



JACK KIRBY COLLECTOR FIFTY-EIGHT
PRESENTS:

Lee & Kirby:

The Wonder Years

1968 • 1969 • 1970 • 1967 • 1962 • 1963 • 1964 • 1965 • 1966 • 1961 • 1960 • 1965 • 1966 • 1967 • 1968 • 1969 • 1970

LEE & KIRBY: THE WONDER YEARS

(a.k.a. Jack Kirby Collector #58)

Written by Mark Alexander (1955-2011)

Edited, designed, and proofread by John Morrow, publisher

Softcover ISBN: 978-1-60549-038-0

First Printing • December 2011 • Printed in the USA

The Jack Kirby Collector, Vol. 18, No. 58, Winter 2011 (hey, it's Dec. 3 as I type this!). Published quarterly by and ©2011 TwoMorrows Publishing, 10407 Bedfordtown Drive, Raleigh, NC 27614. 919-449-0344. John Morrow, Editor/Publisher. Four-issue subscriptions: \$50 US, \$65 Canada, \$72 elsewhere. Editorial package ©2011 TwoMorrows Publishing, a division of TwoMorrows Inc. All characters are trademarks of their respective companies. All artwork is ©2011 Jack Kirby Estate unless otherwise noted. Editorial matter ©2011 the respective authors. ISSN 1932-6912

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(above and title page) Kirby pencils from *What If?* #11 (Oct. 1978).

(opposite) Original Kirby collage for *Fantastic Four* #51, page 14.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, thanks to my Aunt June for buying my first Marvel comic, and for everything else. Next, big thanks to my son Nicholas for endless research. From the age of three, the kid had the good taste to request the *Marvel Masterworks* for bedtime stories over *Mother Goose*. He still holds the record as the youngest contributor to *The Jack Kirby Collector* (see issue #21).

Shout-out to my partners in rock 'n' roll, the incomparable Hitmen—the best band and best pals I've ever had. Thanks for canceling practice for a month so I could finish this text.

There's not enough room on this page to adequately express my gratitude to John Morrow and the zany bunch (how's that for a mid-sixties Marvelism?) at TwoMorrows Publishing. The meteoric rise of the TwoMorrows Universe, which started with a phantasmagoric fanzine called *The Jack Kirby Collector* #1, is living proof of what someone with a Kirbyan work ethic can achieve in a very short time.

Thanks to Rhonda Rade who paved the way for the Stan Lee interviews, and who never once acted like she was sick of my endless requests for more pieces of the puzzle. Without her, this book would not exist. See ya on the tour, Ro-Ro.

Thanks to Carol "Kay-Ro" Dixon, whose internet research was invaluable (especially the bit about the Marx Brothers). Big thanks to Tracy Stubblefield for prints and M.U., and particularly to Laura Bruns who opened several doors that were closed to me. Besides this, Laura's willingness to sacrifice her weekends on behalf of this manuscript is the only reason we made the deadline.

Thanks to Mark Evanier for his exclusive FF info and for decades of unselfishly helping comic book scribes everywhere while asking nothing in return. Jack Kirby couldn't have picked a better historian or a better friend.

Thanks to author Gerard Jones for encouragement, inspiration, and especially for the tips on Charles Dickens, The Lower East Side and ANC. This book might have been a "revoltin'" development" without his help. Thanks to Mike Gartland and Will Murray for their much appreciated input. They've always been my favorite *TJKC* writers. Thanks to Larry Lieber for his friendly and informative phone calls. And thank you Mr. Roy Thomas for providing your 1965 Marvel map.

Huge thanks to Dr. Michael J. Vassallo, Tom Lammers and Jim Vadeboncoeur for pulling us from the quicksand of Timely/Atlas contradictions. The pre-Marvel era of Martin Goodman comics is alive and well because of these visionary historians. Do yourself a favor: read Tom's book *Tales of the Implosion* and "Doc V's" forthcoming book on artist Joe Maneely.

Thanks to Joe Sinnott for providing exclusive info on the final Kirby *FF* issues.

And more than anyone else, thanks to Fabulous Flo Steinberg for being so generous with her Marvel memories, for proof-reading, and for drawing maps of all the 1960s Marvel offices. She's beyond fabulous—she's one of the superheroes of this story.

Thanks to Queen Roz Kirby for being the woman behind the man. And speaking of The Man, thanks to Stan Lee for the exclusive *FF* interviews. And last but not most, thanks to Jack Kirby who (along with Stan) gave me the best moments of my childhood.

To offer a cliché, 'NUFF SAID.

Mark Alexander, May 2011

[The editor wishes to add special thanks to Rand Hoppe of the Jack Kirby Museum and Research Center (www.kirbymuseum.org), Glen Gold, Larry Houston, David "Hambone" Hamilton, Cheryl Urbanczyk, Heritage Auctions (www.ha.com), and the Jack Kirby Estate for their help supplying imagery for this book.]

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INTRODUCTION

by editor John Morrow

This publication started life as a lengthy *Jack Kirby Collector* article entitled “A Universe A’Borning” that Mark Alexander had spent many, many months writing in the early 2000s. After turning in the final draft of his manuscript, Mark would regularly send me updates on it, and ultimately asked me to pull it entirely from the schedule, as he was going to re-tool it into something else. You now hold that “something else” in your hands (although his original “A’Borning” article will likely see print in an upcoming issue of *TJKC*). He was absent from *TJKC*’s pages for several years, largely because he had spent countless hours refining the original “A’Borning” article, and then literally years crafting it into this book.

Seeing how well it turned out, I made the decision, in consultation with Mark, to turn one issue of *TJKC* into a king-sized book instead of the usual magazine, featuring only Mark’s revised article, then called “Fantastic Four: The Wonder Years.” Since the book was as much about Stan and Jack as it was the *FF*, we decided to modify the title to better reflect the content.

But don’t get the idea that Mark stopped working on this book once he’d handed in his “final” manuscript. Starting in early 2010, for weeks and months after he first said it was done, I’d get “Stop the Presses!” updates by Priority Mail Flat Rate Envelope—at times on a weekly basis—saying he’d just discovered some new tidbit or factoid that was essential to the book. He’d always ask if there was still time for “just one more revision”, and since we’d planned this book well in advance, there was always more time—or so I thought.

Mark didn’t use e-mail regularly, so he usually had his friend Rhonda Rade post messages for him (thanks, Rhonda!), and I’d e-mail notes back for Rhonda to pass on to him. She also sent me the various digital versions of his presumably completed

manuscript. The last e-mail I got was the *FINAL* “final” version on May 16, 2011, just three days after the *previous* “final” manuscript; this one was titled “*Final Wonder Years May 16 please delete all others*”. I also received one last Priority Mail envelope from Mark, sent on May 11, 2011 containing his suggestions for some illustrations to run with the text.

Knowing this book wasn’t due on press for several months (and figuring I’d get at least one more “final” version, knowing what a perfectionist Mark was),

I put it all aside for more pressing deadlines, and finished prepping for the 2011 Comic-Con International in San Diego, California. The theme this year was the *FF*’s 40th Anniversary, and the con folks had asked me to contribute something for their Program Book. I immediately thought of *this* book, and they were delighted to run an excerpt from it, which Mark put together back in April 2011 from one of his “not quite final” final manuscripts.

I headed off to Comic-Con last July, and made sure to snag a few extra copies of the Program Book to send to Mark,

so he could see his work there. But the week after the Con, while vacationing with my family in Los Angeles, his sister, Cheryl Urbanczyk, sent me an e-mail with the shocking news: Mark had died on June 30, a month prior. He’d had a heart attack and been in a coma for a week before he passed away.

I don’t know if Mark somehow knew his time was near, but in the month between this last “final” manuscript and his passing, I didn’t get any more updates, so I know he must’ve been pretty happy with it. And now, knowing it will see print after his passing, this manuscript feels as rare and valuable to me as an early *FF* page, and

I wanted to treat it with the utmost respect.

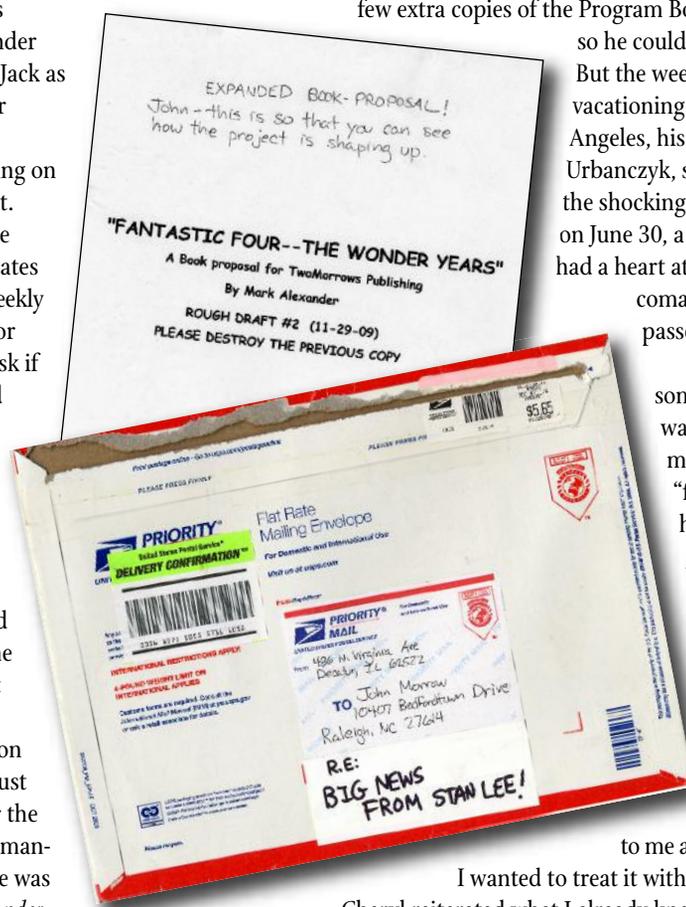
Cheryl reiterated what I already knew—that Mark was immensely proud of this book, and very excited for it to see print. So despite my original plan to present it at our usual tabloid size, I decided to hark back to the first 30 issues of *TJKC* when Mark was a regular contributor, and revert to our old size. It just felt right.

We discussed this book back and forth through the many revisions, and I pointed out some errors that he corrected. While I don’t agree with all his conclusions, I think it’s a pretty amazing look at the Lee/Kirby collaboration—where they came from, how they worked together during those years, and how they affected us all.

So here’s to you, buddy. Thanks for all you’ve done for this publication, and Kirby fandom, over the years. Rest well, and say “hey” to Jack and Roz for us all. ★



Mark Alexander (1955-2011)



FROM MARK’S OBITUARY:

Mark A. Alexander, 56, of Decatur, IL died Thursday, June 30, 2011 in Decatur Memorial Hospital. He was born February 15, 1955 in Brockton, MA, son of E. Nick Alexander and Barbara (Hicks) Clough. Mark was an accomplished musician and played in several bands including, The Stand, Slip Mahoney and most recently The Hitmen. Mark is survived by his son, Nick Alexander of Decatur, IL; mother, Barbara J. Clough of Cleveland, TN; favorite aunt and uncle, June and her late husband Dale Coleman who raised Mark; sisters: Cheryl Urbanczyk (husband, Ray) of Hendersonville, TN and Penny Seeman (husband, Claude) of Eagle, CO; fiancé Laura Bruns of Decatur; many nieces, nephews, other relatives and friends. In lieu of flowers, memorial gifts are suggested to the Decatur Public Library.

IRONY (A PROLOGUE)

If there was a secret to his greatness, it was probably rage.

In the Lower East Side of New York, you needed anger to survive. You needed even more to transcend. Jack Kirby's fury might have come from his childhood, or even from some previous incarnation, some past life. It wasn't important. What mattered was the energy he drew from it.

The King of all comic book artists was a short, cantankerous man who rose from the Lower East Side of Manhattan, one of the toughest and most overcrowded neighborhoods America has ever produced. The millions of immigrants who poured through Ellis Island at the turn of the last century and filled the Lower East Side, Kirby's parents among them, endured some of the most abject conditions that overpopulation and neglect had ever contrived anywhere.

At that time the Lower East Side was the densest neighborhood on Earth, the densest in history—half a million people in a square mile, with anywhere from 1,500 to 1,800 people crammed into a single block.

The young Jacob Kurtzberg, as he was then known, came of age during the Great Depression when the idea of making a living as an artist was an unrealistic and impractical notion. Fighting bullies, rival gang members and anti-Semites all through his formative years made him tough, temperamental and full of fury. He eventually channeled his rage into the most powerful action art anyone had ever seen. When we see superhero art today, no matter who rendered it, we're looking at some variant of Jack Kirby's anger: teeth-gnashing, forward-thrusting characters, brutal punches and bodies hurtling through space. From any angle, it all channels back to one man.

Stan Lee, the son of two Jewish-Romanian immigrants, grew up wanting to write *The Great American Novel*. All his life he was agonizingly sensitive, desperate for approval and easily influenced by others. Fresh out of high school, he lucked into a cush, well-paying job in a relative's magazine firm—just until he could launch a career as a "serious" writer, he told himself.

By 1940, both Lee and Kirby were working for Martin Goodman's *Timely Comics* where Stan prospered and quickly moved up the corporate ladder. Kirby, on the other hand, managed to get himself fired in less than two years. Shortly thereafter, when America entered World War II, both Jack and Stan patriotically volunteered for the Army.

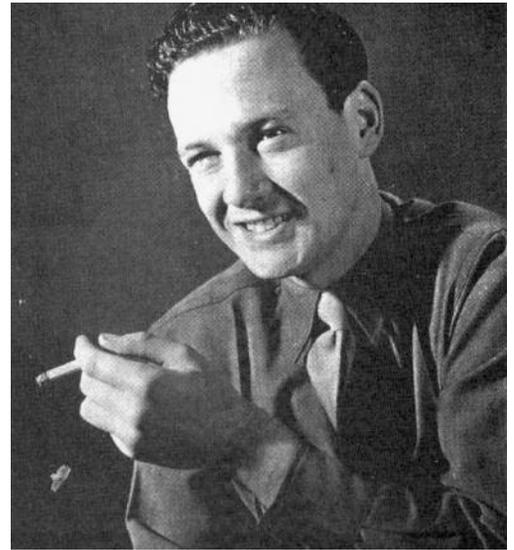
There is no greater analogy to underscore the contrasting fortunes of these two men than their wartime experiences. When Stan told his commanding officer he worked in the comic book industry, Lee was assigned to draw cartoon training manuals and venereal disease awareness posters. When Kirby mentioned that he had drawn *Captain America* prior to the war, his C.O. ordered him to become an advance scout, and draw reconnaissance maps detailing German artillery points. It was one of the most dangerous jobs in the military.

So instead of drawing posters, Kirby dodged bullets and almost had his feet amputated as a result of hypothermia. Lee on the other hand remained stateside the entire war, and supplemented his military paycheck by writing for Goodman through the mail. At one point Stan was arrested and jailed for breaking into the mailroom to procure a writing assignment. Lee was facing court martial and prison time in Leavenworth, but in the end the eternally lucky Stan Lee was freed with no consequences.

After the war Kirby continued to battle his way through the comic book industry, creating new genres and pissing off publishers. Out of necessity, sixteen years after being fired by Martin Goodman, Kirby had to swallow his pride and ask Stan if he could come back and work for him. At this point *Timely Comics* (now called "Atlas") was teetering on the cusp of insolvency, and Goodman was ready to jump ship at the next sign of trouble.

This is when irony reared its absurd head.

Lee and Kirby both had proletarian Jewish backgrounds. They were both fast, indefatigable workers who could produce stories of remarkable quality and quantity without ever missing a deadline. Other than that, they were diametrically opposite in every possible way. Fate brought them together because Lee was about the only editor who would hire Kirby, and Jack was about the only good artist Stan could afford. They joined forces at midlife, at the nadirs of their careers, and against all odds their contrasting personalities and talents coalesced—creating a synergy that eventually made the comic book medium



(this page) Lee (top) and Kirby in their WWII uniforms, early 1940s.

a force to be reckoned with.

Had it not been for these two iconoclastic mavericks, it's entirely possible that superhero comics would never have budged an inch from the rancid cesspool of the DC-dominated early 1960s; in which case they would be extinct, or only exist as an endangered subspecies of children's entertainment. Kirby and Lee carved out a whole new world for comic book fans. A world that was startling, overwhelming and vivid with life—a world that seemed perfectly tailored to the taste of young readers in the Silver Age of comics.

Kirby's violent ghetto-bred anger and Lee's self-mocking charm were the bed in which the Marvel Universe was conceived. And from day one, Reed Richards and Sue Storm were the Adam and Eve of that Universe.

The Fantastic Four made everything that came before them seem redundant. Their impact was prodigious. They were more complicated, more neurotic, and in every way more interesting than anything comics previously had to offer. They startled the entire industry into a whole new perspective on superheroes. They caused infinite changes and opened new vistas that had been closed by narrow-minded corporate editors with marginal imaginations. They were the sun, the center, the nucleus of the Marvel Universe. Everything ebbed and flowed around them.

The 1960s *Fantastic Four* was the most consistently satisfying superhero series in the history of comic books. For nearly a decade it offered unwaveringly solid craftsmanship juxtaposed with the boldest experiments readers had ever seen. No comic series before or since has changed the *status quo* so much, so fast, so thoroughly and with such style. There may come a time when future comic book creators equal or surpass the majesty of the Lee/Kirby *FF*, but at the time of this writing, it has yet to happen.

Mister Fantastic, the Invisible Girl, the Thing and the Human Torch were the four cornerstones; the foundation on which The House of Ideas was built. They rose above what comic book heroes had been, and dictated what comic book heroes would become. Above all other superheroes they defined their times and epitomized their era.

This is their story.



Kirby recaptures the old days of working with Lee, in this pencil art detail from *What If?* #11 (Oct. 1978).

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A 1965 distributor's flyer, used to convince newsdealers to carry the Marvel line. With an estimated 32 million copies waiting to be sold, it didn't take much convincing.

1

THE KNOCKOFF CHAMPION

No one ever accused Martin Goodman of moderation.

From the time he first entered the publishing business in 1931 until he retired in 1975, Marvel's seminal publisher was known for two things: replicating other companies' successful ideas and indiscriminate binge-and-purge marketing strategies.

He certainly isn't an easy character to unravel. His ex-employees describe him as a soft-spoken pleasant looking man of medium height with finely chiseled features and prematurely white hair. He was a dapper dresser who wore wire-rimmed glasses and favored Ivy League bowties. For the most

part, Goodman distanced himself from his lower level staff but treated them with polite cordiality. Among the writers who worked for him, he had a reputation for imposing very few editorial controls.

As a publisher Goodman had limited imagination. He didn't plan years ahead and he didn't bother too much about innovation or progression. But he made money, and for the most part he avoided mistakes.

It's been rumored that Goodman never continued in school past the fourth grade, yet he was a remarkably adroit businessman with an uncanny knack for predicting what the public would buy on the newsstand. One of the few things that Stan Lee and Jack Kirby agreed on in their later years was that Martin had a penchant for renegeing on deals and promises in the business arena. Be that as it may, Goodman was just as important to the birth of the Fantastic Four as Jack or Stan.

Born in 1908, Martin Goodman was younger than most of the leading publishers of his era—fifteen years younger than DC comic's founder Harry Donenfeld and eight years younger than DC's co-founder Jack Liebowitz. Jack and Harry entered the publishing business in 1932. By 1944, Liebowitz had orchestrated the merger of several Donenfeld-owned publishing, distribution and licensing companies into a single corporate entity called National Periodical Publications. Two of the operations housed by National Publications were Independent News (IND.) and

DC Comics, both of which were presided over by Jack Liebowitz. The young Martin Goodman would find Liebowitz to be a tough competitor.

Indeed, it was a tough business. When Donenfeld and Liebowitz were coming up in the world, there was a blood-splattering newsstand circulation war in progress between the monopolistic American News Company and newspaper tycoon William Randolph Hearst. American News Company (ANC) was a mob-connected distribution arm that would one day play a major role in the story of Marvel Comics.

With its outright ownership of countless newsstands across America, ANC had a virtual stranglehold on the circulation of every major newspaper and magazine in the country. The Hearst/ANC rivalry involved hiring mobsters and hit-men who engaged in fire-bombing, beating, and killing rival news dealers. Between 1912 and 1913, twenty-seven newsstand owners were murdered in Chicago alone, with many more wounded.

The circulation war's worst bloodshed occurred when future DC mogul Jack Liebowitz was a young man. Unlike his partner Harry Donenfeld, who in his youth enjoyed hanging out with gangsters, Liebowitz preferred to steer clear of the mob. But he soon realized he'd have to cooperate with such men in order to survive in the cut-throat business of publishing.

As it turned out, Martin Goodman was a survivor too. He'd learned the art of self-preservation during the Depression, the era of Great Hopelessness. When the Wall Street Crash of 1929 short-circuited the U.S. economy, Goodman became a drifter; bumming

around the country, living in hobo camps and cooking over blazing campfires. Where Donenfeld and Liebowitz had fought their way up in the capitalist jungle, Goodman had battled his way up from the hobo jungles; up from the drifters, the dregs, the human flotsam and jetsam.

Goodman's knack for survival would serve him well during his forty-year rivalry with DC's Jack Liebowitz. It's a testament to Liebowitz's business savvy that Goodman's Marvel Comics were never in first place until Liebowitz had stepped down from the DC hierarchy. Jack wasn't about to give Martin the satisfaction of outmaneuvering him.

But the story's getting ahead of itself:



(clockwise from top left) Liebowitz, Donenfeld, and Martin Goodman.

2

WINDS OF CHANGE: THE 1950s

Winds of change were blowing through the comics industry during the

Eisenhower years. But the warm

gentle breezes from the beginning of the decade would stand in stark contrast to the cold turbulent gusts at the era's end.

However, in the first weeks of 1950, the era's end was a long way away. And it was probably the last thing anyone would be thinking about if they were sitting in Longchamps, the ground floor restaurant of the Empire State Building, knocking back cocktails with the likes of Bill Everett and Carl Burgos, both of whom worked for Timely Comics and both of whom were Longchamps regulars.

The conversation in the restaurant would often center on the reoccurring rumors about dismissals and restructuring, and the considerable melodrama that a female inker named Valerie Barclay had caused among the staff artists a few months back.

Departing from Longchamps, an elevator ride to the building's fourteenth story would lead to Martin Goodman's publishing operation which took up half of the entire floor and encompassed several rooms. Suite 1401 was a large room called "the Bullpen"—so named for its occupants' love of baseball—with Stan Lee's office up front, near two female proofreaders. Goodman's nearby office was inevitably bigger than Stan's, with a chaise lounge in the corner near the windows. The view from Martin's office was a breathtaking panorama of the Manhattan skyline.

In the Bullpen quarters, cranking out comic art from 9-to-5 at a furious rate, one might see the soft-spoken, constantly smoking Bullpen supervisor Syd Shores, along with artists Mike Sekowsky, Dan DeCarlo, Joe Maneely, Don Rico, Stan Goldberg, Carl Burgos and Gene Colan. But not Bill Everett, who preferred to work at home and never joined the Timely staff. Come noon, the boys would sit around eating brown-bag lunches and playing poker until Shores called them back to their drawing boards.

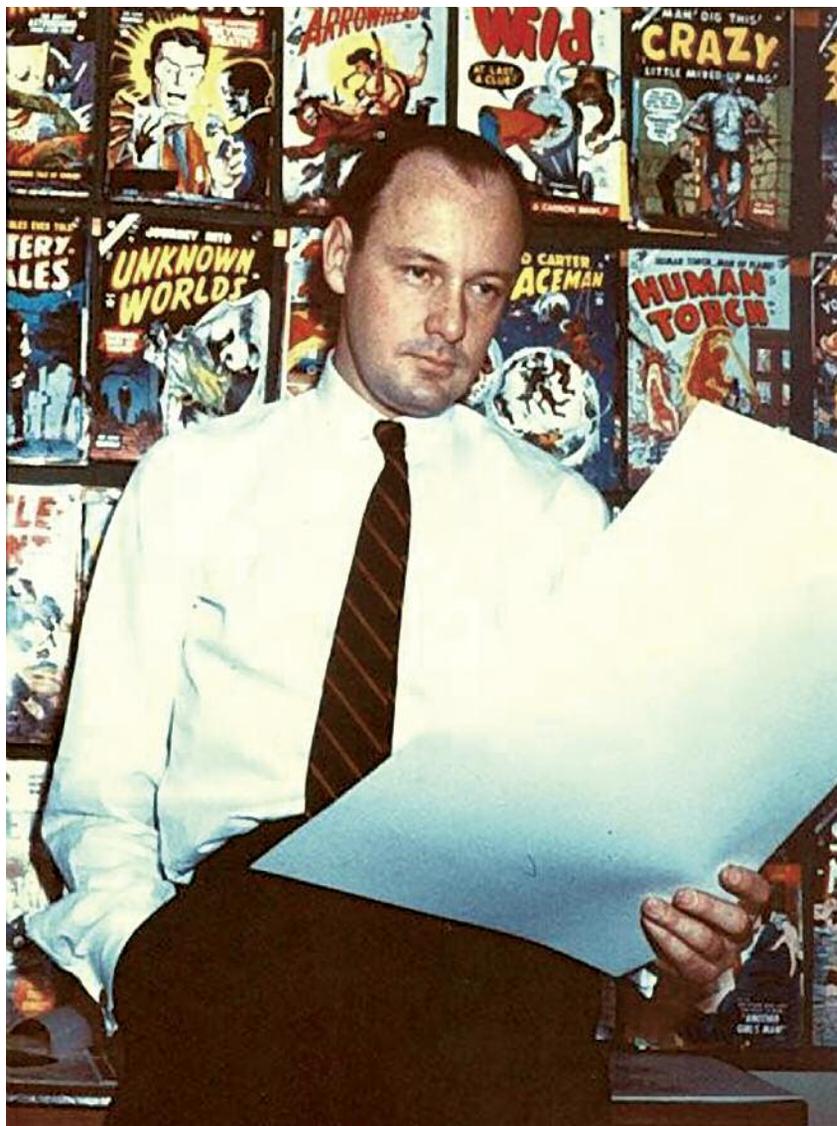
But not everyone paid attention to Syd Shores. At one point writer/artist Don Rico led an in-house "rebellion" against Shores. For this and various other Rico-related Bullpen problems, Martin Goodman would forever refer to the artist as "Rat Rico."

Another Bullpen artist who Goodman viewed as a troublemaker was the transcendently beautiful Valerie "Violet" Barclay, an inker who'd studied under Timely artist Dave Gantz. Gantz was a Bronx native who was born the same month and year as Stan Lee. He would soon regret taking the tempestuous ex-hostess under his wing.

Unsurprisingly, once Barclay was entrenched in the Timely Bullpen, she began causing considerable friction among the male staff—particularly between artist Mike Sekowsky and future *Fantastic Four* inker George Klein, both of whom found her irresistible. Violet soon decided that the \$35 a week Goodman was paying her wasn't worth the drama. In mid-1949 she left Timely to become a fashion model. After that, the only girl in the throng would be the amiable Marie Severin, who on any given summer afternoon might be seen yelling at Artie Simek, for the umpteenth time, to shut up about the damn New York Yankees.

In late 1949, the Bullpen artists began hearing rumors that the axe was about to drop. Exactly how this all came about is unquestionably vague. The dismantling of the Timely Bullpen is probably the murkiest period in the company's history.

The official reason for the firing of the company's full-time



As the 1950s marched on, Stan found himself in charge of a line of less than original titles.

THE DAYS OF DR. DROOM

At the close of the 1950s, darkening clouds of uncertainty were gathering over Martin Goodman's New York comic book offices.

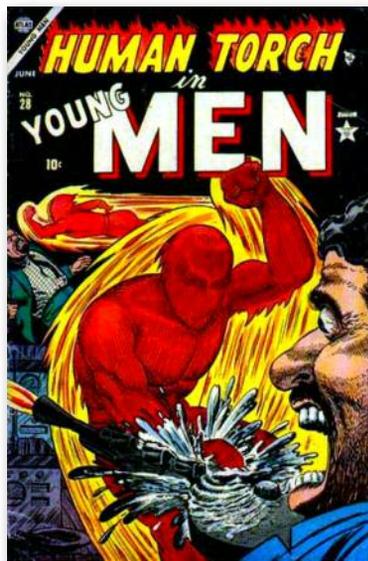
Promisingly, the great Jack Kirby seemed to have settled in for the long haul, and because sales on *Rawhide Kid* picked up as soon as Kirby took it over, Goodman forestalled dropping the axe on his comic book line—for awhile anyway. There was a second reason that Martin stayed his hand from pulling the plug. He'd been hearing rumblings from DC about a couple of their new titles that were selling particularly well.

Was it possible that superheroes were about to make a comeback?

A lot of kids undoubtedly wondered where all the costumed heroes had disappeared to. The Golden Age superheroes, spawned in the late 1930s and early 1940s, had been drawn with an angular, choppy vigor by idealistic young cartoonists in a time when comics were uncontaminated by self-consciousness and significance. Their crudely drawn, wildly exciting adventures were raw, violent and energetic, reflecting the stress of worldwide upheaval and the gathering storm clouds of World War II.

Back then, colorful characters like the Vision, Captain America, Plastic Man, Captain Marvel and the Human Torch blazed from the newsstands with lurid color and insane variety. Fistfights, explosions and death were their calling cards, and in those early, wild days of comics, moral distinctions were a simple clash of absolutes—good versus evil. If a bad guy needed to be killed, the hero killed him. The only thing taboo was boredom.

But by the mid-1950s, the heart had gone out of the comic book industry. All the brash and violent Golden Age superheroes had vanished. Fredric Wertham and his ilk had issued them a passport to literary limbo. The superheroes who managed to survive the do-gooders campaign became squeaky clean and deeply boring. The newly formed Comics Code Authority effectively castrated the Golden Age heroes, and their tales soon approximated the literary equivalent of Sominex. The exclusion of raw, violent action had rendered superheroes dull and feeble. They were gutted, finished, and in no time they became as dead as the Pharaohs.



The Human Torch returns (briefly) in Young Men #27 (April 1954, above) and #28 (June 1954, left, his final outing of the revival).

Granted, DC still published nine superhero books, but six of them starred the handsome, pro-social Superman whose adventures had become increasingly flabby. This was due to the rise of DC's "super family" which included Superboy, Supergirl, and a horrific horde of super-powered pets like Streaky the Super-Cat, Beppo the Super-Monkey, Comet the Super-Horse, and their ringleader, Krypto the Super-Dog. These imbecilic characters, by their very banality, seemed to sum up everything that had gone wrong. It was a truly hideous state of affairs.

With these dire developments came a crucial shift of prominence. Now that superheroes no longer held center stage, many of the writers and artists who created them simply switched gears and kept going, cranking out comics in other genres such as westerns, romance stories and funny animal books.

Martin Goodman had likewise given up on superheroes. In 1953, a brief attempt to resurrect Captain America, Sub-Mariner and the Human Torch had gone straight down the mineshaft. Goodman now instructed Stan to have his small team of freelancers

“Russia’s ticket to the moon.” Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev went on television and announced that Russian troops were gathering to terminate Allied-occupation rights in West Berlin. Later that week, construction of the Berlin Wall began.

The only good news that day was on the pop-culture scene: on 8/8/61 a new magazine called *Fantastic Four* hit the newsstands. Its impact on the comic book world was immediate, titanic and irreversible. From the moment they burst onto the scene—with the sudden fury of a thunderbolt—the FF transformed the entire landscape. It was like the scene in *The Wizard of Oz* where Dorothy opens the door and everything changes from dreary black-and-white to glorious Technicolor. Suddenly everything came alive.

In one throw, that first issue, crudely drawn and undeveloped as it was, laid the foundation for an entirely new complex of ideas. It transfigured all the mediocrity and sameness that had become so endemic to comics. It offered nothing less than a Second Coming.

Fantastic Four #1 launched the concept of realism, a markedly intellectual sense of consciousness and complexity that was previously unfathomable. For the first time, the personality and character of the heroes was the focus—how they related to each other, how they related to society, and how society related to them. The stories evolved on the basis of how these characters, each with a distinct persona, responded to the dramas and dilemmas in which they found themselves. In every way it was a major breakthrough. This was not lost on a twenty-one year old college student from Sullivan Missouri who’d been following comics since the Golden Age. According to Roy Thomas, “It was the start of something really different: no costumes, the monster, the human emotion and things to that end—everything was so much there in that first issue.”



In the early 1960s, DC’s idea of a modern teenager was the Justice League’s Snapper Carr. Compared to Johnny Storm, Snapper’s characterization is downright embarrassing.



Lee and Kirby, early 1960s.

The exactness of how the FF came to fruition has long since vanished into the mist of time. The issue of credit is forever blurred due to the poor memories of the creators and their competitiveness for top-billing as the book’s main architect. Half a century

after the fact, all we can do is dispel some obvious myths and try to draw some fresh conclusions.

...When Liebowitz was carefully setting up for the ninth hole, he remarked that it looked like team superheroes were finally on the rebound. A poker player at heart and savvy to any trend that seemed worthwhile, Goodman might have calmly responded, “Oh? How do you mean?” Liebowitz took the shot and both men quietly followed the ball as it bounced onto the green. Then Liebowitz turned to Goodman with a puzzled look and remarked, “You know

Marty—our new comic book *Justice League of America*’ is a smash success. Didn’t you hear about that?” —From *The Art of Jack Kirby* by R. Wyman Jr. and C. Hohlfield.

That’s a great story, and the meticulous details about the ball bouncing onto the green of the ninth hole add color if not credibility. In any case, it’s entirely false.

The legend of Martin Goodman hearing about *JLA*’s impressive sales on a golf outing with Jack Liebowitz has been floating around since the mid-1970s. It’s impossible to determine who fabricated the anecdote. The best guess would be that Stan came up with it. In 2002, Lee was still repeating the story as gospel in his autobiography.

One version of the tale has Martin golfing with DC’s top man Harry Donenfeld. Another version has Jack Liebowitz, who was then publisher of DC Comics, as Goodman’s golf partner. Either way, both Jack and Harry have denied the entire account. Donenfeld swore he’d never been on a golf course

with Martin Goodman in his entire life. Beyond that, the final nail in the coffin for the golf game anecdote came from Goodman himself, who in his later years admitted the entire episode was largely apocryphal. In view of all this, it’s rather amazing that the golf game story is still being presented as fact in nearly every history of comics. In recent years some authors have even attached a specific date to the non-event.

DC Production Chief Sol Harrison has stated that Goodman learned of the *JLA*’s sales figures during golf with one of the heads of Independent News, the DC-owned distribution outlet. Harrison worked closely with Independent News’ top management for many decades, and he may have gotten the story straight from the horse’s mouth. But to obfuscate the truth even further (if that’s possible), other DC insiders claim that Goodman had paid informants working at Independent News, and that he received the *Justice League*’s sales figures through them.

A recent interview with Stan strongly indicates that the “paid informants” scenario might be the correct one. According to Stan, “Martin Goodman, who was the Publisher, called me in and said, you know Stan, I think the superheroes are coming back. I was looking at the sales figures for DC’s *Justice League*. Why don’t we do a team of superheroes?”

Note that in this version of the story there’s no mention of any golf game. Martin said he’d been “looking at the sales figures” as if



THE EARLY YEARS

In *Fantastic Four* #1 (Nov.

1961), revelations flew off the pages right from the start. "Look! In the sky— what in blazes does it mean?"

"I dunno, but the crowds are gettin' panicky! Rumors are flyin' about an alien invasion!" Kids never read dialogue like that in the squeaky-clean DC comics. The speech patterns were colorful, the spelling was arbitrary and even a casual declarative sentence might end in three exclamation marks. It was

the most jarring, visceral and gut-level writing the industry had ever seen. With no corporate editor to make him script the "right" way, Stan Lee was unleashed.

Another breakthrough: in the initial stories, the team fought monsters and aliens in their street clothes and never even considered concealing their true identities. Being superheroes was their only profession. The quartet's lack of "secret identities" gave them a high public profile that was totally unique. It led the general populace to be both suspicious and in awe of them, and the FF often found their celebrity status to be a mixed blessing. Invariably, the group didn't even act like superheroes. DC action heroes were never seen quarreling, but these four were constantly bickering and belittling each other.

Another divergence from the norm was the writer's use of the entire book for one storyline. This was something that Kirby had done in *Challengers of the Unknown*, but in *Fantastic Four*, sometimes even 23 pages weren't enough. With the Lee/Kirby FF, a new era of epic-length comic book adventures began.

Even the look of the magazine was weird. The early issues had no conception of quality whatsoever. The production values seemed crude and heavy-handed. The coloring was dreary with too many grays. The word-balloons on the covers had garishly thick borders that distracted from the artwork. In fact, the entire magazine seemed totally devoid of corporate craftsmanship.

But whatever else it lacked, *Fantastic Four* had a raw vitality that had been missing from comics for years. It seemed dark and downright subversive; the perfect antidote to the sterile, sprayed-with-antiseptic *Superman* books. It was, in every way, the anti-*Justice League*.

These were exciting times for comic book fans. With each subsequent issue this strange new comic would produce something totally unique, something wilder than anything that had gone before. The book's lack of prettiness only added to its strange allure. One issue would turn almost any uncommitted reader into an instant loyalist, a *True Believer*. Roy Thomas, sufficiently intoxicated after the first three issues, was ready to pony-up for a two-year subscription as he stated in one of the magazine's earliest letters. The revolution had begun.

It must be said that Kirby's artwork in the FF's origin issue and in FF #2 (Jan. 1962) had been slow off the mark. Over-pressured and overworked as always, the King's initial penciling looked sparse and hurried. And it wasn't bolstered much by the craggy brushwork of Timely Comics vet George Klein, who inked the first two issues unaccredited. Jack's art on *Challengers of the Unknown* and *Sky Masters* had been markedly superior. However, by FF #3 (March



One of the earliest original FF pages known, from issue #3 (March 1962).



Joe Sinnott dropped FF #6 after inking a few panels, to do a higher-paying assignment for Treasure Chest. Check out Sue's "Sinnott face" from page 2 above.

1962), Kirby's vitality had returned.

FF #3 brought more advancements. In a totally unexpected closing moment, an embittered Human Torch quit the group and blazed off into the sky. It was another shocking revelation, something that never happened in other super-team comics. Also in this issue, the FF began wearing their utilitarian blue uniforms. Kirby said they were based on his no-frills Challengers of the Unknown jumpsuits.

A couple of books have reported that when Kirby first designed the FF's uniforms they were totally plain, and that Lee took a pencil to Jack's concept-drawing, and added a circle with a number "4" on their chests. In an exclusive interview for this book, Stan denied this. According to Lee, "I don't remember that happening. I think it's more likely that Jack and I discussed it and mutually decided to have the number 4 in a circle on their chests."

On many occasions Stan has claimed the FF's costumes were a bow to reader demands, but there's no evidence of this in the early letter-pages. In the beginning there were so few *Fantastic Four* fan letters that Stan wrote some himself and had Sol Brodsky and colorist Stan Goldberg add others. If the fans were writing letters to request uniforms (or anything else for that matter), Lee surely would have printed them.

Comics historian Greg Theakston has an alternative theory about the FF's costumes. In 1961 Goodman's comic books were being distributed by Independent News, which was owned by National Publications. DC had a lock on superhero comics, and they might have considered Marvel's new action heroes a conflict of interest. If this had irritated them, they could have refused to renew Goodman's contract once it expired. Theakston believes that Lee and Kirby may have been trying to sneak *Fantastic Four* under DC's radar by making it look more like a monster/sci-fi title than a superhero comic. Only when National failed to complain did the writers turn *Fantastic Four* into a full-fledged superhero series. Such was DC's power in those days.

And speaking of DC, there's an often-reported misconception that surrounds the birth of *Fantastic Four*: Various books have stated that FF #1 was the ninth title in Goodman's eight-books-a-month deal with Independent News, and that Martin snuck it into the line-up in an unauthorized distribution slot. In an exclusive interview, Stan

dispelled this myth. According to Lee, by 1961 IND. had loosened its restrictions, allowing Goodman to publish 9 to 12 titles a month. "There's no way we could have snuck it in," said Stan. "The people at DC were way too smart to let something like that happen."

Meanwhile, a few blocks north of the DC offices at 655 Madison Avenue, Martin Goodman's cousin-in-law was feeling his oats. Stan Lee and modesty had never been an easy fit. Indeed, Stan was constitutionally incapable of understatement. Preposterously, on the cover of FF #3, Lee had the audacity to write "THE GREATEST COMIC MAGAZINE IN THE WORLD!!" That slogan, slightly altered, would become a fixture of the book's cover, but to make that claim after only three issues, no matter how groundbreaking, was ludicrous.

In just two years the slogan would be entirely justified.

Fantastic Four seemed a perfect place to rekindle the faded glory of the Golden Age Timely superheroes. In FF #4 (May 1962), Johnny finds a bearded amnesiac in a Bowery flop house who turns out to be Bill Everett's aquatic anti-hero, the Sub-Mariner. Subsequently Namor becomes enamored with the beautiful (and apparently fickle)



Stan Lee and "J. Kirby" remove the Thing's uniform for good in *Fantastic Four* #3.

Invisible Girl, which sets off a mutual infatuation that wouldn't be resolved until *FF* #27 (June 1964). How many radical ideas could the writers cram into one story? *FF* #4 was a model of ceaseless innovation.

More changes: Beginning with *FF* #4, the storyline's locality changed from the fictional "Central City" to New York, an idea that Stan probably got from the Doc Savage stories. Into the breach created by the FF, there would soon surge a battalion of new Lee/Kirby superheroes. All of them would reside in The Big Apple except the Hulk, and even he would come to visit.

Almost immediately, New York City became a vital element in the adventures of the Fantastic Four. The city's tangible presence became almost as important to the storyline as the FF themselves. Ordinary men in suits (all with Bronx accents) and women in pillbox hats gawked from street level at all the heroes and villains flying, fighting and stretching up in the sky. Kirby, a lifelong native, obviously had a great feeling for the town. The Big Apple, seen from all angles as Kirbyized cityscapes, kept the entire storyline rooted in reality.

Ultimately, there was Doctor Doom.

FF #5 (July 1962), introduced the vicious, vainglorious Victor Von Doom; wrecker of cataclysms, the man in the iron mask. He was the nastiest piece of work imaginable. His mind seemed a labyrinth of dark, twisted corridors. He was the FF's first antagonist who was able to balance an atmospheric creepiness with a true sense of majesty.

Throughout the series the megalomaniacal Dr. Doom would keep coming back, totally obsessed with defeating the FF, and Mr. Fantastic in particular. It was as if the idea had crawled into his brain and set up housekeeping. He appeared in the magazine no less than seventeen times before Kirby left the book, and to this day he's still Marvel's premier villain.

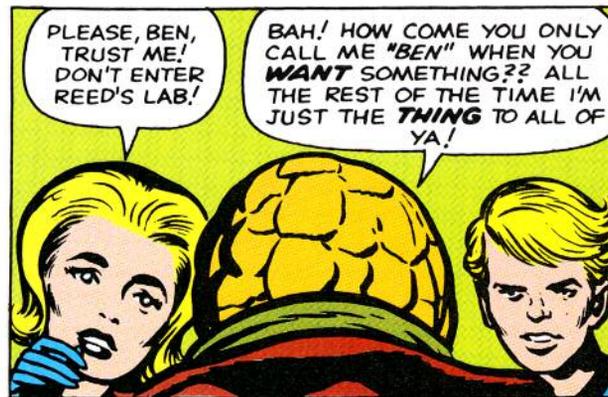
FF #8 (Nov. 1962) introduced Alicia Masters, a blind girl who immediately became Ben's love interest. It was a brilliant plot twist, right out of a Simon/Kirby romance comic. Only the innocent and sightless Alicia accepted the Thing for the basic goodness and decency of his character, indifferent to what the rest of the world saw. Bathed in Alicia's refracted light, Ben's persona slowly began to shift. He softened. It was a significant turning point in the Thing's characterization.

More milestones: In *FF* #8, Sue called the Thing "Ben" for the first time since his transformation by cosmic rays. Previously, his teammates had referred to him exclusively as "the Thing." In a year's time they would be addressing him by his Christian (or in his case, Jewish) name only. Little by little, the man within the monster was beginning to emerge.

In *FF* #9 (Dec. 1962), our heroes get evicted from the Baxter Building due to financial woes. This story has been praised time and again for its unusual premise. However, some claim this idea had been done earlier by DC in *Strange Adventures* #114 (March 1960). In this story, 21st century detective Star Hawkins couldn't make the rent and had to pawn his beloved robot-secretary Ilda for some quick cash. *FF* #9 also saw the first inker/letterer credits (Stan and Jack had been singing their names on the book's splash-page since *FF* #1).

FF #11 (Feb. 1963) was the debut of Willy Lumpkin, the FF's exasperated, overworked mailman. There's a backstory to Willy: In the days before Silver Age superheroes held the limelight, many comic book creators were moonlighting, trying for success with syndicated newspaper comic strips. Stan, along with Timely artist Dan DeCarlo, managed to get a strip published in 1960 about a small town mailman named Willy Lumpkin. The strip flopped after fourteen months, but Lee recycled the character later in *Fantastic Four*. (DeCarlo didn't exactly starve after the cancellation of *Willy Lumpkin* either. He went on to Archie Comics where he eventually created *Josie and the Pussycats* and *Sabrina the Teen-Age Witch*.)

FF #12 (March 1963) was the book's first-ever crossover, featuring the brutish Hulk. It should have been a blockbuster, but except for the mesmerizing Kirby cover, it was pure anticlimax. In a rare and egregious case of the writers dragging the storyline, the



In *FF* #8, Sue called the Thing "Ben" for the first time since his transformation. Slowly, the man within the monster was beginning to emerge.

action didn't get underway until page seventeen. The end result was a lackluster three-page battle. Lee and Kirby would make up for this in spades the next time the two monsters met.

In *FF* #13 (April 1963), the team met a moon-based cosmic sage called the Watcher. An obelisk of bland passivity, he stood huge and still, stoic and Sphinx-like, surveying apocalyptic upheavals in which he could take no part. He was the FF's first supporting character, and Kirby's first "space god."

Beginning with *FF* #14 (May 1963), a colorful little box appeared in the upper left of the magazine's cover, bearing the faces of the FF, the price of the book and the company's new name. This distinctive "Marvel Comics" logo was reportedly Steve Ditko's brainchild. With this turn of events Martin Goodman's comic book line finally had an identity after being nameless since 1957. Ironically, Stan Lee, whose own name would eventually become synonymous with "Marvel" wanted to re-launch the old Atlas name for Goodman's 1960s comic book division. But Martin insisted otherwise. Goodman had instructed his staff to conduct a survey of common words that appeared in the titles of his better-selling publications. "Marvel" was one of the words that Goodman claimed sold magazines along with "astonish," "suspense," "uncanny" and "incredible."

Now that the comics company had a name, Stan could begin to promote it. Ever since 1939, Goodman's comic book division had suffered from a lack of distinctiveness. That was all about to change; Stan would see to that. And Lee's efforts to push the new Marvel brand would be greatly assisted by his new secretary.

Flo Steinberg was another bright and dynamic personality whose star crossed with Marvel Comics in the early 1960s at a pivotal point in the company's career. Flo, a cabdriver's daughter, hailed from Boston where she'd graduated from the University of Massachusetts and had campaigned for both Teddy and Bobby Kennedy.

In March 1963, when Flo knocked on the doors of Magazine Management Company looking for a job, she was living at the YWCA as many freewheeling young career girls did at the time. Upon hiring Steinberg, Stan told her she'd be required to answer the

THE AGE OF INNOVATION

AT A GLANCE *FF* #1 (Nov. 1961)
Ayers-cover inks

"The Fantastic Four" 13p Klein-inks

"The Fantastic Four Meet The Mole Man" 12p Klein-inks

The entire comic book medium was about to be forever altered.

In one pass, this startling debut issue managed to utterly demolish DC's straight-jacketed ideas of superheroism with a sense of anarchy and recklessness that was previously unfathomable. *FF* #1 shattered limitations of every kind. It immediately forced a stagnant comics industry to reevaluate its unenlightened and outmoded notions of the superhero genre. It was as fast, and simple, and complete as that. Readers knew immediately that *Fantastic Four* was going to shape up to something big.

On the first page we see a strange man—who is somehow *more* than just a man—holding a still-smoking flare gun that he used to signal the most unique superhero team comics had ever seen. Once the quartet has gathered, the story flashes back to the *FF*'s origin—the unauthorized flight to the stars, the bombardment of cosmic rays, the crash and the amazing discovery; they had all gained superhuman powers. *And so was born "the Fantastic Four!!" and from that moment on, the world would never again be the same.*

The sweeping action begins on page 14 as the *FF* discover the subterranean grottoes of the grotesque Mole Man—a tragic, unwanted soul who would rather face the underground's darkness than the scorn of those who breathe in the light of day. The *FF* managed to polish him off in a mere three pages, but not for good. He would return many times to make scattered appearances throughout the series, right up to Kirby's final months on the book.

That a comic book like this could have come to exist at all is extraordinary; but that it came from a nowhere outfit like Martin Goodman's was a complete shock. This radically dark-edged anti-superhero story changed everything. It ushered in an unforgettable era of hope, upheaval and



achievement. It was like a window opened to let some bad air out.

The enormity of *FF* #1's impact is incalculable. It was the comic book medium's ultimate declaration of change; a decisive goodbye to everything that came before it. In terms of historic significance, this revolutionary origin issue is second only to *Action Comics* #1, which featured the first appearance of Superman.

The Marvel Universe, the greatest fictional playground ever created, has officially begun.

AT A GLANCE *FF* #2 (Jan. 1962)
Ayers-cover inks

"The Fantastic Four Meet The Skrulls from Outer-Space!" 24p Klein-inks/Thing 1p Klein-inks

This sophomore issue achieved the same impact as its predecessor: the promise of new possibilities presenting themselves, of a great new breadth and sophistication, of a whole new style made possible.

Has any *Fantastic Four* comic ever resembled an Atlas alien tale more than *FF* #2? All the elements of Jack and Stan's "take me to your leader" stories are found in this issue: Earth's impending doom at the hands of space-invaders and the intruder's inevitable defeat—not by might, but by an ingenious use of human wit. There's even a *Tales to Astonish* type ending where the Skrulls turn themselves into contented cows.

And in this issue we find seeds of the Universe to come.

Previously, in both Atlas and DC comics alike, alien invaders hailed from various planets and endless galaxies, no two alike. After being defeated at the story's end they were never seen again. But in an unprecedented move, the Skrulls would return to *Fantastic Four* time and again, adding another consis-



tent element to the ever-expanding Marvel Universe.

Reed vanquishes the Skrulls by convincing them that monsters from *Strange Tales* and *Journey into Mystery* actually roam the Earth. Stan's penchant for hyperbolic salesmanship was already rearing its head, and *Fantastic Four* was only in its second installment.

Here's the odd thing: The artwork that Kirby was producing for many of Goodman's other titles at this time seems superior to the underdeveloped art in *FF* #1 and 2. Take for example Kirby's "Sserpo" tale from *Amazing Adventures* #6 (Nov. 1961). The King's art in *AA* #6 is noticeably more labor-intensive compared to the sparse backgrounds, simple layouts and lack of detail seen in the early issues of *Fantastic Four*. Obviously, the King had a staggering workload at this point, but why wasn't he giving these all-important first issues his best stuff? Unfortunately, the answer is unknowable.

Seen in the warm nostalgic glow of hindsight, Kirby's sparse, raw-edged vitality in *FF* #1 and 2 harks back to something older, something more archaic, something that had been missing from comics for years.

In fact, these thrilling, crudely-drawn early *Fantastic Four* stories seem like a throwback to the dark, fearsome, pre-Comics Code aesthetic of the 1940s Timely superheroes. And in that light, *FF* #2 shines brightest.

AT A GLANCE *FF* #3 (Mar. 1962)
Ayers-cover inks

"The Menace Of The Miracle Man" 23 p Brodsky-inks/Human Torch 1p Brodsky-inks

To have come out of such a vacuum and wreak such changes at such speed, with such totality—even now, it's hard to conceive the



daring and self-belief it must have taken from Lee and Kirby.

Astonishingly, it took only three issues for Jack and Stan to get *Fantastic Four* stabilized. The foundations they established in *FF* #3 would be the magazine's template for the next fifty years and undoubtedly longer.

"The Menace of the Miracle Man" is a prime example of the writers shifting boldly into new terrain. The costumes, the Doc Savage-style skyscraper headquarters and the original bathtub-like Fantastocar all make their debuts.

Emotional nuance is introduced on page 16, when the Thing once again acknowledges his attraction to the Invisible Girl, just as he did in *FF* #1.

The introduction of another Atlas-type monster in *FF* #3, the second in a mere three issues, displayed an uncharacteristic caution on the part of the creators who seemed reckless in every other regard. Perhaps at this point Martin Goodman was hedging his bets on a full-blown superhero revival.

Another development in this issue was the first "Fantastic Four Fan Page" with a letter from Sol Brodsky and an unsigned correspondence that was undoubtedly written by Stan. This wouldn't be the last time Lee would slip a letter into the *FF* Fan Page. At this point the letters all began with "Dear Editor" in the age-old DC tradition.

The key to this issue's immortality is its totally unexpected twist ending. The flaming mad Human Torch, sick of the Thing's haranguing, quits the team in disgust and blazes off into the sky. Superheroes simply did not act like this in 1962. It was spellbinding.

Now the stage is set, now all the necessary elements are at hand.

Now the long upward climb begins.

A GALLERY OF FF CHARACTER PROFILES!

DOCTOR DOOM

FIRST APPEARANCE:
FF #5

THE MORE ONE STUDIES THE LEE/KIRBY *FANTASTIC FOUR*, THE MORE IT BECOMES CLEAR THAT JACK AND STAN'S STRONG SUIT WAS CREATING NOBLE, DIGNIFIED HEROES. SO NOBLE IN FACT THAT THEY OFTEN BORDERED ON MESSIANIC, IN THE VEIN OF BLACK BOLT AND THE SILVER SURFER. LIKewise, THE DUO'S GREATEST FAILING WAS THEIR INABILITY TO CONCOCT THE ANTI-THESIS OF THESE HEROES—MENACING VILLAINS, EVIL-DOERS, AND BAD GUYS.

DURING THE FF'S COSMIC ERA, THE BOOK'S MOST SIGNIFICANT PERIOD, IT'S NOTEWORTHY THAT THE QUARTET OFTEN FOUND THEMSELVES BATTLING CHARACTERS WHO WERE BASICALLY HEROES LIKE THE INHUMANS, THE SILVER SURFER AND THE BLACK PANTHER. THIS TENDED TO AMPLIFY THE WRITER'S STRENGTHS AND CAMOUFLAGED THEIR WEAKNESSES.

JACK KIRBY'S *FANTASTIC FOUR* HAD THREE INCOMPARABLE ADVERSARIES: SUB-MARINER, DR. DOOM AND GALACTUS.

GALACTUS WAS A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD BECAUSE HE WAS SIMPLY TOO POWERFUL, TOO OMNIPOTENT TO BE CONVINCING AS A REOCCURRING CHARACTER. THE WRITERS KNEW THE MORE HE WAS EMPLOYED THE LESS EFFECTIVE HE WOULD BECOME. AS FOR NAMOR, AS SOON AS HE GOT HIS OWN SERIES HE BECAME TOO BUSY TO SQUARE-OFF WITH THE FF. ALMOST BY DEFAULT DR. DOOM BECAME *FANTASTIC FOUR*'S EVILDOER EXTRAORDINAIRE; THE VILLAIN TO BEAT.

AND SELDOM HAS A COMIC BOOK ANTAGONIST EVER BEEN GIVEN SUCH DEPTH AND DIMENSION. *FF ANNUAL* #2 CONVINCINGLY ESTABLISHED THE ROOT OF HIS EVIL, AND DEEPER INSIGHTS INTO HIS DARK, TWISTED PERSONA WOULD BE REVEALED WITH EACH SUBSEQUENT APPEARANCE.

UNSURPRISINGLY, THE OFTEN-AT-ODDS LEE AND KIRBY DISAGREED STRONGLY ON WHAT LAY BENEATH DOOM'S HIDEOUS METAL MASK. LEE CLAIMED THAT VICTOR'S FACE WAS HORRIBLY DISFIGURED FROM A COLLEGE LAB ACCIDENT, WHEREAS KIRBY INSISTED THAT DOOM ONLY RETAINED A SMALL SCAR FROM THE MISHAP. THE KING FELT THAT VON DOOM'S OBSESSIVE VANITY CAUSED HIM TO HIDE HIS VISAGE FOREVER BECAUSE OF THE TINY FLAW.



MOMENTUS

Fantastic
Four
drifted
along, erratically
and on occasion
brilliantly.
The magazine's
swift popularity meant a shift
away from scattershot innovation and

Ben's vocabulary was his iconic battle-cry "It's clobberin' time!" From the moment he first shouted it in *FF* #22 (Jan. 1964), it became his immortal hook.

Lee's characterization shone brightest on the emotional triangle between Sue, Reed and Sub-Mariner. Readers were astonished to see Namor and Storm dating in *FF* #9. In 1962, the idea of a fickle superheroine being infatuated with a villain was unheard of. You wouldn't see Lois Lane doing the town with Brainiac. But unlike the psychologically unsophisticated Lois, Sue Storm was wracked with complex

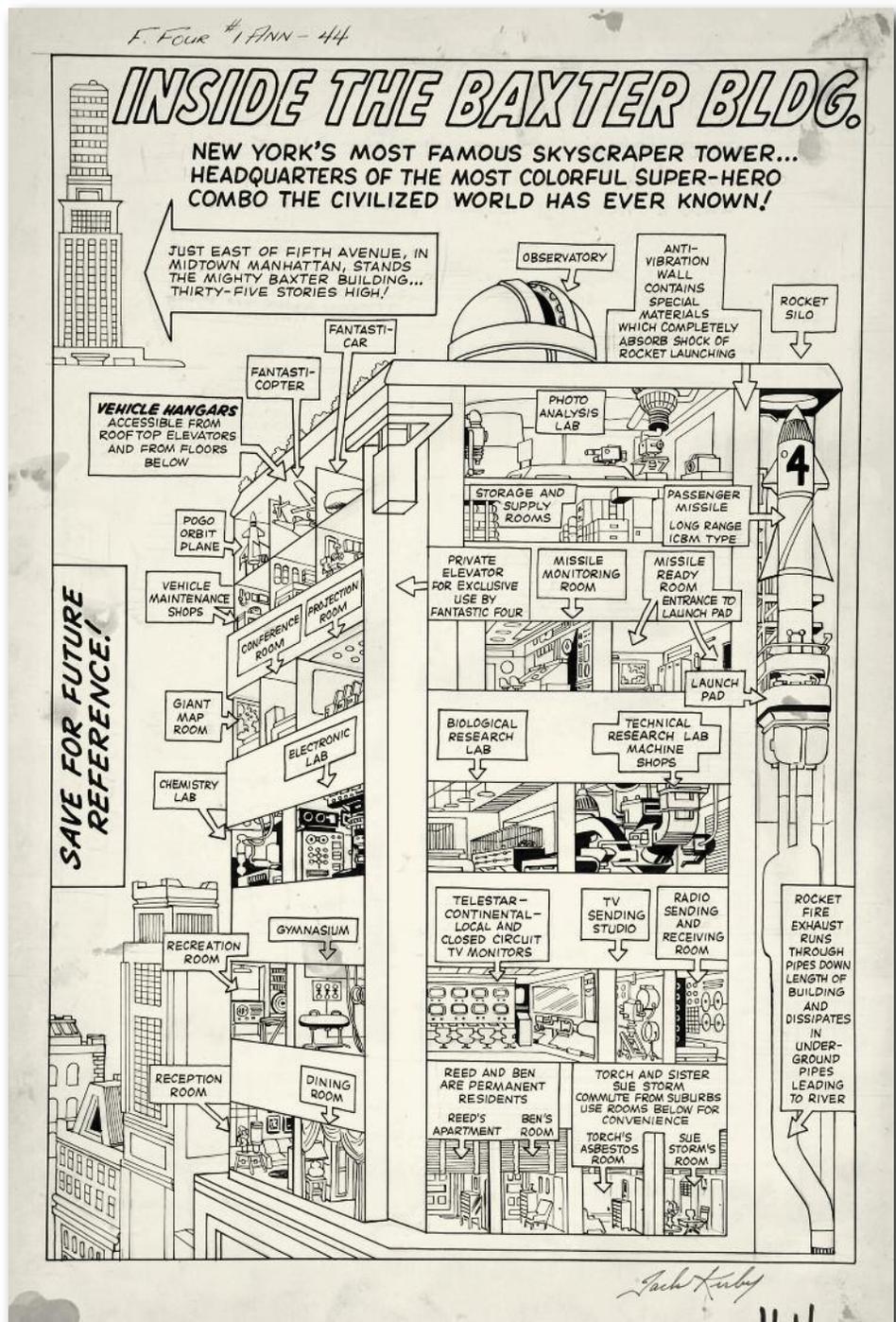
a move toward calculated refinement. The writers seemed to have stumbled onto the right formula. Now they could get down to the business of fine-tuning.

After the prodigious innovations in the first six issues the series cooled off and began to gather steam slowly, almost imperceptibly. This period was a bit of a lull, a leveling-off. On the plus side, the book finally had a consistent look due to the dedicated and dependable inking of Dick Ayers. Ayers may not have been the best in the business but his warm, unassuming brushstrokes gave the series a visual signature that will nowadays trigger fits of nostalgia in any first-generation *Fantastic Four* fan.

Throughout this period the big stumbling block was the book's antagonists. Many of them were thoroughly third-rate; boring, ludicrous and one-dimensional. In particular, Kurrigo, the Impossible Man and the Red Ghost were total losers.

When you compare the *FF*'s early villains to the rich array of evildoers that Stan and Steve Ditko created for *Spider-Man*, Lee and Kirby's shortcomings become clear: bad guys were their Achilles' heel. This is probably why the book's two most potent adversaries, Dr. Doom and Prince Namor, kept returning again and again almost to the point of over-saturation.

Fantastic Four's most consistent strength during this era was its rich character depictions and scripting. The Thing, over time, developed a wisecracking Brooklynesque dialect that counterbalanced his angst. Ben's speech was peppered with remarks like "what a revoltin' development," William Bendix's catchphrase from the 1930s radio sitcom *The Life of Riley*. Ben called Reed "Stretcho" as if Richards was the lost Marx Brother. There were arcane references to a mysterious Aunt Petunia, and curses for the despicable Yancy Street Gang. Unquestionably, the colloquialism that towered above all else in



Baxter Building schematic pin-up from *FF* Annual #1 (July 1963).

the lessons he'd learned from Gaines and his "usual gang of idiots," such as the importance of catering to fans on a personal level, giving greater creative freedom to his top artists, and loosening up the letter-pages.

Suddenly, from out of nowhere, Lee began to display an uncanny ability to connect with his readers that was entirely lacking during his Timely/Atlas years. In welcome contrast to the staid, serious

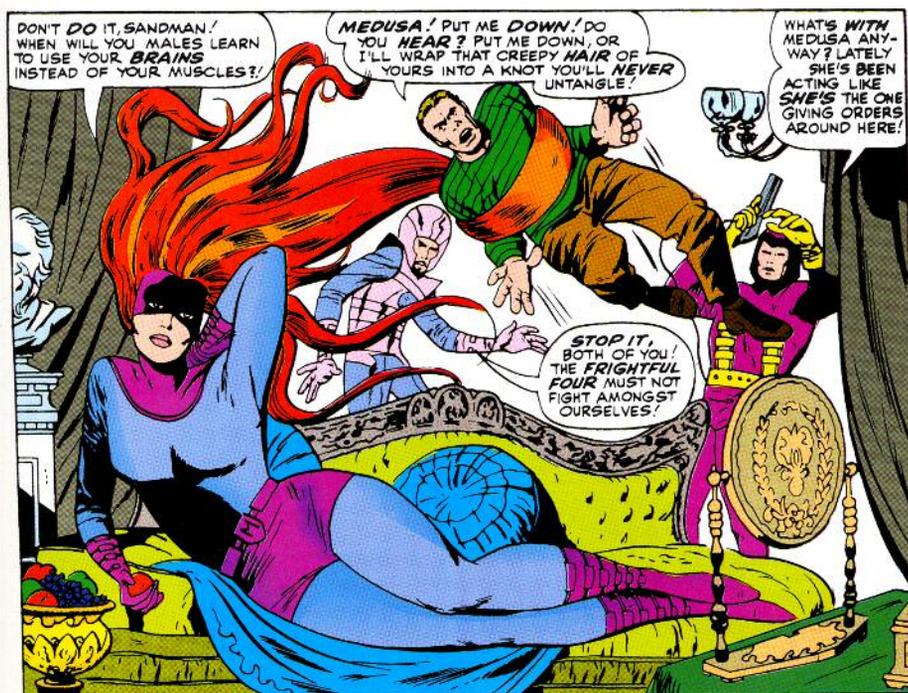


approach of DC's editorial staff, Stan injected an element of irreverent fun into his comics. He developed pet names for all his superheroes like "Subby" and "Match-Head" (for Namor and the Torch),

and he devised in-jokes for his readers like Irving Forbush, Marvel's fictional mascot whose face was never seen. Lee went to great lengths to forge a sense of intimacy between Marvel's creators and Marvel's readers, assigning snappy nicknames to all his artists, inkers and letterers. Even Fabulous Flo Steinberg (above) had her own fans.

In the late spring of 1964, Stan did some checking and reported that there were over 200 Fantastic Four Fan Clubs worldwide; an estimate which he may have (typically) exaggerated. Nevertheless, it was around this time that Lee decided the True Believers should have an official fan club.

Beginning with Marvel comics dated November 1964, the initials "M.M.M.S." started to appear in Goodman's comics with no indication



The most sinister seductress of the Silver Age, Madam Medusa looked intimidating, even in repose.

of what the letters stood for. Fans from across the globe wrote in, hoping to be the first in line to crack the code. Stan introduced the company's fan club, "the Merry Marvel Marching Society" in *Fantastic Four* #33 (Dec. 1964). It was Stan's one-up version of E.C.'s "Fan-Addict Club" which had been the first comic book fan club.

The M.M.M.S. offered the True Believers a \$1 membership kit that included a welcoming letter along with a scratch pad, a pinback button, a certificate, a membership card and a one-sided vinyl LP called "The Voices of Marvel." The vinyl record was totally Stan's brainchild. He and other Marvel luminaries like Kirby and Fabulous Flo held court, bantering back and forth from a script of Stan's that was filled with corny gags. True to form, the intensely private Steve Ditko, a camera-shy and uncommunicative loner, refused to participate. "Nobody expected the fan-club to be so big," said Flo Steinberg. "There were thousands of letters and dollar bills flying around all over the place. We were throwing them at each other."

The early 1960s Marvel Comics Group seemed to exude a breezy "anything goes" attitude that the collective consciousness of comic fandom swallowed hook, line and sinker. Marvel's first-generation fans were almost religious adherents. Nothing like this had ever happened before. The readers were beyond impressed; they were utterly demolished, and they lined up in droves.

By mid-1964 Marvel was successful enough that Martin Goodman was able to move Magazine Management to a more lavish setting. The new location was at 625 Madison Avenue near 58th Street; a large building in a business district that was crowded with shops and restaurants. Marvel's sector of Goodman's operation consisted of three offices and a room which would eventually be used by Marvel's freelance artists. Stan had a comfortable corner office next to another office shared by Flo and Sol, who in 1964 became a full-time member of the Marvel staff. And in July 1965, a young man who wrote the first-ever review of *FF* #1 would join Steinberg and Brodsky in that office. Roy Thomas had moved to New York to write comic books.

Stan's desk at 625 Madison Avenue was located in front of a big window which overlooked the street several stories down. It was

adorned by a small twin-picture frame that contained two black-and-white headshots of Stan's beautiful British wife. To the left of Lee's desk was his drawing and proofreading board. The wall behind his desk was decorated with Stan's favorite Marvel comic book covers, and below the Marvel covers there was a couch—a couch very similar to Martin Goodman's, which Stan once claimed was a sign of indolence.

Across the hall from Lee's office there was a reception area and a room with drawing tables that could hold up to three of Stan's freelance artists. Flo Steinberg called the new 625 address the first "real" Marvel Bullpen where a roomful of artists at drawing boards making corrections and preparing art for printing was established.

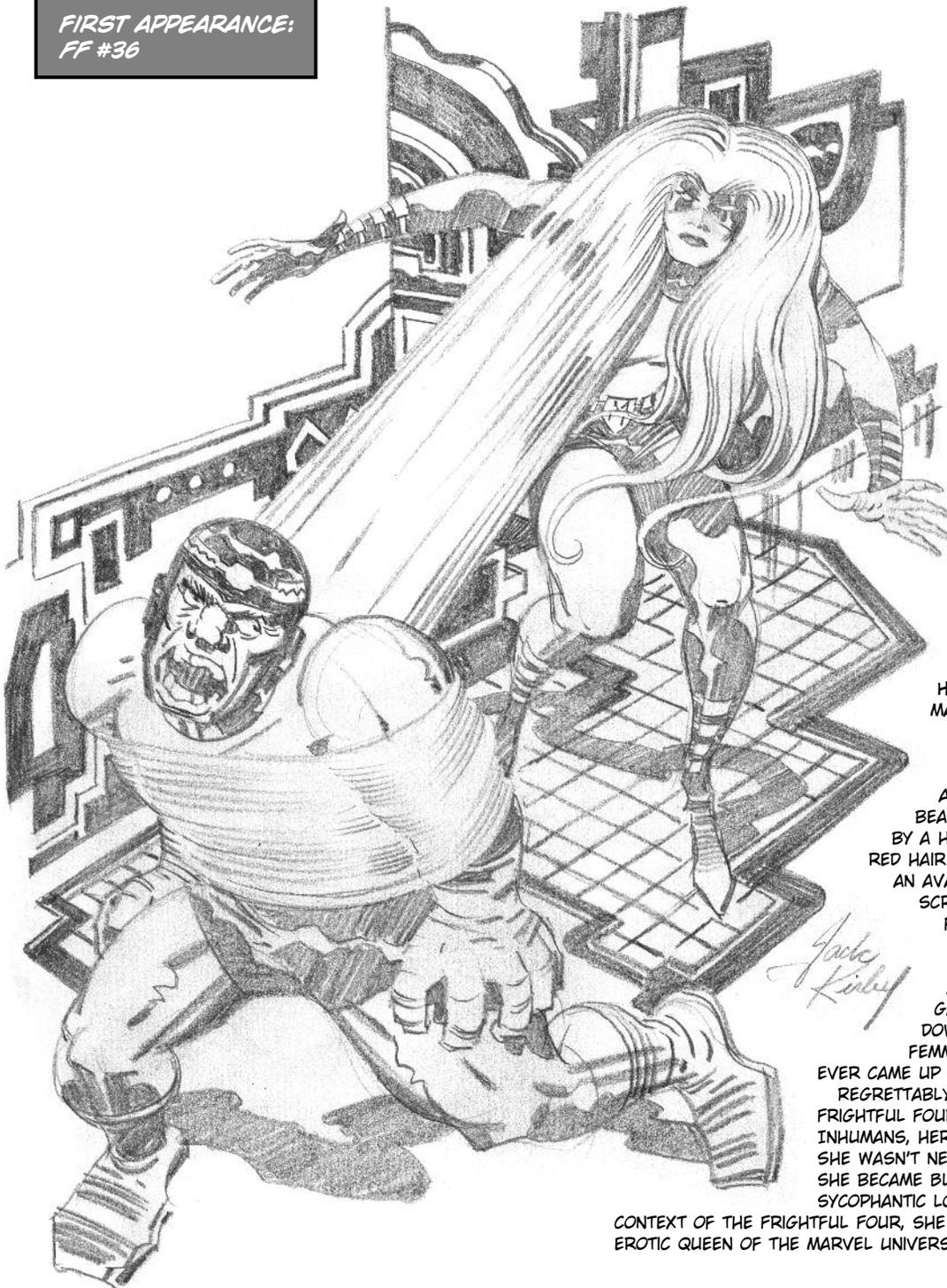
The fan club, the new location and the media attention that Marvel Comics was enjoying were all testimonials to the nonstop work Stan had been doing to promote the Marvel brand.

Around this time Martin Goodman became worried about Stan's popularity and

A GALLERY OF FF CHARACTER PROFILES!

MADAM MEDUSA

FIRST APPEARANCE:
FF #36



PERPLEXINGLY, ALL THROUGHOUT THE 1960S KIRBY'S TAKE ON FEMALE CHARACTERS WAS FUNDAMENTALLY ASEXUAL. GRANTED, ASGARD'S ENCHANTRESS WAS A BLOND BOMBSHELL, BUT FOR THE

MOST PART SUE STORM, BETTY ROSS, JANE FOSTER AND EVEN THE BOY-CRAZY JANET VAN DYNE SEEMED MORE LIKE YOUR BIG SISTER THAN AN OBJECT OF CARNAL DESIRE.

THE ODD THING IS THIS: KIRBY WAS ENTIRELY CAPABLE OF RENDERING THE FEMALE FORM WITH TRUE EROTICISM. HE DID IT HABITUALLY IN THE SIMON/KIRBY ROMANCE COMICS. THE BRAZEN TEMPTRESS WHO SEDUCES HER KID SISTER'S FIANCEE IN *YOUNG ROMANCE* #1 (SEPT. 1947) IS EVERY BIT AS

RAVISHING AS THE TO-DIE-FOR BABES THAT WALLY WOOD DEPICTED IN THE GLORY DAYS OF *E.C. COMICS*. LIKEWISE, "THE GIRL WHO TEMPTED ME" FROM *YOUNG ROMANCE* #5 (JAN. 1950) FEATURES AN EVIL SEDUCTRESS WHO'S VIRTUALLY DRIPPING WITH SENSUALITY—NOT THAT VIRTUE HAD ANYTHING TO DO WITH HER APPEAL. SO

THERE'S THE PARADOX: KIRBY COULD DRAW STUNNINGLY BEAUTIFUL FEMALES. HE SIMPLY CHOSE NOT TO. MADAM MEDUSA WAS THE EROTIC EXCEPTION.

EVEN HER BLACK MASK COULDN'T DIMINISH THE ALLURE OF HER GLACIALLY BEAUTIFUL FACE—A FACE ENGULFED BY A HUGE WATERFALL OF RADIANT RED HAIR THAT THUNDERED DOWN LIKE AN AVALANCHE, DOWN PAST HER SKYSCRAPER LEGS AND ONTO THE FLOOR AROUND HER TINY BOOTED FEET. SHE HAD A BUILT-IN CHARISMATIC SELF-CERTAINTY AND AN ARISTOCRATIC ARROGANCE THAT MADE HER, HANDS DOWN, THE MOST INTOXICATING FEMME FATALE THAT LEE AND KIRBY

EVER CAME UP WITH.

REGRETTABLY, AFTER SHE LEFT THE FRIGHTFUL FOUR AND RETURNED TO THE INHUMANS, HER ALLURE BEGAN TO WANE. SHE WASN'T NEARLY AS INTOXICATING AFTER SHE BECAME BLACK BOLT'S SERVILE AND SYCOPHANTIC LOVE INTEREST. BUT IN THE

CONTEXT OF THE FRIGHTFUL FOUR, SHE WAS THE UNDISPUTED EVIL AND EROTIC QUEEN OF THE MARVEL UNIVERSE.

7

APOTHEOSIS

The cosmos now seemed to shift with each new issue.

Fantastic Four was about to take on mystical and metaphysical overtones which no one had suspected

the comics medium could achieve. The long, interweaving story arcs that typified the magazine's "Cosmic Era" seemed like a colossal payoff; a spectacular reward to the loyal True Believers who had followed the book from its humble beginnings. It was a spellbinding mosaic of futuristic realms, hidden civilizations and god-like beings; a wondrous voyage into uncharted worlds of fantasy that seemed to have no boundaries.

Basically, this is what happened: By 1965, *Fantastic Four's* premise had been defined and fine-tuned like no superhero series before it. By now the quartet's greatest strengths were clarity of image and the way they balanced. There were no loose ends, and it all made for a comforting sense of completeness. By way of long familiarity with their characters, Lee and Kirby were now ready to think big; to become more ambitious, more grandiose with their storylines. Now the book's limitless possibilities hit them like a prophetic vision and they moved fast, racing like mad to see just how far they could bend the envelope.

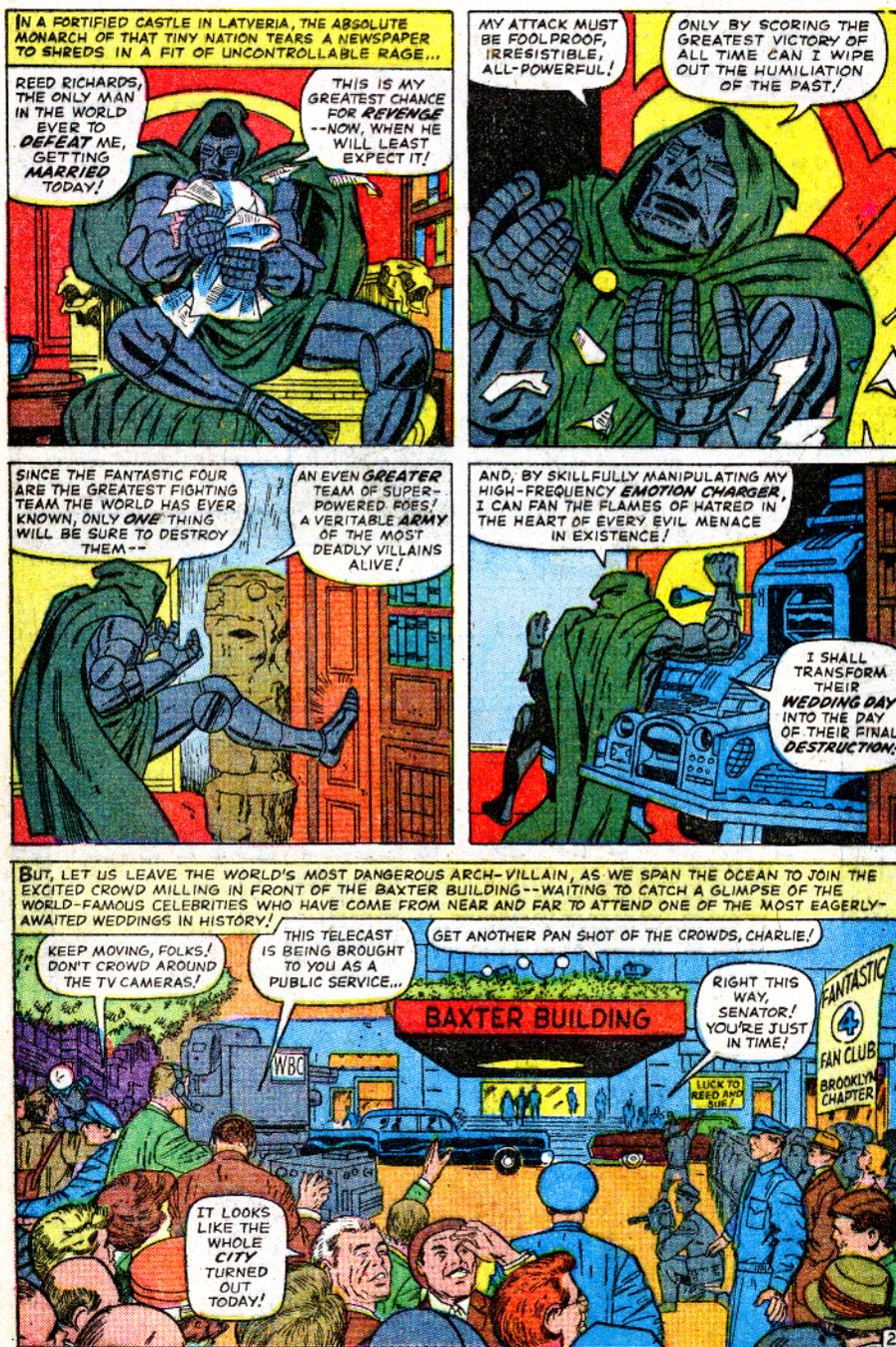
In this environment, with all the necessary elements at hand, Jack and Stan began to create sweeping sagas that were outside anyone's wildest expectations. It seemed a nonstop fusillade of epic stories and art—an explosion of creativity. Suddenly, everything the magazine had been aspiring to came to full flower. The series was about to begin a two-year hot streak that in all likelihood will never be equaled.

Throughout this period the book's storyline grew to genuinely mythic proportions, relying more and more on a body of sustained character development, multi-issue stories, cliff-hangers and scintillating subplots that occasionally went nowhere. Now only narratives that ran to several issues would be able to contain Lee and Kirby's increasingly complex ideas. At this point *Fantastic Four* became somewhat inaccessible to the casual reader. The dilettantes were soon weeded out, and only the True Believers

remained in the know.

Meanwhile, at the end of *FF* #38 (May 1965), Reed and company were soundly and unequivocally beaten by the Frightful Four. They didn't even regroup in the next issue and defeat the evil FF as you might expect. The idea of this happening in a 1965 DC story is inconceivable. It was a complete shock, a sensational twist ending.

Fantastic Four #38 signaled a dramatic departure from the optimistic 1965 *FF* stories that focused on Reed and Sue's engagement. Comics historian Mike Gartland has opined that after *FF* #38 the



In this page from *FF Annual* #3 (1965), note how Dr. Doom is holding his hands in agony—the after effect of the Thing crushing them in *FF* #40. Stan missed this Kirby continuity carry-over in the dialogue.

plots seem more Kirby-driven with less input from Lee. This was a major turning point. From here on, *Fantastic Four* acquired a darker, more disturbing tone.

After an impressive twelve-issue run, issue #38 would be the last *FF* story inked by Chic Stone. Chic was tired of inking other people's work, and wanted to draw his own comics. Stone claims he practically begged Stan to give him some penciling work, but Lee refused, so he went elsewhere.

Now that Chic was gone Stan had problems. Lee had wanted

Joe Sinnott on *Fantastic Four* ever since issue #5, but at this point he still couldn't lure him away from Treasure Chest and Archie. Frank Giacoia, the next closest inker to Sinnott talent-wise, was Stan's second choice. Frank had aspirations to ink Kirby's work since that day in 1956 when he told Lee he'd bring Jack over to Atlas. Giacoia did a terrific job on *FF* #39 (June 1965), but he missed the deadline and was pulled off *Fantastic Four* after one issue. Before Lee sent Giacoia packing, he had him ink the covers to *FF* #40 and 41 as well.

Just about everybody loved the way Frank Giacoia embellished

Kirby's pencils, Joe Sinnott included. Sinnott thought Giacoia (who at the time was going by the *non de plume* "Frank Ray") had a style that was close to his own. Kirby himself admired the way his friend and neighbor kept his energetic figures in fluid motion in the action scenes, which is no small feat. A lively pencil drawing has a way of losing its spontaneity in the inking process.

But Stan needed someone more dependable than Giacoia. Vince Colletta had seen how much work he could get by becoming Kirby's inker and applied for the job, reminding Stan that he'd inked Jack's work in the past on romance comics like *Love Romances*. Still, Stan didn't consider Colletta to be a superhero artist. Lee had pretty much dismissed Vinnie back in '63, at which time he'd decided he didn't even want Colletta on *Millie the Model* or *Patsy Walker*.

Undeterred, Vince asked Sol Brodsky what he could do to get assigned some Marvel superhero books. Sol told Colletta that Lee liked bold blacks and lots of detail. As soon as possible, Vince got some penciled pages from Charlton Comics and inked them in the manner Brodsky had suggested. Then he showed them to Stan. According to Sol, Colletta's Charlton pages didn't look much different than Vinnie's usual stuff, but somehow Lee was swayed.

It was probably good timing on Colletta's part more than the Charlton pages that got his foot in the door at Marvel. At this stage Dick Ayers was busy with his own books and George Roussos had cut back on his Marvel inking for higher paying DC work. Consequently, Vinnie was about the only deadline-dependable freelancer Lee could afford at the time. So almost by default, he became the magazine's new inker.

In a two-part Daredevil crossover



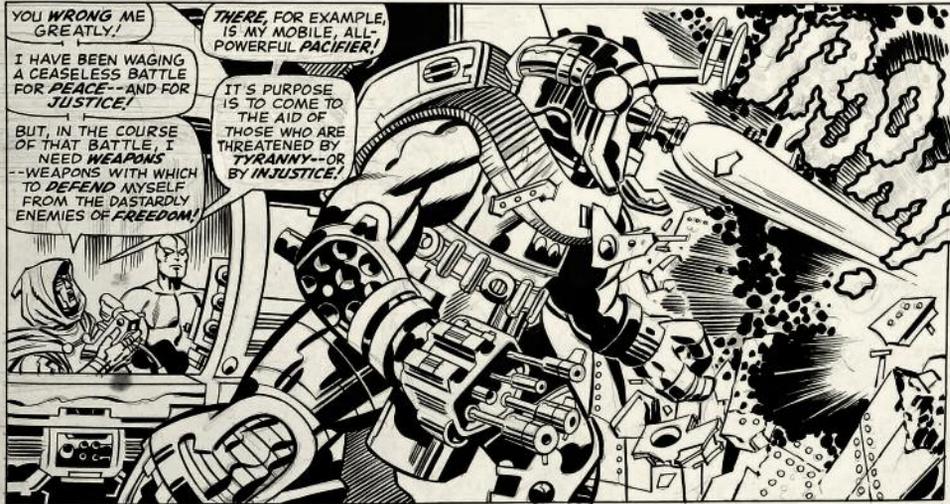
The sparse Colletta inking makes this action-filled page from *FF* #40 rather weak, but (next page, top) for one panel from *FF* Annual #3, Colletta's "romance comics" style of inking looked suitable for *Fantastic Four*.

DOC DOOM SAYS - OF COURSE -- IN MY NOBLE FIGHT FOR PEACE AND JUSTICE -- I GOTTA USE EVERY WEAPON I CAN DEVISE -- LIKE THIS MOBILE - ALL BALLISTIC -- ANTI-COMMUNITY PACIFIER -- IT PUTS DOWN RESISTANCE BY INEQUITOUS ENEMIES OF PEACE IN SIZABLE FORCE

FANTASTIC FOUR #51

6 1/4 x 9 1/4 - 151.

14



DOOM SAYS - WHAT ME? THE PEASANT DANCE IN THE STREETS AT THE MENTION OF MY NAME

WORTHLESS, INSUFFERABLE CLOD! DO YOU KNOW WHAT THIS MEANS??

SUDDENLY TECHNICIAN BUMPS INTO DOOM -- SPILLS TEST TUBES HE'S CARRYING

DOOM SLAMS HIM MURDEROUSLY AGAINST WALL -- HE SAYS YOU LOUT, DO YOU KNOW WHAT THIS MEANS? GUY SAYS -- SAYS YES -- THE ULTIMATE PUNISHMENT

FF #57 (Dec. 1966)—Stan at times follows Jack's margin notes very faithfully in writing the final dialogue.

heroes who emerged during the 1965 *Batman* bonanza.

The King reflected on this furiously competitive "year of the bat" in a 1976 interview. According to Kirby, "I created the Inhumans because the competition was coming up in the field—so I thought I would try a new concept; the family concept. So, when someone came up with one superhero, we would slap them with five. As simple as that."

There was something else: Martin Goodman didn't instruct Lee to create more heroes just to have them languish in the pages of *Fantastic Four*. Goodman had plans for Marvel to expand as far back as 1965. He felt he could convince Jack Liebowitz at DC to distribute more of his titles because Marvel's sales were soaring. Martin was determined to add more superhero titles to his line-up as soon as possible. At several points in 1966 and 1967, Goodman thought he was on the verge of convincing Independent News to expand his line. One week he'd tell Stan it was on, the next week no dice.

This unpredictable situation would eventually change the course of *Fantastic Four* quite significantly. Because the Inhumans were to be the first new characters to receive their own book, it was imperative that Jack and Stan give them high-profiles in the pages of *Fantastic Four* as a lead-in to their upcoming solo series.

Meanwhile, just when the True Believers had grown accustomed to the magazine's sprawling, multi-issue story cycles, Lee and Kirby whipped up a self-contained, single-issue story which many consider to be the high point of the entire series. "This Man, This Monster" (FF #51 June 1966) was Marvel's answer to fans who wondered

to stave off the competition. Considering that Black Bolt and the Black Panther from Kirby's unused FF #52 cover both look like Marvel versions of the Caped Crusader, there's little doubt that T'Challa and the Inhumans were a response to the new horde of

what *Fantastic Four* could possibly do for an encore after Galactus. In this flawless, unsurpassed masterpiece, Jack and Stan confound the expectations of the reader. Instead of the obvious conclusion

Fantastic Four into a triangulated saga whose prongs were Reed, Sue and Ben in New York, the Inhumans in the Great Refuge, and Johnny and Wyatt residing wherever Lockjaw, the interdimensional bulldog led them. Johnny and Wyatt's journey into the vast unknown became the unifying element between the residents of the Baxter Building and the inhabitants of the Great Refuge.

Fantastic Four's remarkable triple-storyline was an entirely new approach to comic book writing. Nothing this ambitious had ever been attempted in the medium's history. It was one thing to create all these mesmerizing new characters. It was another thing to develop them, integrate them and have them play key roles in the book's increasingly complex plot-structure. No superhero series had ever been populated by such a rich and colorful supporting cast. By this time *Fantastic Four* was soaring from one astonishing peak to another. The storyline never seemed to run out of steam.

But the bold experiment had its drawbacks. The common complaint was that the FF now seemed like bit players in their own magazine. Apart from this, it was now virtually impossible for a new reader to pick up a single issue of *Fantastic Four* and understand who all these characters were, and what they were trying to accomplish.

On occasion, these hop-scotching narratives tended to overtax the writer's organizational faculties. Stan could never remember if the huge dome that imprisoned the Inhumans was in the Himalayas or the Andes. Sometimes he called it the Great Barrier. Other times he referred to it as the Negative Zone or the Negative Barrier. Kirby was also known to drop a thread here and there (see **AT A GLANCE** FF #54). But despite the occasional slip-up, this period of FF monumentality—issues #54 through #60—seemed to synthesize all the underlying potential that *Fantastic Four* had been hinting at since day one.

FF #56 (Nov. 1966) was the first issue where the opening credits stated "Produced by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby" as opposed to "Stan Lee writer" and "Jack Kirby illustrator." This was done at Jack's prompting. He wanted it known that he had a hand in the writing process. Inexplicably, Stan still refused to give Kirby a full writing credit even though he'd given that perk to *S.H.I.E.L.D.* illustrator Jim Steranko after only four months with the company.

A puzzling disappointment: "The Torch That Was" from *FF Annual* #4 (Nov. 1966) proved to be a superb story with Kirby/Sinnott art at its zenith. But it only weighed-in at nineteen pages. With no milestone events

or Kirby pin-ups, it seemed more like "FF #56 and" than a bona fide *Fantastic Four Annual*.

The period between *FF Annual* #3 and *FF Annual* #4 had solidified the quartet's personalities once and for all. They had all mellowed with age. Reed and Sue's early squabbling gave way to a deep love and commitment now that they were man and wife. There would be no more tempestuous moments between them. The days of Reed calling the Invisible Girl "scatterbrained and emotional" (and Sue's inevitable rejoinder, "Go polish a test-tube!") had vanished into the haze of 1963. Like many married couples they were becoming a bit dull. It was yet another dose of reality.

Ben's mood swings, ranging from morose depression to explosive rage, were all but over. He seemed to have finally come to terms with being the Thing. He now played the lovable cutup, giving the series an element of comic relief. But sometimes a sense of tragedy showed through the comedy.

Johnny too had changed significantly. He was becoming an



From Kirby's files, a remnant of a photocopy of his pencil art from *FF Annual* #5 (1967), showing some basic outline inking, presumably by Frank Giacoia.

the wedding; he was physically unable to tackle the FF personally. Stan ignored this directive and subsequently the three panels on page 2 (where Victor's hand is obviously hurting) were given incompatible dialogue.

Here's a list of all the characters featured on the cover who weren't seen in the story, in no particular order: Sub-Mariner, the Wasp, Medusa, the Leader, the Hulk, Loki, the Red Skull, Rick Jones, the Wingless Wizard, the Crimson Dynamo, Dragon Man, and most inexplicably the WWII era Sgt. Fury and the Rawhide Kid.

Just as *FF Annual* #1 was the perfect swan-song to the book's early period, *FF Annual* #3, which went on sale right before *FF* #44, seemed to perfectly cap-off the mid-period Lee/Kirby *Fantastic Four*, because with *FF* #44, the "Cosmic Era" began. It's a safe bet the writers didn't plan any of this, which makes it all the more astounding.

For detail-stickers: On page 14, panel 4, Steve Ditko drew and inked the Spider-Man figure.

THE COSMIC ERA

AT A GLANCE *FF* #44 (Nov. 1965)
Colletta-cover inks
"The Gentleman's Name Is Gorgon" 20p Sinnott-inks

"The Gentleman's Name Is Gorgon" is one of the heftiest achievements in the entire checkered history of comic books. It is here that *Fantastic Four* begins to acquire real purpose.

Now that Joe Sinnott was inking the series, it's obvious the magazine was taking a quantum leap. But not just because of Sinnott's adroit brushwork. Now that Kirby had a little more time to spend on each page, his art would rise to match the wondrous new visions and vistas that were launched in this landmark issue.

Strangely enough, at first glance Gorgon seemed like a miscalculation. Coming on the heels of the series' greatest run of stories to date, a foe without much going for him besides a powerful kick seemed like a letdown. This might be the reason Dragon Man was thrown in. When you think about it, he really didn't belong in the Inhumans saga. He was a bit of a consolation prize.

As it turned out, Gorgon was just the tip of an iceberg. He held the key to a Pandora's Box of original



characters who would prove to be the most innovative group of comic stars since the FF themselves.

The prodigious originality of the Inhumans was stunningly obvious. The Royal Attillans owed very little to anything comics had ponyed-up in the past. Their roots could be traced back to ancient mythology more than anything.

With the advent of *FF* #44, the Cosmic Era is now underway. Thus begins the book's most fertile and influential period; an epoch that may never be surpassed.

Jack Kirby and Stan Lee would now take a bottom-rung art form—the comic book—and use it to create High Art; fantasy on par with the likes of Homer and Shakespeare. In doing so they would galvanize an entire generation of future writers and artists by proving that comics have limitless possibilities. Many of the characters from this period will prove to be as timeless and powerful as the Greek and Roman pantheon of mythological deities.

The comic book medium is about to transcend.

AT A GLANCE *FF* #45 (Dec. 1965)
Sinnott-cover inks
"Among Us Hide The Inhumans" 20p Sinnott-inks

Fantastic Four's new era of cosmic complexity now shifts into high gear.

A potent plethora of new characters and first-time innovations are found in this magnificent milestone issue: Johnny falls for Crystal, the FF's jet-cycle is introduced, and the electrifying Black Bolt makes his startling entrance in the final panel.

Triton appears for the first time but he's literally under wraps, wearing a concealing water-bag cloak. Only his hideous scaly arm and webbed hand is revealed. Karnak the Shatterer also makes his debut, as does Lockjaw, the dimension-hopping bulldog.



On page 18 readers are mesmerized by the first-ever "suitable for hanging" Kirby/Sinnott full-page stunner: a street-level view of Reed, Sue and Ben on their new streamlined airjet cycle. How much more excitement could the writers cram into one issue?

The story kicks-off with one of the most riveting splash-pages that Kirby ever rendered. As Dragon Man flies off with the Invisible Girl, the entire building which houses Reed, Ben and the Torch suddenly collapses from the destructive tremors of Gorgon's concrete shattering kick.

This timeless masterwork ends with even more cement shattering as Black Bolt, one of the most powerful and godlike comic book characters ever seen, rips through a brick wall and comes crashing onto the scene in the last frame.

They really *don't* make comics like this anymore.

AT A GLANCE *FF* #46 (Jan. 1966)
Giacoa/Sinnott-cover inks
"Those Who Would Destroy Us" 20p Sinnott-inks

1966 was the watershed year. This era can easily be viewed as *Fantastic Four's* Second Coming. Everything seemed fresh, everything felt new and the exciting possibilities seemed boundless.

It's hard to imagine why the writers thought this storyline would require the presence of Dragon Man with all these astonishing new characters. The Inhumans and the Seeker surely would have been intriguing enough to stand on their own. But Dragon Man is still hanging around after three months running. Perhaps Lee and Kirby felt the presence of an older, more established character would help ease the readers into all these new innovations. Or maybe Jack just felt like drawing him. Who knows how Kirby's mind worked?



At any rate, some conspicuous storyline paradoxes were about to emerge between this issue and the next. In *FF* #45 and 46, Medusa and the Royal Family were fleeing in terror from the Seeker, whose mission was to return them to the Great Refuge. In this story, Triton emphatically tells the Seeker: "You'll never send us back to the Great Refuge! We want to remain here! We want to live free!" But as soon as the Inhumans return to the Great Refuge in *FF* #47, Medusa exclaims: "We're safe at last! In the Great Refuge where we belong!" The contradiction was confusing.

In the next issue Black Bolt usurps Maximus from the throne simply by removing his crown. If that's all it took, why did the Royal Family bother to flee the Great Refuge in the first place?

But those observations come with a backward glance of time and hindsight. In 1966, the overall effect of *FF* #46 was simply mesmerizing. The new Kirby/Sinnott artwork was virtually dripping with power and panache. It pulled the reader magnetically into this Shakespearian epic of secret civilizations, doomed young lovers and a super-powered race that shunned the outside world.

The cover alone was worth the price of admission.

AT A GLANCE *FF* #47 (Feb. 1966)
Sinnott-cover inks
"Beware The Hidden Land" 20p Sinnott-inks

The Inhumans saga would prove to be long and labyrinthine.

At this point it had already spanned four issues with no end in sight, making it the most voluminous *Fantastic Four* story yet. With the Inhumans tale about to wrap up, and with the Galactus Trilogy just up ahead, the series' most fertile period is now coming to full fruition.

A GALLERY OF FF CHARACTER PROFILES!

GALACTUS

AFTER THE INHUMANS' RIVETING FIVE-PART STORY-ARC, STAN SAID THAT HE AND KIRBY SET OUT TO CREATE "THE MOST AWE-INSPIRING MENACE IMAGINABLE; SOMEONE EVEN ODIN MIGHT FEAR."

THE LEGEND OF STAN LEE TELLING JACK KIRBY TO "HAVE THE FF FIGHT GOD" IS ONE OF THE MOST CLASSIC ORIGIN STORIES IN THE HISTORY OF COMICS. IT'S ALSO LITTER NON-SENSE. TRY FINDING ANY SOURCE WHERE JACK OR STAN ACKNOWLEDGES THAT STATEMENT. WHEN PRESSED FOR SPECIFIC DETAILS ABOUT THE LUNCH CONFERENCE THAT PRODUCED THE MOST AWESOME ANTAGONIST OF THE SILVER AGE, ALL STAN COULD REMEMBER WAS, "I TOLD HIM I WANTED A CHARACTER CALLED GALACTUS AND I DESCRIBED GALACTUS TO HIM."

GALACTUS WAS A NEGATIVE, DESTRUCTIVE FORCE WHO RENDERED ENTIRE WORLDS BARREN AND DEVOID OF LIFE. THE IDEA THAT HE WOULD BE LEE OR KIRBY'S VERSION OF GOD IS PRETTY HARD TO SWALLOW. UNFORTUNATELY, THERE ARE TIMES WHEN MISGUIDED INTERPRETATIONS OF ART CAN UNDUPLY INFLUENCE THE ARTIST WHO CREATED IT. AFTER YEARS OF HEARING FANBOY ALLEGORIES AND PARABLES LINKING GALACTUS TO THE ALMIGHTY, KIRBY HIMSELF BEGAN MAKING SUCH CONNECTIONS. BE THAT AS IT MAY, IN 1966 WHEN GALACTUS WAS CREATED, NEITHER OF THE WRITERS WERE ACKNOWLEDGING ANY BIBLICAL UNDERPINNINGS IN THE CHARACTER'S GENESIS.

COMPARED TO THE APOCALYPSE-WREAKING GALACTUS, EVEN DOCTOR DOOM SEEMED LIKE JUST ANOTHER COMIC BOOK VILLAIN. HE CUT AN EXTRAORDINARILY IMPOSING FIGURE. HIS BODY ARMOR WAS STAGGERINGLY COMPLEX; MASSIVE, METALLIC AND METICULOUSLY DETAILED. IT WAS CROWNED BY THE MOST OMINOUS AND OSTENTATIOUS HIGH-TECH HEADPIECE ANYONE HAD EVER SEEN. HIS OVERALL EFFECT WAS SPELLBINDING.

NO ONE EVEN QUESTIONED WHY AN ALIEN FROM THE FARTHEST REACHES OF THE UNIVERSE WOULD HAVE THE LETTER "G" ON HIS CHEST.

THIS PILLAGER OF THE PLANETS IMMEDIATELY BECAME A FAVORITE ANTI-HERO OF THE MARVEL UNIVERSE. LIKE SO MANY OTHER LEE/KIRBY CREATIONS, GALACTUS HAS ENDURED FOR OVER 40 YEARS AND STILL SHOWS UP IN MARVEL STORYLINES.



FIRST APPEARANCE:
FF #48

INSIDE - COMING THRU

TRANSFER - GRIP IS

ALICIA AND HER

CHANGE ESCORT

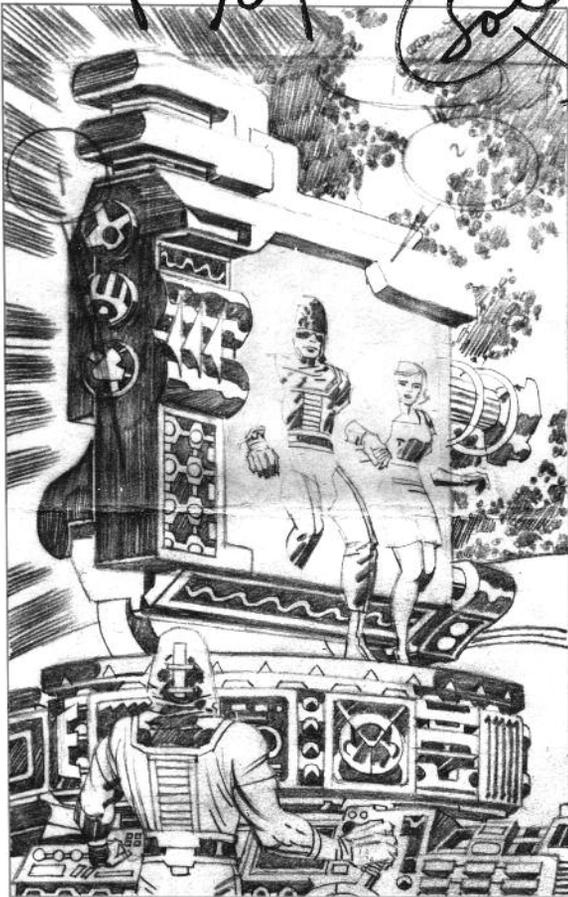
JACK for your reference Sol

ZOTA

MORLAK

SHINSKI

AWAITING THEM ARE THREE MEN - TOP SCIENTISTS WHO VANISHED FROM WORLD SCENE IN EARLY STAGES OF ATOMIC DEVELOPMENT -- WITH GLASSES -- ZOTA -- ELECTRONICS BEARD -- MORLAK -- NUCLEAR PHYSICS -- SHINSKI -- BIO-CHEMISTRY GENETICS



GIRL'S ESCORT IS HAMILTON ---- YOUNG SCIENTIST - MEDICAL GENIUS -- HE TAKES OFF PROTECTIVE HEADGEAR -- HAS BEEN AWAY FROM OUTSIDE A LONG TIME -- YEARS IN CITADEL HIM SUSCEPTIBLE TO EXPOSURE TO ORDINARY DAYLIGHT

ALICIA HEARS PLACE HUMMING WITH EQUIPMENT -- SHE FEELS ITS LIKE A BIG MECHANICAL BEE - NIKE -- MORLAK TELLS HAMILTON TO TAKE OFF 'WARTER' FROM WRIST

DECLINE

In the months following the Inhumans' return to society, there was virtually no perceptible deterioration in *Fantastic Four*. At this stage the book showed hardly any

signs of dying down or even slowing up. The Kree in *FF* #65 (Aug. 1967), and "Him," whose flesh gleamed like gold in *FF* #67 (Oct. 1967), both appeared to have exciting long-term possibilities.

FF Annual #5 (Nov. 1967) seemed to atone for everything the previous year's Annual lacked. It featured great pin-ups, guest-stars galore and a staggering surprise. After two years of marriage (i.e., long enough to avoid any nasty gossip), Sue announced she was pregnant. It was totally unexpected. It was another first for the superhero genre, another explosion of Marvel Age innovation.

But something had changed. It wasn't as if cracks were showing; it was more a vague sense of tapering off. Beginning with *FF* #68, the storylines became less ambitious, the innovations fewer. Straight-ahead battle sequences began to fill the pages of *Fantastic Four*, and themes of cosmic significance began to disappear.

The faceless android on the cover of *FF* #70 (Jan. 1968) didn't seem as mesmerizing as Klaw, or Blastaar the Living Bomb-Burst. And almost inevitably, the second Galactus tale in *FF* #74 (May 1968) wasn't nearly as awe-inspiring as the first. The magazine's once-unstoppable rate of progression was now degenerating into a state of inertia. Despite this, *Fantastic Four's* early erosion barely showed. When imbued with the combined force of Kirby and Sinnott's incomparable artwork, even the most uninspired story became a thing of rare beauty.

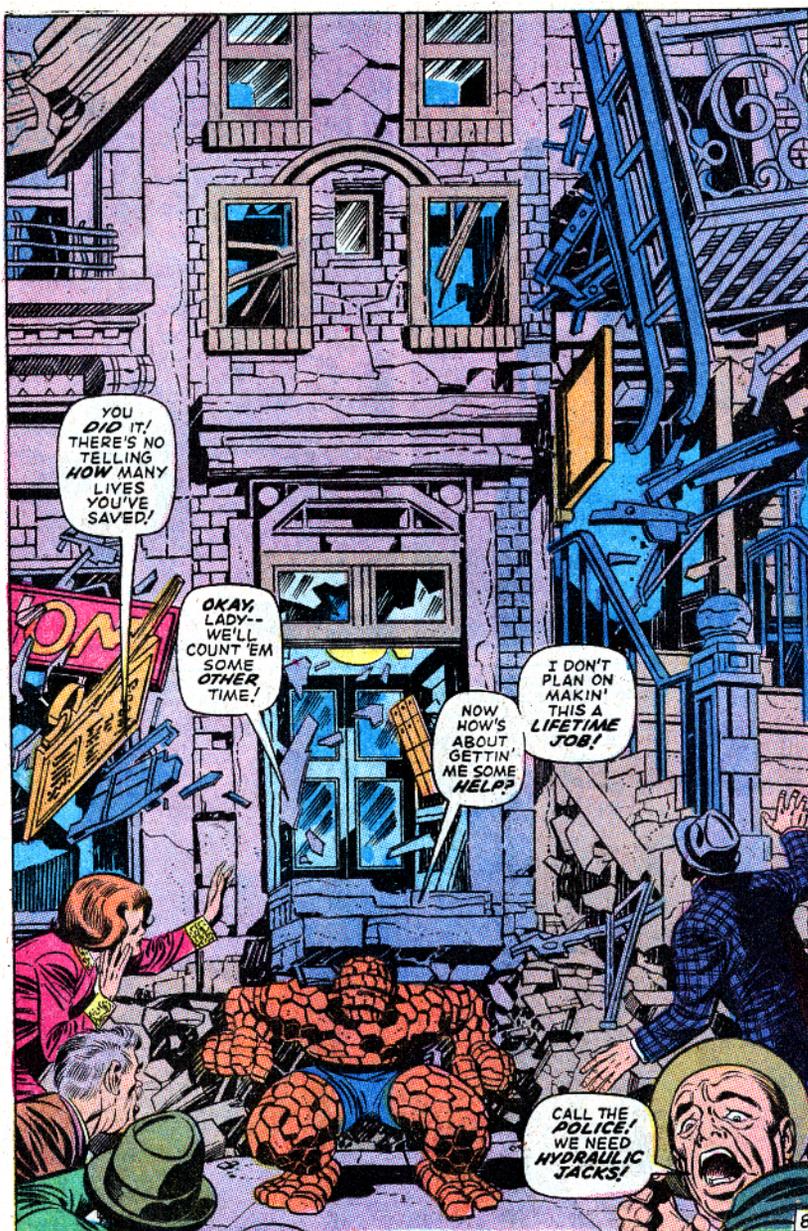
Fantastic Four's main problem at this point seems to be a reluctance on Kirby's part to contribute anything but lukewarm concepts and recycled ideas. Many historians feel that after Stan changed Jack's plot to the "Him" tale in issue #66 (see **AT A GLANCE** *FF* #66), Kirby pretty much shut down. He considered it a waste of time to create innovative, thought-provoking storylines, only to see them cannibalized and turned into clichéd comic book plots—which is basically what happened to the King's "cocoon" story.

There's also evidence that in the late 1960s Goodman directed Stan to target younger readers by focusing on simpler stories with more action and battle sequences. When the Lee/Buscema *Silver Surfer* began to decline in sales, Goodman ordered Stan to give the magazine a more action-oriented framework with more fighting and less philosophical leanings. Martin may have told Lee to use this approach across the board as well. According to Goodman, "I think when Stan developed the Marvel super-heroes, he did a very good job and he got a lot of

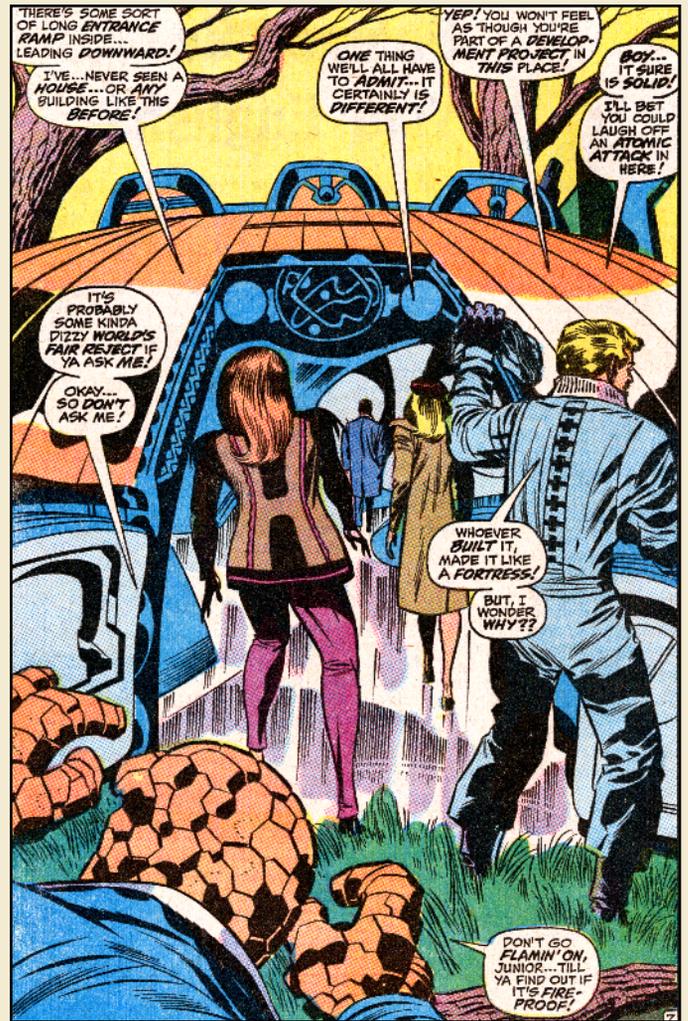
college kids reading us. They make up a segment of our readership, but when you play it to them you lose the very young kids who just can't follow the whole damn thing. We try to keep a balance. Because I read some stories sometimes and I can't even understand them. I really can't!"

Another factor that contributed to the downslide was Stan spreading himself too thin. At this point Marvel was in a state of expansion, the type of which hadn't been seen since Goodman's wild binge and splurge days.

Due to the success of the Marvel line, Independent News was finally allowing Martin to publish more titles. By January 1966, Goodman had convinced Jack Liebowitz to increase the number of comics he could publish to thirteen, including *Fantastic Four*,



Here in *FF* #95 (Feb. 1970), Kirby seems to be paying tribute to Steve Ditko's classic scene of Spider-Man overcoming a tremendous weight in *Amazing Spider-Man* #33.



Talk about superfluous! Kirby used not one, but two consecutive single-page splashes in FF #88, just to propel the characters through a doorway.

unnecessary to the plot. It's the type of "pin-up panel" that the fans had come to expect at this stage. The overall impression is that the artist is using these big drawings to finish the job faster.

And "job" is the only applicable description. At this point, what had once been a labor of love for Jack Kirby was now just a labor.

Worse was yet to come.

AT A GLANCE FF #90 (Sept. 1969) Sinnott-cover inks
"The Skrull Takes A Slave" 20p Sinnott-inks

Just when you thought our heroes had put the kibosh on the sinister subterranean Mole Man, he shocks the FF and the readers by unexpectedly leaping up and making his great escape. He then wraps up

the "House That Was" storyline by vanishing into the dread reaches of the Earth from whence he came.

Obviously, Kirby hadn't lost the knack for surprise.

At a rather late point in the tale (page 9), the new Skrull storyline which began in the previous issue is revisited. It felt like a return to 1966, where important story points were randomly injected without

regard for traditional comic book beginnings or endings.

While the stage is being set for the new Skrull saga, there's very little action in the storyline and a lot of plot points to establish. To cover all the details, Kirby employs more 9-panel grids than he's used in ages; 15 in a row on pages 10 and 11. These small, dense frames effectively set the mood in welcome contrast



LOOK OUT--THEY ARE US-- GALACTUS HAS MADE SOULLESS COUNTER-PARTS OF US

COUNTER PARTS ARE FAST- STRONG-- VICIOUS



THAT WAS HIS PURPOSE!

HE MADE SOULLESS REPLICAS OF US!

BEN! LOOK OUT! THEY'RE ATTACKING!!

YEAH-- I KINDA NOTICED!

THEY EVEN HAVE THE SAME POWERS AS WE DO!

WE'RE EACH BEING ASSAULTED BY OUR OWN COUNTER-PART!



TORCH FLAME ON -- WILL GET MY COUNTER PART FIRST



WELL, I'LL BEAT MY CARBON COPY TO THE PUNCH!

HERE'S WHERE THE REAL HUMAN TORCH STRIKES FIRST!

UNHHH! IT--DIDN'T WORK!

HE MET MY BLAST-- WITH A BOLT OF ENERGY--

LIKE NOTHING-- I EVER FELT BEFORE!

HOW CAN THE SURFER-- HOPE TO STAY HIDDEN--

FROM A POWER-- THAT CAN CREATE-- BEINGS LIKE THIS?!!

BUT EVIL TORCH DOESN'T SHOOT FLAME HE SHOOTS COSMIC FORCE IT PICKS UP UN-BALANCE'S TORCH



AND, SINCE THE TORCH ASKED--

WITH EACH PASSING SECOND I GROW SMALLER!

SOON I SHALL ATTAIN SUB-ATOMIC SIZE!



FOR, ONLY BY VANISHING INTO A DROP OF CHEMICAL FLUID--HERE ON A MICROSCOPE SLIDE IN THE LABORATORY OF REED RICHARDS--

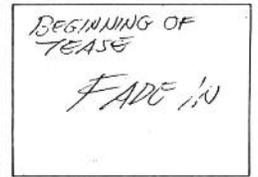
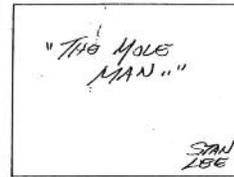
CAN I HOPE TO LOSE MYSELF IN A WORLD FAR BENEATH THE NOTICE OF ALL-SEEING GALACTUS!

IN REED'S LAB-- SURFER

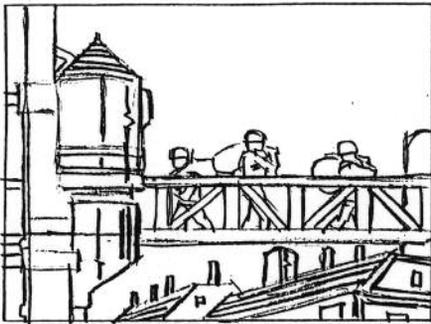
AND VANISHES INTO CHEMICAL FLUID ON SLIDE--

A NEW TAKE ON AN OLD CLASSIC

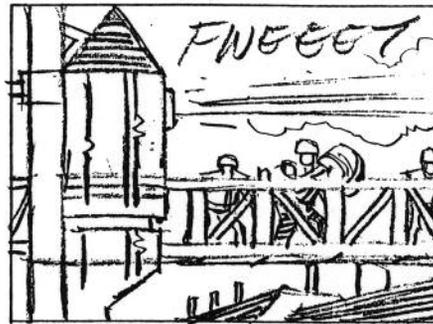
Presented here, in its entirety, are Jack Kirby's storyboards for the Depatie-Freleng *Fantastic Four* cartoon "The Mole Man" from 1978. Kirby and Lee worked together on the series, marking their final creative project together. This episode introduced the Mole Man to Saturday morning cartoon audiences, as the FF meet the villain in sort of an expanded version of the *Fantastic Four* #1 and #22 stories. For a fascinating comparison, view Jack's storyboards while watching the finished episode online at <http://youtu.be/qiEY6y0sS8o>. ★



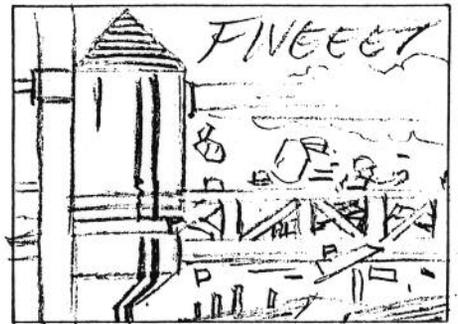
POWER PLANT SOMEWHERE IN EUROPE



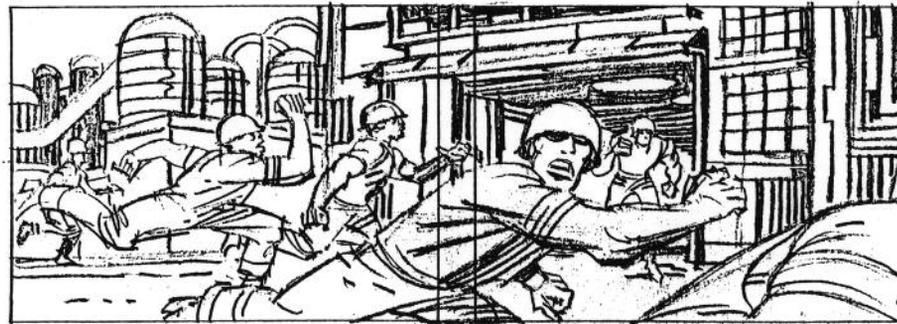
WORKERS AT NORMAL ROUTINE



SUDDENLY ALARM SOUND



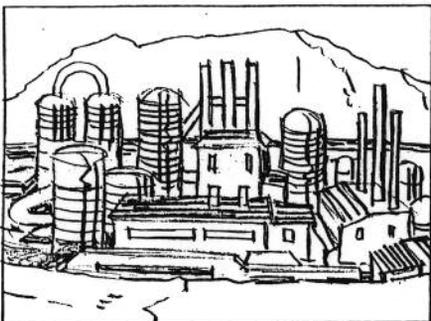
TREMORS CAUSE PANIC



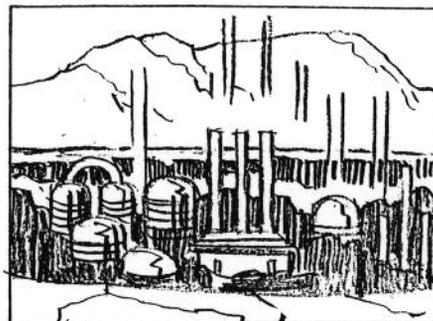
WORKERS FLEE PLANT



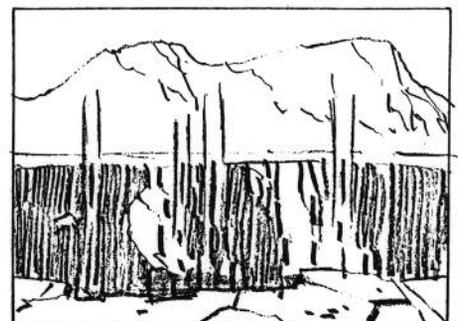
TREMORS INCREASE



PLANT BEGINS TO SINK



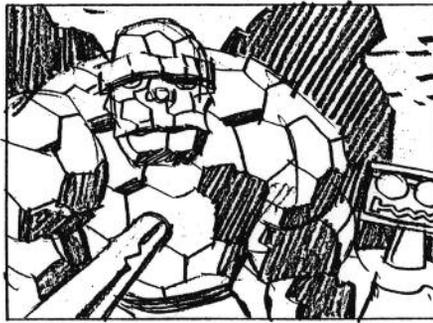
ITS DRAWN BELOW GROUND



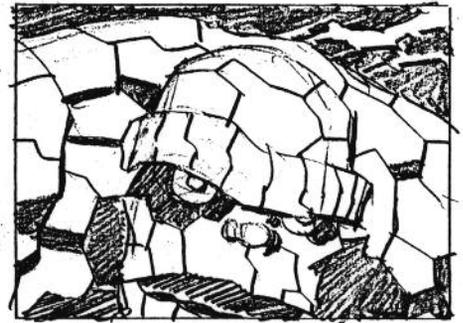
-- AND VANISHES!



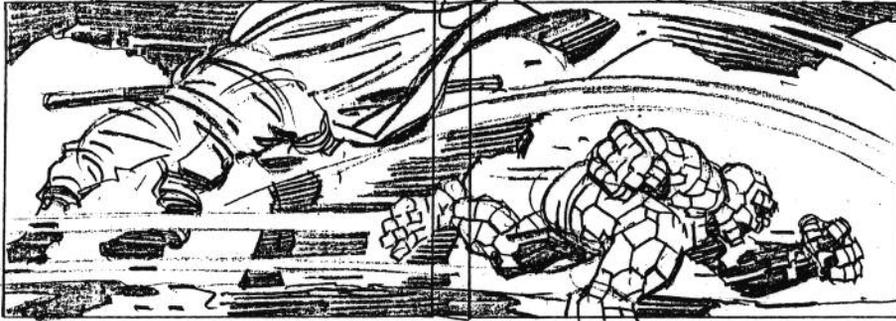
I'VE DEVELOPED A
RADAR SENSE!



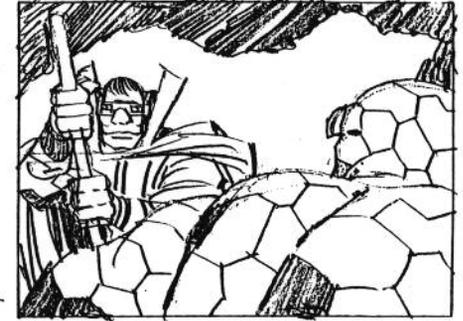
TRY TO HIT ME!



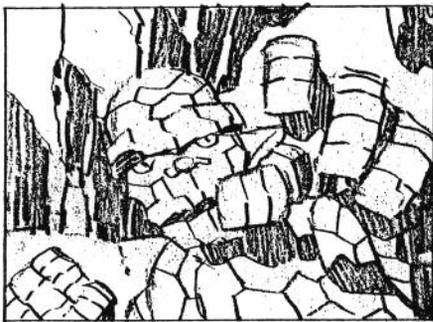
I'M WILLING!



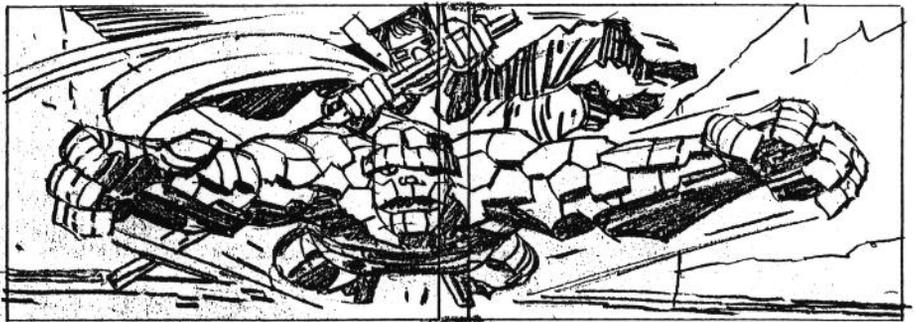
BEN SHOOTS FORWARD.



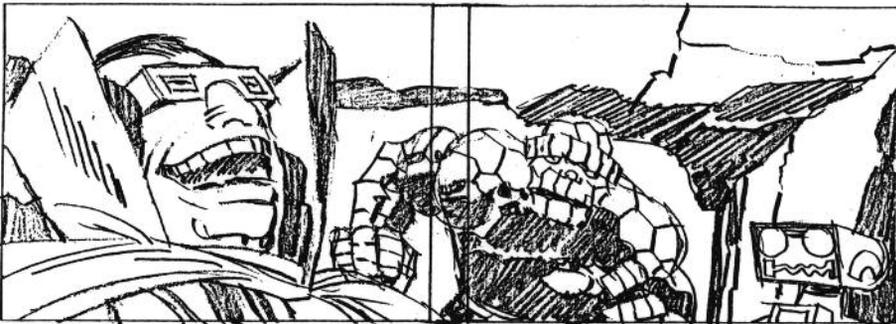
MOLE MAN DODGES HIM



I'LL TRY IT AGAIN!



MOLE MAN VAULTS OVER HIM WITH
STAFF!



MOLE MAN TAUNTS THEM



HE'LL DEMONSTRATE HIS
POWER



EACH CIRCLE IS POWER PLANT!

THIS IS A PLOT?

An examination of Lee and Kirby's *Fantastic Four* writing process



Stan and Jack plot an issue, in *FF Annual #5* (1967), with script and art by Kirby. (below) *FF #7* and 8 panels.

Mark Twain once said that all partners do at least 90% of the work.

If one looks back on the history of comic book writer/artist teams, they'll find that most of them, especially in later years, disagree on who contributed what. This goes right back to Superman's creators Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster.

Roy Thomas put it like this: "It's only later—and this happens with a lot of artists—suddenly 20 years later they start deciding they were the only person that was important in the team. This happened with Stan, and it happened with me. And generally that's bull."

From time to time over the years both Lee and Kirby were prone to make preposterous, self-aggrandizing statements regarding what they individually contributed to Marvel Comics. For example, Stan claims that he created *Sgt. Fury and his Howling Commandos* over a bet with Martin Goodman. Conversely, John Severin said that *Sgt. Fury* and his squad was an idea that Kirby had for a newspaper strip long before he went back to Atlas in 1956. Stan's occasional attempts to take credit for things he couldn't possibly have created are almost as ridiculous as Jack telling Gary Groth that Lee never co-plotted any of the 1960s Marvel comics and that Stan had "some



"MY FIRST OFFICIAL ACT WILL BE TO TEAR DOWN THE U.N., FOR IT WILL NO LONGER BE NEEDED! THE PUPPET MASTER WILL CONTROL THE DESTINY OF NATIONS!"

guy at the office" do all his dialoguing for him.

Several sources claim that Kirby plotted his post-1964 Marvel stories with almost no input from Lee, after his workload was reduced and he

settled down to concentrate on *Fantastic Four*, *Thor* and *Captain America*. This gives the impression that all the mind-boggling ideas from *Fantastic Four's* "Cosmic Era" were Kirby's alone. But like the fictional 1961 Goodman/Liebowitz golf game, this claim is a myth—a myth which can easily be disproved.

A funny thing happened on the way to this book. From the outset, a conscious decision was made to avoid any "who did what" debates regarding Jack and Stan's individual contributions to *Fantastic Four*. But with no preconceived agenda whatsoever, we kept finding more and more evidence that shows Stan was actively involved in the plotting of *Fantastic Four*, to some degree or another, during Kirby's entire run on the series.

This is not to say the magazine's storyline was always an equal division of labor. After 1965, Kirby undoubtedly came up with a greater portion of the ideas. Dr. Michael J. Vassallo has always believed that the book was 70% Jack and 30% Stan, and for years he's had to battle legions of



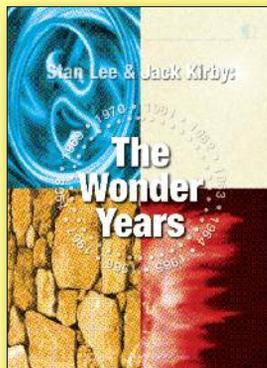
Kirby fans don't to give credit V" also the er cess a Marv comp from agree "spea

J tales i Age K outlin detect every these captio a tiny

These captions are always followed by a series of panels which describe a string of past or future events.

This repetition in the scripts is indicative of the book's early story-

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g adamantly s that Stan

he earliest Thor n of the Marvel n's detailed plot FF plots can be ssion.

patterns in nearly Almost all of floating head augmented with e sequence).