

CROSSROADS



Illustration by Marie Severin of Marvel Comics

POP NEUROSIS: STAN LEE'S COMIC RELIEF

NEW YORK—Red Sonja is in a rage.

Scantly attired in her familiar armor-plated bikini despite wintry temperatures, Marvel Comics' leading cover girl leaps with raised cutlass about the modern offices of publisher Stan Lee; with her crimson mane flouncing like a flaming cape, and cantaloupe-sized breasts in buoyant animation, she reaffirms her fearsome sub-title: "She-Devil with a Sword!"

"Mighty Mother of Mitra!" she bellows, slapping a leather-gloved hand against one of her bare, sweat-sequined thighs. "I was raped by an evil overlord while still a young girl, and I swear that no man shall ever conquer me again!"

Fixing her baleful gaze on the willowy, mustachioed fellow seated calmly on a nearby couch, Sonja lunges forward with the speed of thought, her singing blade whirling in a wide arc whose path intersects the soft center of his neck. Stan Lee nods

deftly as the sword whooshes past. Without missing a beat, his shapely assailant bows low to plant an admiring kiss on his ruddy cheek.

An instant later, the vivacious warrior is gone, having slipped silently through the far wall and into the art department. She is bound ultimately for the mist-shrouded Turanian Steppes or even the Hyborian kingdoms where Conan the Cimmerian dwells.

"Red Sonja's fantastic-looking, with a beautiful, sexy costume," Lee announces gleefully as he balances his boot heels on the ledge of a glass coffee table.

"We can't show naked people in our comics, or play up violence too flagrantly, but Sonja's readers know about the rape and that she's the way she is now because of it."

"She's caught on tremendously. I know the artwork had a lot to do with it, yet I also think there's a market now for girl heroines who don't act wishy-washy. In this age of women's lib, a lot of fe-

males want to see a heroine who's rough, tough and can hold her own with men."

Lee is detailing the origin of Sonja—how she began as a minor character in a Marvel comic based on Robert E. Howard's *Conan the Barbarian* and was "plucked" for solo features with the assistance of staff writer Roy Thomas and artist Frank Thorne—when in waddles a two-and-a-half-foot duck wearing a rumpled blazer, white shirt with polka-dot tie, and a blue fedora. His name is Howard; Howard the Duck. He says he wants a cigar.

Smiling Stan obligingly draws a fat, glowing panatela on a sketch pad and hands it to Howard, who thanks the boss—in well-chosen words, not quacks—and exits in a cumulus paper cloud of smoke.

"Howard is one of the biggest stars in the history of Marvel Comics," Lee tells me after the duck has gone. "A fellow by the name of Steve Gerber dreamed him up. He

was doing a book for Marvel [*Adventures into Fear*] centered around a monster hero named Man-Thing—we're the only company that has monster heroes. One day I picked up an issue and there's an incidental duck in the story. I say, 'What the hell is he doing in here?' and I'm told: 'That's Howard.'"

"I checked around, discovered the little guy was getting a lot of fan mail and did something that could have been the dumbest move of my career—I put out an entire issue of Howard the Duck. The response was phenomenal! Collectors ran through cities buying all the copies available; minutes after going on sale, the issues were worth from three to ten dollars each. That initial flurry is nearly over but all of America seems to be going Howard the Duck-crazy."

Why?

"Good question," Lee concedes. "The reader probably looks at poor Howard—an alien who came here acciden-

tally from a planet where talking ducks aren't unusual—and feels that there but for the grace of God goes he. Howard is a regular guy with a with-it manner who smokes cigars and has no more super powers than your average, casual, everyday duck.

"Also, there seems to be a girl [brunette Beverly Switzer] in his life. She's a human he met on Earth and got friendly with. I don't really know what goes on between them during their private hours; I shudder to think of it."

Since the '30s, Marvel Comics (formerly Timely, and then Atlas Comics) had been turning out vividly illustrated, small-change hero fantasy. Growth prospects appeared paltry until Marvel publisher Martin Goodman suggested to editor/art director/head writer Stan Lee that he create a team of altruistic mutants resembling National Comics highly successful *Justice League of America* (Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, et al).

"The idea was a sound one," says Lee, "but I couldn't bring myself to copy the same old stuff. My wife Joan said, 'Why not write the type of story you'd enjoy?'"

"I decided I didn't care for heroes that were 100% perfect—boring. And I wouldn't want plots that always had happy endings—dull, no suspense. If people with super powers really existed, what would their everyday lives be like? Would they need to worry about dandruff and job security? When I started thinking that way, the ideas came fast and furious."

Beginning with the introduction in Nov., 1961 of the jealousy-plagued *Fantastic Four* (The Thing, Mr. Fantastic, Invisible Girl, Human Torch), Lee and his staff pitted a stable of superpersons beset with personality flaws, overdrawn bank accounts and soiled uniforms against emotionally complex and even pitiable villains. The storylines were off-beat, the characters iconoclastic, and although the Good Guys could dish out winning combat repartee [The Shocker (startled): "Who

said that?" Spiderman (kicking his opponent in the face): "I'll give you a hint, man—it's not Aretha Franklin!"] they frequently lost a lot of important battles to the Bad Guys.

Nevertheless, Marvel Comics became a sensation still mounting, unabated, to this day. As Stan Lee puts it, "For the first time in history, there were comic books aimed at adults of college age and older that could also be enjoyed by children."

Stanley Martin Lieber, 17, the New York-born son of an itinerant dress-cutter, was hired by Timely Comics in 1939 as an office boy, proof-reader and go-fer. Several months later, his superiors left the tiny company and Lieber was asked to assume the jobs of editor and art director until qualified replacements could be found. Except for a leave of absence during WW II, he held those posts until assuming the publisher's role. Lieber, AKA Lee, served with the Army Signal Corps as one of nine journeyman writers officially designated as uniformed "playwrights." He and his colleagues (among them, Pulitzer prize-winning William Saroyan) were dispatched to various Stateside outposts to compose and/or edit training manuals, draft scripts for training and propaganda films, design graphics, etc.

"One of my most famous posters," Lee recalls, "—they had millions of these around the world—was about the dangers of venereal disease. The Army wanted to convince soldiers who exercised their carnal knowledge that they should get checkups afterward at centers they called prophylaxis stations. It was a difficult assignment but I came up with this image of a soldier, beaming with his chest stuck out as he walked through a door marked 'PRO STATION.' Over his head was a balloon that said, 'VD? NOT ME!'"

"I feel I won the war single-handedly with that poster."

Too excited with the future to relive the past, Lee bubbles on about his current projects.

"Spiderman is going into newspaper syndication start-

ing [this month] in the New York Sunday News. We're discussing the syndication of *Howard the Duck* and possibly *Conan*. We always have original characters in the wings, one of which is a rabbit—but that's a big secret.

"Some of the new characters are fresh incarnations of old ones. We may go with a Kojak book and have gotten the rights to Tarzan and another Edgar Rice Burroughs character, John Carter of Mars. And Jack Kirby and I are collaborating on what may be the largest original comic strip, a 100-page *Silver Surfer* book to be published by Simon and Schuster. I love the Surfer, he's a pure, Jesus Christ type."

[Other ventures under consideration include "rock-hero" books depicting the ex-

ploits of Kiss, Paul McCartney, David Bowie, Elton John and Alice Cooper.]

"But the biggest news is *Godzilla*! Marvel is bringing back *Godzilla*!"

At that moment, a mammoth, claw-shaped shadow falls on the office. Pressed against the long row of sixth-floor windows is a shifting mass of scaly green hide, and the whole building rocks with the undulating roar of an ersatz tyrannosaurus.

"Our *Godzilla* will have the unusual moods and feelings of the other Marvel characters," Stan Lee assures serenely as a great reptile snout bursts through the buckling ceiling. "However, I don't suppose he'll be particularly garrulous. . . ."

—Timothy White

FRETFUL BENSON: BOP IS NO BREEZE



photograph by Joe Dera

George unmasked: "My whole life I've been caught between two evils"

ENGLEWOOD CLIFFS, N.J.—The electric guitar in the pawnshop window cost \$50. Too much. Fifteen-year-old Georgie Benson couldn't afford it, and the acoustic he had used as a child singer had been hocked years ago. Besides, his doo-wop group, The Altairs, needed electric backup.

Georgie's stepfather finally went for a look at the solid-body guitar in the shop window. "I can make that," he decided. Georgie designed

the replica, and his stepfather spent a full day cutting up Mrs. Benson's solid oak hope chest with a small coping saw. Fingerboard, frets, machine heads, and a cheap pickup—Georgie had his electric guitar. For an amp, he plugged into the monitor system of a scrounged tape recorder. He only scraped together enough cash to buy a real guitar amp after a year of singing and playing with the Altairs.

Nowadays a Mercedes sits

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