

COMIC-BOOKS

INTERVIEW **STAN LEE**

MARVEL CREATOR ZAPS HEROES INTO HARDCOVER

BY JEFF ROVIN

Until you created *The Fantastic Four* in 1961, Marvel was publishing mostly monster-type comics.

That's right. I was 39, and I was getting tired of doing stories about creatures named Moomba and Bombu and Vandoom—which were real characters I created, by the way. So I came up with a superhero team... but with a difference. Manned space flight was a hot subject, so I made the characters space pioneers who were irradiated on an experimental flight. More importantly, though, I conceived of them as being as real as possible within the fanciful framework of having super-powers. They spoke and behaved very much like everyday people, with hangups and egos and you-name-it. That struck a chord with readers, and I stuck with that approach in every new character we published.

You followed the *Fantastic Four* with *The Hulk*.

Yes. The misshapen Thing was the most popular member of the *Fantastic Four*, and that got me thinking about some of the greatest so-called monsters in literature, like *Frankenstein* and *Quasimodo*, or like *King Kong* in films. These are not characters who are inherently evil. They were driven by mankind to use their great powers to destructive ends. So I felt it would be a great challenge to take a monster-type character and make him misunderstood—but a hero. That gave the Hulk an edge of tragedy which characters like *Superman* didn't really have.

Spider-Man was the watershed for Marvel in 1962, the hero who really put Marvel on the map. How did he come about?

We had a magazine, *Amazing Fantasy*—one of those bizarre monster-type titles—which was going to be canceled anyway. So I thought I'd have fun with the superhero genre and do something in the last issue that had never been done before: a teenage hero with the neuroses of an average youth. Having decided that, I tried



to think of a kind of superheroic power which hadn't been done before. There were already characters who had super-strength, super-speed, and so on. The only thing I didn't know of any character doing was crawling on walls. I thought, "Wouldn't it be fun to get one who could behave like an insect." My next thought was, "What kind of insect?" I considered Mosquitoman or Gnat-man or Moth-man, because I really wanted to experiment. Well, when I was a kid, there was a detective magazine called *The Spider: Master of Men*. I always liked that name, so I decided to call this new character Spider-Man.

And sales went through the roof.

Correct. And they clung to the roof, somewhat like Spider-Man himself.

Unlike *The Fantastic Four*, your next team, *The Avengers*, was a teaming of some of your most popular loner-type characters.

Right. These weren't heroes who had all known each other and worked together. They opted to band together.

Why didn't you start with a clean slate and come up with a team of entirely new



Zowie! Fantastic Hardcovers!

MARVEL MASTERWORKS

Volumes 6 and 7

Marvel Books, November 1988

\$29.95, 250 Pages, Hardcover

☆☆☆☆

When Stan Lee unleashed his barrage of innovative superheroes in the early 1960s, he was laboring in a genre that had been battered by competition from television and suffered a dearth of ideas for nearly a decade. What he managed to do in the space of just two years was to transform comics into the creatively fresh, commercially viable field it had been when *Superman* created the medium in 1938.

No longer were comic book heroes merely lantern-jawed ciphers, virtually all of them white males. Lee created a host of female heroes, black heroes, foreign heroes, even a blind superhero and another (Professor X of the X-Men) who was in a wheelchair.

Today, the original editions of Lee's early works are extremely rare, commanding an average of \$1,000 each issue on the collector's market. In issuing several volumes of *Marvel Masterworks* every year—each volume containing ten successive issues of individual titles—the reader is getting nearly \$10,000 worth of comics for the relatively modest price of \$29.95!

More importantly, however, comic books were printed on paper that was not meant to last more than a reading or two. Nor did they allow for particularly vibrant or varied colors. These editions rectify both problems: the paper is high-quality and bound to last, and the color reproduction is exceptional (though purists may quibble with the way Marvel has added subtle tones here and there, and corrected occasional artistic blunders, like retouching a panel where one character had two left hands).

If there's a problem with the books, it's the fact that these handsome editions underscore the looniness inherent in stories about a teenager who swings on a web, or mutations who have wings, super-vision, and the like. One readily accepts such larger-than-life attributes in a comic book; it's jarring, and tougher to take them seriously, in very literary-looking hardbounds.

Still, Lee's classic tales deserve to be preserved and made available to a new generation of readers, and with the release of these new volumes, Marvel has now given us *Spider-Man* issue numbers 1-10 (*Marvel Masterworks* #1), *The Fantastic Four* issue numbers 1-10 (*MM* #2), *The X-Men* issues 1-10 (*MM* #3), *The Avengers* issues 1-10 (*MM* #4), *The Fantastic Four* issues 11-20 (*MM* #5), and now *Spider-Man* issues 11-20 (*MM* #6) and *The X-Men* issues 11-20 (*MM* #7).

More than living up to its name, the *Marvel Masterworks* series does one thing more. It reminds us that while their names may not be as well known as Steven Spielberg or Stephen King, there are people like Lee and his artists who have worked some breathtaking, and frequently more inspired wonders in the fantasy adventure field. Even if you're not a comics buff, their efforts are well worth a look. □

characters?

Well, I'd get that out of my system with the X-Men. Besides, the readers seemed to like it when our characters teamed up in adventures, so we decided to go wild and bring together the Hulk, our god of Thunder hero Thor, the armored Iron Man, and—since Spider-Man was such a hit—two insect characters, Ant-Man and the Wasp. In the fourth issue, Captain America joined the team. The fun of doing this book was that none of the characters had the temperament to belong to any kind of team. They were united by the desire to do good, but there was constant friction.

The mutant superheroes, the *X-Men*, were created in 1963—that was an interesting development. Most of our characters had become super-powered by some form of contamination. Spider-Man was bitten by a radioactive spider. The *Fantastic Four* encountered Cosmic Rays. The Hulk was hit by gamma rays. So I wanted to do a group of heroes who got together largely because they had been born with super abilities. And the part of that which intrigued me was that, as mutants, as "freaks," they would be shunned by the very society they were trying to help.

Though the *X-Men* were successful, their popularity really soared in the late 1970s—they became the bestselling comic book of the era.

A lot of that had to do with a new writer and the introduction of a new member, Wolverine. The *X-Men* became a more cynical band of heroes, more no-nonsense, even a little more or less confident, depending on the character, and people seemed to relate to that. You know, after many years, you have to make changes in the line-up and creative team of even a successful book, or readers can become bored.

You've got to be pleased that all of these classic, very perishable stories are being reprinted in handsome hardbound editions.

I'm ecstatic! I'll finally be in the libraries, along with Melville. I told my wife I'd get there one way or the other. □

