

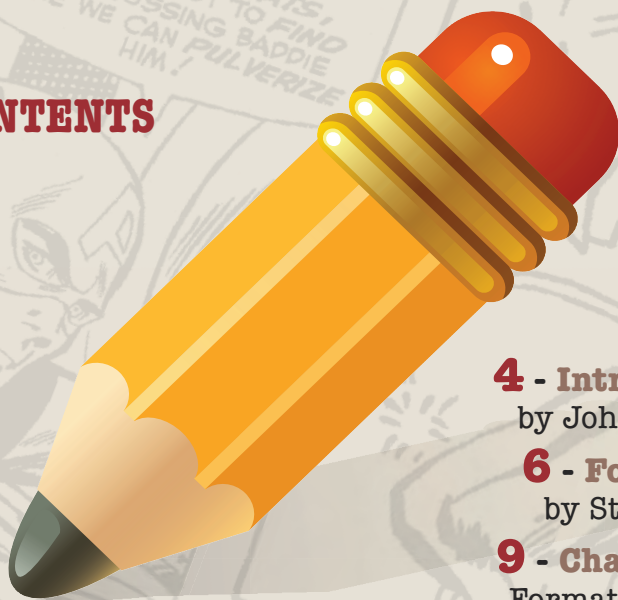
Don Heck

A Work Of Art
by John Coates



Foreword by STAN LEE • Afterword by BEAU SMITH

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1949-1954 EARLY DAYS IN COMICS

chapter
2

MURRAY: Did you ever work in advertising?

HECK: I did some when I first started out. I worked in advertising, not that I wanted to. I took Advertising Design and Layouts, I remember that. Up to the first nine months I worked [at an advertising firm], and then I said, "I don't want this." Somebody called me up on a Saturday and told me, "Harvey's got a comic book out, and they're looking for somebody."

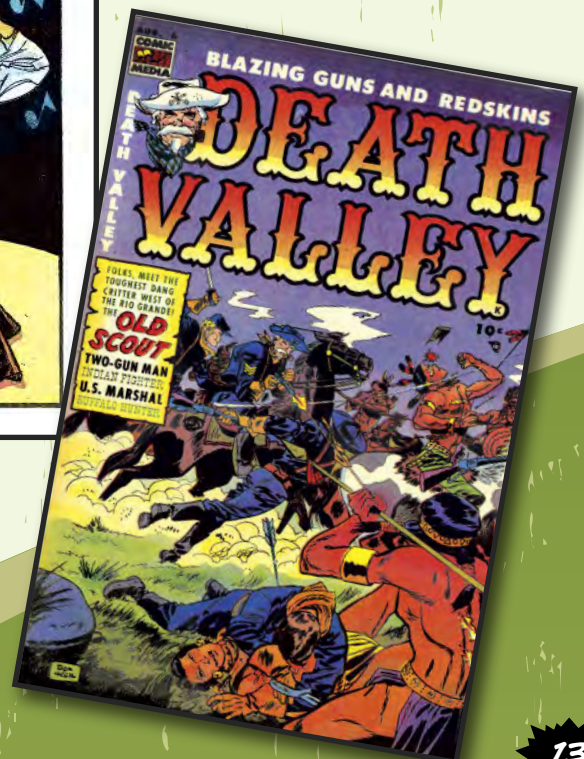


Above:
Captain Gallant, page 8 panels,
US Pictorial, 1955.

Right:
Death Valley #6, cover, Charlton Comics,
Aug. 1954.

MURRAY: Tell me when you got started in the business.

HECK: I first worked for Harvey Publications back in December '49, when I first started in comics. I stayed there for about 2½ years, and then I started to freelance.





ATLAS COMICS AND THE MARVEL AGE OF COMICS

chapter
3

1954-1960s

[Earlier Don had mentioned to Richard Howell that he was hired by Stan Lee at Magazine Management, a.k.a. Atlas Comics, on September 1, 1954.]

HOWELL: You've got a good memory for these dates.

HECK: Only because I've got the book in front of me. I would have known it was September 1954, but I wouldn't have known it was September 1st.

HOWELL: And what were you working on for Marvel at that point?

HECK: "Werewolf Beware." *[laughter]*

Opposite Top:
Rugged Action #3, Atlas Comics, April 1955.

Opposite Bottom:
Mystery Tales #25, Atlas Comics, Jan. 1955. Don's first known published work for Atlas.

Right:
Navy Combat #6, splash, Atlas Comics, April 1956, featuring "Torpedo Taylor."

HOWELL: Oh boy!

HECK: Yes. "The Red Pirate." I remember that one, that was one of those... *[laughter]* you know, [it] had the whale crashing into one of those whaling boats, *[laughter]* you know, the ones they throw the harpoons from? Not the big ship, but the small jobs. And there were Westerns, and then it says here that December was the first time I did a Navy Combat. That's when I got involved with...

HOWELL: War comics?

HECK: Yeah. Well, I did a character in there called Torpedo Taylor, who was—obviously—a submarine type.

.....

HECK: [Torpedo Taylor] had bright red hair, and [later I gave him] a beard. Stan Lee got one of the



Atlas Comics

"By 1955 it looked like Atlas might be nearing the end of the line. Oddly enough, it was a group of recent arrivals at Atlas who eventually turned things around. Artist Don Heck had arrived in 1954 and was soon enhancing war books with his vigorous work on characters like 'Torpedo' Taylor."

Marvel: Five Fabulous Decades of the World's Greatest Comics, by Les Daniels, Harry N. Abrams Publishers, 1991, page 80.

THE MARVEL AGE OF COMICS



Stan on the Success of the Marvel Age...

"To start things off, I had the unbelievable good fortune to work with the most incredibly talented artists of our time. There was Jack Kirby with whom I co-created the Fantastic Four, the Incredible Hulk, the Mighty Thor, Sgt. Fury and His Howling Commandos, Nick Fury: Agent of Shield, and the X-Men, to name a few. Then there was Steve Ditko, my collaborator in the creation of Spider-Man and Dr. Strange. And lest we not forget Don Heck who toiled with me so mightily to bring forth Iron Man, while Bill Everett was my partner on creating Daredevil."

— Stan Lee

Overstreet Price Guide #16,
Overstreet Publications, 1986,
page A-82.

HOWELL: When the Marvel super-hero explosion, such as it was, got going, did you work in the same manner with Stan Lee as did Kirby and Ditko—contributing all the story's pacing?

HECK: You mean when they suddenly threw a synopsis at you?

HOWELL: Yes.

HECK: Boy, that was a surprise. [laughter] I'd been so used to working from scripts, and then Stan said, "I'm going to give you a synopsis." Well, Jack Kirby was



Left Inset:

Tales of Suspense #55, Marvel Comics, July 1964.

Above:

Tales of Suspense #16, Marvel Comics, April 1961.

ANT-MAN



Above:
Tales to Astonish #43, splash, Marvel Comics, May 1963.

Right:
Tales to Astonish #54, page 6 panel, Marvel Comics, April 1964.

Below:
Tales to Astonish #43, panel, Marvel Comics, May 1963.



MURRAY: One of my favorite early Marvel super-heroes was Ant-Man. You slid right into that after Kirby set that book up. You took a different approach to that character.

HECK: I tried to do it like him, but.... [chuckles]

MURRAY: Kirby built him up larger than life. You drew it from the point of view of a normal-sized world with a tiny Ant-Man.

HECK: Yeah, well, that's the way I would see it. I would think of it as he's so small, and occasionally I would try to draw him [with] something around the character. So it's sort of like a matchbook, where you'd have the Ant-Man next to a matchbook and then looking up at the [reader].

MURRAY: [laughs] When you got used to that; did you find you liked it?

HECK: No, it wasn't that bad. When it first happened, it was like somebody saying, "Oh, by the way, you're going to fly that airplane over there." [laughs] Whoa, wait a minute!

Well, I enjoyed doing The Wasp, and stuff like that, because it was a pretty young girl flying around. And like I say, with the small characters who are—Giant Man suddenly turning into Ant-Man, they'd go up and down. After a while, it became fun. In the beginning, like I say, it was tough when I first did "Ant-Man," but after I got used to it, then it was something sort of like making the character that suddenly wound up with a whole bunch of little people around him—*Gulliver's Travels*. Of course, when I started thinking of it in that respect, then it was easy to do.

MURRAY:

I guess you'd done a few "Giant-Man" stories as well as "Ant-Man" stories, and you'd inked the first



"Giant-Man," and then Kirby drew that, as I recall.

HECK: Yeah. You probably remember more of what he did than I [do]. What happens is you finish something, and you put it in the mail or get rid of it, [and] it's gone. [laughs] The reason I still have the magazines from that time is because I always kept them. And I'd get an order, turn around and then an *Avengers* was behind me, or something like that, and *Thor* was over here or all the issues of *Daredevil* or whatever I was working on. So in one way, it's good because I wanted to peek through all those books.

IRON MAN

MURRAY: Let's talk about Iron Man. That's one of the characters you're most linked with, and Mark Hannerfeld tells me there's quite an involved story on how that character came into existence.

HECK: There is? [laughs]

MURRAY: Well, all right, let me put it this way. As I understand it, you and Stan Lee devised a character or fleshed out the character, but Kirby designed the armor and did the first cover, but that's all Kirby did.

HECK: Yeah. Well, if you look in the thing, it's listed that Kirby laid out the first story, which was, I think, #39, which is not true. I think he did #40.

MURRAY: He did, yeah.

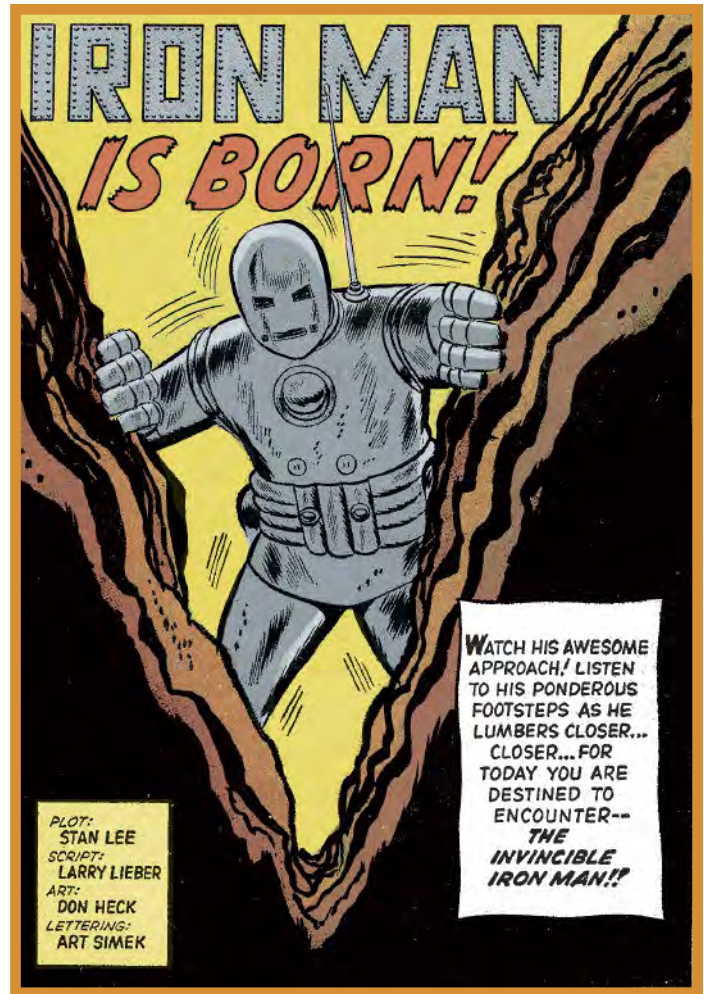
HECK: He did the layouts on that, but you've got to see some of the layouts to appreciate it, because a lot of times it would be—which was fine because he wasn't getting paid that much for it—it would be almost like what Ditko did. He did stick figures sometimes. Sometimes Kirby would just put in things and say, "Tie them in." [laughs] "This is so-and-so and he's over here. This is a building," or something like that. But no, #40 was good. He was good on that, I remember. But the reason he did the character was because of the fact, as I said before, he was in the city and the covers were always done first.

Creation of Iron Man



"Although he didn't design the Iron Man armor itself, Don Heck did just about everything else to bring Tony Stark's adventures to life."

Iron Man: The Ultimate Guide to the Armored Super Hero, by Matthew K. Manning, DK Children, Feb. 2010, page 11.



MURRAY: I thought the covers were done last.

HECK: No, because they had to print all that stuff up.

MURRAY: But it was unusual at that time for Kirby to design a character, but not do the first stories. Tell me how you ended up doing "Iron Man" and what you and Stan Lee did to put a guy inside that armor.

Left Inset:

Tales of Suspense #42, page 2 panel, Marvel Comics, June 1963.

Above:

Tales of Suspense #39, splash, Marvel Comics, March 1963.

Opposite Top Left Inset:

Tales of Suspense #39, page 11 panel, Marvel Comics, March 1963.

Opposite Top Right:

Tales of Suspense #45, page 11, Marvel Comics, Sept. 1963. Panel showing Tony Stark as rendered by Don Heck.

Opposite Below:

Tales of Suspense #46, page 3, Marvel Comics, Oct. 1963. Another panel showing Tony Stark as rendered by Don.



Late
1960s-1977

MARVEL COMICS, GOLD KEY, AND DC COMICS

chapter
4

MURRAY: You did work on *Spider-Man* at one point.

HECK: I did the in-between stuff in a lot of cases. In fact, I think I did [*Amazing*] *Spider-Man Annual #3* or something like that. John Romita roughed it out and then I tight-penciled it, and then he'd send it over to Mike Esposito [to ink it], who was listed as "Mickey Demeo" at the time.

MURRAY: Yeah, that's right. You did a run of *Spider-Man* as well, where Romita would lay it out, I guess.

HECK: Right, right. He'd send it out to me, and probably on

Opposite:

The Avengers #37, unpublished cover, Marvel Comics, Sept. 1967. Art by Don Heck.

Above:

Wonder Woman sketch by Don Heck.

Right:

Amazing Spider-Man Annual #3, splash, Marvel Comics, Nov. 1968. Layout by John Romita, pencils by Don Heck, and inks by Mickey Demeo (Mike Esposito).

tracing paper with some pen drawings or something like that, then I'd work it from that point.

MURRAY: The web lines must have driven you crazy.

HECK: They did until John told me what they were. The things had to go a certain way around on the page. Once you know what the pattern was, it was easy.

MURRAY: Give Ditko credit, he didn't skimp on his design, even though he knew he had to draw every issue and every webline.

HECK: Yeah. [*laughs*] Well, I think in a lot of cases, it was sort of like stuff that you'd do. You're only expecting to do a couple of issues, or something like that, and then all of a sudden, it winds up to be an every month thing and, "Oh sh*t. I wished I hadn't put this on there and that on there." [*laughs*]



MURRAY: You did a character later on, but there was one book that was always floundering around and that was *Daredevil*. First it was Bill Everett, and then it was Joe Orlando, then it was Wally Wood, and then it was Bob Powell. And I would think that would have been a perfect book for you to do, and you never did it.

HECK: Yeah, well, I did some *Daredevil*.

STEVE ENLEHART / AUTHOR JOHN BUSCEMA / GUEST ARTIST DON HECK / EMBELLISHMENT JOHN COSTANZA / LETTERS ROY THOMAS / EDITOR
R. GOLDBERG / COLORIST



John Buscema on Don's Situation Prior to Leaving Marvel

ROY THOMAS: Don Heck was the *Avengers* artist before you. You two were friends, weren't you?

JOHN BUSCEMA: Oh yeah. We lived about ten minutes away from each other. One of the things I remember about Don, he was having a lot of trouble with a lot of the editors in later years. I don't know why. I always thought Don was one of the better men in the business, and for some reason, these young editors wouldn't give him enough work to survive.

I was out to lunch one day with a couple of the editors and some of the writers. And I brought up the subject of Don, and I told the editors, "What the hell's the matter with you guys? Why don't

you use Don Heck? He's one of the best men in the business!" And you know, one of them said, "You know, I love the guy's stuff, but I never think of calling him." And that's murder. [laughs] I said, "The guy's gotta eat." What's the matter with them? Give him some work. They never gave him the work, anyway.

THOMAS: If Stan had told someone he was going to keep them busy, even if they were officially freelancers, he got very angry if that person had time on his hands because no one had work ready for him when he needed it! I continued that policy, and so did an editor or two after me. But, over the years, it went by the wayside. And once the company went to having a whole ream of editors a few years later, if one editor dropped you from a book, nobody else at Marvel felt any obligation to find you a replacement. That horrible, inhuman departmentalization was happening there, like it had at DC earlier. Editors would forget about people.

BUSCEMA: And that's a hell of a way to treat a guy after so many years, and he was damn good.

THOMAS: Don had been very popular, especially in the '60s, doing *Avengers* and "Iron Man." Of course, he wasn't really a guy who enjoyed doing super-heroes. I remember the back-up story you did for an *Avengers Annual*, with humorous versions of you and me and Don Heck in it. Do you remember it at all? It had the feel of Mort Drucker in *Mad*.

BUSCEMA: [laughs] I couldn't believe that I had done that. I didn't think I could do it.

Alter Ego #13, TwoMorrows Publishing, March 2002. Interview conducted by Roy Thomas.

Above:

The Avengers #121, splash, Marvel Comics, Sept. 1973. John Buscema pencils and Don Heck inks.



DC Comics

chapter 6

1977-1988

As shown in Chapter 4, Don first briefly worked a few assignments for DC Comics' war books back in the late 1950s. During the early '70s, Don had a short stint with DC Comics on their horror and romance line of comics, including the popular "Batgirl" back-up feature then appearing in *Detective Comics*. He would return to Marvel through to the mid-1970s, until leaving Marvel entirely for DC Comics in 1977. Don would stay at DC Comics for eleven years, up to 1988.



MURRAY: You did a lot of romance work. Was that for Marvel or was that for DC or someone else?

HECK: I did DC covers, and I think one of the first things I did for DC in a long—I did something for them, like I said, in the '50s. I did a lot more [in]

1971 or '72 or something like that. I think it was Roy Thomas [who] called me [at Marvel], and they were going to have somebody else take something I was doing—I don't recall, it may have been *Daredevil*—and they were going to have this other inker on me, and I said, "That's okay. I'm done." [laughs] And I said, "Another 'star' is going to screw [up] this stuff that I did, working on it." So I figured

maybe I'd have a better chance over at DC. You take a shot. If it doesn't work, you go back to the other one—the only way you can work at something.

Opposite:

Teen Titans #52, page 17 pin-up, DC Comics, Dec. 1977. Don Heck pencils and Bob Smith inks.

Above Inset:

Detective Comics #424, splash, DC Comics, June 1972. Art by Don Heck.

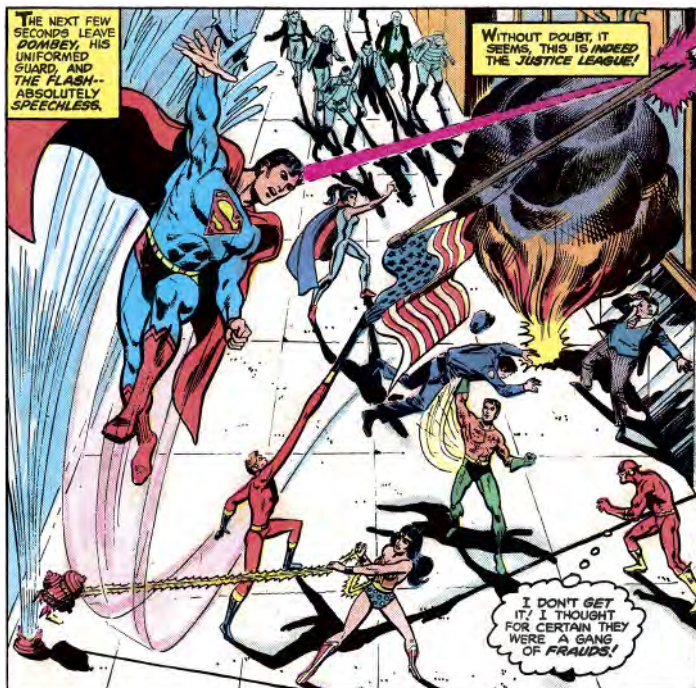
Above (Top to Bottom):

Young Love #89, cover, DC Comics, Nov. 1971. Don Heck pencils and Dick Giordano inks.

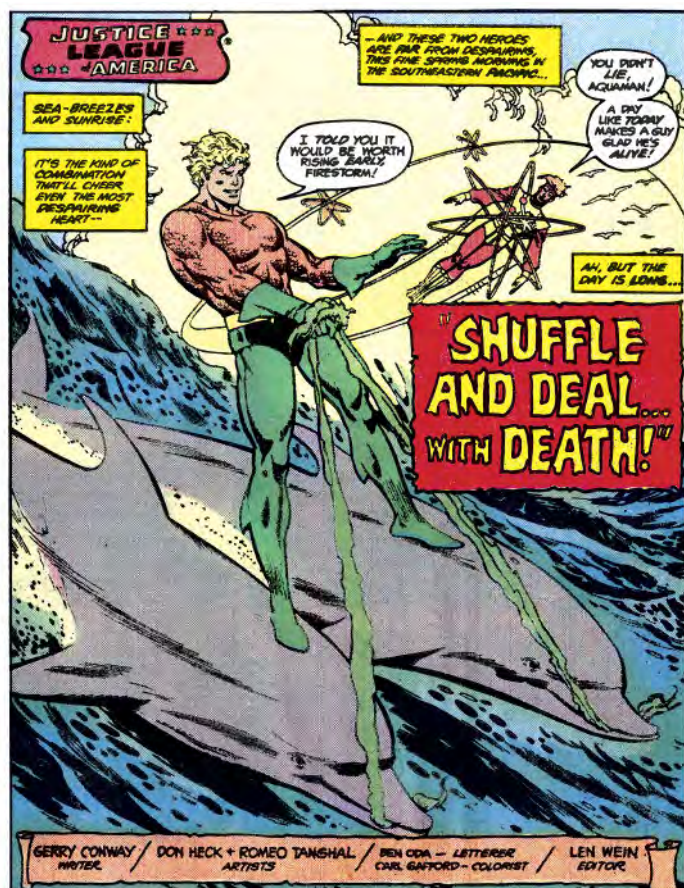
Young Love #91, cover, DC Comics, Jan. 1972. Art by Don Heck.

Superman's Girl Friend, Lois Lane #123, "Rose and Thorn" page 7, DC Comics, June 1972. Art by Don Heck.





JUSTICE LEAGUE OF AMERICA



Don began as regular monthly artist on the *Justice League of America* title with issue #201, April 1982.

MURRAY: In terms of characters, which is the specific series character you least liked working on?

HECK: When I was doing *The Justice League of America*, I did quite a number—in fact, they wanted me to do it and I said I didn't want to do it, because I didn't like the guy that was inking it. I said, "He's the regular inker on it, and I don't want you pulling him off the story for me, so I'd rather not do it." And then all of a sudden, one day, they told me, "You're doing it, period." But they got a different inker on it.

MURRAY: What didn't you like about *Justice League*?

HECK: Just [that] it was strange to me. You know, different characters.

MURRAY: Yet I can't imagine it would be that different than doing *Avengers*.

HECK: No, after a while, you get used to it. To me, 20 different characters running around—in fact, a couple of the stories was where it had Superman, you'd have Wonder Woman, you'd have somebody





WONDER WOMAN

Don Helps Bring Back Wonder Woman



"After nearly five years of Diana Prince's non-powered super-heroics, writer/editor Robert Kanigher and artist Don Heck restored Wonder Woman's... well, wonder."

DC Comics Year by Year: A Visual Chronicle, by Daniel Wallace, Matthew K. Manning, Alexander Irvine, Alan Cowsill, and Michael McAvannie, DK Publishing, 4th edition, Sept. 2010.

HECK: That's why I wanted to do something on *Wonder Woman*; I'd do penciling and inking, because then I didn't have to tight-pencil it that much. I could spend more time finishing it. In other words, when I got it back, I could see mistakes, make corrections, and then ink it. And to me, that's where I started making the money for a change, because I wasn't stuck with this other thing.

MURRAY: You could make more money penciling and inking?

HECK: And inking, yeah, because in other words, instead of having to tight-pencil every damn thing, [I could tighten it up when I] ink it, [and] there's nobody who can screw it up. [I would] pencil it, but there were certain areas you didn't have to tighten every damn thing.

MURRAY: Oh, I see, I see. I would have thought that in considering the Kirby way of doing things, which is just pencil and that's it, I would think that you could make more money just penciling and never inking.

HECK: No, to me, it was the other way. In fact, somebody says to me, "Where you're penciling, it's not the same as when you ink it." I said, "Why should it be? I know what I want to do with it; as long as the finished product is there...". Ross Andru said something to me one time; he says, "Gee, your inks look like your pencils." And I said to

Above:

Wonder Woman #329, page 24, DC Comics, Feb. 1986. Art by Don Heck. Stunning Amazon battle scene.

Left:

Wonder Woman #204, cover, DC Comics, Jan.-Feb. 1973. Don Heck pencils and Dick Giordano inks. Return of Wonder Woman to her costume, death of I-Ching, and introduction of Nubia.



BACK HOME TO MARVEL, AND THE INDIES

chapter
7

1989–1994

MURRAY: Oh, so you went back to Marvel.

HECK: Yeah, that's why I had to come back.

MURRAY: There must have been big changes at Marvel since—

HECK: Oh yeah. Like, my God. [laughs]

MURRAY: Yeah, that's the thing that amazes me about your work is I'd look at either if it's a story you inked—a Hawkeye story, let's say—and I'd compare it to a Hawkeye story you did in '65, '66—I don't see a big difference, stylistically. You have maintained the edge, to an amazing degree, that you had then. Whereas Kirby became sort of a caricature of his own style, that Ditko sort of super-simplified his style to the point it lost some of its weight. But you've still

got the weight and you've still got the line, and I wonder, one: how you maintain that crispness of line, and two: how come you're not appreciated, because you're doing the same kind of work you'd done in the '60s?

HECK: I don't know why I'm not. [chuckles] They sometimes [say], "Oh, I love your stuff." But then, like I say, you don't get the calls. I mean, as far as drawing, I always try to keep drawing. I was looking at the guys who are good, guys like Caniff, or stuff like that. I've got the files here and I thumb through them. Or Dan Barry, who was doing *Flash Gordon*. He was doing great work. And I keep [looking] back at what I consider is good artwork and hopefully, I'll keep drawing it.

Sort of like the reason John Buscema is so good; you see all these pages that he'd done for the books. But not only that, he draws all the time. If he's not working all day, he'll fill a whole page of different figures. Just practice working, you know? Maybe a certain panel gave him some trouble. He'll do it four or five different ways, just as practicing stuff. That's why he's so damn good.

MURRAY: So you maintain your edge by drawing, no matter what.

HECK: I draw all the time, yeah. I've got a whole bunch of pages where you're just drawing figures there, [working] with that, trying different methods or trying different things that you're working with.

Opposite:
Fantastic Four Board Game illustration,
Marvel Comics. Art by Don Heck.

Above:
Mr. Fixitt #1, cover, Heroic Publishing,
June 1993. Art by Don Heck.

Right:
Avengers Spotlight #28, cover, Marvel
Comics, Jan. 1990. Don Heck pencils
and Al Milgrom inks.





whether you want to or not.

HECK: If you want to or not, yeah.

MURRAY: But you want to.

HECK: Yeah.

MURRAY: You want to, that's good. That's good because you still do good work.

HECK: Well, I try to. All I can do is the best I know how at the time. And it also depends on the writing. If you get a decent story, then hell, you've got something to grab ahold

MURRAY: Do you still like the work?

HECK: Yeah, yeah.

MURRAY: You still maintain your enthusiasm for it.

HECK: Yeah, that's surprising to me, because I did this for a long time, and after a while in most cases, people would say, ["retire"]. And then if you came in the [office], you [see] you really shouldn't have thrown in the towel. I guess I'm just stubborn. [chuckles]

MURRAY: Well, that's a good way to be, to be a freelancer, to be stubborn. Do you ever think of retiring? Does it ever enter your head?

HECK: I don't have the money to do that. [laughs] I don't get these royalties. We don't get stuff that's going to do anything for you.

MURRAY: So you've got to keep working

Opposite Inset:

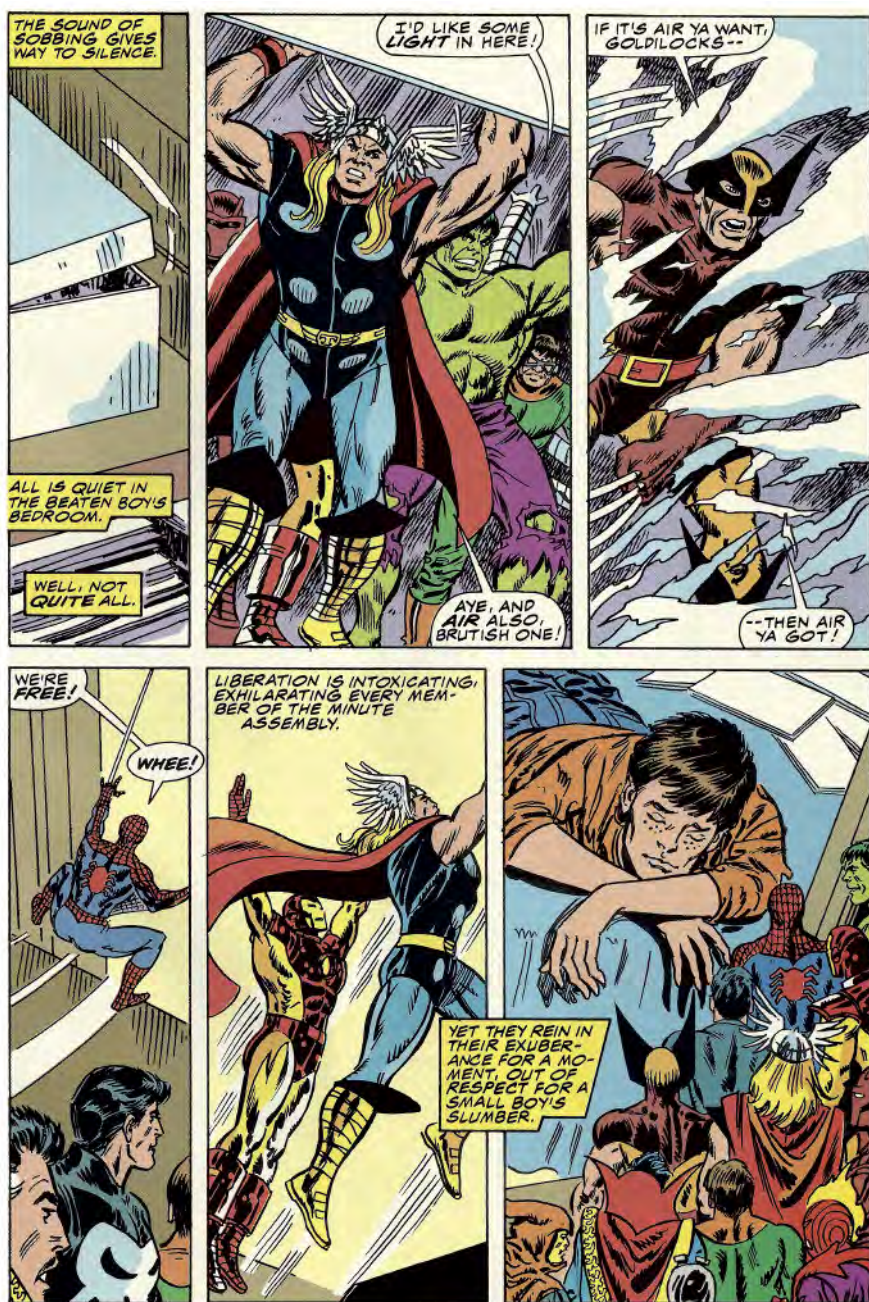
Tales of Suspense #50, page 50 panel, Marvel Comics, Feb. 1964.

Above:

The Destroyer graphic novel, page 143 panel, Marvel Comics, Oct. 1991.

Right:

Marvel Fanfare #54 (Vol.1), page 4, Marvel Comics, April 1991. A short story where a boy's Marvel action figures come to life.





Above:
Don Heck,
pen to paper.

PROCESS, TECHNIQUE, AND STYLE

chapter 9

HOWELL: How would you describe a “good script,” something that you feel would bring out the best elements in your storytelling? Does it have to have particular elements in it, like lots of action, or particular types of characters?

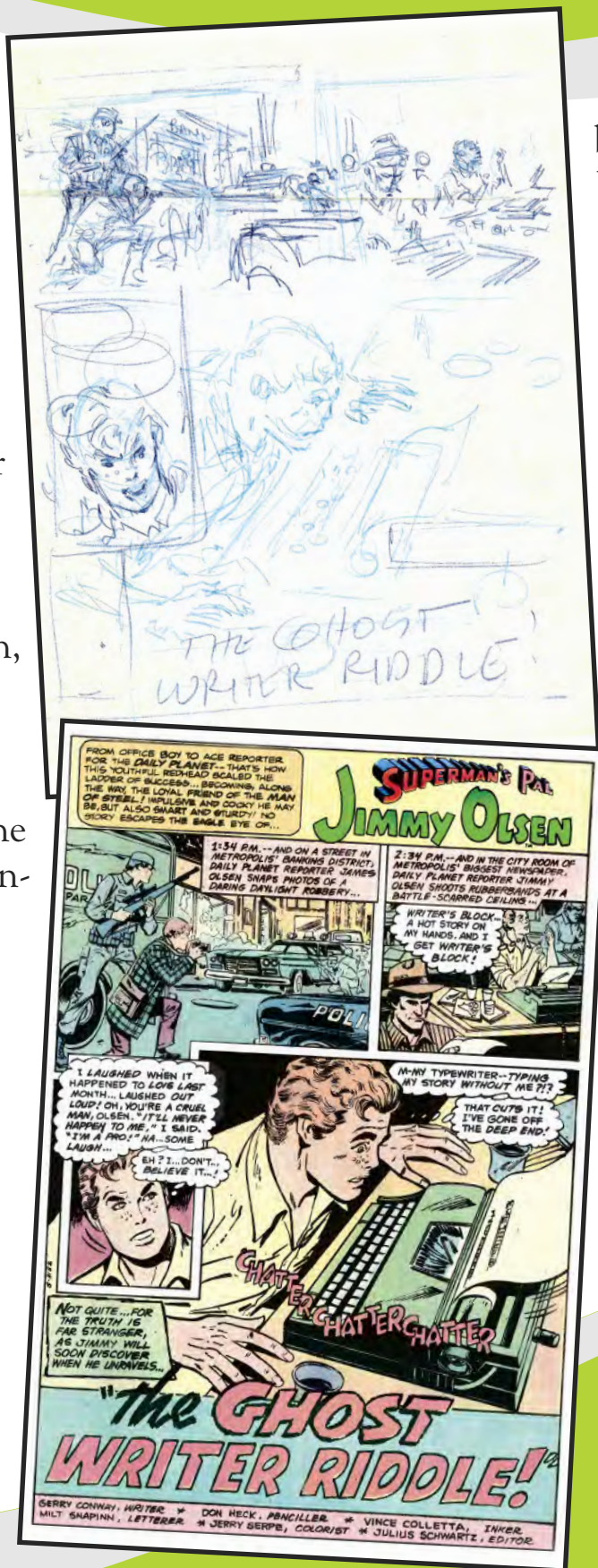
HECK: A little of each, actually. I mean, obviously there has to be a certain part of a story where you sum up in the end, a good visual beginning, and there has to

Opposite Above:

Batman Family #20, page 10, DC Comics, Oct.–Nov. 1978. To the right is Don’s rough pencil layout of the page, prior to doing full pencils, while to the left is the published page. Don Heck pencils and John Celardo inks.

Opposite Below:

Flash #282, splash, DC Comics, Feb. 1980. Don Heck pencils and Frank Chiaramonte inks. To the left are Don’s uninked pencils, while to the right is the published page. Notice the revisions on the published page in the upper-right to add dialogue.



be some action in-between. Otherwise, if there’s too much talk, it may look good on television, because they can bang one panel after another, or one picture after another, but it won’t work in comics. There has to be some action. Nothing is, to me, worse than where the guys are inside one little room talking to one another for four pages, y’know?

HOWELL: So you think comics have their own particular requirements?

HECK: Yeah, definitely,

Left:
Superman Family #197, page 10, DC Comics, Sept.–Oct. 1979. Don Heck pencils and Vince Colletta inks. Above is Don’s rough pencil layout of the page, prior to doing full pencils, while below is the published page.

By The Numbers

chapter 12



A myth that has been perpetuated about Don is that while at DC Comics, the circulation of

monthly books where he was the regular artist fell sharply during his run—or in some cases it's also been argued, *because* of it—specifically *The Flash*, *Justice League of America*, and *Wonder Woman* titles.

Obviously, there are numerous factors that contribute to a book's sales success, though admittedly in a creative industry, the writer and the artist are always integral to a book's success, either collectively or separately. However, contemporaneous factors such as the state of the comic book industry, changing consumer tastes, creative direction, and the economy should be considered as well. This applies when analyzing both an increase in circulation as well as a reduction. Also, as with any creative industry, sales and popularity do not always equate to quality. And finally, during any period, it's also important to consider the then latest "hot" creative team being assigned.

The point: Though circulation numbers are absolute, the possible reasons behind them are not as easy to define.

That said, some fans might be surprised with the reality of the before, during, and after circulation numbers of the books in question under Don.

[Ed.: For the circulation numbers below I used the average total paid circulation as reported by the respective companies in postal records, which are recorded in the back of the respective issues listed: "10C Total Paid Circulation — Avg. no. of copies each issue preceding 12 months."]

In *The Flash* #285 letters column, a fan writes his disappointment that Alex Saviuk was not assigned the permanent artist on the book, though he points out, "I have nothing personal against Don Heck," but that he prefers Alex's interpretation. He concludes his criticism that the overall "constant shifting of artists" on the title is "a little disconcerting and distracts from the continuity of the stories."

Editor Len Wein responds in the "Flash-Grams" letters column of *The Flash* #285 (May 1980) that Alex was unavailable and that, "The next logical choice for *Flash* was Don Heck, who had been penciling the Scarlet Speedster's exploits in the dollar-sized *Adventure Comics*. And frankly, we're as happy as can be about the turn of affairs. Don is breathing new life into the Fastest Man Alive, and we think you'll come to agree with us if you give him half a chance."

Opposite:
Montage of Heck's DC work.

Above:
Wonder Woman #319, splash, DC Comics, Sept. 1984. Heck pencils and Rick Magyar inks.

Right:
"Flash Grams" letters page logo.

