been reinvented yet by Frank Miller, Superman was long-dead. Nobody really cared about that stuff. And you really wanted to go to Marvel; that was where you wanted to be. And Jim Shooter was the editor-in-chief at the time, and I brought him what I had done at DC for the past year, plus the original portfolio that I did, and he hired me right there. He doubled my page rate, which was, wow, that's a great selling technique. I jumped over and I started doing little things again. Not anthology stuff, but stuff people didn't really pay much attention to, Conan books and….

Yeah, but you were into that. That was the genre that you were into, wasn't it, at that point?

I like the fantasy stuff. I was never really a super-hero guy. I think that's because I wasn't really brought up on comics, so I didn't get that stuff. My exposure to super-heroes, really, when I was a kid, was the *Batman* TV show. Which I loved, by the way, I watched that religiously. But I came from a sci-fi/fantasy background. That's the kind of stuff, when I was a kid, that I would read, and those were the kind of movies that I would watch. To this day I'm still a sci-fi fan, and a lot of my work today in a lot of stuff, a lot of stuff that Top Cow publishes, or I've had something to do with the creation of, has a sci-fi or fantasy bent to it. We blend in the super-hero elements, but primarily, at their core, they're sci-fi/fantasy concepts. That really is where I come from.

When you were working on Conan, *that's when you really started studying John Buscema and the Marvel masters and that sort of stuff, trying to push your anatomy and layout?*

Yeah. When I was at my cousin's house all those years, those were the kind of things I was drawn to. I really like the dynamicism of guys like Kirby and Buscema. They really had a way of drawing the human figure that kind of leapt off the page to me. And being a horror fan, I loved Bernie Wrightson's stuff. I loved all the old EC books, all those *Creepy* and anything that Warren published. I swallowed all that stuff up. *Vampirella*.

Did you feel like they were grooming you at Marvel, that there were going to be phases to your career already at this point?

I don't think there was such a thing as grooming back then that much. I think Marvel just sat back. The joke back then was that DC was Marvel's farm club. That's kind of what we adopted in the early punk-ass days of Image was we were saying that Marvel and DC were our farm club, because that is the attitude that we had early on. But, yeah, I think it was just, in comics back then, if you wanted to do that for a living, you had two places to go. You had DC and you had Marvel. So I don't think that Marvel really cared whether or not that you were going to become a superstar or what books you were going to be working on. They had an audience, and that audience bought their books. Obviously when there was a better artist or writer on one of those books, there was a spike in sales, but I don't think there was a grooming mentality, necessarily.

All right. You weren't, like, one editor's main guy or something throughout your career at Marvel?

Yeah. I had a great relationship with Bob Harras. Once you get to a certain point, I think once I got to *The X-Men*, obviously, I was one of those guys that editors wanted to work with.

Was that what you were aspiring to? Were you, like Jim Lee, hoping to get that Uncanny *title and that would have been the thing?*
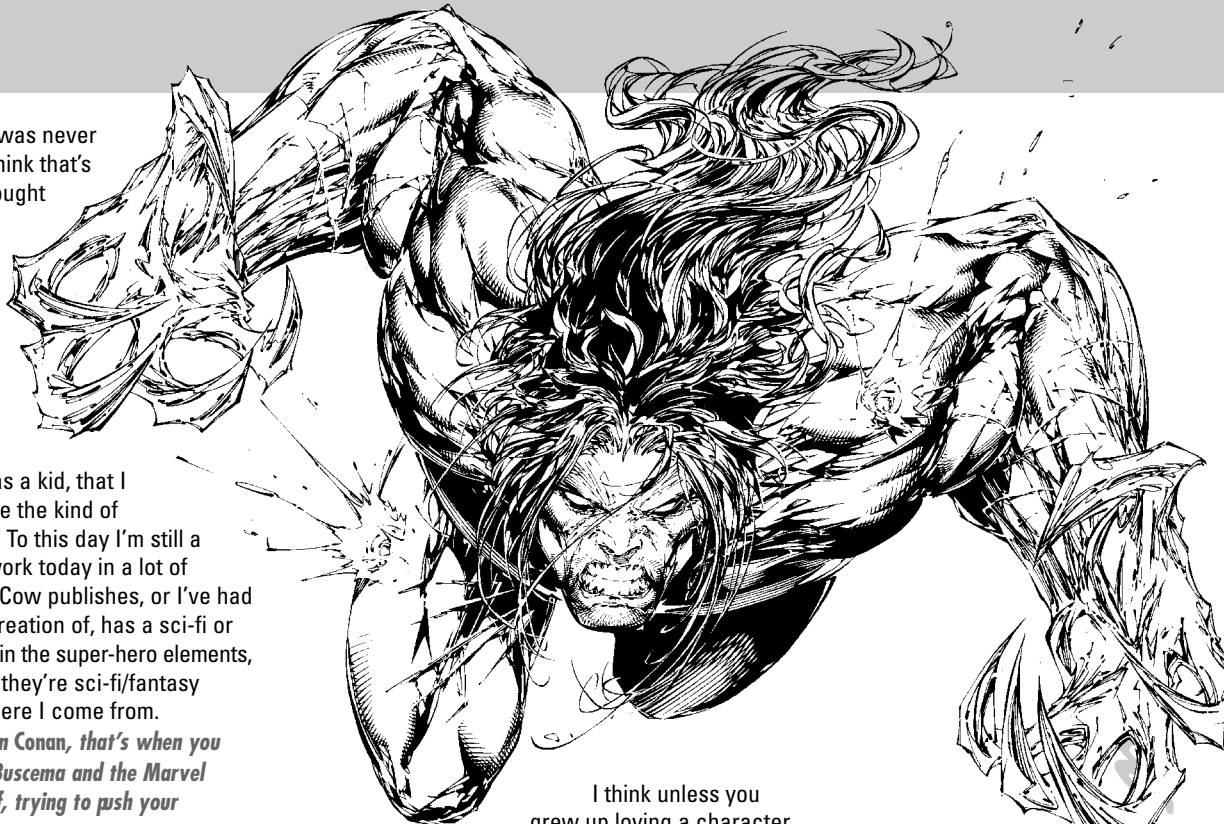
I think unless you grew up loving a character and you were obsessed with drawing *Batman*, for an example, I think everyone wanted to work for the Holy Grail in comics, which at that point was *The X-Men*. In the '80s there was really nothing higher-profile that you could be working on, unless your name was Frank Miller.

Nothing against Claremont, but one of the things about working on The X-Men *is that it's always been an artist-driven book, too. Only the top guys have worked there.*

Yeah, and again, it was the ultimate. That was as far as you can go in comics. If you did have a career path, you wound up at the apex at *The X-Men* working with guys like Chris Claremont. I mean, if you wanted the highest sales — and at that time you were getting royalties on book sales, so if you wanted the highest-selling books, and you wanted the biggest paycheck, and you wanted the highest profile, and you wanted to work with the best writers, that's where you wound up.

What got you the Uncanny *job? Working on* X-Men vs. Avengers, *or on* Living Monolith, *or… ?*

No, well, I think *Living Monolith,* as much as I look back at that, every once in a while I get some fan who brings a copy of that, and I kind of just roll my eyes. Yeah, but that led to the *Avengers/X-Men*, rather, and then the *Avengers/X-Men* led me to the *X-Men* gig. So, yeah, I guess you could trace it back to the *Monolith* book.

That was your first super-hero work. You didn't get, I'm guessing, a good taste for super-heroes from that book? I thought you did a great job on that book.

Oh, thank you. I actually did *Spider-Man* for a couple of issues, which people don't remember.

With Kyle Baker inking you, right?

It was *Web of Spider-Man*. Again, I wasn't really used to it, and I would point at that as not being work that I was most proud of, but that was some of the first super-hero stuff that I had done, so I had a little

Ripclaw at work (in the Image Comics Tenth Anniversary *hardcover). ©2007 Top Cow Productions.*

115

Cyberforce *page from Image Comics: Tenth Anniversary book. ©2007 Top Cow Productions.*

taste of it, and I liked it. I liked the fact that the superhero stuff was close to science-fiction. At least you could draw some fantastic worlds that didn't exist in, like, police dramas or detective dramas.

Did you feel you were ready for Uncanny *when [Ann] Nocenti offered it to you?*

At that point I was a little burnt out from comics. I didn't feel like I was really getting anywhere, and suddenly it became available, and, yeah, it was offered to me, and I jumped at the chance. I went, wow, okay, here you go. Suddenly I'm in that seat that not a lot of people were able to sit in. Yeah, at that point the biggest guy that had worked on *X-Men* was, as far as artists were concerned, John Byrne. This was before Jim Lee jumped on there. And I felt, wow, this is a great opportunity for me to kind of sit on there and put my take, my spin, on *The X-Men,* and get to work with Chris Claremont, who was obviously, at that time, the writer to work with. And it was fun. I enjoyed the higher profile that I got from it. I enjoyed being invited to conventions, which was something that was kind of novel for me.

Didn't the book become bi-weekly, almost as soon as you joined?

Yeah, that happened pretty quick. It wasn't really bi-weekly, but they wanted 15 issues a year. Yeah, they wanted 15 issues a year, so that worked out to not quite bi-weekly, but it was hardcore, deadline-wise, and there's a few issues in there where you can kind of see it. But, yeah, you wouldn't be able to attempt that today, really.

What were your influences back then? Because, if you look at your figure work back then, the characters are more slender, they're not as muscular as they are now.

I think guys like, again, even though Buscema, he drew beefier guys, he was still one of my main early influences when I drew figures, and I think that, if my characters had a little slender look to them, it was probably from residual Neal Adams influence from way back when I was first looking at comics at my cousin's house. I was attracted to what he was doing, too, and his guys were all pretty lean and cut, and I kind of got that look from him, I think. But for me, I didn't feel there was a template too much to follow on *The X-Men.* I could do my thing and see if people liked it or not. There were some great guys that came in just before me that I was looking at, and I certainly wanted to not pale by comparison, so I was doing the best work that I was able to at that time. And I thought it was a great learning experience, but the deadline I wasn't used to.

Did you contribute to those plots, though? It wasn't like the traditional X-Men team; Wolverine and Storm I think were at the head of your team.

That was mostly Chris. I mean, my favorite character was Wolverine, to this day, still one of my favorite characters. I think he's one of the best comic book characters created. Storm was a lot of fun, Colossus was fun to me. But it was Chris.

But the people were always in flux, right, during that whole period? Because you had a lot of new members, like, Psylocke and some odd members.

Yeah, yeah, and I think that reflected the fact that Marvel may have wanted to get as many characters in there as possible, and I think Chris's writing style, he likes to throw a lot into the pot and stir it up and see what comes out. And for me that was a blessing and a curse in that, wow, I didn't quite figure out until later on in my career how to squeeze bodies per square inch into a story. So a lot of times I was a little vexed by it, but working with Chris was a pleasure. He had a great imagination, and the guy just obviously loves the medium. You could tell that with the plots that he would send in. They were very dense, and he had a lot going on. He was asking me, "Hey, who do you like drawing, and what characters do you think we should concentrate on?" But then the stories were all his. He'd do all the plotting and I'd just do my job.

Okay, you didn't feel like you had to give plot or any ideas to him?

Well, I was a little intimidated by Chris at that time, early on. This is the highest profile project I ever had, and this was Chris Claremont, so I didn't, until a little bit later on, have the real desire to be creative and plot and come up with concepts until just before

Image broke.

But hadn't The X-Men *really run its course for you? At the end, there were lots of fill-in issues, and then all of a sudden you were gone.*

I was getting to the point again before I got the *X-Men* gig, where the deadline was a drain on me. And I'm just not one of those guys built for that, really. Even to this day it's a lot for me to maintain a schedule on a book. So I was at that point again where, geez, I'm burned out from drawing all these characters, and Jim Lee had just stepped into the limelight, and the timing was kind of perfect. I slid over to a single-character book, which was my favorite character, *Wolverine*.

You didn't see that as a step down at that point? I mean, you really didn't trade the top book for Wolverine, *you didn't think of it as that?*

I was happy to make that move. I wanted to work with Larry Hama. I think the *Wolverine* stuff, to me, was probably my best Marvel work.

Yeah, because I think you really put your foot down.

I was able to do more of my stuff, as the world that Wolverine inhabited in his own book was a little bit more to my liking. It was a single character, it was more *noir*, I was able to experiment a little bit more with positive and negative space, which I had a good time with. Also at that point, Mike Mignola's work started to influence me a little bit. If you look real carefully at what I do, it's hard to find, but you can see some of his influence in there, as well, and the Buscema stuff. And, yeah, Jim Lee was really sky-rocketing. It was the kind of situation where you go, you know what? You're not going to get in the way of that. You've got to just move over.

That Wolverine *title, I always took that book for granted until you came along and Larry did something with it. I think your artwork changed, too, right away. It got a lot fiercer, too.*

It felt more comfortable for me. And, again, I was ready for that book, I think more so than I was ready for when I got the *X-Men* gig. The way that I feel that I was professionally, I was a little green for that kind of responsibility. But by the time *Wolverine* came around, I was feeling more comfortable with myself as an artist and as a creator, and it just sort of gelled. And that ran its course, and then again the time was perfect when Image came along, because I was ready again for a change. I remember Jim came up to me pretty soon after he took over *The X-Men,* and I think we were in, I don't remember for sure, I think we were in the Northwest, somewhere over there, and he came up to me and introduced himself. He just wanted to make sure that I was cool with the fact that he was doing *The X-Men* now and such. I said, "Hey, man, it's actually no problem. You're doing great work, and it's all good, I was ready. I was ready to move over." And he was very concerned that I felt put out, which I appreciated from him. But he was a force that was not going to be deterred. There's a reason why he's Jim Lee, and that's because I don't think anyone really did comics the way he did.

You guys had a kind of a synergy, if you really look at it. Like, I always remember it was you, Whilce, and you

had Jim doing the core X-Men *books, and that was a really exciting time.*

Yeah, we had fun.

That's the precursor to Image, those books.

Yeah. And I really liked Jim's work. I understood it when I looked at it. There are some guys that you look at their work and you don't understand where they're coming from as an artist. Not that it's good or bad. But I could see what he was doing, and I appreciated that, and I could see where Whilce was coming from, too, because they both kind of came from the same school, and you had Scott Williams coming in there and changing the way that comic books were inked, and kind of changing the way they were drawn, too, the way that Jim, with his dynamicism and his attention to detail. And his work ethic… I mean, I've never seen a guy able to put out so much work so quickly at such high quality in my life, especially when I got a chance to actually work with him at Homage once Image got started.

You joined Homage after Image or before Image?

Just after. Actually, Rob Liefeld and I were talking

Another segment from the Image anniversary! By the way, this particular story is the most recent Cyberforce *story that Marc has illustrated of his initial creation for Image. ©2007 Top Cow Productions.*

Jim Valentino

No single Image founder took a bigger risk in joining Image Comics than Jim Valentino, who was married with children. After years of struggling through the independent comics circuit on books like *normalman* and *Valentino,* he finally found mainstream success writing and drawing *Guardians of the Galaxy* in 1990. Upon learning about Jim's involvement with Image, his Marvel editors removed him from *Guardians*, although the artist had no intention of ever leaving. A firm believer in the spirit of Image's idealism and potential of the new company's success, Valentino never looked back and proceeded forward on his new creation. The first issue of *ShadowHawk* would sell a half-million books, allowing the artist some personal security and the resources to help other artists. From 1999 to 2004, Valentino served as Image's publisher during a transition period that ushered in some of Image's biggest critical success and talent, such as writer Brian Michael Bendis. This year, the Bronx native has returned to his roots in autobiographical comics with *Drawing from Life* and continues his line of super-hero comics under his ShadowLine imprint.

Jim Valentino photo. Courtesy of Mr. Valentino.

ShadowHawk is ©2007 and trademark of Jim Valentino.

How would you describe growing up in the Bronx with your family?

Well, I didn't actually grow up in the Bronx, we moved to California when I was seven. That said, New York is still the only place I've ever been where I feel completely at home. The pace of the city is my natural pace.

How many brothers and sisters do you have?

I have two sisters, one older, one younger and a younger brother. But only one mom and one dad.

So comics were a bond that you and your father shared? What was it about comics that just grabbed your attention?

Everything. The art, the stories, the characters, the word balloons, everything. They were an epiphany for me. I liken it to how most people describe a religious experience. From the moment I saw one I knew that was what I wanted to do. No question.

Being a teenager in the '60s — did you get into the cultural changes occurring around then?

I'm not sure I know what you mean, but if you mean what I think you do then all I can say is read *Vignettes*, it'll tell you more about my life than you could possibly need to know.

Did you stop reading comics when you discovered girls and other distractions?

Very briefly when I was in junior high school; by high school I learned how to hide it better and by the time I got out of high school I didn't care. I figured if a girl didn't like me because I read comics she was probably not the girl for me. Most of them either thought it was cool or didn't care. At least I wasn't a jock or a geek.

Did underground comix start getting your attention back towards the art form?

Underground comix were my

Image Comics: The Road To Independence

Early 1990s photo of Jim at Golden Apple Comics. Courtesy of our friends at Golden Apple Comics in Los Angeles, California.

ShadowHawk *detail from the cover of #3 (vol. 1). ShadowHawk ©2007 Jim Valentino.*

second epiphany. I was like "Wow! I didn't know you could do that in a comic!!" They were great. As for super-heroes, yeah, I went for a few years where I was an underground comix snob, but luckily I got over it. I realized you could like both… and I did.

When did you start getting serious about becoming a comic book artist?

Very late in life. Early on I wasn't serious about much of anything. Actually, I'm still kind of that way, come to think of it.

Did you ever pursue an art school education?

No, I went to college for about five weeks [and] majored in beer parties and co-eds. I must say, I excelled at those two disciplines, sucked at everything else.

Who were some of your chief comic book influences as an artist?

Too many to name, list or remember — a few off the top would include Jack Kirby, Steve Ditko, Curt Swan, Robert Crumb, Vaughn Bodé, you name them, they probably influenced me at one point or another.

How did you teach yourself the craft?

According to most people, I didn't. Trial and error, man, trial and error. Still trying to learn.

Did you have regular nine-to-five jobs beforehand?

Oh, yeah, a million of them, every rotten job there ever was — I've swept floors, written estimates for a printer, driven a forklift, cooked, was in training as a *maitre d'* once. Worked in factories, warehouses, restaurants, moved armoires. You name it, I did it to earn a buck.

Was your first wife understanding of your career choice?

Very. She believed in me even through all those times that I didn't. She was supportive in every way imaginable.

Who encouraged you to self-publish?

I moved to San Diego in the late '70s and got involved in the scene down there. There was Scott Shaw!, John Pound, Jim Cornelius, David Scroggy, Jon Hartz, Jim Cornelius, Dave Stevens… a whole bunch of guys at

various levels. Two of them, Rick Geary and Joel Milke, were doing these wonderful little Xerox books, what we would now call small press, then were called mini-comix. At any rate, at the urging of Jack Dickens and Ken Krueger, I tried my hand at them. That's how I got into it.

In the '70s and early '80s, was it difficult for you to stay afloat even with a minor triumph in normalman? Was there ever a time you came close to quitting?

Yes to both. *normalman* did fine for what it was, believe it or not. And yeah, I've quit more times than I can recall. It never lasts.

At what point did you start trying to break in at Marvel Comics? I'm assuming that you had been trying for some time. Were you ever tired of being an independent?

I was tired of being broke, I think. Again, I met two guys at a crucial turning point in my life: Rob Liefeld and Brian Murray. Rob was on the cusp and Brian was doing a book for DC called *Young All-Stars.* They really gave me the confidence to change my style and to go for it. It only took about a year before I started getting work.

What was the key to getting assignments there?

I knew one of the editors, Craig Anderson. I could write and draw and I was both fast and dependable. I think all of that helped.

And was it a struggle having to constantly prove yourself to these Marvel editors?

Still is.

After dabbling with a lot of What If? and fill-in issues, you finally got your own Marvel series in Guardians of the Galaxy — what did that take? What was in your propsal that ticked? Was it working with an editor who finally had faith in you and your work? You are one of a handful of writer/artists that was given a chance to assume that much responsibility in a traditional Marvel book.

Tom DeFalco and Mark Gruenwald were scheduled to appear at WonderCon, so Rob and I were going up. I had about three different proposals I'd worked up to show them, one of which was *The Young Avengers,* which Rob and I wanted to do together (I believe this was before the *New Mutants* gig which, in fact, I think he got at that show). At any rate, we were looking through the *Handbook of the Marvel Universe* and I came across the Guardians. I asked Rob what he thought of them and he thought they looked cool, but didn't have much of a story. A few nights later the idea of setting them in the Marvel Universe 1,000 years in the future hit me, and I wrote up the proposal the day before we went to the con. Two weird things happened: Tom had just created a teenaged *Avengers*-type group in *Thor* called *The New Warriors,* so that blew that idea, and Tom had been thinking a lot lately about reviving the *Guardians*. He wanted to set them some 500 years after the Badoon invasion. I told him if he gave me a green light I could set that up for him and I did in #8.

As to why I was given that responsibility it was because I approached them as the writer/artist, it was my concept. They knew that I had written and/or drawn several *What If*s and a few other projects here and there, so I guess they trusted me enough to handle both; especially when Tom realized that Jim

Valentino was also "Valentino" of *normalman* fame, something he didn't know until that show.

Even back then you labored with autobiographical comics like Valentino; *was that one of the appeals for you being independent: To tell your own stories?*

Well, on one level or another I've always told my own stories whether at Image, Aardvark-Vanaheim, Marvel, or in the small press.

Guardians *gave you the chance to play with a lot of Marvel Comics folklore. Was it an enjoyable experience to get some mainstream acceptance? Was that work personally rewarding for you?*

It was rewarding to play around with the folklore, the work was rewarding to me. I've never been real comfortable in the spotlight.

In many ways, the precursor to Image was that you had some of your fellow Image partners [Todd McFarlane, Rob Liefeld, Jim Lee and Erik Larsen] guest-inking various Guardian *covers; when did you start becoming chummy with them?*

Well, I had met all of them, but the only one I was really chummy with was Rob. At the time he was my best friend.

Do you remember your initial impressions of each of them?

Yes, I do — Rob was energetic and enthusiastic, just a ball of energy, Jim was almost too polite, Erik was kind of goofy and Todd was charismatic, funny and dismissive.

When were you extended an invitation to join [what would become] Image?

One day Rob came over to the house and said, "Wouldn't it be great to take a book from start to finish, do everything on it?" Diane and I laughed uproariously because we'd been doing it for years at that point, so we sat him down and we taught him how to do it. We taught him about pagination guides and page marriages, pretty much everything he'd need to know — from lettering to coloring, the whole thing.

Later that year at the San Diego Con, Rob, Erik and I were at a dinner with Dave Olbrich, then the publisher of Malibu. Rob asked Dave if he'd publish us and Dave said yes, laughing. He thought Rob was joking. He wasn't.

Rob kept working Todd and I all summer and fall; don't forget at this time Todd had "retired" from comics. Erik was already in. In December, Sotheby's, can't remember which, was holding their first comic book art auction. They were auctioning off the entirety of Jim's *X-Men* #1, Todd's *Spider-Man* #1 and Rob's *X-Force* #1. Todd and Rob were flying there together. I get a call from Todd, "Me an' Robby are goin' in an' tellin' 'em we quit — now, I got Larsen in one back pocket, do I got you in da other?" I'm in.

I go home and tell my wife that I either made the best decision of my life, or the worst. She was totally behind it.

Was there any resistance from Todd or any of the other members to you joining?

According to Rob, *none* of them wanted me in. Especially Todd, who has never made any bones about it. Rob was absolutely adamant. His argument

was that of them all, I was the one with the most to lose. I didn't have a lot of street cred (while I don't have much of an ego I always felt that was unfair, I deserved more), I wasn't a millionaire or on a million-selling book and I had five kids. The others could and would get gigs, there was a *lot* of doubt that I could. He went to bat for me and Todd grudgingly relented. That's why I defended him so vociferously for all those years until I just couldn't anymore. If it wasn't for Rob's force of will I certainly wouldn't be here. I owe him.

When Image started, were you hoping that you could stay on Guardians*? What was Marvel's reaction to your decision?*

Yes. I had *The Guardians* plotted out until #51 and I really wanted to finish the story I had been building to almost from the start. But my editor and I were not getting along at all. In fact, he told me that he considered the colorist to be more important to the book than I was. I realized that I couldn't write and draw both *The Guardians* and *ShadowHawk,* and deal with the whirlwind that was Image at that time, something had to give. So I requested to continue writing the book and have someone else draw it. He decided to just relieve me of the book altogether. But that was him.

There were a few editors up at Marvel who really took Image personally — guys like Ralph Macchio called us traitors and such, but Tom and Mark, the guys who were heading the company were always generous and gracious. At least in my experience with the both of them.

So Image starts; did you have any idea what type of book you were going to do?

The frontispiece for Jim's return to ShadowHawk in the pages of the Image Comics Tenth Anniversary *hardcover. This image and story were later reprinted in 2006's* ShadowHawk *one-shot.. ShadowHawk ©2007 Jim Valentino.*

Image Makers: The Founders

I had several different ideas, but hadn't really chosen one. In fact, I believe in the first interview I said I was going to do *The Pact,* a group book. But Rob, Jim, Marc and Whilce were all doing group books — only Todd and Erik were doing single characters so I decided to go that route lest there be too many groups. I did agree with the majority that we should do super-hero books. The thinking was that we'd all seen (and still see) a lot of popular creators do an "artsy" book or something their fans really didn't want to see and watched it go down in flames. Still happens. Give the people what they want, that was our motto. To this day I think we were right.

What was the inspiration behind ShadowHawk? Were you envisioning the character as something that would please Marvel fans? Did you want it to be a violent title?

The concept was originally pitched at Scott Fulip, an editor up at Archie who was looking to revitalize the old MLJ heroes. It was a revamp of The Fox — who I saw as a more violent Batman. That's what I was going for. It never made any sense to me that Batman would let a homicidal maniac like The Joker go time and again. Only in super-hero comics do heroes not kill. I decided the character wouldn't

Jim and his sons, Aaron and Joel. Photograph courtesy of Jim Valentino.

kill… but he'd maim.

The name came from a storyline I was doing in *Guardians of the Galaxy*. I changed Starhawk from a being of light to one of darkness and I wanted to change his name to reflect that. The name I chose for him was ShadowHawk. Tom DeFalco nixed the name change but told me that I should create a new character called ShadowHawk… so I dusted off the old Fox proposal and followed Tom's sage advice.

Was there a lot of time for you to develop the character's story and look? Relatively how quick was the transition from working for Marvel to working on your own book?

I was doing both simultaneously plus dealing with the whirlwind that surrounded Image at the time, plus setting up my office, plus raising a family. I had no time to sleep even.

Unluckily, you did break your hand early-on in Image.

Sprained it, actually. I kept the bandage on for a few weeks then couldn't stand it anymore and cut the sucker off! God forbid I ever break a bone, there's no way I could stay in a cast for months on end.

What went through your head when you heard the sales numbers for the first issue of ShadowHawk were over 500,000 copies? Were you able to now afford a lot of luxuries that you went without most of your life? Were you very cautious about what you were going to do with your earnings?

Well, I was ecstatic, of course! Actually the uppermost thought in my head is that maybe now it wouldn't be so much of a struggle. Maybe we could actually afford to send our kids to college, provide for them, and not sweat the mortgage every month. I thought about it all in "dad" terms.

One of the things that I noticed that you did with your newfound recognition was help a lot of other artists by giving them work or giving them a back cover ad. You immediately realized that you were in a position where you could help others. How did you not let your ego get the best of you in 1992?

I got a swelled head when I did *normalman*, and then found myself unable to get another gig afterwards. I realized then that it was a pretty fast drop from the top of the molehill — so I fought to remain humble thereafter. I still fight to remain humble. As for giving away the back covers, they went to old friends — people like Scott McCloud, Jeff Smith, Colleen Doran, Bob Burden, and the like and to people whose work and books I liked. If I could help them get even one extra sale — great!

Were you able to do every project that you wanted? Could the other founders veto you? Was it carte blanche in the early Image years to do whatever you wanted? Was this a very creative period for you, having done The Others, The Pact, Alliance and your Vignettes collection?

No founder could ever veto another; that was part of our agreement. I always put it like this, if you own the car you can do whatever you damn well please with it — that includes taking a hammer to the fender if that's what you wanted to do. We all owned the car equally… luckily, none of us owned a hammer!

I admire the fact that you weren't bashful in saying your books were among the lower sellers in the Image line, but that you were happy doing these comics with a

Tom DeFalco

From 1987 to '94, Tom DeFalco served as the editor-in-chief of Marvel Comics. Under his leadership, the comic line experienced its biggest period of expansion and financial profit. DeFalco's regime marked perhaps the last time that Marvel provided fertile ground for allowing young talent to develop — every Image founder blossomed to success throughout this period. Tom was also present at the infamous meeting with Todd McFarlane, Jim Lee, Rob Liefeld and Marvel President Terry Stewart; this fateful reunion is where the future Image co-founders voiced their grievances to Marvel. After his editorial tenure, DeFalco continued his successful freelance writing career, eventually even bringing his own creator-owned title, *Randy O'Donnell is the Man*, to Image in 2001.

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Tom Defalco. Courtesy of Tom DeFalco.

When you started as the editor-in-chief at Marvel, did you have a clear plan of what you wanted to do with the Marvel line? Was there something you wanted to do differently from what Shooter was doing?

I wanted to reorganize the editorial department. When [Jim] Shooter was editor-in-chief, I was an editor, and I felt that since I was dealing with the books on a daily basis that I had a little bit better insight to the books. I also felt that there were a lot of big problems associated with being an editor, and that sometimes the guy upstairs in the corner office wasn't aware of those problems. I figured that I was going to take more of a backward role in terms of the individual books and try to look at them more over a period of time than individual issues.

So did you also want to bring in a new wave of creators? Because John Byrne had already left to DC, and some of the other guys from the early '80s were gone, things were starting to change. There was a changing of the guard around that time, too, when you started.

Well, that happens whenever there's a big shake-up. People who didn't care much for Shooter came back to Marvel when he left. It's not like I did anything special. I didn't think I really had to do anything. At that time we were Marvel Comics. We just had to offer the best deal for our creative people that we could. If you build it, they will come.

But you were willing to gamble on some of the new guys. I don't think Todd had done anything too big before Hulk — or Rob before he did New Mutants.

No. That was more of a function of the individual editors. The *Spider-Man* book, the adjectiveless *Spider-Man* book — do you think that was created for Todd McFarlane?

I thought so.

It was not. The reason why we did that book is because I was traveling in Europe, dealing with our European licenses, and they had such a demand for *Spider-Man* material that I realized that we could produce another *Spider-Man* title. We would make a profit on that title even if we didn't publish it in our country. So that's why I decided to do that *Spider-Man* title. When I told the editor of [*Amazing*] *Spider-Man* that we wanted to do another title — he was totally against the idea. He didn't like the idea of doing another one.

I always thought the story was that Todd wanted to do his own thing.

No.

Well, he wasn't working too well with the writer, with David Michelinie, and basically this was a way to keep both guys happy: Todd getting his book and do what he wanted to do, and Michelinie can do what he wanted to do on Amazing Spider-Man.

Nope. That had nothing to do with it. This was just purely an economic decision.

Were all of them economic decisions?

A lot of them were, yeah.

Was that part of the pressure when you were editor-in-

chief? Like, you had to keep pouring in money into the company, "I gotta think of the next big thing. We need to keep expanding."

Nope. You're thinking about it like a fan, and I'm going to tell you how I thought about it like a professional. We were in the publishing business, and I wanted to run Marvel Comics like any other publishing house. I just felt that as long as we were making money, that the people upstairs would leave us alone. My goal was to make money for the company and to expand the number of titles we were doing. Here's the simple economics of publishing: in order to make money as a publisher, you have to publish. In those days I could see that comic book stores depended upon the monthly comic books. The individual stores would basically sell the same amount of each title every month. In order to ensure the health of the comic book stores, we needed to slowly build up our output, because the more titles we produced that sold through every month, the more money the comic book stores would make. The more money the comic book stores made, the more secure the industry was. And I wanted to be in a secure industry.

But did you feel you had enough creators to put a line of good books out there?

Yeah. I also felt that, as publishers, it was our responsibility to help develop new talent. You can only develop new talent if you're expanding. So I wanted to be in a growing company. I felt that the more we grew, the more work we would provide to the creative people. I always saw myself as a freelancer who masqueraded as a staff person. The goal was to slowly increase the production over a period of time, and give people a chance to develop. Here's the secret with creative people: they don't spring full-blown. They all need time to develop as creative people. That's why we had books like *Marvel Comics Presents*. That was essentially our version of *New Talent Showcase*. It gave a lot of people like Rob Liefeld and many others an opportunity to develop their craft.

A chance to spread their wings.

Yeah, and learn how to tell a comic book story; there's a real craft to this business. A lot of people think that you just sit down and it just flows, that it's just the work of genius. No, you really have to know what you're doing.

Did you feel you had a huge momentum going on around '89, '90? It seemed like you had someone really good working on all the books, and you had stories that readers were into.

Well, yeah. I think we kept getting good momentum going. I also think the golden age of comics is whenever you started reading them. So that might have been around the time when you were really getting into them.

This was a key era, too; I remember it was very strong editorially. DC had nothing on you guys at that point. And that was something I wanted to get into, the superstar artists. Were you aware these guys were becoming big names for themselves, Todd and Jim Lee at that point? It happened pretty quickly. I think as soon as

Interesting X-Men *piece by Jim Lee (along with Cyclops character shot). Top panel was used to promote 1991's* X-Men #1 *release; lower panel was an unfinished thought by the artist.* X-Men ©2007 Marvel Characters, Inc.

Jim Lee did a couple of issues of Uncanny, *right away with people, he struck a chord.*

Yeah, but don't forget, Jim Lee had been around a long time before he did *Uncanny X-Men*.

But he was in the minors on Alpha Flight. *His star started coming up when he was doing the* Punisher War Journal.

Here's the secret of comics: the characters make the stars, and the stars make the characters. If you're a talented guy and they put you on a major character, then you'll become a superstar.

But you were aware, when people talk like, "I like that Jim Lee run of books," or "I like Tom DeFalco's run on Spider-Man." *People talk like that, and in fan circles they do talk like that.*

But the fans always talked like that. The guy I like is terrific. The guy you like is a bum. Y'know?

Did you ever start feeling like they were getting out of hand after a while? Because I remember

Dave Olbrich

It was Dave Olbrich, Malibu Comics' publisher, who presented Rob Liefeld, Erik Larsen and Jim Valentino an open invitation to doing creator-owned work, over a meal at a convention. It was a notion that Liefeld would never forget. When the time came to start Image, Olbrich had been social with Rob since he broke into the business in the mid-'80s. Although never officially Image's publisher, Dave served many of those very same duties for the extremely successful initial wave of Image books in 1992 and early 1993, a great help in successfully launching the company. For over 20 years, Mr. Olbrich has been a highly respected figure in the comics community and is the founder of Will Eisner Comics Industry Awards.

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Dave Olbrich at Golden Apple Comics in 1992. Photograph by and ©2007 Tom Mason.

Do you remember when you first met Rob Liefeld? Do you remember what you thought, or your impressions of his portfolio?

At the very beginning of Malibu Comics in 1986, Tom Mason and I were looking for comic book series to publish. I don't remember if we met Rob in person first or if we got a submission from him in the mail. It was probably early in 1987 that we first saw Rob's proposal for *Youngblood*. The art looked great, and included a very large group of original super-heroes. Rob's style has changed significantly over the years. These early samples seemed to be influenced by Jerry Ordway and George Pérez. We were excited and immediately started talks with Rob about how Malibu could publish *Youngblood*. Even though the industry was going through a downturn in 1987, we thought Rob's work would generate a lot of excitement.

Did you call Rob, out of the blue, around the time he was working on New Mutants *as a feeler or something else? Was it true that Rob was planning on working with Malibu and Marvel simultaneously during his* X-Force *days?*

We talked with Rob about how to do *Youngblood*

and when we could do it. My memory of these long-ago details are a bit fuzzy, but I believe that Malibu came to terms and sent him a contract. I even believe that he signed the contract. At that point, Malibu Comics was very, very small. We were only publishing four or five black-&-white books per month and the page rate/upfront money didn't come close to the rates offered by Marvel and DC. But we had a couple of things going for us — we marketed our books really well, and creators retained complete ownership of their work. Before *Youngblood* was completed, Rob's artwork came to the attention of someone at DC and he landed the penciling gig on *Hawk & Dove*.

We had become quite friendly with Rob while discussing how to make *Youngblood* a reality, but we couldn't compete with Marvel/DC page rates. We graciously agreed to cancel the contract, and Rob and I always kept in touch. While he was doing comic books elsewhere, Rob continued to do a number of guest covers for Malibu. You'd have to check with a comic historian or Liefeld collection completist to tell you which ones. His guest covers always provided a boost in sales.

What was the gist of Rob's The Executioners *with Malibu? Did Marvel Comics make any legal threats over that book?*

We maintained a good relationship with Rob in the years that followed. *Youngblood* would come up in discussions occasionally, but he was so busy with everything he was doing at Marvel and/or DC that we were never able to move forward. We were always open to doing something together and we would occasionally get calls from either Rob or from his friend Hank Kanalz about doing something.

Rob has always been a ball of energy, full of more ideas than he could ever find the time to complete. As time went by, it became clear that after working

Larry Marder

In a time of chaotic logistics and late books at Image, the founders turned to Larry Marder for help stabilizing their company in late 1993. As Image's executive director, Marder brought professionalism and order when he assumed all responsibilities of the company's publishing. He provided direction, mandates, guidelines, business and editorial advice and an open ear to grievances from the Image founders, comics distributors and retailers. Prior to Image, Marder worked in an advertising agency, created the alternative comic *Beanworld*, and served as the marketing director for Moondog's, a pop culture store chain. In the fall of 1999, Larry stepped down from his seat at Image to accept his current position as the president of McFarlane Toys.

Had you known any of the Image founders prior to the formation of Image?

I've known Valentino since 1984, when I started doing my comic, *Beanworld*. He was doing *normalman*. After I broke into comics, I met Marc Silvestri while he was still living in Chicago. He was working for First Comics, and I met him right before he moved to New York to do *King Conan.* Erik Larsen I knew from Chicago conventions. I noticed him because he always held his pencil funny when he sketched, and I had had some conversations with him. But I didn't know Rob, and I didn't know Todd. And I met Jim Lee early on, before Image had started, but I didn't know him particularly well. I was a cartoonist working in the alternative press, and somehow all of our paths had crossed at some point.

Beanworld.
©2007 Larry Marder.

Were you successful prior to Image?

My story is a whole different story. *Beanworld* was around for a bunch of years. It got nominated for some awards. It didn't win any, but it got nominated.

You started during the black-&-white boom?

I was part of the black-&-white boom, yeah. There was a group of artists that came up in 1984, 1985, and 1986, and I was a part of that.

But you were centered in Chicago?

Absolutely. I was living in Chicago and working in the advertising field.

Were you also working for Moondog's?

That was a little bit later. I started working for Moondog's, I think, in 1991… '91, '92 and '93, I think were the years I was there.

That was a chain of comic book stores?

Yeah, it was a chain. At one point there were eight locations, but I think most of the time I was working at Moondog's, there were six of what we called "popular culture stores" in the Chicagoland area.

Where's your business experience come from?

My business experience comes from the fact that I was in the advertising business for over 20 years, and so doing business-to-business advertising, that's where I learned most of my skills. My story is that *Beanworld* came out in 1985. I was affiliated with Eclipse Comics. In 1986, the San Diego trade show schedulers were looking for someone to give a talk to comic book retailers about how to think about advertising. I was suggested to them as someone who could do that. So I put together a presentation, and that got videotaped by IADD, which was the distributor cartel. That tape went around to a lot of retailers, and that got my name out there as a person who knows something about business, because at that point the direct market was very primitive. The big issues were should you have a cash register or
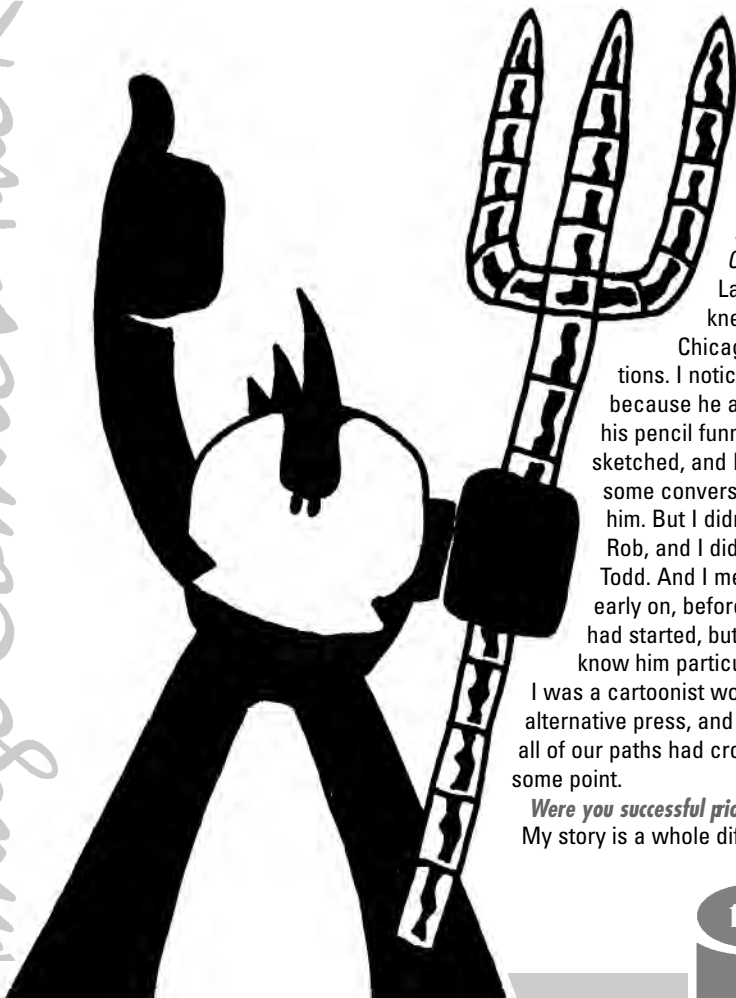
Matt Hawkins

At Marc Silvestri's Top Cow Productions, Matt Hawkins is the president of day-to-day operations and the company's chief operating officer. Since 1998, Hawkins has been instrumental in getting Top Cow properties the massive recognition that they have today in Hollywood and the rest of the global business world. Matt has been a part of the Image family since his days at Extreme Studios, where he worked in promotions, marketing and editorial. While working for Liefeld at Awesome Comics and Maximum Press during the mid-'90s, Hawkins created *Lady Pendragon*, which had a very devoted fan following and was eventually published at Image. Under Matt's charismatic leadership, Top Cow is one of the most popular lines at Image as they continue to charter into new mediums.

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Matt Hawkins. Photo courtesy of Mr. Hawkins.

Todd Nauck, Badrock and Rob Liefeld pose for the camera at Golden Apple Comics. Behind them is a physical Youngblood transport that Rob had built for displaying at conventions and appearances. Photo courtesy of Golden Apple Comics.

How did you end up getting hired by Extreme Studios?
I was hired in April 1993, and I went to the grand opening of the Mile High Comics store down in Anaheim. And at the time I was working for a mortgage banking company. That's what I was doing, and it was awful work. Honestly, people hate me when I tell them this, but I wasn't really ever into comics. But my nephew was really into comics, and he wanted to go to this signing, so we went down. And I remember him telling me, "We should go early and get in line." I'm like, "What are you talking about?" So I took him down, like, five minutes before the signing, and the line was 700 or 800 people. So we ended up waiting for two-and-a-half, almost three hours, before we even got to the front. And then we got closer to the line, there was this group of seven or eight guys that were all there signing. There was Rob Liefeld, Eric Stephenson, Danny Miki, Richard Horie… and I'm

trying to remember who else, but those are the main ones I remember. They were all behind the tables there, they all had these black leather jackets on that said "Extreme Studios."

I saw someone show Rob his portfolio right in front of me, and Rob looked at it and said, "Dude, you're awesome! You're hired. Get behind the table." And I was like, "Whoa." I was actually taken aback. Here was this guy I'd just spent the last couple hours with who was talking about how much he wanted to do this and how fun it would be, and here was Rob hiring the kid on the spot. And I remember I was just caught up in the moment, I got up to Rob, I'm like, "Hey, man, how are you doing?" And I just said, "You know, I don't know if you're looking for anybody that does other things, but I've done some marketing work, done some press release stuff, any letters pages, anything like that. I don't know if you're looking for anyone like that, but I'd certainly be willing to give it a shot." And he's like, "Yeah, we are looking for somebody to do something like that. You should talk to Eric Stephenson." And I talk to Eric, and I had no idea that at the time that Eric had only been there for, like, a month. I don't remember actually Eric's hiring story, but I know that Eric was like an assistant librarian, and that Rob had hired him away from working as an assistant librarian. So here I am chatting with this guy, he was only a year or two older than me, but I was clueless. We were all clueless. It's sort of funny in hindsight. Eric said, "Give me a call tomorrow." So I called the next day, and I took some of the initiative, because they said they were looking for somebody to write letter pages and write press releases. I went from the signing right over to a bookstore and bought a book on how to write a press

McFARLANE
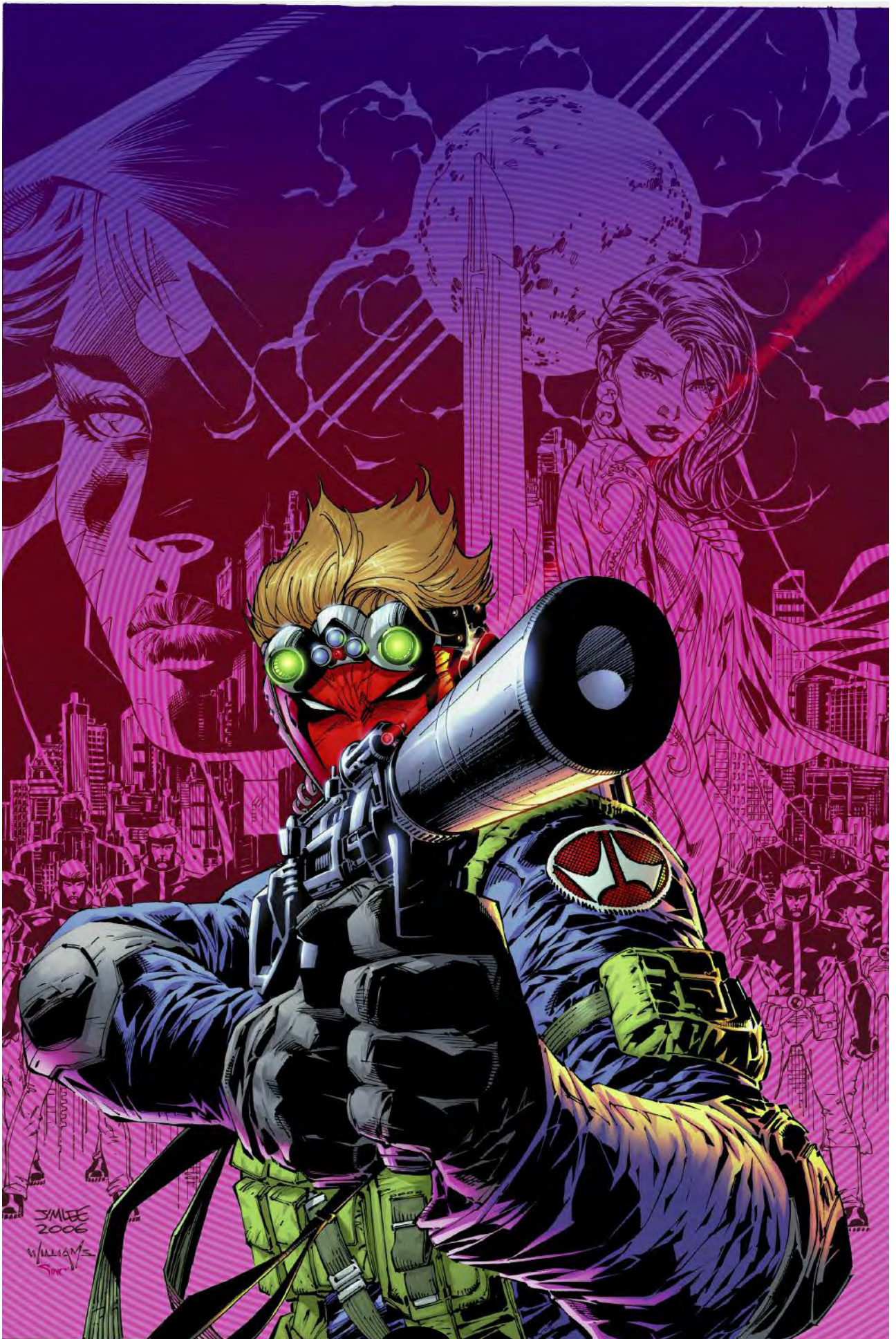
Counter Tension

(Or: "How We Learned to Stop Worrying and Not Solely Blame Image for the Fall of Comics")

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When Phil Seuling's Seagate Distributing Company created the direct market distribution system in 1972, he probably unknowingly changed the entire economic course of comics for the foreseeable future. By avoiding the traditional newsstand channels (where sellers can return books), he created a system where comics were bought from direct distributors for Marvel, DC, and smaller comic book publishers — this window would allow sellers to get their books earlier than newsstands at competitively discounted rates on a non-returnable basis. The creation of the direct market allowed the rise of devoted comics shops and retailers that would cater to a dedicated readership. Publishers encouraged the growth of the direct market because it was a win-win scenario that not only built customer loyalty, but provided a lucrative new source of business. Throughout the seventies, sales were declining on the newsstands; a new market where books were non-returnable was the future that they were going to pursue to its fullest extent.

The direct market also allowed independent and alternative publishers a chance to gamble on a mechanism with which to keep their readers – books like *Cerebus, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* and *Bone* would have never found success on newsstands. "What this created was an environment where small publishers could enter the market," said Steve Milo, the founder of American Entertainment (which during the early nineties was the biggest single retailer of comics) and the pioneer of comics retailing online. "They could enter a market on a non-returnable basis, which was a very low risk, and they could be a lot more risky in terms of their offerings. So they didn't have to worry about coming out with mainstream products. They could take more chances. So this really created kind of a creative revolution, and really opened up a lot more opportunities for upcoming talent who previously had really been restricted to just Marvel and DC."

When the media's anticipation of the *Batman* movie began in 1988, there were many prominent comic book distributors (key ones were Diamond, Comics Unlimited, Capital City, and Heroes World) when the boom in comics exploded wide open. In the years prior, major comics publishers had set their sights so strongly on the direct market that they practically allowed their product's presence on convenience, grocery and drug stores to disappear by turning a blind eye to the newsstand market — more than 70% of their revenue coming from just the direct market. Stores dedicated to selling comic books and related paraphernalia began emerging in malls and local neighborhoods all across the country. In the beginning, it was practically a license to print money from an audience of readers and speculators too eager to give it up.

"*Batman* was insane for the comics business,"

Second row, left to right::
Erik Larsen, Marc Silvestri, Whilce Portacio, Rob Liefeld, Len Brown (Topps creative director) and Ira Friedman (Topps V.P.). **First row, left to right:** *Todd McFarlane, Jim Valentino, Jim Lee, Arthur T. Shorin (Topps chairman & CEO), and Jim Salicrup (Topps Comics' editor-in-chief and former Marvel editor). This is the only known photo of the seven Image founders together. The occasion took place on July 12, 1993, at the L.A. headquarters of the Creative Artists Agency for the signing of a Topps and Image Comics trading card set. Courtesy of Jim Salicrup and Topps.*

Five of Image's founding partners, during an appearance at Golden Apple Comics in Los Angeles.

Next page, top: *Marc Silvestri gives artistic advice to youngsters in Los Angeles.*

Rob Liefeld at Golden Apple Comics in Los Angeles.

recalls Jim Hanley, the founder of the landmark Jim Hanley's Universe stores in New York. "The people who had the books could just sell anything Batman. That year we had opened up a store in the Staten Island Mall, and it was the perfect year to be in a mall store. We were selling all sorts of Batman merchandise hand over fist, and we were selling all the Batman books. We'd go down to Comics Unlimited, which was our distributor, twice a week to pick stuff up, and we'd say, 'How many *Dark Knights* do you have?' 'We have four cases.' "Okay, we'll take two.' Or, 'We'll take all four.' They say, 'Can you hold on, just take two, and take more next Wednesday, because we'll have more of them in?' 'Okay, we'll take the other two on Wednesday.' Every time we walked through the door there we took two or three cases of the "Death of Robin" trade. Marvel seemed to deliberately back off that year. But they saved stuff up, so the beginning of 1990 they put out a bunch of new #1's."

Without a doubt the mass epidemic of speculation took off around this time. "Oh, yeah, there was the undercurrent of that," Steve Geppi, the Founder and President of Diamond Comic Distributors Inc. remembered. "You had what I call the baseball scabs coming over and perpetrating their fraud on the comic industry. The same thing they did with cards that they busted, that they came over here and decided to do with comics; you know, buy cases of them and have people believe that they were going to put their kids through college on cases of recent comics."

As new readers and fortune-hunters entered the marketplace, they gravitated heavily to the emerging art talent coming from Marvel. "Oh, absolutely," commented Chuck Rozanski, the owner of Mile High Comics and a prominent figure amongst comics retailers. "They had a huge fan base, and that's why they were able to step so successfully away from Marvel and to strike out on their own. See, part of that came from Marvel's philosophy, and Terry Stewart's philosophy, of making stars. And so Marvel in effect created the notoriety of these guys by really, really pushing their star power and using that to sell books, but then in the end it came back and really did bite them in the tail. I think to this day it's the philosophy of Marvel to downplay individual creators and to really emphasize the team effort and the editors and so on. Marvel to this day doesn't send people out that much on a promotional tour. You almost never see them set up at conventions in any real substantive way. They are trying to keep their creators very much under their thumb."

Since comics publishing was ruled by Marvel and DC, Terry Stewart probably imagined that Lee, Liefeld and McFarlane didn't really pose any real threat to him after their impromptu meeting in 1991. He likely thought that they'd change their minds and keep in line. At the time, there weren't many options; most major artists that went independent would come back to Marvel or DC with their tail between their legs. A key in Image's success was not only that the top artists banded together, but for the first time the retailers showed an abundance of confidence in showing their support by ordering Image books with little worries. Milo said, "I really thought Image was going to be extremely successful because I really felt that they were really tied down by Marvel. There was definitely a Marvel method back in that time, and I think from a creativity standpoint, this was the way to go… I think *Youngblood* #1 we sold 40,000 copies, and I think *Spawn* #1 we had 50,000, and *WildC.A.T.s* was probably right at the 30,000 to 40,000 range. *WildC.A.T.s* came out a little later. They started to dilute themselves, so the initial ones had the bigger runs because there weren't as many of them at that point."

"They were good for the industry!" Geppi confirms. "Their timing was good. It was an innovative time. And I think they made their mark, and I think they learned a few lessons along the way, and guys like Todd and Jim Lee really maintained a good business sense and made some good moves for themselves when they saw that it wasn't sustainable… It was somewhat of a Renaissance. You might even, with due respect, compare it to Marvel in 1962. All of a sudden the market got shaken up. New things were happening. There could be an independent title that would sell huge quantities, and that was very, very… it was great exposure for the industry. Like I said, the downside was when it collapsed because it wasn't built on solid ground, but the quality titles stayed, and the quality creators stayed. And I think it expanded the market. I'm sure Marvel and DC weren't happy about it at the time. Particularly Marvel, because Todd had defected, and he was doing *Spider-Man.* But he leveraged his popularity on *Spider-Man,* and

Image Comics: The Road To Independence

Steve Oliff

Steve Oliff is one of the true masters of comic book coloring with a career that spans back to the '70s and continues to the present day. He's provided sophisticated hues to such classic stories as *The Death of Captain Marvel, X-Men: God Loves, Man Kills,* and *Avengers Forever.* With his groundbreaking artistic work for the Marvel translation of *Akira* by Katsuhiro Otomo, Oliff became one of the key pioneers in integrating the digital coloring age into the field. By the arrival of Image Comics, Steve and his innovative Olyoptics Studios made everyone take note of Image's top notch production, which at the time was second to none. At the height of Image's boom period, Olyoptics provided color and separations for over 70 percent of the line; eventually WildStorm, Extreme and Top Cow developed their own coloring departments. Steve's contribution to books like *Spawn* and *The Maxx* remain eye-opening in terms of how natural the colors and art came together. Oliff recently returned to comics on Bob Burden and Rick Geary's *Gumby Comics.*

*Steve Oliff.
Courtesy of Steve.*

● ●

In the '80s, what you were doing was kind of revolutionary at the time. No one had quite seen someone use colors in comics like you did.

Well, there was nobody doing full color, and that's what I've always done. Since basically my earliest work, it's all been hand done full-color, until we took over the computer stuff. I did a little bit of the coded color guide stuff where you have it hand-separated, but I started off on the four-color *Hulk* magazine and Bill Sienkiewicz's first *Moon Knight* story in 1978, and it just went from there.

You hadn't worked for Todd before Spawn*; he was the one who brought you into the Image fold?*

Yeah, he was. We'd talked about it for a long time. He said that he liked the stuff that I'd been doing earlier. I think this was probably after *Akira* had started, but I remember we had talked about working on a *Hulk* graphic novel that he was supposed to do, and then he got the *Spider-Man* gig. When it went into its own title, he talked to Marvel about trying to see if they'd be interested in having me do the color on that, but it didn't work out. So when *Spawn* came along, he sent us a test series of pages. He was basically hedging his bets and he wasn't sure who he wanted, really, so he had some test guides done and some color separations done. Olyoptics was pretty well cruising on *Akira* by that time, because I think this was '92, and we'd started *Akira* in '89.

Akira was ground-breaking work.

Yeah, because that was the first comic book to be colored using a computer.

Who took that chance? Was it Archie Goodwin?

It was Archie Goodwin. I'd been interested in computers for a long time. I'd been coloring first on photostats and different things, that was in the late '70s, early '80s, and then we did the graylines with Eclipse. Then we moved onto some of the blueline projects that I did for DC, like… Well, the first blueline project I did was for First Comics. It was Howard Chaykin's *Time²*, the First graphic novel, which is some of my best coloring ever, actually. And then went on to the *Blackhawk* mini-series for DC, which led to *Cosmic Odyssey, Gilgamesh II* and a bunch of other blueline projects.

Armature, mascot for the colorist's Olyoptics company. ©2007 Steve Oliff.

Armature says: "The better YOU draw the better WE color!"

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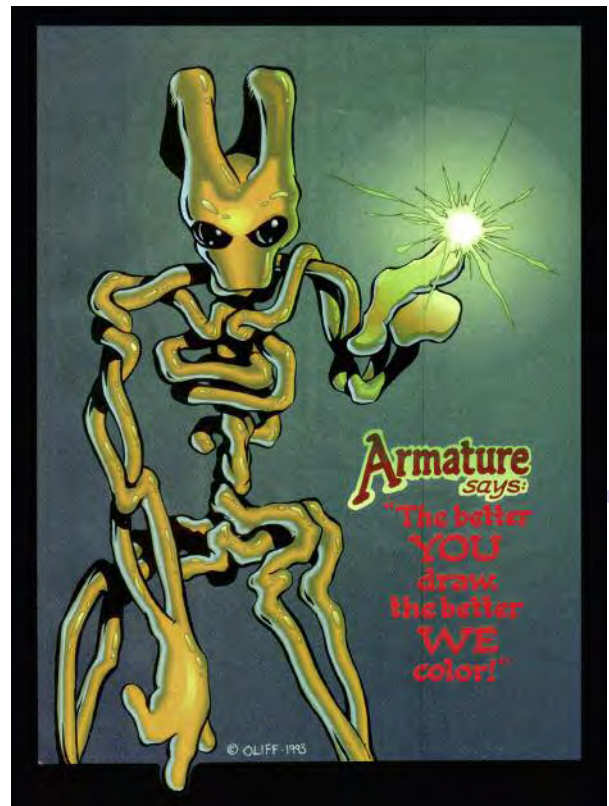
Image Comics: The Road To Independence

Scott Williams

Behind every great penciler, there's a great inker; when you think of Jim Lee's exquisite pencils, you'll usually find Scott Williams's bold finishes right besides it. The legendary comic book artist entered the business by assisting his pal, Whilce Portacio, on inking *Longshot*. During his busy time at Marvel, Scott formed Homage Studios with Whilce (and later a new guy named Jim Lee); this would formalize their bond as an art studio to be reckoned with. First paired with Lee on *Punisher War Journal,* the duo made their mark, having enormous success on *Uncanny X-Men* and *X-Men*. As Homage would eventually morph into WildStorm Studios, the birth of Image Comics showcased Scott's relentless tenacity, making him the backbone of the company when he was the only inker man enough to ink Jim Lee (on *WildC.A.T.s*), Marc Silvestri (on *Cyberforce*), Whilce Portacio (on *Wetworks*), and Dale Keown (on *Pitt*) virtually simultaneously. It's evident from his contributions to *Batman: Hush, Superman, WildC.A.T.s*, and *All-Star Batman and Robin,* that he hasn't slowed down one iota. For almost 20 years, Scott Williams has been the *crème de la crème* in this business — the inker against which all other inkers will forever be measured.

Scott Williams. Courtesy of Scott Williams.

WildC.A.T.s pin-up (from #50, vol. 1) with pencil & inks by Scott Williams. ©2007 WildStorm Productions.

How did you get into comics originally?
Like most other professionals, I started off as a fan. I read comics, bought comics, collected comics, and borrowed comics from my older brothers. I became a fan of the medium, the art form, but also had a bit of a desire to be an artist, and some talent; it seemed like an obvious marriage. I enjoyed buying and reading and being entertained by the entire concept of comics as an art form, and combining that with a natural desire and love of drawing, with a certain amount of talent sprinkled in. And it took some hard work to hone that talent. It was a natural progression. Frankly, it's one of those things where, if I hadn't found comics, I don't know if I would have taken my artistic skills and talent to a level that would have allowed me to have a career in art, and therefore I have no idea what I would have done with my life, because I'm not sure what else I would be good at. So thank God for comics and thank God for art.

You connected with what Neal Adams was at DC in the '70s?
Yeah, I definitely was a two-pronged comic aficionado. I was a fan primarily of Marvel Comics, specifically in my early years. I liked the whole continuity aspect of their universe. I liked the approach to their comics. I liked the fact that if something happened in one book, it somehow inevitably affected some of the other books. There seemed to be cohesion about it. I liked some of the character traits, where Peter Parker would have growing up problems and girl problems, and the Fantastic Four fought with each other, and the Avengers roster, which would continually change over. I found that an appealing approach to comics, whereas with DC — as much as I enjoyed some of the iconic characters — it seemed like each issue
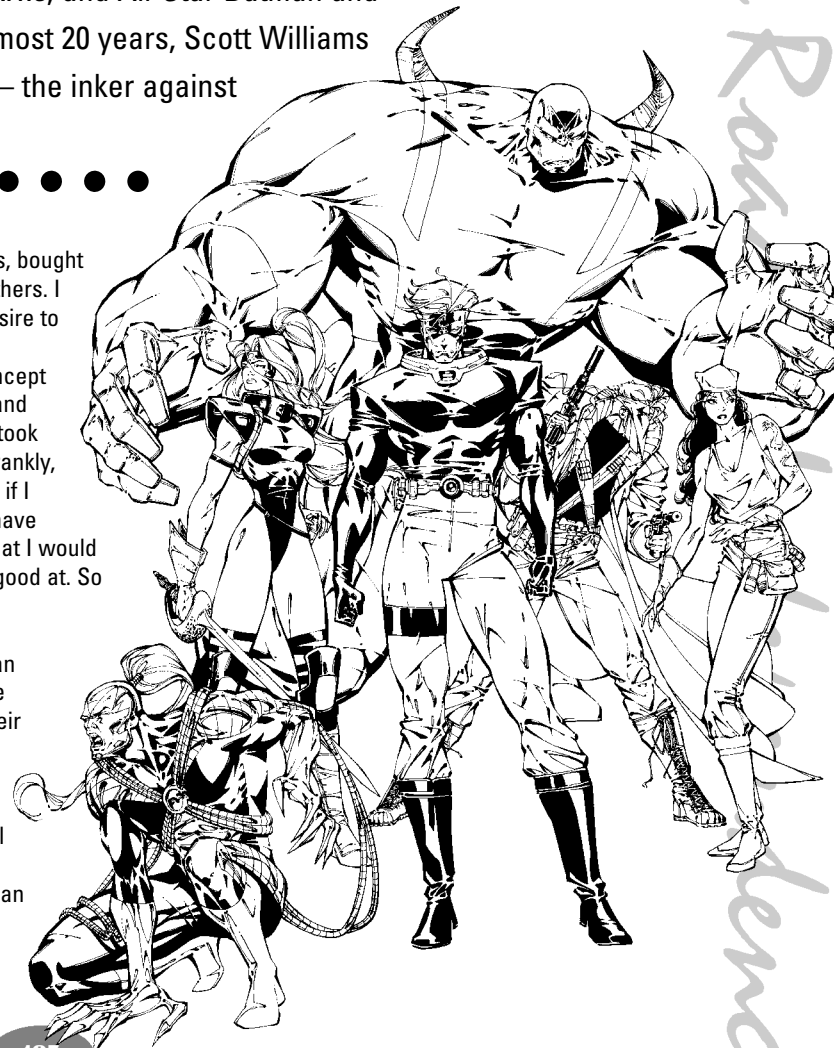
Dale Keown

Perhaps the definitive artist of *The Incredible Hulk,* Dale Keown's *Pitt* arrived at the dawn of Image, packing the artist's powerful punch. An unapologetic raging alien assassin, *Pitt* was a massive badass killer from another planet that arrives to Earth and befriends his human little brother Timmy. Upon being freed from Marvel, Dale's work on *Pitt* was now larger than life, loaded in poetic scenes of beautiful violence and action, along with his magic for awe-inspiring alien designs, impressive landscapes and bodacious babes. One could see all the excitement and relentless energy that Keown had on his superbly drawn covers and his mastery of page layouts. In 1995, Dale started publishing *Pitt*, from #10 to #20, through his Full Bleed brand when he left Image. The artist returned to Image with Top Cow Comics on *Darkness*; Keown's is presently at work on the highly-anticipated *Darkness/Pitt* crossover that'll make fanboys drool for more of his artwork.

*Dale Keown.
Courtesy of Larry Marder.*

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Dale, you were one of the imprtant guys that came to Image very early on.

Oh, thank you very much.

But you were! Did you ever see Todd's letters page in Spawn #1? He mentions all the guys, and your name is in a bigger font.

Like, triple-bold font. I know. Yeah, that's not enough pressure, right?

He was really excited to have you aboard.

That was probably because *Hulk* was doing so well, and he wanted to get one of the guys — .

Not only did he like your art, but you're also Canadian.

Yeah.

Was it a big decision for you to join Image?

Well, yeah, it was, because I was doing so well, and things were just getting better and better at Marvel. And then I talked to Todd, it was back in '89 or '90. I was doing a convention in Vancouver, and he invited me to come and just hang for a few days at his place. And I remember showing up, and I didn't know anything about Todd. I just saw a couple pictures and I liked his artwork. And then I show up and he's got this huge, beautiful house on Victoria Island, and I just said, "Wow, I guess you can make some good money in comic books." Even though the real estate market probably wasn't real expensive there or anything, but I was just really impressed with his house. And his energy, he had so much energy. He didn't really mention anything about Image back then, but I think he was just trying to feel me out a bit as to if I would be willing to do it. He didn't say anything in particular, but he was just talking about different things. And later on he says, "Yeah, well,

what did you think I was talking about? Of course, I was trying to get you involved, or see if you'd be interested." Yeah, but then I talked to Todd after the Image thing had broken, Jim Lee called me up and said, "Do you have any characters that we can do?"

Wait a minute… Jim Lee was the one who got you aboard?

Both Jim and Todd. Todd sort of buttered me up, and then Jim

Pitt is ©2007 Dale Keown.
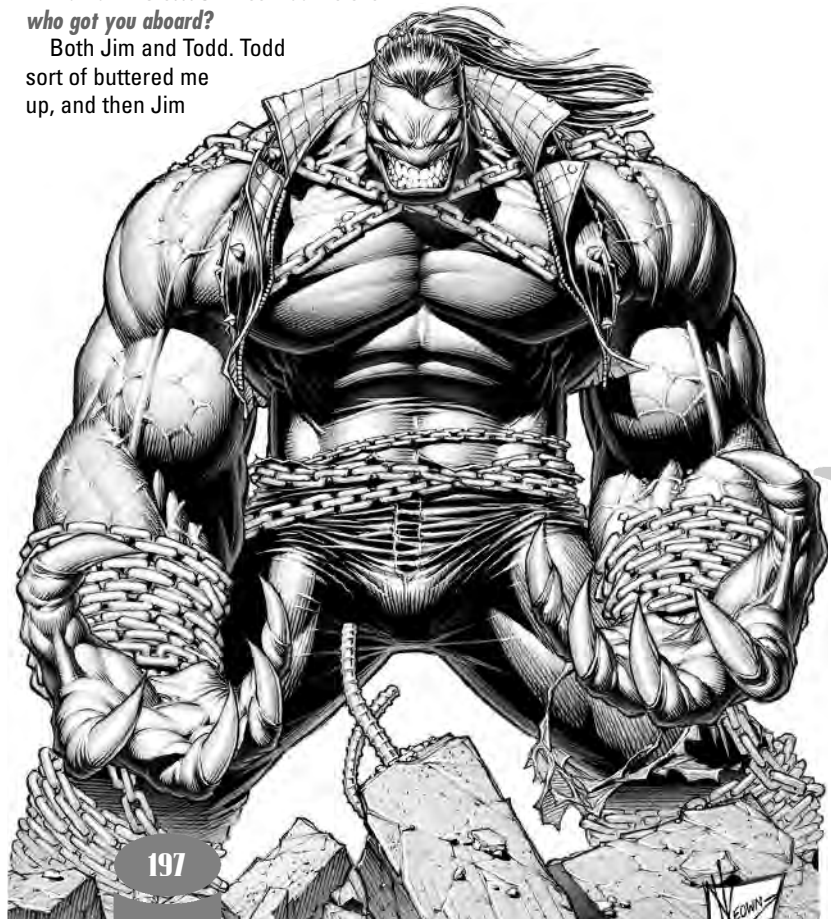
Sam Kieth

Although Sam Kieth is fondly remembered for his artwork on *Marvel Comics Presents* and *Sandman*, it was at Image Comics that the artist finally found his creative chops on his title *The Maxx*. Born in the pages of the 1.3 million selling anthology *Darker Image* #1, The Maxx was everything that Kieth wanted to say in a comic at the time — a heavy psychological exploration of the human character and the world around us. His book was real heavy material amongst the violence and "T & A" that were commonplace in early Image books; perplexing protagonists like Julie and Maxx made this the first book of substance and critical acclaimed published by Image. Despite his low-key persona, Sam Kieth put together one of Image's best sellers, a loyal fan following, movie deals and a fondly remembered MTV animated adaptation. Still a highly in-demand cover and super-hero artist for his surreal vision, Kieth now has the freedom to create character-driven narratives like *Four Women, Zero Girl* and *Ojo*.

Maxx. ©2007 Sam Kieth.

I was looking at your work, and you had been working independently for a long time. You backed Matt Wagner and things like that.

Everybody starts on super-heroes, when they're growing up and first reading comics. Later on I hoped to be an underground comics artist, but there weren't any. By the '70s and '80s, the undergrounds were kind of dead. So I think I came back to super-heroes because there was nowhere else to go.

You didn't experience some of the black-&-white boom?

No, I just missed that. I remember when the *Hamsters* came out, there was a whole bunch of books that were clones of them, all these other funny animal books. When the *Turtles* were huge, there was a book about hamsters, and I did two or three issues of that.

You did the Adolescent Radioactive Black Belt Hamsters?

That was it. I did the very last three issues before they canceled the book. And Mike Dringenberg was caught up in some of that, too, trying to get jobs. Both of us were lamenting the fact that we just missed the funny animal boom. There would be no more booms in comics that — .

You knew Dringenberg before Sandman?

He was always running around San Diego, and he was the guy who had the best portfolio, so everybody knew that, no matter what else would happen, Mike would get in and the rest of us wouldn't.

So were you working anywhere else in the beginning?

I did little black-&-white stories and back-up strips. Just pretty much anything anybody would give me. I'd go six months or a year and then I'd do a five-page or nine-page story.

Were you scraping by?

No, my wife was supporting me. I wasn't making any money doing back-up stories for $35 or $25 a page, y'know?

Trying to break into Marvel and DC took you a few years, right?

It took me too many years. People shouldn't use me as an example at all. It took me, like, five or eight years. I couldn't get into either one of those places for years.

About your style? It looks a little bit like Wagner's stuff, but there's somebody else, right?

Yeah, there's a lot of guys from the '70s that I was always…

Like Frank Brunner?

Well, even before him. More like Bernie Wrightson
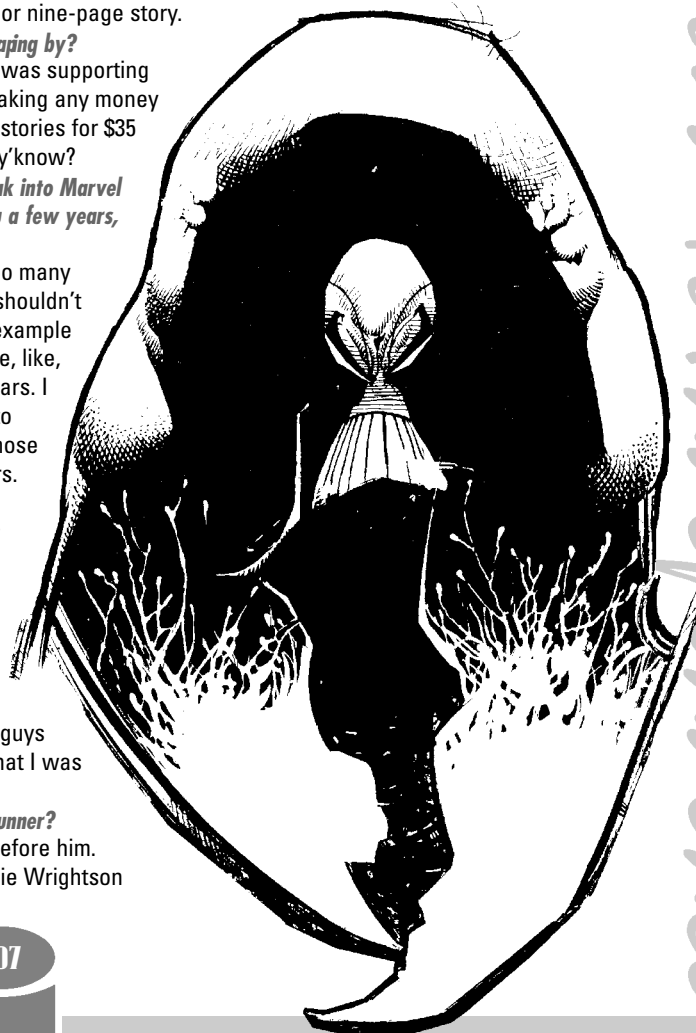
Larry Stroman & Todd Johnson

With the release of *Tribe* #1, Larry Stroman and Todd Johnson provided the single best-selling comic in history by African-American creators when it sold over 1,000,000 copies. The longtime friends from Detroit designed a black super-hero team that dealt in high-tech international adventures in the underworld. Artist Larry Stroman built his career on taking *X-Factor* (with Peter David) and the cult favorite *Alien Legion* to both of their sales heights with his ability to render pulse-pounding action, hyper detail and his intricate trademark panel work. Shortly after the release of the first issue, the Image founders voted *Tribe* out of their company. Larry and his writer, Todd Johnson, continued the adventures of their characters through Axis Comics, their own company, in the mid-'90s. To the present day, this super-hero title remains a fan favorite with readers that eagerly await the day when there are new adventures for *Tribe*.

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Larry, when you were illustrating X-Factor, *your career was just starting to really kick off, right?*

Stroman: My career's always been going. That's just the first time that everybody recognized who I was. Previous to that, shoot, I was having a great time doing *Alien Legion.* I was doing that book for about seven years. And I was having a good old time. As a matter of fact, at the point at which I stopped doing *Alien Legion,* I really started to get into it.

That was Carl Potts' baby, right?

Stroman: Yeah.

So you had a fun time working on that?

Stroman: I had a great time working on *Alien Legion.* Every time you work on something and people for the most part leave you alone and let you do your own thing and they praise you and everything, you have a great time. But when you're working on some-thing where every five minutes they're telling you you've got to change this, you've got to change that, which was what the experience was like working on *X-Factor*, you start to kind of stall down a little bit.

When you pitched Tribe *to Image, what did they say when they heard what you guys wanted to do? Did you have to get anybody's approval?*

Stroman: There was no pitch. I got a call from Jim Lee. Just — "do you want to do a book for Image?" I said sure and that was that. He said you should come out to California.

Johnson: No, there wasn't really any approval process at all.

Stroman: At that time it was just the creators and everybody just did — .

Johnson: Yeah, pretty much at that time everybody just did whatever the hell they wanted to do. They didn't care about who your characters were or what city it was based in, they didn't care about anything for the most part. They never even asked.

Tribe. ©2007 Larry Stroman & Todd Johnson.

215

Jae Lee

Jae Lee came to prominence at Marvel in late 1992, during just the first full year of his career. This was also during the mass exodus of the Image founders and their associates from the House of Ideas. Barely out of his teens, Lee was recruited by Rob Liefeld for *Youngblood: Strikefile,* and later Jim Lee hired him for the *WildC.A.T.s Trilogy,* as both titles served to lure the popular artist away from Marvel. At Image, Jae Lee started his creator-owned book, *Hellshock*, in 1994, which forced the artist to gain a new perspective into his craft. The seasoned illustrator returned to Marvel Comics with great success on *The Sentry, Fantastic Four 1 2 3 4,* and his Eisner Award-winning *The Inhumans.* You'll find Mr. Lee providing his atmospheric storytelling to Stephen King's *Dark Tower*, Marvel's biggest mainstream project of 2007.

*Jae Lee,
courtesy of Jae Lee.*

*ShadowHawk pin-up by
Jae. ©2007 Jim Valentino.*

What was your big break into this business?

It was actually not an editor that discovered me but a writer, Scott Lobdell. I met him at a convention in 1990. I was straight out of high school, and I was showing my portfolio around; the editors that I showed it to weren't very interested. And, in fact, one particular editor laughed at it and made fun of it. He's a DC guy. But I was so sad, I was heartbroken. And then Scott saw what was going on, and he felt bad for me, and so he gave me his contact information and said, "Hey, why don't you just work up some more samples and work on your storytelling and over the next few months keep sending me work, and I'll show it around?" And that's what I did. He was breaking in, himself. At that point he was just doing pick-up stories for *Marvel Comics Presents,* here and there. But he was in the Marvel offices all the time, trying to get work.

That was a big book back then, when Sam Kieth was doing those little Wolverine stories. It was like a spotlight for a number of artists, wasn't it?

Yeah, Sam Kieth was doing it, and before it was Barry Windsor-Smith's *Weapon X.* Well, it's funny. In *Marvel Comics Presents,* the stories that I took over for, there was a Beast story that Rob Liefeld was supposed to draw. It was an eight-part story, and he did the first two chapters, and then he quit to do *New Mutants.* And so I filled in for him. On the first two chapters there was a page or two here and there that he didn't draw, so then I had to go back and draw those pages. And so when you see the two stories, I think it's kind of jarring when you have Rob's art and mine, because it's so different. One page is really bright and characters are jumping all over the place full of action, and then you have one page that is just all black.

Did they get somebody to ink you back then?

When I first started I worked with various inkers, but I didn't like giving up that control. And I was never happy with the inks, so I was determined to learn how to ink. One time, I was visiting the editors, and I was also late on an issue, so I was inking the last page of one of the issues of *Namor*, and I was splattering it and going in with razor blades and just cutting the page up. And then John Romita Jr. happened to walk by, and he was horrified. He said, "What are you doing? Don't do that! The penciler's going to get really upset! You shouldn't be inking like that!" He thought I was one of the bullpen guys inking over somebody's work.

Were you surprised that people accepted your art so quick when it was so different from what Jim Lee and the other guys were doing?

Yeah, absolutely! The Jim Lees

Jeff Scott Campbell

In the pages of *WildC.A.T.s* #2, Homage Studios conducted a successful talent search that discovered the phenomenal talents of Jeff Scott Campbell, as well as Brett Booth, Alex Garner and dozens of others during 1993. Hailing from Colorado, Campbell made the move to sunny La Jolla to see if he had the gravitas to make it as a professional artist. His art brought together his love for film and animation with his influences from Art Adams, Todd McFarlane, Jim Lee, and the classic humor of *Mad.* At WildStorm, Jeff started slowly by doing spot illustrations, trading cards and pin-ups until finally penciling and co-developing *Gen13* (with Jim Lee and Brandon Choi). With the characters from *Gen13*, Jeff brought a much-needed degree of humor, sexiness and hipness during the grim and gritty era at the start of Image Comics; the artist's influence was felt immediately by his peers and fans. During WildStorm's final days at Image in 1998, Jeff co-founded an imprint with a new wave of artists called Cliffhanger that housed his successful *Danger Girl* series. After a short sabbatical, Campbell re-emerged on *Wildsiderz* with his art now more gorgeously well-crafted and lavish than ever before. At this moment, Jeff is extensively laying the ground-work for his highly anticipated debut at Marvel Comics.

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What possessed you to send your submission to the Homage Talent Search [in Image's **WildC.A.T.s** *#2]?*

Well, it just happened to be the perfect timing, because I was already actively trying to get into comics. I had actually sent some samples in. Actually, I take it back. I hadn't sent the samples in to Marvel. I had actually met Stan Lee. Here in Colorado they have these dinky little shows where you can meet one or two pros. And Stan Lee had come through to do one of these things, and of course his line was insane. And he was actually the first person I handed samples to.

Stan evaluated portfolios? I don't think I've heard of Stan doing that [recently].

Yeah, well, I know! And I didn't know any better to know that maybe I shouldn't do that. So I gave him (samples), and I had read up enough to know not to give him a ton of crap and just to pick my absolutely best favorites. And they were Xeroxes that he could take so he could either toss them away or whatever. And I showed it to him, and he was very enthusiastic, very genuine about them, and said that he would actually pass them along to the guys at Marvel, and was genuinely very positive. And he definitely must

have passed them along, because I actually did get a rejection letter, but it was very nicely put and everything like that, and I at least knew that the samples got to where they were supposed to be. But that was probably only a few months before Jim Lee put his talent search ad in the back of *WildC.A.T.s* #2. And once I saw that, I was like, "Okay, listen. I'm not going to let this opportunity slip by." And I took an extra couple of weeks to put together some samples that were specific to him. I did a fake *WildC.A.T.s* sequence where I was drawing his characters, because I just figured it's probably going to help my odds if I draw something that would allow him to imagine me working with him. And then I also threw in a couple of the Marvel samples that I had done — the same ones that Stan Lee had taken. Yeah, I sent it in. I think I did a bunch of artwork on the envelope even, which I think I still have scans of somewhere. I drew all the characters on the envelope so it would be eye-catching when he gets it and stuff like that. And the funny thing was… I think it was about a week-and-a-half later, I got a call from Jim Lee personally in the evening, and of course I was flipping out, because for me, it was as though Steven

Tom McWeeney

A graduate of The Joe Kubert School, Tom McWeeney made a name for himself in comics when he created *Roachmill* (with Rich Hedden) during the '80s black-&-white explosion. After working on various DC books, WildStorm recruited Tom to use his ink talents on polishing the finished art to Jim Lee's roster of budding pencilers in 1994. At WildStorm, the highly productive McWeeney inked J. Scott Campbell (on *Danger Girl* and *Gen13*), Travis Charest (on *WildC.A.T.s*), and Brett Booth, who he was regularly paired with on major projects like *Backlash* and Marvel's *Fantastic Four* during "Heroes Reborn." Besides experiencing the growth of the studio and their acquisition by DC, the respected artist was handpicked by Joe Madureira to embellish his first six issues of the very popular *Battle Chasers* for Cliffhanger.

Tom McWeeney. Courtesy of Tom McWeeney.

Image from Gen13/Generation X crossover. Pencils by J. Scott Campbell and inks by Tom McWeeney. Gen13 ©2007 WildStorm Productions; Generation X ©2007 Marvel Characters, Inc.
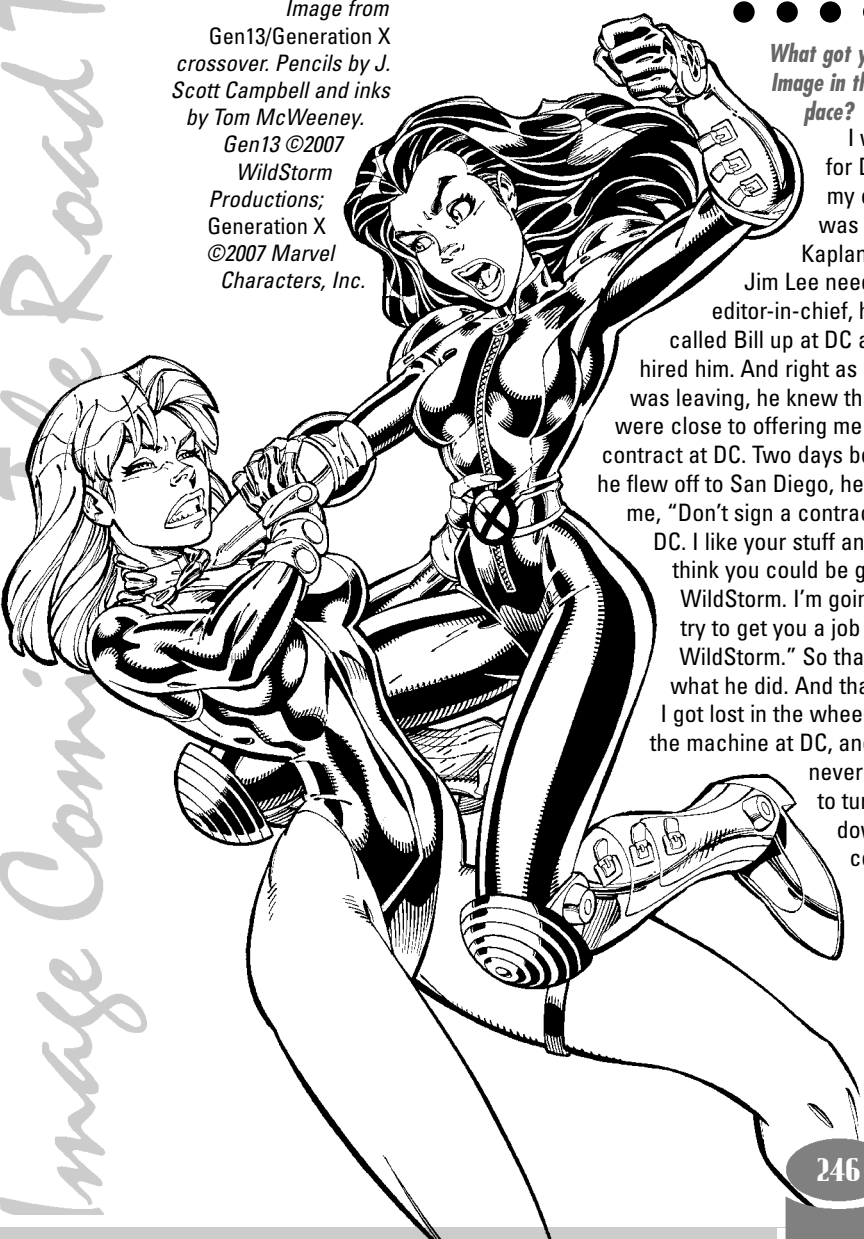
What got you to Image in the first place?

I worked for DC, and my editor was Bill Kaplan. When Jim Lee needed an editor-in-chief, he called Bill up at DC and hired him. And right as Bill was leaving, he knew that they were close to offering me a contract at DC. Two days before he flew off to San Diego, he said to me, "Don't sign a contract with DC. I like your stuff and I think you could be good at WildStorm. I'm going to try to get you a job at WildStorm." So that's what he did. And thankfully I got lost in the wheels of the machine at DC, and I never had to turn down that contract because they never offered it to me.

Was there a formal tryout over Jim Lee's pencils?

Well, yeah, Bill gave me this tryout at WildStorm. And it's not just like an in-the-mail tryout, they flew me out there. Because they were in between the old studio and the new studio, the new studio was underway in La Jolla, they had very limited space in the old studio, so I actually wound up inking most of my tryout at Jim Lee's drawing board, which was this great big drawing board. It was awesome! It was way better than the one I have at home, so it was kind of cool to sit in the big office, I'm the tryout guy, and here I am sitting in the big office. The coolest thing was just all the stacks of original art lying around, just Jim's stuff from *X-Men* days. Whenever I took a break, I would just pore over this stuff and go, oh, just amazing. Especially Scott's inks. It was like having art books right around just to look at when you weren't working.

So they fly me out there to try out, and I'm thinking they're going to try me out, I figured it'd be over Brett Booth or Scottie Clark or something. No, it was an eight-page Travis [Charest] *WildC.A.T.s* back-up. And I had just started inking with a nib probably about three months earlier, so I was still brand new to a pen. And they hand me these absolutely gorgeous Travis pencils. I'd never seen pencils like this in my life. I hadn't seen anything close to the level of finish that Travis was capable of. I'm pretty unflappable in terms of inking guys, but I have to admit, that it scared the crap out of me, basically. These pencils were so beautiful; why even ink these things?

This was that Voodoo story in WildC.A.T.s #8, right?

Yeah, it's that Voodoo story, right. In hindsight I was even inking it with the wrong nib. I wasn't inking it with a Hunt 102, which is eventually what I switched to, I was inking it with a much stiffer nib, so

Brian Michael Bendis

Before Brian Michael Bendis' gargantuan mainstream successes at Marvel on titles such as *Daredevil, Daredevil Ninja, Elektra, Alias, New Avengers, House of M, Secret War, The Pulse, Ultimate Spider-Man, Ultimate X-Men, Ultimate Fantastic Four, Ultimate Six* and *Ultimate Marvel Team-Up*, the Cleveland-born writer was a 1999 Eisner winner — for "Talent Deserving Wider Recognition" — with his biting narrative and cunning dialogue on his titles at Image Comics. For the independent company, Bendis proved to be a key figure when he brought over his titles from the defunct Caliber Comics in 1997; he helped solidify the Image line into genres away from super-heroes and attract a new vanguard of creators. Amongst his written work for Image are *Powers, Fire, Sam & Twitch, Hellspawn* and *Torso*, which is currently being developed as a Hollywood film with Todd McFarlane as a producer. Today, Brian and Image maintain a relationship as they continue to keep in print many of the books that he first published with the company.

Brian Michael Bendis. Courtesy of Brian.

When did you become aware of Image?

I was very aware of Image because I was actually working at a comic store when they debuted, so I had kind of the typical angry fanboy view of it. Also as an up-and-coming creator, I was like, "Aw, screw them and their rich bastards." Like, you'd hear all these stories about limos and all that stuff, so I pretty much decided I hated them, because they were successful and I was not. So that's how you're going to be, you're in college and you're pissed off.

So you didn't root for them because they were going against the corporation? You didn't think about that?

Yeah, I kind of was interested. It certainly was fascinating. I mean, it's funny, like, I've actually met and talked to every single founder at great length since this, so I think about my attitude towards them when I would listen to the stories, and I've asked many of them questions about a lot of the stuff since, and my view of it now is quite different. So at the time I think I was just angry because I was personally unsuccessful, and when you're in this particular field, where there's no map to help you get successful or help you get out of eating Ramen noodles all day long, you get very frustrated. So I was just frustrated at them. You look at the lowest common denominator part of it and you go, "Oh, f*ck them. F*ck you!" Anyway…

Were you reading their books?

Yeah, I definitely read the first issue of everything.

Were you reading, like, X-Force, and X-Men with Jim Lee, and all of their Marvel books?

I wasn't a big Liefeld fan. Obviously, Whilce is the best artist of the group, and Jim Lee is really good. Yeah, I was reading them. But I kind of liked it when Alan Moore and Frank Miller jumped in on *Spawn* and stuff like that. I think *1963* was probably my favorite thing they published in that era.

Yeah, I think when Moore started doing work with them, that's when I started taking them more seriously.

Yeah, and I think they took themselves more seriously. I think they jumped in full blast, and then afterwards they kind of figured out who they were, what they were going to do with this. So that was kind of interesting.

So you were working in a store, you didn't feel the energy, like people were

Powers. ©2007 Brian Michael Bendis & Michael Avon Oeming.

Frank Espinosa

In 2006, Frank Espinosa brought *Rocketo* to Image. The cartoonist and teacher was nominated for three 2006 Eisner awards for chronicling the tales of Rocketo Garrison. Ushered in a classical sweeping manner, his passionate art and story-telling is one of the true assets to the company as it continues to intrigue readers of all ages.

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You had been a successful animator for years — why did you want to get into comics? Were you prepared for all the heartbreak that comes with the art form?

My love for comics, and animation happened around the same time, I can't say that I prefer one to another, or which one came first. Creating a comic can be a more personal form of expression than animation, although the line is blurred right now with the technology to do Flash Animation on your own computer, and make a small film from start to finish all by oneself. The type of film I would want *Rocketo* to be would have required that I never sleep, for the next ten years, so the medium best suited for telling the complete story in the way I would do it, would be a comic.

There is a strength to the comic medium that is wonderful, the ability to pace the story, time the plot and action and get into the readers own mind: that to me is amazing. The limits of working without sound and motion can be a power to itself. Comics are an art form and to be able to work in the field and have the story be told is an honor.

I have been lucky, and not had any heartbreak yet; the typical business blues will happen to you if you are a doctor, a mechanic, or an animator. My only two heartbreaks is that I wish more people would read comics, and while I feel America has made some amazing strides in looking at comics we still have a long way to go. The second heartbreak is

that I would wish that more and more comic artists, writers and publishers would make stories that don't have to have a man in a cape flying around shooting eye blasts. Although my next story is about a guy with a cape shooting eye blasts.

How would you describe your style of art? Who are some of your influences?

I have no idea how to describe it… Art deco, retro, comic strip, Japanese brushstrokes style… that is a bit too long.

My main influences have always been the old timers. Milton Caniff, Roy Crane, I love Frank Robbins, it goes on… and on… Master Jack Kirby. I love European artists, Chaland… Daniel Torres. Old animation from Japan, Europe. Picasso, the

Rocketo! *Rocketo*
©2007 Frank Espinosa.

Image Comics: The Road To Independence
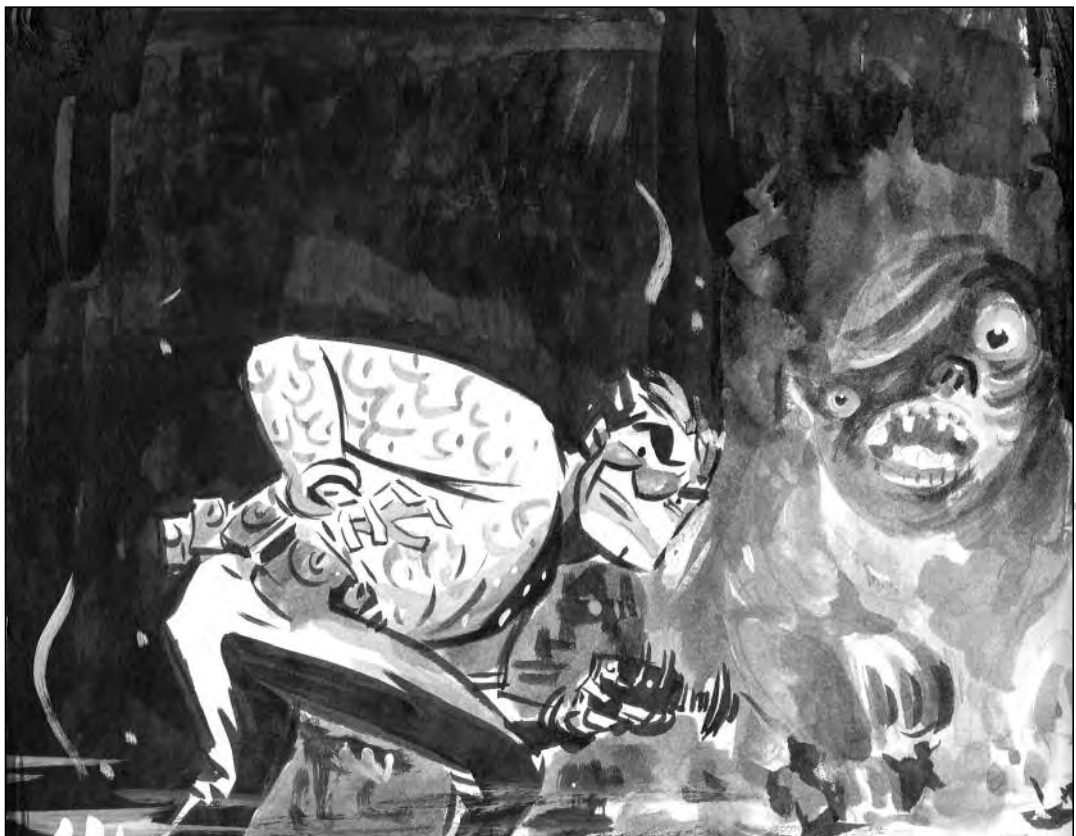
Robert Kirkman

When Robert Kirkman was a wee lad in the bluegrass state of Kentucky, instead of picking up a banjo or making bourbon whiskies, he exposed himself to the world of comics by reading *Savage Dragon, Spawn, Youngblood* and the rest of the titles in
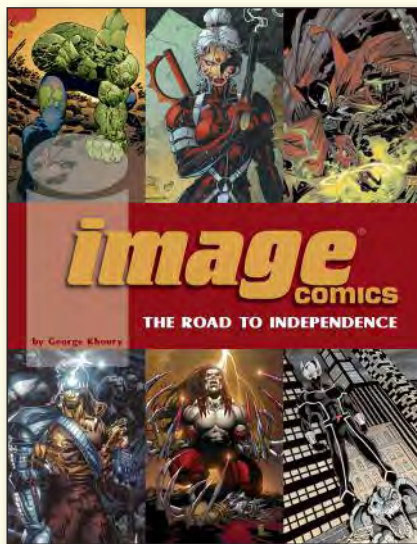
undeniable product of [...] shing the cult *Battle* [...] g with Erik Larsen [...] *Tech Jacket*). An [...] Kirkman to scratch [...] *Invincible* [...] mics. [...] e of the

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this place. And [...] there was an [...] wall for [...] saw was [...] d this [...] t was a [...] I [...] store [...] *Youngblood* [...] poster for?" [...] Rob Liefeld and a [...] rom Marvel are start- [...] ed Image Comics," [...] d I started a reserve box, a folder thing — .

Spectacular Spider-Man stuff.

So when these guys started Image, did you think that was going to be the end of your comic book reading?

Well, I wasn't reading comic book news at the time, because you couldn't find *Comics Buyer's Guide* or anything like that at Wal-Mart, so I didn't know anything about it until I actually — I lived in a small town in Kentucky, there's a larger town in Kentucky that's close by, and my family would go there to shop and visit friends and stuff like that, and so while driving through that larger town, I saw a sign for a place called the Comic Interlude. It was either a comedy club or a comic book shop, but I didn't know what it was. I noticed it said something about comic books on it. I didn't even know comic book stores existed, and so I had to beg my mom to

I remember one thing that, all of a sudden Rob's art started disappearing on X-Force. It started to look a little different.

Yeah, I believe that's when Mark Pacella was doing stuff, but he was still writing it, and so I didn't know anything was going on. I thought Rob was going to come back after a couple of issues. When I saw that, I didn't know anything was going on. Todd had retired. He had stopped doing *Spider-Man*, and Larsen had come in and taken over *Spider-Man*, but Larsen's *Spider-Man* issues

Robert Kirkman. Courtesy of Mr. Kirkman.

Invincible! Invincible ©2007 Robert Kirkman and Cory Walker.