

MISTER X VOL. #1 INTRODUCTION

Comic book art has always been graphic design. Graphic design (and its sister medium, typography), as a discipline and a commercial art form, is defined as verbal/visual communication; comic book art, as a symbiotic relationship between words and pictures. Therefore the two have always been interrelated, yet rarely has the graphic design world recognized comic book art as a legitimate form of graphic design.

And perhaps rightly so; for rarely has good graphic design—best exemplified, historically, by the Bauhaus school of designers in Germany in the 1920s; the Russian Constructivists in the 30s; American designers like Paul Rand (designer of the IBM logo) and Saul Bass (film credits for Hitchcock) in the postwar era; Milton Glaser and his Pushpin Studio designers and England's Pentagram Design in the modern era, among so many others—been employed well in the design of comic book art.

For much of its history, comic art has been more about illustration than about design, its display and text lettering more of an afterthought, a necessary encumbrance to be shoehorned in (witness Winsor McKay's **Little Nemo** word balloons, crammed to the edges with practically-illegible type, in converse proportion to the esthetic standards of his illustration) than graphically designed.

For sure, there have been notable exceptions: Will Eisner's memorable splash pages for his classic **The Spirit** (1940-1952) utilized hand-lettering (by one of the masters, Abe Kanegson) that aped typeset type, and Spirit logo treatments that varied each issue, integrated into the design of each splash; Jim Steranko, during his late-60s run on Marvel's **Nick Fury, Agent of SHIELD**, resurrected many of Eisner's ideas, incorporating design and type into his pop art panels, covers and cinematic, storyboard-like layouts; Walt Simonson picked up Steranko's mantle in the early 70s and breathed new life into hand-lettered sound effects in his **Manhunter** strip for DC Comics; and in the early 80s, former Steranko protégé, letterer Ken Bruzenak, was given carte blanche by writer/artist Howard Chaykin, on his breakthrough book, **American Flagg**, to hand-letter type and sound effects in extremis, in effect giving each page a graphic soundtrack of sorts.

But regardless of the esteem and accomplishments of those legendary creators, most of their aforementioned type treatments, as impactful as they were at the time, were hand-lettered—and therefore did not really prepare the comic book audience for the startling arrival of the stunning, sophisticated, graphic brilliance of Vortex Comics' **Mister X** in 1983.

Created almost by accident two years earlier by Toronto-based artist Dean Motter, at the time a veteran, award-winning graphic designer of record albums and advertising art, **Mister X** first appeared as an enigmatic figure on an album cover Motter illustrated for a San Francisco band called Megatron Man. "Yeah, just this guy sitting there with this mysterious package on the floor, with this big art deco building in the background," Motter said in 2001. "I just played with that image for a while, gave him the round glasses so his head would look like a skull, so he'd be like a Grim Reaper character."¹

Motter's character might've remained a footnote in his resume had it not been seen by his studio mate, illustrator Paul Rivoche, whom Motter had been talking with about doing a comic strip/book together for a while. "Dean started

talking about turning it into a comic,” Rivoche recalled. “I can’t remember who approached whom or how it happened, but somehow it became, ‘Paul’s gonna draw it.’”² Rivoche, drawing from his experience as a background designer for the animation studio Nelvana, was instrumental in the design of Radiant City, a.k.a. Somnopolis, a conflation of every dystopian futuristic city spawned by Fritz Lang’s seminal 1927 film, **Metropolis**. “A lot of the design work I’d been doing had alerted me to the whole idea of how different spaces affect people. Rooms and buildings designed in different shapes have different effects on people...I remember clearly having the idea—which later in Mister X was termed ‘psychetecture’—that the city itself could influence people.”³ Motter concurred, “The idea was that the city was a place that eventually drove everybody mad. Basically, it emerged out of the sketches that Paul was doing off of our conversations at that time.”⁴

Some of those sketches, strong compositions that brought the city backgrounds to the fore, eventually were finished off by Rivoche as a series of pre-publication “teaser” posters that appeared in comic book shops in 1983, heralding the coming of **Mister X** a year later. The release date of these posters, with Motter’s sophisticated use of typeset typography, coincided with what Motter referred to as an “uptake” in the quality of comic book graphic design, mostly over at DC Comics. “They had started using typography instead of sign painters to do their ads,” he remembered. “I became aware of (DC Design Director) Neal Pozner when he was working with Frank Miller on *Ronin* because it was just about the same time as Mister X, and I think the packaging of both books was sort of mutually influential. The first issues of both titles came out about the same time and they had very similar static package sensibility.”⁵

Rivoche’s cover to issue #1, dated June 1984, heralded all the elements that would become trademarks—literally—of the **Mister X** look: the stark, red-black-and-white color scheme, echoing that of Russian constructivism; the logo, and all other type, was typeset—and typeset beautifully, with tasteful letterspacing and drop shadows; and the figure of Mister X himself, rendered more as a graphic symbol design than as an illustration, his bald head and circular glasses lending themselves perfectly to such a treatment. “My visuals did a lot to define who Mister X was—they helped ‘create’ him in that sense, although of course Dean was the one who came up with the name and the earliest visualizations of him.”⁶

The corresponding inside front cover/page one spread “splash” was similarly striking, not the least because it didn’t feature the typical “splash” illustration at all, but was instead pure typography, which flowed from the cover design—the same colors and handsome type, the bold caps of “MR. X” spanning the spread’s length and height. And while the names of the writer/artists of the book, Jaime and Gilbert Hernandez (more on them later), were sufficiently prominent, there was, below them, a unique credit listed, perhaps a first in mainstream comics, that stood out: “Created and **designed** by Dean Motter.”

Motter knew he was breaking ground with such spreads. “Since we had the same stock for the inside cover and title page, and since that previously had been a bifurcated design or an ad facing the splash,” Motter said recently, “I took advantage of the common paper to treat it as a single image, taking the poor left-hand bastard and giving the whole image a raison d’etre.

“A certain dignity was established as the reader opened the cover. Unwelcome advertisements were much more readily accepted later in the book,

since the reader now wasn't being pandered to as soon as they tuned to page one of a publication which inherently had little credibility. The inside cover was now no longer an unwanted commercial, it was part of the whole presentation. It was 'the curtain.' And thus a new species of comic book 'artist' had been born: 'publication designer.'"

Motter's freewheeling design quotations spanned decades: from the neo-modern record cover/music magazine typography of Neville Brody, Peter Saville and Vaughn Williams combined with historical Russian constructivists like El Lissitzky and Rodchenko, through the Age Moderne of artist/designers John Vassos, A.M. Cassandre, Walter Dorwin Teague and Raymond Loewy, and into the mid-century commercial work of Paul Rand and Ben Shahn.

Each issue's opening spread would be drawn from this eclectic olio. Number one's was a combination between Brody's **Face** magazine and Jan Tschichold's constructivist poster designs from the 1930s.

Number four's took a cue from film noir; "I decided to treat it like the opening credits of a vintage film, especially the more illustrative, highly typographically stylized ones like **My Man Godfrey** or **Dead End**—the latter designed by industrial/theatrical designer Norman Bel Geddes of all people!"

Five's influences were more anonymous, but definitely came from the David O. Selznick MGM era. "This is when treating the whole spread as something other than a space filler actually blossomed for us. We had opened a wonderful Pandora's box that allowed us to crib a typographical lick here, a visionary attitude there—influences from Man Ray to Saul Bass."

The covers of **Mister X**, as well, were different each issue, from the logo on down. "A contrarian by nature, I loved the fact that Will Eisner's **Spirit** splash pages had no consistent logo or type treatment from issue to issue. They were completely subordinate to the subject matter—but unmistakably Eisner's **Spirit**; that's what I decided to go for. But with diverse illustrators for the covers, it meant for an even more eclectic typographic palette, letting the illustration drive the design motif. **Mister X** would sell—or not—by virtue of name recognition and the cover image. A rigid logo would have diluted the 'attitude.'"

Rivoche's first three **Mister X** covers, following his three pre-publication posters and one-off comic cover (*Vortex* #2, 1983), confidently set the look, tone, and style of the character and his world, and set the bar high for other illustrators—including Motter himself—to follow. But that never proved to be a problem, as the pop cultural, graphic allure of the **Mister X** milieu attracted a premier talent roster, including Howard Chaykin, Bill Sienkiewicz, Maurice Vellekoop, Michael Kaluta and Dave McKean.

Although they were all different, their covers all shared stronger, designed compositions that, ironically, better reflected that milieu than the interior illustrations of the comic book stories that followed—even though the first four issues were drawn by Jaime and Gilbert Hernandez, who had come to great renown two years prior with their own book, *Love and Rockets* (Rivoche never ended up illustrating the interior of the book due to creative differences with Motter—though his tantalizing 9-page sample exists as a what-could-have-been tease). One would've assumed the Hernandez's styles, while employing the twin motifs of the eponymous title they were known for, would be perfectly suited to the romance-and-

robots world that **Mister X** inhabited. They actually proved to be too cartoony, according to Rivoche: “The character I was imagining as I drew the posters and sketches was a much more mysterious character, a detective, not at all goofy.”⁷ Both Rivoche and Motter felt that the Hernandez’ style didn’t have enough of the Art deco feel the book called for, especially when it came to depicting Radiant City; Motter said, in retrospect, that Jaime “missed the mark on the city because it turned into the kind of city *he* was familiar with. There was no such thing as a hundred-story skyscraper in his part of town...everything was low-rise in his world and almost low-tech, always had a more barrio feel to it, which isn’t surprising...”⁸ In a misguided attempt at visual continuity, the Hernandez brothers were successively replaced by watered-down versions of themselves, including a young Seth, still years away from maturing into the classic *New Yorker* cartoon-influenced stylist on display in his own book, *Palookaville*.

Unfortunately, for the entire life of the book, the graphic “attitude” of **Mister X** that Motter alluded to, interpreted through the covers and opening type spreads (and even the ubiquitous buttons, t-shirts and other promotional material), easily eclipsed the grab bag of interior art to an almost embarrassing degree. “While the imagery we were developing was provocative,” said Motter, “the premise began to seem rather banal by comparison. I became convinced that it was not going to live up to the anticipation that had been created...we had sold the sizzle, but we needed a better cut of steak.”⁹ That proved to be the title’s undoing, as **Mister X** never really found its footing, its true graphic identity, which can only develop not through a series of single images (as great as those covers were), but through its page-to-page storytelling. After a number of years of fits and starts, **Mister X** faded away unceremoniously.¹⁰

And that, finally, is the legacy of **Mister X** in comic book history: that of a unique character and ingenious concept that was strongest in design of that concept, but never truly in execution. Despite all its best graphic intentions, **Mister X** remains a great idea never realized. Not unlike the utopian architecture that served as its inspiration.

--Arlen Schumer, July 7, 2004

FOOTNOTES

1. Jon B. Cooke, “Mister X-Man Motter,” *Comic Book Artist* #15, Nov. 2001.
2. Jon B. Cooke, “Rivoche’s Mr. X Files,” *Comic Book Artist* #15, Nov. 2001.
3. Ibid.
4. Cooke, “Mister X-Man Motter.”
5. Ibid.
6. Cooke, “Rivoche’s Mr. X Files.”
7. Ibid.

8. Cooke, "Mister X-Man Motter."

9. J. David Spurlock, "The Many Faces of Mister X," *The Edge* INFO TK.

10. Years after **Mister X**'s final issue was published (Volume 2, #13, July 1991), Motter got a couple of opportunities to take readers on a tour of his Radiant City-inspired retro/futurist cinematic world of tomorrow, first in two DC/Vertigo miniseries, *Terminal City* (Jul. '96-Mar.'97) and *Terminal City: Aerial Graffiti* (Nov. '97-Mar. '98), both illustrated by Michael Lark, and currently in Image Comics' *Electropolis*, which Motter both writes and illustrates. In addition, in the second volume of this archive, Motter gets to revise the conclusion to his original last issue of **Mister X** (Volume 1 #14, Aug. '88), with 26 newly written and illustrated pages.