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EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
Michael Eury

PUBLISHER
John Morrow

DESIGNER
Rich Fowlks

COVER ARTIST
Nick Cardy
(Art originally appeared
on various DC Comics
covers; see editorial
for details.)

COVER COLORIST
Glenn Whitmore

COVER DESIGNER
Michael Kronenberg

PROOFREADER
Kevin Sharp

SPECIAL THANKS
Terry Austin
Mike W. Barr
Cary Bates
Kurt Busiek
Jennifer Contino
Ed Catto
DC Comics
Gerry Conway
J. M. DeMatteis
Stephen DeStefano
Robert Greenberger
Jack C. Harris
Bob Harrison
Heritage Auctions
Dan Johnson
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James Heath Lantz
Ed Lute
Elliot S! Maggin
Rex Mason
Brad Meltzer
Tom Peyer
Bob Rozakis
John Schwirian
Bryan D. Stroud
Mark Waid
John Wells

BACKISSUE
Comics' Bronze Age and Beyond!

NOT Ready-for-Primetime

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BACK seat driver

by Michael Eury

Regular readers will realize that this issue is a sequel—no, make that a companion—to *BACK ISSUE* #139, which was themed “Not-Ready-for-Primetime Marvel Heroes.”

That issue’s lineup of lower-tier Marvel characters—Doc Samson, Thundra, Stingray, Jack of Hearts, Nighthawk, Union Jack, and the like—was risky, ye ed initially thought. After all, it’s best to have a marketable character on view to ensure healthy sales.

But you liked it—you really liked it! *BI* #139 was a crowd-pleaser that garnered lots of reader response. And more than one of those messages asked for a follow-up edition of DC heroes.

So here we are.

As *BI* #139’s cover parroted a Marvel Comics layout (from *Fantastic Four* #183, June 1977), including encircled headshots bordering the *BACK ISSUE* logo, this issue’s cover replicates the look of the cover layout for a Bronze Age DC Giant (courtesy of our cover designer, Mighty Michael Kronenberg). And who better to feature as our cover artist than the infinitely talented illustrator who was DC’s chief cover artist of the early 1970s, the one and only Nick Cardy. While we lost Nick

over a decade ago, thanks to the original art archives of Heritage Auctions we have produced a “new” Cardy cover cannibalizing Nick’s cover art from the following sources:

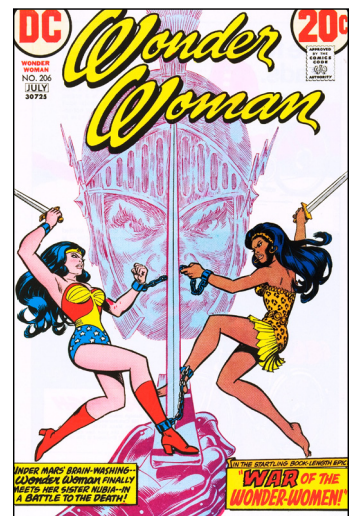
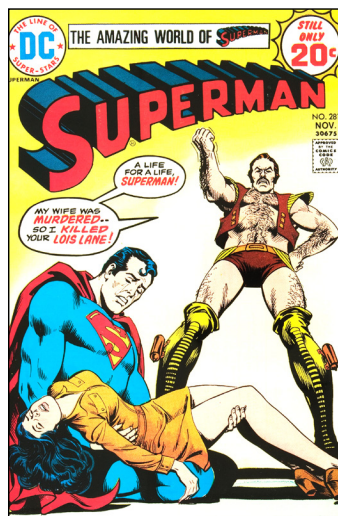
- Lilith: *Teen Titans* #33 (May–June 1971)
- Metamorpho: *The Brave and the Bold* #101 (Apr.–May 1972)
- Vartox: *Superman* #281 (Nov. 1974)
- Nubia: *Wonder Woman* #206 (June–July 1973)

Those images were colored anew for *BI* by Glenn Whitmore.

Even the headshots of Black Canary and Jimmy Olsen which grace the bottom of the cover are by Cardy, from a similar banner on the cover of *World’s Finest Comics* #225 (Sept.–Oct. 1974), during that title’s run as a 100-Page Super Spectacular.

One graphic keeps this from being a “pure” Cardy cover: the Elongated Man blurb stretching atop the *BI* logo. That’s by Murphy Anderson, and was employed on several covers of *The Flash* in the early 1970s when

the Stretchable Sleuth was a backup feature in the Fastest Man Alive’s series.



Everybody's Pal, Ralph Dibny:

THE ELONGATED MAN

by Dan Johnson



FlashBack!

There are some comic book characters that are so dynamic, they own the spotlight. From their first appearances they are destined to be stars, the kind that hold down their own book, if not series of books; headline major motion pictures and television shows; and have their faces put on all manners of merchandise from T-shirts to lunch boxes to action figures. These are your Supermans, Batmans, and Spider-Mans.

Then there are characters that hang out in the background. They rarely get their own title, and if they have a feature, it is usually a backup in an anthology anchored by one of the bigger superheroes. Also, if they get a cover, it is only because they are guest-starring in someone else's book. I have always loved characters that never make the A-list. They aren't powerhouses, but because they aren't leads, they are offered more personality and quirks and they are just so much more lovable. That is certainly how I feel about Ralph Dibny, a.k.a. the Elongated Man.

While the first-string heroes of the DC Universe were often off saving the world in epic story arcs, Ralph was content solving little mysteries that were wrapped up in about eight pages. Plus, because he rarely got dragged into the bigger, Earth-shattering events, he had time to commit to being a detective and husband. When Ralph did get involved with the greater DC Universe, he was able to make the super-stars shine a little brighter. It's not a stretch to say he was the perfect wingman for his many superhero pals. He was the guy who kept it light. The guy who was happy letting his super-friends be the main attraction. And he was the guy who you could depend on to come through in the end.

FAST FRIENDS

The Elongated Man was introduced in the pages of *The Flash* #112 (May 1960) in a story called "The Mystery of the Elongated Man!" According to comic book legend, Ralph was created because editor Julius Schwartz wanted to feature a super-stretchy character similar to Plastic Man. Schwartz was unaware that DC owned the rights to Plastic Man, along with some other Quality Comics characters

Who's Who? It's Ralph and Sue!

As any fan of the Ductile Detective will tell you, it's the love of his wife and best friend, Sue Dibny, not Gingold, that gives Ralph Dibny—the Elongated Man—his pep! Entry from *Who's Who in the DC Universe* #7 (Feb. 1991). Art by Carmine Infantino and Bart Sears.

TM & © DC Comics.

they had purchased several years earlier. DC had not yet found the right opportunity to use Plas. Had Schwartz been better informed, Plastic Man might have made his DC debut as a companion to the Scarlet Speedster. I feel it is important to note Plas here because, as you will learn, this was a rare time when Elongated Man edged out his elastic rival.

Initially there was talk of making Ralph another member of Flash's Rogues' Gallery, and his first cover appearance certainly could have led readers to think that he was a bad guy. But having him be a buddy to Flash was the right call. Ralph was the first superhero friend for Barry Allen, and the two teamed up on multiple occasions for over two decades. It was a good union. As strong as his bond with Crimson Comet was, though, Ralph was destined to meet a partner shortly after his debut that left Flash in the dust.

WEDDING BELLS FOR A SUPERHERO

In the Silver Age, it was rare for a superhero to get married. They were always too busy fighting archenemies, they never had time for the trials and tribulations of a domestic life. But Ralph broke with that by tying the knot with socialite Sue Dearborn. And talk about a fast courtship! He was hitched by his third appearance. We never got to see their wedding, although a newspaper announcement heralding their marriage appeared at the beginning of the Flash and Elongated Man team-up story "The Elongated Man's Undersea Trap," featured in *The Flash* #119 (Mar. 1961). The story showed the Dibnys on their honeymoon, which is interrupted by members of an aquatic race fishing for human slaves. With Ralph as a spouse, poor Sue learned quickly that a vacation with him would be anything but relaxing.

And readers would soon learn that as good as Ralph was on his own, with Sue by his side, he could be truly great. After her first

Elongated Man Milestones

(top left) The Scarlet Speedster meets a malleable masked man in *The Flash* #112 (Apr.–May 1960). (bottom) The wedding of Ralph and Sue Dibny, as revealed—briefly—in *Flash* #119. (top right) The "New Look" Batman was the main attraction beginning with *Detective Comics* #327 (May 1964), but that issue also debuted the Elongated Man's backup series, which would stick around in the mag for (yes, we're gonna say it) quite a stretch. All art shown penciled by Carmine Infantino and inked by Joe Giella.

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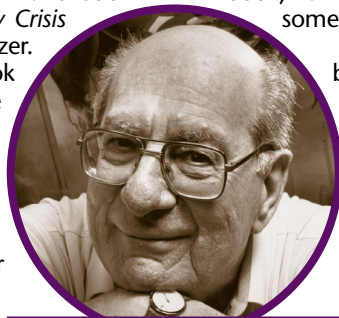


IT IS SELDOM THAT A WEDDING MAKES BANNER NEWSPAPER HEADLINES, BUT WHEN ONE OF THE COUNTRY'S MOST DISTINGUISHED CELEBRITIES MARRIES...





appearance, Sue often showed up with Ralph when he visited the Flash, refusing to be left out of the fun. The Dibnys had a partnership made in comic book heaven. And the Elongated Man had that one thing that many fanboys desired more than superpowers: a loving woman who "got us." "I always felt that Ralph and Sue loved each other," notes *Identity Crisis* writer and novelist Brad Meltzer. "Real love. Not the comic book sterile version of love where we're told 'they're in love' and there's a tepid kiss scene every few issues, along with scenes where the woman looks lovingly at the hero as he (it's usually a he) swings off/flyes off to fight another villain. Ralph and Sue had real love. Complex love. This was an honest-to-God love affair."



JULIUS SCHWARTZ

Sue was a great contrast to other girlfriends in comic books at that time, especially at DC. She wasn't scheming to expose the secret identity of Superman, like Lois Lane, and she wasn't harsh and dismissive towards the man who loved her, like Carol Ferris was to Green Lantern. "They were equals in a medium where most female characters back then were so often two-dimensional

stereotypes," notes Meltzer. "What I appreciated about Sue is that for decades, she wasn't just there in service to a man. She was working the mystery too. She had history, a backstory, an actual personality, and was well... different. And she loved someone different. Like it says in the book, vanilla is the most popular flavor, but some people prefer butter pecan."

Sue was that proverbial woman behind the great man. She was proud of Ralph, as a superhero, a detective, and just as a person. No doubt, were she a real live person, what lay ahead for the Elongated Man would have truly made her beam with pride.

BACKUP FOR BATMAN

It's hard for modern fans to believe that there was ever a time that Batman was not the most popular character in comics. Indeed, in 1964, the Dark Knight was in danger of being cancelled altogether by DC because sales of his comic and his anthology series, *Detective Comics*, were in a slump. More than that, with the sleek Silver Age reboots of Golden Age characters like Flash, Green Lantern, and Hawkman, and their science fiction up-

I Should Stick My Neck Out for You Guys?

(left) Ralph's first JLA appearance, alongside guest-star and future member Zatanna, in *Justice League of America* #51 (Feb. 1967). Cover by Infantino and Giella. (right) After bouncing by for the centennial festivities in issues #100–102, the Elongated Man is at last inducted into the JLA in issue #105 (May 1973)—although his identity is a secret on this eye-catching Dick Giordano cover!

TM & © DC Comics.

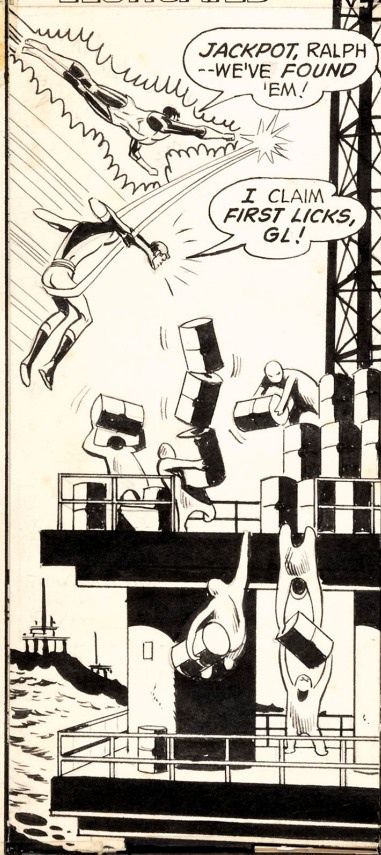
"SPECTER IN THE SHADOWS!" CHAPTER 4

THE CALIFORNIA COAST:
840 MILES OF LOW, SANDY BEACHES
AND ROCK-DIRT HEADLANDS,
DOTTED BY A HANDFUL OF NAT-
URAL ISLANDS--AND A COUPLE
OF MAN-MADE ONES.

HERE AND THERE, GREAT
OIL DRILLS PUMP A MURKY
BLACK FLUID FROM THE
DEPTHS OF THE SUN-STREAKED
SEA--THE LIFE-BLOOD OF
A NATION.

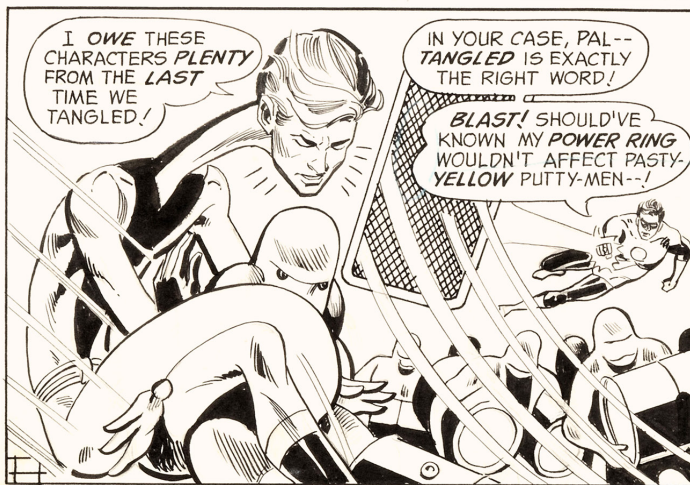
A GLEAM OF JADE-LIGHT--
AND TWO FORMS COME SLICING
THROUGH THE HUMID PACIFIC SKY...

GREEN LANTERN and The ELONGATED Man



JACKPOT, RALPH
--WE'VE FOUND
'EM!

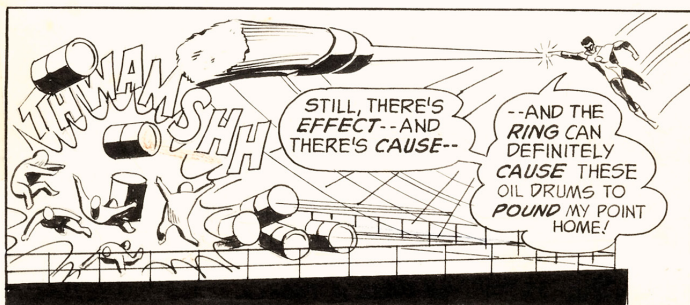
I CLAIM
FIRST LICKS,
GL!



I OWE THESE
CHARACTERS PLENTY
FROM THE LAST
TIME WE
TANGLED!

IN YOUR CASE, PAL--
TANGLED IS EXACTLY
THE RIGHT WORD!

BLAST! SHOULD'VE
KNOWN MY POWER RING
WOULDN'T AFFECT PASTY-
YELLOW PUTTY-MEN--!



STILL, THERE'S
EFFECT--AND
THERE'S CAUSE--

--AND THE
RING CAN
DEFINITELY
CAUSE THESE
OIL DRUMS TO
POUND MY POINT
HOME!



THAT
SHOULD
HOLD 'EM
FOR A FEW
SECONDS!
HOW
YOU
MAKING
OUT--?

RALPH--?
RALPH--?!

NO-OOOH!



GO
GET
HIM,
JUSTICE
LEAGUER!

Long Arm of
the League
Original Dick Dillin/
Dick Giordano art
to the title page of
the Green Lantern/
Elongated Man
chapter from
Ralph's premiere
issue as a JLAer, JLA
#105. Courtesy of
Heritage Auctions
(www.ha.com).

TM & © DC Comics.

dates, Batman was looking more and more out of step with the times. Ironically, the fact that Batman was chasing the aliens and monsters trend was part of the reason he was flagging. Science fiction was a good fit for some heroes, but it just wasn't right for Batman and Robin.

To save the feature, DC decided to take the Dynamic Duo in an all-new direction. Batman's new look premiered in *Detective Comics* #327 (May 1964), and it was spearheaded by the men who had introduced Elongated Man, editor Julius Schwartz, writer John Broome, and artist Carmine Infantino. Besides giving new life to Batman, it was decided to further change the course of *Detective Comics* with a new backup feature. Until this issue, J'onn J'onzz, the Manhunter from Mars (Martian Manhunter), had been the backup feature in this title. With the decision to focus more on terrestrial criminals, it made sense to switch out J'onn for a new supporting character. Thus, the Elongated Man got the call. Ralph even got a spot on the cover that launched the book's new direction. Granted, it was a small blurb at the bottom, but he was there nonetheless.

With this solo feature, Ralph and Sue set out on a tour of America, mixing it up with various criminals along the way. It was in *Detective Comics* that the Nick and Nora Charles/*Thin Man* dynamic of the Dibnys really began to evolve. Meanwhile, Batman and Elongated Man balanced each other out, especially given the tone of both characters. "Well, [Ralph's] not Batman," says writer Bob Rozakis. "I would describe him as dogged; he finds something odd and pursues it until he figures out what's going on. Batman wants revenge on all criminals and is deadly serious. Ralph enjoys solving a mystery and is far more playful."

It was during this time that Ralph really began to further set himself apart from other superheroes. First, he did away with having a secret identity. Then he got to switch up his superhero outfit, ditching the purple bodysuit he had sported since his days running with Flash for the iconic red suit that he is mainly known for today. Up until this point, superheroes rarely changed costumes unless it was a slight modification or if it was a one-off story. That new costume made its first appearance in *Detective Comics* #350 (Apr. 1966), in a story called "Green Lantern's Blackout" (where Ralph worked with the Emerald Crusader), as a birthday gift from Sue. Again, a good woman always wants her man to always look sharp.

JOINING THE BIG LEAGUE

Elongated Man held down the back pages of *Detective Comics* until issue #383 (Jan. 1969). After that, he would begin making sporadic appearances as a backup in the pages of *The Flash*, beginning with #206 (May 1971), and he would return to *Detective Comics* starting with #426 (Aug. 1972). During this time, Ralph also made the biggest move in his career. The Elongated Man guest-starred with the Justice League of America in two issues of their book, #100 (Aug. 1972) and 102 (Oct. 1972), part of a three-issue centennial celebration that reunited all of the JLA's members and past guest-stars (Elongated Man had previously appeared in *JLA* #51, Feb. 1967). With *JLA* #105 (May 1973), the Elongated Man became an official member of the



League. With powerhouses like Superman, Wonder Woman, and Green Lantern, it would have been easy for a character like Ralph to get lost in the shuffle. Yet he always made his presence known.

When you look at the history of the Justice League, Ralph was one of its staunchest members, from the Satellite Era to the Justice League Detroit Era to the Justice League International Era. In those runs, if there was a League meeting, there was always a place for him, his elongating neck often snaking around JLA HQ. The decision to use Ralph and Sue in *Justice League Europe* "came from Keith Giffen and our editor, Andy Helfer," says writer J. M. DeMatteis. "They put the roster of the JLE team together. But, yes, they were naturals. Our style came from character interaction, the banter, the sniping, the affection, and frustration between these characters. And Ralph and Sue had that in spades. In some ways, they were the whole team dynamic boiled down to one couple."

How Can You Top This?

The Flash #296 (Apr. 1981), guest-starring the Elongated Man, remains dear to writer Cary Bates' heart. Cover by Infantino and Giordano.

TM & © DC Comics.

At Least She Didn't Call You 'Plas'

Writer Mike W. Barr included the Elongated Man into the mix of anniversary edition *Detective Comics* #572 (Mar. 1987). Original Infantino/Al Vey art from that issue, courtesy of Heritage.

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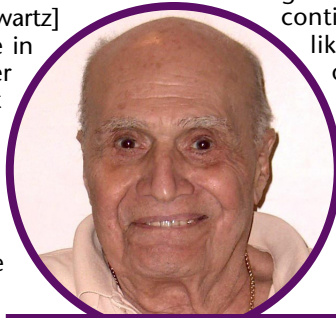
GOING WHERE NEEDED

Throughout the 1970s and the early 1980s, you never knew where the Dibnys would turn up next. The Elongated Man adventures continued to run off and on in *Detective Comics*, and Ralph even got a couple of solo adventures in *Adventure Comics* #459 (Sept.–Oct. 1978) and *Justice League of America* #182 (Sept. 1980). No matter what book he was in, his adventures kept readers entertained. “Julie [Schwartz] always wanted his writers to come in with a ‘narrative hook,’” says writer Bob Rozakis. “Something that would catch the readers’ attention and make them say, ‘Hey, what’s going on?’ This more evident in the Elongated Man stories than anywhere else: What is it that gets Ralph’s nose twitching? So, the key was to come up with something that would get Ralph’s nose

a-twitching. Then, of course, you had to have a clever explanation. Julie always said, ‘Throw out the first few solutions you come up with because those are the ones the readers will think of.’ He always wanted the one the readers would be surprised by.”

A VERY SPECIAL GUEST

Along with his time in the JLA, Ralph continued to encounter other heroes, like the Flash in his own book. Indeed, one such team-up in *The Flash* #296 marked a very special occasion. “If I had to pick a favorite Elongated Man story, it would probably be *Flash* #296, ‘The Man Who Was Cursed to the Bone,’” says writer Cary Bates, commenting on his story. “[In that story,] Flash teamed up with Ralph and Sue to solve a mystery revolving around a modern-day Elephant Man. It’s also worth mentioning this story marked the long-awaited return of Carmine Infantino to the pages of *The Flash* after a 14-year absence.”



CARMINE INFANTINO

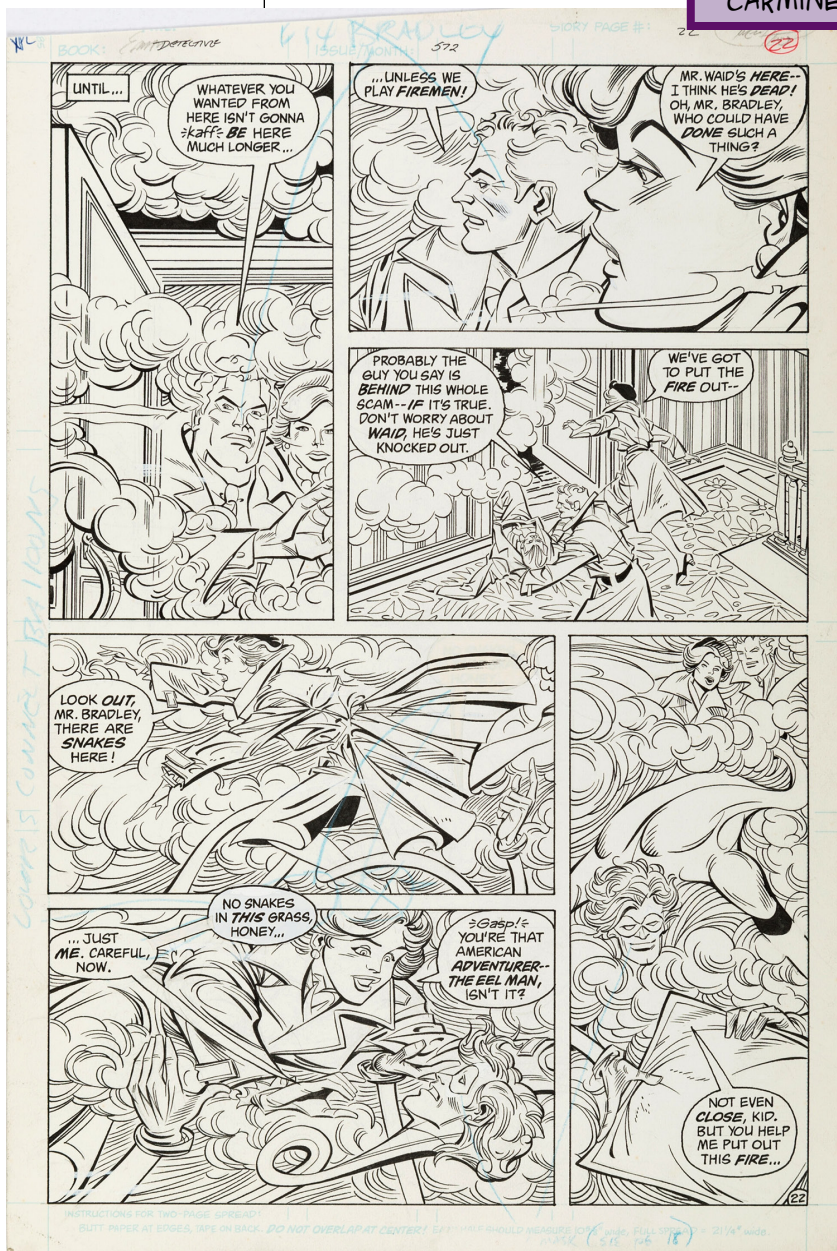
© Luigi Novi/
Wikimedia Commons.

Ralph also made a few appearances in *DC Comics Presents*, teaming up with Superman in issue #21 (May 1980); Superman and Robin in #58 (June 1983); and Superman, Jimmy Olsen as Elastic Lad, and Plastic Man in issue #93 (May 1986).

The Elongated Man teamed up only once with Batman in the book that seems like their partnership should have been a no-brainer, *The Brave and Bold*, in issue #177 (Aug. 1981). “Dick Giordano had become editor of *Brave and the Bold*, so I pitched him a Batman/Elongated Man team-up,” says the writer of that singular issue, Mike W. Barr. “[It was] something the previous editor wasn’t interested in. With two of the best detectives in the DC Universe together, the story had to be a murder mystery. I was a little surprised Dick went for the yarn, because the two issues of *Detective Batman* and Elongated Man teamed up in had not sold well—which is why I think Paul [Levitz, the previous *B&B* editor] passed on the team-up. But that was over 15 years ago, and Dick liked to take chances.” If there was any reason to keep Elongated Man out of *Brave and the Bold*, it wasn’t because of his stretching powers since Plastic Man teamed up with Batman four times in *B&B*! In later decades, the Elongated Man would find himself running second to Plastic Man.

WORLD’S GREATEST DETECTIVES

Even though the Elongated Man teamed only once with Batman in *The Brave and the Bold*, Mike W. Barr saw to it that the pair joined forces with other sleuths to celebrate a huge milestone for DC Comics. “Mark Waid, then fan, now an extremely important DC writer, wrote in a LOC that the 50th anniversary issue of *Detective Comics* was coming up,” says Barr. “This had flown right past our radar, so I immediately notified editor Denny O’Neil and the appropriate DC higher-ups who promptly okayed a special anniversary-sized issue. This is why one of the story’s supporting characters is named ‘Waid.’”





The issue in question was *Detective Comics* #572 (Mar. 1987). In celebration of the milestone for the flagship title of DC Comics, Barr set out to create a story worthy of a comic about detectives. “I had read an article about *The Doomsday Book*,” says Barr. “[It was] an existing tome and an important book in British history, and decided to use that as the basis for the story. The selected detective characters were used because each represents a different facet of the fictional detective as represented in popular fiction: Batman is the pulp detective, Slam Bradley is the hard-boiled detective, The Elongated Man is the superhero, detective and Sherlock Holmes is the Detective. The Elongated Man’s solo chapter of the tale was penciled by Carmine Infantino, the artist who created the visual for the character. I got a big kick out of that.”

INTO THE 1990s AND 2000s

Ralph seemed to be riding high as the 1990s began. He was often at the forefront of *Justice League Europe* and the *Justice League International* spinoff book, *Justice League Quarterly*. He even got his own four-issue miniseries (Jan.–Apr. 1992). But as the JLI era wound down, Ralph found himself on the outside. When Grant Morrison launched *JLA* in 1997 and needed a

stretchy hero for comedy relief, it was Plastic Man that was chosen to join the team.

There were two standout miniseries reuniting the team behind the original *Justice League International* run, plotter and layout artist Keith Giffen, dialogue scribe J. M. DeMatteis, and penciller Kevin Maguire. The first, *Formerly Known as the Justice League*, ran for six issues (Sept. 2003–Feb. 2004) and the sequel, *I Can’t Believe It’s Not the Justice League*, ran in *JLA Classified* #4–9 (Apr.–Sept. 2005). These miniseries were callbacks to the fun JLI days and reunited Ralph and Sue with JLAers Blue Beetle, Booster Gold, Fire, and Guy Gardner. The second miniseries even hinted at a new role for Ralph through a running gag: fatherhood. “[Sue’s] pregnancy came about through the dialogue,” says DeMatteis. “It wasn’t in Keith’s plot. That was the fun of those characters: Keith would set up these wonderful situations in the plot, then I’d get them talking and elements would emerge via conversation that surprised even me. So Ralph started jumping to conclusions about Sue’s pregnancy and it became a running gag. My idea was that she was indeed pregnant, but the powers that be told me not to do that.”

As it turned out, a child would be in the cards for Ralph and Sue, but events took a very dark turn.

Super Friends

Ralph—along with JLAers Aquaman, Martian Manhunter, and Zatanna—anchored the World’s Greatest Superheroes during their “Justice League Detroit” phase (see *BI* #58) and served as mentors to a crop of new members.

TM & © DC Comics.

Dibny in Crisis
 Brad Meltzer's best-selling *Identity Crisis* miniseries began a dark trajectory for one of DC's greatest couples. Cover to issue #1 (Aug. 2004), by Michael Turner and Aspen MLT.

TM & © DC Comics.

NOT ALL LOVE STORIES HAVE HAPPY ENDINGS

Ralph Dibny was a lovable goofball. There were no dark days where he was concerned, a new mystery to solve just a twitch of the nose away.

But then came *Identity Crisis*. The 2004 miniseries opens with the shocking murder of Sue Dibny, who readers learned was pregnant at the time of her death. For the sweetest guy in the DC Universe to be dealt such a blow, it was a "kicking the puppy" moment, a shock felt by the heroes and the fans—the effect that *Identity Crisis* writer Brad Meltzer wanted.

"When DC first approached me, they said I could kill a 'big hero,'" says the celebrated novelist courted to write a comic book. "They gave me a full death list with big names on it. Massive

names of heroes you care about. But that seemed so short-sighted to me. As a reader, I knew that whoever I killed, they'd be back again in a year or two, and the consequences would be meaningless. But when someone mentioned Sue on the list, I remember thinking: 'Why would anyone kill Sue Dibny?' It made no sense to me. In fact, I said no to the story. I walked away (and I forget if this was Dan [DiDio] or Mike [Carlin]), but one of them said, 'Just think on it for a bit.'



BRAD MELTZER

© Luigi Novi.

"I went away and couldn't stop thinking about it," Meltzer admits. "And then I realized that if someone killed Sue, it would make every other hero in the DCU hug their loved one more than ever. That was it. This wouldn't be just a story about death, but it'd be a story about love. The whole core of the story comes from the love and the real true feelings that these characters have for each other. A month later, I came back with the full pitch."

SPIRITED NEW BEGINNINGS

The events of *Identity Crisis*, and 52, the series that spun out of it, are difficult for many long-time DC fans like me to stomach.

What Ralph Dibny was put through was just too brutal for my tastes, as the death of Sue and Ralph's efforts to resurrect her broke the once-cheerful Elongated Man. Readers eventually saw Ralph's own death and his reunion with Sue in the afterlife as ghost detectives. At a time when grim and dark was DC's apparently prime directive, this actually worked for me. As an old school fan, I like the idea of these two having all eternity ahead of them with mysteries aplenty to be solved.

Is that ending a bit goofy? Maybe even a bit absurd?

It sure the heck is. But then, so was Ralph.

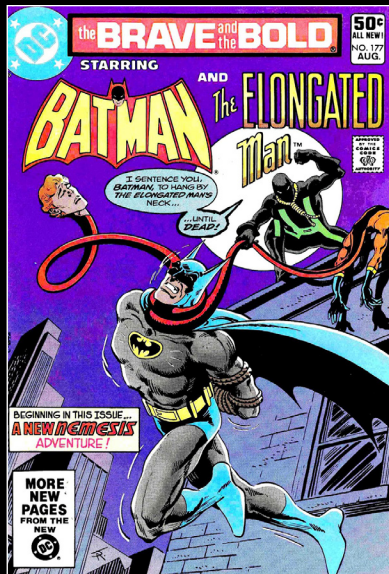
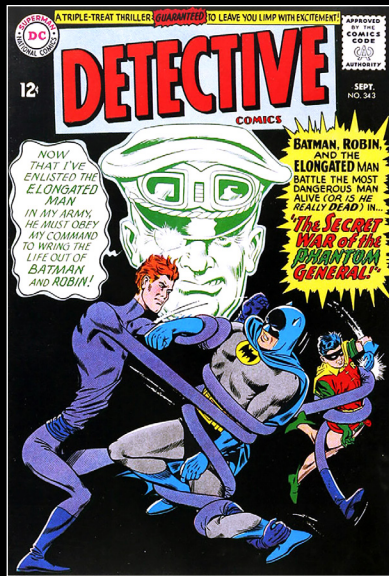
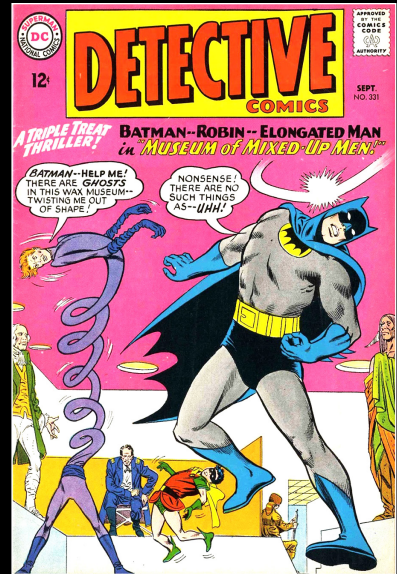
This article is dedicated to the memory of Keith Giffen, who was also goofy and absurd in all the best possible ways. Thank you for showing me it was okay to laugh at superheroes.

[Editor's note: For a deeper dive into Ralph and Sue Dibny's marriage and shared adventures, see our "Superhero Romances" issue, BACK ISSUE #123.]

A longtime contributor to BACK ISSUE, comics writer DAN JOHNSON is a co-founder, editor, and writer for Empire Comics Lab (empirecomicslab.com) and Old School Comics. Dan has written for Antarctic Press, Campfire Graphic Novels, Golden Kid Comics, InDELLible Comics, and ACP Comics, and is a gag writer for the Dennis the Menace comic strip.



ELONGATED MAN COVER GALLERY



end

Motorcycles represented a form of freedom that proved very appealing in the latter years of the turbulent 1960s. In the spring of 1969, a pair of motorcycle-centric pop culture pieces arrived quickly. First, *Then Came Bronson*, which aired March 24 on NBC, starred Michael Parks as a journalist who takes to the road, seeking the meaning of life. The telefilm earned high enough ratings and critical acclaim to earn it a berth on the 1969–1970 television schedule. And as audiences awaited those weekly installments, they went to the theaters on July 14 to see *Easy Rider*.

The latter, a road story written by Peter Fonda, Dennis Hopper, and Terry Southern, produced by Fonda, and directed by Hopper, starred Fonda and Hopper. While Bronson was seeking enlightenment, this pair sought adventure as they headed south, carrying the proceeds of a drug deal.

Both were seen as attempts to understand the counterculture movement sweeping the nation, as a generational divide was fighting one another for the nation's soul. The beatniks of the 1950s became the hippies of the 1960s, and they wanted more freedom, to love who they wanted, to ditch their bras, enjoy free love, and more than a bit of marijuana. This put them in opposition to the conformist generation of the 1950s, who vehemently opposed such moral "looseness" and disrespect for the government, with the increasingly unpopular Vietnam War as the event over which they battled.

The comic books of this era were slow to embrace some of the ideals found on the screen, large and small. In fact, they largely avoided controversy for another year or so, but interestingly, Mike Sekowsky took the first stab.

Sekowsky (1923–1989) started in the late 1940s, drawing features like "Silly Seal" and more for Timely (later Atlas, ultimately Marvel). The cutbacks at Atlas led him to DC Comics, where he was caught in editor Julie Schwartz's orbit drawing Western and science fiction stories before landing the *Justice League of America*, which he drew for 66 consecutive issues.

As he came off that book, he went to work for Jack Miller, helping the editor revamp *Wonder Woman*. However, Miller was fired at a time when incoming editorial director Carmine Infantino was shaking



MIKE SEKOWSKY

© DC Comics.

Hot Wheels

You can't run from your past, Jason Grant—especially when it's haunting you in the form of background floating heads! Writer/artist Mike Sekowsky's short ride, "Jason's Quest," begins here, in *Showcase* #88 (Feb. 1970).

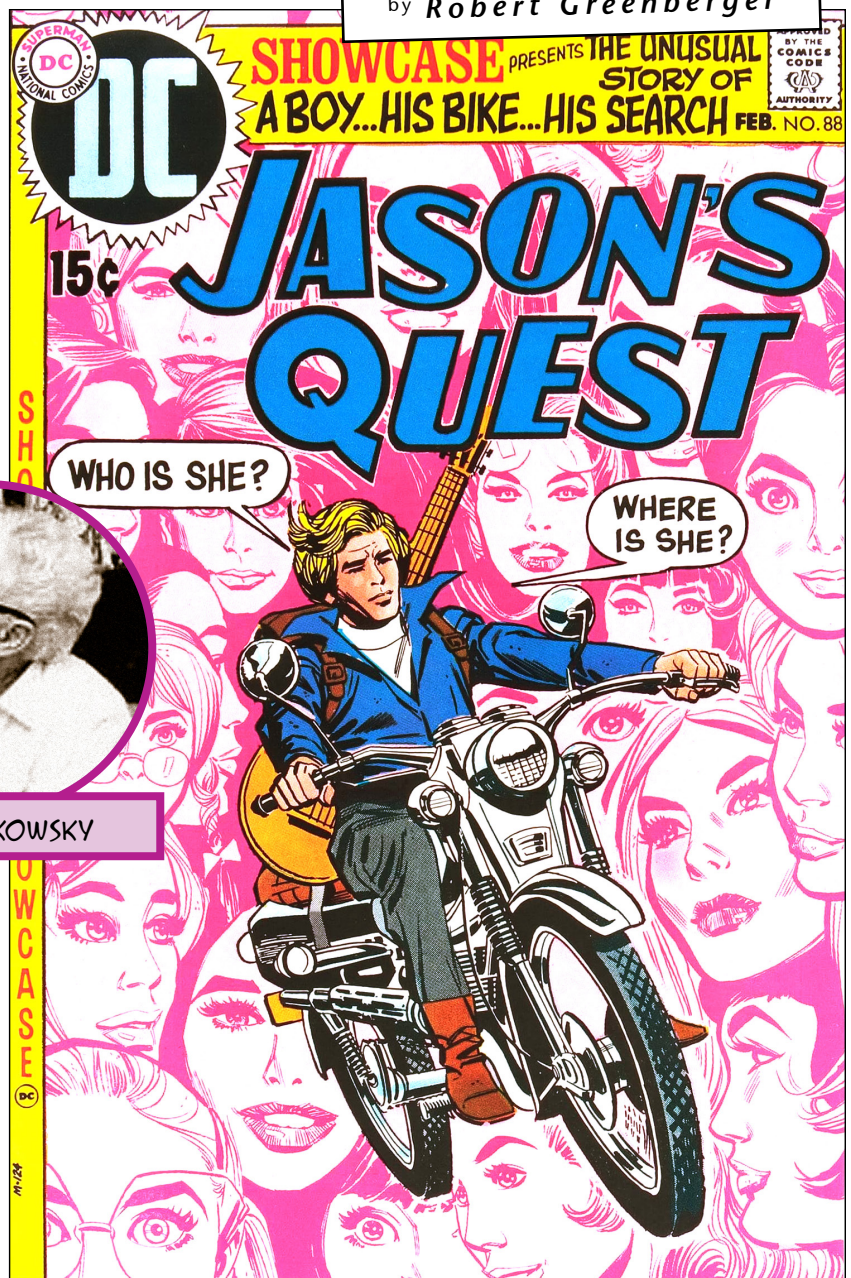
Cover inks by Dick Giordano.

TM & © DC Comics.

JASON'S QUEST

A BOY, A MOTORCYCLE, AND A MISFIRE

by Robert Greenberger





up DC's Editorial Department. Suddenly, Sekowsky became an editor, and his work on the Amazon Princess, and to a lesser degree on *Metal Men*, gave him a lot of leeway with Infantino.

Around the time *Bronson* aired, Sekowsky pitched a three-issue tryout for *Showcase*. As it turns out, Sekowsky holds the record for drawing the most issues of that experimental title, preceding this with the Adam Strange (#17-19), a rare Rip Hunter story (#21), B'Wana Beast (#66-67), the Maniaks (#68-69, 71), Jason's Quest (#88-90), and Manhunter 2070 (#91-93).

Readers got the first hint of the series with an eye-catching house ad featuring Sekowsky's art and Gaspar Saladino's distinctive letter. Award-winning letterer Todd Klein noted, "He probably designed the ad with his art surrounded by Saladino lettering running in all four directions. The

ad is memorable, and it gave Gaspar a chance to use his upper and lower case style more than usual, but the feature went no further."

The first issue, *Showcase* #88 (Feb. 1970), arrived the previous December, as America was caught up in this pop culture phenomenon. He grew more fashion conscious, as seen with Wonder Woman, and despite being 47, his work was skewing towards a younger look than a lot of the line had.

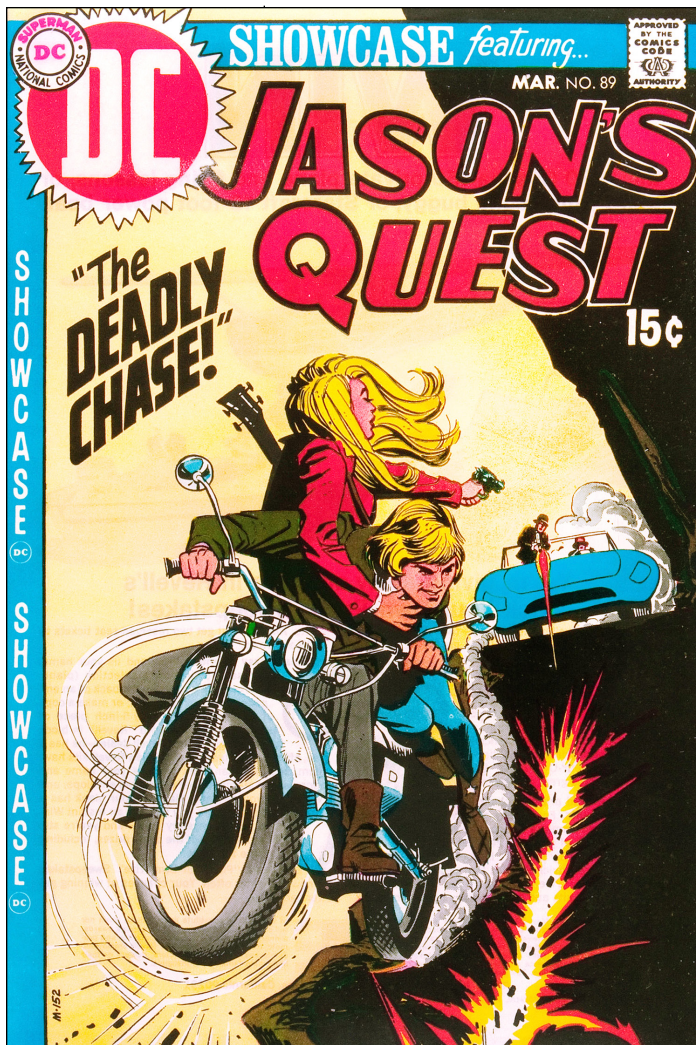
The premise was pretty basic: a boy, his bike, and his search. The story begins when Jason Davis' father is mortally wounded in a shooting. Jason then learns his real name is Jason Grant, Jr., and a man called Tuborg killed his real father when Jason was an infant. As Tuborg ransacked the house to find Grant's latest invention, the manservant, Davis, protected the baby, sending the twin sister Geraldine into hiding with the housekeeper.



Born to Be Wild

(left) Michael Parks starred in NBC's *Then Came Bronson* (1969-1970), whose short TV run spawned this theatrical repackaging of select episodes. (right) Peter Fonda and Dennis Hopper found that freedom has a price in 1969's counter-culture classic, *Easy Rider*, promoted here in an Australian daybill poster. Both, courtesy of Heritage Auctions (www.ha.com).

Then Came Bronson © MGM Television.
Easy Rider © Columbia Pictures.



The Quest Continues
 Sekowsky and Giordano's Jason's Quest covers for *Showcase* #89 (Mar. 1970) and 90 were certainly ominous and eye-catching. Too bad most readers weren't paying attention.

TM & © DC Comics.

Over the next 19 years, Davis trained his adopted son, preparing him for the inevitable confrontation with Tuborg, who was still, inexplicably, on the hunt. And then came the fatal shooting.

With his dying breath, Davis said, "Your sister... somehow your father secreted on her person evidence that will end Tuborg and his evil empire. In the fireplace at home... the box your father gave me—it has your papers... money... and—and... I'm... I'm... sor—"

It was then revealed Tuborg had bugged the hospital room, so it became a race. Jason and Tuborg in search of Geraldine and closure. While the inspiration came from America's open highways and vistas, this story was set in Europe, which brought a vastly different visual aesthetic. Sekowsky seemed to intentionally avoid the political and cultural changes sweeping America. Still, it had its moments, from the forward-looking use of mobile phone technology to chance encounters with interesting people, such as the pistol-packing Billie Jo from "Lo'isiana."

Over the course of the three issues, Jason sought Geraldine, nicknamed GeeGee, and it wasn't until the final chapter that he could explain to the terrified woman what he wanted. Tuborg had men everywhere so nowhere was safe, keeping them on the road. Along the way, Jason finds his sister, once intentionally, the



second time via a fantastic coincidence. In neither case does GeeGee feel any sense of kinship with the somewhat-crazed young man.

When they were forced to split up, he made her promise to meet him the following day; convinced Jason was dangerous, GeeGee was determined to avoid him. The series closed with the quest unfulfilled.

Sekowsky tapped Dick Giordano for the covers and the first issue's inks, while Jack Abel was pressed into service for the final two issues, which was a shame. The Sekowsky/Giordano pairing brought out the best in the penciler's linework. As artist Joe Giella once described it: "Mike's pencils were dark... He had a very deliberate, strong style. Good control over the pencil, everything there. The problem was the drawing wasn't as accurate as one would want. His proportions would be a little off. A good inker could fix that, no problem. But boy, was he a layout man; that's where he really excelled. He could layout a story and utilize a panel to its fullest. Wouldn't fake backgrounds, not at all. Terrific designer, great layout man."

The story arrived well after *Showcase* ceased being a laboratory and, a year earlier, had been used as a launching pad (Anthro, Bat Lash, the Creeper, the Hawk and the Dove) more than a testing ground. Interestingly, the final issue did contain a three-page preview for the more

No Rest

Our two-wheeled hero, Jason, and gal pal GeeGee rely on foot power to flee on this lively Sekowsky original art page from the saga's third and final chapter, in *Showcase* #90 (May 1970).

Inks by Frank Giacoia. Courtesy of Heritage.

TM & © DC Comics.

interesting-looking Manhunter 2070 (for more on that, see *BACK ISSUE* #120).

In listing this at *13th Dimension.com* in a Sekowsky tribute, Paul Kupperberg wrote, "Even at the time, I wondered if DC really expected this to take off into its own ongoing title. But this was at the very tail end of an era when comics were published in all genres; Charlton Comics still had a healthy line of hot rod and racing comics, but primetime melodrama on two wheels didn't catch on with readers of the time. I liked it, but I had already developed a taste for strange concepts and interesting loser characters. I was always willing to give a Sekowsky story a look."

Jason and his quest were forgotten after a one-panel cameo in *Showcase* #100. In the meantime, the Star-Spangled Avenger took the *Easy Rider* lessons closer to heart, buying a motorcycle and riding across the country, starting with *Captain America* #128 (Aug. 1970), out just months after this story.

Everyone didn't forget it. Kurt Busiek actually pitched a Jason's Quest revival to editor Alan Gold when he began writing for DC in the early 1980s. As Kurt explains to *BACK ISSUE*, "All I can remember about my pitch was that it wrapped up the story in Australia, I think, and I had Jason's sister working for an actress or photographer named, I think, Friday Collins, as a nod to Friday Foster, and Dick [Giordano, then DC's Executive Editor] caught the reference and laughed. And that since Sekowsky had gotten one or two villain names from European beers, I named the ones I added that way too, and Dick was also amused by that."

"And in later years, I came up with an expansion/reworking of the whole idea that could have been a 60-issue Vertigo series or something and was so transformative (it involved magic and gods and serial reincarnation and more) that it could make an entirely unrelated series if I could only come up with a better title."

Similarly, when James Robinson briefly wrote *Wonder Woman* and introduced her twin brother Jason, he told Newsarama after his final appearance in issue #50, "It definitely has an element of finality to it, but Jason can be there for other writers, or indeed me, if I ever got to write him again. I do enjoy writing him. I have this vague fantasy of one day doing a story and calling the comic Jason's Quest, which is an old DC title."

Presumably, Jason is out there somewhere and an enterprising writer could weave him into the current DCU fabric, motorcycle and all.

ROBERT GREENBERGER is an industry veteran, having worked at DC Comics, Marvel Comics, Starlog Press, ComicMix, Famous Monsters of Filmland, and other places. He continues to write fiction and nonfiction when he's not teaching high school English or a course at Maryland Institute College of Art.



Ride, Captain, Ride

Marvel's Star-Spangled Sentinel hopped aboard a bike for a series of adventures beginning with *Captain America* #128 (Aug. 1970)—with other Bronze Age bikers like Robin, Wildcat, Black Canary, Ghost Rider, and more hot on his tracks. Cover by Marie Severin and Joe Sinnott.

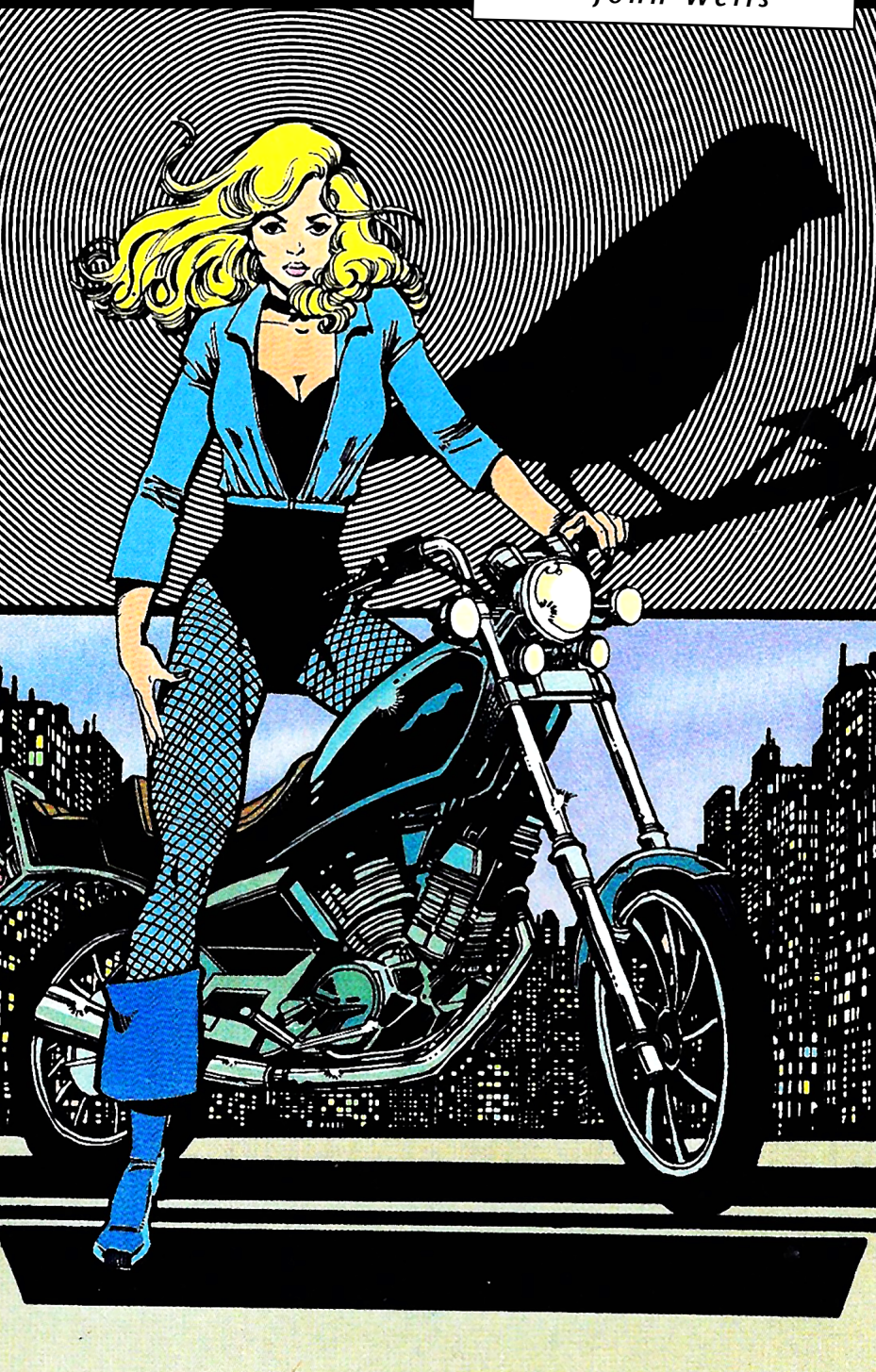
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TWOMORROWS AD PAGE

ERRATIC FIGHT PATTERNS: BLACK Canary IN THE BRONZE AGE

by John Wells



FlashBack!

Few DC characters frustrated me as a fan quite as much as the Black Canary. Although she lacked the name recognition of Wonder Woman, Supergirl, and Batgirl, the heroine in blue and black was in the top tier of DC heroines during the 1970s thanks to her status in the Justice League. For the first half of the decade, she was literally the only woman on the team. And yet...

BLACK CANARY OF TWO WORLDS

But let's back up for a moment. Black Canary was created in 1947 by Robert Kanigher and Carmine Infantino as a frenemy of Johnny Thunder, a long-running comical adventurer whose series wasn't long for the world. After co-starring in *Flash Comics* #86–88, 90, and 91, the Veronica Lake lookalike in a bolero jacket took the feature for herself. Issue #92 revealed that the blonde heroine wore a wig and was secretly a raven-haired florist named Dinah Drake. In both identities, she contended with a cocky private eye named Larry Lance in her own series while taking Johnny's place as a member of the Justice Society of America in *All-Star Comics*.

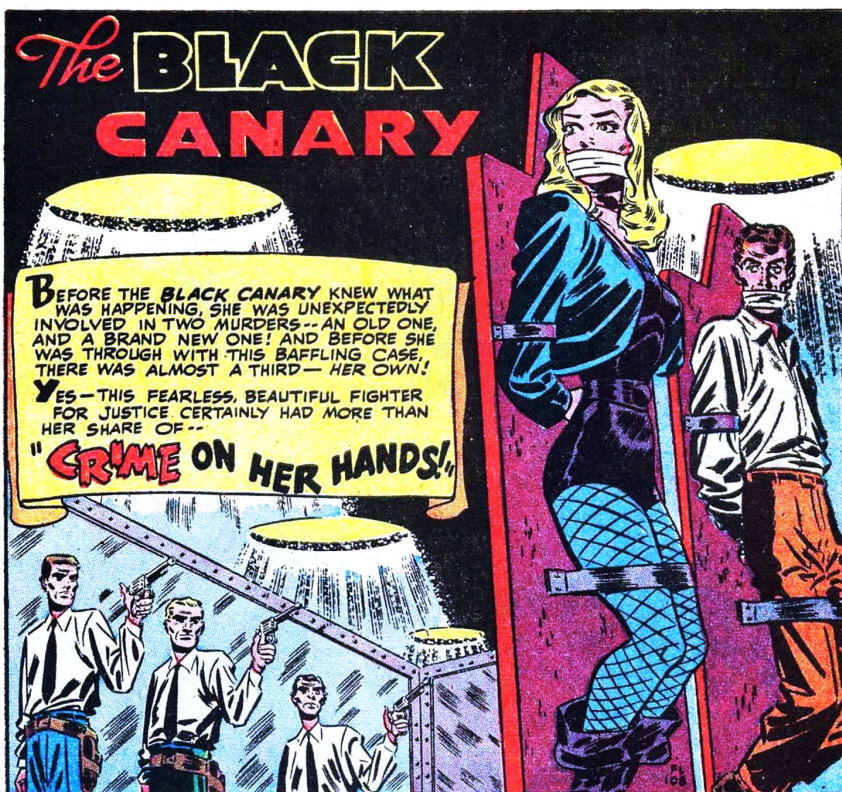
Diminishing returns on superhero comics brought an end to *Flash Comics* in 1948 with #104 and the JSA in late 1950's *All-Star Comics* #57, but Black Canary's story was far from over. She returned in an epic 1963 JLA/JSA crossover (*Justice League of America* #21–22) and was awarded a two-issue series tryout—co-starring with Starman—in 1965 (*The Brave and the Bold* #61–62). Scripted by Gardner Fox and impeccably drawn by Murphy Anderson, the latter showed the older Black Canary still in fine form, her martial arts skills well-honed and supplemented with a few gimmicks. Happily married to Larry Lance, she still operated a floral shop in Park City.

As the Silver Age shifted into Bronze, those happy times came to an end. At the climax of an encounter with a cosmic entity called Aquarius, Larry sacrificed his life to save Dinah (1969's *Justice League of America* #74). In a state of shock, the grieving widow couldn't bear to live on a world that reminded her of her husband. For those who came in late, this was not an insurmountable problem. Black Canary and the Justice Society lived on the parallel world of Earth-Two, so she simply asked if she could relocate to Earth-One and join the Justice League.

Then Came Canary

Black Canary—one-time Justice Society member relocated to Earth-One's Justice League—as rendered by the unmatched George Pérez for DC's 1984 *Justice League of America* postcard set. Unless otherwise noted, art scans illustrating this article are courtesy of John Wells.

TM & © DC Comics.



The reason behind this plot contrivance extended back to recent events in *Wonder Woman*, where its title character had lost her powers and now fought crime with newly developed martial arts skills [see *BACK ISSUE* #17—*ed.*]. Judging herself unworthy of League membership, Diana Prince resigned in *JLA* #69. Determined to avoid the book becoming strictly a boys club, editor Julius Schwartz and writer Denny O’Neil cast about for a new token female on the roster, and Black Canary won (much to Larry Lance’s regret).

The problem with Black Canary was that she had exactly the same power set as *Wonder Woman* currently did. Hawkman argued that very point in issue #75, noting that judo was not going to help against some of the JLA’s high-powered adversaries. Exasperated over the debate, Black Canary felt a “singing” well up in her throat and she involuntarily unleashed a sonic cry that bowled over her teammates. No one knew exactly why it happened—an initial theory blamed it on proximity to the cosmic Aquarius—but that settled the matter. The League’s newest member now had a superpower.

She also had the glimmer of a new boyfriend in the form of fellow member Oliver (Green Arrow) Queen. On the heels of Neal Adams’ recent visual makeover of the hero in *The Brave and the Bold* #85, O’Neil used part of *JLA* #75 to strip the former millionaire of his fortune and reestablish him as a champion of the common man and outspoken critic of the rich and powerful. Despite his advances, Black Canary resisted taking things further, telling him flatly in issue #79 that she was grieving.

Meanwhile, the Blonde Bombshell acquitted herself nicely in her early JLA appearances... when she was permitted to. As the team left its headquarters for missions in March 1970’s *JLA* #80, Superman instructed her to “stay here and play nurse.”

The success the heroine did have was due to her new sonic powers. “I never much liked Black Canary’s ‘canary cry,’ O’Neil remarked in November 2002 on his online message board, “because I didn’t think it worked visually.” After coming up with excuses not to use them for a few issues, the writer finally had Dinah declare them unreliable. “I’d better forget about it,” she decided in issue #80, “and depend on my standbys—judo and wits.” That moment of realization, unfortunately, was also a metaphoric door closing.

Pining for Ollie since he and Hal Jordan had gone on the road in O’Neil and Neal Adams’ famed *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* series [which we’ve oft examined in *BI*, in issues #18, 45, 49, 64, and 143—*ed.*], Black Canary concluded that she had fallen in love with GA and hopped on a motorcycle to find him in May 1970’s *Green Lantern* #78. Instead, she crossed paths with a mad zealot named Joshua who lured her and others into a virtual cult. Commanded to fire a bullet into her would-be lover’s head, Black Canary couldn’t go through with it. Still, from a character perspective, it was a troubling detail to present a previously strong-willed woman as an easily swayed victim.

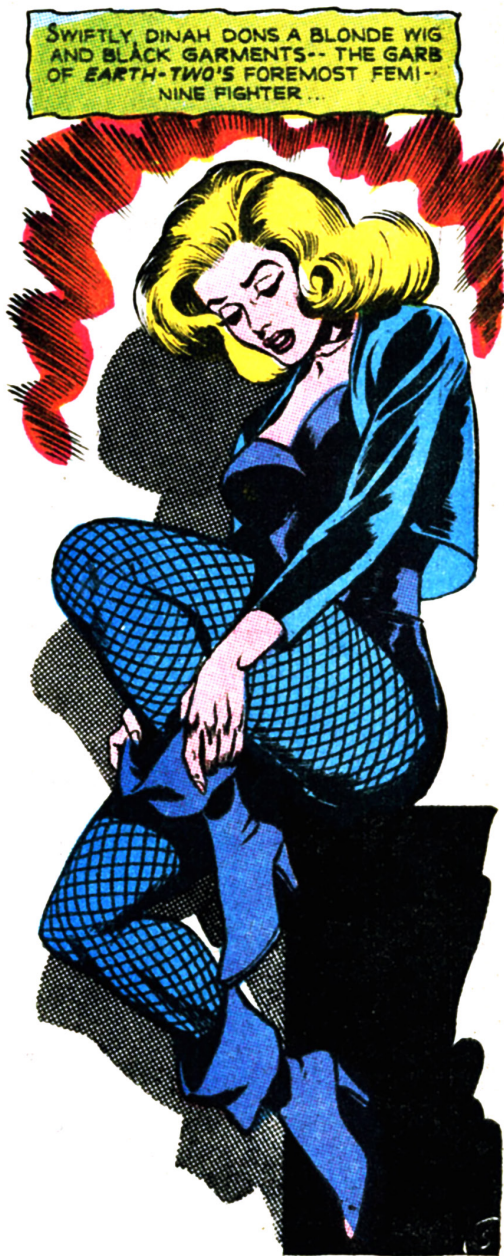
That characterization remained a month later in *The Brave and the Bold* #91, written by Bob Haney and beautifully illustrated by Nick Cardy.



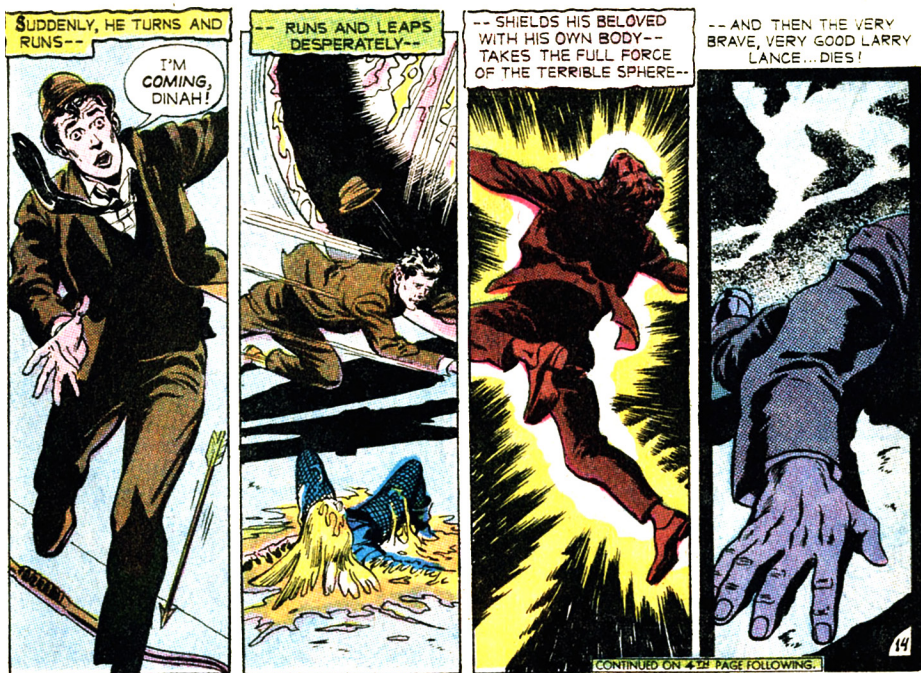
Earth-Two’s Second Banana Superheroine

(top) Sample splash panel from a Golden Age Black Canary solo adventure, originally published in *Flash Comics* #104 (Feb. 1949), the series’ final issue. (bottom left) Black Canary returned, with some JSA teammates, in *Justice League of America* #21 (Aug. 1963). Cover by Mike Sekowsky and Murphy Anderson. (bottom right) Starman and Black Canary become the Dinah-mite Duo in two back-to-back issues of *The Brave and the Bold*, starting with #61 (Aug.–Sept. 1965).

TM & © DC Comics.



SWIFTLY DINAH DONS A BLONDE WIG AND BLACK GARMENTS-- THE GARB OF EARTH-TWO'S FOREMOST FEMINE FIGHTER...



SUDDENLY, HE TURNS AND RUNS--

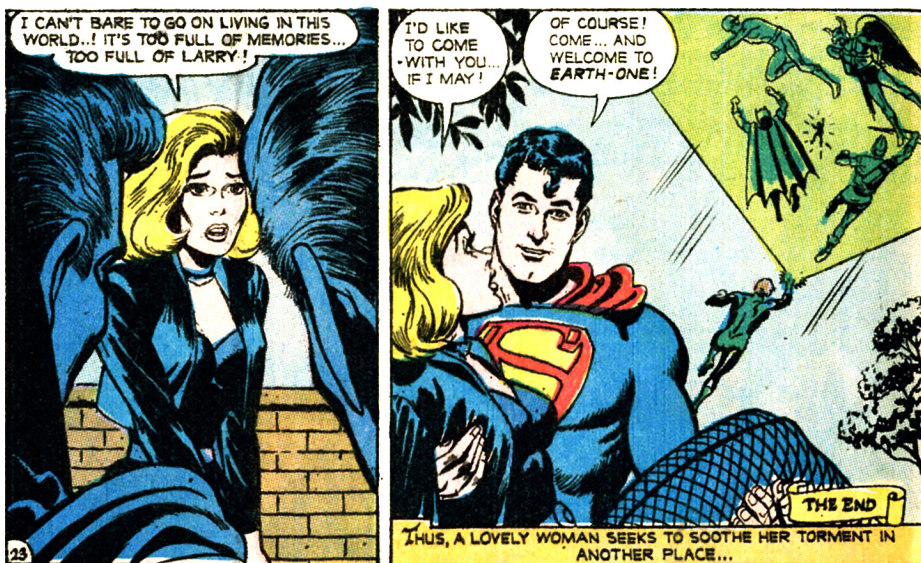
I'M COMING, DINAH!

-- RUNS AND LEAPS DESPERATELY--

-- SHIELDS HIS BELOVED WITH HIS OWN BODY-- TAKES THE FULL FORCE OF THE TERRIBLE SPHERE--

-- AND THEN THE VERY BRAVE, VERY GOOD LARRY LANCE... DIES!

CONTINUED ON 42ND PAGE FOLLOWING.



I CAN'T BARE TO GO ON LIVING IN THIS WORLD...! IT'S TOO FULL OF MEMORIES... TOO FULL OF LARRY!

I'D LIKE TO COME WITH YOU... IF I MAY!

OF COURSE! COME... AND WELCOME TO EARTH-ONE!

THE END

THUS, A LOVELY WOMAN SEEKS TO SOOTHE HER TORMENT IN ANOTHER PLACE...

Clearly set before *GL* #78, it found Black Canary pursuing the Earth-One version of Larry Lance in the mad hope that he could replace her dead husband. For much of the story, she ignored Batman's warnings that this Larry was a killer called the Collector. "I'm not interested," she declared at one point. "I'm a woman first—and a super-heroine second."

Even in the *Justice League*, Black Canary was faltering as—wrongly theorizing she was endangering Earth-One and Earth-Two—she contemplated suicide (*JLA* #82-83). An issue later, Robert Kanigher wrote a melodramatic sequence where a weepy Canary wound up in a romantic embrace with—of all people—Batman! New series writer Mike Friedrich seems to have been as horrified as several readers because he quickly wrote a scene for January 1971's *JLA* #88 where Dinah reaffirmed her love for Green Arrow while declaring that she saw Batman as a brother.

That solved the problem but made a nod toward a bigger one. Black Canary began her costumed career in 1947 and would have to be aged in her mid-40s by 1971. She'd hardly view any of the much younger Leaguers as brothers, at least not older ones. Nonetheless, the portrayal of Black Canary as a 20-something woman, both physically and emotionally, grew more pronounced as writers forgot her origins.

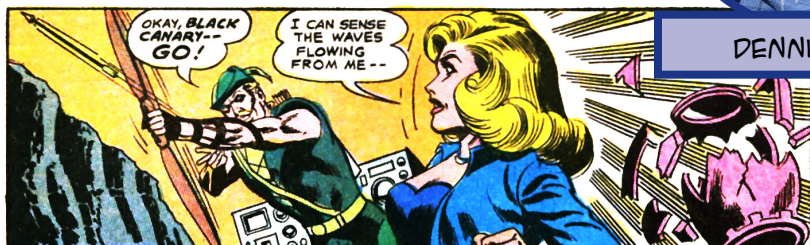
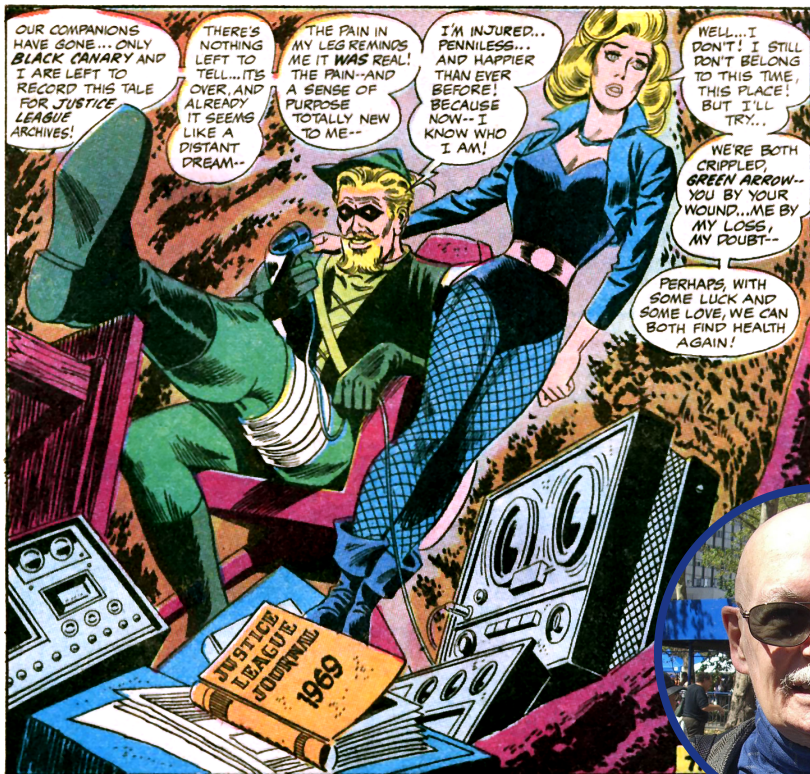
Indeed, writer Elliot S. Maggin told Jim Kingman in 2013's *BACK ISSUE* #64 that he saw Ollie and Dinah as analogues of Dashiell Hammett's Nick and Nora Charles (of *Thin Man* fame). "Nick was a retired cop who got embroiled in a murder mystery and Nora was his much younger, hotter, richer wife who was madly in love with him and aware of his many shortcomings."

Denny O'Neil, by his own admission, later told Jon B. Cooke in *Comic Book Artist* #5 (1999) that he wasn't sufficiently enlightened in the early 1970s. "My understanding of what Women's Lib

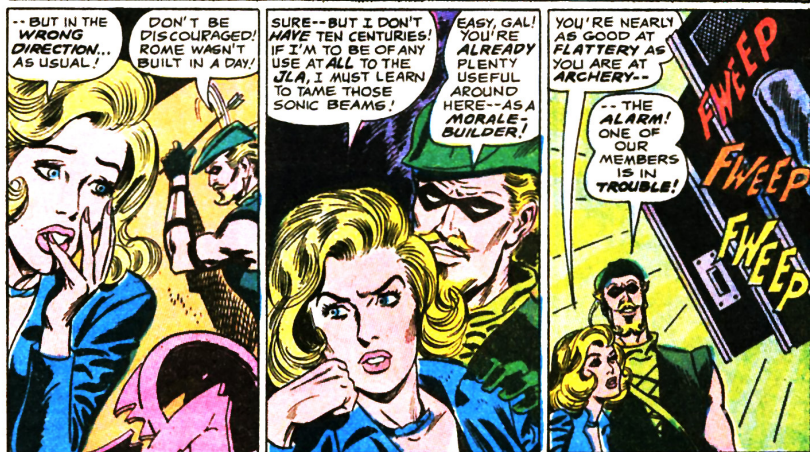
Heartsick Heroine

(left) Dinah makes a quick change in *Justice League of America* #73. (top right) Black Canary's husband, gumshoe Larry Lance, widows the crimefighter in *Justice League of America* #74 (Sept. 1969). (bottom right) Cast adrift without her love, Black Canary opts to hop to a whole new world at issue's end. By Denny O'Neil, Dick Dillin, and Sid Greene.

TM & © DC Comics.



DENNIS O'NEIL



was all about was woefully inadequate. Basically, my paradigm of womanhood was house dress, kitchen, bedroom, take care of the kids and have dinner waiting. Only because I felt I ought to be espousing it did I do so." Hence, December 1970's *Green Lantern* #82, where the women's movement was represented by literal Amazons and Harpies who saw all men as interchangeably rotten.

For all that, Black Canary came off well throughout. She brooked no nonsense from GA, physically overwhelmed every adversary in her path, and ultimately rescued Green Lantern from another dimension. Not bad at all. In the next issue, of course, it was back to Black Canary being saved by the guys. Her only other moment to shine for the duration of the O'Neil/Adams run was in August 1971's *GL* #86, wherein, as Dinah Lance, she steadfastly helped Ollie Queen's ward Roy Harper through heroin withdrawal.

Nothing to date was as cringe-inducing as December 1971's *Brave and the Bold* #100 (by Bob Haney and Jim Aparo), where Black Canary was part of a field team assisting an immobilized Batman. After the heroine disappeared during a rainstorm, Robin found the heroine sitting under a hairdryer in a beauty salon. That was bad enough, but don't forget: She was wearing a wig!

Black Canary came off vastly better in an O'Neil-scripted two-part solo story that ran in 1972's *Adventure Comics* #418-419. Dynamically illustrated by the legendary Alex Toth,

the Blonde Bombshell was a force of nature while fighting the Women's Resistance League. Alas, O'Neil felt obliged to include a flashback, where Green Arrow gave her a pep talk. Even in a solo story, men were rescuing Black Canary.

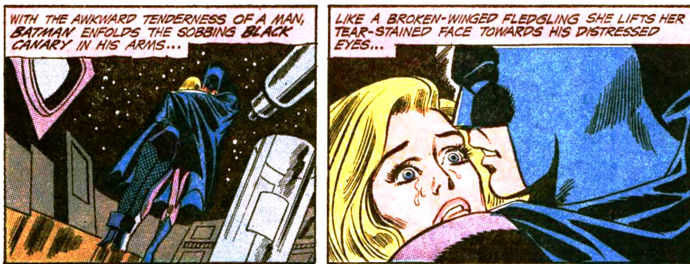
Back in *Justice League of America*, Len Wein took over the writing in 1972, starting with a mammoth JLA/JSA crossover in issues #100-102. The final issue included an inspired team-up between Black Canary's original and current partners. Tiring of Johnny Thunder and Green Arrow fighting over her, she snapped, "I happen to be my own lady... and I intend to see it stays that way!" Wein also brought back Black Canary's "ultrasonic song" in issue #110 (on sale in December 1973) and it remained in her repertoire from that point on.

One is tempted to dock Wein a couple points for having Dinah go the "typical female" route by having her redesign the costume of Amazo, then immobilized in the League trophy room (*JLA* #112). Still, it's hard to deny her argument: "That old outfit hurt my eyes. Reminded me of a 1920s-style bathing suit."

Gettin' Jolly with Ollie

(top) Green Arrow and Black Canary are drawn together. From *Justice League of America* #75. (center) Dinah's got more than morale-building on her mind in *JLA* #77. (bottom) From *JLA* #78: Welcome to the League, Black Canary!

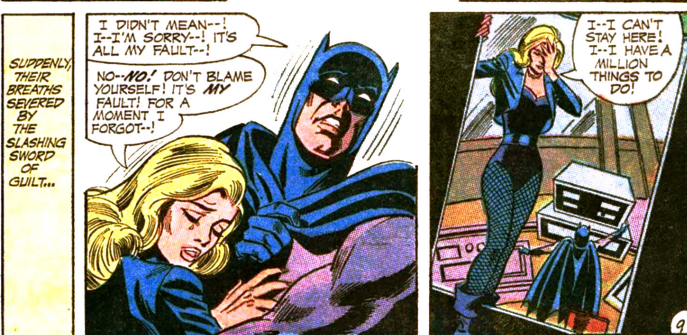
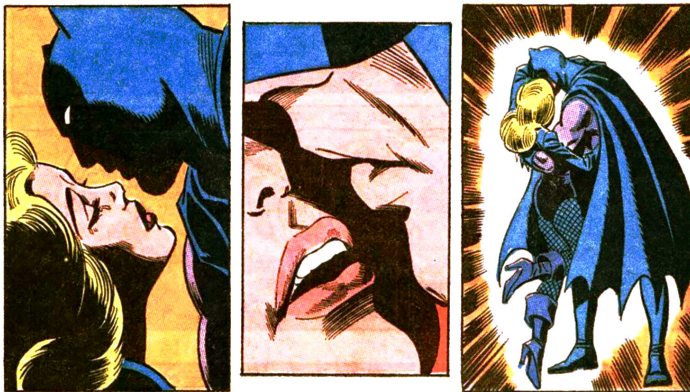
TM & © DC Comics.



WITH THE ANKWARD TENDERNESS OF A MAN, BATMAN ENFOLDS THE SOBBING BLACK CANARY IN HIS ARMS...

LIKE A BROKEN-WINGED FLEDGLING SHE LIFTS HER TEAR-STAINED FACE TOWARDS HIS DISTRESSED EYES...

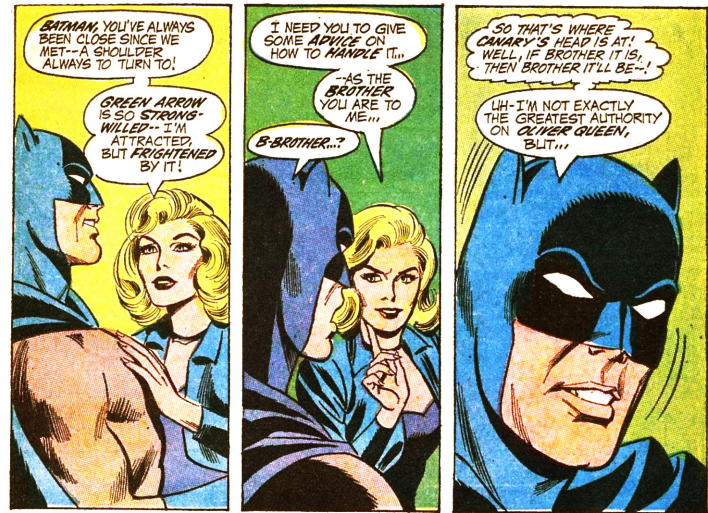
TRAPPED BY THE SAME UNIVERSAL WEB OF LONELINESS IN WHICH ALL HUMANS ARE IMPRISONED... THE COUPLE GROPELS THROUGH THE DARKNESS OF THEIR SOULS... THEIR LIPS FUMBLING FOR WARMTH... THEIR HEARTS BEATING IN A SECRET LANGUAGE WITHOUT VOCABULARY...



SUPPENDING THEIR BREATHS SEVERED BY THE SLASHING SWORD OF GUILT...

I DIDN'T MEAN--! I-I'M SORRY--! IT'S ALL MY FAULT--!
NO--NO! DON'T BLAME YOURSELF! IT'S MY FAULT! FOR A MOMENT I FORGOT--!

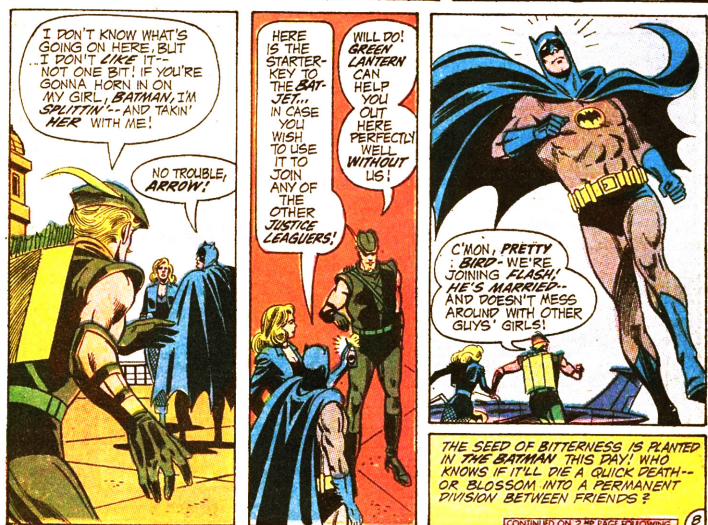
I-I CAN'T STAY HERE! I-I HAVE A MILLION THINGS TO DO!



BATMAN, YOU'VE ALWAYS BEEN CLOSE SINCE WE MET--A SHOULDER ALWAYS TO TURN TO!
GREEN ARROW IS SO STRONG-WILLED--I'M ATTRACTED, BUT FRIGHTENED BY IT!

I NEED YOU TO GIVE SOME ADVICE ON HOW TO HANDLE IT...
--AS THE BROTHER YOU ARE TO ME...
B-BROTHER...?

SO THAT'S WHERE CANARY'S HEAD IS AT! WELL, IF BROTHER IT IS, THEN BROTHER IT'LL BE--!
UH--I'M NOT EXACTLY THE GREATEST AUTHORITY ON OLIVER QUEEN, BUT...

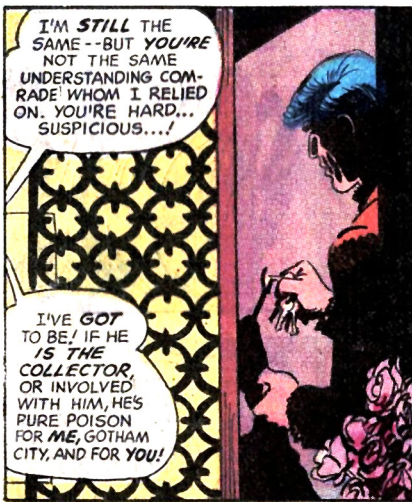


I DON'T KNOW WHAT'S GOING ON HERE, BUT I DON'T LIKE IT-- NOT ONE BIT! IF YOU'RE GONNA HORN IN ON MY GIRL, BATMAN, I'M SPLITTIN'-- AND TAKIN' HER WITH ME!
NO TROUBLE, ARROW!

HERE IS THE STARTER-KEY TO THE BAT-JET... IN CASE YOU WANT TO USE IT TO JOIN ANY OF THE OTHER JUSTICE LEAGUERS!
WILL DO! GREEN LANTERN CAN HELP YOU OUT HERE PERFECTLY WELL WITHOUT US!

C'NONE, PRETTY BIRD--WE'RE JOINING FLASH! HE'S MARRIED-- AND DOESN'T MESS AROUND WITH OTHER GUYS' GIRLS!

THE SEED OF BITTERNESS IS PLANTED IN THE BATMAN THIS DAY! WHO KNOWS IF IT'LL DIE A QUICK PERTH-- OR BLOSSOM INTO A PERMANENT DIVISION BETWEEN FRIENDS?
CONTINUED ON 2nd PAGE FOLLOWING



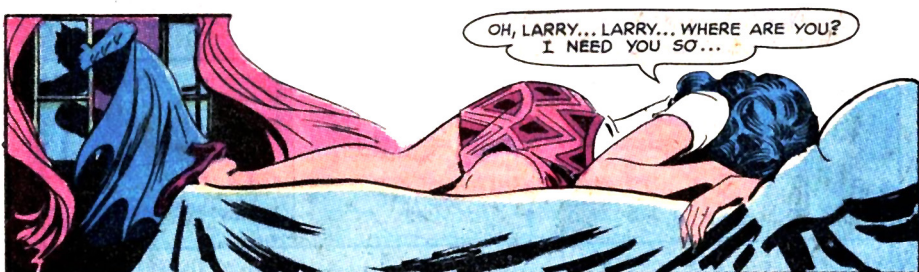
I'M STILL THE SAME-- BUT YOU'RE NOT THE SAME. UNDERSTANDING COMRADE WHOM I RELIED ON. YOU'RE HARD... SUSPICIOUS...!

I'VE GOT TO BE! IF HE IS THE COLLECTOR, OR INVOLVED WITH HIM, HE'S PURE POISON FOR ME, GOTHAM CITY, AND FOR YOU!



I DON'T... I WON'T BELIEVE YOU! I LOST EVERYTHING ON EARTH TWO, NOW YOU WANT ME TO LOSE IT ALL HERE, TOO!

WANT TO KNOW WHAT I THINK? YOU'RE JEALOUS! JEALOUS!



OH, LARRY... LARRY... WHERE ARE YOU? I NEED YOU SO...

Bird of Prey?
(top left) Dinah's Bat-traction, courtesy of writer Bob Kanigher, in *Justice League of America* #84 (Nov. 1970). Art by Dillin and Giella. (top right) Banished to the Bat-Friend Zone! From *Justice League of America* #88. (bottom) Conversely, our lady's not so thrilled with the Caped Crusader in Bob Haney and Nick Cardy's *B&B* #91 (Aug.-Sept. 1970).

TM & © DC Comics.

Forever Your Girl

(left) A brainwashed Black Canary resists the command to murder her new beau Green Arrow in *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* #78 (July 1970). By O'Neil, Neal Adams, and Frank Giacoia. (right) Really, if Alex Toth had drawn a regular *Black Canary* book, bet you would've bought it! Splash page to the Toth-drawn Canary short from *Adventure Comics* #418 (Apr. 1972).

TM & © DC Comics.

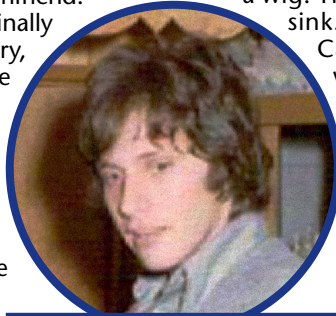
FINDING HER WINGS

Once *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* ran its course, *Justice League of America* was Black Canary's only consistent venue. Green Arrow regained a solo series (scripted by Elliot S. Maggin) in December 1972's *Action Comics* #421, but his lover was mostly relegated to appearances as "the Girlfriend." For what it's worth, Dinah did finally gain a civilian job in that first story, returning to her roots with the opening of the Pretty Bird Flower Shoppe. (Her previous efforts at being a PE teacher in *GL* #83 and judo instructor in *Adventure* #418 had not ended well.)

When Dinah did make a costumed appearance in the Dick Giordano-illustrated *Action* #428, it involved Green Arrow preventing "The Plot to Kill Black Canary." Maggin neatly subverted the usual hero-saves-girl cliché with the Blonde Bombshell's closing rant that she wouldn't have needed saving if he'd just told her she was in the danger. And then she added, "I can't be sure, and I don't know why... but I think... I love you." Cue the Partridge Family.

Black Canary was finally promoted to co-star in *Action* #441 but sat out most the next three-

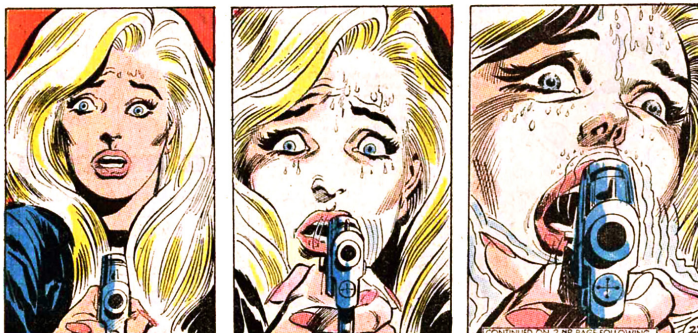
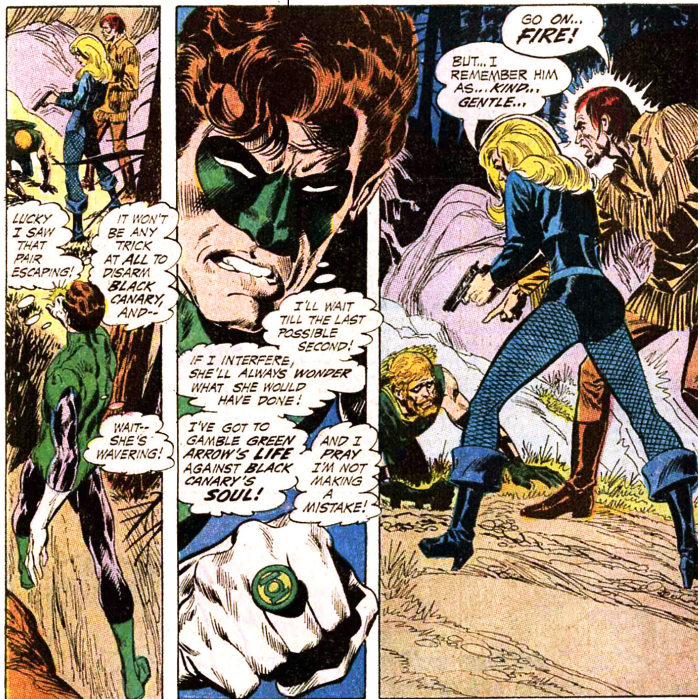
parters (*Action* #444-446) when she was captured while investigating a drug cartel. Still, it was an effective story with some visceral scenes. Offered a strand of the heroine's hair as proof that Black Canary was in the villains' hands, police dismissed it because the fiber was from a wig. That only made Green Arrow's heart sink. The moment when a rescued Canary unleashed her vocal secret weapon was also impressive, rendered by Mike Grell in a vivid circular pattern. (Maggin dubbed it the "sonic whammy" in *JLA* #118, by the way, a term first coined by Bob Haney in *Brave & Bold* #107.)



ELLIOT S. MAGGIN

Courtesy of Bob Rozakis.

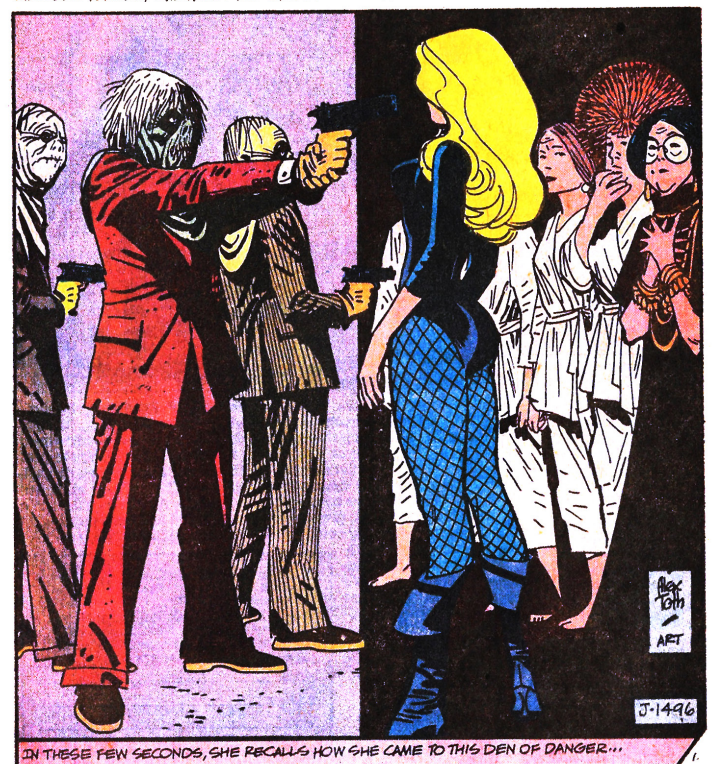
Maggin also wrote Black Canary's guest-shot in November 1974's *Wonder Woman* #216. Despite a passive role as an observer of the Amazing Amazon's latest trial to rejoin the Justice League, the Blonde Bombshell came off well: smart, articulate, and judicious enough to protect the Amazons' privacy even from the JLA following a one-on-one meeting with Queen Hippolyta. Leaping from a skyscraper at one point, Black Canary impressively used the sonic whammy to cushion her fall.



PRESENTING AN ALL-NEW ADVENTURE OF THE LOVELIEST LADY CRIME-FIGHTER OF THEM ALL...THE



MUSCLES TENSED, SHE FACES HER MASKED FOES...AND HER OWN SUDDEN, VIOLENT DEATH...



When Dinah fell from the Star City Bridge months later in the generally delightful Maggin-scripted *Joker* #4, she let Green Arrow rescue her despite having the power to have sonically saved herself at any point in the story. Despite its potential, the sonic whammy was used sparingly, including the impressive climax of the Gerry Conway-scripted *JLA* #132 (Apr. 1976), where Black Canary singlehandedly took down a massive swarm of bees.

The final Maggin/Grell GA/BC trilogy in *Action* #456-458 (concluding in January 1976) brought Black Canary to the forefront. Over three issues, she pursued the kidnappers of a Jerry Lewis-type comedian only to have the "victim" unmask as Lex Luthor. Using a device that commanded the heroine to kill Green Arrow, Luthor soon discovered this wasn't the woman who wilted under earlier orders from Joshua. Via meditation, she hypnotized herself into visualizing Luthor himself as Ollie Queen and the villain had to run for his life.

Moving into 1976, DC had plans for trial revivals of both *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* and *Green Arrow* and *Black Canary* in their own books. The former—launched in May with *GL* #90—met with great success, but the pilot episode for the latter sat unpublished until October 1977's *GL* #100. In the interim, Black Canary starred in a single solo story in July's *Detective Comics* #464. Written by Bob and Laurie Rozakis with art by Mike Grell, it actively incorporated the sonic whammy, which the new villain called the Calculator used to fuel a heat wave in Star City. [Editor's note: See *BACK ISSUE* #13 for the Calculator's story.]

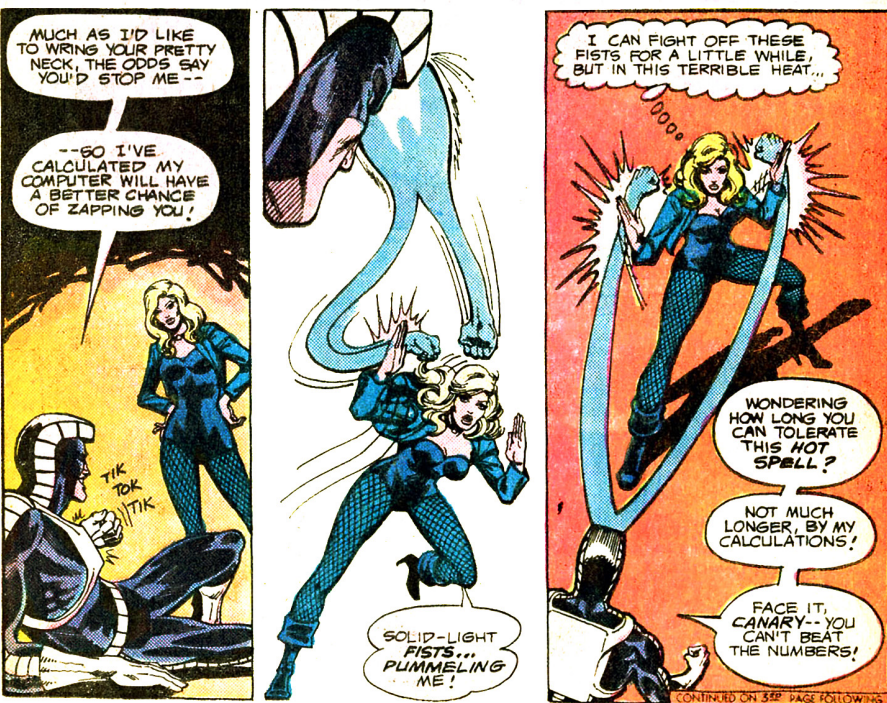
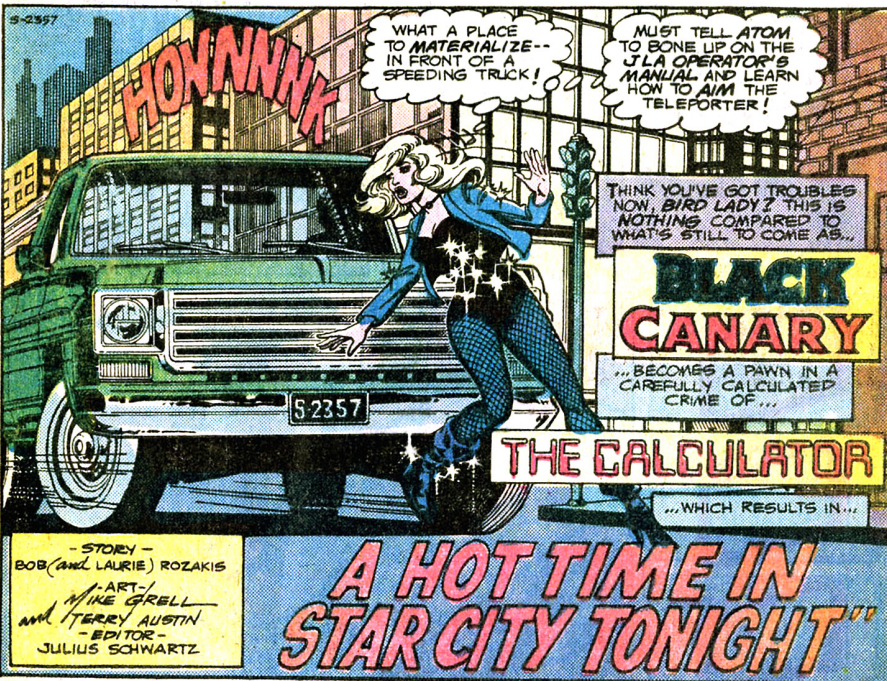
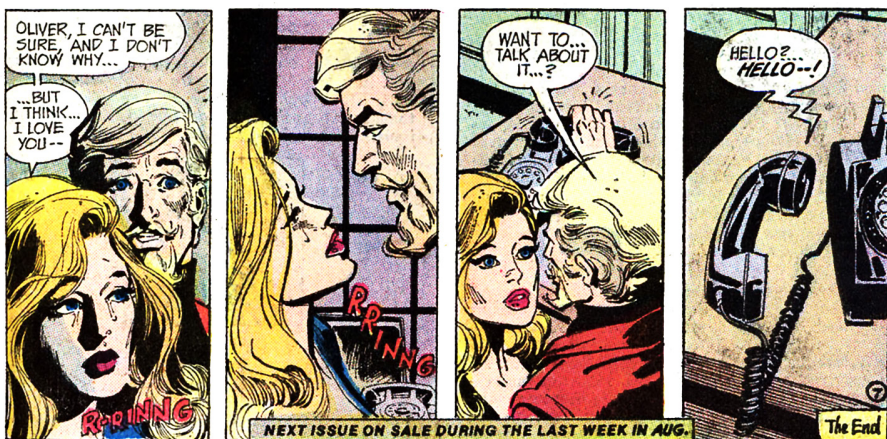
Elsewhere, Black Canary was still a regular presence in *Justice League of America*, no longer the token female since Wonder Woman rejoined the team. Steve Englehart, who began writing the series in November 1976, made a rare reference to the heroine's world of birth in his first issue (*JLA* #139). Discovering that one of the team's latest opponents was Earth-Two's Icicle, the Blonde Bombshell excitedly squealed, "I can fight someone I know for once."

Along with portraying Black Canary as a take-charge veteran, Englehart peppered his run with other such character touches. When the team split into smaller groups in

Calculated Risk

(top) Dinah utters the "L" word to Ollie in Elliot Maggin and Dick Giordano's backup in *Action Comics* #428 (Oct. 1973). (middle and bottom) Black Canary's solo backup in *Detective Comics* #464 (Oct. 1976) pits her against writer Bob (and Laurie) Rozakis' Calculator. Art by Mike Grell and Terry Austin.

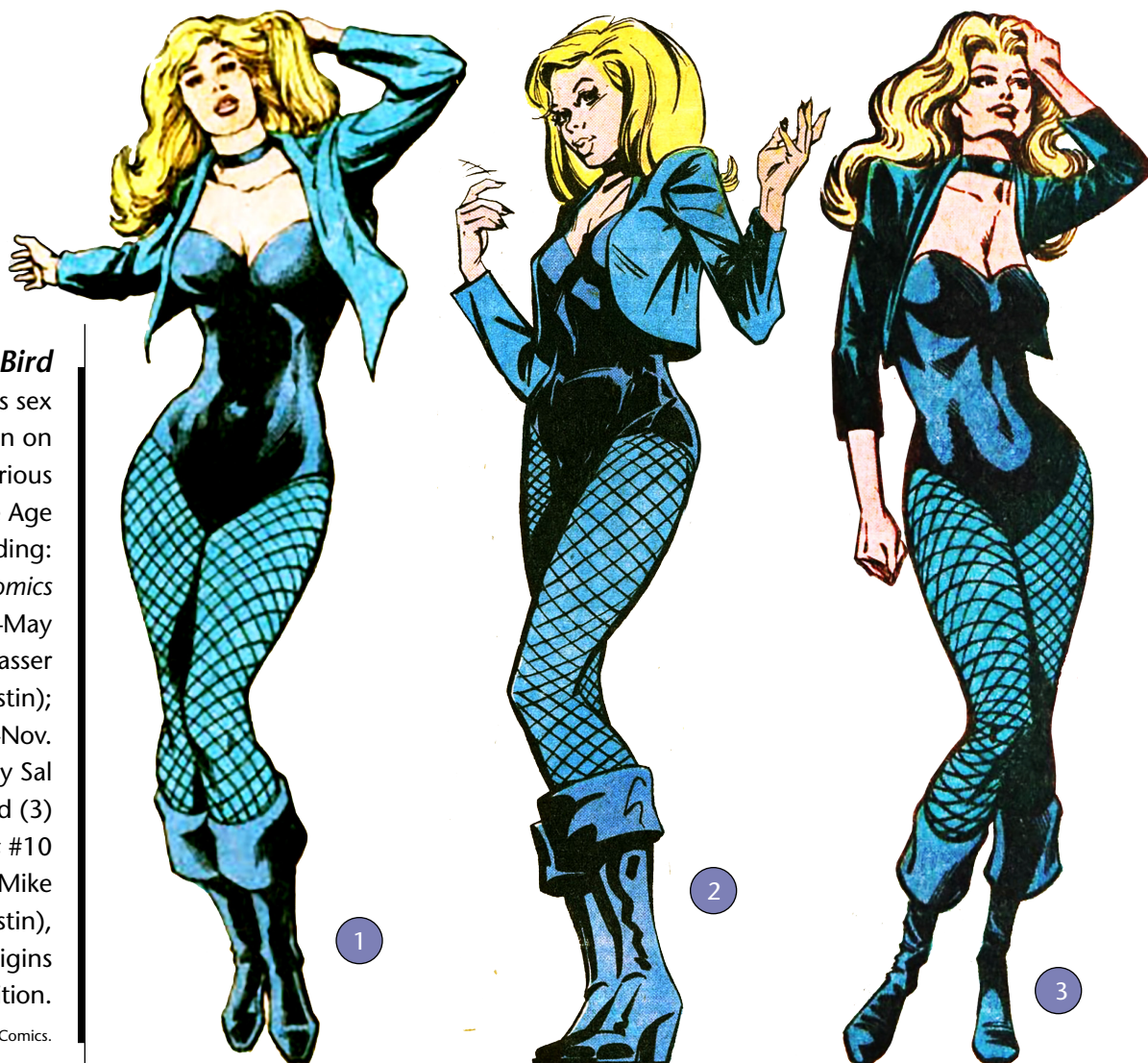
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Pretty Bird

Black Canary's sex appeal was often on display in her various late Bronze Age appearances, including: (1) *World's Finest Comics* (WFC) #244 (Apr.–May 1977; art by Mike Nasser and Terry Austin); (2) *WFC* #247 (Oct.–Nov. 1977; art by Sal Amendola); and (3) *DC Special Series* #10 (Apr. 1978; art by Mike Vosburg and Austin), part of a "Secret Origins of Super-Heroes" edition.

TM & © DC Comics.



JLA #146, for instance, she declined being paired with GA: "Ollie and I don't always come as bookends." An underlying theme throughout the run also dealt with the male members' unconscious patronizing treatment of the women. "I sometimes wonder," she mused to Hawkgirl in *JLA* #145, "whether they'd have accepted me if Wonder Woman hadn't been on a leave of absence."

Nothing like that could be found in Denny O'Neil and Mike Grell's *Green Lantern*, where Black Canary didn't take an active role until January 1977 in issue #94. Sadly, "active" mostly meant being chained up as a hostage (*GL* #94–95) or sidelined after being mesmerized by the seeming ghost of her late husband (*GL* #98). Uncomfortably, GA gave his lover a punch in the jaw to snap her out of her trance in the latter. Dinah announced that she was taking a break from their romance in *GL* #102–103 and, acting more like a naïve schoolgirl than a veteran crimefighter, was suckered by an alien seeking slaves to power his space vessel. Black Canary's sonic powers weren't used at all in the book until Bob Rozakis guest-wrote *GL* #107 (May 1978).

BLONDE BOMBSHELL = GOOD GIRL ART

Fortunately, Black Canary had a third title on her dance card. In January 1977, *World's Finest Comics* (WFC) #244 inaugurated its run as a thick "Dollar Comic" with both Dinah Lance and Oliver Queen's starring in their own solo stories in every issue [see *BI* #57 for more about DC's Dollar Comics initiative—*ed.*].

Jack C. Harris scripted the opening Black Canary tale before Gerry Conway took over with *WFC* #245. Conway had no qualms about using the heroine's "canary cry," as he dubbed it in *WFC* #246.

As illustrated initially by Mike Nasser and Terry Austin, there was little doubt that the intended audience was teenage boys. Well-drawn cheesecake abounded, culminating with a Sal Amendola-illustrated adventure (*WFC* #247), where Dinah was attacked coming out of the shower and spent three pages in the nude fighting a werewolf. A sequence with Ollie and Dinah at home in their bathrobes (*WFC* #250) made it abundantly clear that an unmarried couple was having a sexual relationship in a Comics Code-approved four-color world.

Without Green Arrow horning in, the Blonde Bombshell showcased her fighting prowess to great effect. When Ollie was around, the couple was increasingly bickering in their civilian identities. Feeling adrift in her personal life, Dinah explored closing her sales-strapped flower shop for a career as a fashion designer (a scenario introduced in *WFC* #248). Ollie didn't understand and readers could be forgiven for wondering why his girlfriend put up with his patronizing behavior and frequent lack of empathy.

A fine heart-to-heart in *WFC* #250 found Dinah digging into the decisions she had made since Larry's death. She'd allowed Oliver Queen into her life as a protector and submerged her natural strength and confidence to make the relationship work. "That's not the kind of woman I am! I'm

not weak or dependent, and for months I've felt we've been living a lie." Her solution, quite practically, was to return to Earth-Two, reconnect with old friends, properly grieve, and find the closure she'd avoided. Unfortunately, a mishap with the interdimensional transporter to Earth-Two created a disaster. Once resolved, Dinah never followed up on her plans. An issue later, she was attending her first fashion show and fighting Count Vertigo.

Conway belatedly resumed Dinah's self-analysis in July 1978's *WFC* #253. Drawing on a retroactive Black Canary origin he'd written for January's *DC Special Series* #10, Conway's script had his heroine wondering if she'd become a crimefighter like her late father wanted rather than following a different path. It was another question left unanswered after she was attacked by the other-dimensional Glorn that wanted to tap the canary cry for their own purposes in issue #254.

That effectively ended Dinah Lance's psychoanalysis. Conway touched on it only once more in a November 1980 Black Canary/Superman team-up (*DC Comics Presents* #30). Vivid dreams of Larry Lance convinced Dinah that her husband's spirit might be trapped in a dream-realm, but it was too good to be true. In fact, her subconscious had been warning her about the return of dream-based villain Dr. Destiny. Despite it all, Black Canary seemed content afterwards, certain that she'd eventually see Larry again.

Back in *World's Finest*, she had become an increasingly slight presence following an undistinguished solo story published in January 1979 (*WFC* #256). Once Bob Haney replaced Conway as writer with issue #263, Black Canary was—with rare exceptions—reduced to minor appearances as Dinah, if she appeared at all. That remained the case in the next few years as

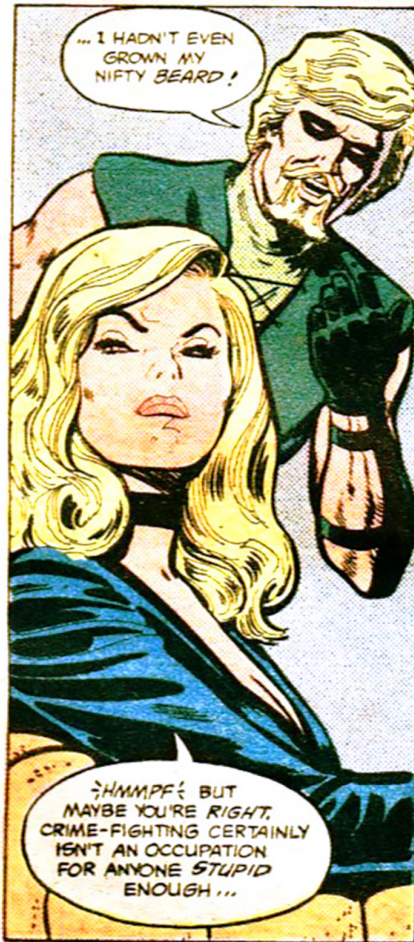
Mike W. Barr and Joey Cavalieri took over the strip. In their defense, the Black Canary and Green Arrow features had a collective 20 pages in 1977; now they had eight.

Elsewhere, Green Lantern had returned to being a solo book in 1979, so Black Canary's home title had effectively become the Conway-scripted *Justice League of America*. In its pages, Green Arrow's role as a contrarian had rendered him increasingly shrill and cartoonish. When he quit the League in *JLA* #181 (May 1980), Black Canary refused to join him. "This is my home," she told him in issue #182. "When I needed them, they took me in, they helped me through the worst days of my life."

Consequently, it was Batman who joined Black Canary in pursuit of the Penguin two weeks later in *The Brave and the Bold* #166, beautifully illustrated by Dick Giordano and Terry Austin. Scripted by Michael Fleisher, the story included a cringe-inducing moment where Black Canary proudly intimidated a

A Canary Rarity
(below) You might've missed this one: writer Mike W. Barr and artist Dan Spigle produced several new pages of story for a collection of Green Arrow reprints in *DC Special Blue Ribbon Digest* #23 (July 1982), including this stunner. (left) Its cover, by Jim Aparo.

TM & © DC Comics.



Freaky Friday

Writer Roy Thomas, with penciler Chuck Patton and inkers Romeo Tanghal and Pablo Marcos, provides a new spin on Black Canary's origin in *Justice League of America* #330 (Nov. 1983).

TM & © DC Comics.

man into giving up information, unaware that the guy was really reacting to Batman (who'd slipped in behind her). The issue concluded with the heroine bound, gagged, and stripped to lingerie, waiting for Batman to rescue her. And after he did, Dinah gave him a big kiss as she cooed, "My hero."

The story drew an avalanche of angry mail, including this excerpt from Bob Hughes' letter: "The purpose of magazines like B&B," he wrote, "is to expose the co-stars to the larger Batman audience in the hope of increasing their popularity. In order to do this, the guest-stars must be given an opportunity to show off the qualities which make them DC super-stars. All Black Canary got to do was sit around tied to a chair in her underwear. She was treated in a totally contemptuous and paternalistic manner by both the Batman and the writer. Not only was she portrayed as being totally ineffectual, but as being too dumb to notice the fact."

SECOND-GENERATION CANARY

Trying to put that embarrassment behind her, Black Canary soldiered on in *Justice League of America* (where Green Arrow eventually rejoined in issue #200). It was in 1983 issues of that title (issues #219 and 220, specifically) that the Blonde Bombshell made the most stunning discovery of her life.

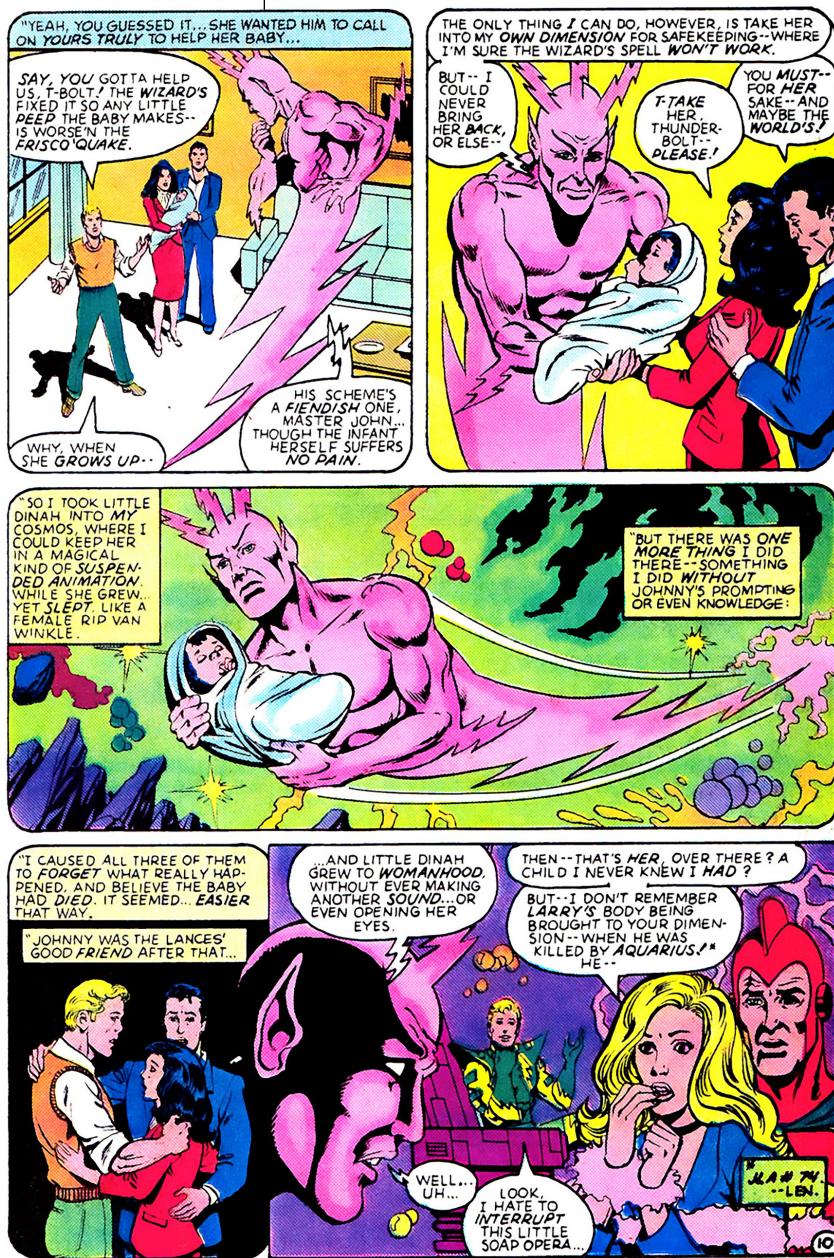
Early in her marriage, Dinah had given birth to a namesake daughter who had been cursed by the evil Wizard with a sonic scream. After no cure could be found, she was placed in a magically induced coma and matured to adulthood in a protective chamber. In the aftermath of Black Canary's decision to travel to Earth-One, she discovered that she had been terminally irradiated by Aquarius' magic. Acting on a suggestion from Superman, Johnny Thunder's enchanted Thunderbolt transferred the older Dinah's memories into the body of her daughter. In short, the Black Canary who'd been operating on Earth-One was really a second-generation heroine, but even she hadn't known it until that moment.

Written by Roy Thomas and based on a suggestion from Marv Wolfman, it was a lot to take in. On the one hand, it explained Black Canary's sometimes erratic behavior and general youthfulness. On the other, one wondered why none of Dinah's old JSA teammates remarked on how much younger she suddenly looked. And then there was the fact that she'd been maintaining romantic feelings for Larry Lance, a man now revealed as her father rather than her husband. Suffice it to say, the idea of mother/daughter Black Canaries worked much better after DC's history was rebooted after 1985's *Crisis on Infinite Earths*. [Editor's note: *Crisis* gets a deep dive soon in *BACK ISSUE* #159 as we celebrate the landmark series' 40th anniversary!]

In those later pre-Crisis days, Black Canary was left virtually homeless following a 1984 JLA makeover that cut her, Green Arrow, and other members from the roster. That same year, young writer Greg Weisman pitched an ambitious idea for a Black Canary miniseries that would have finally allowed her to test her wings in a comic book of her own. As detailed in *BI* #46, however, that project never made it beyond Mike Sekowsky's pencils for issue #1.

Consequently, Black Canary stayed grounded, viewed by many as merely half of a team instead of a fully developed heroine in her own right. Given the almost institutionalized bias among readers toward females who carried their own book, it was perhaps inevitable that she never got a shot. And, to be fair, even Green Arrow faced an uphill battle to get his own miniseries in 1983. Would stronger, more consistent characterization have made a difference? It's a question that will never be answered.

JOHN WELLS is a comics historian specializing in DC Comics. He is the author of the TwoMorrrows books American Comic Book Chronicles: 1960-1964 and 1965-1969, and co-author (with Keith Dallas) of the book Comic Book Explosion.



BEST WISHES TO
AL DELLINGES/ALEX
TOTH



I HOPE
THERE'S ENOUGH
'ACTION'
HERE FOR ALL
OF MY FANS TO
ENJOY!

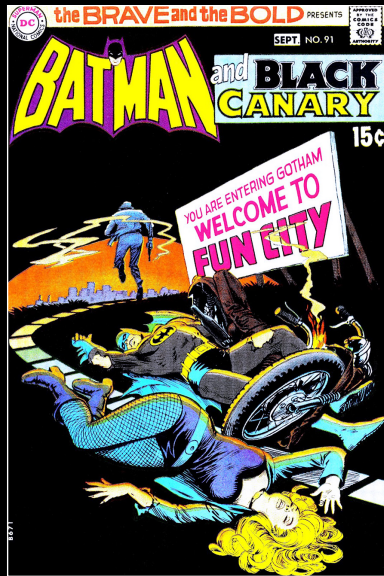
**BLACK
CANARY**
©1976 N.P.P. INC.
ALEX
TOTH

Fishnet Fever

Aren't you glad we had an extra page for an Alex Toth pinup of delightful Dinah? The master's sexy interpretation of Black Canary was produced in 1976 for Al Dellings and appears courtesy of Heritage Comics Auctions (www.ha.com).

Black Canary TM & © DC Comics.

BLACK CANARY COVER GALLERY



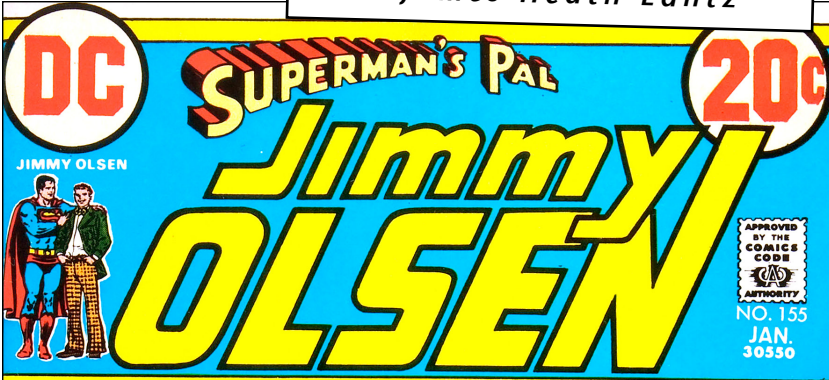
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Jimmy OLSEN MAN OF ACTION

by James Heath Lantz



Cub reporter. Photographer. Turtle Boy. James Bartholomew “Jimmy” Olsen has been many things since his debut in the April 15, 1940 episode of the *Adventures of Superman* radio serial.

Yet, perhaps it’s his work as Mr. Action in 1973 that truly deserves some time in the Super Spotlight. *BACK ISSUE* will look at Mr. Action in the Bronze Age and his later incarnation in *Countdown to Final Crisis* to see what made this persona of Superman’s pal tick throughout his brief career in the DC Universe.

Read on, Superfans, but don’t call Perry White “Chief” while you do. [Editor’s note: But you’re allowed to call me “Chief.” Really.]

WHERE MR. ACTION IS

While an unnamed office boy debuted in the story “The Man Who Sold Superman” in *Action Comics* #6 (Nov. 1938), Jimmy Olsen, like the *Daily Planet*, kryptonite, and much of the Superman lore we know today, technically first appeared in the *Adventures of Superman* radio program. Olsen was a copy boy who aided Clark Kent’s investigation of “Donelli’s Protection Racket” on the April 15, 1940 broadcast. Jimmy would gradually make his way into the comic books, whose publication coincided with the broadcast of the audio serials. The character would later become popular largely due to actor Jack Larson’s portrayal of Olsen on television in *Adventures of Superman* (1952–1958). DC Comics’ series *Superman’s Pal, Jimmy Olsen* had begun its life with its first issue cover dated Sept.–Oct. 1954. Much of the series had young Olsen in strange adventures such as gaining Superman’s powers or becoming the stretchable Elastic Lad and the gigantic Turtle Boy.

At the dawn of the *BACK ISSUE* era as the Bronze Age began in 1970, Jack “King” Kirby was editing, writing, and penciling—with Vince Colletta and other inkers—some of the most fun and offbeat *Jimmy Olsen* issues ever, as part of Kirby’s Fourth World line of comics [which also included *The Forever People*, *The New Gods*, and *Mister Miracle*—ed.]. Kirby left *Jimmy Olsen* to focus more on *New Gods* and other projects. This forced writers E. Nelson Bridwell and Steve Skeates and artists Mike Sekowsky and Bob Oksner to tie up the plot threads of Kirby’s “Intergang” story arc in *Jimmy Olsen* issue #152. The *Olsen* comics after Kirby’s departure from the title and DC were relatively hit and miss for poor Jimmy. Something needed to be done to

Oh, Shoot! Here’s Trouble!

The *Daily Planet*’s onetime cub reporter is rebranded as “Mr. Action” in *Superman’s Pal, Jimmy Olsen* #155 (Jan. 1973)—and he’s tossed in the klink to “celebrate”! Cover by Nick Cardy.

TM & © DC Comics.

Master of the Martial Arts

Wow, look at Jimmy's kung-fu grip! Splash page to Mr. Action's second outing, in *Jimmy Olsen* #158 (June 1973). Script by Leo Dorfman, art by Kurt Schaffenberger. (right) The issue's cover, by Nick Cardy.

TM & © DC Comics.

shake up young Olsen's life if his series was to continue.

1970 had brought the Action News format to television. It is said to have been conceived by news director Mel Kampmann in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, at WFIL-TV (now WPVI-TV) as a response to rival station KYW-TV's Eyewitness News. Both setups would gain traction throughout the United States. Both of these, however, were not limited to home small screens at 6 and 11. Galaxy Broadcasting's Jimmy Olsen had become Mr. Action in an attempt to reflect the times and increase sales after Jack Kirby's departure.

The cover blurb on *Jimmy Olsen* #155 said it all to readers: "The Origin of a New Career For Jimmy—Mr. Action, Trouble-Shooter." The debut of Mr. Action does not involve the typical comic book superhero tropes that made the genre famous. In fact, the premiere of Mr. Action could be considered mundane for those used to Gamma bombs, lightning strikes mixing with chemicals, and radioactive spiders.

Writer Leo Dorfman, penciler Kurt Schaffenberger, and inker Vince Colletta tell the story in

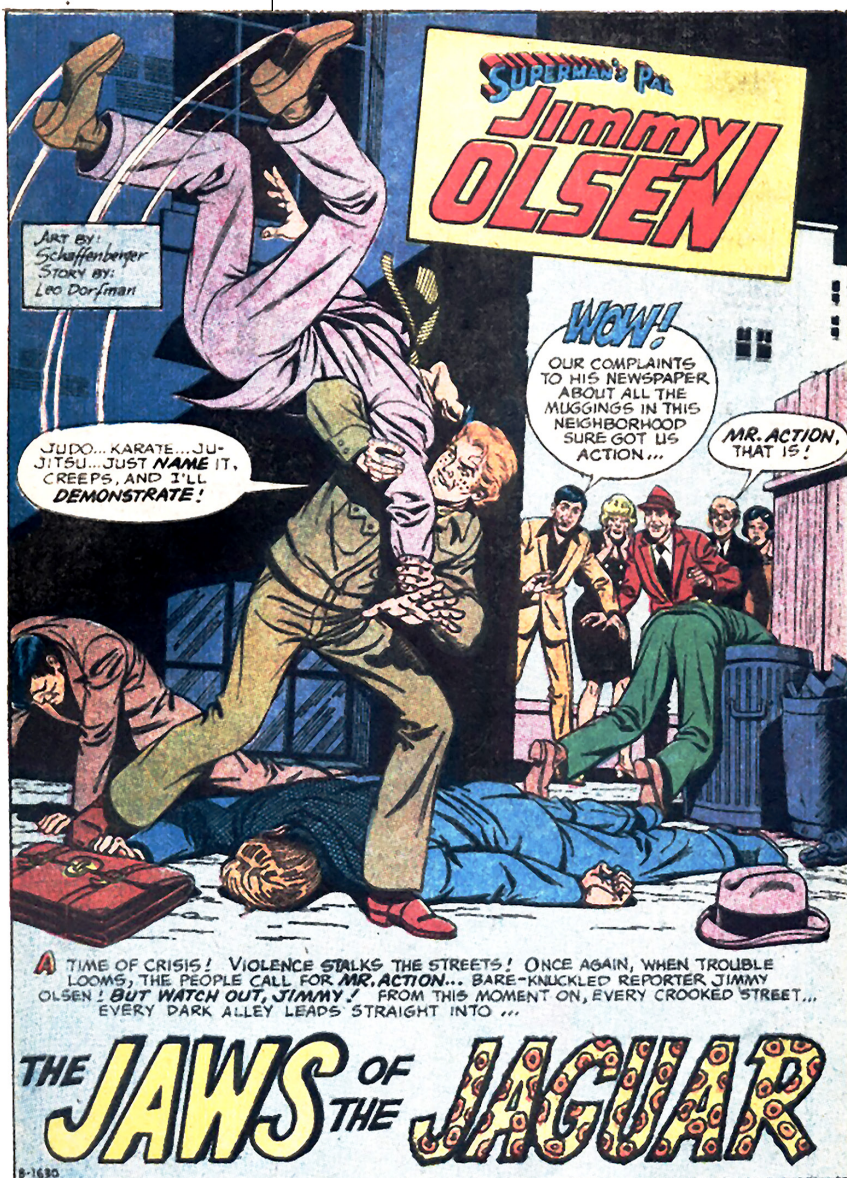
"The Downfall of 'Judas' Olsen." While helping Metropolis University professors and inner city teens using abandoned stores as school, Jimmy tells his boss Morgan Edge that the teachers and students consider him a man of action. Edge sees this as an attempt to boost WGBS ratings, allowing Jimmy to become a hard-hitting reporter for the people—Mr. Action.

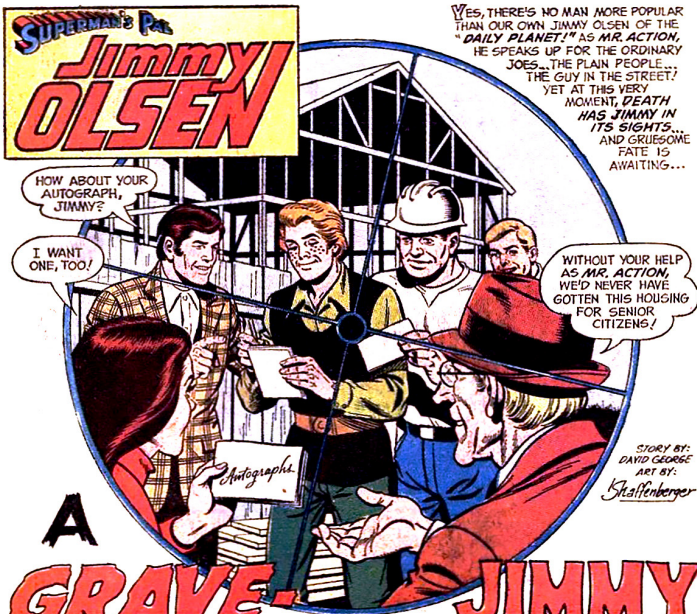
Jimmy Olsen's career as Mr. Action, while the focus of some stories through the run of the *Jimmy Olsen* and *Superman Family* titles, does tend to fly under the radar compared to his adventures with the Newsboy Legion or as Nightwing's sidekick Flamebird. Yet, they are as important to Jimmy's life as those aforementioned exploits.

One constant element of Jimmy Olsen's character, no matter what medium features him, is his desire to be an investigative reporter who is as good as Lois Lane and Clark Kent. Mr. Action gives him a chance to do this. For the most part, Jimmy is more down to earth and more among the citizens of Metropolis and the world than most of his other comics. Jimmy also proves that he doesn't need superhuman abilities to help others. In fact, he states something similar in the two page "Jimmy Olsen's Other Identities" feature in *The Superman Family* #176 (Apr.–May 1976).

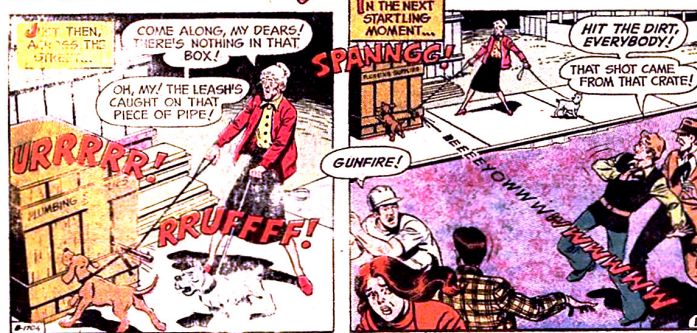
"I may climb mountains," says young Olsen, "or swim the depths of the sea, but I get my story—and see justice done."

Mr. Action had his share of mysteries, costumes, and disguises that helped him aid those in need when Superman and the rest of the DC Universe heroes were busy battling bad guys elsewhere. *Jimmy Olsen* #158's "The Kiss-Off for Mr. Action" is the best example of the first case. An elderly woman comes into Jimmy's life when he helps





A GRAVE-DIGGER FOR JIMMY OLSEN

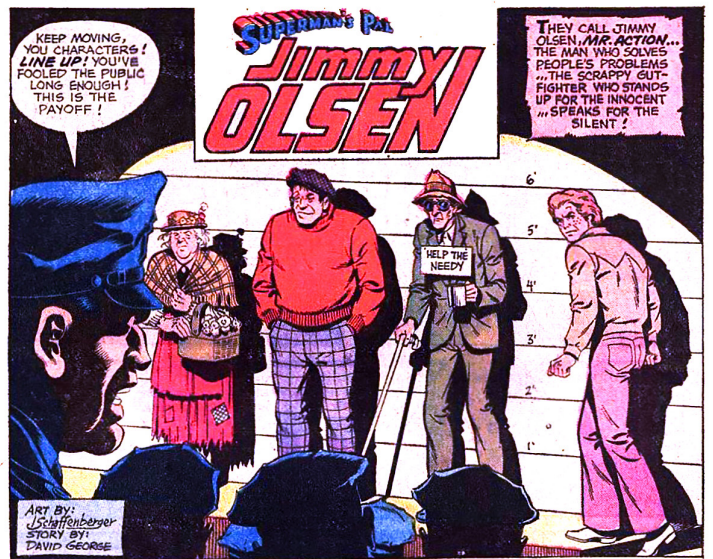


her and her stray dogs have a home. Plot threads throughout subsequent issues gradually reveal she is Lucy Lane. Believed to be deceased, Lucy was rapidly aged by jungle herbs while acting as a secret agent. Jimmy helps her youth return when he carries her in a burning DNA lab in *Jimmy Olsen* #161. While #159, "The Day They Unmasked Mr. Action" (Aug. 1973) shows Jimmy's quick change ability oddly, yet brilliantly. Jimmy must dress like a woman to hide from police who believe he's selling secrets to criminals and a gang of costume wearing crooks called the Masquerade Squad.

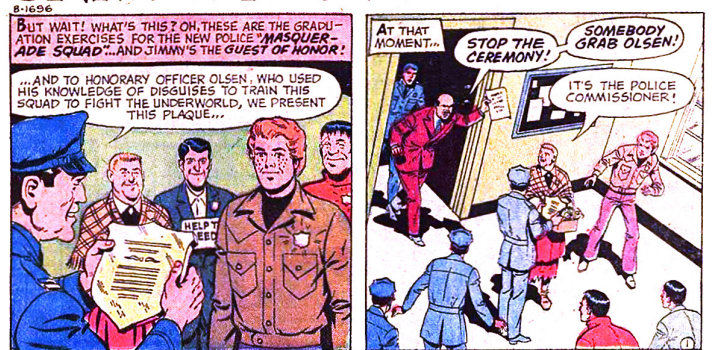
Jimmy Olsen's time as Mr. Action, the investigative reporter, went quietly into the night without much, if any, fanfare. Yet, those stories from the 1970s were just first chapter for young Mr. Olsen under that moniker.

THE ALL-NEW MISTER ACTION

We move forward to the year 2007. Much has happened in the life of Jimmy Olsen since he last called himself Mr. Action, and much of what was seen in the 1970s was no longer part of the character after writer/artist John Byrne's *Man of Steel* reboot of Superman and his supporting cast in 1986. DC Comics released the *Countdown/Countdown to Final Crisis* weekly series with a backwards numbering system like that of a NASA launch or Top 40 music program. Among the



SO WHAT'S HE DOING IN THE POLICE LINE-UP? BE PREPARED FOR A SHOCK! FOR THIS IS... THE DAY THEY UNMASKED MR. ACTION



events that occurred was Jimmy Olsen gaining various superpowers. Many of these randomly activated abilities—elasticity, super-speed, and porcupine quills—were more modern versions of some Jimmy had had in his pre-Crisis iteration.

It's later revealed they were triggered when Jimmy is in danger. Yet, in his decision about his superhero name, Jimmy chose to call himself Mr. Action.

Various writers, under head writer Paul Dini, and artists worked on *Countdown*. Yet, it was *Untold Tales of Spider-Man* and *Avengers* scribe Kurt Busiek and co-plotter and *Deadpool* co-creator Fabian Nicieza who brought the new Mr. Action to the appropriately titled *Action Comics*, one of the main monthly comic books featuring Superman and his supporting cast.

According to Comic Book Resources' conversation with Busiek and Superman Homepage's "Questions for Kurt" forums, "3-2-1 Action" in *Action Comics* #852-854, was not intended to be a Busiek/Nicieza tale due to *Action* being in the midst of Geoff Johns, Richard Donner, and Adam Kubert's "Last Son" serial. Production delays forced the need for a fill-in. Busiek chose to focus on Jimmy's new Mr. Action persona that appeared in *Countdown*. *Action* #852-854 expanded on Jimmy's adventures in *Countdown* while exploring the impact Mr. Action had on Jimmy's friends and loved ones. In fact, the

Nobody Ever Wanted Giant Turtle Olsen's Autograph...

Did the Jimmy Olsen Fan Club become the Mr. Action Fan Club during this crazy period in Olsen's history? (left) Title page to David George and Kurt Schaffenberger's Mr. Action adventure in *Jimmy Olsen* #159 (Aug. 1973). (right) From the same issue, another Mr. Action tale.

TM & © DC Comics.

**Mr. Action Returns
in 'Action'**

Writer Kurt Busiek returned young Olsen to his little-known Bronze Age role in a three-parter in *Action Comics* #852-854, even scoring this cover "appearance" (sort of) on issue #853 (early Oct. 2004)! Cover art by Brad Walker and R. H. Livingstone.

TM & © DC Comics.



story coincides with *Countdown* #42-37.

Jimmy's superhuman gifts were among the many schemes of Darkseid, despotic darklord of the planet Apokolips. Yet with the help of the Atom, a Soul Battery is removed from Jimmy, allowing Mr. Action to disappear into the nether-realms of comic book superhero-dom, never to be heard from again as of this writing. However, Mr. Action will always have a place in long boxes and back issue bins throughout the *BACK ISSUE* era and beyond.

Dedicated to my beautiful and amazing wife of action Laura, whose love and support are stronger than Superman; Jadis, Pupino, Odino, and our four-legged feline and canine Action News team, who always get their story; my nephew Kento, who has more powers than Jimmy Olsen; and Kurt Busiek, Fabian Nicieza, and the late writer Leo Dorfman, artist Kurt Schaffenberger, and inker Vince Colletta, whose stories and art put Jimmy Olsen in the middle of the action. May Mr. Action be on your side forever.

JAMES HEATH LANTZ is a freelance writer whose stories, essays, and reviews can be found online and in print at Sequart.org, [Superman Homepage](http://SupermanHomepage), his blog and such publications as his self-published Trilogy of Tales and PS Artbooks' Roy Thomas Presents Sheena vol. 3 Three. James currently lives in Italy with his wife Laura and their family of cats, dogs, and humans from Italy, Japan, and the United States.

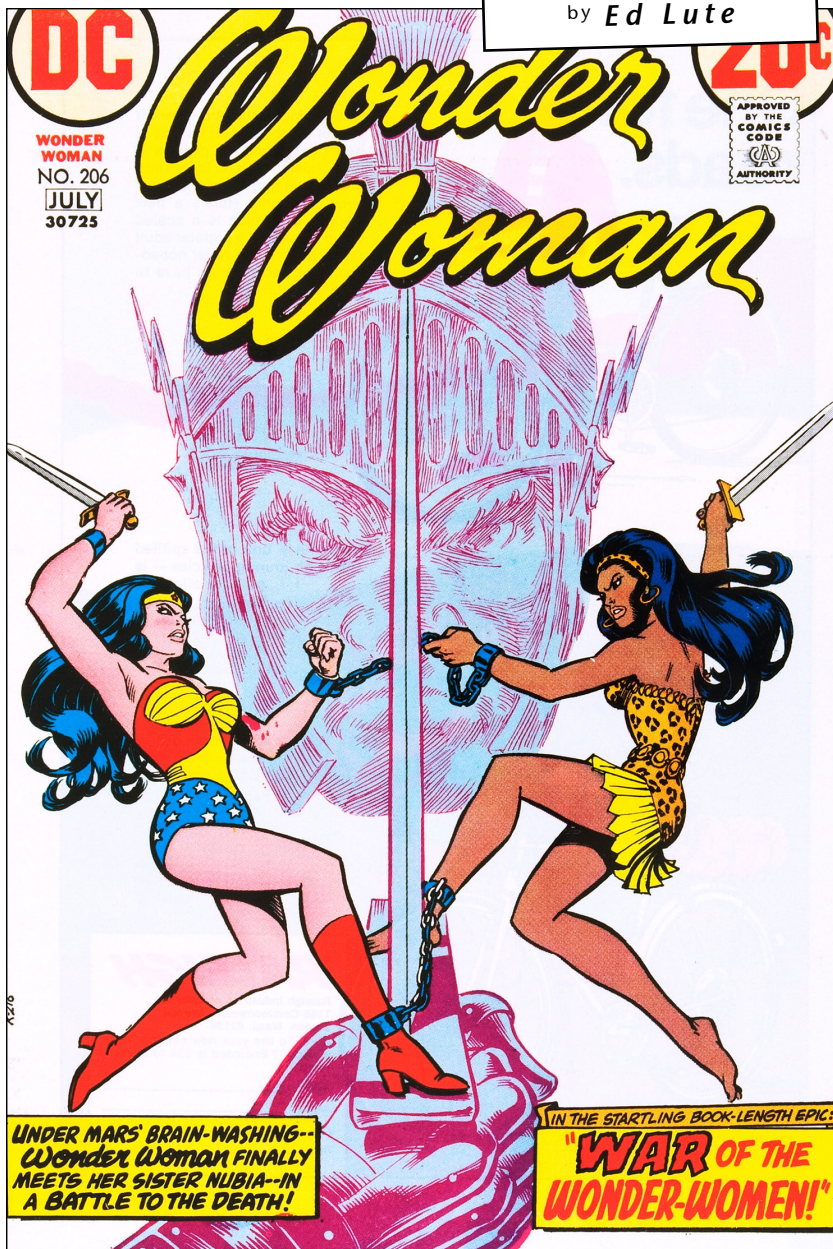


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TWOMORROWS AD 1/2 PAGE

WHO IS NUBIA?

by Ed Lute



UNDER MARS' BRAIN-WASHING--
Wonder Woman FINALLY
MEETS HER SISTER NUBIA--IN
A BATTLE TO THE DEATH!

IN THE STARTLING BOOK-LENGTH EPIC:
"WAR OF THE
WONDER-WOMEN!"

You'll find some of the most iconic comic book superheroes ever in DC's comics—from Superman, to Batman, to Wonder Woman, to the Flash... the list goes on and on. However, earlier in its history, DC, like many publishers of the time, did not always have the best track record where diversity is concerned. Yet the publisher introduced one of the earliest Black superheroes in comics. In fact, Nubia was the first Black female superhero in mainstream comics. So why isn't she as well known as other Black female superheroes?

The character Nubia was an Amazon warrior that seemed to be positioned to be a major player in the pantheon of DC superheroes, but she disappeared about as quickly as she appeared. It wasn't until recent times that Nubia became the hero that she was intended to be.

Why didn't Nubia take the leap to become a major character or even just a major supporting character? The answer is a bit complicated as we shall see, so come along to Paradise Island with *BACK ISSUE*.

WHO IS NUBIA?

In 1968, writer Denny O'Neil, along with artists Mike Sekowsky and Dick Giordano, began one of the most controversial Wonder Woman storylines ever with the de-powering of Wonder Woman turning her into an ordinary human [see *BACK ISSUE* #17—ed.]. The Amazon Princess went without her Amazonian powers from issue #178 until 204 (Oct. 1968–Feb. 1973). Even powerless, Diana Prince was depicted as a hero who could save the world with only her martial arts skills and the help of her blind mentor, I Ching.

Wonder Woman #204 returned the Amazonian princess to her status quo. The issue found an amnesiac Diana Prince's return to Paradise Island, where she regained her memories along with her powers. The issue also found an unknown armored Amazon challenging Diana to the name of Wonder Woman. Although the issue was important because it featured the return of Diana's powers, it was the identity of the armored Amazon that set this book apart from others published by DC at the time.

The cover featured a helpless Wonder Woman lying on her back with an armored Amazon warrior holding a sword towards her. The identity of the warrior was not revealed on the cover. Much like the issue of first appearance of the Black Panther in *Fantastic Four* #52 (July 1966), which featured the character on the cover but did not reveal that he was a Black superhero, the cover to this issue did the same with Nubia, as she was fully covered. It was not until the end of the story when the warrior removed her helmet that she was revealed

When Amazons Clash

Diana vs. Nubia, on Nick Cardy's cover to *Wonder Woman* #206 (June–July 1973).

TM & © DC Comics.

Maiden of Mystery

(top) Nubia—her face and features shielded—is seen by readers for the first time on Don Heck's cover to *Wonder Woman* #204 (Jan.–Feb. 1973).

(bottom) A solo story for Wonder Woman's sister, from issue #205. Written by Cary Bates, penciled by Heck, inked by Vince Colletta.

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CARY BATES

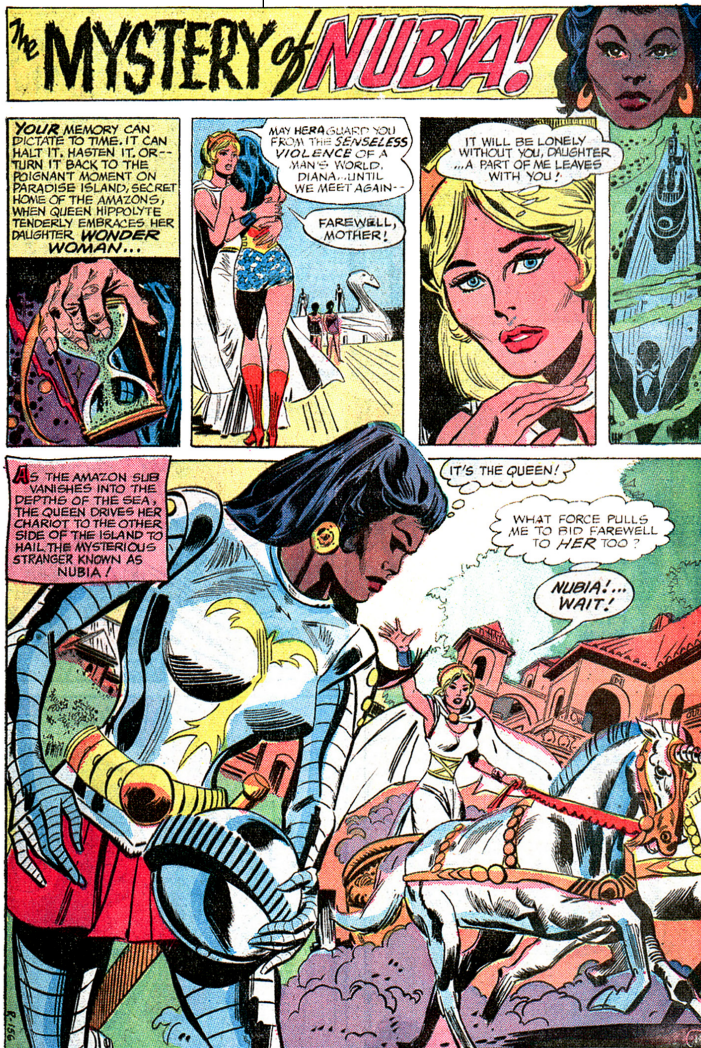
© DC Comics.

to be Black. The character was created by writer Robert Kanigher and artists Don Heck and Vince Colletta.

DC is generally known as following in Marvel Comics' footsteps when it comes to providing diversity in their stories. This is with good reason. Marvel introduced the Black Panther, the first Black superhero in mainstream comics, in 1966, but DC would not introduce their first Black superhero, Green Lantern John Stewart, until *Green Lantern* #87 (Jan. 1972) and even then as a backup to GL Hal Jordan. However, DC deserves props for giving readers the first Black female superhero.

Nubia did not star in the main story of *Wonder Woman* #205 (Apr. 1973), but in a backup tale instead. In the seven-pager called "The Mystery of Nubia!" readers learned that Nubia lived on a floating island surrounded by male warriors who wanted to fight each other for her hand in marriage. She fought one, declaring that no one would fight for her hand. It was also seen that she was an orphan. In this story, Nubia followed the tradition of powerful women that were seen in the pages of *Wonder Woman*.

Although Kanigher wrote the first two appearances of Nubia, it was writer Cary Bates who gave readers her origin in issue #206 (July 1973). Heck and Colletta



returned for art duties. Nubia once again faced off against Diana on its classic cover, but this time, the Black Amazon was not hidden behind a suit of armor.

The story revealed that Queen Hippolyte created two girls (one Black and one white) out of clay. Aphrodite gave life to them thus making them fraternal twin sisters. However, Mars, the God of War, stole Nubia from her crib. Mars then trained Nubia to be his instrument of destruction against the Amazons. According to Cary Bates, "I thought mirroring the WW origin and revealing Aphrodite breathed life into a second statue of black clay was a kind of classic Bronze Age trope that Kanigher always excelled at."

The issue had the two warriors resume their battle for the title of Wonder Woman. In the end, the superheroes teamed up to defeat Mars. The final panel of the issue depicted the two women as babies sleeping next to each other in a crib with the words, "The end... and the beginning." [Editor's note: And you thought we were done mentioning infant superheroes after last issue's "Big Baby Issue" theme...]

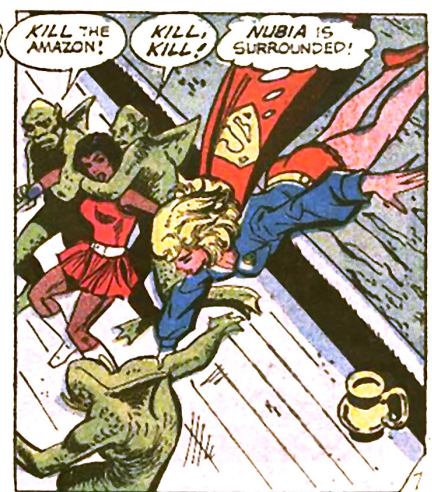
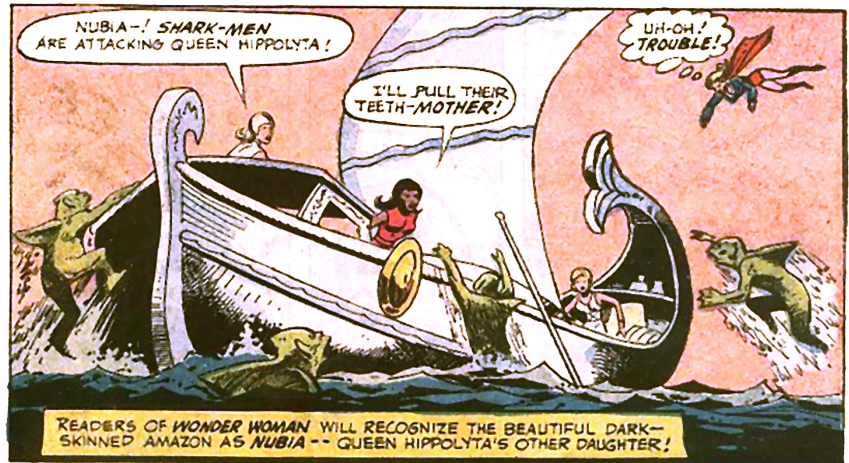
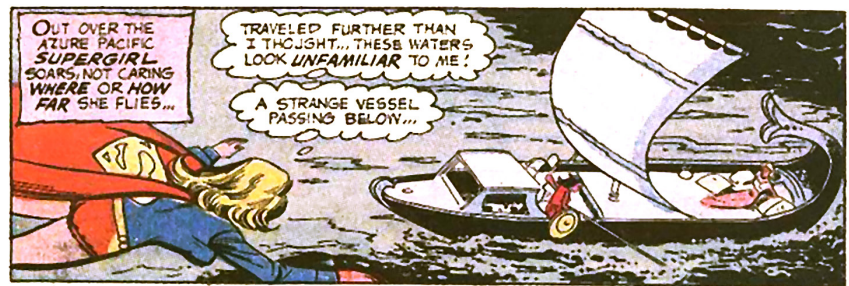
"Since Bob Kanigher had long been the guiding force behind *Wonder Woman* and was officially the editor and main writer on the book at that time, all things Nubia originated with him," Bates explains to *BACK ISSUE*. "Since I was just a 'guest writer' on the book, it's a safe bet most of the story points were his and I was more or less just fleshing out his vision for the character."

Nubia's creation was a historic one, but Bates did not view it as such at the time. "I doubt I gave much thought to future social relevance that early in my career, though it wouldn't surprise me at all if Kanigher viewed her creation in that context," says Bates. "There may have been more overt buzz about 'history-making' three years later when [artist] Mike Grell and I created Tyroc, the first Black Legionnaire, but that would've been because the Legion had a more avid (and vocal) fan-base."

Nubia's next appearance was in *Supergirl* #9 (Jan. 1974), written by Kanigher, with art by Art Saaf. However, she was just a plot device in this tale more than an actual character. Nubia was injured and needed the Girl of Steel to save her. This was a big difference than her previous appearances where she was shown as a strong self-assured warrior. The story would have been the same if a nameless Amazon had been used instead of the great character that had been featured previously.

Nubia wouldn't appear again until the end of the decade, and not even in an in-continuity book. In *Super Friends* #25 (Oct. 1979), writer E. Nelson Bridwell, penciler Ramona Fradon, and inker Bob Smith brought Nubia back for one final Bronze Age outing. The series was a loose tie-in to the popular Saturday morning cartoon that featured DC's big guns [animation know-it-all Andy Mangels expertly chronicled *Super Friends'* long and ever-changing history in a four-part feature appearing in our sister mag, *RetroFan* #26-29—ed.]. The story had Wonder Woman battle Nubia for little more than one page, with no mention of their sisterly connection. A rather inauspicious Bronze Age ending for Nubia.

Nubia came and went so quickly that many fans either did not know about her or forgot her. This is



unfortunate, because Nubia was a noble attempt at brining diversity into the DC Universe and the character's connection with Wonder Woman makes her an even more important character than the other Black females that would follow.

For a character that had started out the decade strong as the first Black female superhero, Nubia barely ended it with a whimper. She should have been bigger in the Bronze Age, especially given featured cover appearances and her link to Wonder Woman. Bates agrees: "Certainly in the ongoing Wonder Woman continuity, at minimum."

WHO IS NU'BIA?

In 1987, with DC Comics going all-in on a rebooted continuity and brand new *Wonder Woman* title with superstar writer/artist George Perez behind the wheel [see *BACK ISSUE* #147—ed.], you would think that Nubia was not far behind. Unfortunately, you would be wrong. Perez did bring diversity to the book, but not with Nubia [see sidebar].

Super Sisterhood

The Maid of Might meets Nubia in *Supergirl* #9 (Dec. 1973-Jan. 1974). Story by Bates, art by Art Saaf and Colletta.

TM & © DC Comics.

WHO IS PHILLIPUS?

In 1987, in the wake of DC's massive company-wide crossover *Crisis on Infinite Earths* and its follow-up *Legends*, writer/artist George Pérez rebooted *Wonder Woman*. This updated post-Crisis mythology was the perfect time to reintroduce Nubia to the new DC Universe.

However, she was nowhere to be found. Instead, Pérez—no stranger to bringing diversity into comics as with his co-creation of Marvel's first Puerto-Rican superhero, the White Tiger—created an entirely new Black Amazon named Phillipus. She made her debut in the pages of *Wonder Woman* #1 (Feb. 1987).

Although Phillipus was not a sister to Diana in this series, she was one of the most important Amazons in the series' run. She was a close confidant to Queen Hippolyta and helped raise Diana into the woman and warrior that she would become both as Diana Prince and in her role as Wonder Woman. She was a Black woman in a position of power and influence when characters were not often seen in these positions. Although she was not as iconic as being a sister to Diana Prince, Pérez had added an important Black character into DC canon regardless.

Phillipus continued to make appearances throughout Pérez's *Wonder Woman* run and even after he left the title. She even became popular enough to have small roles in the animated *Justice League* series, and was portrayed by Ann Ogbomo in the live-action films *Wonder Woman* and both versions of *Justice League*.



Phillipus, illustrated by Phil Jimenez. From *Wonder Woman* vol. 2 #86 (Dec. 2001).
Courtesy of Wikipedia.

TM & © DC Comics.

Sibling Rivalry

Good ol' DC "Human Encyclopedia" E. Nelson Britidwell—he didn't forget Wonder Woman's sister when it seemed like everyone else had! From *Super Friends* #25 (Oct. 1979). Art by Ramona Fradon and Bob Smith.

TM & © DC Comics.



Nubia eventually made her post-Crisis on Infinite Earth appearance in *Wonder Woman Annual* #8 (Sept. 1999), two decades after her final Bronze Age appearance. This time she was referred to as Nu'bia.

However, this wasn't the same character. Besides the name change, the character was not the sister of Diana but instead a warrior who was left to guard Doom's Doorway.

Although Nu'bia was portrayed as a powerful Amazon who could hold her own with Wonder Woman, she could have just been any Amazon warrior and didn't stick out as much as Nubia. After only two appearances (along with showing up in crowd scenes), this version of the character was quickly forgotten and hasn't been seen since.

This was not the last time readers would hear from Nubia... and the next time, she would be given the exposure and cache that she should have been given from the beginning.

WHO IS NUBIA NOW?

With Nubia's less-than-stellar time in the comic book pages, you might think that she would be relegated to the dollar bins. That is not the case. To say that Nubia has made a resurgence would not be correct, because for her to have that she would have had to had made a major presence in the first place. But she has gained prominence in recent years. Why the renewed interest in a character with only a few appearances decades earlier?



In the new millennium, comic book publishers have mined their archives for characters that could connect with readers of all genders, races, and nationalities. Nubia is at the center of DC's multicultural push, along with new versions of pre-existing characters such as Blue Beetle, who's now Latino-American Jaime Reyes. Not only do these characters represent underrepresented minorities, but they also help to present a more diversified world just like our own.

Today, Nubia is no longer the fraternal twin of Diana, but both were born on the same day. Even though they are not related, they have a close sisterly bond. Both even share the title of Wonder Woman.

At this writing, Nubia appears prominently in the 2021 young adult graphic novel *Nubia: Real One* (written by L. L. McKinney and illustrated by Robyn Smith), as a Funko Pop figure, in the DC's Heroes and Villains mobile match 3 game, on T-shirts, and on other items. DC has also published several series featuring the hero including *Nubia & the Amazons* and *Nubia: Queen of the Amazons*, both written by Vita Ayala. It looks like Nubia is here to stay this time—finally.

The title of this article posed the question of "Who is Nubia?" The answer is a bit complicated. Is she simply mainstream comics' first Black female superhero, is she a character that should have been bigger in both the Bronze and Copper Ages than she was, or is she one of DC's most important characters of the new millennium in their quest to represent people of all colors?

Nubia is all of these things and more as she continues to grow within the DC Universe stable of characters. She will probably never reach the



level of Superman, Batman, or even her sister Wonder Woman (then again, who could?), but she has shown that even though she didn't get shot out of the starting gate, she is making her presence felt when she is needed most in a world that must show everyone that they matter and they are represented in the books they read, toys and games they play with, and television and movies that they watch.

A special thank-you to Cary Bates for his time and recollections for this article.

Educator and freelance writer ED LUTE has written for both BACK ISSUE and The Jack Kirby Collector. He enjoys the diversity that promulgates the comic book pages and other superhero media including television shows, movies, and video games.



She's Ready for Primetime Now!

In more recent years Nubia has become a significant and popular character in the DC Universe. *Nubia: Queen of the Amazons* #1 (Aug. 2022) and #4 covers by Khary Randolph.

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end

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TWOMORROWS AD PAGE

is

METAMORPHO

OUT OF HIS ELEMENT AS A SOLO STAR?

by Bryan D. Stroud



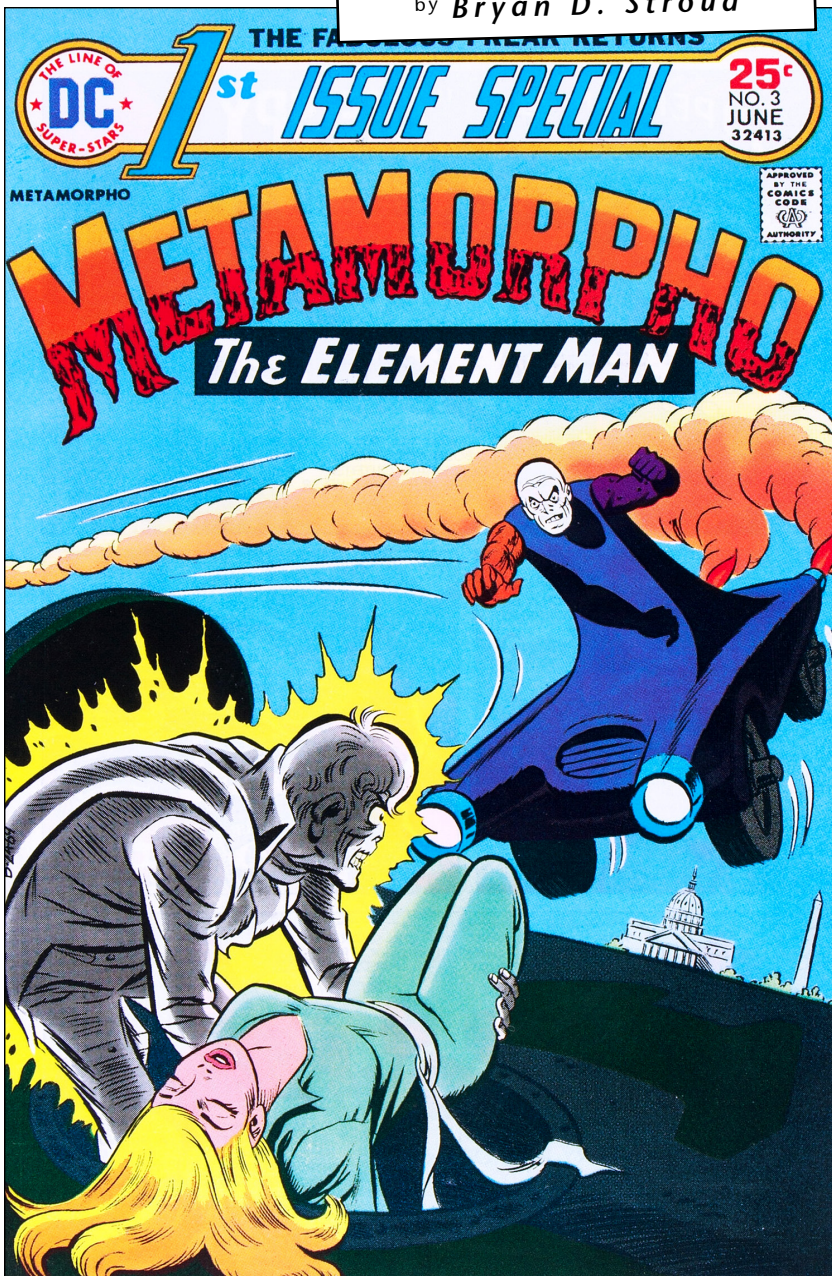
According to the Merriam Webster dictionary, "metamorphosis" is described as a change of physical form, structure, or substance, which is a pretty good way to define that swinging superhero from the '60s, Metamorpho, the Element Man. The character first came onto the scene in *The Brave and the Bold* (B&B) #57 (Dec. 1964–Jan. 1965) under a dynamic cover penciled by co-creator Ramona Fradon, with Charles Paris supplying inks. "The Origin of Metamorpho" was also illustrated by the same artistic team, with Bob Haney scripting and editing by George Kashdan.

THIS IS THE STORY OF THE ELEMENT MAN (METAMORPHO, METAMORPHO)

Readers are quickly introduced to Rex Mason, adventurer, soldier of fortune, and adrenaline junkie, who is passionately in love with Sapphire Stagg, socialite and wealthy heiress to the Stagg fortune—or at least she will be, someday. But meanwhile, Simon Stagg, power-hungry industrialist and brilliant scientist, is still alive, kicking and calling the shots. And boy, does he call them. When the term "control freak" was coined, they likely had "Mr. Millions" in mind. Stagg is suspicious of Rex Mason and serves as both antagonist and frenemy to his daughter's suitor. Throwing into the mix Java—a prehistoric man revived by Simon with enhanced intellect, who additionally suffers an unrequited love for Sapphire—and you have a rich stew for conflict.

Rex, in his bid to make his own fortune and extricate he and his lady love from the controlling Simon Stagg, accepts an assignment from "Daddy-kins" to fetch the Orb of Ra from an ancient pyramid in the Middle East. The gig pays a cool million dollars, but Simon has sent Java along and is plotting to ambush Rex.

Once inside the mysteriously glowing pyramid, Mason interprets some hieroglyphics that show a meteor had fallen and the priest Ahk-Ton had removed a piece of it and made it into a scepter for the pharaoh—and thus the Orb of Ra came to be. Soon, Java and Rex locate the artifact in a chamber, but Java quickly seizes it and knocks Mason unconscious with the intent of leaving him inside the pyramid. The unconscious Rex Mason has accidentally activated a system of pulleys and counterweights



Way-Out Try-Out

Oddball Silver Age superhero Metamorpho, the Element Man—with the character's reunited creators, writer Bob Haney and artist Ramona Fradon, at the helm—gets another shot at stardom in *1st Issue Special* #3 (June 1975).

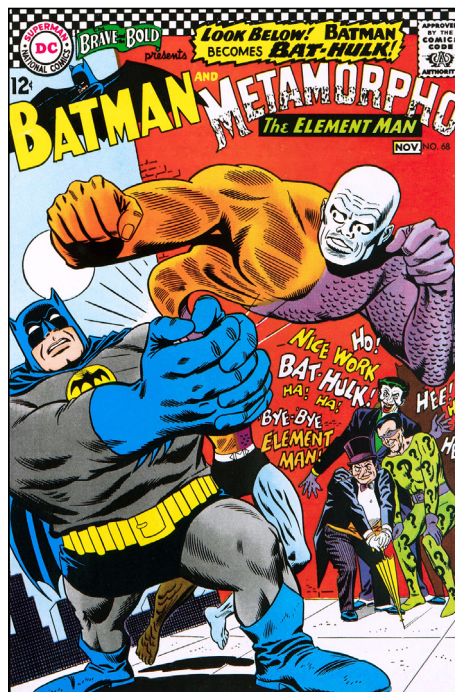
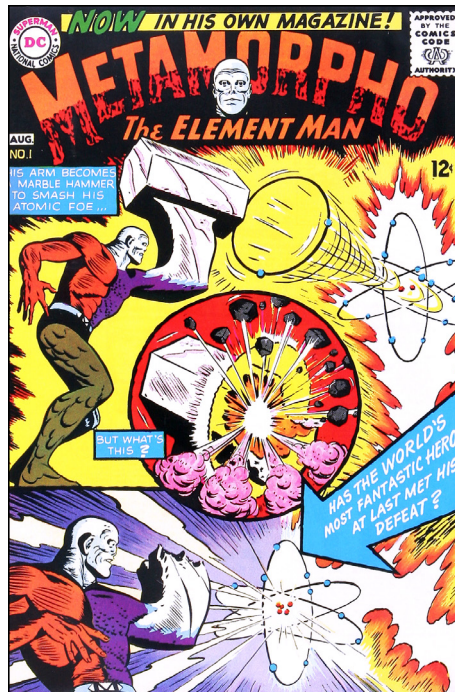
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comics behind the scenes

Great Moments in Metamorpho's Silver Age History

(top left) his premiere, in *The Brave and the Bold* #57 (Dec. 1964–Jan. 1965), and (top right) the first issue of his solo series, *Metamorpho* #1 (July–Aug. 1965). Both covers by Ramona Fradon and Charles Paris. (bottom left) “Metamorpho Says No!” to the World’s Greatest Superheroes in *Justice League of America* #42 (Feb. 1966). Cover by Mike Sekowsky and Murphy Anderson. (bottom right) The first Batman/Metamorpho team-up, reveling in mid-’60s Batmania, in *B&B* #68 (Oct.–Nov. 1966). Cover by Sekowsky and Joe Giella.

TM & © DC Comics.

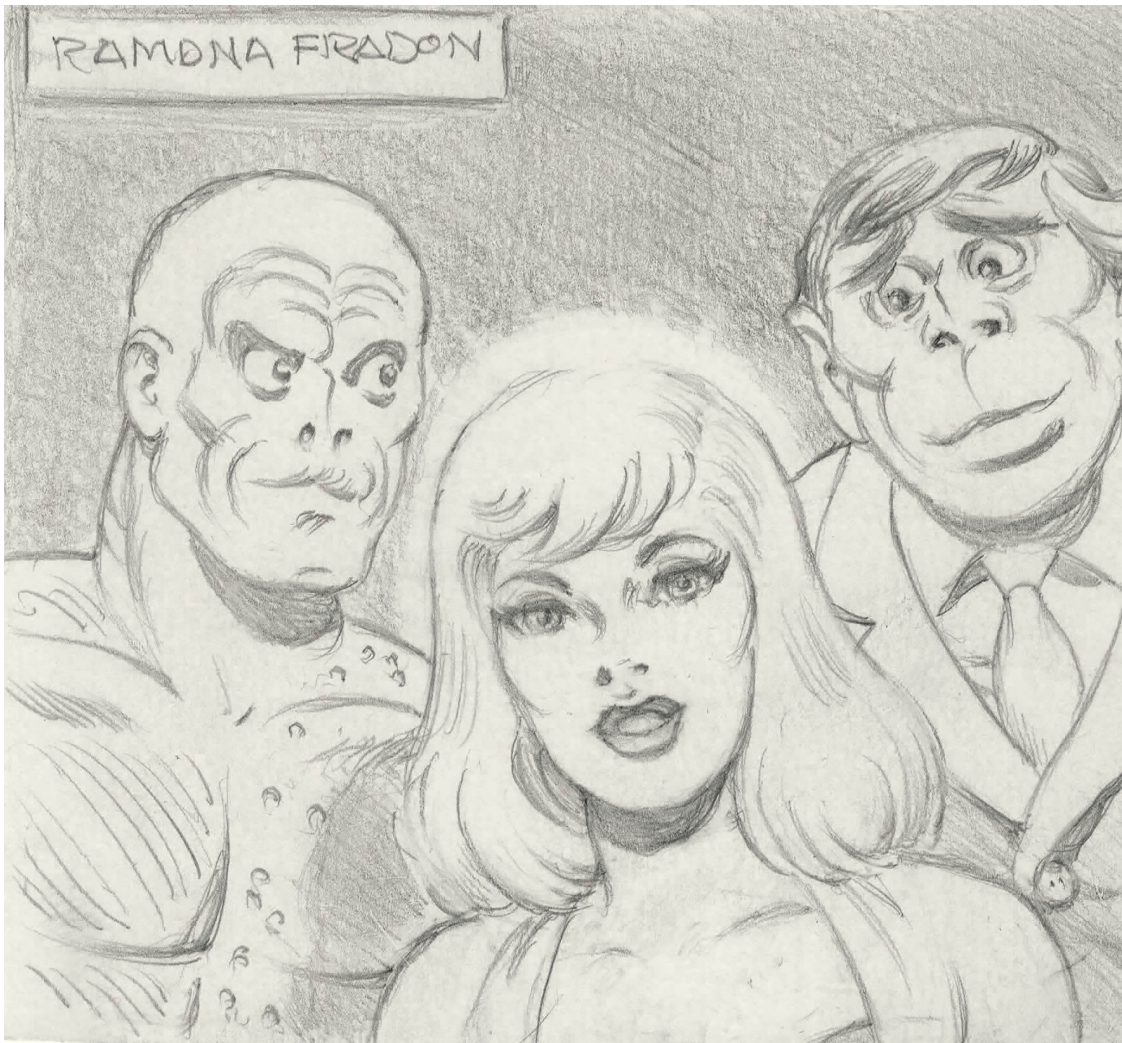


that carry him to another hidden chamber where he finds a landed meteor, glowing with great heat and intensity. Just as he's about to pass out, Rex downs a chemical formula hidden in a ring given to him by Simon Stagg... and when he awakens, he discovers the incredible results of his brush with death when he comes upon a mirror that reveals his drastically altered state. His body now appears to be in quadrants of differing colors and textures and his head is dead white. He then discovers he's trapped within the ancient pyramid, but something causes him to instinctively use his new abilities to alter his physical form by converting his body into a gas that allows him to escape between the building blocks of the pyramid.

Eventually making his way back to the Stagg estate, Rex learns that he has complete control over the elements of his body and can convert all or part of it into those chemicals and can shape shift at will. The only thing that seems to keep him in check is the Orb of Ra, which has a weakening effect on the Element Man, and Simon Stagg keeps it close at hand for that very purpose, while also promising to help Rex find a way to return him to his natural state.

Metamorpho's next appearance is in the very next issue of *B&B* (#58), where he faces off against Maxwell Tremaine before he is given his own title with *Metamorpho* #1 (July–Aug. 1965). The series runs for a total of 17 issues, until cancellation in the spring of 1968.

While having contributed Metamorpho's visual and being co-creator of the character and supporting characters, artist Ramona Fradon was only involved in those two tryout appearances and the first four issues of *Metamorpho*. In a 2007 interview, she recalled some details of her work on the Element Man: "I always hated drawing superheroes and the editors kept assigning them to me. I preferred drawing the mysteries and goofy characters like Plastic Man and Metamorpho." As to his visual, "I did a number of sketches before I arrived at Metamorpho's look. Bob [Haney] and George Kashdan both approved it." She described her brief tenure on the character as well: "I only agreed to get it started. I had a two-year old daughter and wanted to get away from deadlines and be a full-time mom." As far as the book's relatively short run following her exit, Ms. Fradon suggested, "Bob Haney and I had a synergy when we were working on that feature, and I don't think it had the same energetic core of humor after I left. I enjoyed working with Bob enormously. His scripts influenced my drawing, and my drawing influenced him. We had such a rapport on that feature you might say we were walking around in each other's heads."



Three's Company

Rex ain't too happy over Java's loving gaze toward Sapphire in this delightful Metamorpho cast pencil sketch by Remarkable Ramona Fradon. From the collection of Bryan D. Stroud.

Metamorpho TM & © DC Comics.

OUT OF THE GOOP AND INTO THE OUTSIDERS

The Element Man was put on ice for a time, though it should be noted that he had a guest-starring role in *Justice League of America* #42 (Feb. 1966), where he famously told the League "No!" to membership—until he had a reappearance, appropriately enough, in the pages of *The Brave and the Bold*, this time teaming up with Batman in issue #101 (Apr.–May 1972). Bob Haney is again writing the adventure. We learn that Metamorpho had been undergoing experimental treatments in Simon Stagg's basement laboratory, but when he awakens and looks at a nearby calendar, our hero realizes how long he's been out of commission and how ineffective it was. He remains a freak, when all he desires is to be restored to his human form.

At the end of this team-up tale, a caption informs readers that "The magnificent Metamorpho returns in a feature of his own—starting in June's *Action Comics* #413." That did indeed become Rex Mason's new home, at least through issue #418 (Nov. 1972) when he was again sent packing, this time to the pages of *World's Finest Comics* for a few issues, beginning with #217 (Apr.–May 1973). [Editor's note: For more on Metamorpho's run in *Action Comics*, please see *BACK ISSUE* #64.]

At this point, readers could wonder when Rex Mason, a.k.a. Metamorpho, would again emerge into the spotlight on his own. Rex Mason and company seemed to be destined to be relegated to little bursts in the anthology titles, with no place to truly call home.

Then, in 1983, a new title debuted to replace the venerable *Brave and the Bold*, as explained by the writer who brought us *Batman and the Outsiders*, Mike W. Barr: "As has been written before, *Brave & Bold* was being cancelled, and a title had to take its place on the schedule. It had to be Batman-centric, because one of DC's foreign publishers was publishing the four Batman titles as a weekly. So, I came up with the idea of making Batman the leader of a team."

Batman and the Outsiders (BATO) #1 (Aug. 1983) was that book, and the debut issue set the tone for this new team of superheroes. Batman is, to put it politely, disillusioned with the encroaching politics and bureaucracy that seems to be felt in the Justice League of America, the team he'd been associated with since the earliest days. The Dark Knight departs in a bit of a huff and heads for a mission to the foreign land of Markovia, where a new super-team is about to be born.

The World's Greatest Detective assembles a new group of heroes, some new and some seasoned, including Black Lightning, Katana, Halo, Geo-Force, and Metamorpho, the Element Man, who happened to be in the vicinity in his endless pursuit of finding the right scientist to restore him to normal. In fact, it is Metamorpho himself who coins the term "Outsiders" to describe the new team, and despite his reluctance to join the JLA back in the day he becomes a charter member of the Outsiders and stays with them throughout the series.



RAMONA FRADON

PLUS

The 1ST of a **NEW** series with **METAMORPHO**

ACTION COMICS

414 -

JULY

1972

METAMORPHO

The ELEMENT MAN

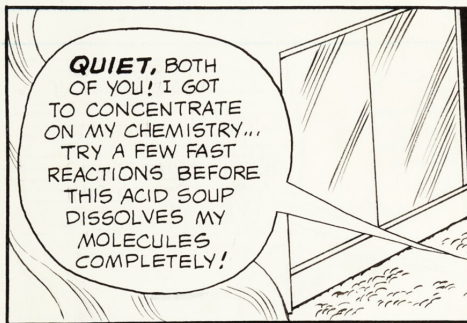
A SINISTER-SHAPED PEAK RISES FROM A SMILING LANDSCAPE SOMEWHERE IN THE GOOD, OLD U.S. OF A ! TOMORROW, IT OPENS TO THE PUBLIC, ITS EXHIBITS AN UPLIFTING LESSON TO A SINFUL WORLD...

BUT, TODAY, ITS HOLLOWED-OUT INTERIOR CONTAINS A BIZARRE SCENE--AS **METAMORPHO**, THE HUMAN CHEMICAL PLANT, FIGHTS AGAINST ENGLUFGING LIQUID DEATH...



REX...THE FUMES...I'M CHOKING--

D-DON'T LET US DOWN...OLD BU-BUDDY!



QUIET, BOTH OF YOU! I GOT TO CONCENTRATE ON MY CHEMISTRY... TRY A FEW FAST REACTIONS BEFORE THIS ACID SOUP DISSOLVES MY MOLECULES COMPLETELY!

DESPERATE, UNABLE TO ASSUME ONE OF HIS USUAL FANTASTIC FORMS AND ESCAPE--THE **ELEMENT MAN** WILLIS HIS NUMB BODY TO ASSUME DIFFERENT CHEMICAL STATES...

UHHNNMMMMM! ALL I'M DOING IS MAKING IT WORSE!

THAT FINK STAGG NEVER TAUGHT ME ENOUGH CHEMISTRY--AFRAID I'D GET INDEPENDENT OF HIM! NOW IT'S HELPING TO DOOM SAPPHERE--HIS OWN DAUGHTER!



AND NOW CONTINUING FROM LAST MONTH'S ISSUE OF **ACTION**, THE CONCLUSION OF THE STARTLING UNCENSORED SAGA OF "THE 7 SINS OF SIMON STAGG".

B-1319B 1

Metamorpho in 'Action'

(top) Cover blurb from *Action Comics* #413 (June 1972), touting its new "Metamorpho" backup series.

(bottom) Original art to the title page of the Metamorpho tale in *Action* #414.

Story by Bob Haney, pencils by John Calnan, inks by Murphy Anderson.

Courtesy of Heritage Auctions (www.ha.com).

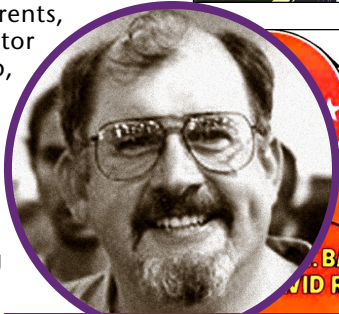
TM & © DC Comics.

"I had not read all his adventures, but I had read his early stories, knew his origin, and his supporting cast," Mike W. Barr shares regarding his familiarity with the Fabulous Freak. "I was not intimately familiar with him, but I liked him." Barr further points out that while Metamorpho had historically not been much of a joiner, there was perhaps more going on with that than met the eye: "Metamorpho said 'No!' to the JLA because JLA editor Julie Schwartz didn't much like the character. But BATO editor Len Wein and I did. We decided the Outsiders would consist of two existing characters and three new ones. Metamorpho has a fun personality and great powers, making him handy as a teammate."

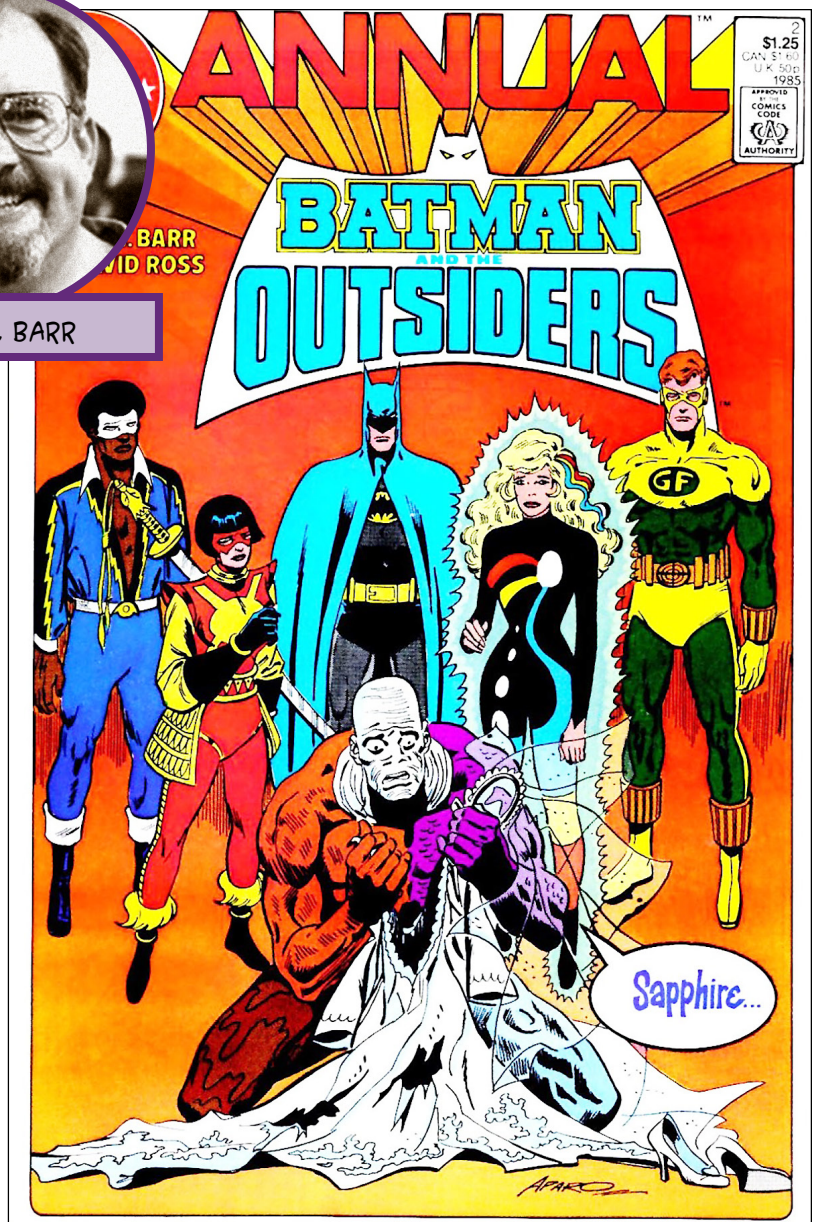
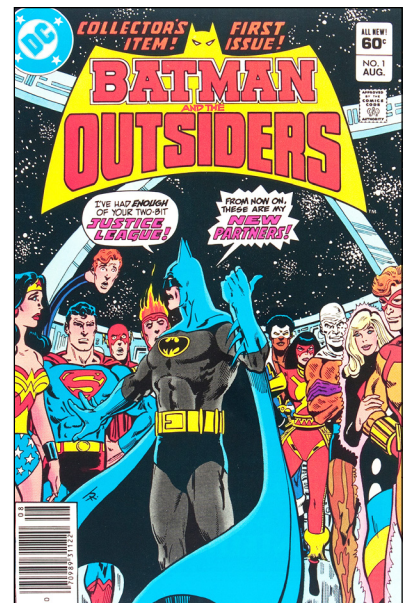
One particular twist Barr put on the enduring romance between Rex Mason and Sapphire Staggs was seeing them tie the knot after nearly 20 years of courting. Mike recalls to *BACK ISSUE*, "It just seemed as though it was time, after all those years, to give some closure to that aspect of the relationship. I had begun to explore the idea of Rex and Sapphire becoming parents, but I was fired off the book as editor before that storyline could develop, and the new editor had no interest in that storyline."

When queried about the possibility of using the series as a springboard to another solo title for Metamorpho, Barr shares, "Mark Waid, when he was a staff editor, and I were discussing the idea of bringing Metamorpho back as a solo character, but it never came to pass. Mark loves Metamorpho, so I wouldn't be surprised to see him do it." [Editor's note: He has! Keep reading!] Barr further offers his thoughts on what makes the Element Man work: "He was obviously created in the fashion of the Marvel heroes—he was nicknamed 'The Fabulous Freak'—but the chemical powers give him some DC DNA, too, making him not just a Marvel imitation, but a strong enough character to survive for decades, thanks to the creative efforts of Bob Haney and Ramona Fradon."

Metamorpho's seeming inability to regain his status as headliner was also addressed: "Maybe because no one has tried. His *1st Issue Special* revival (*1st Issue Special* #3, June 1975) didn't lead to his own series, but maybe the time wasn't right. He's seemed to be a popular character whenever he appears."



MIKE W. BARR



Hanging with His Bat-Buddy
 (top left) Bob Haney gets another crack at the Element Man in this Batman/Plastic Man/Metamorpho team-up in *B&B* #123 (Dec. 1975). (top right) Metamorpho joins the Darknight Detective's new super-team in *Batman and the Outsiders* #1 (Aug. 1983). (bottom) Wedding bell blues, in *BATO Annual* #2 (1985). All covers by Jim Aparo.

TM & © DC Comics.

**Metamorpho
Faces Front**

Look who's all bright and cheerful on Bart Sears' cover to *Justice League Europe* #1 (Apr. 1989)!

TM & © DC Comics.

HOW DO YOU HANDLE A PROBLEM LIKE REX MASON?

After *Batman and the Outsiders* closed up shop in the spring of 1986, Rex Mason was again in limbo for a while until he again became a team member, ironically enough in a subset of Justice League International, itself a subset of the Justice League of America. The new group was called Justice League Europe and was based in Paris, France. The team consisted of Animal Man, Captain Atom, the Elongated Man, the Flash (Wally West), Metamorpho, Power Girl, Rocket Red, and Wonder Woman, serving as a European outpost to keep order on that continent.

The series endured for a solid decade, but Rex Mason didn't particularly have any breakout appearances and seemed to con-

tinue to be a B-list superhero, but right about then, the aforementioned Mark Waid, with an assist from Graham Nolan, serving as co-plotter and artist, were about to give Rex Mason star billing once again, this time in a four-issue miniseries titled simply *Metamorpho*, with issue #1 cover-dated August 1993. It is notable that Graham Nolan gave Metamorpho a kind of wrestler's physique, perhaps updating him for a new era.

The basic premise of this miniseries includes a tough list of conflicts and complications for the Element Man to overcome. They include trying to help his son, Joey, the result of his marriage to Sapphire. He and Sapphire have divorced and she has remarried... to none other than Java! Still a toddler, Joey has inherited his father's chemical abilities, but in reverse. Joey has the ability to transmute other materials to others of his choosing. An alchemist's dream and likely one for Simon Stagg, who is "taking care" of his grandson but doubtless has a heavy self-interest in doing so rather than simple grandfatherly affection. Stagg has Joey under heavy security in his compound, but Rex is determined to reconnect with his son.

Another dramatic plot point is that an archaeologist named Jillian Conway is waving the possibility of a cure under Rex Mason's nose, but it's going to require finding the Orb of Ra, which had apparently been stolen from Simon Stagg years prior. Conway had been exposed and is also an elemental freak, but inexperienced in the use of those abilities and also seems to be in a process of decay, so time is



MARK WAID

© Luigi Novi.

STORY BY
GIFFEN &
DEMATTEIS
ART BY
SEARS &
MARCOS



of the essence to find the Orb of Ra and hopefully reverse the effects suffered by her and Rex Mason.

Their quest leads them from Ireland to Morocco and points in-between, including finding a fake Orb of Ra. Eventually they track it back to the very same pyramid where Rex Mason found it all those years ago. In a story with some wild twists and turns, including Java being killed by Simon Stagg in “self-defense,” Sapphire at last standing up to her father, and Joey being cured of his condition, it looks like things are finally going Rex Mason’s way as he and his family are reunited and the future appears bright.

Mark Waid generously shares his recollections of the assignment with *BACK ISSUE* in an interview conducted by email:

BRYAN STROUD: *How did the assignment come about?*

MARK WAID: We lived in easier times back then, when DC would greenlight a mini about a third-tier character with ease so long as the pitch made sense. That rarely happens today in a more budget-conscious DC world, but basically it was “we love this character, we have a take, can we do four issues?” There’s also a little-known consideration that helped the C-listers get books from time to time—in order to keep their names trademarked.

STROUD: *Did you have to do much research to prepare for the miniseries?*

WAID: I didn’t have to do any back reading—all of DC’s Silver Age is committed to memory even today—but with *Metamorpho*, I always do a ton of research into chemistry. It makes me absolutely insane that everyone keeps getting his powers wrong. He can’t turn into just any element, only those already in the human body (and combinations thereof). His human form wasn’t so much utterly transformed as it was scrambled, if you will. Giving him the power to transform into just anything is lazy, it takes away what makes him unique, and it makes no sense since he could then just win every fight by turning into plutonium.

STROUD: *Was there any discussion of seeing if *Metamorpho* could return to a solo title?*

WAID: Not so much as I recall, though had it done gangbuster sales, they would have asked for more. It sold reasonably well—I don’t remember sales figures, but they met expectations for an oddball project like this one.

STROUD: *Did you and Graham Nolan have plotting sessions?*

WAID: We did! If I recall correctly, we were both living in Buffalo, New York, at the time, allowing us opportunities to talk about wild, visually interesting deathtraps—and about fatherhood, since I have no kids of my own.

STROUD: *As the search for the Orb of Ra went global, I was a little surprised at Ireland as a destination. Was Cohan’s pub by chance a tribute to the location in the *Quiet Man* movie?*

WAID: I’d just watched the movie *The Quiet Man*, which Graham loved, hence the nod in naming the pub Cohan’s.



STROUD: *After seeing multiple references in the story to “The Farouk Affair,” I wondered if I’d missed something. Was there a storyline about that or was it more of a placeholder in the story?*

WAID: [Metamorpho editor] Brian [Augustyn] and I both loved the show *Moonlighting*, where whenever the writers needed the characters to reference some unsolved case, it was always “the Anselmo case.” Hence the forever-unseen “Farouk Affair.”

STROUD: *Speaking of movies, I’m guessing The Maltese Falcon was another source of inspiration.*

WAID: By all means. Brian and I were both huge fans of that film.

STROUD: *Simon Stagg was portrayed as particularly ruthless and even a bit creepy. Was that a way to solidify him as an antagonist?*

WAID: It was certainly a way to bring him further into the 1990s. The Stagg of the Silver Age wasn’t honestly much of an antagonist. I do kinda regret dropping hints that his interest in his daughter was borderline creepy, but that was the time we lived in.

Pardon My Punch

Rex didn’t see that one coming! A spectacular original art page (courtesy of Heritage) from *Metamorpho* #3 (Oct. 1993), from the Mark Waid–written miniseries. Pencils by Graham Nolan, inks (with signature) by Ron Boyd.

TM & © DC Comics.

Looking for the Element Man?

Detail from the Dan Mora–drawn cover of *Batman/Superman: World’s Finest* #13 (May 2023). Metamorpho and his entourage were involved in a subplot beginning that issue of this Mark Waid–written series.

TM & © DC Comics.



STROUD: *Recently you had another crack at Metamorpho, in 2023 issues of Batman/Superman: World’s Finest. How did the two experiences compare?*

WAID: Look, anytime I’m able to dig out my chemistry textbooks and do a Metamorpho story, I’m happy. He’s often name-checked in *Shazam!* as well, and cameos in issue #9.

STROUD: *What do you think makes Metamorpho work as a character?*

WAID: First, he was Indiana Jones before Indiana Jones was Indiana Jones. In the Silver Age, most powered and/or costumed heroes were guys with stuffy office jobs or millionaire playboys. Rex Mason was a straight-up adventurer who got his hands dirty. And it’s such a simple premise with a supporting cast that you can grasp instantly.

STROUD: *Why do you think he hasn’t been able to be a headliner after his original series was cancelled?*

WAID: All it would take would be the random-chance perfect combination of creators. I love reminding people that *Green Arrow* has been DC’s bestselling book not once, but twice. Anything can happen if the stars align.

THE FABULOUS FREAK’S FRESHMAN YEAR

Unfortunately, when this miniseries ended, so did Metamorpho’s prospects—at least until his second shot as a solo star, when, beginning in 2008, Dan Jurgens was given the opportunity to feature the Element Man in a six-issue miniseries titled *Metamorpho Year One*. Jurgens did the layouts for the first two issues and scripted the entire series, a wonderful mixture of the familiar, including appearances by Max Tremain and the Thunderer, along with some contemporary material that made it a highly entertaining read.

Dan Jurgens generously shares his recollections of the assignment with *BACK ISSUE* in an interview conducted by email:

BRYAN STROUD: *How did you get linked up with Metamorpho?*

JURGENS: [DC executive] Dan DiDio gave me a call and asked if I knew much about or had any interest in Metamorpho. I started

talking about the fun qualities of the old series from the ‘60s, as well as his appearances in *The Brave and the Bold* and *Justice League of America*, and after that, we were off and running.

STROUD: *Was much research involved?*

JURGENS: More as a way of refreshing my memory. I was well acquainted with the character and always found him to be an odd, fun, intriguing character with a unique cast.

STROUD: *You began with some layouts and then focused on writing. Did you feel your scripts were interpreted well and was it difficult to let the artistic portion go?*

JURGENS: The plan was always for me to draw the entire miniseries, but we got started a bit later than anticipated. By that point, other projects were coming on line and I had to step aside.

STROUD: *Did you receive much editorial input or were you pretty free to write the story you wanted?*

JURGENS: I had a pretty good sense of freedom, but I always anticipate that, because the idea is to work with editors I have a good relationship with. Once you do that, you’re likely to have a good collaboration that allows you to go in the direction you want.

STROUD: *Simon Stagg seemed to be portrayed as utterly ruthless. Was this a way to set him apart from the classic version of the character?*

JURGENS: The idea wasn’t to set him apart as much as it was to emphasize what was already there. Stagg had been jerking Metamorpho around for years and to do that, you really have to be rather ruthless, right? I really think it was always there. We just emphasized it.

STROUD: *Your use of classic themes like the Junkyard of Doom and the Thunderer seemed like a love letter to the Silver Age. Was that your intent?*

JURGENS: I think it was more a way of capturing what made the character work in the first place. Characters are often changed so much that they end up being pushed too far away from what made them work. My own philosophy is that it’s generally best to embrace what was originally there and build around that.



DAN JURGENS

Gage Skidmore / Wikimedia Commons.

STROUD: You also gave a clever nod to the Silver Age “Metamorpho Says No!” story and left intact the fact that Rex Mason is a reluctant hero. Do you feel this is a foundational characteristic of the Element Man?

JURGENS: Without a doubt, yes. Rex didn’t ask to be Metamorpho nor did he seek out the life of a hero. What happened to him was pure happenstance. Given his druthers, he’d have gone back to his previous life.

STROUD: Was this an attempt to test the waters to see if Metamorpho could again carry his own title? It looked like the building blocks were in place, particularly with Sapphire Stagg’s new love interest.

JURGENS: Without ever identifying it as a test, we always know that if a book or project does well, it’ll have legs. Unfortunately, I think when Metamorpho is on his own, he’s likely to have a more narrow audience. He’s one of those characters that may work best in a group book, if the goal is a wider audience.

STROUD: What else makes Metamorpho tick as a character?

JURGENS: Part of it is that sense of reluctance and wish that he could go back to being normal. Add Stagg to that, as someone who’s pulling Rex’s strings, and it makes for an intriguing setup.

STROUD: Any thoughts as to why he hasn’t been able to have a solo series since the original was cancelled?

JURGENS: It’s a bit hard to say, but I tend to think that Metamorpho is such a product of the ‘60s camp and kitsch that he has a hard time working with today’s audiences. Now... I’m sure that there’s someone out there who has a “take” on Metamorpho that might work well, but I also think some of that would require moving him far away from his original concepts and approach.

As we can see, Metamorpho has continued onward in the DC Universe for nearly 60 years, including bit parts in *Wednesday Comics* and even a team-up with Scooby-Doo. Despite his positive reception, he seems to continue to lack the star power to regain his title as a headliner.

Is the Element Man too much a product of the past to be more than an also-ran, or in the hands of the right creative team would he rise from the ashes and be a force to contend with again?

Whatever the case may be, fans of the Fabulous Freak can continue to thrill to his amazing exploits from a goodly catalog of adventures while waiting to see what the future holds for Metamorpho.



BRYAN STROUD proudly wears the badge of *Metamaniac* and appreciates the kind help of Mike W. Barr, Mark Waid, and Dan Jurgens, along with the opportunity to revisit the career of the *Fabulous Freak* known and loved as *Metamorpho*, the *Element Man*.

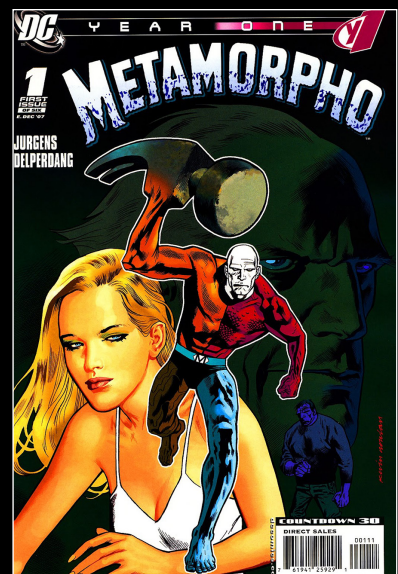
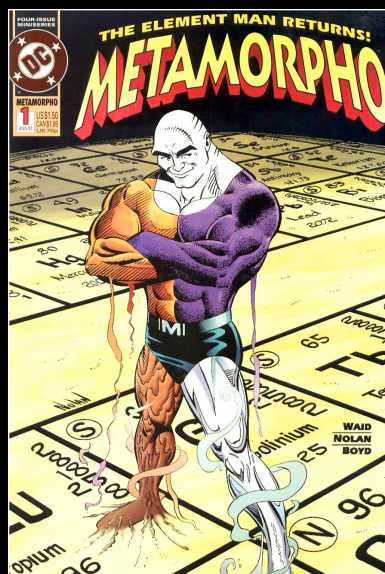


Metamorpho Says ‘Yes!’

...to the incredible Kevin Nowlan covers that adorned his *Year One* miniseries, that is. (top) From the Heritage archives, original Nowlan art—featuring the JLA—to *Metamorpho Year One* #6 (late Feb. 2008). (bottom) Cover to issue #4.

TM & © DC Comics.

METAMORPHO COVER GALLERY



TM & © DC Comics.

end

FRIENDS FOREVER:

FlashBack!

THE BROMANCE OF VARTOX AND SUPERMAN

by John Wells



Among the pleasures that emerged from the revival of the Justice Society of America in the 1960s was watching their younger Justice League counterparts interact with heroes who had years more of experience. Earth-Two Flash Jay Garrick, in particular, became a fatherly advisor to Earth-One Flash Barry Allen. It was a relationship Superman could only dream of.

As the model for which every other superhero aspired, the Man of Steel at best interacted with others as peers. Earth-Two's Clark Kent, it was teased in 1970s text pages, had settled down to marry Lois Lane and succeed George Taylor as editor of the *Daily Star*. Sadly, writers of the period rarely gave the elder Superman the opportunity to share his wisdom with Earth-One's younger Metropolis Marvel.

Luckily, 26-year-old Cary Bates—already a veteran scripter of the Superman series—had ideas on filling that void. Accompanied by artists Curt Swan and Bob Oksner, he introduced a seasoned newcomer in

Superman #281 (cover-dated Nov. 1974), on sale in August. Vartox, readers soon learned, was the champion of a world trillions of light years away, a 50-something hero who enjoyed the love and admiration of the entire population and had just married his own version of Lois Lane.

Still in the honeymoon phase, Vartox was stunned to find his bride dead on their bedroom floor without so much as a mark on her body. He recalled that “for years she suffered from mysterious pains and ailments” and the autopsican confirmed that there was a connection. The hero was stunned to learn that she had been “biologically linked” to a woman from Earth. When her “bionic twin” died, his bride had perished as well. Using a time-scanscope of his own invention, Vartox discovered that his wife’s twin had been ruthlessly gunned down by an armed robber on Earth named Frank Sykes. Even more ghastly was that, thanks to a legal loophole, Sykes would not be punished for the crime.

Vartox vowed to bring Sykes to his world for punishment, but concluded that a direct approach was not an option. “By hyper-powers, [he] mentally projected what would most likely happen if he carried out such a battle-plan—a clash between Superman and [himself]—ending in the death of the woman he loves” (i.e., Lois Lane, as seen on Nick Cardy’s vivid cover). Instead, Vartox met Sykes in the guise of a fellow criminal, manipulated him into stealing a jewel, and convinced him to return to his alien world for more riches.

Despite the stealthy hero’s best precautions, Superman spotted Sykes snatching the gem and attempted to intervene. Still hoping to avoid a potentially disastrous confrontation with the Man of Steel, Vartox funneled some of his power into Sykes, who sent Superman spinning away like “a human corkscrew.”

The ‘Bear’ Necessities

Nick Cardy’s provocative cover (courtesy of Heritage) to *Superman* #281 (Nov. 1974) introduced DC’s hairiest he-man since Green Arrow’s makeover—Vartox! The cover’s sexism was spoofed in late 2009 in (inset) Amanda Conner and Jimmy Palmiotti’s cover for *Power Girl* #7. Unless otherwise noted, scans accompanying this article are courtesy of John Wells.

TM & © DC Comics.



A JOHN BOORMAN FILM

ZARDOZ

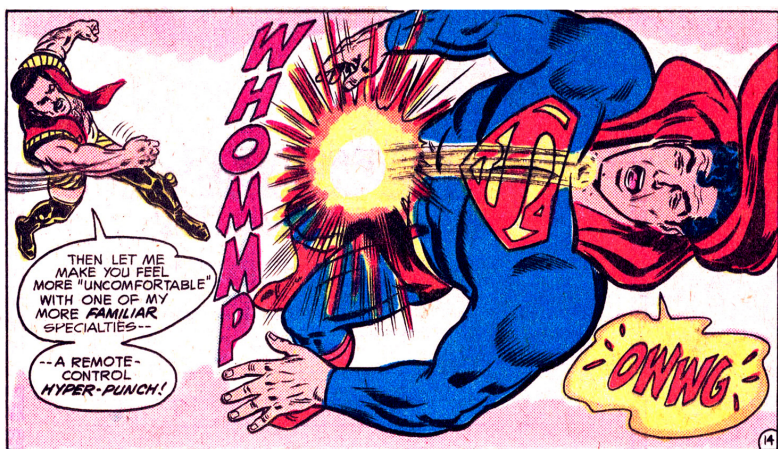
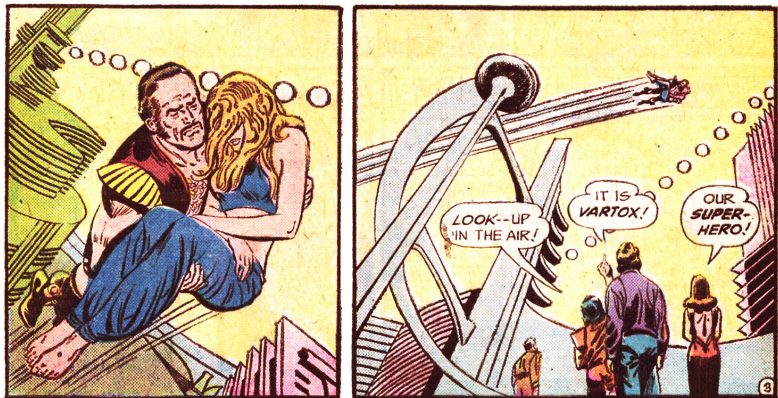
20th Century Fox Presents
SEAN CONNERY
 in
ZARDOZ

Written, Produced and Directed by
JOHN BOORMAN

Also-starring
CHARLOTTE RAMPLING
 SARA KESTELMAN And JOHN ALDERTON



PANAVISION®
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Meet Our Hands-some Hero

(top) Vartox grieves the loss of his wife and is lauded by those he protects, in *Superman* #281. (center) Vartox's hands were the conduits of many of his hyper-powers, as sampled in this panel from *Action Comics* #475. (bottom) Vartox doesn't even have to physically punch his opponent when waylaying the Man of Steel in this panel from *Superman* #356.

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Superman raced after the duo, now traveling 7.5 light years via a teleport-beam, and literally outraced the ray to destroy "a fragment of a white dwarf star" in its path. On his home planet, Vartox placed the killer under arrest and explained that "not a law was broken, Sykes. I carefully worked out my plan so you'd come of your own free will. And thanks to your greed, you did." He confirmed to Superman that "I planted the gem [in the jewelry store] myself. I could not let Sykes steal one of the store-jewels—that would be breaking a law."

Though the Man of Steel was sympathetic, he was concerned about the confinement of an Earthman on another world for the 60 years that its law dictated. The hyper-man was accommodating, noting that "he has already served his time. As you can see, Sykes' age has been accelerated by 60 years. Now that our laws have dealt with him, I can accept my wife's death in peace." Heading home with the 90-year-old Sykes, Superman noted that "the scales of justice have balanced out. Frank Sykes got away with murder on one world... only to pay the penalty for it on another."

Bonded

Vartox's physical appearance was based upon Sean Connery's look and costume in the 1974 sci-fi flick, *Zardoz*. Poster art by Ron Lesser. Courtesy of Heritage Auctions (www.ha.com).

© 20th Century Studios.

MACHO, MACHO MAN

Certainly, the Man of Steel had never met anyone like Vartox before. Unlike the multitude of fresh-faced, clean-shaven intergalactic heroes he'd encountered during the Silver Age, this hero sported a handlebar mustache and a receding hairline that conveyed maturity. Vartox virtually radiated testosterone, his hairy chest barely concealed by a brown vest (supplemented by black-and-yellow bikini briefs, long boots... and nothing else). A subset of fandom loved to laugh at the outfit, viewing it as outrageous on a man without acknowledging that many costumed women were forced to wear even less material.

In any event, those visuals were no accident. Bates was a devout fan of the James Bond franchise—even penning an unused treatment for *Moonraker*—and he couldn't resist tipping his hat for former Bond actor Sean Connery. In 1974, the famed Scotsman had just starred in a science fiction adventure called *Zardoz*, complete with an outfit not much different from the one worn by Vartox. "I recall giving Curt [Swan] a bunch of *Zardoz* stills as swipes," Bates recalled to Michael Eury in *The Krypton Companion* (2006).

"We were fortunate to have Curt Swan on the Vartox stories," Bates explained to *BACK ISSUE* in May 2024. "Of all the Superman artists working at the time, his photorealistic style made him the ideal choice because he was able to capture the Sean Connery likeness to perfection." Just as Bates wrote all the Vartox stories of the 1970s and 1980s, Swan penciled them, missing only a two-parter done by Kurt Schaffenberger. The legendary artist depicted Vartox for the last time in December 1986's *Who's Who: The Definite Directory of the DC Universe* #25.

Gay novelist and playwright Robert Rodi, then an 18-year-old Chicago fan writing as "Bob Rodi," responded enthusiastically in *Superman* #285's letters column. "Women have been sexy in comics," he declared, "but not men. Sure, he was modeled after Sean Connery in *Zardoz*, but he was terrific looking. It was great to see a scantily clad, hairy-chested hero for once. And with a real masculine mustache, not the little accidents that usually occur on the upper lips of other heroes."

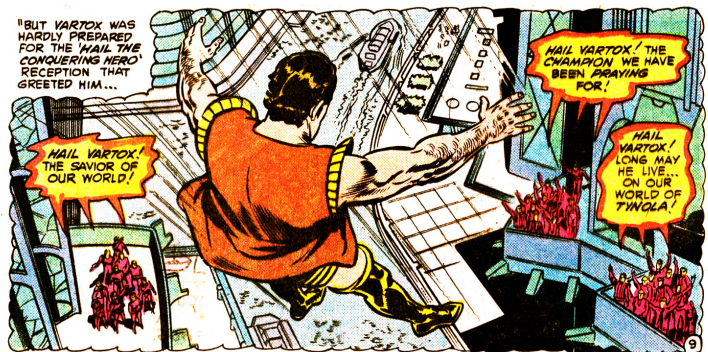
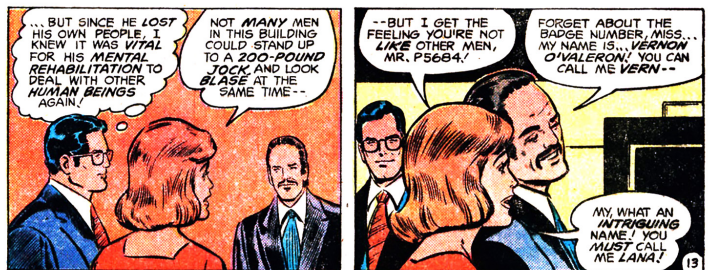
However good the response to the character, Vartox seemed destined to be a one-off homage. Three years later, however, he made a surprise return in a mid-1977 Bates two-parter (*Action Comics* #476–477), with pencils by Kurt Schaffenberger. Staggered by an attack that he'd once have shrugged off, the alien hero conceded that "the specter of age is finally taking its toll on my hyper-powers." For the sake of his people, Vartox used the transcope to seek a solution and found it in the extra-terrestrial Karb-Brak. Afflicted with an allergy to the superpowers that all of his own planet's people possessed, the latter alien had sought refuge on Earth in 1976's *Action Comics* #460–463.

Vartox realized that "the energy toxins which caused Karb-Brak's dread superhero allergy contained the vital elements [that he] needed to revitalize himself." The hyper-man traveled to Earth, secretly reactivated his allergy and, while Karb-Brak fought Superman in "his fever-rage," Vartox "absorb[ed] those vital elements." Intoxicated by the energies in his system and suffering "enormous guilt for endangering Karb-Brak's

life," Vartox convinced himself that it was Superman who had been losing his powers, not himself.

In a one-on-one battle, the Man of Steel soon realized he was no match for the added hyper-man. His only option was a psychological tactic. Disguised as the hyper-man's late wife, Lois Lane called on Superman to abandon the fight and return home to her. Tears streaming down his cheeks, Vartox insisted that "she is *not* your wife—she is *mine!*" The plan had worked and a contrite Vartox told Superman to "consider yourself fortunate, old friend, to know the love of Lois Lane. *Never* take her for granted." In the company of Karb-Brak, whom he'd unwittingly cured as he recharged his powers, Vartox headed homeward.

"I first ran into Vartox in *Action* #475–476, though I have a vague memory of having read his first appearance," longtime Marvel editor Tom Brevoort tells *BACK ISSUE*. "Either way, I had no awareness of *Zardoz* or Sean Connery at that young an age, and so I took Vartox at face value, as a well-established alien hero,



Crisis on Earth-V

(top) The destruction of Vartox's homeworld, Valeron, in *Action Comics* #498. (center) Hey, Vern—it's Vartox! Also from *Action* #498, the displaced hyper-man, as Vernon O'Valeron, cozies up to Lana Lang. (bottom) The big bear of a hero is welcomed by the people of Tynola, in *Superman* #356.

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Ain't No Ordinary Bromance

A lively Superman vs. Vartox smack-down in original art form as rendered by the super Curt Swan, inked by Frank Chiaramonte. From *Superman* #357 (Mar. 1981). Courtesy of Heritage.

TM & © DC Comics.

assuming that he must have been a character with a long history of appearances in past Superman stories and not somebody who'd only been created a short time ago. And I liked him in the same way that I liked the Earth-Two Superman, in that he was portrayed as being older and more experienced than the Earth-One Man of Steel, and so acted as a bit of a mentor to him (even though his appearances always wound-up causing trouble for Superman). He was one of several elements that was introduced into the series during Julie Schwartz's tenure that added some texture to the character's universe."

HANDY HYPER-POWERS

As he became a recurring character in a succession of Bates/Swan tales, details of Vartox's abilities were filled in, although it was never specified how he acquired them in the first place. His so-called hyper-powers were "psychic in nature" and mostly directed through his hands. Aside from the powers

of super-strength, flight, super-sight, intangibility, teleportation, and telekinesis, he was capable of generating blasts of heat and cold and could place his adversaries in suspended animation. His "hyper-charge" amounted to a virtual death-bolt. He could also manipulate his hyper-energy into forming nets, ropes, force bubbles, or other basic objects. With hyper-hypnosis, he could manipulate crowds into seeing whatever he wished. At one point, he even "defied all the laws of physics and turned a three-dimensional object into a two-dimensional one." His ultimate exploitation of his abilities temporarily "converted [his] molecular structure into pure hyper-energy," generating a staggering burst of destructive force.

His home was belatedly identified as Valeron in *Action Comics* #498 (on sale in May 1979, with an August cover date). Situated in the "Sombrero Hat" Galaxy, it held technology that one might anticipate on Earth in another few centuries. But it was not Earth, despite the presence of a dominant humanoid race. A glance into the sky revealed two orbs, a pair of suns and a pair of lunar satellites, possibly known as the Dadra Moons. The atmosphere was composed of 60% oxygen (versus 20% on Earth). Open flames were discouraged on Valeron.

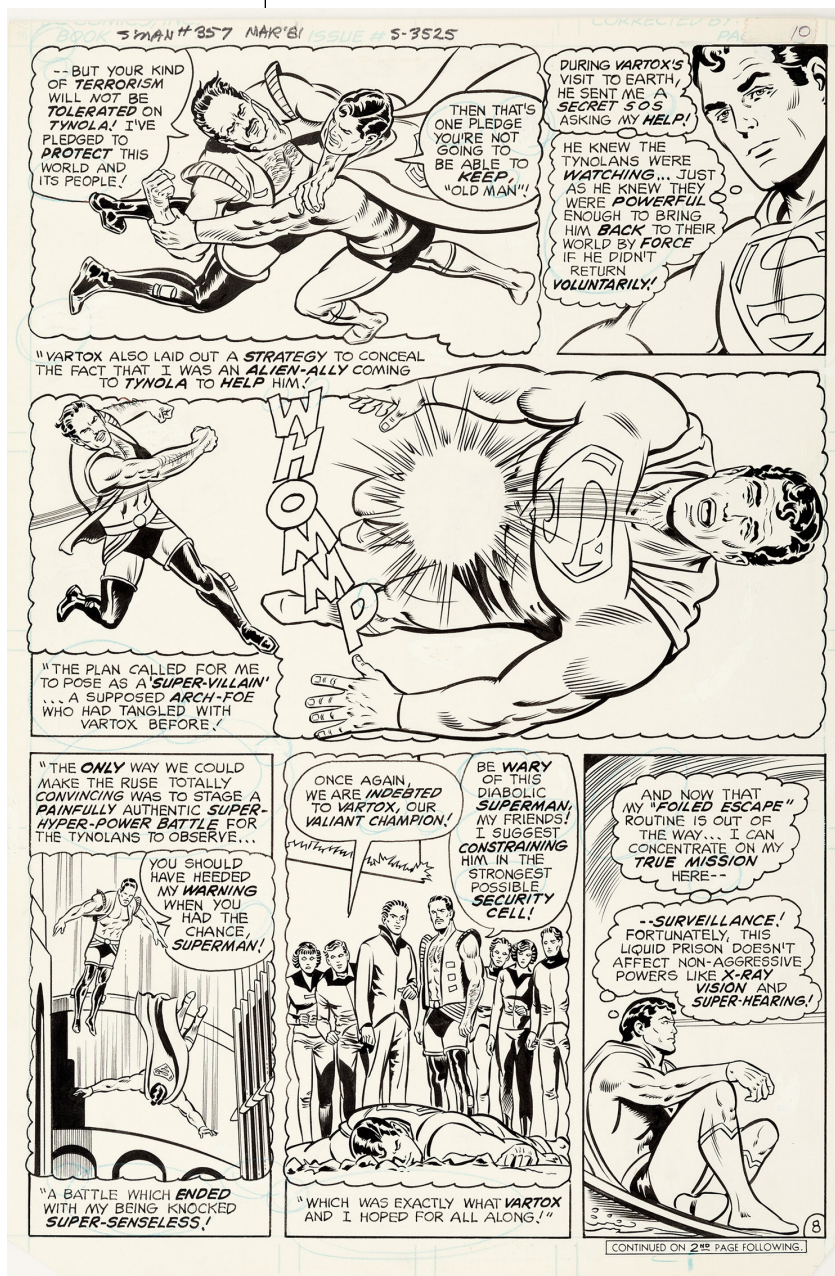
Returning to Valeron from a routine patrol of the galaxy in *Action* #498, Vartox was soaking in the sights and sounds of his beloved world when his "hyper-senses detect[ed] a violent vibratory flux spreading rapidly across the planet." In a matter of moments, the world had detonated like a bomb!

With nowhere else to turn, the inconsolable hyper-man traveled to Earth, where he choked out the details of the tragedy to Superman. "Though the Man of Steel still endures the scars of immeasurable grief from losing his own home world when he was a mere infant, he cannot begin to comprehend the weight of the pain and agony that must now weigh upon his comrade's mighty shoulders." Deep in the grasp of survivor's guilt, Vartox found himself suffering visions of his people blaming him for their deaths.

Regaining his composure, the hero displayed several radioactive fragments of Valeron and asked Superman if he might use the equipment of his Fortress of Solitude to analyze the rocks for clues to his world's destruction. The Man of Steel was agreeable to the proposal but insisted that his friend set up roots in Metropolis and mingle with other human beings rather than pull away from society in his grief.

Grudgingly adopting the persona of Galaxy Broadcasting security officer Vernon O'Valeron, the grieving hero found a welcome distraction in Clark Kent's co-anchor (and childhood girlfriend) Lana Lang. Alas, the sparks flying between the couple were nothing compared to what was happening in Earth's atmosphere on a microscopic level. Vartox's investigation revealed that he had inadvertently picked up "an undetectable space element" that fatally interacted with Valeron's oxygen-rich atmosphere. Worse, he'd carried that doom to Earth, whose lower oxygen level was the only reason it hadn't blown up already.

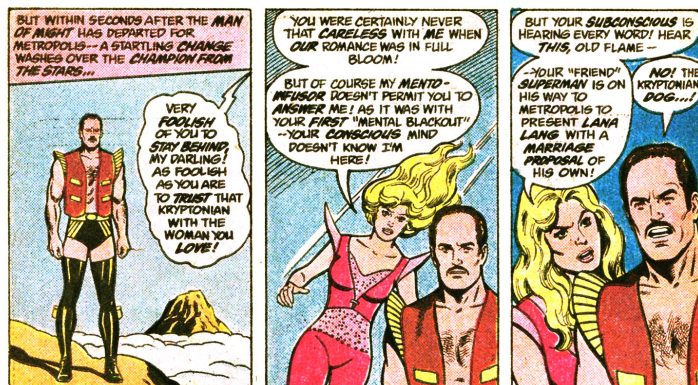
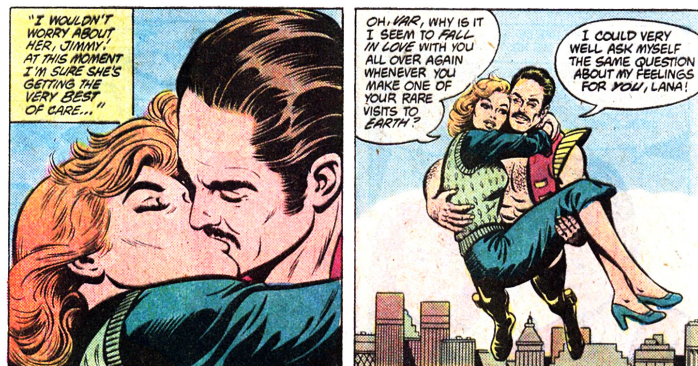
Given the psychic base of his powers, Vartox began subconsciously "broadcasting [his] dread of Earth's impending doom at a telepathic level so



Fifty First Dates

(top) "Var" drops in on Lana for a romantic flight over Metropolis in *Superman* #373. (bottom) In the very next issue, the duplicitous Syreena fools Vartox into another conflict with Superman.

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intense, Earth people [were] being overwhelmed by [his] fears." Playing Science Council to Vartox's Jor-El, Superman insisted that his friend was working off bad data. Eventually, the Man of Steel came around to the truth, joining his friend in using the irradiated fragments of Valeron to save Earth.

As *Action* #499 ended, Vartox kissed Lana Lang goodbye. She'd been stunned by the fact that she'd fallen for another superhero, sighing, "You know, it's funny—deep down, I guess I always suspected you were too good to be true, 'Mr. Vernon O'Valeron.'"

One also suspects that Vartox may have wanted him to deny himself happiness in penance for his unwitting destruction of Valeron. Officially, though, he felt that his powers would be wasted on a superhero-rich world like Earth and vowed to seek out "a struggling civilization in desperate need of a champion." That said, he also promised Lana that, if she was open to the idea, he'd come back to visit one day.

LONG-DISTANCE ROMANCE

That day fell in November 1980, with *Superman* #356 (cover-dated Feb. 1981), when he checked back in long enough to inform his long-distance girlfriend that he was now protecting a particularly embattled world called Tynola. By now, there was a constant in any Vartox-Superman reunion. Like two Marvel superheroes, they inevitably had to come to blows before uniting to fight a common enemy. It was no surprise, then, when the Man of Steel followed his friend back to Tynola, picked a fight, and got his clock cleaned by Vartox.

It was all a charade to ferret out the true motives of the Tynolans, who had been manufacturing crises to keep their so-called champion busy. Their goal was to sacrifice a super-being to a cosmic entity dubbed Moxumbra. With Vartox and Superman on the case, the plot blew up in their face and Moxumbra turned its figurative tail and ran. Demonstrating empathy that would have made Ma and Pa Kent proud, Vartox insisted on sticking around as Tynola's defender. The monstrosity, he declared at the end of *Superman* #357, had "warped their moral judgment. Ironically, *now* they truly *do* need a super-champion to guide them, to help them back on the path of self-reliance."

The post-Moxumbra era on Tynola was considerably less perilous, though, and Vartox now felt comfortable in taking extended vacations to Earth to visit Lana. Although she was frustrated by the pattern that was emerging ("A few precious days of bliss, and then we'll say our goodbyes"), Lana was genuinely touched by his insistence that she not abandon her life and friends on his behalf. "In spite of all your awesome powers," she told him, "you've always treated me as nothing less than an equal. You don't know what a *rare* quality that is in the men I meet. The ones who aren't trying to dominate me feel threatened by my successful career as a TV journalist."

Admittedly, as Vartox confided to his Kryptonian friend, it would have been difficult for Lana to join him on Tynola, anyway. Its "atmosphere would soon prove fatal to her or anyone else with an Earth-based physiology." That suddenly became a moot point when a ghostly being bestowed a protective aura on Lana and erased her memory of the encounter. Vartox and Superman were astonished when they found her apartment filled with a poisonous gas, something that the hyper-man recognized instantly as the Tynolan atmosphere. Having discovered that the

blue glow around her body had somehow immunized her, Lana realized that there were no longer any barriers to prevent her from joining the man she loved on his adoptive world.

Although Vartox clung to the theory that his powers had somehow acted on his subconscious wishes, Superman and his pal Jimmy Olsen correctly feared that it was too good to be true. As wedding plans proceeded, Bates and Swan flashed back to Vartox's early career and his passionate affair with the sultry Syreena. In fact, she was a terrorist who'd been channeling his hyper-powers to herself by using a special pendant. Incarcerated in real time rather than being punished by accelerated aging, Syreena fumed as her ex-lover married Elyra (named here for the first time). In the moments before Valeron's destruction, she managed to escape and now sought revenge.

Goading her ex-lover in a jealous rage, Syreena set Vartox against his imagined rival Superman while Lana was transformed into a stone statue in the crossfire. As his devastated friend surrendered to authorities, the Man of Steel privately rejected his guilt. "Vartox is somewhat older than I am... and his hyper-powers and vast experience have made him a force for good in the universe ever since I was a super-tot. I don't buy a champion of his caliber suddenly losing his mind over the woman he loves—not unless an outside force was at work." Microscopically examining photographs that Jimmy Olsen had taken at the reception, the Man of Steel spotted a secondary beam directed at Lana at the moment of her transformation.

Cornered and repentant, Syreena ultimately agreed to save Lana, taking her immobile stone curse onto herself and negating the Earthwoman's aura in the process. The hyper-man spent another several days on Earth before returning to Tynola with Syreena's immobile form. "Only a cruel twist of fate could make my wish come true this way," he cursed as he left the planet's atmosphere. "I was hoping to go back to Tynola holding in my arms—the woman I loved" (*Superman* #373–375, on sale in April–June 1982).

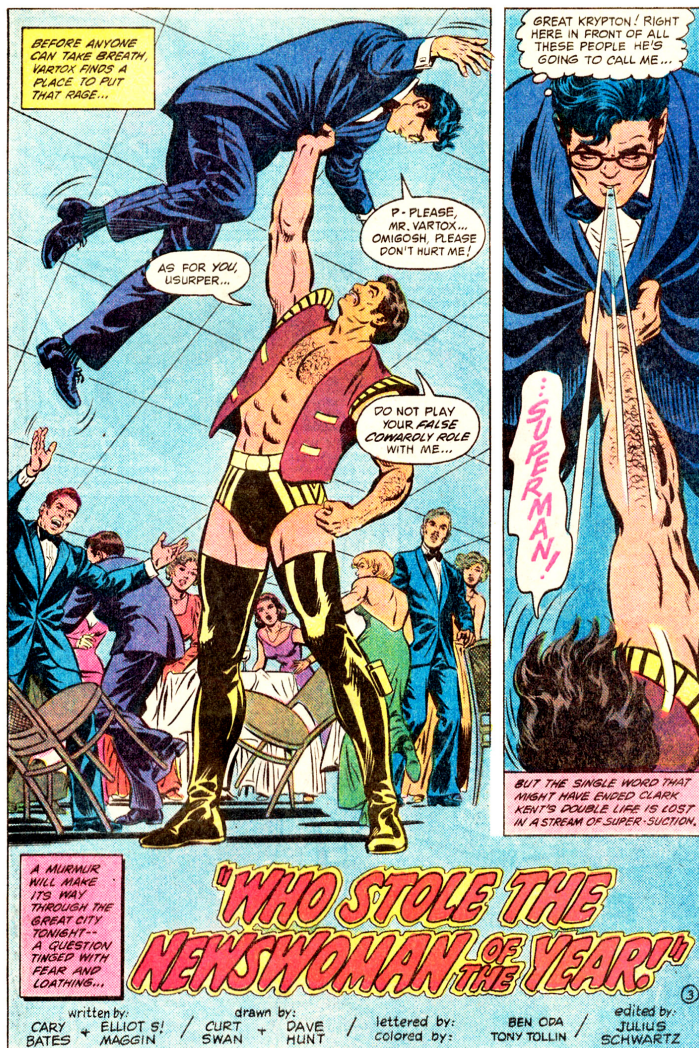
"Much as Lois was for Superman," Bates reveals to *BACK ISSUE*, "I believe Julie and I set out to make Vartox the ultimate love of Lana's life, though a permanent happy ending never seemed to be in the cards for them."

HAPPILY NEVER AFTER

That held true in *Superman* #389–392 (Nov. 1983–Feb. 1984, on sale in August–November 1983), co-written by Bates and Elliot S. Maggin. The Man of Steel was justifiably concerned when Vartox returned to Earth, once again suffering blackouts and partial amnesia. He couldn't remember Tynola's location—or even its name—and headed to the only location in his mind: Earth. With a bit of hesitation, Superman gave his friend another bit of potentially bad news. As Clark Kent, he'd begun dating Lana Lang.

Vartox seemed to take the news well—"I should have married Lana when I had the chance"—before doing a 180-degree pivot and screaming, "I will kill you!" The Man of Steel hadn't seen the hyper-powered slap coming and was helpless as Vartox incinerated him with a blast of hyper-energy. Blinking, Vartox realized that the entire conflict had been in his mind. As Superman left him alone in the Fortress, the hyper-man silently wondered what he had done to deserve such never-ending torment.

Both he and the Man of Steel would have been far more concerned if they'd checked into the welfare of Tynola. The former planet Tynola. An otherworldly dybbuk, "an entity capable of occupying someone's body," had been on a systematic quest for power that led it to inhabit and drain the powers of one alien super-champion after another. The evil Srakka was captured only once while in one of its alien hosts and the parasite vowed to have that champion's body as its next conquest: Vartox. Aware that it could only enter a super-being's body if its prospective host "was suffering the pain and anger of a great loss," Srakka decided that a logical course of action would be the destruction of Tynola!



The plot was all too successful. In a state of fury at losing a second world, Vartox seemed to slay the super-champion, realizing only afterwards that "never before have I deliberately killed a conscious being. I cannot live with that!" Srakka found that its new body "was in not only rage, but self-doubt. Because he thought that he, not I, had killed my previous host, he went wandering confused for a time... until eventually he himself led me to the home of my next prey."

Having successfully expelled Vartox's spirit from his body, Srakka abducted Lana Lang in the hope of gaining access to Superman's Kryptonian form. When "Vartox" seemingly killed Lana, Superman reacted exactly as Srakka had hoped and went into a frenzy. The parasite emerged from Vartox's body with the intent of taking over the Kryptonian but found itself blocked. The rage had been faked! Psychically swapping bodies with a willing partner (ironically, an obsessed fan of Lana), Vartox had been able to warn Superman and set up the charade. Holding the now-tangible dybbuk in his hand, the Man of Steel flew it deep into space for "a deep freeze on Pluto."

Thrusting his hand towards the hyper-man, Superman asked, "Friends again?"

Grabbing the hand, Vartox responded, "Friends forever!"

"When I was writing the character," Bates remarks to *BACK ISSUE*, "I remember initially thinking of Vartox not only as an older version of Superman, but as the super-big brother he never had. Don't remember how much of that undercurrent came through in the scripts though."

Rumors abound as to what happened to Vartox after that. One account claims that the former champion of Valeron made a final trip to Earth, arriving in the wake of the murder of Lana Lang and the disappearance of Superman (1986's *Action* #583). Another theory contends that the hyper-man eventually remarried and started a family, one that extended several centuries into the future when a clean-shaven lookalike named Damos worked with Jan Vern as an agent of Interplanetary Investigations (1965's *Mystery in Space* #100 and #102).

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO VARTOX?

In the post-Crisis DC Universe, Valeron was never destroyed. Its version of Vartox didn't meet Superman until May 1999, shortly after the murder of Valeron's green-skinned previous planetary champion, Ontor, at the hands of an otherworldly serial killer known as the Anti-Hero (*Team Superman* #1, by Mark Millar, Georges Jeanty, and Doug Hazelwood).

This incarnation of Vartox, who wore a less-revealing brown body suit with a yellow stripe on the torso, was forced along with other alien heroes to do the bidding of Brainiac lest their respective homeworlds be destroyed. Having developed a deep respect for Superman in the short time that they'd known each other, Vartox used his "invisible hyper-shield" to protect the Man of Steel from a lethal blast from Brainiac. On Earth, Vartox and fellow heroes Paz and Vestion drew a line in the sand and sent the villain into space as they pursued him. "Remain here and take care of your home and your loved ones, Superman," the hyper-man shouted as they teleported away, "for the day may come when you might lose them" (1999's *Superman* #148 and 150, by Dan Jurgens, Steve Epting, and Joe Rubinstein).

A decade later, Vartox completely shed his mentor role and aura of tragedy while reclaiming his original costume. Indeed, Amanda Conner's cover for December 2009's *Power Girl* #7

I've Got a Secret (Identity)

An impatient Vartox nearly blows the Metropolis Marvel's alter ego on this exciting title page from *Superman* #391, written by the duo of Bates and Maggin.

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paid homage to Nick Cardy's version from *Superman* #281, complete with bright yellow background. Inside, Conner and writers Jimmy Palmiotti and Justin Gray doubled down on the implicit sexuality of Vartox's look and went the *Austin Powers* route. With the entire population of Valeron sterilized, the hyper-man selected Earth's Power Girl as the perfect mate to help him continue their race. "There is no female in the whole of the universe," he declared, "who can refuse Vartox's many charms."

Power Girl set him straight on that, but ultimately agreed to help in *PG* #8 once she learned that no physical mating was involved. Rather, it was just a matter of her and Vartox donating genetic material to a miraculous device. It was, the hyper-man said, more of a spiritual process than anything and participants essentially "give birth to themselves in new, younger bodies."

Reflecting on his version of Vartox in a September 2010 interview at *comicsbulletin.com*, Palmiotti remarked that he was "kinda like a male chauvinist, but deep down he's just a guy. He doesn't really know what else to do and Power Girl sees through it a little bit, and it's actually very sweet and it makes for a lot of funny moments. We set out to make a really sweet, cute book, and I think we did." In a 2015 interview with Tony Guerrero for *Comic Vine News*, Conner added, "At first, I was like, 'Vartox, what a jerk. At the end of that I was like, 'I like him! I would date him in a second!'"

Learning that no good deed goes unpunished, Power Girl had to contend with Vartox and his amorous attentions more than once thereafter, first in *PG* #12 in 2010 and later in *Harley Quinn and Power Girl* #1-6 (2015).

Meanwhile, writer Grant Morrison revived Vartox for cameos in *Action Comics* #15 (2012) and *The Green Lantern* #9 (2019). The latter included him as a member of the United Planets Superwatch, an intergalactic group whose membership was drawn from mostly one-off alien heroes of the Silver and Bronze Ages.

Elsewhere, Greg Weisman included Vartox as part of the *Young Justice* animated universe by way of issues #21 (2012) and 25 (2013) of the tie-in comic book drawn by Christopher Jones. The hero was one of scores captured by the alien Kylstar. Vartox (played by Owain Yeoman) also made a lone live-action appearance as part of the October 26, 2015 season premiere of *Supergirl*. Regrettably, this version was a Phantom Zone escapee, randomly given a familiar name to create a tenuous link with the four-color world.

Back in the comics, Matt Fraction and Steve Lieber included a flashback cameo in 2022's *Superman's Pal Jimmy Olsen's Boss, Perry White* #1 that depicted Vartox fighting Superman, with Maxima off to the side. It was a sly nod to the fact that the latter had tried to claim Kal-El as a mate in the 1990s even as the hyper-man now pursued Power Girl.

Fifty years after his creation, the original Vartox created by Cary Bates and Curt Swan still looms large in memory. "I always saw him as a 50-something version of Superman who managed to retain his basic nobility," Bates told Michael Eury in *The Krypton Companion*, "even after enduring the sort of adversity and tragedy that turned many a DC character to super-villainy." Rising above it all to find purpose and love, Vartox was the sort of friend any superman would be lucky to have.

VARTOX COVER GALLERY



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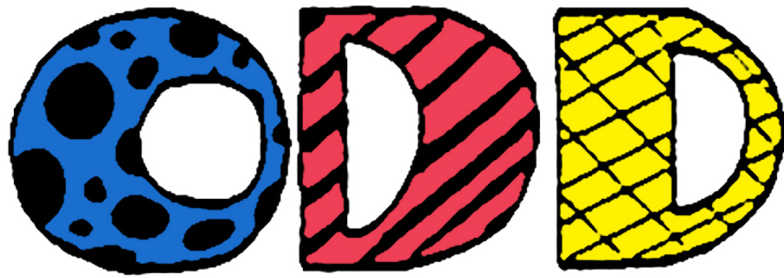
THE DC SUPER-VILLAIN LUNCHEON WENT WELL--
--UNTIL THE CHECK ARRIVED.....
(NO ONE WOULD ADMIT TO ORDERING TWO DESSERTS!)



Cartoon © 2024 Terry Austin. All characters © DC Comics.

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THE ODD CASE OF THE



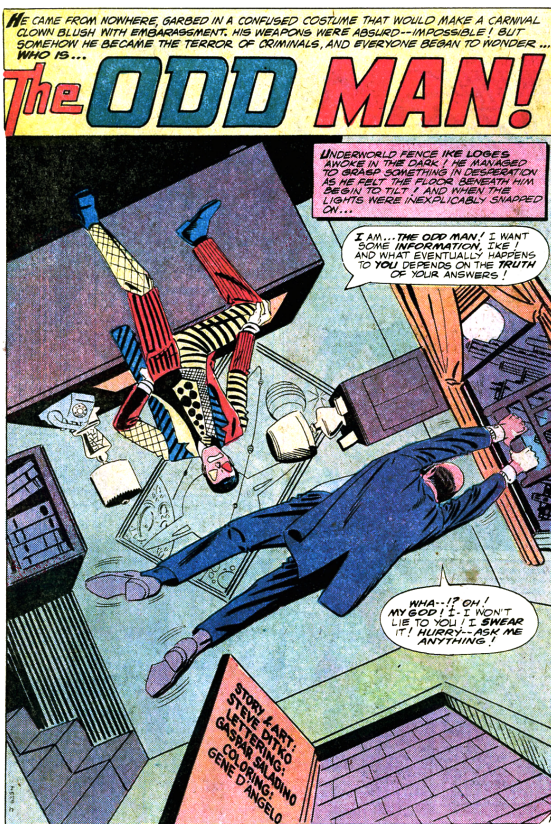
MAN

**ONE-HIT
WONDERS**

Odd Man Out

(left) Splash page to writer/artist Steve Ditko's "Odd Man" story, originally intended to begin as a backup in *Shade, the Changing Man* but shunted into obscurity by the DC Implosion. Published in *Detective Comics* #487 (Dec. 1979–Jan. 1970). (right) Photocopy of Ditko's original version of the same page, culled from its eventual publication in the ashcan edition, *Cancelled Comic Cavalcade* #2.

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At the risk of stating the obvious, Steve Ditko was an incredibly prolific creator over the course of his career, giving readers dozens of original characters and illustrating thrilling stories with them and others along the way.

Quite often, he'd come up with something unique. Such was certainly the case with the Odd Man. While this character didn't leave a lot of footprints, the goal is to document those appearances here, so let's get started.

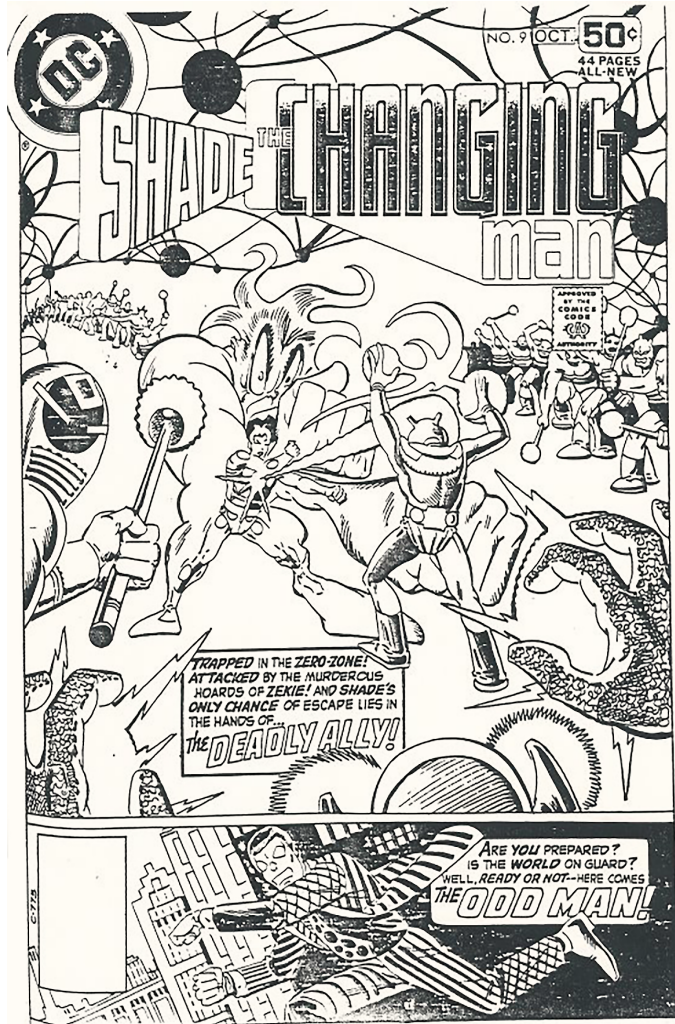
The first and most important appearance of the Odd Man was originally intended as a backup feature to begin in *Shade, the Changing Man* #9 (Oct. 1978). The lower quadrant cover treatment of the character was quite reminiscent of the similar workup for the debut of Ditko's enigmatic mysteryman the Question on the cover of Charlton's *Blue Beetle* #1 (Jan. 1967). Prior to publication, however, *Shade*—and therefore the Odd Man—was among the casualties of the DC Implosion

and both ended up instead in *Cancelled Comic Cavalcade* #2 for copyright purposes. [Editor's note: See BACK ISSUE #2 for Mike W. Barr's recollections of *Cancelled Comic Cavalcade*. And you'll find no better history of the DC Implosion than Keith Dallas and John Wells' book, *Comic Book Implosion*, from TwoMorrows.]

Prior to the company's infamous Implosion, DC Comics was experiencing an "Explosion," the addition of extra pages and backup features to titles—which was the reason the Odd Man came into being. Jack C. Harris, in his 2023 book from TwoMorrows, *Working with Ditko*, recalled: "For his contribution to the 'Explosion,' I had asked Steve if he would like to expand the *Shade* adventures, or would he rather introduce a new character? I was hoping for the latter. I had remembered when he was doing *Captain Atom* for Charlton in the mid-1960s and had created a Blue Beetle



STEVE DITKO



Somebody Pulled the Rug Out from Under This Guy

(left) Ditko cover produced for the unpublished *Shade, the Changing Man* #9, touting the book's unrealized "Odd Man" backup series. (right) The Odd Man tale was bundled into the diverse contents of *Cancelled Comic Cavalcade* #2. Cover by Alex Saviuk.

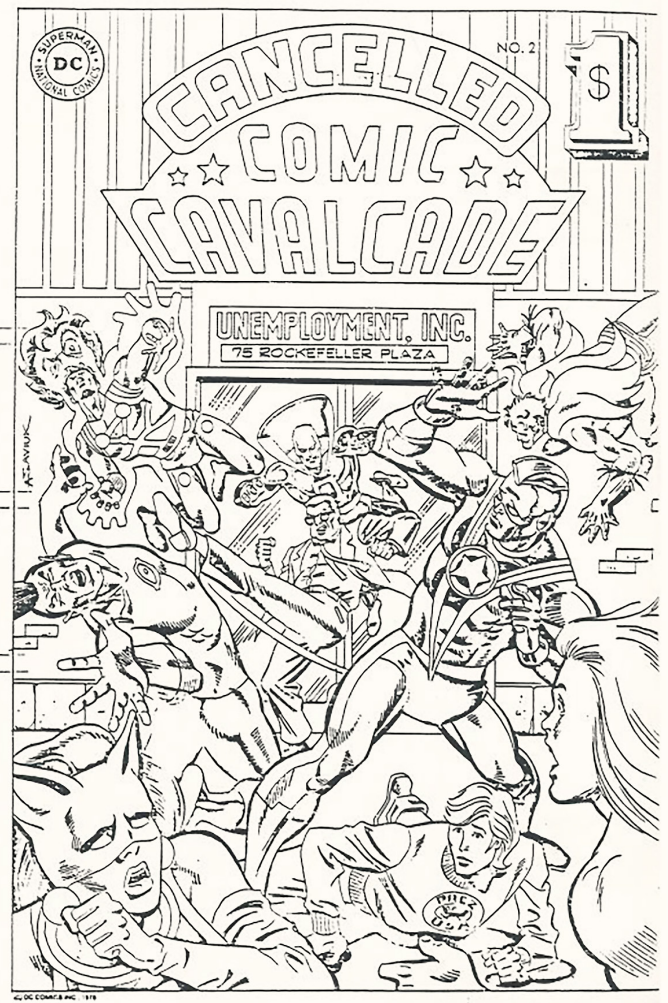
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backup. Blue Beetle had been so popular that it was soon awarded its own title. Once again, Steve added an original and captivating backup feature in the person of the Question. As for *Shade*, Steve did not disappoint. As a backup for *Shade, the Changing Man*, Steve Ditko created the Odd Man!"

Regarding the Odd Man story that was to appear in *Shade* #9, Harris wrote, "Steve had already plotted the story and Mike Fleisher had already turned in the script, when Steve dropped off the Odd Man pages. I guess Steve (and everyone else) assumed Fleisher was going to dialogue that story as well, but no one had ever talked about it. So, I turned to my office typewriter and I dialogued the Odd Man story myself. I didn't submit a bill for it and neither Ditko nor Fleisher ever questioned who had scripted the dialogue, so I let it stand. As far as I know, no one ever got paid for scripting the Odd Man!"

Eventually, both the *Shade* and Odd Man stories would be printed, and in the case of the Odd Man, that story saw the light of day in *Detective Comics* #487 (Dec. 1979–Jan. 1980), but—ahem—oddly, it had undergone some significant changes from the original in *Cancelled Comics Cavalcade*.

At the Grand Comics Database (comics.org), under the "reprint" section of the listing for



Detective #487, the indexer notes, when comparing the published version to the original that was intended for *Shade* #9: "Almost all dialogue rewritten by an unknown author for this printing." It is uncertain who was responsible for the heavy-handed rewrite and why it was rewritten so heavily.

One of the first things one notices in comparing the original against the 'Tec version is that the splash page has changed, with a different logo and the omission of the story title. Furthermore, there was a new blurb above the revamped logo: "He came from nowhere, garbed in a confused costume that would make a carnival clown blush with embarrassment. His weapons were absurd—impossible! But somehow, he became the terror of criminals, and everyone began to wonder... who is... the Odd Man!" The only other change on this page is the colorist, originally Jerry Serpe and now Gene D'Angelo. Presumably Gaspar Saladino did the lettering on both versions, or at least he got the credit for it.

Right off the bat as the page is turned, while he artwork is intact throughout, the dialogue has been altered in many places and even had additional balloons and dialogue added, as in the first panel of page 2, where the original doesn't show the balloon over the Odd Man's body, nor is there dialogue from the Odd Man in the original

panel 2, while the revised one shows the Odd Man taunting Ike. Panel 3 has altered the dialogue by Ike somewhat and split it into two balloons while the Odd Man's commentary has been changed and greatly abbreviated. For comparison, the original says, "You're free on your own recognizance! But if you're lying, you'll be brought back—for keeps!" The published version: "That's better. Now tell me where..." followed in the next panel by: "That will do, Ike. Good night," whereas the *Cancelled Comic Cavalcade* version contains no dialogue, only the bottom panel caption, which is identical.

In the final panel, the caption is different, with the original stating simply that the Odd Man has arrived at the home of S. Loson, one of the three names Ike had given the Odd Man in the original, but omitted from the reprint. The original shows a one-word exclamation by the Odd Man—"Blazes!"—and a thought balloon with "The killer dressed as—a Pharaoh? And he's mummified Loson in some kind of plastic! The police held back on the exact nature of the killings!"

Contrast that with the new, abbreviated "Too late! The killer's already struck!" with accompanying thought balloon "And he looks even weirder than I do!" The man in Egyptian garb fares no better as far as alteration. The first version displays a thought balloon containing "Wha—!? Is there another after the Loson jewels?" while the new one has been changed to a dialogue balloon with "Infidel—would you dare intrude on my sacred search?"

One can only speculate about the changes, but it nearly seems to be something of a toning down or softening of the Odd Man, whose personality seems to be a hybrid with the traits and attitudes of both Mr. A and the Question. He's out for justice and has little patience for the members of the underworld he's dealing with as he goes in search of the fenced jewels. At the top of page 4, the man dressed in Egyptian costume is presenting the sacred Nile Jewel to a woman he addresses as queen, similarly costumed and sitting on a throne. A further Mr. A comparison can be gleaned in the middle of the page where the Odd Man, a.k.a. Clay Stone, is at home and the full head mask of the Odd Man rests on a nearby stand while Stone contemplates meeting up with Judge Brass. [*Editor's note: Ditko's Mr. A is the subject of an article in the forthcoming BACK ISSUE #158.*]

The last three panels of the page, containing the meeting with the judge, have been significantly revised as well. The newer version is truncated with mere pleasantries in the first one, followed by Stone's observation that Brass is a "...big buff on Egyptian artifacts—" and a request to tell him about the new jewelry exhibit. Brass offers to introduce Clay to the collector and owner, Emil Haxer. The original, however, has dialogue in the second to the last panel not by Stone, but by Judge Brass, where he notes the Emil Haxer who he describes as a particularly nervous gentleman, insisted on the meeting and that while he's a famous jewel collector, he is a bit on the shady side, so he won't go to the police about the recent jewel robberies and murders and he's looking

for some help, so the judge recommended Clay. "You're already on the case as the Odd Man! Haxer could be your ticket to an inside track!" Quite different circumstances for the meeting and in the original we learn that Judge Brass is aware of Clay Stone's alter ego as the Odd Man.

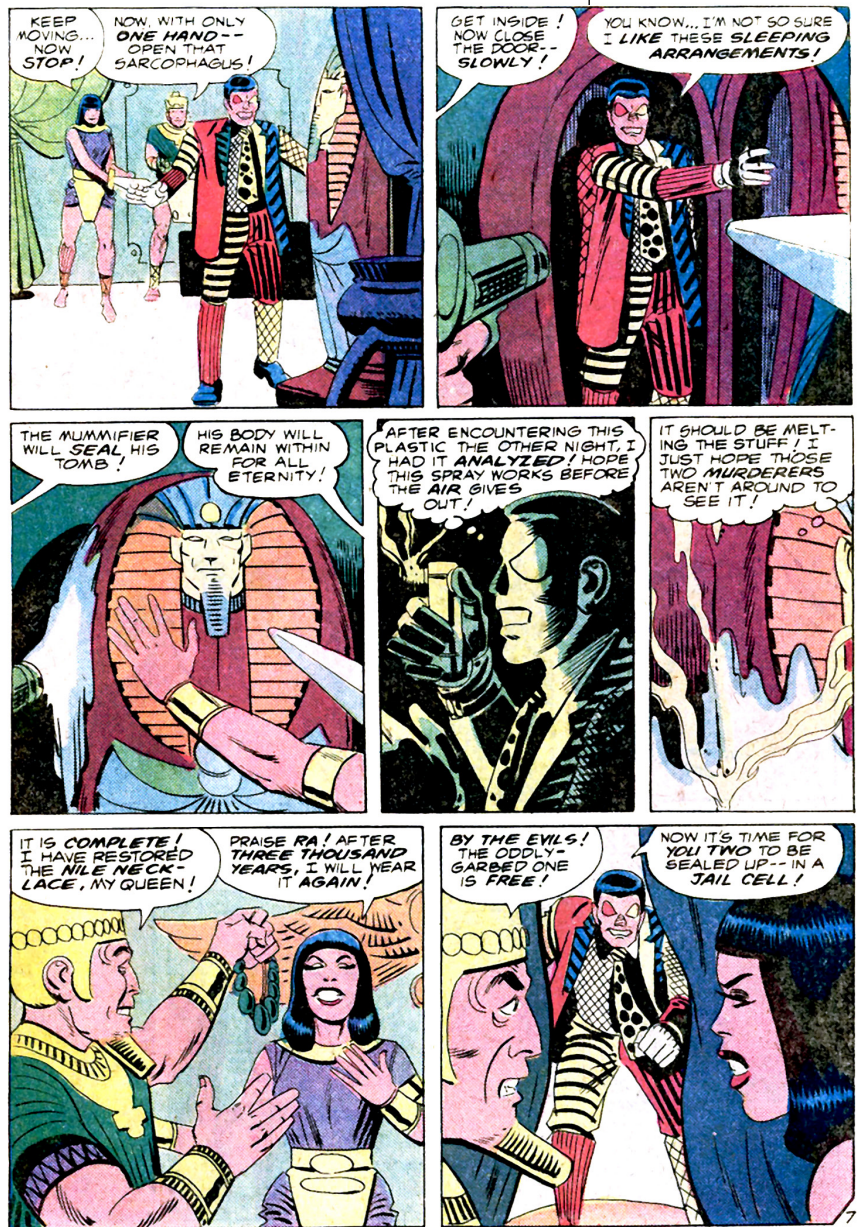
The next page has some changes as well, but mostly in the form of contexts. The solution of Emil Haxer remains intact, that he's putting his jewel collection on permanent display at the museum and making certain it's announced far and wide to limit his vulnerability for potential theft or murder from the recent rash of them. The Egyptian queen and her minion, however, have been at the museum to check things out and they discover that Haxer has retained his Nile stone. Later, the man disguised as a pharaoh pays Emil a visit, and not only gets the gem, but uses his weapon to mummify Haxer just as he'd done with Loson.

Strangely, as Stone and Brass arrive at Haxer's just after the pharaoh's departure, the third

Walk Like An Egyptian

Ditko offers a glimpse of his quirky new hero's personality and prowess on page 7 of the single Odd Man tale, from *Detective #487*.

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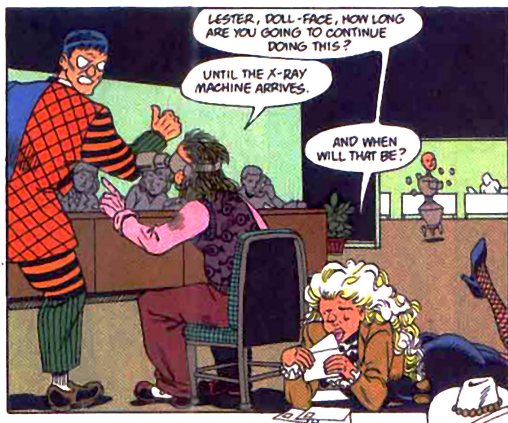


Odds and Ends

Rare Ditko-drawn Odd Man appearances:

(top) a cameo from the Creeper story intended for *Showcase* but axed due to the DC Implosion, and (bottom right) a group shot of Ditko-created DC characters illustrating *DC Profiles* No. 58, spotlighting Steve Ditko, appearing in April 1980 cover-dated DC titles. (bottom left) Artist Stephen DeStefano added this Odd Man cameo to page 13 of *Hero Hotline* #5 (Aug. 1989). Written by Bob Rozakis, inked by Kurt Schaffenberger.

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panel has been changed just slightly, but instead of a continuation of Clay's dialogue from the previous panel, the balloon's tail has been shifted to the judge when the deduction is reached that the insurance company records they'd reviewed provided the vital clue about the Nile gems and that each of the victims had one, though the original panel dialogue specifies that Emil Haxer had one illegally. A small, but confusing detail for the reader. Next, Judge Brass suggests that Mrs. Nyla, the Egyptian expert on the museum's staff, would understand the significance of the gems, so Clay opts to investigate further as the Odd Man.

The final panels on page 6 show the Odd Man entering Mrs. Nyla's home, which looks more like an Egyptian museum than a residence, when they get the drop on the Odd Man, with the phony pharaoh holding his mummification gun and the queen holding a vintage short sword. The original dialogue from the pharaoh is a bit more menacing as he threatens the Odd Man with death, which was omitted in the *Detective Comics* version.

The pair force the Odd Man into a sarcophagus and they quickly move to mummify it, but Clay Stone is no fool and had previously had the plastic material analyzed, so inside the coffin, he utilizes a spray he'd developed to dissolve the material.

Elsewhere, the triumphant pharaoh presents his queen with the restored Nile necklace. She exclaims that she will finally wear it again after 3,000 years. Just then, however, the freshly freed Odd Man arrives and brings his own unusual arsenal of weaponry to bring down the felons, first

with his powder and smoke gloves to distract the pharaoh and then using the spray mechanism again to cause him to lose his footing.

As the pharaoh begins to fall, he accidentally discharges his mummification gun, striking the queen. In his despondency, he turns the weapon on himself, ending their threat and this eight-page story.

The Odd Man would make a cameo appearance in a Creeper tale originally slated for *Showcase* #106, another DC Implosion victim that would be published in *Cancelled Comic Cavalcade* #2. The final Ditko-drawn Odd Man would appear in three different DC issues cover-dated April 1980 which contained Steve Ditko's profile, which Jack C. Harris arranged, but instead of the typical creator bio, it was an illustrated lineup of Steve's DC characters.

The Odd Man all but disappeared afterward, but made another cameo appearance in *Hero Hotline* #5 (Aug. 1989) and was placed in the story by artist Stephen DeStefano, who explains to *BACK ISSUE*, "I simply love Steve Ditko's work and I loved the [Odd Man] character. *Hero Hotline* was a book about fringe heroes, and it felt like the Odd Man fit the moment."

Finally, the Odd Man was spotted in *Superboy* #65 (Aug. 1999) in a very peripheral role with almost no dialogue.

Jack C. Harris had hopes that the Odd Man would graduate to his own title one day, much as the Blue Beetle had, but apparently the fates had other plans. We can only wonder, under different circumstances, what could have become of the Odd Man.



STEPHEN DESTEFANO

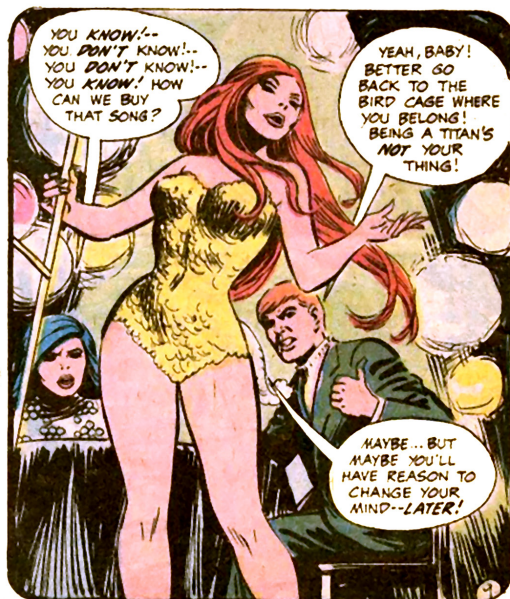
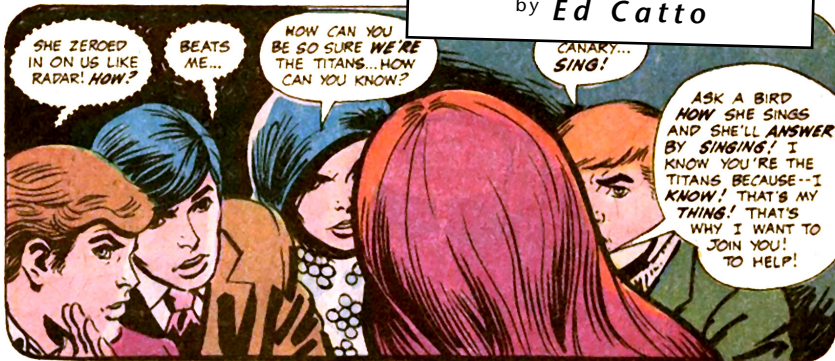
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LILITH

That Girl You Just Can't Forget

by Ed Catto



For many of us, there's a girl out of the past that you just can't forget. It doesn't matter how you met her; you just always remember her. And you think of her often.

As the '60s were fading into the '70s, many comics readers were growing up. At that time, the Teen Titans were the epitome of a bunch of neighborhood pals getting together for a bit of lighthearted mischief and fun. But that was about to change. It was time for the Titans to grow up too. This little, close-knit club was about to be invaded by a fresh face: a confident young woman who was brash, sexy, and confident. She didn't need those childish superhero costumes and eschewed tired tropes—like superhero secret identities.

"Like every Silver/Bronze Age reader," recalls comics writer Mark Waid, "I found Lilith in her first appearance in *Teen Titans* #25 and was intrigued—I'm sure in part because my young hormones were somewhat stirred by Nick Cardy's women in general and this one redhead in particular."

Comics journalist Jennifer Contino also has fond memories of the character. "My first exposure to Lilith was the back issue bins, since I wasn't born when she made the scene," says Contino. "However, experiencing her second hand, I always thought she was kind of DC's attempt to have a Mary Jane Watson—a 'partying redhead.' She also reminded me of Daphne from *Scooby-Doo*. I don't think she had a lot of depth or dimension. I thought it was strange how she was with [one-time Titans benefactor] Mr. Jupiter, an attempt, it seemed, to kind of have a Jean Grey/Professor X dynamic. Lilith never really had a chance to shine. She seemed very one note in the pages of *Teen Titans*."

"I love Lilith," declares Bob Harrison of *Pop Culture Squad*. "She was always the grooviest of the Titans. I discovered her in the last few issues of *Teen Titans*, because those were the first back issues that I got."

Lilith was an endearing and enduring character for many. "I loved that Dan Jurgens used her in his weird *TT* run," Harrison notes, adding, "Her role in volume 2 of *New Teen Titans* is great."

"In many ways, Lilith was the Teen Titan that seemed most real."

A GROOVY CHICK MAKES THE SCENE

It was time to shake things up. For two dozen issues, the Teen Titans seemed to be the coolest superheroes ever. At least, that would be the case if you believed their PR. But by 1970, these teens all too often seemed out of date and silly, bouncing

The Go-Go Girl with Something Extra

Lilith shakes her booty and the Titans' souls during this eerie encounter in *Teen Titans* #25 (Jan.–Feb. 1970), the issue marking her first appearance. Script by Bob Kanigher, art by Nick Cardy.

TM & © DC Comics.

from teenage adventure to adventure in a world that was clearly conjured up by middle-aged men in skinny ties and white short-sleeve shirts.

That all changed with *Teen Titans* #25 (Jan.–Feb. 1970). Editor Dick Giordano and new writer Bob Kanigher decided to do away with the teen sidekick bit and remake the young heroes into a questioning, introspective band of adventurers. It might not have been any closer to reality (these creators were also middle-aged men, after all), but it was worth a try.

And it all started in a nightclub when the Teen Titans met a bewitching go-go dancer.

Lilith had one of the very best comic character introductions. She's working as a dancer at a discotheque and billed as "The Enigma of the East – Lilith." Her yellow canary costume thematically fits in with the birdcage in which she dances. Several of the Teen Titans, in their civilian identities, enter the disco. Speedy and Kid Flash are immediately enthralled by this strawberry blonde beauty. Lilith saunters up to their table, calls them out by their

superhero alter egos (Wonder Girl, Kid Flash, and Speedy), portends that death is looming... and that she wants to join the Titans and help.

That's quite an introduction!

After a tragic random gunshot that night in the disco leads to an accidental homicide, the Titans are upset and confused. Lilith introduces her new friends to the mysterious Mr. Jupiter (although Robin knows of him from the social circles in which his mentor Bruce Wayne runs), who offers to teach the Titans how to be superheroes *without* using their powers or costumes.

And they buy it! One can only chalk it up to Lilith's powers of persuasion.

"Lilith has always been a kind of emotional and moral center for the Teen Titans," notes *Pop Culture Squad's* Bob Harrison. "From her first appearance she challenged her teammates to question established norms such as violence. She was in many ways a stand-in for the reader. Often she was not a direct combatant in the battles of the rest of the Titans standing outside the fray and wearing 'regular' clothes."

This reboot was (thankfully) short-lived. Writers Kanigher and Steve Skeates would rotate in and out. So would editor Giordano, who was replaced by Murray Boltinoff. Original *Teen Titans* writer Bob Haney would return to the series, recruited by Boltinoff, with whom he had been working on *The Brave and the Bold*.

As the Teen Titans shifted back to their traditional superhero garb, Lilith would stay as part of the team, typically wearing her green mini-skirt and long-sleeved top. This was decidedly non-superheroic.

STAR-CROSSED LOVERS

Returning *Teen Titans* writer Bob Haney quickly tried to bounce the book back from its non-costumed reboot. Kid Flash and Mal Duncan found themselves in an alternate universe (*Teen Titans* #32), and cavorting with a teenage prehistoric caveman in the next issue (*Teen Titans* #33). Haney brought the cavemen to the modern era, but even in 1971 this was an overused schtick.

Yet Lilith quickly becomes enamored with the caveman all the Titans call "Gnarrk," based on a repeated phrase he uses. She cuts his hair and helps him acclimate to the modern world. It seemed as if the alluring strawberry blonde had forgotten the rest of the world and focused only on Gnarrk in subsequent adventures.

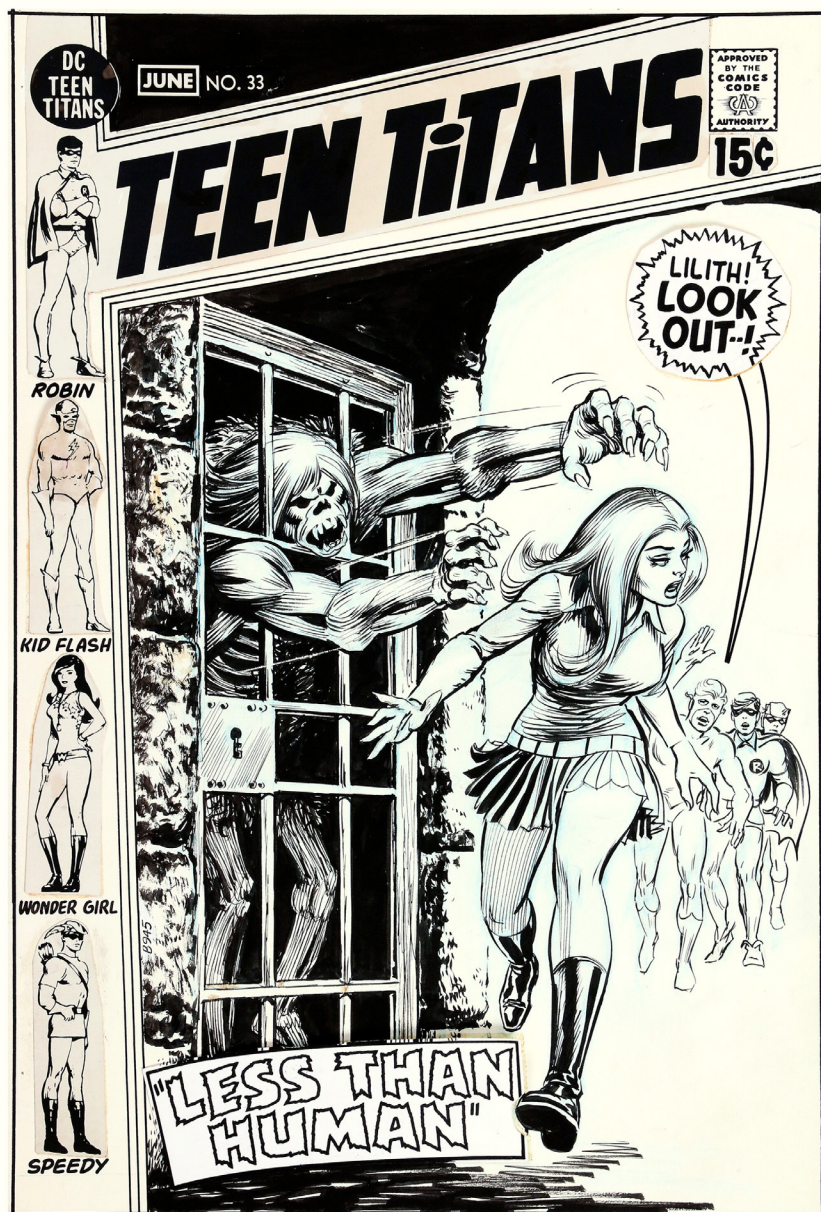
On the Lookout for Lilith

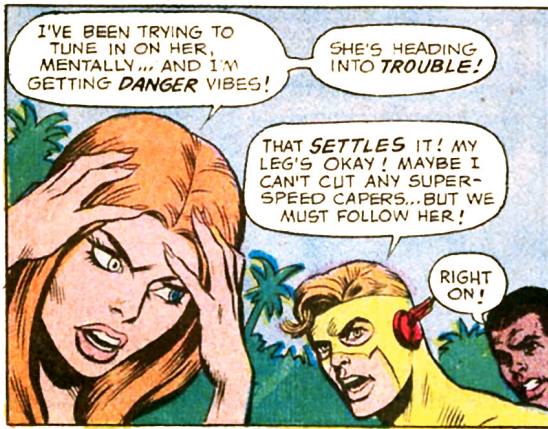
While Wonder Girl remained the primary cover queen during *Teen Titans'* original run, Lilith occasionally made a cover appearance, none more dynamic than *Teen Titans* #33 (May–June 1971)—the source for the Lilith image on this issue's *BI* cover! Original Cardy cover art courtesy of Heritage Auctions (www.ha.com).

TM & © DC Comics.



NICK CARDY





Despite the fact that she was not an original character for the series, Lilith was soon standing toe-to-toe with favorite heroes with decades of experience and fan exposure.

At the conclusion of *Teen Titans* #38 (Mar.–Apr. 1972), Mal asks Lilith, “Okay, Miss Witch... you spied into our heads... but how about you? What’s your hangup? What’s buried inside your conk?”

Lilith pensively muses to herself, “How can I tell my teammates my greatest fear? My deepest secret? That I’m terrified I’ll never know who I really am... and where my powers come from.”

And that sets up another Lilith backup feature—with typical ’70s DC sell copy: “Where indeed? Flip the pages, Titanic Ones, for another chapter on the bizarre background of the mysterious Lilith!”

Several of these issues—*Teen Titans* #36, 38, 41, and 43—revealed bits of Lilith’s history in solo backup stories. Young Lilith was searching for her parents as her psychic abilities began to manifest, and discovered in issue #36 her family name of Clay. The serialized backup format allowed Lilith to meet new characters each adventure—and then leave them behind, a storytelling format previously seen on 1960s TV on *The Fugitive* and other series. She never got that close to real solutions. She’d generally hop on her motorcycle at the end of each story, bravely fight back tears, and continue her search.

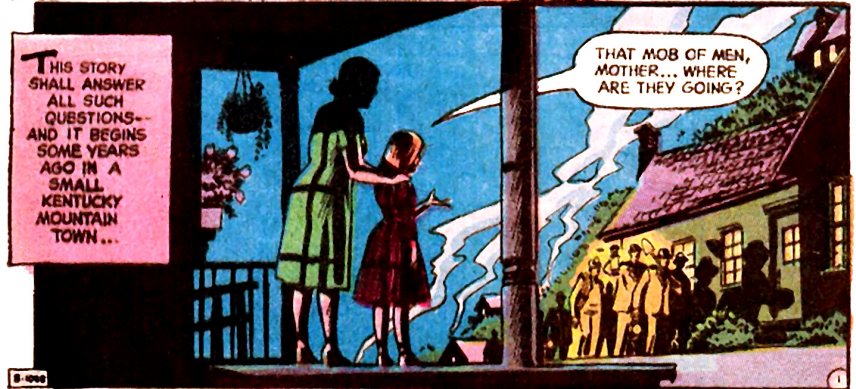
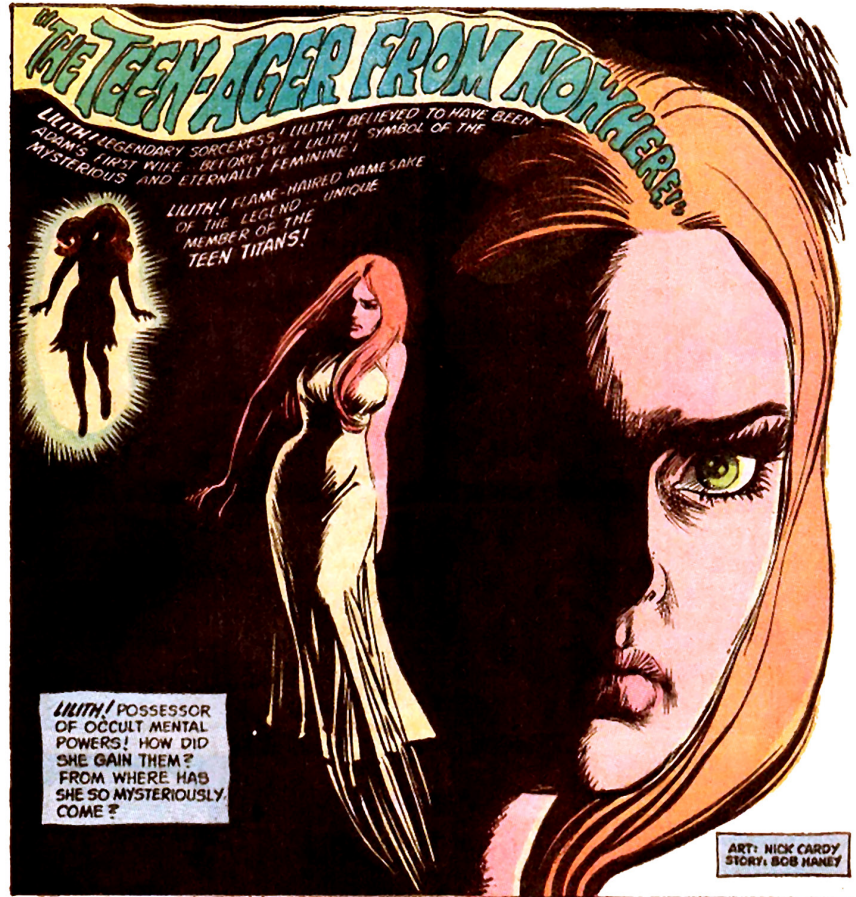
In the main *Teen Titans* adventures, Lilith’s role seemed to be just a way to ratchet up a sense of suspense or danger. Like a B-movie actress, she was frequently given lame dialogue like, “I’ve been trying to tune in to her mentally... and getting danger vibes. She’s heading into trouble.”

Lilith continued adventuring as a Teen Titan right up until the end. Or, more accurately, the first of many “endings” for a *Teen Titans* series. In fact, in her backup story in *Teen Titans* #43, Lilith decides to stop searching for her parents and proclaims she’s “found her ‘family’—her place in the world... as a Teen Titan.”

Lilith did get around—just a bit—beyond the *Teen Titans* title. As a member of the Titans, she met Batman in *The Brave and the Bold* #94 and Superman in *World’s Finest Comics* #205.

Lilith was on her own (after Kid Flash dropped her off) as she shared an adventure with Robin in the backup stories of *Batman* #241 (“The Secret of the Psychic Siren”) and 242.

“Inter-title continuity was still a rarity at DC in the early 1970s, so it was pretty remarkable to see



Lilith cross over into the ‘Robin’ series so we could learn a little more about her,” observes Mark Waid. “I do worry that no one quite knew what to do with her, not even her creator Robert Kanigher, though [Robin writer] Mike Friedrich showed he had at least some notion.”

These stories revealed her long-lost cousin, who manifested uncontrollable physic powers when the two came in close contact. Sadly, Lilith realized she must always keep her distance from her cousin.

THE (FIRST) TEEN TITANS REDUX – THE MID-’70s

In 1976, DC editor Julius Schwartz edited a revived *Teen Titans* series, continuing the numbering with #44 (Nov. 1976) with Bob Rozakis as writer. This series re-established the core characters, adding Karen Beecher (who becomes the Bumblebee) and the peculiar Duela Dent (ostensibly the Joker’s Daughter, later the Harlequin) to the mix.

She’s a Real Nowhere Girl

(left) From *Teen Titans* #42. (right) Title page from Lilith’s backup tale—by Bob Haney and Nick Cardy—from *Teen Titans* #36 (Nov.–Dec. 1971).

TM & © DC Comics.

Before long, in issue #50 (Oct. 1977), the “regular” East Coast-based Teen Titans met their counterparts, the so-called Titans West, the TTs’ West Coast affiliate. This alternate branch consisted of auxiliary Titans and teen heroes Hawk and Dove, Bat-Girl, Beast Boy, and Golden Eagle—led by Lilith Clay.

“Using her was my idea,” explains Rozakis. “Since I was creating Titans West using the ‘almost TTs,’ it was just logical to have her be a part. And her mental powers were perfect for the plot of the story.

To be fair, the Teen Titans needed a more gender-balanced team roster. Rozakis “definitely thought the Titans needed more female characters. That’s why I brought in Bumblebee and Duela.”

Although the villain they were fighting was the less-than-awe-inspiring Captain Calamity, Lilith claimed, “Captain Calamity isn’t the reason Long Island is floating away, the cause of that and all the other disasters—is me!”



BOB ROZAKIS

The regulars seemed less than thrilled to see Lilith again. Speedy, with his finger wagging, complained, “So our former resident *witch* is behind all this!”

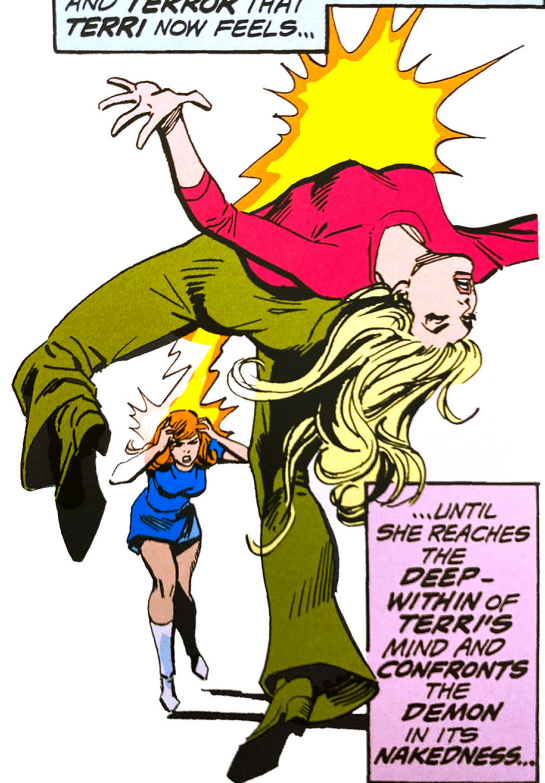
After the ubiquitous fight-resulting-from-misunderstanding, Lilith explained, “By self-hypnosis, I’ve learned that a criminal known as Mr. ESpEr has found a way to tap into my mental powers! In doing, he has been able to create terrible disasters—”

Rozakis wrote Lilith well but didn’t see the charm in her. “Lilith debuted while I was still just a fan,” he recalls. “I don’t recall being particularly impressed by her (or Gnarrk, for that matter). For the period when the Titans gave up their costumes, I guess it didn’t matter much to have her on the team, but once the Titans were back in uniform, she seemed totally insignificant.”

In fact, Rozakis was worried that fans might be confused by her and imagined what characters on the street might say about her: “Hey, look, it’s the Teen Titans! But who’s that girl?”



FOR AN INSTANT, LILITH HESITATES AS SHE EXPERIENCES EVERY FEAR AND TERROR THAT TERRI NOW FEELS...



...UNTIL SHE REACHES THE DEEP-WITHIN OF TERRI'S MIND AND CONFRONTS THE DEMON IN ITS NAKEDNESS...

Beyond 'Teen Titans'

(left) Lilith and her teammates join up with the Man of Steel in an offbeat team-up in *World's Finest Comics* #205 (Sept. 1971). Cover by Neal Adams. (right) Lilith is locked in a cerebral smackdown with the Teen Wonder's gal pal Terri in the “Robin” backup from *Batman* #242 (June 1972). Script by Mike Friedrich, art by Rich Buckler and Dick Giordano.

TM & © DC Comics.



GNARRK + LILITH = FOREVER (?)

The shaggy caveman and former go-go dancer may seem mismatched, but beyond the original *Teen Titans* series the two would remain a couple in later TT lore.

In the first reboot, Gnarrk and Lilith would again be portrayed as a couple.

Gnarrk would seemingly die several times. For example, at the wedding of Donna Troy (*Tales of The Teen Titans* #50, Feb. 1985), Mal consoles Lilith, saying "...I am sorry about Gnarrk. I know you two were close."

The full story would be told in *New Titans* #56 (July 1989), as Gnarrk's origin was updated for post-Crisis continuity. Lilith again fell in love with him, and then stood by as he slowly died, despite his being kept on life support for a year.

In the DC's "Rebirth" era of 2016–2017, Gnarrk returned again—this time unentangled with Lilith. He evidently had become a superhero code-named Caveboy. Shortly after this inauspicious re-introduction, he would die again in the *Heroes in Crisis* miniseries.

And Gnarrk and Lilith made the scene yet again in 2023's *World's Finest: Teen Titans* miniseries, as its writer, Mark Waid, explains at the conclusion of this article.

Surf's Up, Titans!

Lilith returns, as part of Titans West! Cover to *Teen Titans* #50 (Oct. 1977) by Rich Buckler and Jack Abel.

TM & © DC Comics.

"Oh, that's Lilith. I think she's their mascot, like Snapper Carr."

This incarnation of the series wrapped up quickly. There was a group photo at the end of issue #52 and retelling of the team's origin in #53 (Feb. 1978), the final issue. "As I said, I was unimpressed with her in the original run," recalls Rozakis. "Had the book not been cancelled, I had plans for Titans East and Titans West both appearing regularly, but there was nothing major planned for Lilith."

Both Lilith and the TTs dropped out of sight for a while after *Teen Titans'* cancellation. The Titans—sans Lilith—popped up alongside Batman in *Brave & Bold* #149 (Apr. 1979) in a token appearance. Soon, however, the Titans' and DC's fortunes would change as writer Marv Wolfman, artist George Pérez, and editor Len Wein reintroduced the group as the New Teen Titans, bowing as a preview in *DC Comics Presents* #26 (Oct. 1980) before spinning off into a new series, *The New Teen Titans* vol. 1, the next month. After a slow boil *The New Teen Titans* became DC's top seller.

LILITH AMONGST THE 'REAL' TITANS

Following the precedent set by book publishers, in the mid-1980s DC experimented with publishing "deluxe" versions of two of its most popular series on bright, high-quality paper in comics distributed to the Direct Market only, then reprinting their stories one year later at a reduced price. Chosen for this initiative were DC's two white-hot super-team titles, *Legion of Super-Heroes* and *The New Teen Titans*. The Titans' new book launched with *The New Teen Titans* vol. 2 #1 (Aug. 1984), from the fan-favorite Wolfman/Pérez creative duo.

The initial story arc, "The Terror of Trigon," welcomed Lilith back to the team in the second issue, but she had become secretly possessed by Azar. Things seemed to be on a better course during

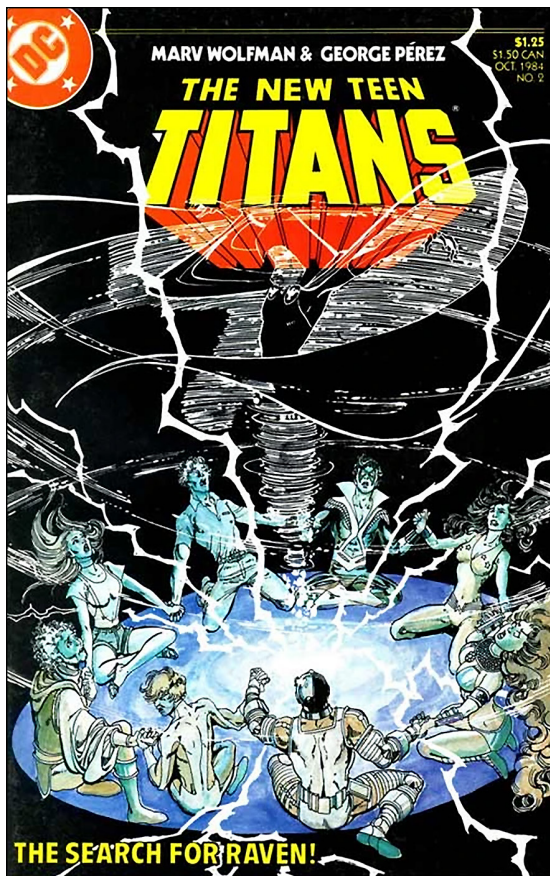




NEXT: THE SECRET ORIGIN OF THE TITANS-- IN THE TT # 53, ON SALE NOVEMBER 22 ND !

Titans United
 Titans East and West—including Lilith and her boyfriend Gnarrk—grab a “photo op” in this group shot concluding Bob Rozakis’ *Teen Titans* #52 (Dec. 1977). Original Don Heck/ Bob Smith art courtesy of Heritage.

TM & © DC Comics.



The Modest Goddess

(left) Lilith reunites with her old friends in “The Search for Raven.” Cover to *The New Teen Titans* vol. 2 #2 (Oct. 1984) by George Pérez, who also illo’ed (right) the cover for issue #7 (Apr. 1985) featuring Lilith, Starfire, and Azrael.

TM & © DC Comics.

the following story arc, as the winged Azrael swooped into Washington Square, scooped up Lilith, and began passionately kissing her. Writer Marv Wolfman and artist José Luis García-López revealed that Lilith was actually the daughter of the Titan Thia, who had killed Lilith’s father and taken over his publishing empire.

After the Titans and the Amazons defeated this threat, Lilith was offered the opportunity to live on Mt. Olympus as a demigod. Off she went, seemingly to live there forever.

“In the Wolfman/Pérez reboot of the *New Teen Titans*,” says Bob Harrison, “when she eventually made her way to the group she served as resource to the team, her role throughout her appearances is often that of caregiver and comforter. She almost always maintained a calmness and supportive nature. You can see her taking that role in all of her iterations even the present day.”

Readers, and even writer Marv Wolfman, found this adventure to be forgettable. Wolfman regretfully reveals to *BACK ISSUE* that even he has few memories of Lilith. This Lilith storyline was, in fact, scrubbed from the continuity during later reboots.

TEEN TITANS – ‘90s STYLE

The success of the Wolfman/Pérez incarnation was indisputable, but unsustainable. In 1996, *Booster Gold* creator and *Superman* writer/artist Dan Jurgens introduced a new team of Teen Titans with four new characters and a reimagined classic character, the Atom, who served as an old hand at superhero-ing. Jurgens’ new incarnation was full of heart and enthusiasm. And the supporting cast was clever, too—the Titans’ mentor, Mr. Jupiter, was back, but this time he was aided by a mysterious hooded figure called Omen. [Editor’s note: Come back in a few months for *BACK ISSUE* #158 for a look back at Mr. Jupiter—plus Mr.

Fantastic, Mr. Freeze, Mr. A, Mr. Monster, Mr. A, and more in our “Hey, Mister!” issue.]

By the second year, classic Teen Titans were brought back into the series. At that time, Wonder Girl (Donna Troy) was unavailable, so Nightwing (Robin), Arsenal (Speedy), Tempest (Aqualad), and Flash (Kid Flash) reunited in an adventure involving their old sponsor, Mr. Jupiter. This story’s antagonist, Haze, was a master at creating illusions that kept the characters and readers guessing. In particular, readers were guessing about the identity of the hooded Omen character. After a few clever fake-outs, Jurgens revealed [SPOILER ALERT] that Omen was Lilith Clay from the original series... and that Mr. Jupiter was her father (that had been a secret to fans all these years) and that the villainous Haze was Jupiter’s son.

“All those years... you and Jupiter were a part of the Titans and you never let on!” exclaimed Dick Grayson, the detective of the group, in the Jurgens-written *Teen Titans* #15 (early Jan. 1998).

Lilith also revealed that she’s more than just a pre-cognizant psychic. “I absorb much from the people around me,” explained Lilith. “My psychic powers make me a bit of a blank slate. Everyone I meet leaves a residue of themselves upon me.”

The Omen identity served to finally give Lilith a superhero costume and codename.

“As a kid,” Dan Jurgens tells *BI*, “I always liked the character of Lilith. I found her to be different from the rest of the Titans and she had an air of mystery that I found intriguing. So, for the purposes of this series, I decided to play that up a bit and push her down that road a bit farther, and I also gave her the name Omen, which I thought was quite a good character name, and one that fit her well.”



MARV WOLFMAN

Scott Edelman.

Jumping Jupiter!

A startling revelation, from *Teen Titans* #15 (early Jan. 1998). Story and pencils by Dan Jurgens, inks by George Pérez. Scan courtesy of Ed Catto.

TM & © DC Comics.

The creepy hood reflected Lilith's penchant of foretelling the ever-mysterious future. The clever nomenclature bestowed upon Lilith by Jurgens has stood the test of time over the years.

Of note are the oversized peace-sign earring Omen wears, reminiscent of Lilith's original peace and love/pseudo-hippie origins... although if the character was to exist today, Lilith's age would be in her 70s to have been a part of the hippie movement. One *could* argue that this character just embraces the mindset of the era through icons like peace signs.

REBOOTS, MISSTEPS, AND FALSE (RE)STARTS

The Titans (sans "Teen") would be relaunched in another series soon after.

The Titans Secret Files and Origins #1 (Mar. 1999) was a companion issue to kick off this new *Titans* series. The premise was simple: Each

of the founding members would recruit one new member—the likes of Argent or Jesse Quick. Other "almost TT" characters, as Bob Rozakis calls them, like Lilith only made a brief appearances, as part of a one-pager spotlighting the "Titans Supporting Cast." She's described as: "Lilith, Omen, can not only see the future, but can teleport herself and others. She also possesses 'fragments off all the Titans' psyches.'"

Titans #13 ended with a cliffhanger as Lilith reached out for help. In the following issue, Donna Troy explained to the new members (and to the readers) more about Lilith: "Omen was a Titan when Garth and I were on the team. Back when she went only by the name of Lilith. She had precognitive abilities and later, teleportation powers. But I didn't know she was a telepath..."

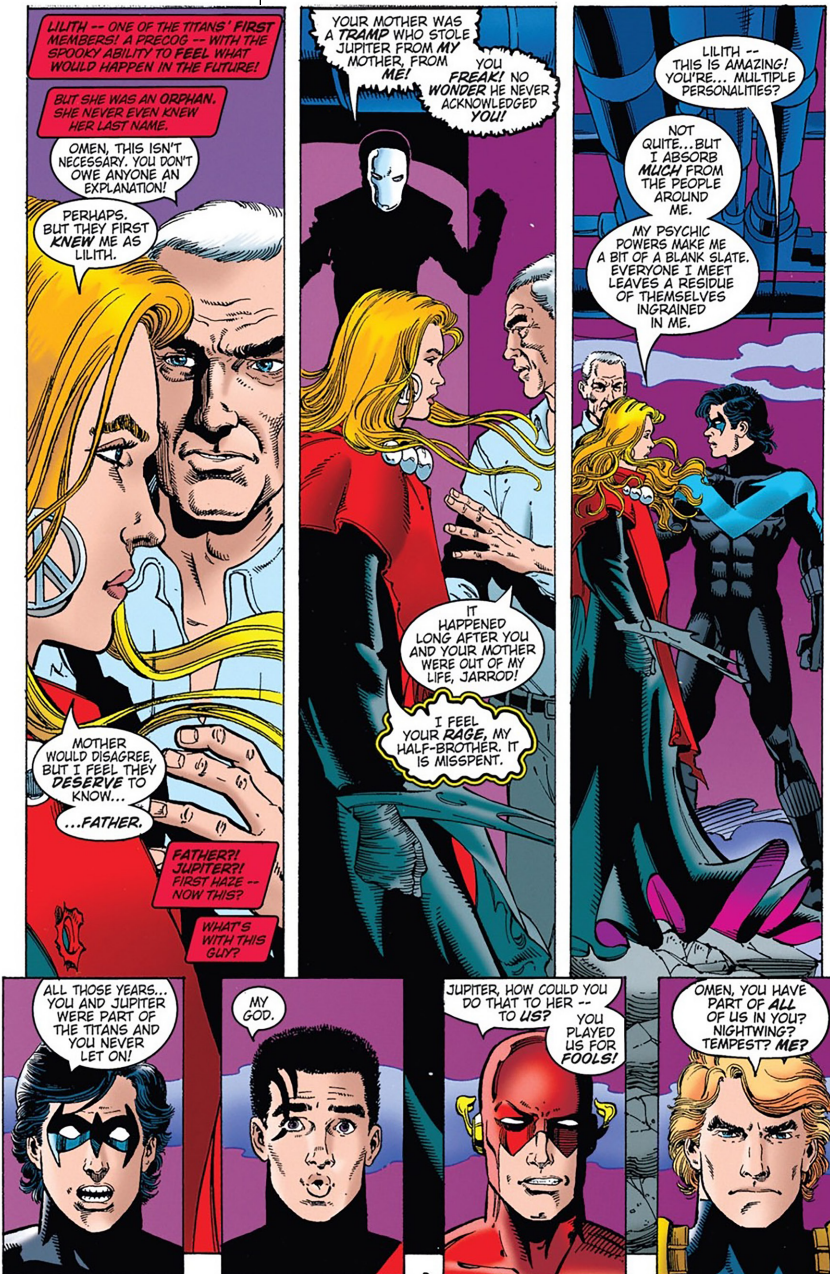
Lilith was seemingly working with supervillain Vandal Savage and a secret organization called Tartarus, but in actuality was arranging for this evil group to self-destruct.

Writer Tom Peyer would rotate in and script several issues of this series, giving Lilith a chance to participate in a space adventures and ghost stories. Peyer remembers his time writing Lilith with his usual creativity, sarcasm, and humility.

Dark Turn

Go-go dancing is a distant memory for Lilith in this eerie "Bad Omen" cover by Kenneth Rocafort, from *The Titans* #12 (Aug. 2017), by writer Dan Abnett.

TM & © DC Comics.





“When she came along,” Peyer muses, “Lilith was the harbinger of a new, more modern Titans that incorporated subjects then in vogue—spies, psychics—with, inevitably, artist Nick Cardy’s mastery of the male gaze. By the time I was working on the characters, more than three decades later, those reasons for being had long since faded. But her psychic powers came in handy for plotting. If you had closely followed Lilith through those years and cared about her deeply, my run would have been a huge disappointment. Sorry, everyone!”

Different creative teams struggled to discover how best to use Lilith in the Titans mythos. She was killed off by a Superman robot in *The Titans/Young Justice: Graduation* miniseries, and turned into a villain in the early days of DC’s New 52 initiative.

‘TITANS HUNT’ AND REBIRTH ‘TITANS’

Jennifer Contino interviewed writer Dan Abnett for *Sequential Tart* about his *Titans Hunt* series and the subsequent “Rebirth” era of *Titans* that began in 2016. Abnett discussed how he worked to pull together the six core members of the Teen Titans and build from there.

Contino asked, “For me the 1960s incarnation of Lilith presented the strongest, most confident version of the character. Your version seems a little less sure of herself. Why did you choose to present her as almost in need of a hero herself?”

Abnett’s response: “Mainly because of what she’s been through. I like the ‘60s version too, but she can’t just ‘be’ that again after recent events. We need to show her becoming that again.”

During *Titans’* “Bad Omen” storyline, Lilith flirted with prominence, even taking on the villainous Psimon in this story and getting the solo cover treatment on *Titans* #12 (Aug. 2017).

LILITH TODAY

You can’t keep a good woman down, as Lilith has appeared in several DC comics of recent vintage.

2023’s *World’s Finest: Teen Titans* miniseries is a love-letter to the Silver Age TTs by writer Mark Waid and artist Emanuela Lupacchino. It’s a fun romp through the classic, early days of the team, unencumbered by pesky continuity details. Lilith makes an appearance in the series. “...You can thank editor Brittany Holtzher [for that]” explains Mark Waid. “I’d originally planned only to include the early ‘60s Titans, but Brittany’s such a fan of the Bronze Age incarnation of the team—including Gnarrk, Mal, and Bumblebee—that she talked me into throwing those three into the cast as well. In *WF: TT*, as in the Silver Age, the Titans have made it clear to kids all over the world that they can reach out if they need help. Lilith and Gnarrk act as advance scouts for the team, separating the legitimate calls for aid from followers who just make up problems so they can meet their heroes.”

Power Girl also has been reinvented many times over the years, and her powers and purpose have been changed. To cope, she’s also aided by her new best friend, Lilith (Omen) Clay. Lilith is delightful, kind, and supportive of Power Girl.

Not bad longevity for a strawberry blonde who started out as a brash go-go dancer.

No matter what her incarnation, Lilith was always just a little bit different—as Bob Harrison calls her, the Titans’ “cool friend.”

ED CATTO is a marketing and start-up strategist, with a specialty in pop culture. As founder of Agendae, Ed is dedicated to helping brands and companies innovate and grow. As part of the faculty at Ithaca College’s School of Business, Ed teaches entrepreneurial courses and one unique class focusing on comic conventions and Geek Culture. Ed’s also an illustrator, a two-time winner of the Pulp Factory Award, and a retropreneur, rejuvenating brands like Captain Action.

Girl Loves Caveboy

(above) Detail of Lilith and Gnarrk from the (left) cover of the Mark Waid-written *World’s Finest: Teen Titans* #6 (Feb. 2024). Art by Chris Samnee.

TM & © DC Comics.



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TWOMORROWS AD PAGE

THE WONDER FROM DOWN UNDER: ULTRAA HERO FROM EARTH-PRIME

by John Schwirian



"His name is ULTRAA!" declared the cover of *Justice League of America* #153 (Apr. 1978). "Where did he come from? How did he get his incredible powers? Is he the world's supreme super-hero—its most dangerous menace—or both?"

Before any of those questions can be answered, several unusual factors that influenced his story must be explored.

WHAT LURKS BEHIND THE CURTAIN?

Like ripples in a pond, one action causes the next, continuing to spread into wider circles, and the appearance of Ultraa was one such ripple.

It began when DC Comics announced that, starting with the February 1977 issues, the page count of *Justice League of America* and *Superboy and the Legion of Super-Heroes* would increase from 36 to 52 pages, accompanied by a price hike from 30 cents to 50 cents (which would change to 60 cents five issues later). This was done in part due to an increase in printing costs and was the beginning of what would become the big title expansion known as "The DC Explosion" (for the full history, see *Comic Book Implosion* by Keith Dallas and John Wells, TwoMorrows Publishing, 2018).

Justice League of America #139 (Feb. 1977) was the first issue in this format, and the added pages allowed for a second letters page. While the regular letters page discussed the story from a previous issue, the "Mail Room Extra" page debated other topics. The first letter, from Yip Wingo of Hartford, Connecticut, challenged readers to get controversial in their comments. The second letter, from Hurshell S. Stevenson (no address given), stated that the JLA was popular enough to be made into a movie and gave a list of actors he would like to see play the roles of the JLA team members. Assistant editor Bob Rozakis liked Stephenson's idea and encouraged the readers to submit their casting suggestions for a *Justice League* movie. According to Rozakis, "The poll about which actors should play the JLA members was spun out of my remembering that a similar idea was proposed back in the early '60s [*Justice League of America* #17, Feb. 1963]. So, we ran with it." The results of the casting poll were printed in *Justice League of America* #146, listing the most popular choices for each JLA member culled from the "dozens" of letters received.

Not to Be Confused with DC's Ultra, the Multi-Alien...

...of Silver Age *Mystery in Space* fame, or even Golden Age hero Gary Concord, the Ultra-Man. Readers—and the JLA—meet the hero of Earth-Prime, Ultraa, in *Justice League of America* #153 (Apr. 1978). Cover by Rich Buckler and Jack Abel.

TM & © DC Comics.

Primed and Ready

The origin of Earth-Prime's Ultraa is revealed in *JLA* #153.

Story by Gerry Conway. Original George Tuska/Frank McLaughlin art to story page 16, courtesy of Heritage Auctions (www.ha.com).

TM & © DC Comics.

Rozakis announced a new poll in *Justice League of America* #147, requesting fans to list and rank their top five favorite Leaguers. Results were posted in #152, with Green Lantern coming in first place by a landslide 858 votes. Flash and Superman tied for second (427), with Batman close behind (410). Green Arrow barely beat out Black Canary with 311 votes to her 305. The rest of the team scored under 300, with Hawkgirl in last place at 112.

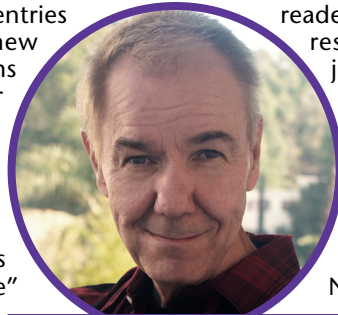
Encouraged by the number of entries received, Rozakis proposed a new poll at the end of #152, asking fans to choose an existing member that should be dropped from the team and to name a character to add. Those results appeared in issue #158, suggesting that the Phantom Stranger depart and Zatanna be admitted. Rozakis confirmed that editor Julius "Julie"

Schwartz liked the idea "[as] running such polls brought in more mail (and reader participation). Julie was happy with them because I was doing all the tallying."

Wanting to give more meaning to the Top Five poll, Schwartz and writer Gerry Conway developed a story using the five highest-scoring heroes. "It was Julie's idea to do the story after we'd done all that polling," Rozakis explains.

"Otherwise, what was the point of asking the readers to vote? And it was certainly a result of the polling that Zatanna joined the JLA."

Now there is a good chance that none of this directly affected the creation of Ultraa. Gerry Conway replaced Steve Englehart as scripter on *Justice League of America* with #151 (Feb. 1978) with new ideas and plans in mind. Normally, Conway came up with the plot first and later decided which Justice League members to use. He explains that he chose "mostly either the members I hadn't used



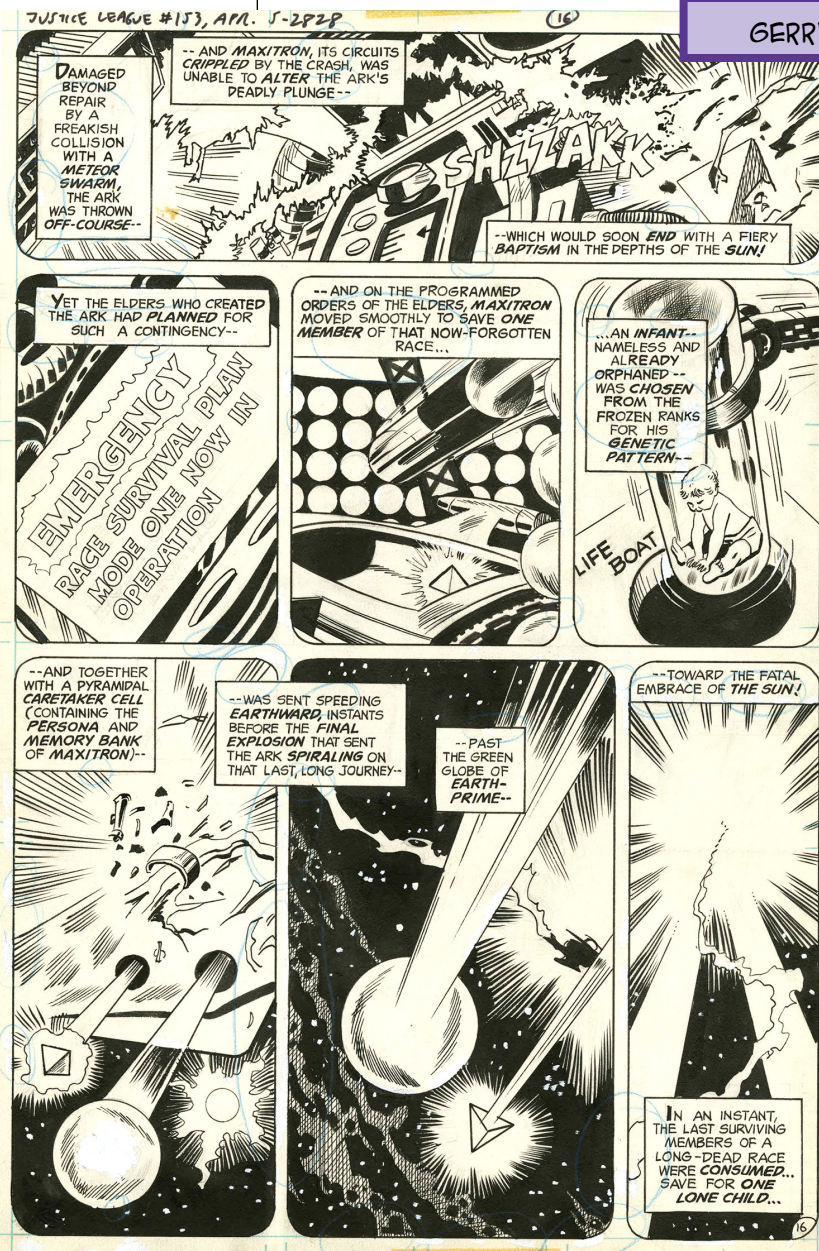
GERRY CONWAY

in a while or ones I enjoyed writing." In this case, Schwartz informed Conway that #153 must use Green Lantern, Flash, Superman, Batman, and Green Arrow, and they sat down and hashed out a plot together. Most likely, Conway had developed the Ultraa character and plot previously, and he and Schwartz felt it was a good fit for this issue. Unfortunately, seeing as how all this took place 45 years ago, Conway doesn't remember much about Ultraa. "I wish I had more to say about Ultraa," Conway confesses. "He does seem like a character with potential—but apparently, I was the only one who thought so. Truth is, I was writing so much for DC at the time I've lost track of what I did, didn't do, or intended to do."

While Conway created Ultraa and his origin, it is unclear whether he or editor Schwartz tossed in the Earth-Prime angle (see sidebar). Also lost to the mists of time is the identity of the artist that designed the look for Ultraa. Rich Buckler drew the cover, while guest artist George Tuska drew the interior. Bob Rozakis, a.k.a. the Answer Man, presents this theory: "Covers were usually designed after the story was being penciled, so if I had to guess, I'd credit George Tuska with the design."

EARTH-PRIME'S FIRST SUPERHERO!

Ultraa's story begins in *JLA* #153 on a planet far from Earth, in a universe that is not home to the Justice League. Adjust your internal vibrations and cast your gaze to the parallel dimension in which resides Earth-Prime—a world virtually identical to the one we live in (see sidebar). Eighteen thousand years ago, in a galaxy a great distance from Earth-Prime, a star turned nova, destroying everything in its solar system—well, almost everything. One planet succeeded in launching a space-ark that carried a precious cargo of one-third of its population, all in suspended animation and tended by a robot crew. Maxitron, the computer brain, guided the ship for 18 centuries until it reached Earth's solar system. On the outer edge, near





Pluto's orbital plane, the spacecraft was struck by a meteor swarm. Having suffered extreme damage, Maxitron enacted an emergency survival plan. One infant, whose DNA satisfactorily represented its people's genetic structure, was ejected along with a caretaker robot containing Maxitron's data banks. Sadly, the ark and all its inhabitants perished as the ship plunged into Earth's sun. The child landed safely on Earth in the Australian outback, but the Maxitron unit collided with Sputnik and crashed into the snow and ice in Antarctica. Aborigines discovered the baby and raised him as one of their own while Maxitron lay damaged, its memory decaying, in the frozen wasteland.

Advance forward several decades to 1978. Earth-Prime has no super-beings of its own, but Flash did visit it once. Comic book writers Cary Bates and Elliot S. Maggin had traveled from Earth-Prime to Earth-One, displaying how individuals from Earth-Prime can influence events on Earth-One. On this day, five members of the JLA were transported against their will to Earth-Prime. Flash quickly realized where they were and led them to the one man who could help them—DC Comics editor Julius Schwartz! When Flash found himself on Earth-Prime previously, Schwartz helped him build a Cosmic Treadmill which the Flash used to return to

Earth-One. Schwartz still had the treadmill, but this time, it failed to transport Flash home. Schwartz theorized that the popularity poll his readers had participated in focused many minds on these five JLAers, and that focus was keeping the heroes from going home.

Meanwhile, Ultraa had been defending the Australian outback and, deciding that he was at last ready to offer his services to all humanity, headed off for the United States. At the same time, a scientist in Antarctica unearthed the malfunctioning Maxitron unit, which immediately set out to locate and kill Ultraa. In typical comic book fashion, first the JLA and Ultraa clash, then join forces against Maxitron. Following Maxitron's destruction, the heroes erase the memories of their existence from everyone on Earth-Prime (except Julius Schwartz) and return to Earth-One with Ultraa in tow.

The interesting part of this story is how the people of Earth-Prime react to the presence of super-beings. Ultraa is confronted by US military pilots who are terrified of him. Witnesses to later super-combat likewise respond in fear and terror. Ultraa concludes that this Earth is not ready for super-beings and that his presence poses more threat than benefit. Thus, he chooses to relocate to Earth-One.

Rematch

(left) Ultraa returns, in *Justice League of America* #158 (Sept. 1978). Cover by Buckler and Frank Giacoia. (right) A Whitman variant of *JLA* #158, which was distributed via alternative markets such as supermarkets and department stores. (Whitman's variants of DC comics will be explored in an article in *BACK ISSUE* #160.)

TM & © DC Comics.

You Again??

An ultra-amazing Ultraa entrance illo'ed by longtime JLA penciler Dick Dillin, with McLaughlin inks over a Conway script. Original art for page 12 of *Justice League of America* #158, courtesy of Heritage.

TM & © DC Comics.

THE SUPERPOWER OF NEGATIVE THINKING!

Five months later, Ultraa returns in *Justice League of America* #158 (Sept. 1978), when he interrupts Flash and Wonder Woman in their attempt to apprehend Injustice Gang members Mirror Master and Poison Ivy. After the two villains escape, Ultraa surveys the results of the battle and is disgusted. He does not see this as an attempt to protect ordinary citizens; rather, he believes that these conflicts are merely part of an egotistical, personal war among super-beings that damage property and threaten the health and lives of non-super people. He concludes that all super-beings pose a threat to the world and must be eliminated. Using knowledge gleaned from Maxitron, Ultraa builds and uses a ray gun on the Flash, Green Lantern, Red Tornado, Superman, and Wonder Woman that induces negative thoughts and crippling doubt. Fearful of the outcomes of their actions and even their ability to survive the use of their powers, the

heroes are unable to act when the Injustice Gang launches their master plan. Ultraa uses his negativity-ray on the felons, only it has the opposite effect on them. The six archfoes thrive on the ray's energy, growing more confident and powerful. The inexperienced Ultraa is soon overwhelmed—but the JLAers overcome their doubts by encouraging and cheering each other on and take down the Injustice Gang before they can do any harm.

This issue poses new questions about the nature of superheroics. Just as he was concerned about the pilot's reaction to him in *JLA* #153, Ultraa is outraged by the behavior of the super-villains. "Those villains endangered the lives of innocent people" shouts Ultraa, "for an object of no value? ... Any act which endangers life is an act of evil! ... We have such power... we could destroy all humanity! ... Such power is wrong!"

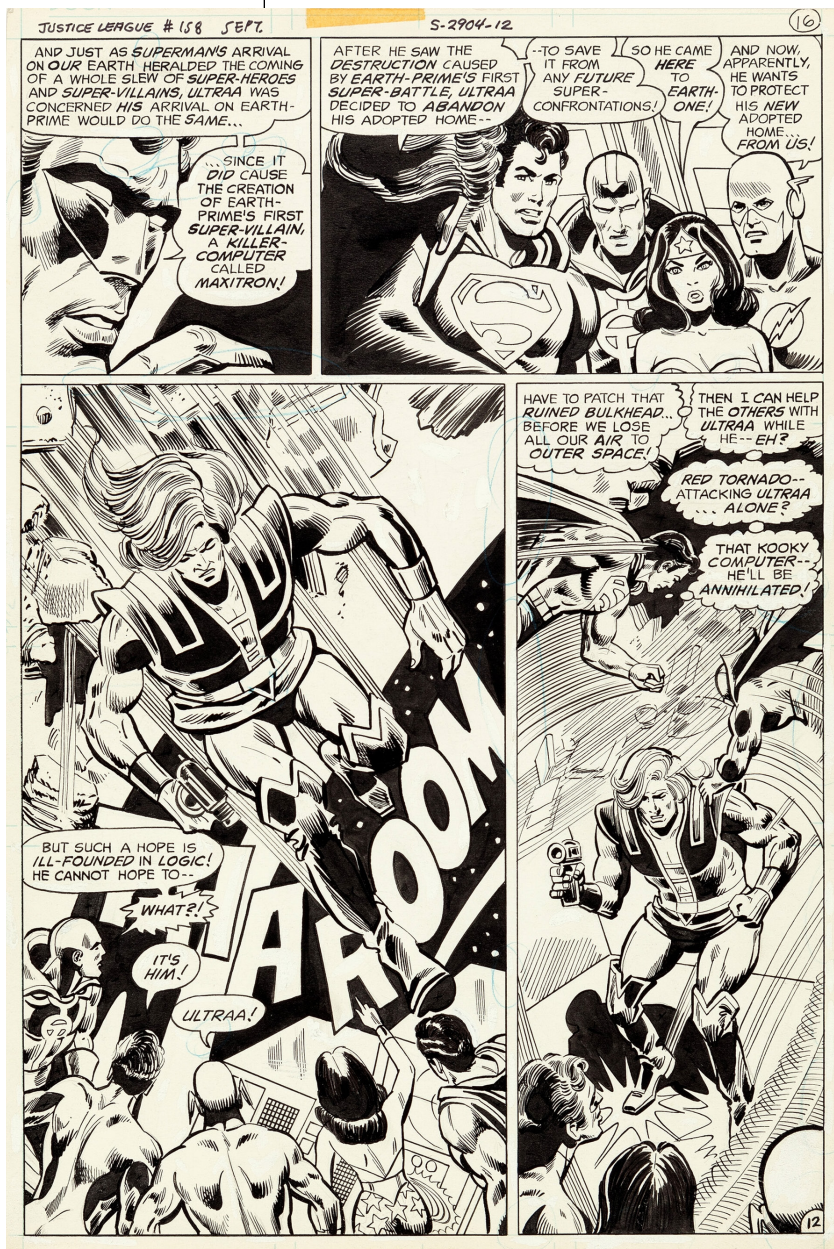
After the furious Ultraa flies away, several people emerge from hiding and ask Flash if it is safe yet. One man explains that, "When you super-heroes get battling, it's like being caught in a combination earthquake and hurricane! Hiding is about all we can do!"

"I'm just glad we survived" adds another woman, causing Flash to wonder if superheroes are no longer fighting danger—but have become the danger! Sadly, the issue ends with Superman asking what to do with Ultraa as they can no longer trust him. The real problem is forgotten... for the moment.

THE DOOMSDAY DECISION!

Nine months later, Ultraa's fate was revealed in a three-page sequence in *JLA* #167-168 (June-July 1979). The mysterious Mr. Ernest Sloane takes a helicopter ride to a remote lighthouse on the coast of Nova Scotia. Inside, he finds a "weird, twinkling cube" and, using an electronic tuning fork, proceeds to shatter the cube. It seems that "the cube was a prison, a stasis device designed by Superman for the Justice League" specifically to imprison Ultraa. In *Justice League of America* #169-170 (Aug.-Sept. 1979), the tale of Mr. Sloane and Ultraa takes center stage. Flash, Green Lantern, Red Tornado, Superman, and Wonder Woman are summoned to court where they are accused of violating Ultraa's human rights by denying his right to a trial with a proper defense and imprisoning him against his will in the absence of due process. Specifically, they are put on trial for the illegal imprisonment of Ultraa. Green Lantern calls the trial a farce while Superman calls Ultraa a madman and a "threat to all mankind." Outside, a crowd has gathered, shouting that they are "super tyrants" and "unjust" and fighting breaks out when the haters attack those who support the JLA.

Meanwhile, violent protests, mob scenes, and rioting are taking place all around the world. While Batman tries to deduce the cause of this sudden madness, Ultraa discovers that Mr. Sloane is a non-human conglomeration of creatures that belong to a communal organism called the Complex. Following the orders of the Over-Complex, Sloane used the trial to keep





Gambling on Another Appearance

Ultraa scored a cover penciled by the unsurpassable George Pérez for his comeback in *Justice League of America* #201 (Apr. 1982). Inks by Dick Giordano.

TM & © DC Comics.

the JLA distracted while other members of the Complex began changing Earth's atmosphere to kill humanity so they could claim the world for themselves. The trial is forgotten as Ultraa and the League battle the aliens with victory assured when Batman discovers the Over-Complex and destroys it and its spacecraft.

While this story tries to sidestep the issues raised by the trial, one still must wonder if super-heroes have indeed become super-tyrants imposing their will over the law of the land.

A HERO FOR ALL SEASONS!

Two and a half years later, Ultraa resurfaced in *Justice League of America* #201 (Apr. 1982). He had been working as busboy Jack Grey in Atlantic City until he was found by Joe Parry, a career criminal that once faced off against the JLA (in issue #31, to be specific). Parry somehow convinced Ultraa to help him rob a bank, which attracted the attention of the JLA. A fight ensued where Ultraa pounded the JLA senseless. Instead of fleeing, Ultraa sank to his knees, bemoaning his mistakes

and stating that it would have been better had he never been born. The next page shows Joe Parry being sentenced for his crimes and Ultraa nowhere in sight. Hawkman, realizing that Ultraa was "simply lost, confused, and very lonely," relocated Ultraa to the Australian outback where he could live out his life among an Aborigine tribe.

This issue was Ultraa's last tale. The questions raised by Ultraa remained unresolved.

Looking back, the key to understanding Ultraa is his naivety. Born on another planet in the Earth-Prime universe and raised in Australia by aborigines, Ultraa has no real understanding of the complexities of modern society. He is especially clueless about the dynamics of cultures with superpowered beings. In his innocence, he sees all super-beings (including himself) as a menace to society. However, whenever he tries to remedy the situation, it backfires. Thus, he eventually removes himself from society to live among Australian aborigines on Earth-One.

Yet his concerns were valid and would become a recurring theme in the not-so-distant future, with Alan Moore's *Watchmen* and Brad Meltzer's *Identity Crisis* being two of the most prominent. It always bothered me how the Justice League and Justice Society left the Crime Syndicate members of Earth-Three imprisoned in an energy bubble. Clearly, it was too small for them to stand up or stretch out to sleep. How did they eat or go to the bathroom? What kept the air breathable? Doesn't this qualify as cruel and unusual punishment?

EXISTENTIAL CRISIS!

Ultraa is presumed to have ceased to exist along with Earth-One and Earth-Prime. He was briefly identified in *52 Countdown* #45-44 (Aug. 2007) as part of the backup feature where many Monitors review the history of the multiverse. Otherwise, he has not been seen since.

A post-Crisis Ultraa debuted in *Justice League Quarterly* #13 (Dec. 1993; see inset). While he looks like his predecessor, this Ultraa is a native of the planet Almerac and a suitor of its ruler Queen Maxima. He is merely a combatant for Captain Atom in a simple plot where he tries to prove his worth to Maxima. He would go on to make several minor appearances and cameos, often as a member of the United Nation's League Busters. Additionally, an alternate version of Ultraa from one of the Earths in the post-Crisis universe was killed in *Countdown: Arena* #1 (Feb. 2008).

Grant Morrison revived Ultraa in 2015 as a concept—a comic book character empowered to act when enough people read his adventures and believed in his ability to protect them (harkening back to Mr. Schwartz' theory in *JLA* #153). It stands as an intriguing tribute to the brief career of the original Ultraa.

BACK ISSUE editor Michael Eury once asked, "Ultraa seemed destined for a bigger role but, after a handful of appearances, faded away. What might have happened had Ultraa gone the distance?" Apparently, no one else picked up on the potential Gerry Conway created, but Ultraa could have gone on to become the first super-tyrant, conquering the world and enforcing his idea of Utopia.

JOHN SCHWIRIAN is a retired English Professor who now spends his time researching comic book history, except for when he is chasing children off his lawn and talking about the good old days.



BEWARE THE POWER OF PLOTTER CARY BATES, EARTH-PRIME'S FIRST SUPERHERO

DC Comics—home of the multiverse, which consists of alternate Earths, parallel dimensions, divergent timelines, imaginary stories, Elsewords, Hypertime, and more!

Confused? Then travel back to a simpler time, when the concept of variant realities was unknown to comic book readers.

It all began in *Flash* #123 (Sept. 1961), when writer Gardner Fox set out to explain why there were two Flashes—Barry Allen, star of the contemporary comic, and Jay Garrick, whose super-speed exploits saw print in the 1940s. With this issue, Fox introduces the idea into DC lore that there are an infinite number of universes, all occupying the same space but separated by their individual vibrational frequencies. Barry Allen lived on Earth-One, while Jay Garrick ran around on Earth-Two. [Editor's note: *Flash* editor Julius "Julie" Schwartz later regretted not naming the Golden Age Flash's world "Earth-One" since Garrick and his colleagues predated Earth-One's Silver Age-introduced characters.] Soon, other Earths were discovered, but our focus is on Earth-Prime.

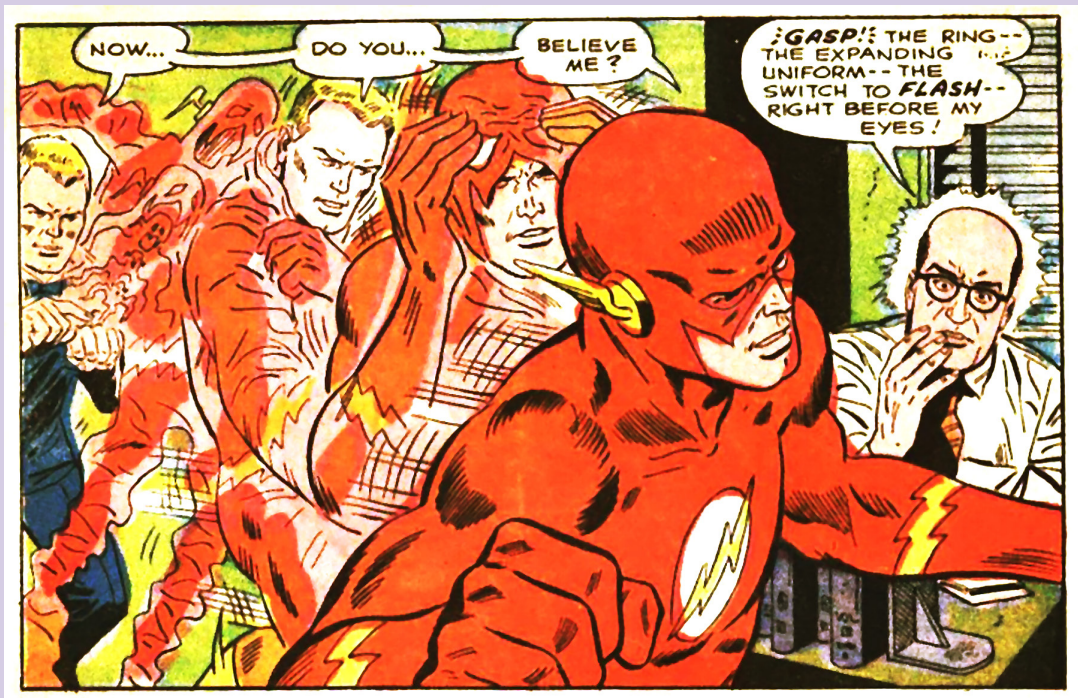
Looking back at the classic *Flash* #123, one finds the roots of the basic concept of Earth-Prime "...the parallel Earth where super-heroes don't exist except as the fictional characters in the pages of comic books" (*Retroactive 70s Justice League* #1, Sept. 2011). In the story, Barry explains that he knew all about Jay Garrick because he read about Jay in a comic book. "A writer named Gardner Fox wrote about your adventures," Barry declares, "which he claimed came to him in dreams. Obviously, when Fox was asleep, his mind was 'tuned in' on your vibratory Earth." This statement reinforces the scene in *Showcase* #4 (Sept.–Oct. 1956)—the issue premiering the Silver

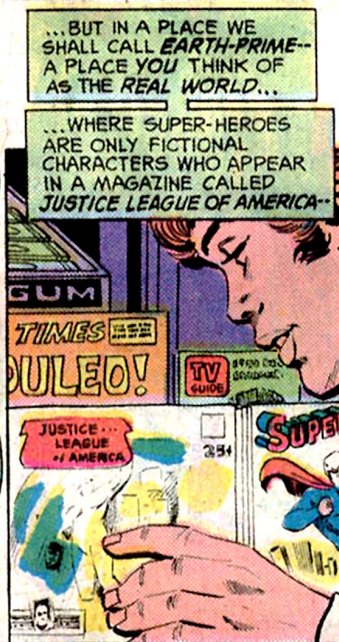
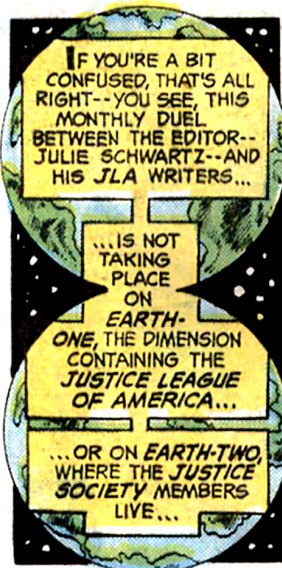
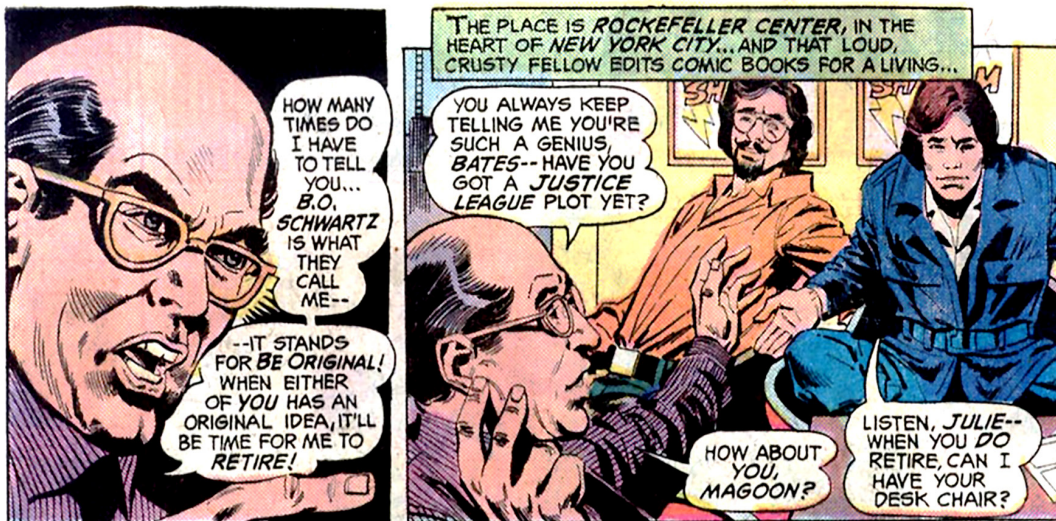
Age Flash—where Barry Allen is reading an old issue of *Flash Comics*. What is important to note here is that while Barry Allen is referring to the Gardner Fox of Earth-One, it plants the seed that will grow into Earth-Prime.

In the years that followed, the multiverse expanded from just Earths-One and -Two to include Earth-Three and Earth-A. Then, thanks to a 19-year-old named Cary Bates, Earth-Prime debuted in *Flash* #179 (May 1968). "As a fan," Bates explains to *BACK ISSUE*, "I was always fascinated by the Earth-Two concept. My thinking was if there could be a parallel Earth populated by the Golden Age superheroes of the 1940s, why couldn't 'our' (i.e., the readers') reality be portrayed in DC continuity as its own parallel Earth?" To introduce this idea, Bates wrote about an alien creature called the Nok that rampaged across Central City. Flash confronts the creature, only to suffer a blow that sets his molecules vibrating out of sync with Earth-One and into tunes with Earth-Prime. Finding himself in the town of Willowdale, Flash meets a young boy with a *Flash* comic book chronicling the Scarlet Speedster's recent encounter with Gorilla Grodd "in every last detail"—including his secret identity and innermost thoughts! Thinking back to when he first met Jay Garrick, Flash realizes that he is on a parallel Earth where a writer like Gardner Fox "tunes in" to his adventures on Earth-One. Using the address given in the comic, Flash dashes to New York City and the offices of DC Comics. There, he convinces editor Julius Schwartz to help him construct a Cosmic Treadmill, which he uses to return to Earth-One. "Julie had no input on the basic concept as I pitched it to him on spec," Bates recalls, "although it should be no surprise [that], under his guidance, the script was greatly

Julie Schwartz
of Earth-Prime
meets the Flash of
Earth-One in *The
Flash* #179.

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The multiverse is explained, and Earth-Prime's Cary Bates and Elliot S. Maggin meet in editor Julius Schwartz's office, in *JLA* #123.

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improved. And I do believe he got a kick out of being immortalized in DC mythology and 'meeting' Barry Allen, though I don't remember him ever saying so out loud."

Six years pass before we visit Earth-Prime again, in *Flash* #228 (July 1974). Writer Bates, while driving to a class reunion at Ohio University in Athens, Ohio, passes the time by plotting out the next issue of *The Flash*. In a segment worthy of *The Twilight Zone* or *The Outer Limits*, a fog rises, enveloping Bates and transporting him to Earth-One. There, Bates witnesses the Flash's enemy the Trickster enacting the ideas Bates dreamed up during his drive. Flash consistently loses each encounter with his foe due to the Trickster's hypnotic yo-yo. Fortunately, Bates gains Flash's confidence and plots out the Trickster's defeat. Then, exactly as planned, Bates watches Flash capture his opponent. Driving into a newly formed mist, Bates returns home with the yo-yo for a souvenir.

Aside from being a fun read, this issue added a twist to the "tuned-in" dreaming concept. Previously, writers merely watched events in their dreams like someone watching television. However, in this situation, Bates really could

influence events on Earth-One, begging the question, *Was this only because he was on Earth-One, or did he and his colleagues control superheroes with their thoughts?*

This concept is further explored in *Justice League of America* #123-124 (Oct.-Nov. 1975) in a tale co-written by Cary Bates and Eliot S. Maggin. The "power of plot" takes center stage when the two writers reassemble the Cosmic Treadmill hidden in Julius Schwartz's office. Accidentally activating it, Maggin is sent to Earth-One, while Bates materializes on Earth-Two. Somehow, the Wizard recognizes Bates' plotting power and enchants him into becoming a devious villain. Calamity ensues, including a hilarious moment when Bates traps Maggin inside a word balloon. Eventually, Maggin breaks the Wizard's spell, the villains are defeated, and the writers are sent home by Johnny Thunder's Thunderbolt.

Alas, Earth-Prime's Cary Bates is never seen again. "I think by the time we put out that *JLA* two-parter," Bates notes, "the consensus was the concept had lost its novelty. Although the idea of DC writers being able



Superman of Earth-One encounters future villain Superboy of Earth-Prime in the bestselling *DC Comics Presents* #87.

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to personify *deus ex machina* by controlling or interfering with what goes on in various other DC Earths was an intriguing idea, down the road I think we all thought we were avoiding a convoluted rabbit hole full of potential complications and contradictions."

Three years later, Gerry Conway put a new spin on Earth-Prime's inhabitants' ability to influence the activities of people on other Earths. In *Justice League of America* #153 (Apr. 1978), Batman, Superman, Flash, Green Lantern, and Green Arrow are snatched from the JLA satellite and brought to Earth-Prime. This time around, the ever-helpful Julie Schwartz theorizes that when

enough people on Earth-Prime focus their thoughts on individuals from Earth-One, they can influence events on that Earth. In this case, comic readers voting in a popularity poll involving the Justice League caused the five heroes to be transported to Earth-Prime.

Three more tales of Earth-Prime would follow: *DC Comics Presents* #87 (Nov. 1985), *DC Comics Presents Hawkman* #1 (Sept. 2004), and *Retroactive 70s Justice League* #1 (Sept. 2011). In chronological continuity, *Retroactive 70s Justice League* occurs shortly after Conway's *JLA* story. Cary Bates wrote, but did not appear in, its story of how Adam Strange's Zeta-Beam is sabotaged by Kanjar Ro, sending him to Earth-Prime. There, Strange is placed in a mental hospital, where electroshock therapy damages his memory. Enter Flash, Zatanna, Wonder Woman, and Green Arrow, who retrieve Strange and take him to New York City where Julius Schwartz uses issues of *Mystery in Space* to restore Strange's memory.

DC Comics Presents Hawkman #1, a tribute to editor Schwartz, is set prior to *Flash* #179 and relates how the cover to an upcoming issue of *Hawkman* has forced the Thanagarian detective and a winged gorilla to grapple with each other in the sky. Orvo and Dryl—a pair of alien fanboys—track down Julius Schwartz and convince him that the worlds in DC's comic books are real. They further relate that this artwork caused a rift to open between worlds and Hawkman and the airborne ape have been ensnared by it. This rift threatens to engulf reality, and only the staff of DC Comics can close it. Schwartz and Gardner Fox plot out a story to accompany the cover, which miraculously ends the threat. Orvo and Dryl leave Schwartz with a hint that he will soon meet the Flash and then depart this realm.

Sadly, the illusion of Earth-Prime being the world we inhabit was pretty much destroyed with the introduction of the Superboy of Earth-Prime in *DC Comics Presents* #87. Superboy meets the Superman of Earth-One, and they fly around in costume, encountering disasters generated by the Crisis on Infinite Earths. No employees of DC Comics are present, nor is there any attempt to claim this world as our Earth. Shortly thereafter, Earth-Prime is destroyed in *Crisis on Infinite Earths* #10 (Jan. 1986).

While it lasted, Earth-Prime helped the readers believe in the possibility of superheroes. With its passing, a new era of comics began—focused on continuity and gritty reality rather than wild imagination. Next thing you know, they'll tell us there is no Santa Claus.

end

IN MEMORIAM: RAMONA FRADON

I don't know if you heard, but Ramona Fradon has passed away. She was a Golden Age legend who worked right through the Bronze Age. I also loved her work on *Brenda Starr, Reporter*.

I have enclosed some art I have from her. You can use them in *BACK ISSUE* if you like.

— Patrick Moreau

Thank you, Patrick, for sharing this sad news, as well as this lovely art.

For those readers who may have missed the announcement elsewhere, Ramona Fradon (1926–2024), one of the few female superhero cartoonists of the Silver and Bronze Ages, died on February 24th of this year. While best known for her long stint as the artist of Aquaman and as the co-creator of one of this issue's spotlighted characters, Metamorpho, Ms. Fradon regaled Bronze Age readers with her work on Plastic Man, The Cat, and Super Friends. She remained active on the convention circuit and as a commissions artist until shortly before her passing.

We dedicate this edition of BACK ISSUE to her memory.



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Next issue: BACK ISSUE #155 is *Haunted!* Revisit the Bronze Age's *House of Mystery*, *House of Secrets*, *The Unexpected*, *Marvel's failed horror anthologies*, the *Haunted Tank*, those gory mags from *Eerie Publications*, *Marvel's House II* adaptation, *Elvira's House of Mystery*, and more. Chills and thrills courtesy of NEAL ADAMS, MIKE BARON, MIKE W. BARR, JIM FERN, SAM GLANZMAN, ROBERT KANIGHER, RALPH MACCHIO, DAVE MANAK, JOE ORLANDO, STERANKO, ROY THOMAS, TREVOR VON EEDEN, BARRY WINDSOR-SMITH, BERNIE WRIGHTSON, and more. Featuring a previously unpublished version of *House of Mystery* #251's cover by JOSE LUIS GARCIA-LOPEZ and Wrightson. Don't ask—just BI it! See you in thirty!

Your friendly neighborhood Euryman,
 Michael Eury, editor-in-chief



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TWOMORROWS AD PAGE