

MODERN MASTERS VOLUME SEVEN:

# JOHN BYRNE



By Jon B. Cooke and Eric Nolen-Weathington

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# JOHN BYRNE

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# Part 1: Drawing with a Ballpoint Pen

**JON B. COOKE:** Where are you originally from?

**JOHN BYRNE:** Well, I was born in England and I lived there for about the first eight years of my life. Then we immigrated to Canada, and I lived there until I was about 30. Then I came to the States.

**JBC:** Do you have any brothers and sisters?

**JOHN:** No, only child.

**JBC:** What did your parents do?

**JOHN:** My father is a town planner—zoning, architecture, that kind of stuff—and my mother is a housewife.

**JBC:** What got you guys to make the move to Canada?

**JOHN:** Land of opportunity. They wanted me to have a better chance than they'd had, and they thought they could find it there.

**JBC:** Was it pretty much a middle-class life style?

**JOHN:** Mostly, yeah. Maybe nudging toward upper-middle-class. But my father was, by the end of his career, fairly highly-placed in the city government in Calgary. He was the City Clerk, which is a lowly-sounding term for what is the highest non-elective office. So he was powerful. I didn't realize how powerful when I was a kid, but... we lived all right.

**JBC:** Where you were born?

**JOHN:** I was only born where I was born. We lived in a town called West Bromwich, which is just north of Birmingham.

**JBC:** Is that pretty much in the center of the country?

**JOHN:** Yeah, the Midlands, in fact, it's called.

**JBC:** Do you have much memory of it?

**JOHN:** Quite a bit, yeah. In fact, I said to Mike Carlin a while back—this was when I was doing the John Cleese Superman project [*True Brit*], and so I'm calling up all my old memories of England, because the gag is what if Superman landed in England rather than the United States. And I said, "Y'know, people are going to discover my secret, here." Because I have this reputation for being able to draw the '30s and the '40s so very well, and all I'm really doing when I do that is drawing the England that I remember. So now I'm drawing the England that I remember *as England*. So people will know my dark secret.

**JBC:** What year were you born?

**JOHN:** 1950.

**JBC:** So England was still in a post-war kind of semi-Depression...?

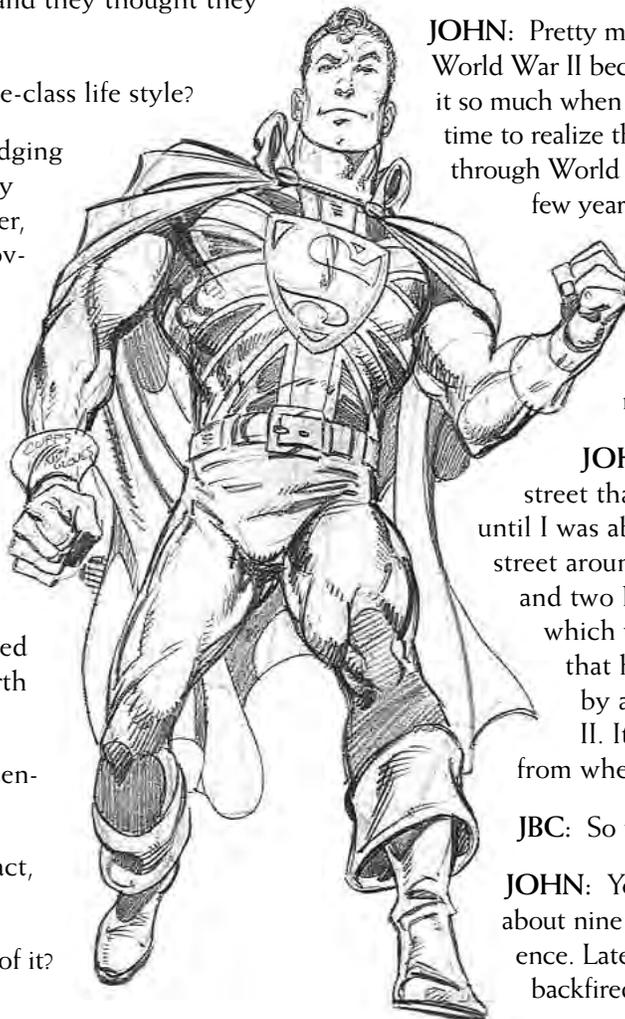
**JOHN:** Pretty much. I have false memories of World War II because all my relatives talked about it so much when I was a kid. It took me a long time to realize that I had not actually lived through World War II, because I have such... A few years ago, when people started talking about false memory syndrome, I went, "I know what that is! I know exactly what that is!"

**JBC:** Did Birmingham suffer much damage?

**JOHN:** Quite a bit, yeah. The street that I lived on in West Bromwich until I was about eight, I would go down the street around the corner to walk to school, and two houses in, there was a vacant lot which was a bomb site. It was a house that had been completely taken out by a German bomb in World War II. It was just around the corner from where my grandparents lived.

**JBC:** So the Blitz really went that far in—?

**JOHN:** Yeah. And in fact, when I was about nine years old, we had a funny experience. Late at night a truck drove by and backfired, and I heard this tremendous



thump in the next room, my parents' room. My mother had actually, in her sleep, jumped out of bed and rolled under the bed.

JBC: Something she had done before?

JOHN: Yeah, an instinctive movement, and now we're talking close to ten, 15 years after the war.

JBC: Was there any rationing in the '50s?

JOHN: A little bit. I didn't feel it much.

JBC: Socialism was kind of coming—

JOHN: Working its way in, and we were sort of aware of changes. That was probably one of the key reasons that we moved to Canada.

JBC: Was your father a Tory?

JOHN: Weeelll... yeah, I suppose so. He's sort of apolitical, but he would lean conservative.

JBC: Obviously the climate of Calgary must have been worlds different.

JOHN: Well, yeah. Calgary's better than Edmonton, which is where we first landed. I mean, Edmonton is that Canadian winter that people think about, where it starts in September and ends in May. [laughs] And the skies are gray the whole time. And then we moved to Calgary when I was 16. Calgary is in the foothills of the Rockies, and it gets these warm winds that are called Chinooks, and they come down over the Rockies and the temperature will literally go from 40° below to 40° above overnight. And that will last for a week or so, just like spring, and then the winter comes back. I was there from age 16 to 30.

JBC: Isn't Calgary out west?

JOHN: That's the good image for it. They think they're cowboys.

JBC: But they're certainly more "American" than the rest of Canada.

JOHN: Yes. Very much. In fact, the first time I visited Dallas, I thought, "Wow! This is Calgary, but bigger!" And then I thought, "Well, of course. It's the other end of the pipeline, isn't it?" It's the same people, it's

the same costumes—costumes being the key word—the same architecture. It's a very different urban environment from what Edmonton was, because Edmonton is much further north, like 120 miles north. You're starting to get into the cold parts. Calgary, yeah, is much more open. They think they're cowboy. They're not, but they think they are. [laughs]



JBC: How did you come across the Pond? Did you fly?

JOHN: No. We took the big boat. In fact, we came over, we went back, we came over again.

JBC: Why?

JOHN: My mother decided she didn't like it, possibly because when we came over the first time she had appendicitis and Dad couldn't find work and I had a bone disease and she sort of said, "I don't like this!" So we went back. And then we decided that, all things considered, Canada *was* better. So we returned.

JBC: How long was the return to England?

JOHN: Two years in Canada, two years back in England, and then we returned to Canada when I was eight. So I usually skip the part where we went back and forth and just say I've been in Canada since I was eight.

JBC: What was the experience of being on a boat ride for that long? What was, it, five days?

**Previous Page:** Panel detail in pencil form from *True Brit*.

**Above:** John's old memories of England provided nice details in these pencils for page 47 of *True Brit*.

Superman™ and ©2006 DC Comics.

**Below:** Jack Kirby, Alex Toth, Steve Ditko, Ross Andru, Frank Bellamy, and Neal Adams are but a few of the legendary comic-book artists whose stellar work crowds the walls of the Byrne sanctuary (not to mention spectacular art by some spectacular comic-strip masters as well, including Charles Schulz and Roy Crane). The proud owner poses before a mere portion of the breath-taking collection at his former home in Fairfield, Conn. **Next Page:** Preliminary sketches and ideas for the *Generations* mini-series. As with John's love for comics, it started with Superman and Batman.

**JOHN:** Five days. It was wonderful. It's the only way to travel. I was a tiny little kid; it's a hell of an adventure. I was four or five the first trip and then seven, six-and-a-half or whatever it works out to, and eight. We had to cross without my father, and my mother was hideously seasick the whole trip. I had free run of the boat, and it was wonderful. All the stewards and whatnot took care of me, and I was eating in the dining room all by myself, because everybody was seasick. It was like an Atlantic crossing worse than anybody—this was on the Queen Elizabeth.

**JBC:** It was rocky water?

**JOHN:** Oh, yeah, boy. And I have one vivid memory, which is that I was going to the dining room. I'm four years old and I'm out there wandering around this boat by myself, pretty much, because everybody's back in their cabins throwing up. I zigged when I should have zagged, and I stepped through these doors and I was out on the deck. I can still see it: the sky was gunmetal, and the sea was actually crashing over the

We crossed on the Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mary, and a little boat that nobody's ever heard of called the RMS Ivernia—that was the three trips. It was five days each way. And then, of course, a long way by train getting out to western Canada. Although that's one of my favorite little memories, too, is that when I was four years old, we came in through New York. And I have a vivid memory of Grand Central Station from when I was four years old. And I've often said Grand Central Station is the only thing that hasn't gotten smaller. I stand in the middle of Grand Central Station sometimes and I go, "It's still big! It's every bit as big as it was when I was four years old!"

**JBC:** Did you get to know other people? Were you social at all as a kid?

**JOHN:** No, I was very much a loner as a child. It was sort of forced upon me. My parents had major wanderlust, so we moved all the time. I don't think the police were actually chasing us, but we moved all the time, with the result that I went to nine

schools in eleven years. And I did not live in the same house two Christmases in a row until I was 16. So I pretty much had to learn to live inside my head, which I did. I had these comic books which helped me a lot. They were my friends. Which is pretty sick and twisted, I suppose, but...

I'm an only child and did not really have a lot of friends growing up, because I was always the new kid in school. We always moved in November, for some reason, too. I would start at the beginning of the year in one school,

side of the boat. And I don't know how my little four-year-old brain worked that fast, but I just stepped straight back in the direction I'd come. I didn't even turn around, and the door was, of course, closed. But I can still see that.

but then two months later I would move. So I was very much introverted, and very, very, very shy. It probably would have helped if I'd had—I've often said that if I'd had a brother or a sister, I'd probably only have half the neuroses. Although perhaps I'd have twice as



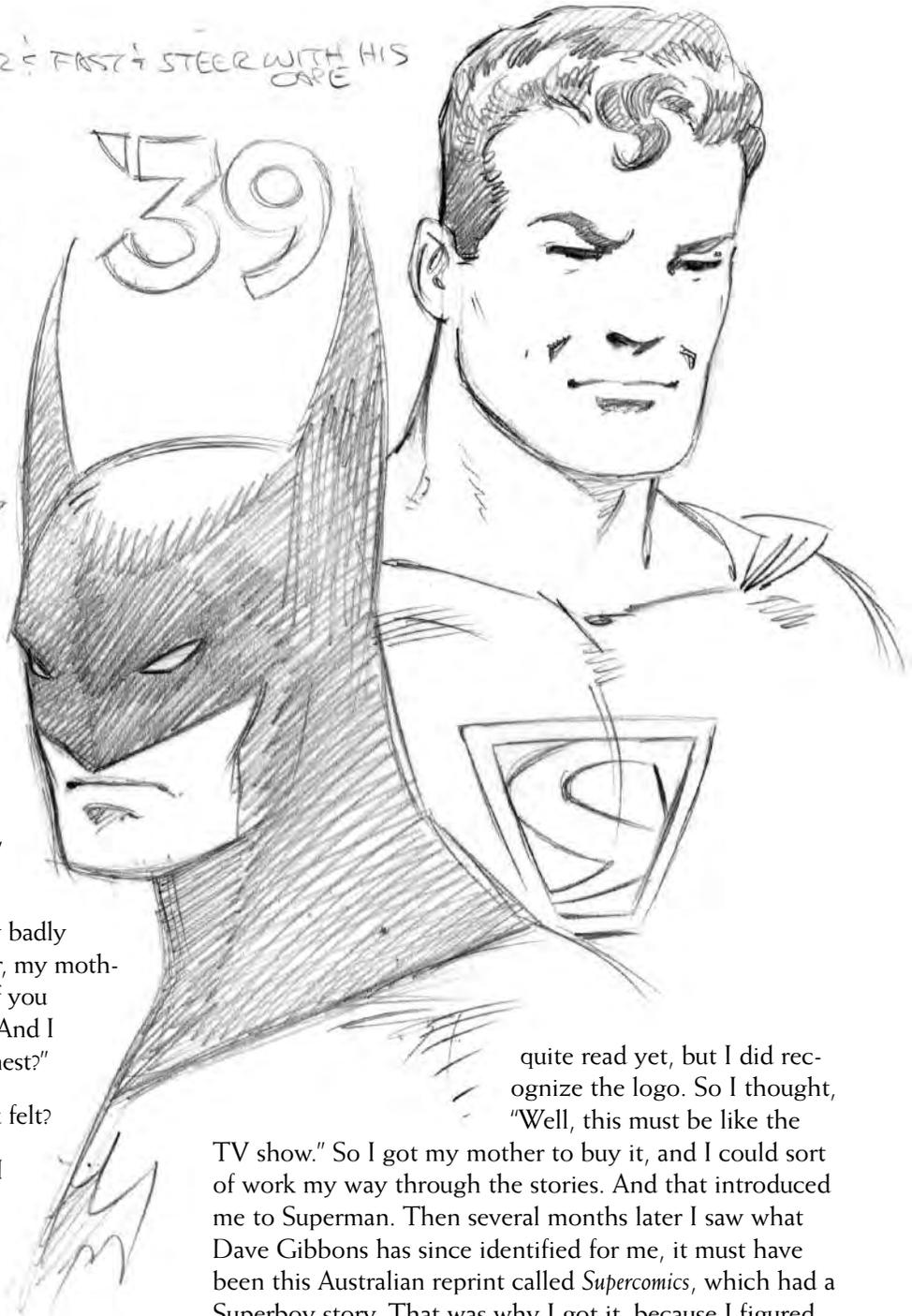
Batman, Superman™ and ©2006 DC Comics.

1939-

NO FLIGHT - CAN LEAP FAR - FAST + STEER WITH HIS  
SCAPER SPEED  
SCAPER STRENGTH  
NUMBER 39 -

BUT CAN BE BURNED  
TO DEATH, OR  
ELECTROCUTED WITH  
SUFFICIENT VOLTAGE  
CAN BE KNOCKED  
OUT BY A BOMB -  
EVEN A SMALL ONE  
KILLED BY SUFFICIENT  
BLAST(S)

XRAY VISION (EYES GLOW)  
SCAPER-ACCUTE HEARING -  
CAN CHANGE FACE/FEATURES?



many, who knows? But, yeah... the number of people I've called "real friends" over my life I can still count on one hand.

JBC: Were you unhappy?

JOHN: I don't think I was smart enough to be unhappy. I know I hated it that we moved, because I was always trying to catch up. Somehow, they always managed to be ahead of wherever I was in school. I always did very badly in school; I always had bad grades. Years later, my mother read an article that said, gosh, you know, if you move a lot, your children's grades will suffer. And I just kind of sat there going, "Really? No! Honest?"

JBC: Did you ever tell your parents how you felt?

JOHN: Oh, yeah. "Do we have to move? I don't wanna." They were always taking me away from whichever girl I decided I was in love with, too. [laughs] I think that was why they did it! So I kind of got used to living in my own head and then living through the comics and making my own comics and all that kind of stuff, which I guess most of us emotional cripples do.

JBC: Comics were your friends. When's your first memory of seeing—?

JOHN: In 1956. I worked this out with my parents a while ago. I was introduced via the *Adventures of Superman* TV series with George Reeves, which turned up on the BBC when we were still in England. And then walking down the high street one day in West Bromwich I saw one of these black-and-white hardcover annuals that they used to do in England, and it said "Superman." I couldn't

quite read yet, but I did recognize the logo. So I thought, "Well, this must be like the

TV show." So I got my mother to buy it, and I could sort of work my way through the stories. And that introduced me to Superman. Then several months later I saw what Dave Gibbons has since identified for me, it must have been this Australian reprint called *Supercomics*, which had a Superboy story. That was why I got it, because I figured Superboy must be connected to Superman somehow. It had a Johnny Quick story and it had a Batman story, and that was the first Batman story I ever read. Superman introduced me to comics, and Batman made me an addict.

JBC: And you were reading an Australian reprint?

JOHN: I was reading an Australian reprint. It was 1956 then, so the story was at least four years old. I now have a copy of the original American publication, which I got from Dick Sprang, from his personal collection. I have his copy of that comic, but I still don't have a copy of *Supercomics*. [laughs]

JBC: So Dick drew the first story?

# Part 2: The Fantastic Climb up the Marvel Ladder

**JBC:** What happened once you said, "Okay, I'm going to be a comic artist now"?

**JOHN:** It took me about three years to become an overnight success. I was pounding the pavement. I actually got a job at an outdoor advertising company in Calgary called Hook Signs as their art department, basically. I was designing all these billboards. And I cringe every time I say "billboard," because that's not what they're called in the business, but that's what civilians call them.

**JBC:** What do they call them?

**JOHN:** They're called "super-boards." [Jon laughs] That's right. Everything is one step down. A show card is a poster and a poster is a billboard and a billboard is a super-board, and all that was drilled into me. So every time I say that I used to design billboards, I go [whispers] "No, I didn't!" Twitch, twitch! And I worked there for about a year.

**JBC:** Did you do calligraphy?

**JOHN:** No, I didn't do that, that was the other department, but I would indicate it. And then I started to get stuff through the fanzines, CPL and all that stuff that Roger Stern and Bob Layton were doing back then.

**JBC:** How did you hook into that?

**JOHN:** This was again this guy in Calgary, John Mansfield, who was Canadian Army. He was able to travel all over the world and he was a big comic fan. And he was the one who introduced my stuff to various people and

showed it to various fanzines and they started running it. And out of that, Nick Cuti at Charlton saw it, saw "Rog 2000," and asked me if I would like to do "Rog 2000" as a back-up in *E-Man*. And that was really my first ongoing series. My first sale, my first professional sale—not counting the *Monster Times*—was to Marvel, but the first stuff that was published on a regular basis was with Charlton.

**JBC:** You did go down to New York and show your work, right?

**JOHN:** Oh, yeah. I visited all the offices. In '71 my parents bought me a trip to New York for my 21st birthday. I went to Marvel and I went to DC and I went to Warren. And they all said, "Go away. Come back when you're good."

**JBC:** Were you good?

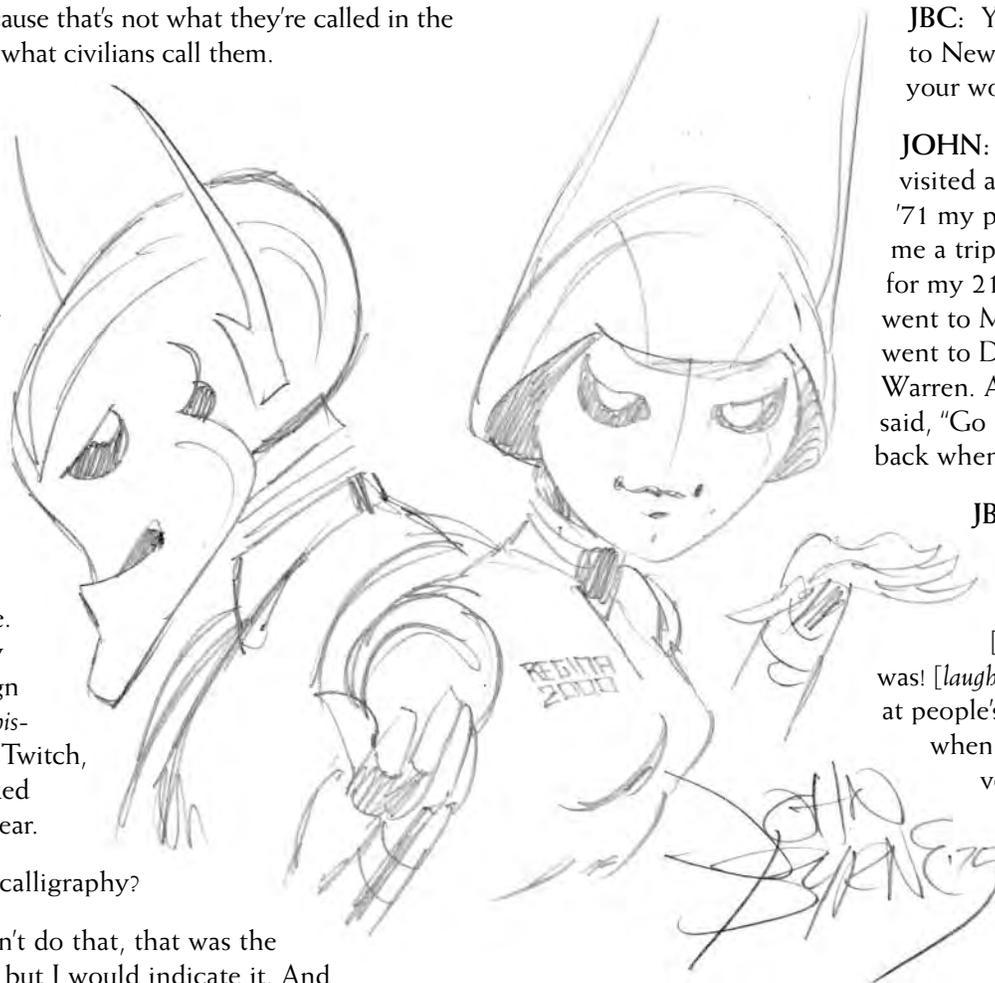
**JOHN:** No. [laughs] I thought I was! [laughs] When I look at people's work now, when people at conventions show me their work and whatnot, I realized that there are two ways of being

bad. There is the "A" way and the "B" way, as I call them. And I was bad in the "A" way. And everybody I know, Jerry Ordway, George Pérez... I've never seen Walt's stuff from that early, but I bet he was bad in the "A" way.

**JBC:** Which is...?

**JOHN:** I can't really describe it, unfortunately.

**JBC:** It's got something, you mean?



**Below:** A 1975 Iron Fist convention sketch.  
**Next Page Top:** A humorous look back at Rog-2000's family tree.  
**Next Page Bottom:** At one time John thought penciling *Iron Man* might be the most he could aspire for, and in 1979 he finally made it there—although, two years after becoming a success on *X-Men*. Page 2 of *Iron Man* #118. Inks by Bob Layton.

Iron Fist, Iron Man™ and ©2006 Marvel Characters, Inc. Rog-2000™ and ©2006 respective owner.

**JOHN:** You can tell that there's something there. And then the people who are bad in the "B" way, there's a softness to it. It's like they don't have bones in their figures and they all sort of look inflated and there's a weird mushiness to it. And I don't know anybody who was bad in the "B" way who ever got to be good enough to become a professional.

**JBC:** There's a foundation in the drawing?

**JOHN:** Something. There's some understanding, some basic thing that's missing. One of the funny things I've noticed is that in the "B" way they always seem to have strangely inflated feet, these big puffy feet. And it always looks like they're wearing bell-bottoms. It's very weird. But I remember some very early Jerry Ordway stuff that he showed me one time and I went, "Yeah, this is bad like I used to be bad." And I look at my old stuff now and I say, "Yeah, I can see that this is bad in *this* particular way. I understand the structure, I'm just not executing it yet." And the people who are bad in the other way, they just don't under-

stand, they don't *get* it. I mean, that's the simplest way to express it. They just don't get it. And unfortunately I've said this in a couple of interviews, so now people will show me their stuff and they'll say, "Am I bad in the 'A' way or the 'B' way?" And I go, "Oh, geez, the 'A' way, you're bad in the 'A' way. No, you're bad in the 'Q' way, man. You've made up your own...." Geez.

**JBC:** Did it deter you at all that they said to come back?

**JOHN:** No. Well, I did go back to Calgary and get a job at Hook Signs—that was sort of, "Oh, this'll just be my hobby."

**JBC:** But you were going to go back?

**JOHN:** Well, it was.... There's a psychology book I have on the shelf, the title of which is *If I'm So Successful, Why Do I Feel Like a Fake?* And I bought it simply for that title, because that's sort of my mantra. Because everything that happened at the early part of my career just seemed to happen by dumb luck. The right people saw the right thing at the right time. Like, Nick Cuti saw

"Rog 2000" at just the moment Steve Ditko said, "I don't want to do the back-up in *E-Man* anymore." So Nick said, "Do you want to do this?" And then Chris Claremont saw some of my stuff at just the moment that Pat Broderick's cat had thrown up on the latest issue of *Iron Fist* or something, and persuaded John Verpoorten to call me. "See if this guy wants to do...."

It was all these dominoes falling over, which I guess kind of scared me about my career sometimes, because I feel like I've had no direct control over anything that's ever happened in my career. Like, where the industry is now, I really feel like I have to grab the tiller and do something about my life and my job. But if I do that, I'll hit the rocks, because I've never been able to control the stuff that happens—it just happens. And that's really what happened at the beginning, just a series of very fortuitous dominoes toppling.



JBC: What Nick was doing was just fun; there was a lot of enthusiasm that was going on. A lot of it was really trashy, but there was just an enthusiasm to it that was just fun. So I think my brother and I saw you right at the start. We still have back issues of *Wheelie and Chopper Bunch*, and we didn't buy any of the Hanna-Barbera stuff.

JOHN: Well, that was my first whole book. And I thought, "*Wheelie and the Chopper Bunch*?" I'd never even seen the show; it wasn't running in Canada. And I just said, "Okay, if this is going to be it, then I'm going to be the Carl Barks of *Wheelie and the Chopper Bunch*." And I put all my energy into that first issue. Then Hanna-Barbera saw it and they said, "This is too scary. Tell him to dumb it down." So I dumbed it down for the second issue and it just sucked the life right out of me, which is why I only did two issues of the thing. It was so simple, the stuff that I had to do to meet what Hanna-Barbera wanted, that I felt—this is going to sound weird—but I felt wrong taking the money. It was 50 bucks a page for pencils, inks, and lettering, right? But I just felt wrong taking—and that's what I said to George Wildman when I called him. I said, "Well, I can't do this." And he said, "Why?" And I said, "I just feel bad taking the money. Give me something real to do."

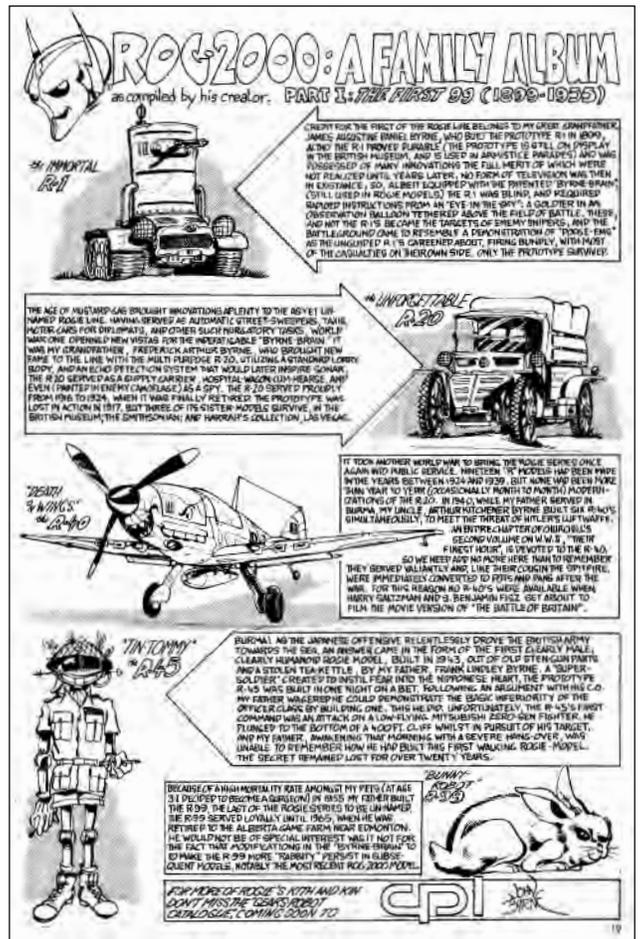
JBC: And that's when *Doomsday* came?

JOHN: *Doomsday*, and later *Space: 1999*.



JBC: Did you feel this was a project that fit in with your sensibilities?

JOHN: I really liked *Doomsday* + 1. My expectations of where I was going to end up in funnybooks was much lower than where I actually ended up. I used to think that if I was really lucky I would end up as the #1 guy of the second tier. And the way I saw that in my mind was I'd be penciling *Iron Man*. Somehow I figured that was as high as I would ever get—I would be penciling *Iron Man*. And in fact when Howard Mackie got me to write a few issues of *Iron Man* a few years ago, I said, "Well, I finally made it!" It was one of those weird things where, "That's as high as I'm ever gonna get. So over here at Charlton, they're letting me do all kinds of stuff. Wow, that's really cool! And they're not really watching me all that closely." And Joe Gill, who was the writer on *Doomsday*, I asked him if I could rewrite a couple of little things along the way, because I was lettering it as well. And he said, "Oh, rewrite whatever you like." Okay! So from that point on I was rewriting the whole thing. I mean, I wrote most of those issues after the second one.





"Is this why people think my stuff doesn't sell anymore?"

JBC: It was bi-monthly when you started!

JOHN: When I started, it was bi-monthly. It was about six issues, maybe less, maybe four issues in, that it went monthly. Dave Cockrum just couldn't do it on a monthly basis.

JBC: Why not?

JOHN: Jim Shooter once said that Dave is one of those

artists who, if you give him X amount of time to do X amount of pages, he will get two thirds of the job done. So if you give him a year to do three pages, he'll do two pages, and if you give him a month to do 90 pages, he'll do 60. [laughs]

JBC: He's probably not unique in that. There's a lot of artists like that, right?

JOHN: It's just the way that seems to work. And Dave just couldn't quite get there to do a monthly book. And that was one of the reasons he was sort of... "invited to leave" is a subtle way to say it, I suppose.

JBC: Did you see team books as your specialty? I mean, *X-Men* is a team book and it's crowded. You and George Pérez were coming out at the same time, and you actually were two guys who seemed to like the team books.

JOHN: I love team books. I've always said that George and I are at about the same level, artistically. We have different strengths, but we obviously both hit the page with the same kind of enthusiasm, the same kind of mentality. George was off doing *Avengers* and *Teen Titans* and all that stuff, and of course I did the *FF* and the *Avengers* and the *X-Men* all at the same time at one point. Which led to the famous panel, which I caught before I sent it in, but I did a shot of the *X-Men* flying in the quinjet and

I had the Scarlet Witch instead of Storm. [laughter]

JBC: Really?

JOHN: Yeah. "Whoops! I'll have to erase *that!*" That was when I used to have my drawing board in one of the bedrooms of my two-bedroom apartment, and I had a closet—one of those louvered-door closets. I would tape the pages to the closet as they were done, so I could look up at them. The closet would just take a book except for the last page. And of course the last page didn't need to be taped up,

because it was the last page. I had done that issue of the *X-Men* and I was sitting there doing the next-to-last page and I kind of looked up and literally did a double-take. "What the hell is that?" I walked over and looked and there was the Scarlet Witch sitting in the back seat instead of Storm. But yeah, the *X-Men* was always one of my favorite books when I was a kid. Actually, whatever book I was reading at that precise instant was my favorite book when I was a kid. We know how *that* works. But the *X-Men* always spoke to me.

JBC: Really?

JOHN: Yeah.

JBC: I was born in 1959, so we're a bit separated in age. But it became a dry book after a while.

JOHN: Oh, yeah. Well, I didn't last long. I only lasted for the first six issues. That's the timing.

JBC: Oh, right, and then you were out of comics.

JOHN: Then I was out of comics. In fact, I think the last issue I read was the one where they graduated. I would always yell at Shooter when he'd say, "It's about a school." I'd say, "They graduated in, like, issue eight! C'mon! Give me a break!" I loved that.

At some point I found out about the new *X-Men* book being in the works, and I sent in a bunch of *X-Men* drawings to try and get the job, because I didn't know it was going to be *new new X-Men*. Then Cockrum ended up doing it, and I was reading it and enjoying it, and Chris was doing some interesting stuff. And I basically made it known that if Dave ever left and I didn't get the assignment, people would be hurt. There would be blood. The streets would run with blood.

JBC: I guess one of the things that made *X-Men* cool was that it was so *un-cool* for a while. And then all of a

sudden—it's like Springsteen's appeal. It started like "he's ours," and when *Born in the USA* comes out, "Yahh! You don't *get* it!"

JOHN: The funny thing is that the *X-Men* seems to have crossed that line without ever crossing that line, because I would bet money that if you grabbed the average *X-fan*, who is fully aware that there are 500 *X-titles* and

that they each used to sell a billion a month, they would still tell you it was "a special book that only *I* am reading." Because that's the mentality that that book generates. It's like, "This is *my* book over in my corner."

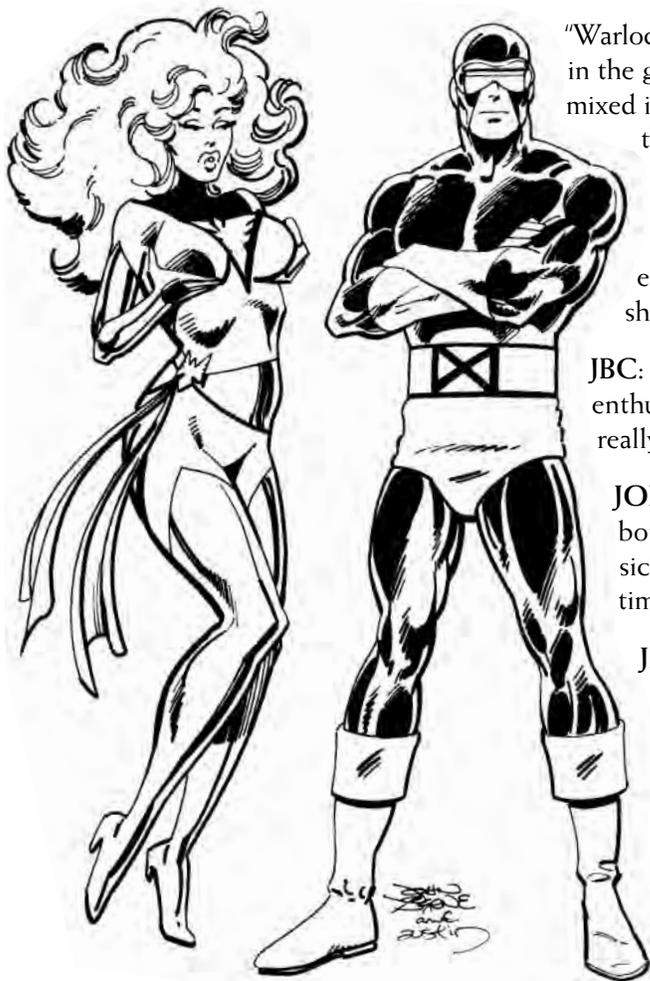
Again, going back to what Roger said, that's what the characters are. They are the outsiders, they are off to one side. They aren't the Fantastic Four, they aren't the Avengers. There was some appeal. I mean, I was the loner guy, obviously, so....

JBC: What was that big issue with you behind the Dark Phoenix story? Was that emotionally a big issue for you?

JOHN: Oh, yeah. At the time it was huge. Number one, it was a big, big story that we'd been building to for the better part of a year. And then right at the

end—even after the end, really, as far as Chris and I were concerned—Shooter had to come in and, as I so discreetly phrase it, piss on it and make it his. There we were, with this thing that had been worked out, plotted out, he knew about it, everything had been detailed. And then all of a sudden it had to be a different story. And, just to really frost me all that much more, what came out of all that was a better story. [laughs] Chris has never been able to accept that, that yes, the death of Phoenix, that whole thing, was better than what we originally had planned. When the emotional thing settled and it finally came out and I read the printed book, I said, "Yeah. This is better."





**Above:** Cyclops and a sultry Dark Phoenix. Inks by Terry Austin.

**Right:** For the cover of *Fantastic Four* #250, John included all the major characters of his young career, including Super—er, Gladiator. Inks by Terry Austin.

**Next Page:** John recreated the famous “Wolverine in the sewer” panel for a Spanish X-Men portfolio.

Captain America, Cyclops, Dark Phoenix, *Fantastic Four*, Gladiator, Spider-Man, Wolverine, X-Men™ and ©2006 Marvel Characters, Inc.

“Warlock” about diamonds in the garbage? Diamonds mixed in the garbage. And there was so much crap at Marvel back then. The *X-Men*, just from the sheer energy of it, just shined.

**JBC:** I guess it was the enthusiasm of you two really coming out.

**JOHN:** Well, we were both a couple of really sick guys, too, at the time.

**JBC:** What did you think of Terry's inks?

**JOHN:** Well, the funny thing is, Terry and I, artistically, are totally different. My stuff is very

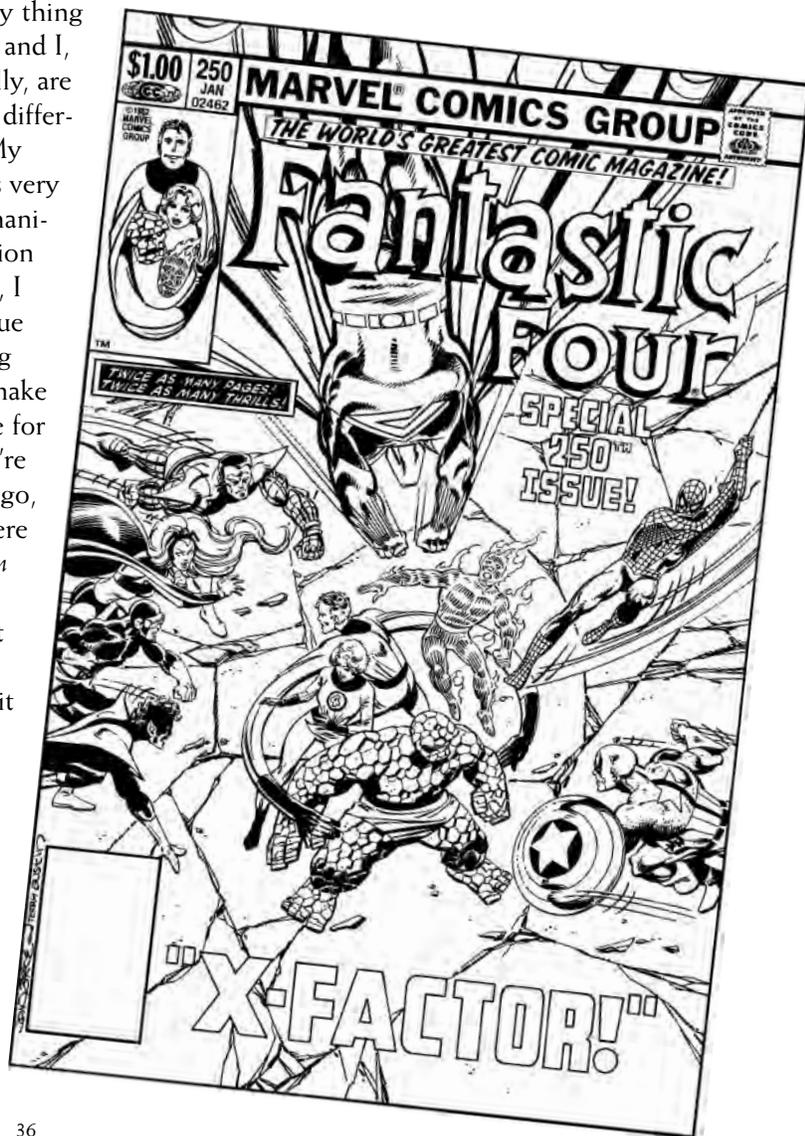
organic and Terry's is very mechanical. And I would never in a million years have picked Terry. I mean, I wanted Sam Grainger to continue on *X-Men*, because he was inking Cockrum. In part, I wanted to make it as easy a transition as possible for the fans. And they said, “No we're going to give you Terry.” And I go, “Oh, this isn't gonna work.” There is not a single page of the *X-Men* that Terry inked that looks the way it looked in my head, but it sure looks sweet, doesn't it? I don't know how it worked, but it really worked. And yet we were on opposite ends of the spectrum as far as our styles.

**JBC:** That's some incredible energy, really—and even Tom's lettering with Chris' writing, it all came together—

**JOHN:** And Glynis' coloring. I mean, Glynis' coloring

was extraordinary. Glynis won me over with a single panel. I'd always liked Glynis' stuff, but the one that really made me go “wow” was where the Beast and Phoenix have escaped from where the X-Men fell into the Savage Land and they're up on the ice cap—it was the last page, I think—and the Beast is holding Jean. So it was his face, her hair, her face, and I think his hand. As I was penciling it, I was thinking, “Y'know, I'm going to get a coloring job on this and there's going to be 15 shades of blue and 25 shades of red.” And Glynis colored it blue, red, flesh, boom. Just boom, boom, boom. And it was just perfect. That's *exactly* right. That shot would have been ruined by modeling. And I think she'd maybe not colored me much before that, but I just said, “Yes! This is what I want.”

**JBC:** Was your star rising while you were doing *X-Men*? Did your page rate rise?



**JOHN:** Yeah, somewhat. Eventually, my star rose. The initial reaction was, "Oh God, get rid of this guy, bring Cockrum back." And that lasted for the first four or five issues, really. And then what really seemed to win the fans, the fans really came over with the circus issue that ended with the splash of Magneto going "Hello dere." And from that moment on, people went, "Okay, this guy doesn't suck. I think this guy will be okay." And then, of course, we went off and did all the crazy stuff. Wolverine in the sewer, which I will spend the rest of my life living down, because it's "the greatest panel in the history of comics, ever" to hear some people talk.

**JBC:** My brother was always an *X-Men* fan, and if he was into something, I would have to be into something else. He was into *Kamandi*, I was into the *Demon*. He was into *Spider-Man*, I was into *Fantastic Four*. So I wasn't into *X-Men*. But I distinctly recall the "Wolverine in the sewer" shot.

**JOHN:** Yeah. That was really the shot.

**JBC:** You could tell Terry labored over that one so long.

**JOHN:** I labored on it, too! [laughs]

**JBC:** There was just this layer upon layer and it all worked, the characterization, too.

**JOHN:** Supposedly—I haven't seen it, but I've heard that somebody's doing one of those little model things they do of that shot. One of those little dioramas. When I first heard about it, all I thought was, "But it only works from one angle!" [laughs] If you turn it, it won't work! "You can look at this model, but only from over here."

**JBC:** Was Tom [Orzechowski] used as the letterer because he could letter really small?

**JOHN:** Well... Tom lettered "Star-Lord"—I think that was the first time we worked together—and there was a line in "Star-Lord" where one of the characters says, "Star-Lord, you talk too much." And in the margin, Tom had lettered "Letterers' Lament."

[laughter] That was funny. So, yeah, Chris is verbose, that's his style. And sometimes it works. Chris is the only writer I've ever worked with that managed to make me cry reading a page that I had drawn.

**JBC:** Really?

**JOHN:** That was a page in *Iron Fist*. When I got to that page and read what he had written, I actually teared up. It was beautiful. So give the guy his props. Chris Claremont is the best damned Chris Claremont out there. No doubt about it.



# Part 3: Up, up, and Away from Marvel

JBC: How did the Superman deal come about?

JOHN: Basically from me shooting off my mouth for ten years. After the first *Superman* movie with Christopher Reeve, I just went around saying, "See? They knew how to do it right. DC doesn't know how to do it right."

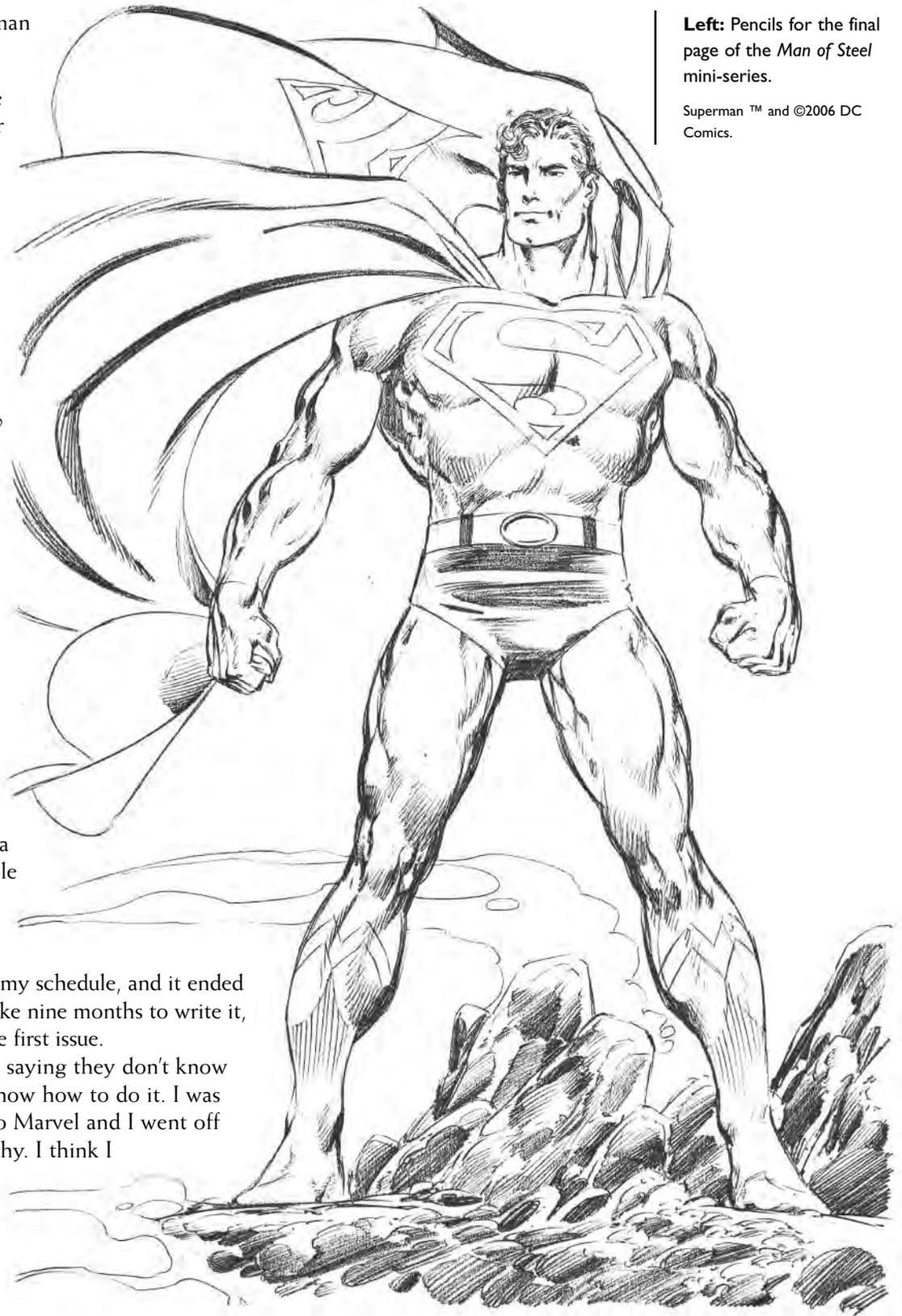
JBC: But you had already done *Legends of the Batman* at that point, right?

JOHN: Yeah, but on that I was only the art robot. And I only penciled the first issue.

JBC: Just quickly, how did you....

JOHN: How did I get that? I was at a convention in Chicago, I heard they were doing it, and I went to Jack Harris, who was the editor, and I said, "I hear you're doing a Batman thing. I've got a hole in my schedule. I'd like to do that." And they said, "Great." Unfortunately, it was a three-month hole in my schedule, and it ended up taking Len something like nine months to write it, so I was only able to do the first issue.

With Superman, I kept saying they don't know how to do it, they don't know how to do it. I was under exclusive contract to Marvel and I went off contract.... I don't know why. I think I maybe sensed that I was going to have to jump. And almost the instant I decided to go off contract, the phone rang. It



Left: Pencils for the final page of the *Man of Steel* mini-series.

Superman™ and ©2006 DC Comics.

**Right:** Early Superman sketches from John's sketchbook.

**Below:** Once the kryptonite conundrum was solved by Jenette Kahn, John proceeded to kill off Krypton in a more traditional manner than he had originally intended. Pencils for page 7 of *Man of Steel* #1.

**Next Page Top:** John further explored the history of Krypton in the 1987 mini-series, *The World of Krypton*.

**Next Page Bottom:** A ghost from the past. A panel from page 17 of *Man of Steel* #6.

Jor-El, Lara, Superman™ and ©2006 DC Comics.

was Dick Giordano, and he said, "Okay, wise guy. Put your money where your mouth is. We are, in fact, going to reboot Superman. Tell us what you want to do." So I put together what I called my "List of Unreasonable Demands," which was like 20 things, as I recall. I turned it in, and they liked 19 of them. So, [laughs] 19 of them were not unreasonable, as it turns out.

The one thing they didn't like—and I ultimately agree—I said if we're starting from scratch, if we're starting from the bottom line, here's our problem. It was a problem all along, really, if you thought about it, but... Superman is the sole survivor of the doomed planet Krypton. That was one of my main things: he's the only one. How do we know Kryptonite can kill him? I mean, that's kind of a test to destruction, isn't it? If we've got this green, glowing rock here, this will kill

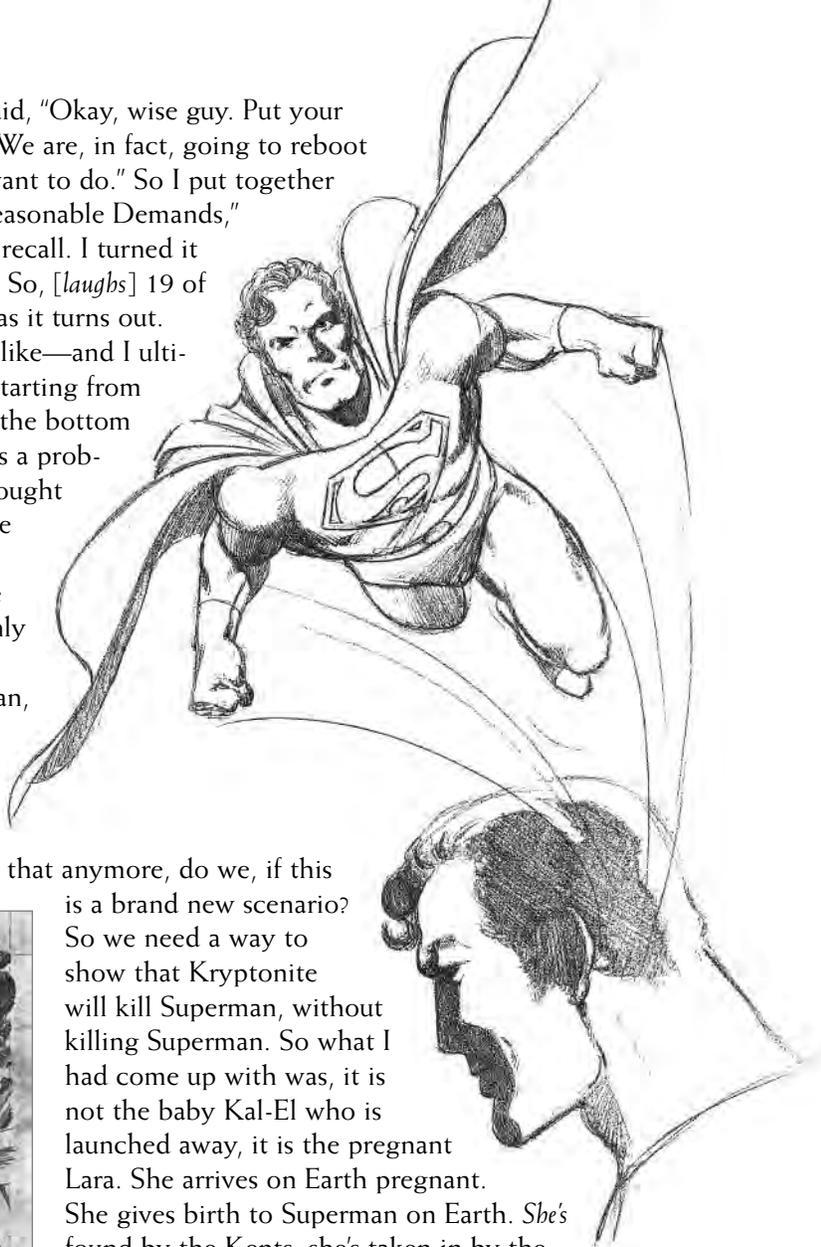
Superman. But we don't know that anymore, do we, if this

is a brand new scenario?

So we need a way to show that Kryptonite will kill Superman, without killing Superman. So what I had come up with was, it is not the baby Kal-El who is launched away, it is the pregnant Lara. She arrives on Earth pregnant. She gives birth to Superman on Earth. She's found by the Kents, she's taken in by the Kents. She gives birth. And then she finds that piece of Kryptonite that came along, and *she* dies. And that's how we know.

JBC: That's mean! [laughs]

JOHN: Yeah! Then Jenette [Kahn] said—and I thought this was good; she was smart to say this—she thought that took it a little too far away from what we knew. And then she demonstrated a surprising knowledge of the characters that I didn't realize that she had. She said, "If the explosion was caused by all these pressures inside Krypton, and if it was those pressures that fused the native elements of Krypton into Kryptonite—which is the story—perhaps it was already happening before the planet blew up. Perhaps there was already Kryptonite in the core, and that radiation was already killing people on Krypton before Superman is launched away. And I said, "That's brilliant!" And in my opening, that's what Jor-El discovers is that the mysterious plague that's killing everybody is Kryptonite radiation from the pressures in the core.



JBC: Did the Superman deal launch you into a different stratosphere, financially?

JOHN: No, no, not at all.

JBC: Were you already there?

JOHN: I did make a nice piece of change of the first *Man of Steel*, because it was the first comic in like a hundred years to have sold a million. Not since the '40s had we seen those kinds of numbers. But, no, I got my regular page rate. And in fact I wasn't inking the book.

A funny little sidebar story: The fans, even back then without the Internet, were saying, "Well, Byrne's leaving to do the Superman bit for the money." So I said in an interview somewhere, "Actually, I expect to make less doing Superman, because I won't be inking it." I had no idea what the royalties would be like, but I knew that DC books generally sold a lot less than Marvel books. *Superman* at that time was selling half of what the *Fantastic Four* sold.

I was Ralph Macchio's office one day, and he said, "You know, John Buscema was in here the other day." I said, "Oh, yeah?" And Ralph said, "He said, 'I heard Byrne's gonna do Superman and he's gonna make less money.' I said, 'Yeah.' And Buscema said, 'Schmuck.'" [laughs] And I thought, "Well, at least he knows my name." [laughter]

JBC: So there's royalties on the books that...?

JOHN: Well, most of my money has always come from the actual doing of the job, because of the amount of pages that I do. I mean, my page rate got to a certain level. There was a while there, around '92-'93, where the royalties, because of the direct sales and the speculation and everything else, they really took off. But for the bulk of my career, about a third of my income has come from royalties. Which is why—



JBC: That's not bad.

JOHN: Yeah. But it means I can still live in this house even though the royalties are usually non-existent these days.

JBC: You obviously grew up on Superman.

JOHN: I had a book called *Superman: Serial to Cereal*, and they covered every single manifestation of Superman. It had a very spooky picture in it, too: a Kellogg's Cornflakes or something ad from the '40s that had a painting of Superman with some kids, and it looked exactly like Christopher Reeve. Exactly.

JBC: Did you ever meet Reeve?

JOHN: Twice. That was fun, too. Well, I met him at DC and we talked about the fourth movie. And then for the 50th anniversary, there was this big show at the Smithsonian. I went down for that





because they invited me. He came over and introduced himself to me. "Hi, I'm Christopher Reeve, we met up at the DC offices." "Really? Let me just think..." [laughter] And I chatted with Margot for a while because we were bonding on being Canadians. And... three years ago? I went to the Sundance Film Festival with a couple of friends.

JBC: Just for the heck out it?

JOHN: Just for the heck of it. These friends go every year and I decided to go with them. And we were walking out, having seen this movie with Margot Kidder in it, and Margot Kidder walked past me going down the aisle. We went on a couple of paces and I turned to my friends and I said, "See that? These Hollywood people, they just walk right past me like we've never even met." [laughs] Of course, how long ago was it, 15 years? It was fun.

JBC: So basically you did two titles, you did *Action Comics*, which was a team-up book, and you had the *Superman* title....

JOHN: And I ended up writing *Adventures of Superman* when Marv... departed.



JBC: Were you ostensibly the *Superman* editor at that time?

JOHN: Well, not really, no. Ostensibly, that was Andy Helfer. And that turned out to be another situation where I didn't get along with the editor. Helfer is at that end of the spectrum where everything has to be changed. Mike Gold made a comment one time, he said Helfer would change the spelling of his own name in the credits if he could think of a way to do it. I used to

**This Page:** John's Lois Lane was both glamorous and one tough cookie—much as Margot Kidder portrayed her to be in the *Superman* movies. Pencils from *Man of Steel* #4 and an early design drawing of Lois.

**Next Page:** A brilliant page from *Superman* #1. You can almost feel Superman's pain through John's pencils.

Clark Kent, Lois Lane, Metallo, Superman™ and ©2006 DC Comics.



# Part 4: A Legend is Made

**JBC:** From Superman, did you just go right back to Marvel?

**JOHN:** Um... yeah, I think I did.

**JBC:** The next thing you did was *West Coast Avengers*, right?

**JOHN:** Yes, *West Coast Avengers*, but I actually pitched *Hidden Years* before that.

**JBC:** You pitched an X-Men book in the '80s?

**JOHN:** Yeah, I pitched *Hidden Years*. I didn't have that title then. And it was actually killed because of *X-Factor*. Because they said it would be the same team as *X-Factor* and it would be confusing. Tom DeFalco had this great line, "Another book called *X-Men* would be too confusing." I wish I had that in writing.

**ERIC NOLEN-WEATHINGTON:**

Over the past 30 years or so, with a few rare exceptions, humor books don't tend to do very well. How were you able to sell Marvel on the idea of *Sensational She-Hulk*?

**JOHN:** It started with Mark Gruenwald—he was second-in-command back

then. He asked me to do a new *She-Hulk* book, but he asked me to come up with something that hadn't been done with the character before—something new and different. I thought about it for a while, and then I thought, "Well, how about she knows that she's in a comic book.

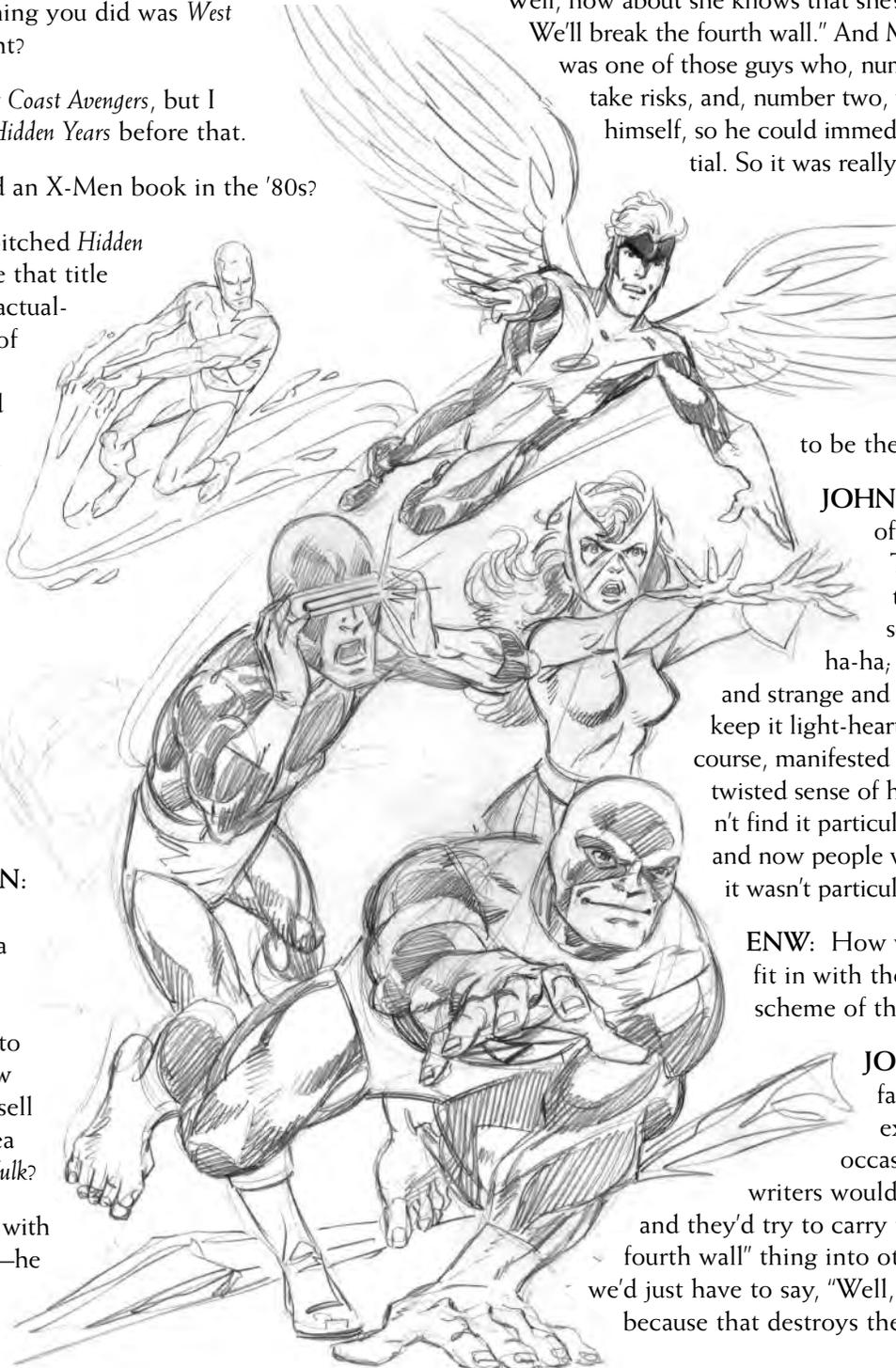
We'll break the fourth wall." And Mark loved it. Mark was one of those guys who, number one, loved to take risks, and, number two, was a very funny guy himself, so he could immediately see the potential. So it was really not a hard sell at all.

**ENW:** Most writers I've talked to find humor harder to write than a straight-ahead action/drama. Did you find that to be the case as well?

**JOHN:** I didn't really think of it as a humor book. That was part of the trick, I think. I didn't set out to be funny ha-ha; I set out to be weird and strange and wonky, and to try to keep it light-hearted. And that, of course, manifested itself as my own twisted sense of humor. So, no, I didn't find it particularly hard to write, and now people will tell me that's why it wasn't particularly funny. [laughter]

**ENW:** How well do you think it fit in with the overall Marvel scheme of things at the time?

**JOHN:** Well, it fit in fairly well, I think, except for those few occasions when other writers would use the character and they'd try to carry the "breaking the fourth wall" thing into other books. And we'd just have to say, "Well, no, don't do that, because that destroys the only thing this





**Right:** Opening splash page of *Next Men* #3. Included in the margin are John's notes to Legend's group editor, Barbara Kesel.

**Below:** *Next Men* #14, page 10.

**Next Page:** Bethany, aka Harbody, in a commission drawing and in the pages of *Next Men* #7.

*Next Men*™ and ©2006 John Byrne.

JBC: You weren't there that long?

JOHN: I was there longer than anybody, actually. But that was the problem. I got pissed off when I noticed that I was the only monthly presence. "Where are the rest of you guys?" Frank was doing stuff every once in a while, but then a bunch of people were coming in who *hadn't* done anything yet. Like, Walt Simonson had just joined, but he hadn't done anything yet.

There was talk about doing a card set, and that we should have Walter in the card set, and I said, "Well, no, remember we said we wouldn't solicit anything that hadn't appeared yet? So Walt's book should come out before he's part of the Legend card set." And it just went

NEXT MEN #3  
PAGE 1  
BALANCE -  
FIRST POINT  
CHANGES -  
REGULAR - 13pt  
BOLD - 14pt  
KEEP EDGE OF  
PAGE (TOP) AS  
CLOSE TO DOTTED  
EDGE OF PAGE  
AS POSSIBLE  
FULL BLEEDS  
THROUGHOUT  
(EXCEPT  
PG 10)  
I'VE RECEIVED THE  
PROOFREADS OF  
THE COVER GONGS  
OF THE RIGHT (AND  
THE INSIDE BLURB  
LINE) AND AS  
CLOSE AS POSS. TO  
THE 2 1/8" PROOF-  
CORRECTED  
CORRECTIONS  
BY TRAINING  
TOP & BOTTOM -  
JBY



back and forth and up

and down and then finally the industry crashed. And I said, "Okay, I need a *real* job."

JBC: What was the thinking behind *Next Men*?

JOHN: I wanted to do an independent thing. I think Dark Horse was doing three. I wanted to be safe; I wanted it to sort of smell like a super-hero book even though it wasn't going to be a super-hero book—it was going to be science fiction. So I gave them super-powers and I gave them a name that sort of sounded like "X-Men" as sort of a signal to everybody. It did very well. Actually, it was funny, because the first issue was the best-selling direct sales market book ever to that point. And this is where I go wrong, this is where I make mistakes. The first issue's initial orders were 109,000. And there were some orders here and some orders there, and by the time all was said and done, I think it got up to about 150, 175.

JBC: Wow!

JOHN: Yeah. And that was huge back then. The best anything had done was, like, 30,000. Dark Horse wanted to promote that. I said, "No, don't promote that. Because then the speculators will think it's a big seller, and they won't buy it." Because I was stupid, and I thought speculators actually thought like people who were logical. [Jon laughs]



# Part 5: Storytelling and the Creative Process

JBC: How long did you work at that sign company again?

JOHN: About a year.

JBC: Did you get a good, solid feel for professionalism, for being on time, getting the job done?

JOHN: I think so. Most of that I think actually comes from self-application, because I was working at Charlton at the same time I was working at Hook Signs. And when I quit Hook Signs, my first reaction was, "Great! I can sleep until noon and I can do what I want!" And it only took a couple of three o'clock in the morning hitting the deadlines for me to kind of go, "You know, this is a job isn't it? I should treat this like a job." And I have ever since. It's get up in the morning, get to the drawing board...."

JBC: When do you stop? Is it a nine-to-five thing?

JOHN: It's seven-to-four, actually, with maybe a half an hour off for lunch.

JBC: And do you stay up late watching movies or something?

JOHN: No, I go to bed at nine o'clock.

JBC: Really?

JOHN: And I get up at, like, five.

JBC: You have a dog?

JOHN: I have a dog. And a cat, somewhere. I let the dog out and I stagger around like a zombie for a while.

JBC: How many pages can you do in a day?

JOHN: It varies. Two to three pages a day.

ENW: You don't do thumbnails at all, right?

JOHN: Oh, no. I haven't for 30 years.

ENW: Do you plan it out in your head beforehand, or do you just sit down and draw?

JOHN: The way I try to describe it to people, when I was a kid teaching myself to draw, and I didn't know about drawing it in pencil first so you could erase, I used to draw everything straight with pen. Which meant that every line had to be the right line the first time. I developed that habit of drawing very, very tightly, very, very carefully.

And the way I describe it is I'd get a snapshot in my mind of the image, and I'd sort of project that onto the page and trace it. And that's what I still do, even with a pencil. This has served me well over the years.

When I first started out, when I was still in my fan days—because I stopped doing thumbnails even

before I turned pro—the thumbnails were kind of binding, because having put that onto paper, that was what I was required to draw. Whereas with the snapshot in my mind, I can mess with it a bit. I can move things around; I can change

things. So it keeps it much more spontaneous; it keeps the energy level higher. And that's the main thing I've always been concerned about is keeping the energy level high.

ENW: Is there any extra thinking involved when you're working with another writer?

Do you read the entire script before sitting down at the board, or do you take it a page at a time?

JOHN: Generally speaking I will flip through the script—or the plot, if it's broken down page by page—just to see if there's anything there that's going to surprise me. But then I'll just start drawing on page one. There's a funny quirk that I have, if I have a picture or a panel or a page in my



BOOM! PHOENIX  
ZAPS STRONGSHIP

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PHOENIX MONICUM

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LIL YELLS CRAZY	X TRIES TO REACH X-MEN 30
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PHOENIX LIES THROUGH TEETHS -	SCOTT IS CONVINCED BY X
PHOENIX MURK PROCEEDS REVENGE	SCOTT & ORRANTO
	STORM LASHES OUT -

31

OTHERS ARE  
VERY TROUBLED

---

FEELING  
GADGERS

---

PHOENIX  
TRANSFORMS

---

DICK'S  
PHOENIX

32

PHOENIX SH WANTS MAD JOHN	OTHERS HEARD
KILL ME	
SHE KNOWS DIE -	
SCOTT FOR SAD	SHE STOPS HER - SHE EXPLAINS ABOUT PHOENIX - SHE MOMENT

33

CHARLIE

---

LAST PAGE WELL IS THE FINAL	ZAP!
SCOTT TURNS BACK -	OTHERS DISAPPEAR
	JOHN GOES 34

WARNING &  
RECONSTRUCT  
SEQUENCES

35

head, it will fester if I don't get to it. So I really don't like to know for sure what's on page 18 when I'm starting on page one, because by the time I get to page 18 it will have turned into something disgusting in my head and I won't be able to draw it. I prefer to just start on page one, though sometimes on my own stuff I frequently draw the pages out of order. I'll sometimes do that with

**Previous Page:** Self-illustration from 1985.  
**Left:** John's page breakdowns for X-Men #137.  
**Below:** Partially finished Justice League piece that was never used—but it does provide some insight into John's inking process.

Batman, Flash, Hawkman, Superman, Wonder Woman™ and ©2006 DC Comics.

a full script, too—just open it to a random page and draw, and just keep doing that until the pages are done.

**ENW:** How do you work when you're inking yourself? Do you ink a page as soon as you finish the penciling, or do you work in batches?

**JOHN:** I usually finish a page in pencil and then ink it. There are several layers to it, because I'll do the pen work, then I'll do the brush work, and then I'll fill in the blacks.

**JBC:** Do you have any current favorite artists?

**JOHN:** Who counts as current? I love... I call them the Dodson twins [Terry and Rachel], although I know they are husband and wife. Nobody else is doing Adam Hughes right now, so they might as well. So them—

**JBC:** Did you see CBA #21 [featuring Adam Hughes]?

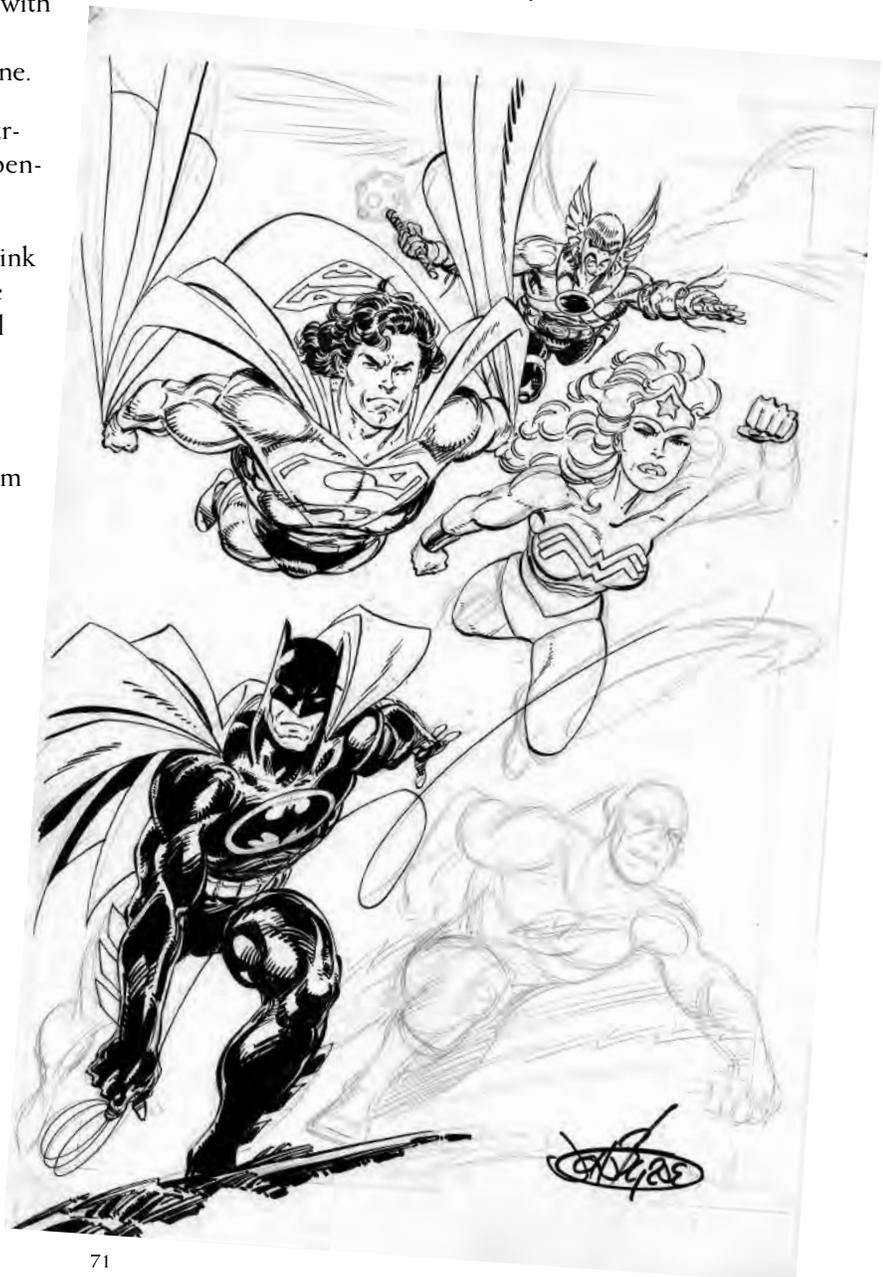
**JOHN:** Yes, I thought it was a terrific issue. In fact, it was that issue that finally pushed me over the edge to say, "I've got to fatten my line." I've been thinking about fattening my line, and looking at the way Adam does it. I thought, "Why not?"

**JBC:** Do you use the computer as an artistic tool?

**JOHN:** I've been using the computer to do a lot of 3-D modeling, and I've found a way—

**JBC:** Does it look like Byrne drew it?

**JOHN:** Oh, sure. I found a way to do models that look like line drawings, so I've been doing



# Part 6: John Byrne Takes On...

JBC: There's a British reserve. Did your parents have that?

JOHN: I've often said that when a British baby boy is born, they take this expanding steel rod and they shove it up his rear end and it just gets longer as he grows up. And I've struggled to get rid of that. I'm not sure I've been entirely successful.

JBC: You find it hard to loosen up, so to speak?

JOHN: Somewhat. I'm not nearly as stuffy as I used to be.

JBC: Did you have any children?

JOHN: No. Not of my own, no. My ex had two step-kids. Kieron Dwyer used to be my stepson. I think that's how it works. He used to be my stepson, I don't think he is anymore. *[laughs]*

JBC: I first met you when I was probably 13 years old, and this was just in your first brush with the Charlton stuff. You were just incredibly enthusiastic. My little brother, he must have been eleven years old, and he talked with you. You asked him to get you some coffee or something and you'd draw a few sketches for him, something like that.

JOHN: I don't know how the reputation of "John Byrne, the ogre" has grown up over the years—

JBC: You know, that actually surprised me. But I did have some encounters with you online which were very sharp and—

JOHN: Yeah, there are so many idiots online that my threshold is, like, zero. And of course, you can't read tone of voice into that stuff. And I will slice people up online and then kind of go, "Hmmm, maybe I read that wrong." *[laughs]* But by then it's too late. But, no, for the most part, as the people who have figured me out have said, I just don't suffer fools gladly.

JBC: But you've got to get into it, right?

JOHN: A little bit. I enjoy the interface with intelligent people and those who are there for the correct reason, which is to talk about funnybooks. I *don't* like the people who try to bring my personal life into it, I *don't* like the people who imagine themselves to be telepathic. "Oh, you're doing this because blah." No, I'm not! And the people who... as I've said on a couple of occasions, I've never heard a rumor about myself that was true. Not even the good ones. And these people who come in armed to the nines because they "already know what an ogre John Byrne is," well, yeah, they're probably going to meet an ogre. I play the cards I'm dealt.

JBC: I have to admit, I'd got into... we were talking about Kirby and I was relatively fanatical about it at the time, "Oh, Kirby is God!"—

JOHN: Well, he is. But it's a pantheon. *[laughter]*

JBC: Stan certainly played a role.



HEY, JOE!  
 THESE ARE THE F.F.  
 ROUGHLY CIRCA #99/100.  
 ANYTHING YOU CAN DO TO  
 GIVE 'EM THAT LOOK AND  
 "FEEL" WILL BE MUCH  
 APPRECIATED!



JOHN: Yeah, yeah.

JBC: I've gotten much more pragmatic and I think more realistic about it. I went to the message boards for a while, but I've never gone to that message board again, because of that ambiguous tone—it turns into a monstrous explosion. And people are such asses.

JOHN: You betcha. It's the anonymity. They're all behind their little secret identities, because "FuzzyBunny" can say something that Joe Smith would never dare.

JBC: You're obviously not anonymous, though. Is the Internet an attraction for you?

JOHN: It's human contact in one way, of which of course I don't get much. It's a way of reading the audience, and we need that. I don't do as many conventions as I used to, so this has replaced the convention as a way of getting vibes from the audience. And you kind of have to filter through a lot—it's kind of like panning for gold. Because obviously people will do things and say things online that they would never in a million years do. The worst convention experience I've ever had doesn't come within light years of these bozos online. It's the anonymity. You get these clowns tearing a strip off me and saying, "Well, the next convention, boy, you're gonna get a piece of my mind." They never turn up. Yeah, it's easy to pretend you're Batman lurking in the shadows, but when you actually have to face somebody, it just doesn't happen.

JBC: Did you ever just say, "I don't like this anymore."

JOHN: Oh, yeah.

JBC: Do you periodically stop?

JOHN: Oh, yeah. I've gone cold turkey a couple times, but I always find myself creeping back.

JBC: I was amazed, I did some online chats with you—you were actually instantaneous in your response. I think we did a 5000-word interchange in a half an hour.

**Previous Page:**

An unfinished piece which was intended for Jack Kirby's *Fourth World*.

**Above:** In *X-Men: Hidden Years* #8, Joe Sinnott—FF inker for most of Jack and Stan's classic run—inked the FF throughout the issue (Tom Palmer inked the rest).

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# John Byrne



Aurora, Invisible Woman, Marrina, Snowbird  
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# Art Gallery



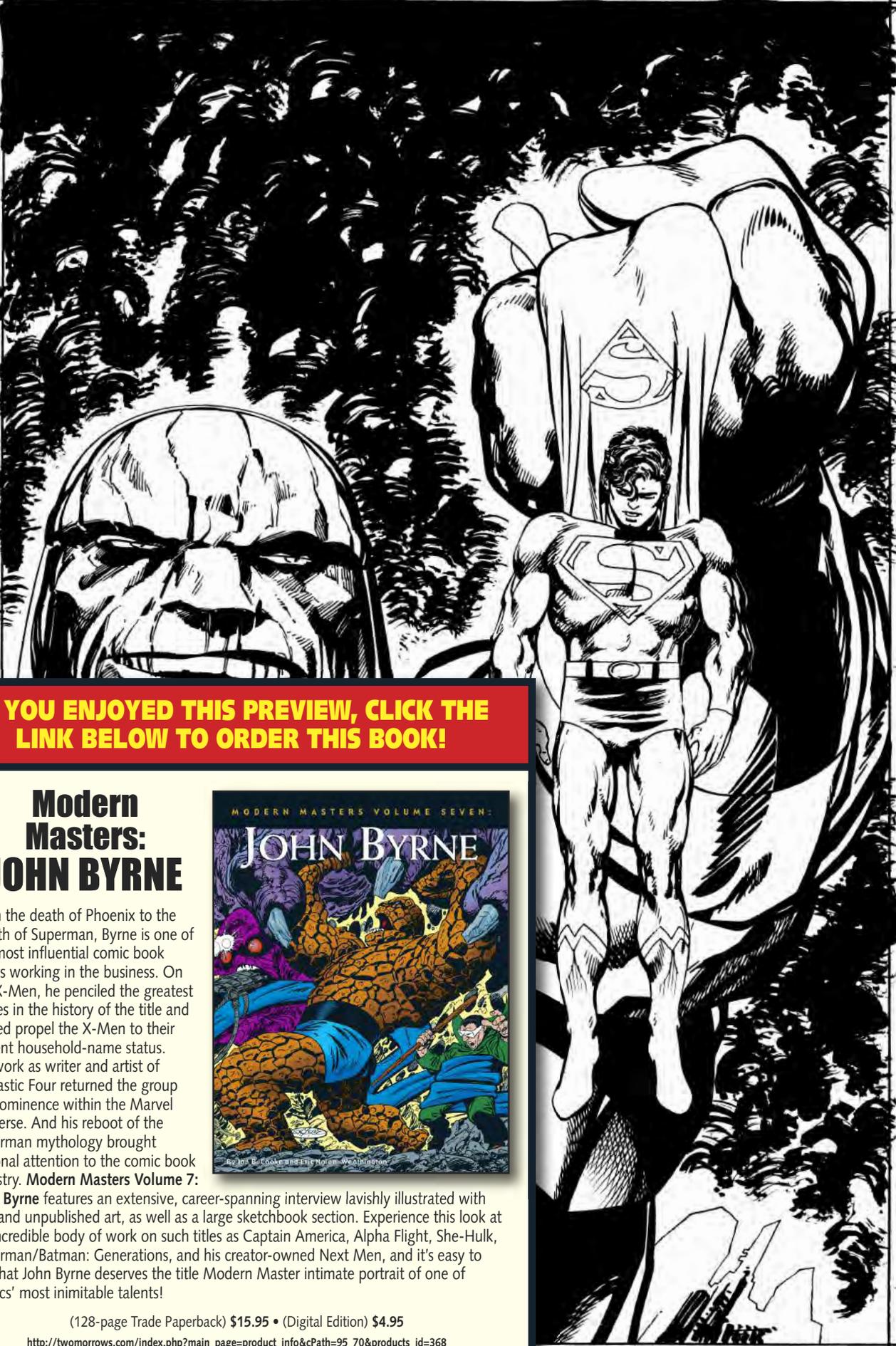
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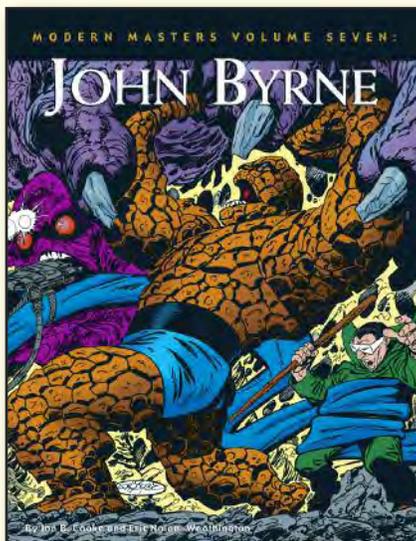
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