

# Interview: The Marvel-ous Stan Lee

## *On Spider-Man, comics for adults and fighting illiteracy*

By MARK TOMPKINS  
Editorial staff

It was like getting to meet Santa Claus. Forget about meeting actors, actresses, film professionals or rock stars, this was a man who had done something of real worth. This was Stan Lee, the man who, to oversimplify, put the *zap!* and the *pow!* into comic-book writing. Back in the early '60s, Lee was a writer and editor at the fledgling Atlas/Marvel comics line, and sales were not good. A rival company (DC) owned all the well-known characters like Superman and Batman, and so Lee mostly churned out campy monster stories or little mysteries with an O. Henry twist.

But divine inspiration seems to have taken over; trying to bolster sales, Lee wound up revitalizing the entire comic-book industry. First he created The Fantastic Four, then the Amazing Spider-Man, the Incredible Hulk, The X-Men, the Mighty Thor, the Avengers, Daredevil and numerous other superhero characters. His twist was to give the characters human foibles and the comics themselves a weird kind of vitality.

Working with artists like Jack Kirby (who probably inspired filmmakers like Lucas and Spielberg more than anyone else), Lee ushered in what has become known as "The Marvel Age of Comics." Printed in bright, gaudy colors, his comics pulsed with kinetic energy and irreverent wit. A sort of warped literacy filtered through the books: Lee was fond of quoting Shakespeare at various moments (while Spider-Man was getting whumped by a villain like the Green Goblin, for instance), and a noticeably self-mocking tone ran through the editorials and letters pages of Marvel Comics, said editorials being another of Lee's innovations.

Lee's comics were ideal for the '60s; for a while Marvel didn't even call itself a comics company but "Marvel Pop Art Productions." Comics were (and still are) widely read by adults in Japan and Europe, especially France, but in America they had long been regarded as an illegitimate offspring to the publishing industry. No longer. Marvel Comics became popular with college readers and hippies, many of whom would ask



Lee what he was on. All told, Lee's characters for Marvel constituted a sort of new pop mythology. Not bad for a guy who got started at Marvel as a copy boy way back in 1939, at the age of 17.

Moreover, Lee's idea that American comic books could aspire to something a little higher than mere juvenilia has inspired many writers and artists since, and right now the comics industry is more ambitious than it has ever been before. The recent "Dark Knight" series, which treated Batman as a sort of violent Expressionist cartoon, has attracted the most attention, for it exploded the whole concept of the superhero as a benign figure, instead drawing out the quasifascist undertones of characters like Superman. Other notable titles include "The Watchmen," "Cerebus," "Elektra: Assassin," "Maus" and "Neat Stuff," all of which show just how much can be done in the medium of comics storytelling.

Lee became Marvel's publisher in 1972; since then he has become vice president of creative affairs at Marvel Productions, a Hollywood branch seeking to bring Marvel creations to a wider audience via movies and television.

Marvel was recently bought by New World Pictures, so, as Lee explained, it's very likely that more Marvel characters will be hitting the screen in some form or another. Lee himself no longer has time to write any comics himself, although he continues to write the Spider-Man newspaper strip.

In San Francisco last week to discuss Marvel's future plans and arrangement with New World, Lee was the very picture of excitement and amiability. Though in his early 60s, he threatened to bowl

me over with his enthusiasm. The former editor in him came through when he jokingly admonished me to check all my spelling, because, he said, "I'm a careful proofreader, and if there's one mistake..." I didn't ask what would happen — perhaps Lee sics the Incredible Hulk or Doctor Doom on writers who don't consult their dictionaries, so I made sure to check mine.

**Daily:** When you first created all your characters, did you have any idea how long they would last, that they would be this successful?

**Lee:** None at all. In a million years I couldn't have predicted what would happen.

**Daily:** Was there any particular moment along the way where you said to yourself, "Hey, I might really have something here?"

**Lee:** Yes. After a couple of years, or whenever it was that we changed the name to Marvel Comics. Up until then we were Atlas Comics, I believe. At some point I said, gee, these books are really selling. We were getting fan mail — we never used to get fan mail before Marvel. We might get one letter a year from somebody, saying "I bought one of your books and there was a staple missing. I want my dime back." I'd hang it up on the bulletin board and say, "Look, we got a letter! Somebody's reading us!"

But all of a sudden we got real fan mail. The books were selling well, and people were talking, and then I realized fan clubs were popping up, little stores were starting to sell our comics, and I knew we were on to something. I thought, we've got to get a better name, be-

cause the books are not the same as they used to be. We came up with the name Marvel, and the rest is history.

**Daily:** What do you think it was about Marvel Comics that was so revitalizing to the comics industry?

**Lee:** I'd like to think it was the personality, the style. A story is a story — our stories were good guys fighting bad guys. Basically, the theme I used was to try and tell fairy tales for grown-ups. You had to suspend disbelief and believe that a guy who's been bitten by a radioactive spider can crawl on walls (Spider-Man), you have to believe that a guy can turn into a green-skinned monster (The Hulk), or whatever. Granting that, I tried to make everything else realistic. If a guy really were a spider-man, what would his life be like? How would he relate to girls, how would he earn a living? And wouldn't he still have to worry about pimples?

Also, I tried to put humor into the stories. I tried to put humor into the letters pages, tried to do "Bullpen Bulletins," do soapboxes where I would talk to the readers. I tried to make it as if we were all part of an in-group, sharing a good time, and the people who didn't read Marvel were really missing something because we were all having fun. It was a feeling I tried to give, and by some lucky, one-in-a-million chance it seems to have worked.

Didn't I say that beautifully?

**Daily:** Do you ever miss the actual writing of comics?

**Lee:** Sure. I miss the excitement and the fun. Mainly, I miss the immediacy, because in comics I'd get an idea for a book, I'd call an artist and in three months it was finished and I had it in my hands. In movies and in television, you can wait three years and still not have the finished product. So I miss that. But I don't have too much time to miss it, because I keep so busy.

**Daily:** What exactly do you do now? What kind of considerations do you have in transferring a character from comics to TV?

**Lee:** It's difficult. You have to try to keep the same qualities that made the comic, the character, popular in comics, but at the same time you have to bear in mind that comics are a different medium than the movies. Changes and adjustments have to be made. You have to make sure you're making the right changes.

I'll give you a funny example. With "Superman," they made a lot of changes in the movie, because the movie had a flavor and a style that the comics never had. The

movie had humor and a certain sophistication, which the comic book never had. "Superman" was very dry as a comic book. The Marvel Comics were done in the style that the "Superman" movie was done. Now, if we ever do a "Spider-Man" movie correctly, it'll look as if we were copying "Superman." It's a funny thing. If they had done "Superman" exactly as it was done in the comics, I think it would have bombed.

**Daily:** Do you have any particular projects now that you can tell us about?

**Lee:** Oh yeah. You know, we were bought by New World Pictures, and they do movies, TV series, video cassettes, and they're very anxious to get most of our characters up on the screen. So we're really developing almost every character that we have, either as a TV series, an animated show or as a motion picture. Plus there are some original concepts we've come up with, which we're going to do as movies and then we'll do as comic books. So we'll reverse it.

**Daily:** How involved are you in the process? Are you creating anything new?

**Lee:** As much as possible. Our first new movie, which is based on an original idea, is my idea. And I'm involved in all the movies we're doing. I meet with the artists, and I have a feeling I'm going to be more and more involved as time goes along. It's incredibly exciting, the fact that we were bought by New World. It's the best thing that could have happened to us.

**Daily:** Do you think it's a good marriage for Marvel Comics?

**Lee:** It's the greatest, the greatest. I was so afraid that we would be bought by some stock brokerage company or a plumbing supply company — who knows? We were bought by a young, energetic movie, TV and cassette company. What could be better?

**Daily:** What's your impression of the comic-book field today? Do you keep an eye on things?

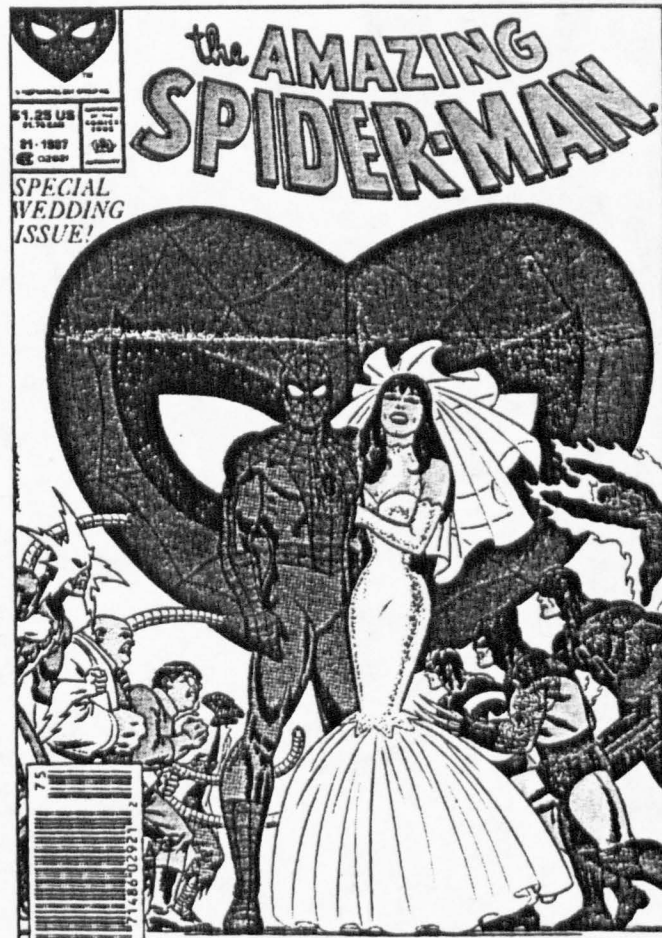
**Lee:** I try to look at the books as much as possible. The field has become much more adult. With things like "The Watchmen," "Elektra: Assassin," "The Punisher" and even the way "The X-Men" is being done, it's catering much more to the adult audience.

**Daily:** Why do you think that is? Is it a natural progression?

**Lee:** The artists and writers are really doing what they want to do now. They're writing the kind of stories they want to do, which gives you the best stories, generally. Usually if a man does what he wants to do, then you get his best work. A lot has to do with the comic-book stores which have proliferated throughout the country. They are usually patronized by older readers, and a lot of books are sold in those

stores. So, both because the writers and artists are adults, and they're doing the kind of stories they want to read, and also because more and more adults are buying the books, everything has become more adult.

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## Spidey

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**Daily:** How's the writing of the Spider-Man newspaper strip different from the writing of the comic book? Are there a lot of technical considerations?

**Lee:** It's much different. As you can imagine, the whole pacing has to differ, because we've got two or three panels a day. In the first panel you have to give a sort of resume of what's happened before, in the second panel you try to move the story along and try to have a cliffhanger, and that's it! That's all you've got!

One of the things I did early on — we've had the strip going for about eight years now — was to eliminate super-villains and costumed characters other than Spider-Man from the strip, because I realized newspaper strips are read mainly by adults. And adults couldn't relate to crazy characters running around in costumes. So Spider-Man is the only one who wears a costume, and basically I write the strip as if

I were writing a soap opera, as if I were writing "Mary Worth," only the lead character happens to have a super-power. It seems to work. I know it works, because "Superman," "Star Wars" and "Star Trek" came out in the newspaper at the same time as "Spider-Man" and all three of them died. And "Spider-Man" is still in over 500 papers.

Again, as I said, you have to change a comic book to accommodate it to movies or TV or newspapers, and they didn't. They did the "Superman," "Star Wars" and "Star Trek" newspaper strips exactly as they're done on TV or wherever.

**Daily:** Of all the stories and characters you've made up, is there any one scene or character that's nearest and dearest to you?

**Lee:** Yeah, probably Spider-Man. He's more like me, he's a regular guy who has a lot of problems, always doing the wrong thing and tripping up and gettin' in trouble. He's me.

**Daily:** Are there any characters you think it might have been a mistake to introduce?

**Lee:** I do not make mistakes. I am not programmed to make mistakes. No, it doesn't seem that way — they've all sold. It's a funny thing, they're all our best-selling books today, all the ones I did 20 years ago. It's incredible.

People used to look down their noses at comics. I've probably lectured as much as any living being at colleges around the country — for a period of 15 years I never went to less than one a week — and I have found that the kids I talked to in the audiences were inevitably among the smarter kids in the school, the ones who were into comic books.

**Daily:** Comics must have an educational potential, you think?

**Lee:** Comics are like the last bastion against creeping illiteracy in this country. The problem is, so many kids aren't reading; they're hooked on TV, movies or whatever. You try to get them to read a book, they resist you — nobody ever wants to do anything you tell them is good for them. Comic books are the one thing that makes a kid equate reading with pleasure. They teach kids the reading habit, to identify what's on the printed page with enjoyment, and then once the kid gets more facile at reading, he goes on to read other things.

I've had so many teachers tell this to me. I've had so many parents write in saying, "I don't understand it, my little son was the dumbest kid in English, he was almost illiterate and wouldn't read or anything, suddenly he got hooked on Marvel Comics and now he's getting straight A's in grammar and composition." So I'm convinced that comics serve a very useful purpose, and I'm not even doing comics any more!

**Daily:** Any final words?

**Lee:** "Think Marvel!" No, I'm very happy when I go to do interviews or when I go to a TV station or anywhere, I meet people who are now adults, and they say, "I've loved Marvel for years, I grew up on them!" It's the greatest feeling in the world, when you feel that

people respond with enthusiasm to what you've done. And basically, I feel that my job has been to try and entertain people, so if I've succeeded, that's terrific. And I'm the luckiest guy in the world, because now I'm in a whole different thing, movies and TV. The fun thing of it is trying to do on the screen what we did years ago on the page. Now it remains to be seen whether we're going to succeed, but we're sure going to try!