comic book CREATOR

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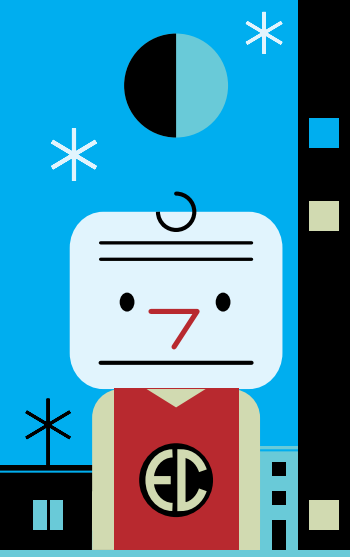
INTERVIEWS WITH
Hilary Barta &
Ralph Reese

Cover art by Hilary Barta

WOODY'S WORLD



ENTERTAINING WOODY
CBC mascot by & © **J.D. KING**

About Our Cover

Art by **HILARY BARTA**
Colors by **JASON MILLET**

Art ©2018 Hilary Barta.

Artist **HILARY BARTA** pays homage to the late, great Wallace Wood in our cover portrait of the legend. Colors are by **JASON MILLET**, who based his approach on the fabled EC Comics color palette of the legendary Marie Severin. "She's a brilliant artist," Jason shared, "who just happened to be coloring in the 1950s and she did it brilliantly. Of course, in hindsight, it's impossible not to realize that she was actually being under-utilized at EC, so thank God Stan Lee at Marvel let her do so much more than just color!" For more of the colorist/illustrator's work, visit *www.jasonmillet.com*.

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Wallace Allan Wood: His World and the Price of Dreams. *CBC* is proud to re-present, all within this issue, David J. Hogan's massive 20,000-word biographical essay on the life and artistry of the great Wallace Wood, from his early years with Fox and Avon through his EC heyday into the Marvel years and success at Tower Comics, his self-publishing years and mentoring an army of young artists, and, lastly, into his career descent and subsequent suicide. This comprehensive examination tells the story of arguably comics' greatest artist 6

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Right: *In this panel detail, the great Wallace Wood draws himself as narrator of his* Tower of Shadows *#5 [May 1970] story, "Flight into Fear," a seven-pager the legendary comics artist also scripted.*

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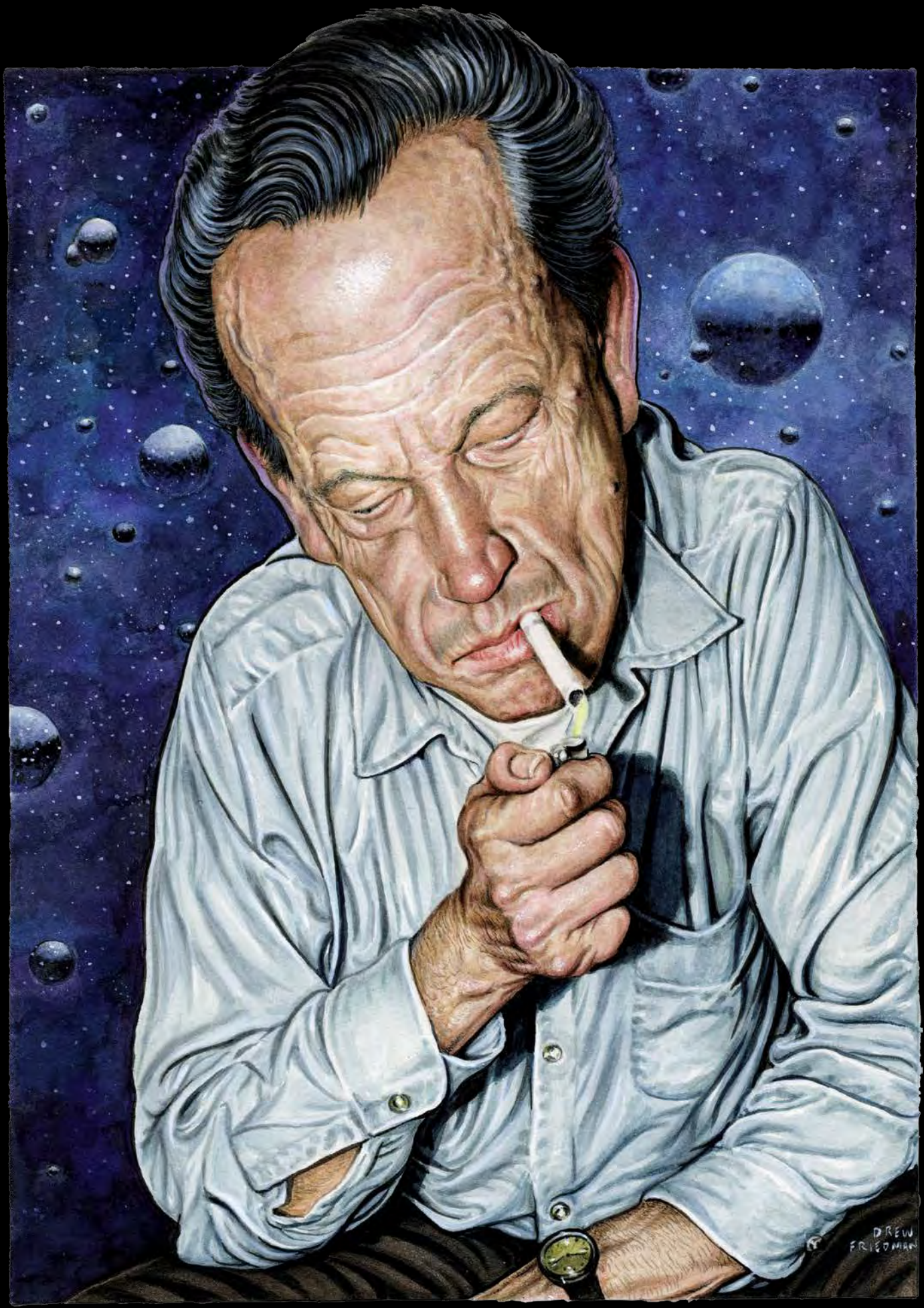
Panel detail © Marvel Characters, Inc.


DREW
FRIEDMAN

wallace allan wood

HIS WORLD AND THE PRICE OF DREAMS

Biographical Essay by

david j. hogan

[*The following first appeared over a three-year period in a seven-part series featured in* Outré *magazine #7–13, published between 1996–98. It appears here complete in one issue courtesy of the author and with the kind assistance of* Outré *publisher, Michael Stein.*]

The boy drew. Incessantly, obsessively, he used pen, brush, and Zip-A-Tone to set down on paper his dark visions: skulls, dank caverns, firearms, grinning fiends. And he drew heroes, too — blond, square-jawed lugs who battled the darkness and defended the women that the boy drew as sultry and full-figured. Countless pages of undisciplined but wildly imaginative sketches and drawings occupied the boy's time for ten years, from his tenth birthday until his twentieth. As an adult, he remarked, "I had a dream when I was about six that I fund a magic pencil. It could draw just like Alex Raymond."

Raymond wrote and drew the *Flash Gordon* newspaper strip, bringing to comics a level of draftsmanship and an elegance of style that was unprecedented. The boy had selected Raymond as his hero, and although he never equaled the illustrative quality of Raymond's work, he eventually surpassed his idol in drama, vividness, and aggressive storytelling.

The boy's mother, a schoolteacher, would accept selected pages her son had given her and bind them on her sewing machine, creating homemade comic books. The boy was creating whole worlds, and an insistently moral universe where good and evil were startlingly etched and clearly defined.

In later years, Wallace Allan Wood would claim that his early attempts at drawing were direction-less, implying that because he had done without training and proper guidance as a boy, he had been wasting his time. Yet, to look at the brilliant comic book work Wood did throughout his career is to recognize themes, motifs, and obsessions that germinated in those youthful drawings, and that fascinated Wood for his entire life. He became comics' best-ever artist because he did not — could not — free himself from the boy he had been.

wood.

Wood was born in Menahga, Minnesota, on June 17, 1927. To earn money as he drew and dreamed, Wally took jobs as a theater usher, bus boy, pin boy, printer's apprentice, assistant in a dental lab, truck laborer, and factory worker. At one point, he joined his father, a lumberjack, in the Minnesota timber. The jobs were not glamorous, so Wood's drawing — as for many artists — became an escape from the drudgery of everyday life. As a teenager, he idolized Raymond, Walt Kelly, Will Eisner, Milton Caniff, Basil Wolverton, Roy Crane, and Hal Foster. Each of these men had a unique style and vision. Although Wood took a bit from each, his artistic point of view was completely his own.

Wood's early sketchbooks and doodles are fascinating, not merely because they illustrate the development of a singular talent, but because of the drawings' peculiarly dark psychology. Although sometimes crude and always firmly rooted in the pulp magazine/dime novel tradition of inflated melodrama, the drawings have an edge that's unexpected from one so young. Much of the work is informed by the melodrama of World War II, particularly as played out in the Pacific. Wood's sketchbooks are rife with animal-like Japanese; grubby yet heroic G.I.s; fetid jungle swamps; blazing small arms (usually submachine guns and semi-automatic pistols); edged weapons of all kinds.

Portrait of the Artist by

drew friedman

For more portraits, order ***Heroes of the Comics*** and ***More Heroes of the Comics*** [Fantagraphics].

Wallace Wood portrait © Drew Friedman.

And then there was a world almost completely removed from reality, and defined by dank caves; imposing thrones carved from stone; scattered skulls and skeletons: tide pools thick with octopi and monsters; and sultry women with full breasts and lush mouths. There were cats, too: menacing black ones and oddly anthropomorphized kittens; one sketch page shows a "cat-tank" — a kitten fitted with a cannon and guided by an insect operator. Sometimes Wood's cats had human skulls instead of cats' heads.

The sketchbook heroes were swaggering, unshaven men of adventure, gripping a bottle of liquor when not brandishing a gun or sword. They were soldiers, sailors, pirates, freebooters, travelers. Typewritten vertically in the margins of some pages are Wood's ideas for names of his heroes: Justin Blade, Zip Laraby, Lance Parker, Pepper Barton, Sick Storm, Brett Crater. Some names are crossed out: Ted Moll, Red Journey, Barney Future (beneath which Wood typed "terrible"), Orbit Olsen. Other monikers have check marks next to them, as if, after a proper period of rumination, Wood approved of them: Clint Banner, Sick Voyage, Brett Banner.

Many of the sketchbook heroes were assisted by tiny, pixie-like creatures armed with enormous guns or swords. Wood's interest in minuscule creatures with formidable physical abilities would recur in his work again and again, and is vividly expressed in a sketchbook tale called, "The Dweller in the Cellar," in which the evil sorcerer Zur projects his aggressive mentality into the body of a baby boy. Here, as in Wood's mature work, size does not matter. If you have the courage, the determination, and the right weapon, you're dangerous and you can slay giants.

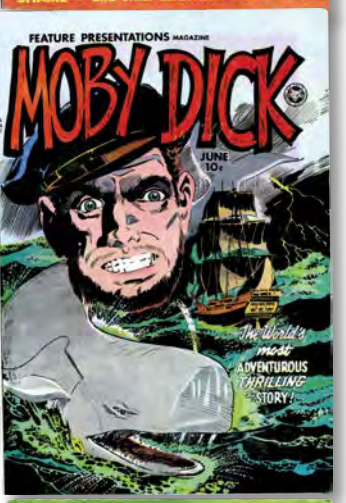
Whatever Wood's true self-image at this time, in the make-believe world of his homemade comic books, he had as much self-confidence and braggadocio as any of his heroes. His sketchbook cover for *Different Comics* was by "W. Alan Wood, 'The Kid Cartoonist,' A DIFFERENT ARTIST!" The cover continued: "Dear Public, Here is a comic we believe is Truly Different! You'll see what we mean — Editors." Beneath this were the scrawled signatures of two apocryphal editors, one of whom is "Bob." In his enthusiasm, Wood made the other signature undecipherable.

Some of the sketchbooks contain carefully rendered stories. At the beginning of one, "Tales of Heads," the alliterative youngster wrote, "Ghostly and ghastly in the garish glow of the dimming disc of a dying moon — sat the idol, serene and silent and pondered — futility[.] Somewhere, in a far-off, debris-strewn cave, dwell the heads — ancient, dried human heads — floating in their glass worlds…" The panels are dark and claustrophobic, effectively textured with carefully applied Ben-Day screens. The heads, bubbling in their bell jars, are pinched and foreboding. The artwork is crude, almost diagrammatic, but has mood and a potent sense of place. Even at a relatively early age, Wood was skilled enough to effectively delineate his private worlds so that they could be experienced by others.

wood.

During World War II, while still a teenager, Wood enlisted in the Merchant Marine and traveled to Guam, the Philippines, Eniwetok, South America, and Italy. Near the end of the war, he joined the Army and became a paratrooper with the 11th Airborne Division based in Japan. These experiences fueled Wood's appetite for exotica and the love of the mysterious that inform much of his professional work.

He continued to sketch during



this period of his life, by now expressing the jaundiced yet immature wit of a young serviceman. Penciled attempts at service strips clearly modeled on George Baker's *Sad Sack* were called *Private Life* and *"Wacky" and the Wac*. In the former, a G.I. asks the pretty PX clerk, "Say, Miss, is that chocolate pure?" "It's as pure as the gal of your dreams, soldier," comes the reply. The dogface considers: "Hmm! Gimme some chewing gum!" To this the clerk can only respond, "!!"

After his discharge from the Army in 1946, Wood returned to Minnesota, where he studied for one term at the Minneapolis School of Art. At last, he felt, he was getting the training he needed. Later the same year he moved to New York City to attend Burne Hogarth's Cartoonists and Illustrators School. Hogarth, a skilled anatomist who drew the *Tarzan* newspaper strip, offered not just a solid grounding in the principles of drawing, but practical advice on how to apply those principles to the world of commercial art. Wood, like many of Hogarth's students, was studying courtesy of the G.I. Bill, which brought $75 a month plus an additional $15 monthly for art supplies. Among the students in Wood's classes were men who would, like Wally, make significant contributions to comic book art: John Severin, Ross Andru, Mike Esposito, and Al Williamson (one of the youngest students, and one of the few who was not a veteran).

Another student was Harry Harrison, a bright kid with a talent for writing as well as drawing. Wood hit it off well with Harrison and, by 1948, they had teamed up, but not before Wood, working solo, had made his first professional sale: a campaign comic strip for a New York State politician. Late in '48, the Wood-Harrison team was assigned its first job, a story for comic book publisher Victor Fox.

wood.

Mr. Fox was well-named. A onetime Wall Street player and the ultimate capitalist, he ground out comic books like sausages, caring more about quantity than about quality. He was particularly adept at selling sex, in such titles as *Rulah, Jungle Goddess;, Crimes by Women,* and *Phantom Lady*. Like many comic book publishers of the period, Fox maintained no creative staff, but turned to comic book "shops" for his stories and art. "Sweatshops" might be a more apt word, for the scripters and artists who toiled as freelancers in these places were at the mercy of the publishers' middlemen — self-proclaimed agents and "art directors" who took commissions for the work they brought to Victor Fox and others.

The system was corrupt. Although Fox's page rate was $23 (written, penciled, inked, ruled, and lettered), the art directors operated on a kickback scheme whereby they made it clear to the struggling artists that they expected $5 off the top for every page. For a ten-page story, then, the artists had to pony up $50 cash before they were paid for the job. Those who balked received no assignments.

wood.

Cash-poor to begin with, the artists found the kickback scheme devastating — and unavoidable. Although there was a great glut of comic books in the late 1940s, there also was a glut of artists, and anyone who didn't want to play ball didn't work; there always was another hungry artist somewhere, desperate for work. The agents' leverage was brutal — and unavoidable.

To top it off, artists had to wait weeks and often months for the publishers' payments, and even when the checks finally came through, they sometimes bounced. So frantic were Wood and Harrison at one juncture that they traveled to the Fox offices and physically threatened a vice-president in order to collect $600 that was due them. Wood, slit-eyed and vaguely menacing even when at ease, put on a scowl and made a move as if reaching beneath his overcoat for a gun or a sap. The VP immediately produced a good check.

Wood and Harrison established their own studio above a Spanish dance club in midtown Manhattan. The first Wood-Harrison job was "My One Misstep," a ten-pager that appeared in issue #8 [Aug. 1949] of Fox's *My Confession* (a continuation of the numbering of the queerly titled *Western True Crime*).

"My One Misstep" and the plethora of Wood-Harrison romance stories that followed were trite little melodramas, overburdened with dialogue and contrived situations that had been created by others. The genre was challenging for artists because of its inherent lack of action and preponderance of static talking heads. Wood and Harrison routinely cut dialogue and captions — anything to pick up the stories' pace and gain visual excitement.

Romance comics were a chore, but they were paying jobs that allowed Wood and Harrison to develop their craft. In 1949 alone, the pair produced hundreds of pages for Fox. Additionally, Wood produced his first solo story that year, a tale that appeared in issue #7 [Sept. '49] of Magazine Village's *True Crime Comics*. He also assisted *Terry and the Pirates* strip-artist George Wunder during this period, working mainly on lettering when he developed the emphatic letter style that would become a Wood trademark.

The comic book stories Wood produced with Harrison were teamwork in the best sense. Initially, Wood penciled and Harrison inked, but when Wood's inking blossomed, the pair freely alternated roles. In time, Wood, because of his fine touch, inevitably inked the characters' heads and hands. It was the beginning of the refinement of his gift for detail, a flair that would eventually bring him hundreds of thousands of fans.

Sometime in 1948, Wood and Harrison visited EC Comics, a small, struggling publisher located at 225 Lafayette Street, in Manhattan. Originally called Educational Comics, EC had been founded by comic-book pioneer M.C. Gaines, who was instrumental in laying the groundwork for what became DC Comics. Gaines had modest success with his EC line of funny-animal, historical, and Biblical titles (some of which were published under the banner of Entertaining Comics), but his period of industry influence had passed — he had become a fringe player. His death in a boating accident, in '47 (while saving a boy from drowning), passed control of the company to his wife, and to his son, William.

wood.

William M. Gaines was not a businessman and did not fancy himself one. Portly and somewhat retiring, he had taken his college degree in chemistry. However, he was a gifted autodidact, and, through trial and error, and the encouragement of his mother, he taught himself the business. When Wood and Harrison visited the outfit — now renamed Entertaining Comics — in 1948, the formal launch of the company's "New Trend" comics (which produced the legendary EC horror, science-fiction, crime, and war comics, plus a wholly fresh comic called *MAD*) was still two years in the future. However, Bill Gaines and his creative staffers, writer-artists Al Feldstein and Johnny Craig, were already creating and supervising work that was a notch above that of EC's numberless competitors.

Feldstein and Craig liked the Wood-Harrison samples, and assigned the team a romance story, "I Thought I Loved My Boss," which was published in issue #10 [Nov. '49] of *A Moon, A Girl… Romance* (formerly *Moon Girl*). Significantly, the assignment came directly from Feldstein and Craig. No middleman was involved and no kickback was demanded or expected. Further, no one insisted that the team conform to a "house style," the sort of visual corporate identity that

DAREDEVIL

This page and next: *Above is a detail from penciler Jack Kirby and inker Bill Everett's figure gracing the cover of* Daredevil *#1 [Apr. 1964], featuring the Man without Fear's original yellow-&-red costume. Below is the cover blurb from* Daredevil *#5, the first of Wallace Wood's outstanding run on the title, which trumpets the creator's arrival. Next page features a cover detail from* Daredevil *#10 [Oct. 1965], perfectly encapsulating the innovative changes implemented by Woody — a completely red costume and clever double-D chest emblem. Far right is poster promoting the Netflix series' second season.*

In league with Marvel Studios, Netflix broke new ground in 2015 with the all-new, streaming broadcast premiere of the live action show *Daredevil*. The series' first two seasons are huge hits and at the forefront of one of the most exciting new trends happening in the entertainment industry. But along with all the raves has come an ironic controversy.

Though Netflix/Marvel credit a host of comics creators who have contributed in one way or another, to Daredevil over the years, one supremely important name is conspicuously missing: **WALLACE ("Wally") WOOD**. Comments started flooding the Internet soon after the first episode's premiere from fans and creators alike. The slight is particularly ironic as 2015 was the 50th Anniversary of Wood's legendary surprise debut of his red Daredevil character design!

Marvel Editor-in-Chief Emeritus, *Daredevil* writer, and Punisher co-creator Gerry Conway said, "Of course, Wally Wood deserves credit on Netflix and all Daredevil TV and film." On April 13, 2015, legendary author-editor — including Daredevil with Frank Miller — Dennis O'Neil shared on Facebook, "I was happy to see Bill Everett recognized [at the opening of Netflix's *Daredevil* series], but Woody [Wallace 'Wally' Wood] surely deserves the same." Many, including those cited, feel Wood's contributions to Daredevil are so vital to the essence of the character, that he be credited, not at the end of *Daredevil* TV and film projects but, up front along with Bill Everett and Stan Lee, who launched the very first issue of *Daredevil*.

For the uninitiated, Eisner Award Hall of Fame creator, Wallace ("Wally") Wood (June 17, 1927–Nov. 2, 1981) was a fast-living, hard-drinking, fiercely independent man who packed several lifetimes into his 54 years. That being said, Wood was also a quiet individual who chose to speak primarily through his work as a writer-illustrator-cartoonist. Upon discharge from the Army's 11th Airborne Paratroopers, at the end of World War II, Wood enrolled in the Cartoonists and Illustrators School (now the School of Visual Arts), in New York. Wood quickly moved on to assisting Will Eisner, prior to forming the original, late-1940s Wood Studio with Harry Harrison, Joe Orlando, Ed McLean, et al. The studio churned out crime, Western, romance… pretty much everything but super-heroes as they had suddenly, lost all popularity.

Rather than discussing Wood's seductive Sally Forth, Power Girl, and Vampirella work, or his groundbreaking publishing with *witzend* magazine and the *Wizard King* graphic novels, or even his trademark "Panels That Always Work," we review and celebrate more than half a century of Wood's explosion into the world of super-heroes, with a look at Wood's road to, and through, his creative development and 1965 red character design of Daredevil and the related launch of *T.H.U.N.D.E.R. Agents*.

Wood's work began appearing in EC Comics in 1950 and he soon proved to be the company's "talent to watch" as he mastered every genre; horror in *Tales From the Crypt,* war in *Two-Fisted Tales*, ground-breaking morality plays in *Shock SuspenStories,* and especially science-fiction — which Wood and Harrison had convinced EC to try — with *Weird Science*. Wood was quickly recognized as America's top sci-fi comics talent. This did not go unnoticed by Eisner, who invited Wood back in a last-ditch attempt to save *The Spirit*. When Wood appeared in the first issue of *MAD,* in 1952, he was already a star. Wood began a historic 12-year run on what would become one of America's most popular magazines.

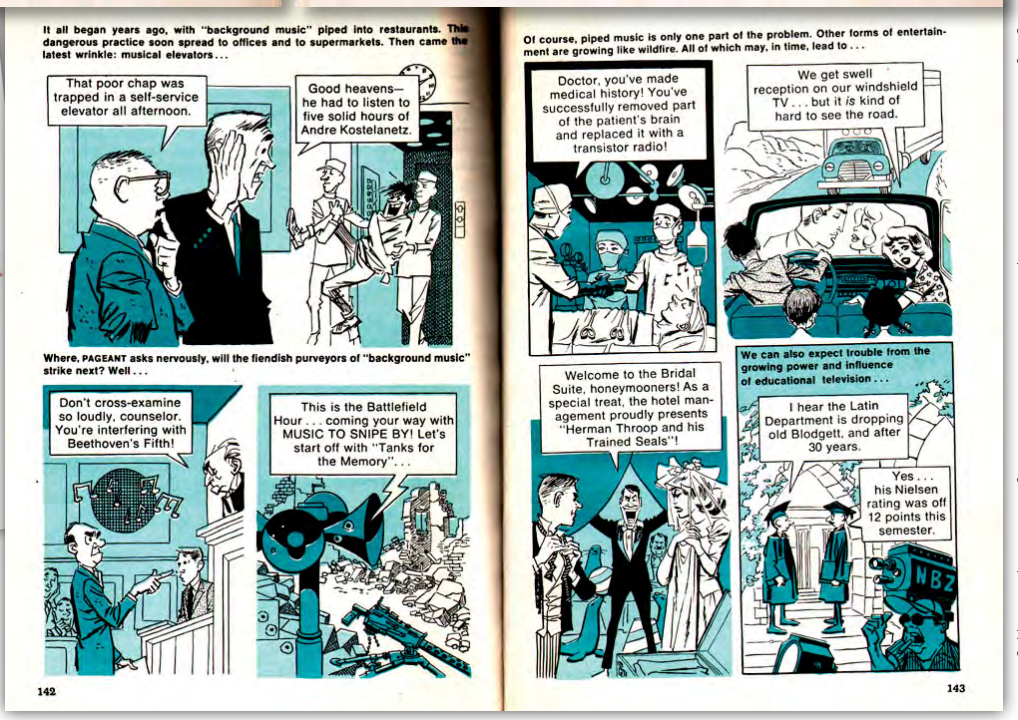
It was Wood and Al Feldstein who saved *MAD* from cancellation when Hugh Hefner wooed Harvey Kurtzman away. By the late-'50s, Wood, as *MAD*'s award-winning superstar, was a bigger name than traditional comic book creators and he was also illustrating books and magazines by Isaac Asimov, Philip K. Dick, etc. Jack Kirby then invited the artist to collaborate on the *Sky Masters of the Space Force* newspaper strip. No less than Neal Adams has noted that it was thanks to Wood's embellishment of Jack Kirby when Adams first came to truly appreciate Kirby.

Upon creating the *Mars Attacks* trading card series with Len Brown and Woody Gelman for Topps Chewing Gum Company, Wood left *MAD* (which was selling well over two million copies per issue to return) to traditional comic-book work at Marvel, where the top Kirby and Ditko titles, *Fantastic Four* and *Amazing Spider-Man*, were selling only a tenth as many as *MAD*. Wood created the risqué spy strip *Pussycat* for the mens magazines for Marvel's parent company. For the "House of Ideas," it was decided that Wood would invigorate the then-foundering new title *Daredevil*, which had lost co-creator Bill Everett after #1.

Stan Lee was thrilled to add such a famous talent as Wood, thus completing a titanic triumvirate of talents: Kirby, Ditko, and Wood. With this stellar line-up, Marvel consistently broke new ground through Wood's 1964–65 Marvel tenure. With unprecedented heraldry, the cover of *Daredevil* #5 announced, "Under the brilliant artistic craftsmanship of famous illustrator Wally Wood, *Daredevil* reaches new heights of glory!" No hyperbole here, Wood rocked the super-hero world by instantly making improvements to the feature. Inside, Stan explained that Wood decided to redesign "portions of DD's costume" (Note that this is the first time Marvel refers to Daredevil as "DD" and it is because Wood changed the costume from a single D on his chest to an interlocking double-D!). In the title's letters pages, the editor addressed Wood's creating of villains like Mister Fear, Stilt-Man, and most importantly, as Wood surprised the world in 1965, an entirely new red character design. As the change came totally unexpected by Marvel, Wood had to stay in the office and re-draw — from the black and yellow costume to Wood's new red design —

exotic wood

Courtesy of über Wallace Wood fan Ronn Sutton (and a few from Heritage Auctions), here's a gallery of rarely seen work by the master himself, Woody!

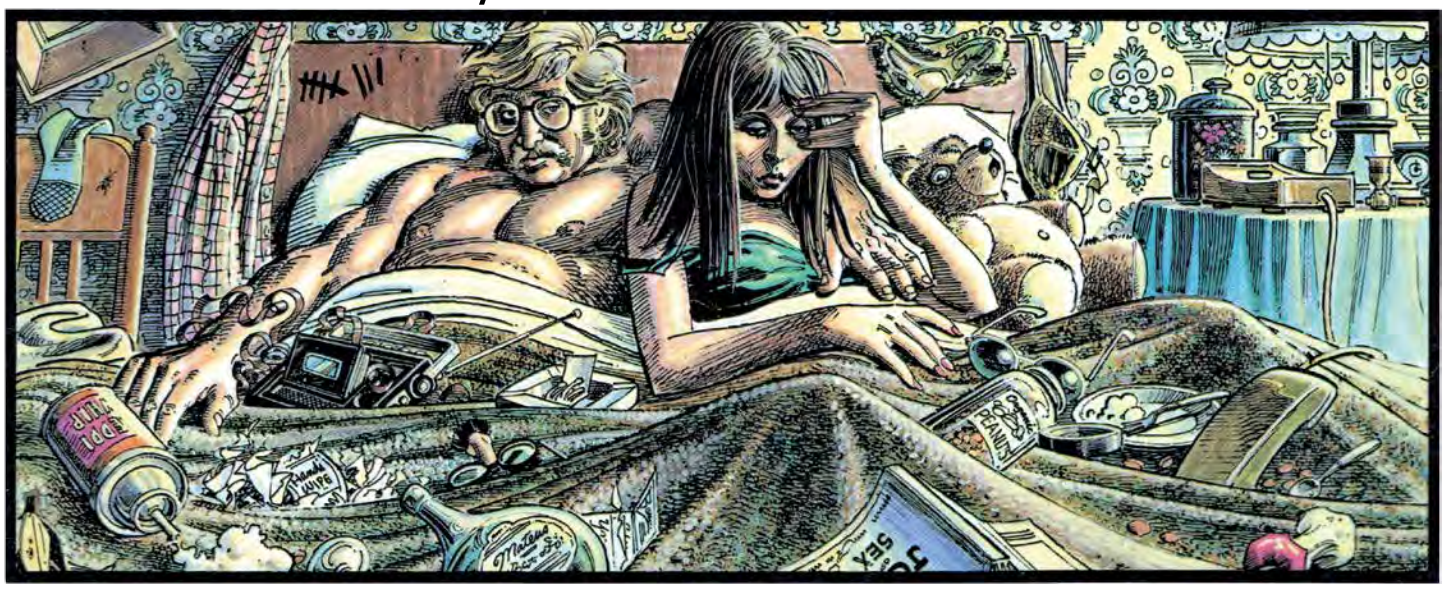


Above: *While his brief stint on the DC Comics' war titles come nowhere near the caliber of his EC Comics work in the same genre, Wallace Wood did contribute a nice handful of stories to the publisher of Superman in the mid-'50s. This is from* Our Fighting Forces *#10 [May 1956].* **Right:** *Extremely rare rubber stamps were produced in 1980 in an effort to raise funds for Woody.* **Far right:** *A spread from one of three original comic stories Wood drew for* Pageant *magazine in the mid-'60s, this one titled "America's Entertainment Explosion" (written by Sy Reit, co-creator of Casper, the Friendly Ghost, and* MAD *magazine writer).*

This page: *Clockwise from above: Woody's mom saved favorite art from his youth, including these drawings, one featuring a self-portrait; gags for the reverse of the unproduced* Captain Nice *trading card set (the mid-'60s TV super-hero sitcom was quickly cancelled as the* Batman *craze was subsiding); contributor Ronn Sutton shares that he's only seen one other rough for Wood's tryout for the U.S. Army* P*S Magazine *assignment and that this page was nearly destroyed by fire at Bill Pearson's home years later; and lunch box art by Wood for* Fireball XL5*, a science-fiction themed children's TV puppet show featuring the dauntless Colonel Steve Zodiac!*

THE SALVATION OF RALPH REESE

An Artist's Fifty Year Affair With Illustration



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Back in the 1970s, the artistry of Ralph Warren Reese, protégé of Wallace Wood and one of the Young Turk creators emerging during that era, was absolutely *everywhere*. Whether gracing the pages of the black-&-white horror magazines and color anthologies, or inside *National Lampoon* and its innumerable knock-offs, or embellishing the legendary Gil Kane's pencils on his Marvel Comics cover assignments, and even within the occasional underground comix, the guy was producing exquisite work, so much so he was honored with the Shazam Award in both 1973 and '74 for "Best Inker" by the Academy of Comic Book Artists. Teaming with Byron Preiss, Reese was probably most widely recognized for his art on their *NatLamp* collaboration *One Year Affair* and in that mag's spot-on *MAD* parody (where he expertly imitated mentor Wood's style). This talk occurred at the artist's Cape Cod home.

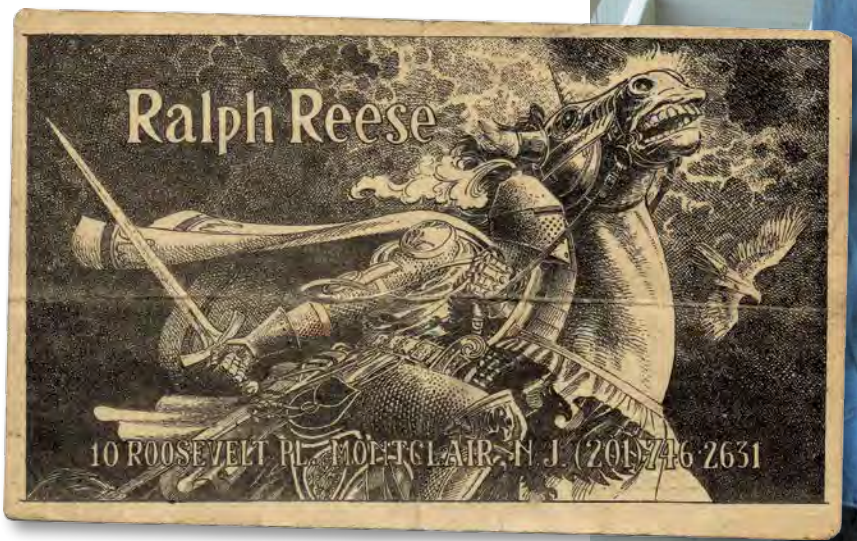
INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

Jon B. Cooke

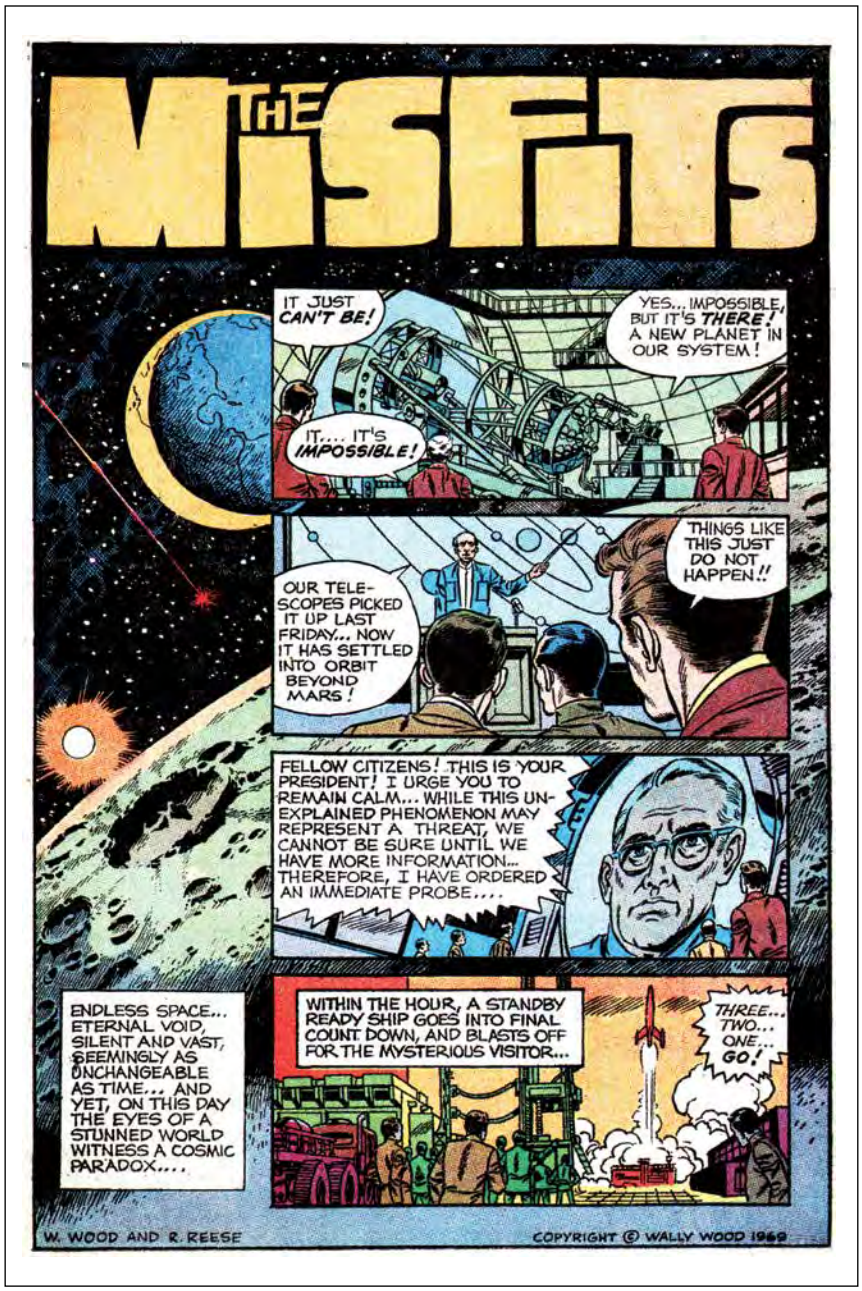
TRANSCRIPTION BY

Steven Thompson

Comic Book Creator: *Where you from, Ralph?*
Ralph Reese: New York City. I grew up on the East Side of Manhattan when it was still called Yorkville, before it became the Upper East Side and was gentrified. This was when the Third Avenue El was still there. I come from a working class neighborhood — mostly Irish, Italian, Polack. My father was the building superintendent in a tenement there.
CBC: *What was your father's name?*
Ralph: Conrad.
CBC: *And your mom?*
Ralph: Marilyn.
CBC: *What was her maiden name?*
Ralph: Graves.
CBC: *What's your ethnicity?*
Ralph: Yankee. My grandparents used to be very proud of the fact that they had relatives that fought in the Civil War and all that sh*t, but that never meant a thing to me.
CBC: *Did you have siblings?*
Ralph: I have a brother, Bruce, who is a year younger than me and lives in Pennsylvania now, does social work. I had a sister, Roxanne, who died about ten years ago.
CBC: *Was she older or younger?*
Ralph: Younger.
CBC: *Where are you in the family?*
Ralph: I'm the oldest son.
CBC: *What's your middle name?*
Ralph: Warren.
CBC: *Any other people creative in your family?*
Ralph: No, not really.
CBC: *Not at all?*
Ralph: My father, you know, kind of fiddled around with stuff when he was young, and both of my parents had an interest in art and music. Considering that they basically led working class lives, they talked a lot about Shakespeare, Beethoven, and Mozart as opposed to Frank Sinatra. They were fairly cultured people. They both went to college, but



Previous page: *Ralph Reese cover art for the* One Year Affair *trade paperback collection [1976].* **Above:** *Reese's professional calling card featuring now-defunct address and phone number.* **Right:** *Photo of the artist taken this winter at his Massachusetts abode.*



Above: *Ralph Reese worked with mentor Wallace Wood on "The Misfits," a strip appearing in the ill-fated* Heroes, Inc. Presents Cannon, *the 1969 comics anthology title published by Wood and intended to be sold in U.S. military post exchanges.*

handle it. He didn't know how to handle it at all and he just became a bitter and angry man and started drinking more and more and beatin' on us more and more.

CBC: *When you were children?*

Ralph: Yeah. It was ugly.

CBC: *Were you afraid to go home?*

Ralph: I was afraid of my father, for sure. I was terrified of him. He *wanted* me to be terrified of him! He deliberately terrified us. That was what he wanted.

CBC: *Did you have extended family you could go to for support?*

Ralph: I had grandparents who lived out in Queens.

CBC: *You didn't have any places to feel protected?*

Ralph: No, not at all.

CBC: *That must've been very difficult.*

Ralph: Yep. [*laughs*]

CBC: *In retrospect, how do you look at it now, as part of your development?*

Ralph: Well, I feel sorry for my mother. She couldn't help what happened to her. At the time, I hated her. She had abandoned us, y'know? She just wasn't there anymore. I had a lot of anger about that, as well as a lot of anger toward my father, too. I guess I kind of came to grips with it over the years, but there are still a lot of scars there. I had trouble with relationships all my life, you know, because of growing up that way.

CBC: *After you left home, did you maintain any contact with your father?*

Ralph: I kept seeing him up until about the time that I was 30, and then I decided that things aren't really ever going to get any better and I was never going to get what I really wanted out of him. Just being around him stirred up so much bad feelings, I decided to just divorce my parents. I just stopped seeing them and I didn't see either of them again until their funerals.

CBC: *How old were you when they passed away?*

Ralph: My father died when I was still in my mid-30s and my mother died about five or six years later, when I was in my early 40s. They both died fairly young, in their 60s. My father basically died from alcoholism.

CBC: *Cirrhosis?*

Ralph: His kidneys failed. Besides that, he was a diabetic and wasn't taking care of himself. He got blood poisoning, sepsis.

CBC: *He never divorced your mom?*

Ralph: No. They never split.

CBC: *Was he devoted to her? Did he go and visit her?*

Ralph: Well, yes and no. They stayed together. He was just as mean to her as he was to us. He browbeat her constantly before she even got sick and then after that they hardly even communicated much I don't think.

CBC: *When you went to high school, was it far from your house? You had moved to the Bronx, right?*

Ralph: We had moved to the Bronx, so I had to take the subway down to Manhattan to go to Art and Design. But anyway, even up until the time I went to Art and Design, I was familiar with comic books, but it never occurred to me that it was something that I could actually do for a living. I had planned to make a career in industrial design, because I was interested in drafting and mechanical things — cars, airplanes, and things like that looked shiny and went fast. So that was the direction that I thought I was headed, but I ran into Larry Hama at the School of Art and Design in my first year there. He was in my homeroom class. We became friendly and he was already working for Calvin Beck at the time, the publisher of *Castle of Frankenstein*. So I started hangin' out with Larry and he and this other fella named John Smith, who he was friends with, introduced me to the whole world of comic book fandom. So, after school, we would go down to King Features and annoy people or see what we could see or who would talk to us or we could show our stuff or that kind of thing.

CBC: *Who was in charge at King Features at the time?*

Ralph: I have no idea. We wouldn't have been able to see him anyway. We were just kids. High school kids, anyway. We would go and walk in the front door. "Hey, we're from Art and Design. We're kids and we wondered if you could show us around. We're hoping to make a living in doing this someday."

CBC: *And they did show you around?*

Ralph: Sure.

CBC: *Did you go to DC or Marvel?*

Ralph: I can't remember. We never went to Marvel. We *may* have gone to DC. But, at any rate, there I was in tenth grade. I knew Larry and John from the high school.

CBC: *Did you know Frank Brunner?*

Ralph: No. I'd never met him at that point. What happened was I got into some legal trouble. I had *been* in trouble a bunch of times before that, even from the time I was 10 or 11 years old. I started stealing stuff and running away from home. I was showing all the signs of a troubled kid who'd been abused, who came from a really f*cked-up situation. So I had been in some trouble before. They caught me stealing at E.J. Korvette's (which was like K-Mart, a department store kind of place).

CBC: *Were you stealing a coat? A leather jacket?* [Ralph nods] *How old were you?*

Above: *This is deliberately drawn by Reese to appear as a crude underground comics page in* Eye *magazine in the late '60s.* **Below:** *Around the same time, Reese was contributing to* Gothic Blimp Works, *a New York City underground publication, and producers of an Al Capp documentary about the generation gap solicited the cartoonist to appear in the TV special.*

it. For all that he's the straightest guy in the world, there's something really *bent* going on in there. [*laughs*]

CBC: *It's in the name, right? Strange!*

Ralph: I don't know where it comes from, but all those bridges to nowhere and screaming faces. You get the feeling that he has some demons somewhere.

CBC: *He is a really nice guy. We were correspondents for a time.*

Ralph: He's the sweetest, most unassuming, regular guy in the world, y'know? And he coulda made *so* much money and he hasn't. I mean, people would pay him $10,000 for a sketch now. He's gonna die any minute. What would Ditko's last sketch be worth?

CBC: [Spots some recent artwork] *That's nice.*

Ralph: That's one of the re-creations I've been doing for Shaun Clancy, who has got me re-creating every Gil Kane cover they ever used at Marvel… or a bunch of 'em anyway. It's easy work. I don't mind it.

CBC: *Was Wood starting to think of* witzend *at the time? When did that come into play?*

Ralph: While he was still doing *T.H.U.N.D.E.R. Agents*, he started on *witzend*. He had some ideas that he wanted to do that he couldn't find a market for. He thought that there were other people who… I guess this was around the time that Tower folded. What year did *witzend* first come out?

CBC: *Nineteen sixty-six or '67.*

Ralph: Yeah, well as Tower was kind of winding down, *witzend* got started. Adkins was working up there a lot at the time. And Roger Brand.

CBC: *Did you know Tony Coleman?*

Ralph: Yeah!

CBC: *Was he British?*

Ralph: Yes.

CBC: *What was he like?*

Ralph: He was funny as hell! [*laughs*] He had all these… what do you call it… like British pub drinking songs and poems that he'd recite, you know, that kept us all amused. Yeah, he was a funny guy. He was funny to have around but he was here, I think, illegally.

CBC: *Was he?*

Ralph: Yeah, he had to work off the books.

CBC: *Wasn't your first published work in* witzend*? Was that poetry?*

Ralph: Uh, yeah. He ran some old poetry of mine in *witzend*. I make no claims. My first wife was a poet, among other things.

CBC: *When did you get married?*

Ralph: The first time? When I was about 20.

CBC: *You have any kids?*

Ralph: Not with her. No. We only stayed together for two or three years. She was a radical feminist.

CBC: *Was that a good thing?*

Ralph: Well, yes and no. I admired her guts, y'know, but it got to be a little tiresome after a while. She was a real Chairman Mao-quoting, *Communist Manifesto*, Weather-woman kind of person.

CBC: [Looking at Reese's junior high yearbook] *So is that you right there?*

Ralph: Yes, I think so. That's me without my glasses. You can see them jug handles, all right. [*laughs*] You know how I got that? Before we moved to the Bronx, my father had a piece of land in upstate New York, by Peekskill, and it was his plan to build a house on it, but the government came, they incorporated it into a park and that dream got shot down. At any rate, we used to go up there on weekends and there was like a swampy part on this five acres that we had and I was down there picking blueberries. I got so many mosquito bites that I looked like I had measles. And both of my ears swelled up huge because of all the mosquito bites that I had. I kept scratching them like this and eventually they never returned to their proper size.

CBC: *Really? Permanent. So you had a really integrated school huh?*

Ralph: Yes. Actually, John Smith is black, Larry Hama's a Japanese-American. We had all kinds there. As long as you had a talent in art.

CBC: *That's all that mattered.*

Ralph: Yeah. That's one good thing about it actually as a career, kind of like being an athlete or something like that. You can come from a really sh*tty, poor, background, but if you have the talent, you can escape it. You can get out of there.

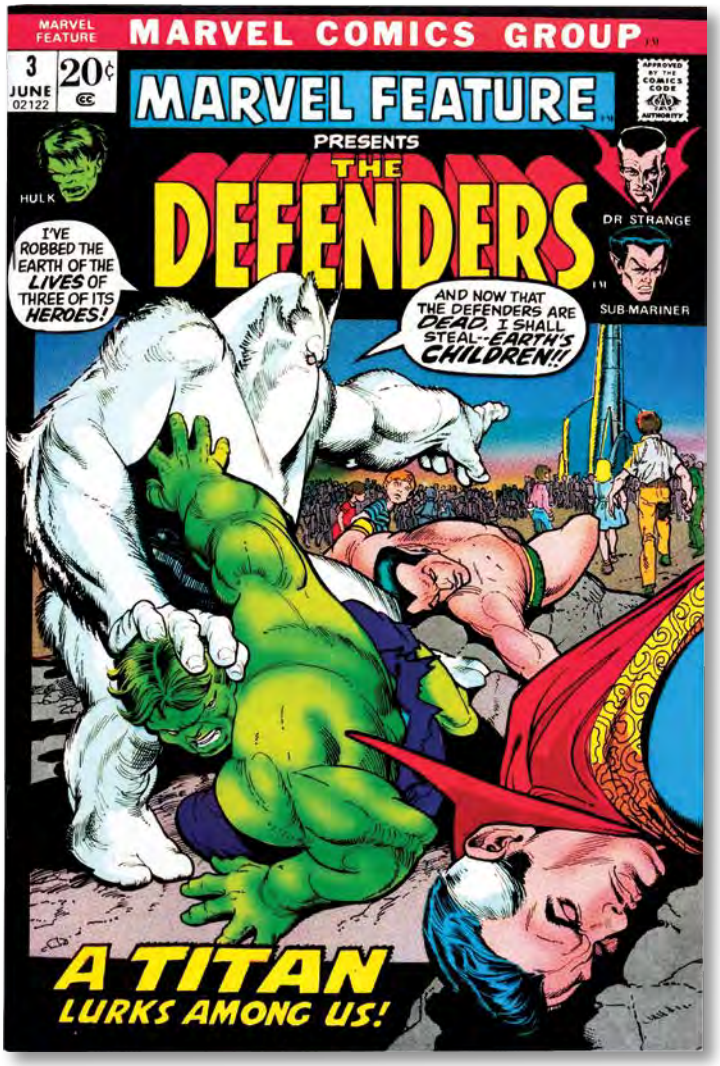
CBC: *That really was your one ticket out, right?*

Ralph: Pretty much, 'cause I didn't really have the discipline to pursue an academic career. I wasn't going to be able to make it through college, not because I wasn't smart enough but because I was just too… I had too much going on with me. [*laughs*]

CBC: *So, it's the mid-'60s. The counter-culture was starting to rise up. Were you a part of that? Were drugs a part of your story?*

Ralph: Oh, yeah, sure. I was a stoned hippie. [*laughs*] Still am to some extent.

CBC: *Was LSD a part of it?*



Ralph: I did a few trips, maybe a half-dozen or so.
CBC: *But it wasn't a part of your creativity necessarily?*
Ralph: No. I tried working on it once or twice, but it was kind of like speed. It made you focus way too much on one little tiny thing, you know, as opposed to seeing the whole picture.
CBC: *Alcohol: was that big for you?*
Ralph: I used to enjoy drinking when I was in my 20s and I used to abuse it to some extent. I would drink if I went to parties or something like that because I felt like it would loosen me up and I'd get happy, you know? And that actually worked to some extent. But then, as I got to be in my late 20s, my early 30s, it just started making me morose if I drank. So there wasn't much percentage in it. I was never an alcoholic. I never had that gene. No, I was a pot-aholic. I've been a pot smoker all my life, yeah.
CBC: *Do you think that helps you creatively?*
Ralph: Yes and no. It doesn't help creatively. It helps give me patience to sit at that desk is what, to not get restless and itchy and whatnot. It made work more enjoyable to me. Not that I needed it or it actually helped to do work, but it made it easier or more pleasant and I could lose myself in it more. I don't know. It's worked for me. [*laughs*] But it has its drawbacks.

CBC: *It can certainly affect ambition.*
Ralph: Yeah, that can be a problem. You find yourself never leaving the house. [*laughter*] It's just too much trouble to go outside and do this or that or the other thing.
CBC: *Did you date when you grew up in the mid-'60s, your teenage years?*
Ralph: I was too poor and then I was a fugitive on the run and then everything else. I didn't have any girlfriends 'til I was, oh, 19 or so. My first wife was the first woman that I slept with and that was about 19, I guess.
CBC: *Really? How did you meet?*
Ralph: An encounter group.
CBC: *Oh, yeah?*
Ralph: Back at that time there were these encounter groups that had sprung up all around the city.
CBC: *Like they had out in California? What was it, EST?*
Ralph: That sort of thing. Rather than meet people in bars, people would go to these things. It was supposed to be all psychological. People would talk about themselves and their lives and interact with each other. Really, it was mostly an excuse for people who wanted to find somebody to f*ck. [*laughs*]
CBC: *Without going through the rigmarole.*

This page: *The pencils of Gil Kane and inks of Ralph Reese were an unparalleled match in this editor's opinion and each pairing a masterpiece. Top left and right are the covers of* Marvel Feature *#3 [June '72] and* Iron Man *#46 [May '72], respectively. The two also teamed for* Conan the Barbarian *#17 [Aug. '72] (though this is from a b-&-w reprint).*

were living out in Boonton, New Jersey, which is an hour-and-a-half from the city, in far-off suburbia. I had wanted to see what suburban life was like. I had grown up in the city and lived there all my life and had no experience with suburban life. I wanted to see how that was.

CBC: *How was it?*

Ralph: It was boring. [*Jon laughs*] The people we were living with would have parties and all the guys would come and talk about football, all the women would gather in the kitchen and talk about babies and recipes and sh*t, and I'd go back and forth from one to the other going, "Where are my people? Where do I fit in here?" [*laughs*] "This is not working for me!" On a social level. I mean; it's nice to wake up in the morning and hear birds tweeting in the trees instead of the f*cking El goin' over your head.

CBC: *You worked for the Children's Television Workshop?*

Ralph: Yes. I did a lot of work up there with Ron Barrett. He was the editor up there, of a number of their magazines, including *Electric Company* magazine. He was someone I met through Byron Preiss, who sent me up, recommended me to someone up there.

CBC: *To Ron Barrett?*

Ralph: I'm not sure if it was Ron Barrett who I saw first, but I wound up working a lot with Barrett. I liked Ron a lot. He was a good friend.

CBC: *And he hit it big, huh?* Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs.

Ralph: Yeah. Well, I mean, he'd been doin' okay before that. He was art director at the *Lampoon* for a bunch of years. He had a lot of strong advertising contacts and was really fairly high up with a couple of publishing people, too. He was working with people like Chris Cerf and Henry Beard, people like that.

CBC: *Do you remember a magazine called* Drool*?*

Ralph: Yes. Sure. That was what Bill Skurski and the rest of the Cloud people decided to do after they got fired from the *Lampoon*. They came out with that but it only lasted one issue.

CBC: *Was it funny?*

Ralph: Yeah! Actually, it was pretty good. Peter Bramley is always hysterical, as I recall, whether in person or through his work. [*laughs*] It looked like every other Cloud Studios product. It had that underground kind of thrown together look to it also, with the Michael Sullivan fumetti and that sort of thing.

CBC: *Do you know who bankrolled that?*

Ralph: I don't know. We all went up to this guy's office by the UN building there one time, but I don't remember the publisher's name.

CBC: *Did you like doing the* One Year Affair*?*

Ralph: Yeah, I was okay with it. It wasn't always all that funny.

CBC: *A little droll?*

Ralph: Yeah, and sometimes it was a little too Jewish for me, actually. Byron had a Woody Allen kind of schleppy, nebbish feel to what he wrote, which I didn't always necessarily identify that much with. But yeah, people seemed to like it so I kept doing it. I tried to make it into an artistic showplace for myself, you know? I took photographs for everything and did it the way people did other newspaper strips.

CBC: *Who were your models?*

Ralph: That was my biggest problem! I could not get the same girl to model for Jill more than two or three times in a row, so Jill's appearance kept subtly changing in the strips. Somehow, you can never quite wash out all the character of the model who poses for you.

CBC: *So who was the model for the guy?*

Ralph: Different people. Sometimes it was me, sometimes it was Larry. Larry and I were still working together a lot at that time. We were pretty much partners. We both did our own thing, but we'd still work together a lot.

CBC: *Did you just split the money right down the middle or did you sometimes get paid for a particular job and sometimes he'd get paid for a particular job?*

Ralph: No, we split the money. Basically, we split it 50-50. I never gypped him on the money 'cause I was always happy with what he did and he's a talented guy and he was my best friend. Glad I got to work with him all those years.

CBC: *You worked on Atlas-Seaboard, right?*

Ralph: A little bit. I only did one thing for them. I did a two-pager for that mystery magazine that they came out with, but then that folded almost immediately. But I never got involved with their regular comics.

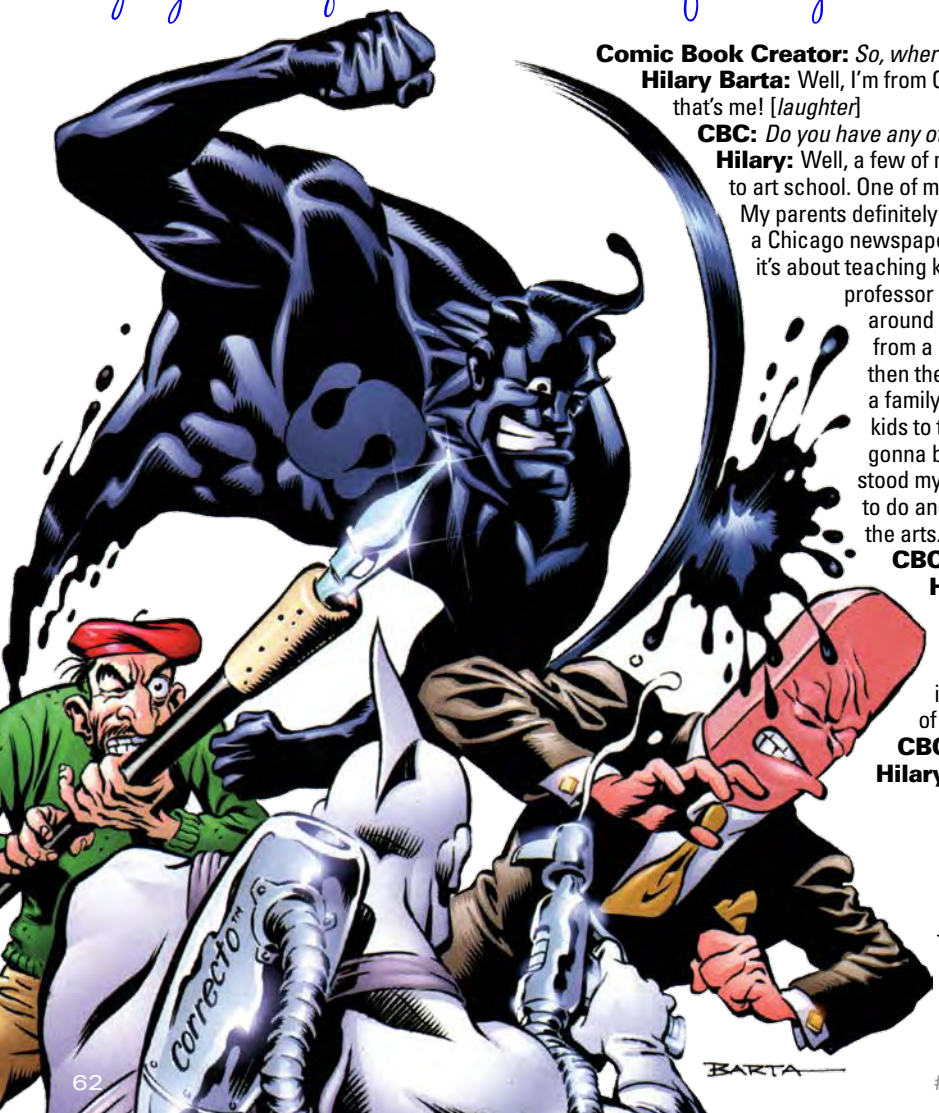
CBC: *So you never went exclusive with anybody?*

Ralph: No. I always didn't want to get locked into

Top and above: *Reese channels Wood and John Romita, Sr., channels Norman Mingo for* NatLamp*'s* MAD *parody.* **Below:** *Reese EC pastiche for* NatLamp.

The Hilary Barta THINKIN' ABOUT

You might think it all started with Stupid for me, or maybe What The--?! But, nahh, the artistry of Chicago boy Hilary Barta first knockened my sockens off with his rendition of Plas, the India Rubber Man, in 1988, via his spot-on Jack Cole riff. Since then, his mastery of the ink brush has been an absolute wonder to behold, whether in collaboration with Alan Moore with "Splash Brannigan" or current work for editor Chris Duffy in SpongeBob SquarePants comics. The following was conducted this past winter by phone.



Comic Book Creator: *So, where are ya from, Hilary?*

Hilary Barta: Well, I'm from Chicago, I reside in Chicago, and I've never *left* Chicago! So, that's me! [*laughter*]

CBC: *Do you have any other artists in your family?*

Hilary: Well, a few of my siblings were artists when they were younger and went to art school. One of my sisters is still a potter, but others in the family gave it up. My parents definitely encouraged the kids to be creative. There's an article form a Chicago newspaper, from probably the late '50s (when I was still a baby), and it's about teaching kids about culture and there's a picture of my dad, a sociology professor here in Chicago, sitting in the armchair with all his kids around him. He's holding me when I was a baby and reading to us from a classic piece of literature he wanted us to know about. And then there's another picture of them taking us to the Art Institute as a family when we were kids. So my parents were all about exposing kids to the arts. It wasn't just, "get a job," or "what's your career gonna be?" And even though I don't think my dad ever really understood my comics, I think he approved that I was doing what I wanted to do and he wanted to be helpful. And my mom always was pushing the arts.

CBC: *How many siblings do you have?*

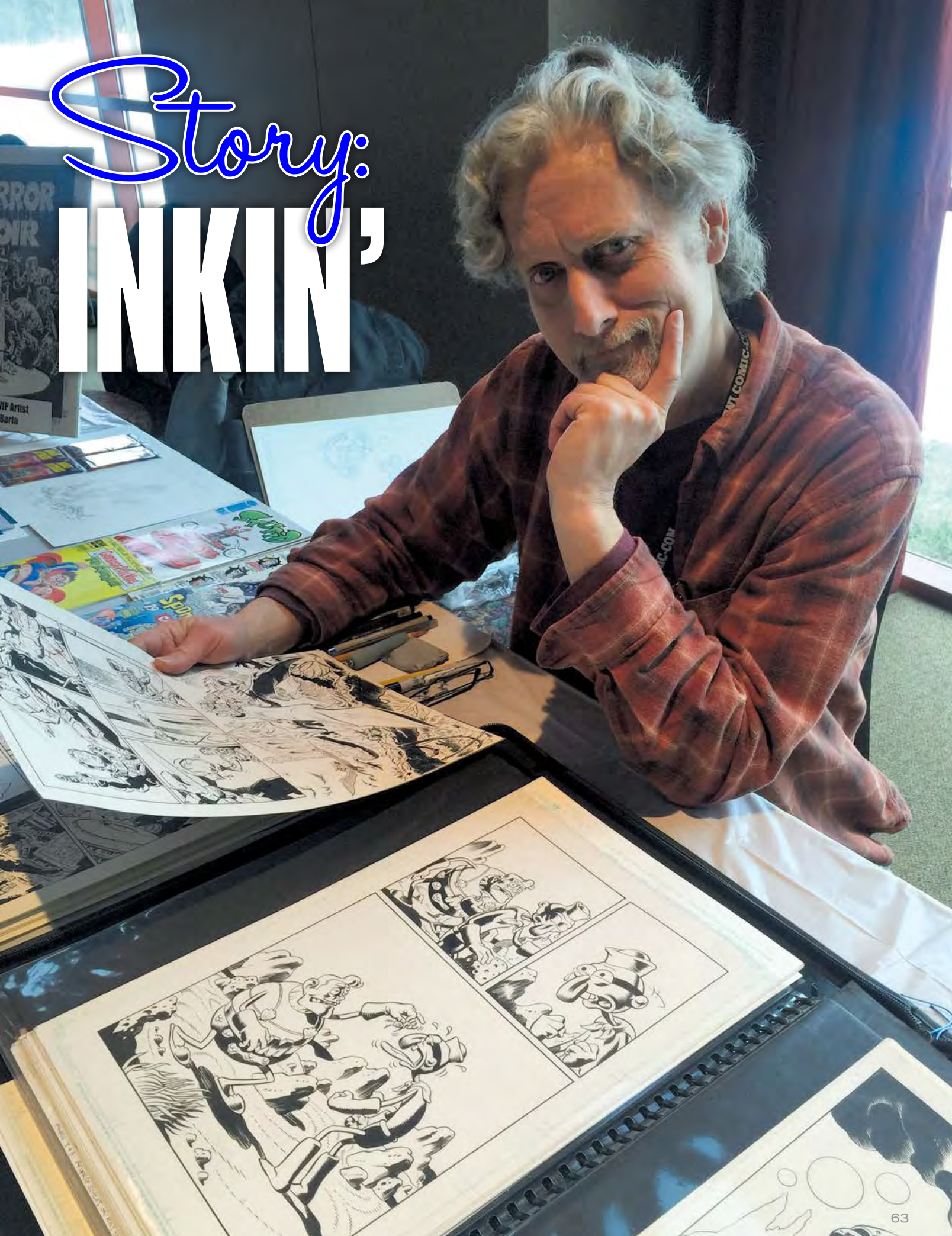
Hilary: I am the sixth of seven kids. We're a Catholic family and, like most Catholics, they practiced the rhythm method, which is, you know, [*laughs*] one kid a year, basically. Yeah. I'm the next-to-youngest and it was quite a raucous upbringing, y'know? There was a lot of hand-me-down clothes, a lot of grabbing for food when it's put on the table. [*laughter*]

CBC: *Survival instincts kick in, right?*

Hilary: Yeah! Something like that.

Interview conducted by **JON B. COOKE**
Transcribed by **STEVEN THOMPSON**
Portrait by **JANNEAL GIFFORD**

Story: INKIN'



"DEAD" BOOKS come alive when they are read aloud. Even 6-month-old Hilary is still as Barta reads about adventures from the classics to his family.

Above: *As a six-month-old, our interview subject gets name-checked in the April 8, 1958 edition of* Midwest*, the* Chicago Sun-Times *magazine supplement.* **Below:** *Kurtzman was a big influence on young Barta.*

CBC: *So where was your father a professor?*
Hilary: Well, he went to Notre Dame, but he taught at Mundelein College. As I mentioned, we're a Catholic family and he taught at a small college (that's since been absorbed into Loyola University). It was a girls school and a lot of nuns who taught there as well as my dad and other non-religious teachers. It was right on the lakefront in Chicago, a beautiful campus. I heard all kinds of stories later that the students *and* the nuns *both* adored him! [*laughs*] There weren't that many men in the institution, so…

CBC: [Laughs] *Oh, right! Was he a nice guy?*
Hilary: My dad was an *incredibly* nice guy! And he was quite the role model. I think he was probably disappointed that I didn't go on to higher education. You know, I took art school classes here and there. He probably would have preferred that I actually went for the degree and everything, but I was looking to get published. That was really my goal, not necessarily the degree. But yeah, he was just a really sweet guy. Bright, funny… he loved Danny Kaye and Sinatra… He liked the smooth singers, like Perry Como.

CBC: *What was your childhood like? Was it pretty much suburbia?*
Hilary: Well, I was born in Chicago proper and then we moved when I was five or six. We moved to Evanston, the suburb adjoining Chicago to the North. As soon as I was on my own and got my first apartment, I moved back to the city and so I've spent more time in Chicago. Evanston is a suburb but it's so closely connected to Chicago, it's the *least* suburban of a lot of the surrounding suburbs. There are other suburbs if you go further north and they're much whiter. At that time, Evanston was integrated and that's one of the reasons my parents wanted to move to Evanston. The public schools in Chicago were pretty lousy, they thought, and my older siblings were going to Catholic school. But she wanted us to get a public education. Both my parents were involved in the civil rights movement. They wanted us to be in integrated schools so that was, I think, one of the main reasons we moved to Evanston. So my education was public school, not Catholic.

CBC: *When did you start drawing?*
Hilary: Again, my mom really encouraged me. I will probably talk about my mom in this regard more than my dad only because she was the one that was home more than my dad, as he was off teaching at school. He'd come home and I'd make him his martini. [*laughs*] But we interacted more with my mom as far as household stuff and she used to encourage us to draw and to create. When we were young, we'd have crayons and, because she'd read somewhere that it was better for kids to be creative, she didn't buy us coloring books. Parents shouldn't want their children to be just drawing within the box, literally, in a coloring book. She'd take the crayons and she'd tear the paper off and then break them in half.

CBC: *Did you pal around with kids in the neighborhood? Were you sociable as a kid?*
Hilary: Yeah! My brother and I were the youngest and the older siblings were off doing what they were doin', and at some point it became my younger brother, Dan, and I. I know it's very different from talking to most of my friends now, but in those days, after breakfast, we'd just run out the door and then we'd get called home for dinner, y'know? [*Jon chuckles*] My mom actually had a cowbell at one point that she would just ring it and we would come running home from around the block. We kept to a small neighborhood, but two blocks away we had what we called "the Hill," publicly owned land that eventually became designated as a park. But, in those days, it was just an empty lot where we played baseball and football and stuff. Because it sloped, we'd be able to skateboard down a sidewalk, too, and in those days, we *made* skateboards by literally taking the wheels off of roller skates and then nail 'em to the bottom of a board. [*laughs*] No brakes and very little steering, but you could get goin'! We had all kinds of crazy stuff we'd play with the kids on the block. We had a big game called Chase that would take hours sometimes, but one person was "It" and you could hide anywhere on the block as long as it was outside. It could be in

Backtracking slightly: one of the ways, too, I found out about Wood and EC — you know I had those old paperbacks, but they never led me back to the comics. It was through people like Bernie Wrightson, when he did *Swamp Thing* and those books. That's when I was at the newsstand looking for the next issue or for anything with Wrightson in it. Wrightson formed an artistic bridge back to EC. And then, when Warren started, they had Reed Crandall and all these guys who had worked at EC and it really turned me back around and I started going back. You could find EC reprints. I couldn't afford to buy ECs myself, but I would start seeing the stuff and realize, "Wow, *this* tradition is something I really love." Eventually, I think that's more what I connected to even though I grew up reading Marvel super-heroes specifically.

I was not a DC guy. You know, Ditko and Kirby, early on, was sort of EC, in that tradition, which is sort of there in what Ditko did in "Doctor Strange." Some of that noir-ish, moody stuff is there that Ditko was doing in the monster books. He brought it to super-heroes. I mean, there's no clear thread here. There were *all* kinds of influences. Once you start finding stuff, where does it end? And when I found Steranko's *History of Comics*, I had to track this stuff down any way I could.

CBC: *Did you get exposed to Jack Cole?*

Hilary: Well, not early, early on. The first taste might have been in Steranko's *History* or maybe Jules Feiffer's book. It may have been some comics history book where I might have been exposed to him, but really I discovered him later on when DC reprinted a few 1940s Plastic Mans by Cole in their Giants, back in the days when they were doing the Golden Age reprints in the back of *Detective Comics* or wherever. I gotta say Jack Cole's Plastic Man is *still* the funniest comic I've *ever* read — the most inventive, visually fluid. I mean, in *every* panel! When Jack Cole was at his peak, he was the most inventive artist I've ever seen! But I didn't discover him early on. He wasn't my reason for drawing comics, but I knew who Jack Cole was well enough.

Doug Rice and Phil Foglio were friends of mine. I knew Phil through Doug. I was in a cartooning class in Chicago with Phil Foglio, but he'd already been a huge sf fan artist. He was a very successful fan artist for years. Phil had been offered a *Plastic Man* mini-series by DC. He was gonna draw and write it, but he didn't even know who the character was and really didn't have much interest in it. He said, "Eh, I don't feel like drawin' it." I went, "Really? Can I draw it?" [*laughs*] And that was just the weaselly way I got *in* there. DC wasn't looking for me, but Phil or I called and asked, "What about Hilary drawing it?" And Doug was gonna be our kibitzer on the plots. That's how that happened. Once I got that job, I bought every issue I could afford of Cole's stuff. I couldn't buy that many *Plastic Mans*, but I bought a lot of *Police Comics* or *Smash Comics* with Midnight. I tried to find everything I could and since, he has moved up into my upper echelon of comics geniuses. He is definitely one of my favorite guys in comics. No question about it.

CBC: *Was that your first work for DC Comics?*

Hilary: That's a good question. It might have been. There were a number of years where, as an inker, I was bouncing back and forth between Marvel and DC, so maybe I'm just… I spent a lot more time bouncing around at Marvel. I didn't do that much at DC. I did a few jobs earlier. I did more later. Now, one of the reasons I got that job is Mike Gold was in charge of the project. So he knew who I was from First Comics since he was the guy who hired me there. [*laughs*] He knew I wasn't a *total* flake, anyway. Brian Augustyn was the editor. I can't remember details but maybe I actually just leaned on Mike and said, "Phil doesn't wanna draw it! Can I draw it?" And I remember the circumstances because I said, "The one thing that I wanna do here is I wanna do it as Cole-esque as we can." We didn't wanna do it set in the 1940s, but we wanted to do it as close to Cole's style as we can, in the spirit of Jack Cole. At least I did. I wasn't able to *draw* like Cole, but I could keep the spirit… I shouldn't keep saying, "the spirit." [*laughs*] I'm not talking 'bout Eisner! [*laughter*] But trying to capture what Cole was doing and that inventiveness and the humor.

At the time, DC didn't really think Plastic Man fit into the continuity, so we had to explain why it was a cartoony book. If I was gonna draw it that way, we had to *explain* that! To this day, that sticks in my craw. I guess it's a pretty small price to pay for being allowed to play with Plastic Man but our first suggestion, mine, was, "Can we do 'Earth-Big Foot'?" [*laughter*] This was when DC was getting rid of all that multiple worlds stuff, and they're, like, "No." So we came up with this even weirder idea that the acid that created him — the acid that Eel O'Brien, you know, the gangster who becomes Plastic Man — gets dumped on him and he's riddled with bullets and the acid seeps into his bloodstream or

This page: *Few cartoonists have been able to capture the essence of brilliant Plastic Man creator Jack Cole's dynamic storytelling as well as Hilary Barta (sez Ye Ed). This pin-up (titled "Plastic Man Stands Up to Crime") appeared in the 1990 edition of* Who's Who in the DC Universe *[#4, Nov. '90].* **Below:** *Barta promo art for the Plastic Man mini-series.*

Above: *Barta has been regularly tapped for his ability to render super-hero parody strips, memorably for the Marvel series* What The--?!, *which ran for 26 issues between 1988–93. This cover is from #21 [Sept. '92].* **Inset right:** *Barta had his pencils inked by the legendary John Severin in* What The--?! *#1 [Aug. '88]. Endearingly, the inker mistook the henchmen's x-ed out eyes as areas to be filled with ink.* **Below:** *Dark Horse recruited Barta for its short-lived parody title,* Insane, *which ran for two issues in 1988.*

whatever exactly happens in the origin of Plastic Man. Well, our idea was that this literally works like some kind of acid, a hallucinogen, and it affects his perceptions of things. Then, we added to that, when he teams up with Woozy and, you know, Woozy befriends him, he's like, "Well, I just naturally see weird stuff." [*laughter*] He's crazy, essentially. I'm pretty sure he was literally in an asylum or a homeless guy. We had this sort of political thing… this was during the Reagan era. It wasn't hard-hitting political satire, but we made reference to the fact that they were closing the asylums. That was part of Reagan's budget-cutting. They were turning mentally ill people out into the streets. But that tied into giving sort of an explanation for why Woozy and Plastic Man both saw things in a cartoony way. And that also is why — and this was forced on us — we had to have these "reality checks" by Kevin Nowlan. That had to be DC's idea. I know Kevin specifically was my idea. There was another artist they wanted to use. [*whispers*] "Oh my God! No, no, no!" And then we got Kevin and Kevin was very upset that *he* was the guy who had to draw this but couldn't go crazy and cartoony. His natural inclination was to draw it cartoony and I kept saying, "Kevin, the reason you're here is to *not* do that!" [*laughs*] He wasn't happy about it. His stuff really is kind of cartoony, his stuff for *Plastic Man*, but it was kind of twisting the poor guy's arm to get him to not let him run free and just draw wacky.

CBC: *It seems, in 1988, you all of a sudden became a humor illustrator.*

Hilary: Did it happen in 1988? "Munden's Bar" at First Comics was where I was first drawing as a penciler, I

believe. And my first pro writing credit was might have been on "Munden's Bar, too, through editor Rick Oliver. I was inking a *Punisher* cover penciled by Erik Larsen and I remember realizing, "I hate this comic! This guy's shooting bullets at somebody." It just seemed to be all wrong. This was not the Marvel Comics I grew up with. The hero wouldn't be gunning people down. And I signed my name "Barta, Hilary," you know, like I was filling out a form, with the last name first. The reason being that I felt like this was like an assignment. My heart's not in this. And then, after I turned it in, I felt really bad. I thought someone might take that as an insult — the editor, Carl Potts, or Erik Larsen — and they had nothing to do with this. I just called up Carl and I said, "Don't offer me any more *Punisher* work. I just don't wanna do it. I don't wanna be tempted by the money. I'd rather not. I really hate this character." And he respected that. I appreciated that. I added, "But if you ever want me to do a parody…!" and they were publishing *What The--!?*, a parody comic. So the first issue is my first writing and penciling credit at Marvel.

I just had this idea for a parody and I went to Peter Gillis who lived here in Chicago. I pitched the plot to him and he wrote the script from my plot. Carl would do this once in a while. He'd go, "Hilary, there's good news and bad news. The bad news is you can't ink The Punisher story." I go, "What? Whaddaya mean I can't ink it? I'm an inker!" "Well, the good news is you have a choice of two artists — Kevin Nowlan or John Severin." [*laughter*]

CBC: *Sophie's choice!*

Hilary: You know, I'm like, "I love Kevin! Kevin's a friend of mine. But, my *god*, it's gonna be John Severin!" So, my first penciling job at Marvel is inked by John Severin, and he, of course, did an amazing job! I called him up when it was over because I had to talk to him once and just thank him

top of your own work. Thank goodness I'm working with Jason Millet on color now.

But I loved "The Competition," and I loved doing the parodies in *What The--?!* Those were great times, with Doug Rice and me just sittin' down and making each other laugh. Another parody thing I did outside of Marvel, was at Dark Horse during their early days, a black-&-white one-shot called *Insane*. We did a parody of *Grimjack* (where I'd been doing the "Munden's Bar" stories) called Dimjack. That was another one with Stephen Sullivan, and we went on to do the first thing I did for Bongo, a *Treehouse of Horror* story that was a limerick alphabet, basically… A to Z with horror limericks about the different characters. It was really a blast to do. The editing got a little wonky because they edited out contractions and certain things so the meter got thrown off and I was never shown it before it went into

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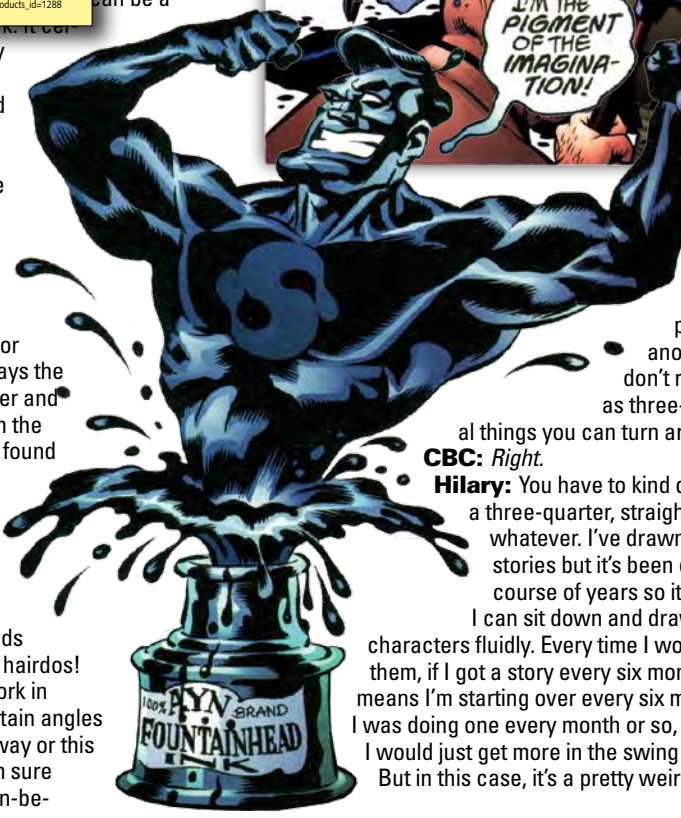
y, it was my don't know might have that I didn't ink *house* story. because, ists draw the get a little toons; I see and stuff and ting and all r artists that stuff. And at comics look can be a

tainly isn't compatible with the way they first started doing the comics. They pretty much stuck to the dead weight animation line and it was many years before they started letting people do a little more in the regular books with line weight, as opposed to just dead weight pen. I know that Andrew Pepoy led the charge trying to push that part of the drawing. He did a lot of inking there. In any case, I've done three or four *Treehouse* stories and it's always the most fun. Just crazier subject matter and they let me go a little bit wilder with the lighting and the shadows, though I found that you can light Homer and Bart rather easily because Homer essentially has a round head. Bart has this sort of tube that's cut off with spikes in the top, but if you look at Maggie and Lisa, it's almost impossible to light their heads because they have these big spiky hairdos!

The Simpsons don't actually work in turnaround. They're specific to certain angles where the eyes don't overlap this way or this doesn't touch that another way. I'm sure that when the person is doing the in-be-



tweens, they just sort of jump from one model pose to another but they don't really work as three-dimensional things you can turn around.

CBC: *Right.*

Hilary: You have to kind of jump from a three-quarter, straight on to a whatever. I've drawn a lot of stories but it's been over the course of years so it's not like I can sit down and draw those characters fluidly. Every time I would tell them, if I got a story every six months, that means I'm starting over every six months. If I was doing one every month or so, maybe I would just get more in the swing of it. But in this case, it's a pretty weird model

Above: *Hilary Barta cover art for* Tomorrow Stories *#11 [Oct. 2001].* **Inset left:** *Detail from* Tomorrow Stories *#6 [Mar. '00].* **Below:** Tomorrow Stories *#7 [June '00].*