

* LISTENING IN

By Katha Quinn & Peter McGowan

Interview with STAN LEE

Marvel Comics, that mystical kingdom of fantasy, sheltered between the mammoth concrete mountains of New York's Madison Ave. Marvel Comics, the last stronghold of the young at heart, the final refuge for those seeking to escape for a while, into a world only a comic magazine can achieve. It is here where our tale begins, and it is Stan Lee, that fantastic weaver of mystery and magic, the Homer of 20th century mythology, who will reveal to us his uncanny ability to breathe life into his colorful costumed characters, who make up the wonderful world of Marvel.

CEL. What puts marvel in the vanguard of the comic book rebirth and to what do you attribute this to?

S.L. I guess it is the personality of the people who produce Marvel. It would seem to me that it is probably the way we approach the comics. Our own competitors, D.C. comics, have been quoted as saying that they think of their audience as fourteen years of age and younger. We at Marvel think of our audience as everyone who reads and enjoys a good fantasy. In other words we write for the adult, as much as we do

the kids. So, once having made that commitment and determining we are writing for older people, a different type of comic is produced. Also, I think our stories contain a lot more satire. They are a little looser and freer. I would like to think they are a little more fun than most other comic books. We don't take ourselves 100% seriously.

CEL. How and why did you become interested in comic books and what made you stay with it all those years, before the success of the Fantastic 4 in 1961?

S.L. It was sheer accident. I never thought I'd be a comic book person all my life. Actually I wanted to be an actor. As a teenager I worked with the W.P.A. Federal Theater. However, there was no money in that profession in those days.

While I was in high school I won the Herald Tribune writing contest three weeks in a row. The Editor finally called me and asked me to stop entering the contest, to give someone else a chance to win. He then asked me what I intended to do when I became a real person and told me to become a writer, when I informed him of my acting



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aspirations.

So, I got some crazy jobs. At one point I was writing obituaries for a news service about people who were still alive. It got very depressing to write about living people in the past tense. Another job I had was writing publicity for a hospital, which was a stupid job. Finally, I heard of a job opening at this comic book company.

I always thought this would be a temporary job. While I wrote comics I did other things such as radio writing, advertising, and television writing. I did these other things figuring I'd give up working with comics as soon as I hit it big in one of these other areas. But, every time I would say that to my publisher, he would give me another raise, and a few more books to write. I got so busy I never sort of got out of it. In those early days, comic book writing did not seem like the type of field a

grown man stayed in. Now, I'm resigned to and think the field has more solidity. I think it is more respected by the public than it was a decade ago. If the obituary thing had panned out, I might still be writing them today. You know, it's all luck!

CEL. Where do you draw your ideas from in the creation of a superhero?

S.L. In the case of Spider Man, the name came first. When I was a kid, there was a character in a magazine called the Spider. Underneath the Spider was written, "Master of Men". I must have been about seven or eight years old then and to me the idea of the spider being the master of men was the most dramatic thing. This character wore a black coat and hat and had a ring with a little spider on it. I remember when he would hit a villain, there would be an imprint of a spider left on him. Oh! to me that was high drama.

I have always sort of remembered this character the Spider, and when I was looking around for a new superhero I thought to myself, I have this man and that man and the other man, how about Spider Man! Once you get the name, the rest comes easily. The next step was to figure out what feats this new Spider Man character should be able to perform. Well, obviously he should be able to climb on walls and ceilings because that is what a spider can do. A spider can also spin a web. So, for my next trick I'll give Spider Man a little device that he rigs up mechanically, enabling him to shoot a web.

My next task is thinking about how I can make him really different from other characters. All the other heroes are adults. What if I make this Spider Man character a teenager? Pursuing that line of thought, I figured I'd make him a teenager but, not like one in all the other books. He won't be tremendously competent, intelligent, and handsome but, sort of an unpopular shnook. So, it is just a case of sitting down and thinking for about ten minutes.

The world is full of ideas, just hold a pencil in your hand and keep jotting down the ideas as they come to you.

CEL. Of all the characters you've created, which single superhero is your favorite?

S.L. I'd have to say Spider Man is my favorite, because he is the most successful. If Joe Blow was the most successful, I'd probably say he is my favorite. Basically, I enjoy them all when I used to write them. Whichever one I was writing at the moment, was the most fun.

CEL. Which superhero was the most challenging to create and fit into a story plot?

S.L. The most difficult character for me to work into a plot was Doctor Strange. He was a magician, able to travel in another dimension, and go to other worlds making things a little too easy. My main concern was making the readers empathise with him, even though he is so nutty and can do anything. I wanted to keep him serious and yet mystical. Those plots came a little bit harder to meet but, basically they are all the same.

CEL. It has been said that there is a Shakespearean influence on your writing. How have you incorporated this into comics?

S.L. I try to use a Biblical, combined with a Shakespearean turn of phrase in the dialogues. Whatever Shakespeare did he did to an extreme. If two young people were in love, they were not like ordinary people in love. Take for example Romeo and Juliet. They had to die. It was the most impassioned love affair of the time. It involved both families and became big and overblown. If he had a character like Falstaff, who was silly and frivolous, he was again bigger than life. He was a bigger buffoon than you ever apt to meet.

We try to incorporate that idea into our comics. If we have a villain, we try to make him the most villainous villain that had ever existed. When we have a hero he is the most heroic hero. We just shoot for extremes in everything. I think that makes for a lot of fun for the readers.

CEL. Evidently times have changed, children do not aspire to the same values they did twenty years ago. Do you update your stories to conform to the present generation of feel your style of writing is always going to appeal?

S.L. I have learned a great lesson. I don't write for kids or for anyone in

particular anymore. I now write for myself. I feel you have got to do what pleases you.

No matter how ego deflating, you have to assume you're not that unique. If something pleases you there are millions of people in the world who have similar taste. This was the situation when I started with Spider Man and the Fantastic Four. I never thought they would catch on the way they did. I did them, figuring I'd get a kick out of that type of story. Then wow! Suddenly mail started pouring in. The response was enormous. It seemed a great many readers also enjoyed what I thought was a private little treat for myself.

Sure the world has changed and the audience is different than it was years ago. The whole world is more sophisticated. Television has changed us. Vietnam has changed us,

assassinations have changed us, a new permissiveness in sex has changed us, we are all definitely changed. But I'm still writing for myself. However, if I write something now it has got to be different than it was fifteen years ago but, not because I think kids are different, because I'm different.

CEL. With the science fiction craze encompassing books, movies, and television cartoons, do you foresee the future comic book characters in animated movies?

S.L. Not really, they are too expensive to make. However, I can't rule it out completely because we don't do our own producing. If someone comes along and wants to do an animated movie of the Mighty Thor and pays for the name and royalties, they can do it. So, I have no way of predicting that within the next five minutes someone might call me wanting to do an animated



Continued on page 23

Steve describes as "Arc music."

The first thing one notices about Arc is their vocals. These four musicians have an extraordinary talent for harmony. Their music is vocally oriented giving their songs a fresh flowing style.

The best way to describe "Arc music" is to say it's like a rainbow to your ears. In a rainbow there are three basic colors that combine to form other beautiful blends while still keeping their individual basic entities. Arc music is composed much in the same manner. We have four basic sounds which blend together forming one entity but each individual is still distinctly prominent.

Arc's sophistication is shown by their ability to avoid repetitious complexities. Arc music is simple and straightforward. A perfect example of this is Arc guitarist Ed Kosowsky. He doesn't play leads that last for hours on end. All his leads are fairly short, but they clearly display his diversified guitar talents.

Hearing Arc is not only pleasurable but relaxing. A possible reason for such a feeling is explained by drummer and lyricist Steve Azczesnick. "We want to make people hear something beautiful.

We want to be positive and show people the goodness we have found in music."

Two other integral parts to the success of Arc are Jeff Natti, sound engineer and H. Scott Friedman, lighting technician. Jeff Natti has conquered the age old problem of getting each voice and instrument balanced in situations where the acoustics are poor. When you hear Arc no one performer becomes overbearing, and no one gets preference over the others. In short, Jeff helps Arc maintain their rainbow of sound. H. Scott Friedman, can be classified as a musician of sorts. This is exemplified by his ability to make music for your eyes which blends perfectly with what you are hearing.

As far as recording contracts, Arc is going into the studio this January and their album should be released by May. The album will be produced by Call West Productions. At present, the record label which will handle them is unknown.

In closing, may I suggest not passing up an opportunity to hear Arc. I have a sneaking suspicion that in a year's time getting tickets for an Arc concert will cost a

STAN LEE continued...

film. My guess that the cost being what it is; these types of movies are highly unlikely.

CEL: With the opening of a comic book gallery in the city, do you feel the public is ready to recognize the comics as an art form?

S.L.: If you think about it comics are an art form. An example I always give is if Shakespeare and Michelangelo were alive today and decided to collaborate

on a comic strip, who is to say it wouldn't be a genuine work of art? So, there is nothing wrong with the comics, it is just a case of who is doing them.

CEL: How large is Marvel's distribution and does it extend outside of the United States?

S.L.: We sell our comics all over the world to different publishers, who reprint and translate them. Our books are published in England by our own little company.

CEL: Are the stories kept basically the

same or are they changed a bit, depending on which country they are produced in? Does the New York background become the background of London for the comics in England?

S.L.: Yes, we give them an English touch.

CEL: Well exactly how large is Marvel?

S.L.: It's a funny thing. We're big and we're little. It's a big business but we're still a little company, as far as personnel. It is an intimate little company. However, we do have a big licensing division. We license "Spider Man", "Captain America", and "Hulk T-shirts", plus games, toys jigsaw

puzzles and so on. The book publication done in conjunction with other publishers, has also become very big. I think we're going to become very big in movies and television, not with our own production, but with other people producing our characters.

CEL: Is Spider Man going to appear in the Daily News?

S.L.: Actually, Spider Man will only be appearing in the Sunday editions. They haven't taken it for the Daily edition yet but I think they will.

CEL: Are there any plans for other Marvel characters to appear in the newspapers?

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STAN LEE continued...

S.L. Oh sure little by little we intend to take over the world, in our own insidious way.

CEL. You started the new idea of putting the comics into book form. Do you plan to continue this?

S.L. Yes, next year. I'm suppose to be writing it now, instead of wasting time talking to you. There is another one coming out called the Super Women. Actually, I think Simon and Schuster would like this to be a one book a year series, which would drive me crazy.

We did another one called the Marvel Fun Book, which became a best seller. It is a little activities book with funny games for children. I'm also doing a Silver Surfer book with Jack Kirby. It will be the first one-hundred page original story to be done in comic book form. There is also an Encyclopedia of Marvel Comics and a book on how to draw Marvel characters being done.

CEL. When a new character is created and the book goes on the stands, how do you know if it is successful?

S.L. By the way it sells. We print about 500,000 copies. If we sell 250,000 out of 500,000 it's considered excellent.

CEL. What do you think the future holds for the comics and what role do you think Marvel will play?

S.L. A huge one. I think the future of comics is growing every day. Not only will they always be here but, they'll be bigger and better. Comics are one of the best methods of communication being discovered by older people. When I was in the army, I used comics to write training and instruction manuals for films. I found that whenever there was an important message to get across, I

resorted to comics and could get that message across quicker and easier than any other way.

More and more educators are getting turned on to comics. We do projects now with the Electric Company and a children's television workshop. I would like to see the day when a novel is done in comic book form. I mean a real Kurt Vonnegut or Arthur Miller novel with magnificent illustration, printed on expensive paper, with a hard cover. It may not happen in my lifetime but I think that eventually comics will take their place next to novels, plays, and poetry as an accepted form of literature — as I think they should be. o

Table for Two continued...

soft-lighted wine and cheese shop, whose quiet attitude and casual surroundings has attracted many Long Island couples. There is no dress code for the 18 and over group here, and no cash register to greet you by the door. Inside, what seems to be a large sitting room an 1850's era house, is a polite 1850's service. The average price for a full bottle of wine is \$6.00, half bottles being approximately \$4.00. Portions of cheese served with crackers, fruit and peperoni are \$1.95.

SALT OF THE EARTH - Bayside, Francis Lewis Blvd. (one block north of Northern Blvd.) (212) 357-9728. No cover charge in this rustic and relaxed atmosphere. Choose from a large menu of soups, omelets, burgers and salads, from 11:30 A.M. to closing. Also choose from an extensive list of wines and cheeses. Liquor is also served. Full length movies can be seen on Mon. & Tues. nights, and live entertainment Wed.-Sun. Also a happy hour is offered 7 days a week 4-7 with 2 drinks for the price of one.

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