

INTRODUCTION

BY ARLEN SCHUMER

These Iron Man tales cover the last issues of the anthology title he shared with Captain America, *Tales of Suspense*, from #84 (December 1966) through #99 (March '68), continue into the one-shot *Iron Man and Sub-Mariner* (April), and then culminate in the first issue of Iron Man's eponymous title in May, when Marvel's line of a dozen titles expanded, and previous second-stringers like Iron Man were promoted to their own books. It was these tales that paved the way for that promotion, proving Iron Man deserved the increased scope and breadth that these 12-pagers could barely contain.

Brimming with non-stop action and soap-opera suspense they were, courtesy of writer and editor Stan Lee's percolating prose and peerless pacing (to pay alliterative homage to the Master). By this time, Lee's gestation of the Marvel style was entering a mature and confident stride, and while it was more defined in Marvel's full-length books, it was nevertheless on full display in shorter takes like Iron Man's.

Right out of the gate, in *Tales of Suspense* #84, Lee's self-aware, self-deprecating editorializing slaps your funny bone when, following two reporters' obvious, expository introductions of Tony Stark's confidants Pepper Potts and Happy Hogan, Lee asterisks in the caption below, "We know people don't really talk this way...but we wanna bring any newcomer up to date!" And in the following issue, when Stark, speaking aloud to himself (rather than think to himself, a trait Lee uses to a fault, eschewing captions to advance the plot), virtually recaps the entire previous issue, Lee follows up with this zinger: "Another electrifying example of a Marvel Instant Summary in sugar-coated form!" It was breaking-the-fourth-wall humor like this that redeemed the hokier aspects of the comic book's conventions and endeared Lee and his merry pranksters to an entire generation in the 1960s.

Though he passed the writer's torch to industry great Archie Goodwin late in this run, in issue #99, Goodwin pretty much kept to the Marvel style and form Lee had laid down like a template (as he did with other Marvel books he had begun to hand off to other writers like Roy Thomas), so much so that the shift in scripting was barely noticeable.

Teamed with Lee/Goodwin was Iron Man artist extraordinaire Gene Colan, who, entering his second year on the character, really hits his stride in these issues. While his basic take on Iron Man had been well-established by this time—including his signature stylization of Iron Man's helmet, giving it human pathos—now Colan's stylistic flourishes and compositional flair extended everywhere, to everybody and everything. Figures arched, twisted, lunged, swung, thrust, leapt and flew with anatomical abandon. Cars, motorcycles, supersonic planes, hydrofoils, high-tech machinery—all received distinctive design and draftsmanship, drawn for maximum movement and velocity by Colan. His most recurring camera composition was not just a mere upshot that any artist could have executed, but one starting from behind a character, on the ground, looking up from beneath his legs, through to another character!

The Marvelite familiar with the rest of Colan's oeuvre—particularly his unforgettable Dr. Strange psychedelic stories of 1968-69—but reading these Iron Man stories for the first time, might wonder why the artist didn't break panel borders, deviate from rectangular panel shapes and experiment with radical page design as he did during his run on the good Doctor. The explanation is simple: Iron Man stories—i.e., straight-ahead super-hero action—didn't call for it. Just as Neal Adams' Batman stories always featured more traditional, conservative panel and page designs compared

to his wilder, outrageous treatments for his wilder, outrageous X-Men and Deadman stories, so too did Colan's Iron Man forms follow their functions. But that doesn't mean his Iron Man work was traditional or staid in the least; it's just that the artistic action here takes place within the panel borders.

That action kicks off in issue #84 with a typical topical situation by Lee that has only become more relevant in both the real and comic book worlds, as Stark has to testify about Iron Man's secrets before a Congressional committee run by a Senator Byrd (who shares only a head of white hair with real-life West Virginia Senator Robert Byrd, who had been in the Senate for 8 years by '66; but when the Senator makes his last appearance in issue #89, his name is inexplicably changed to Boyd!).

Issue #86 is most notable for featuring one of Colan's greatest full-page illustrations, as Iron Man brings down a pair of steel walls in a Samson-like pose of great grandeur.

Yet another timely touch takes place in issue #87, when a civilian mob protests emissions of atomic energy from Stark Industries—because Stark is secretly working on an atomic-powered earth borer, soon to be employed in a crossover confrontation with the early Fantastic Four villain Mole Man. The Underground Overlord is only one of a veritable rogues' gallery you'll encounter in these tales: The Mandarin, The Melter, The Crusher, The Titanium Man, The Grey Gargoyle, Whiplash, and Marvel's two criminal organizations, the Maggia and A.I.M., all star in multi-part stories.

The story The Titanium Man appears in, in issue #92, is perhaps the most relevant in this run—and the title says it all: “Within the Vastness of Viet Nam!” While Iron Man doesn't actually fight in the Vietnam War, and Lee avoids pontificating on the politics of a war that was only then beginning to receive national exposure (and attendant antiwar demonstrations) when the story saw print in August 1967, he nonetheless should be commended for setting a super-hero saga in such a supercharged arena—really a continuation of Lee's policy, which broke ground years earlier, of utilizing real-life, not fantasy locations for his Marvel mythos.

As *Tales of Suspense* wound down to its final issues, Lee ratcheted up the story length, as Iron Man began a 5-issue serial, the longest of his career to date, which concluded in the debut issue of his own mag. That issue sports Colan's finest Iron Man cover, centered on the ultimate iconic Iron Man stance, surrounded by shattered debris and vignетted scenes from the interior story. The title above it reads triumphantly, and for the very first time, “The Invincible Iron Man.” First class, at long last.

Iron Man had arrived.



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Arlen Schumer is one of the foremost historians of comic book art, named by Comic Book Artist magazine in 1998 as “one of the more articulate and enthusiastic advocates of comic book art in America.” His coffeetable art book, The Silver Age of Comic Book Art (Collectors Press), won the Independent Book Publishers award for best Popular Culture book of 2003.