

# 'INSIDE COMICS'

## STAN LEE: BLINDED BY THE HYPE *an affectionate character assassination.*

by alan moore

I doubt that any of you sitting out there reading this are totally unfamiliar with the name Stan Lee . . . unless, of course, you happen to be one of those unfortunates who have spent their childhoods in a laundry hamper. Should this be the case, then please allow me to fill you in on the necessary details.

Stan Lee is the name of the flawed genius responsible for the Marvel Comics empire in its entirety. Without Stan Lee, you would not be reading this. Without Stan Lee there would have been no *Fantastic Four*, no *X Men*, no *Hulk*, no *Thor*, no nothing. Without Stan Lee there would quite probably have been no Conan movie and it is almost certain that the comic book industry as a whole would be vastly different, assuming that it existed at all.

On the other hand, without Stan Lee you wouldn't have to sit through such marrow-chilling dreck as the Spider-man television show. I suppose it's a case of having to take the rough with the smooth.

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My long-distance acquaintance with this gentleman goes back some twenty years to the fateful day when, laid up with one of those loathesome childhood diseases, I had sent my mother out to buy me my weekly comics ration. The particular comic I had been after was an issue of D C's *Blackhawk*.

Knowing, however, that my maternal parent would be unlikely to remember anything as demanding as a two-syllable word like *Blackhawk*, I played it safe and told her that the comic I wanted featured a bunch of people who all wore blue uniforms.

What turned up was *Fantastic Four* number three. Imagine my surprise.

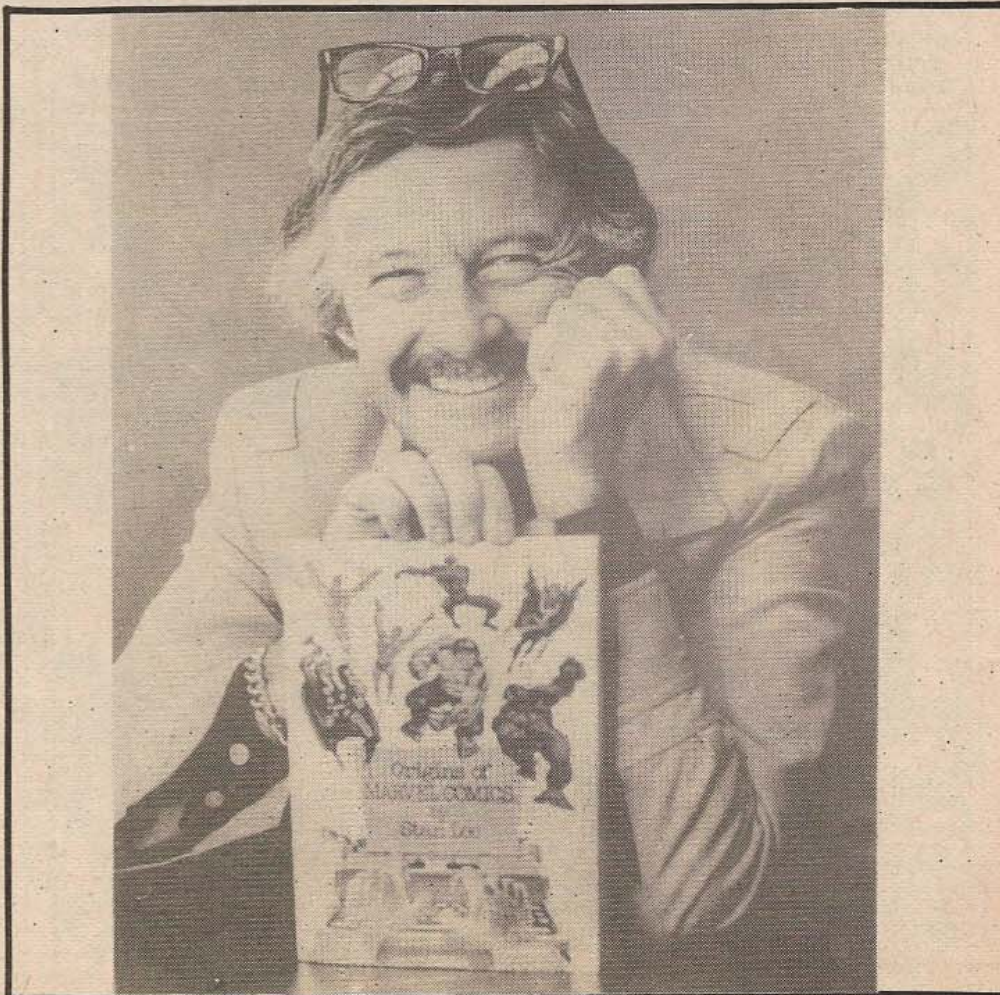
My mother, of course, apologised profusely. For this reason I let her off

with a mild cuffing and didn't loose the dobermanns upon her, as was my usual practice. Some two hours later, after I'd finished reading FF no. 3 for something like the eighth time, I realised that she had in fact done me a tremendous service. This comic was utterly stark raving foaming-at-the-mouth *stupendous!*

Now, I was not the sort of child who regularly went in for lavish displays of gratitude but I recall that that evening I threw mother an extra lump of raw meat and agreed to consider putting a couple of extra links in her chain.

At this point I should perhaps explain exactly what it was that devastated me about that third issue of the *Fantastic Four*. After all, when that issue first appeared, most of you readers were just a bunch of random genes and chromosomes wandering round looking for somebody to happen to. On top of that, you have grown up in a world where you have something in the region of forty different super-hero titles to choose from each month.

I doubt you can imagine the sheer impact that single comic possessed back there in the comic-starved waste-





lands of 1961 or whenever it was. Especially to someone whose only exposure to the super hero had been the clear-cut and clean-living square-jawed heroes featured in the DC comics at the time.

The most immediately noticeable thing was the sheer strangeness of Jack Kirby's art. It had a craggy, textured quality that looked almost unpleasant to eyes that had become used to the graceful figures of *Carmine Infantino* or the smooth inking of *Murphy Anderson*. That said, it was a taste which quickly grew upon me.

Only a few short months later I couldn't really look at *Infantino* or *Kane* or *Swann* or any of the other DC artists of that period without feeling that there was something missing... a lack of grittiness or something. Like I say, the art was very, very strange. Those of you whose only exposure to Kirby's artwork has been something like 'The Eternals' can't begin to imagine how strange.

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The writing, however, was stranger. It wasn't the plot that was so excep-

tional... as I recall the plot featured a second rate villain called the *Miracle Man* who had the power to create illusions. He attacked the *Fantastic Four*, beat them, they regrouped, beat him, end of story. Nothing special.

What was special was the characterization... the way the characters talked, thought and behaved. I mean, think about it for a moment... there was a standard noble scientist type called *Reed Richards* who was given to making long-winded and pretentious proclamations on everything from Epsilon radiation to Universal Love.

There was his wimpy and faint-hearted girl friend, *Susan Storm*, who always looked as if she'd be much happier curled up in an armchair with a bottle of valium and the latest issue of *Vogue* rather than being captured by the *Mole Man* or someone of that ilk.

There was her skinny, teenaged brother *Johnny* who was brash, loud-mouthed and not a little obnoxious, the sort of person who looked like he'd have less trouble picking up an articulated lorry than he would have picking up a steady girlfriend.

And last, but certainly not least, there was *Ben Grimm*, the *Thing*.

In those early days, the *Thing* was nothing at all like the cuddly, likeable 'Orange Teddy-bear' of later years. In

those days he was portrayed as being something like a manic-depressive *Hulk* with a constant migraine headache, forever sprouting dialogue along the lines of "Bah! Out of my way, puny mortal!" and smashing up cars and buildings with a gusto that would leave the average soccer hooligan gapping with admiration.

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On more than one occasion he came dangerously close to actually murdering the *Human Torch* while in a bad mood and in general you had the impression that he was always on the verge of turning into a fully fledged villain and quitting the *Fantastic Four* for good.

To someone who had cut his teeth upon the sanitised niceness of the *Justice League of America*, this was heady stuff indeed. I mean, in DC comics, if *Superman* ever said anything remotely nasty to *Batman* or *Wonder Woman* you knew that he was either suffering from the unpredictable effects of *Red Kryptonite* or was having his mind controlled by *Lex Luther's* latest 'Brain-Ray'.

With *Ben Grimm*, you knew that he was quite likely to pull someone's arms and legs off one at a time for no better reason than that his corn-flakes had gone all soggy before he got round to eating them that morning.

There was a memorable scene in that selfsame issue three which featured the *Invisible Girl* proudly presenting her team-mates with some new costumes which she had designed (Up until that point, the *Fantastic Four* had dressed in ordinary street clothes.)

The *Thing's* costume was a skin-tight blue affair complete with black boots and a blue helmet which did it's best to conceal his hideous, lumpy orange face. By the end of the issue he had ripped it to pieces in a fit of temper and stamped off wearing only the black booties and the modified Y-Fronts which we know and love today.

In the same issue, the *Human Torch* threw a screaming temper tantrum that would have looked better on a five-year old and decided to leave the *Fantastic Four* forever. With all this going on, you can see why I was less than interested by the *Miracle Man* and his horde of illusory monsters.

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It was my first taste of Stan Lee's writing and I was hooked.

Subsequent issues were no let down. In issue four the *Sub Mariner* made his first appearance since the 1950's, turning up in the guise of a down and out amnesiac tramp who



A brilliant scientist—his best friend—the woman he loves—and her fiery-tempered kid brother! Together, they braved the unknown terrors of outer space, and were changed by cosmic rays into something more than merely human!

MR. FANTASTIC! THE THING! THE INVISIBLE GIRL! THE HUMAN TORCH! Now they are the FANTASTIC FOUR—and the world will never be the same again!



was quietly rotting away in a bowery flop-house until said establishment was visited by the *Human Torch* who was still on the run from his three team-mates.

In what, to me, remains one of the most electrifying comic scenes ever, an awestruck Johnny Storm ignites one finger using his flame-power and begins to shave away the tramp's shaggy mane of hair and tangled beard to reveal the unearthly triangular face and elegant curving eyebrows of *Prince Namor*, the legendary *Sub Mariner*.

And on and on it went. And not only within the pages of the *Fantastic Four*: during this period Lee was expanding the whole Marvel line-up, revamping the flagging mystery titles to include a constantly increasing menagerie of super-humans, and, most remarkably, writing them all himself. *Thor*, *Ant Man*, *Daredevil*, *Iron Man*, *The Hulk*, *The Avengers* . . . bearing in mind that the majority of these titles were monthlies, perhaps you'd like to sit down with a pencil and paper and work out just how many pages of script Stan the Man was having to turn out in any given month in addition to being the managing editor of a rapidly snowballing comic-book empire.

I mean, I myself have been known to pen a page or two in my time but the thought of a workload like that makes me tremble uncontrollably and give voice to funny little squeaking noises. The man must have had eight pints of black coffee where most of us have blood.

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Naturally, not all the scripts were that good, although if anyone had suggested that to me at the time I would have ripped their spine out and fed it to them an inch at a time.

Like most readers of that period I had become totally brainwashed by the sheer bellowing overkill of the Marvel publicity machine. If a cover-blurb informed me that *Millie the Model meets The Rawhide Kid* was "The Greatest Action Epic of All Time" then by God, so it was and never mind about *War and Peace*, *The Bible*, *King Solomon's Mines* and *Moby Dick*. As far as I was concerned, if it wasn't written by Stan Lee it wasn't in the running.

Probably the most remarkable thing that Stan Lee achieved was the way in which he managed to hold on to his audience long after they had grown beyond the age range usually associated with comic book readers of that period. He did this by a constant application of change, modification and development.



No comic book was allowed to remain static for long. *Iron Man* traded in his gunmetal-grey juggernaut of a costume for the sleek red and gold affair that has gradually turned into the costume we know today. The *Hulk* left the *Avengers*, never to return. A Howling Commando got killed from time to time. You can say what you like about the early Marvel universe, but it sure as hell wasn't boring.

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As the sixties wore on, Lee's writing began to mirror the changes that were taking place in the society about him. The gritty, streetwise realism slowly gave way to a sense of adventure and wonder on a grand and cosmic scale, just as thousands of middle class American kids were donning kaftans, growing their hair and setting out for San Francisco in search of cosmic adventures of their own.

To many, this 'visionary' period of Lee's writing stands as his finest work. Personally, although it knocked me for a loop at the time, I can see with hindsight that in many ways it spelled the beginning of the end. That said, while it lasted it was probably the most

fun you could have without risking imprisonment.

The *Fantastic Four* encountered, in swift succession, the stunning planet-eater known as *Galactus*, the soulful and simonized *Silver Surfer*, the *Black Panther's* technological Utopia set in the heart of the African jungles, the *Inhumans*, the *Watcher* and a vast plethora of equally brain-numbing individuals.

*Thor* encountered the Rigellian colonizers and, more memorably, Ego the Living Planet. I'll never forget turning the last page of that particular issue of *Journey into Mystery* to be confronted by the full-page spectacle of a massive organic planet with the grafted-on face of a malign octogenarian.

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Believe me, when people of my age wax lyrical about the sense of wonder to be found in those old comics, that's the sort of thing they're talking about. It was the sort of once-in-a-lifetime utterly mind-roasting concept that made you wonder just how long Lee and his Bullpen buddies could keep up that sort of pace and style.

The answer was, sadly, not long.