



The New Superheroes: A Graphic Transformation

By Arlen Schumer

Comic-book art has always been graphic design. Converting an already unique form of verbal-visual communication—the comic strip—to book form, comic books created their own graphic design vocabulary with symbols, styles, and structures born of that form: page-turning, sequential graphic storytelling. The American comic book as we know it turned 50 last year, having gone through an extensive refining and extension of that vocabulary. In the process of redefining its hybrid of story and illustration, it has made a significant contribution to the art of book and publication design.

It has produced the graphic novel, itself a hybrid made by hybrid creators: writer/artists, artist/designers, designer/illustrators, draftsman/painters, etc. These new artists are in fact comic-book iconoclasts, tearing down previous notions of what comic-book art should look like, how comic-book art should tell stories, and the signs and symbols it should use to tell them.

Among this new breed of artists, who include practitioners partial to quirky humor and graphic styling in short takes and those who prefer to express their visions in extended, psychologically searching personal narratives, are writer-artists devoted to the resurrection and renovation of the superhero.

Superheroes have always been a staple of the medium; their development and growth as a genre paralleled that of the comic book itself in the 1930s and '40s. The first comic book, a package of newspaper comic-strip reprints, appeared in 1933; it wasn't until publishers began running out of strips to reprint

that the first comic book of original material on a single theme—*Detective Comics #1*—was published in 1937 by National Comics (later known by the initials of its fledgling experiment, DC Comics). During this same period, by a coincidence that was to have glorious consequences for DC, two Cleveland teenagers—writer Jerry Siegel and artist Joe Shuster—began creating an adventure comic called *Superman* which they intended for publication as a strip in leading newspapers. After four years of rejection by all the major syndicates, however, they sold it in 1937 to National Comics, which was eager for a successor to *Detective Comics #1*. Siegel and Shuster's *Superman* presentation strips were pasted up in the new comic-book form and debuted in *Action Comics #1* in June 1938. The rest is comic-book, and pop-culture, history.

Batman, co-created by artist Bob Kane and writer Bill Finger, appeared a year later in the pages of *Detective Com-*

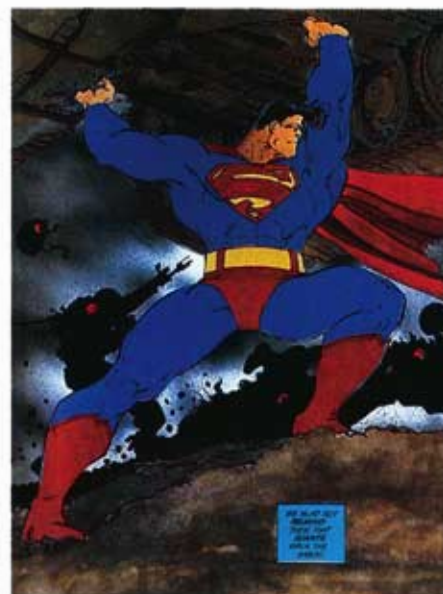
ics #27, and like *Superman*, was an instant success, solidifying National's position as industry leader. Taken together as symbols, Superman and Batman represent the two sides of the superhero coin: one light, one dark; one a god, one a man; one with powers inherited, the other self-made.

The third archetypal superhero, Captain America, created by writer Joe Simon and artist Jack Kirby, and published by Timely (later Marvel) Comics in April 1941, embodied the fervent patriotism that was building even before the U.S. entered World War II. The co-opting of the superhero as super-soldier cemented the superhero's popularity; other superheroes went to war, too, and sales soared into the millions.

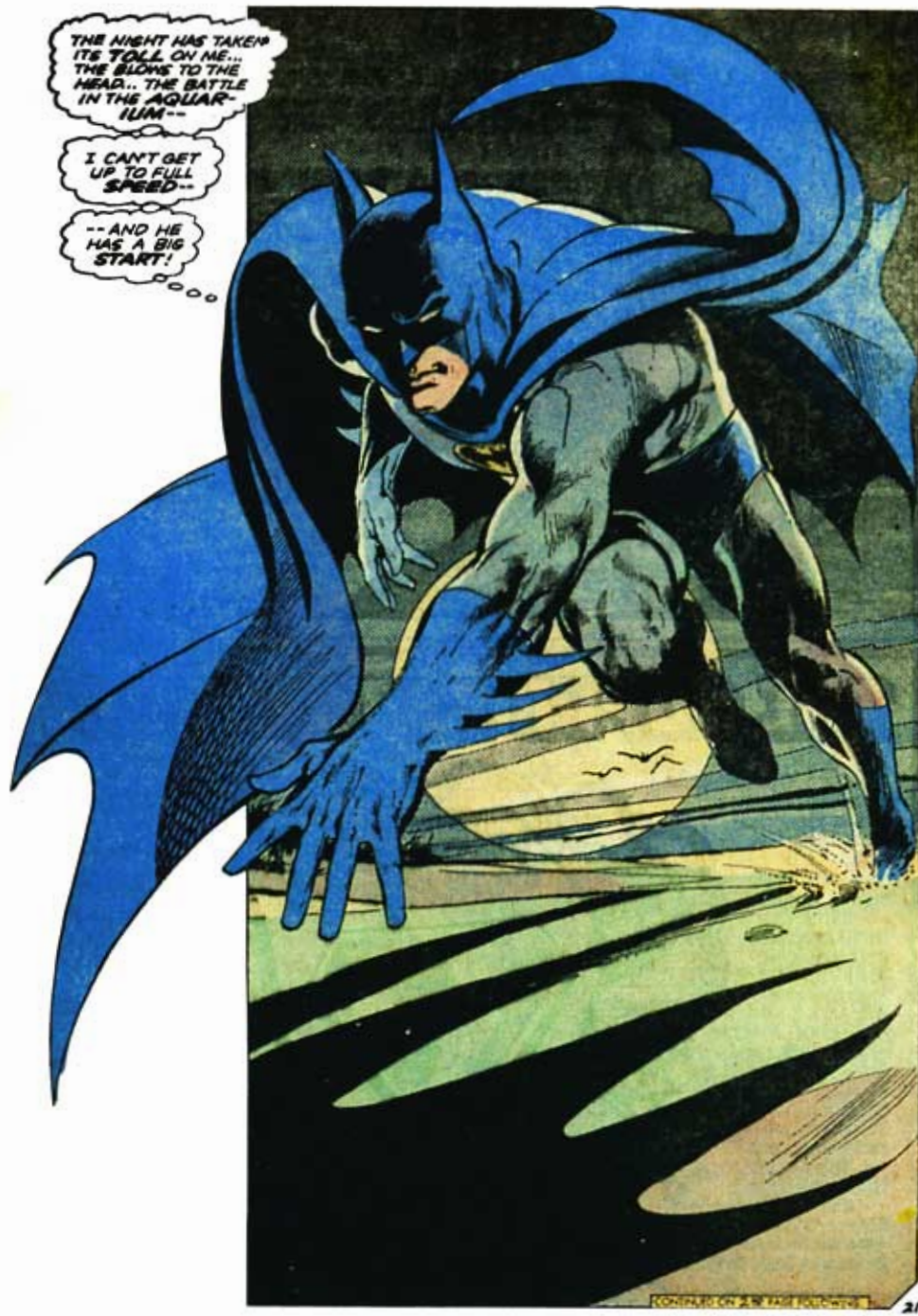
After the war, however, superheroes fell out of favor as the comic-book audience turned to other genres: romance, funny animals, crime, and horror. U.S. Senate hearings in the mid-1950s linked

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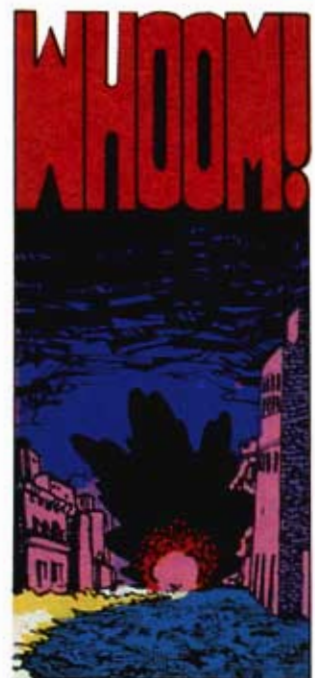
Arlen Schumer is a graphic designer/illustrator who, with his wife and partner, color-artist Sherri Wolfgang, creates comic art for advertising and editorial illustration. They work out of the Dynamic Duo Studio in New York City.



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ITS TOLL ON ME...
THE BLOODS TO THE
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I CAN'T GET
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-- AND HE
HAS A BIG
START!



WHOOOM!

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crime and horror comics to juvenile delinquency and sounded the death knell for those genres, a circumstance which indirectly led to a superhero revival by DC Comics in the latter part of the decade. For to fill the gap, DC took their "retired" heroes from the war years and updated them to fit newly developing science-fiction and pseudo-futuristic story lines.

DC's success with these revampings pressured the competition, Marvel Comics, to follow suit. Writer/editor Stan Lee, who had been with Marvel since the early '40s, was entrusted to come up with a version of DC's Justice League of America, a team including all the revived superheroes. Lee began to develop superheroes who talked and behaved more like realistic, believable adults. The result, *The Fantastic Four*, appeared in 1961 and ushered in what Lee called "the Marvel Age of Comics."

Lee combined soap-opera-influenced story structures and breezy light comedy to counter the rather solemn self-righteousness of the DC superheroes, effectively making Marvel's the first comic-book anti-heroes. Spiderman, who debuted in 1962, was the epitome of this approach.

Providing a counterbalance to the pseudo-realism of Lee's writing was the power-packed, dynamic artwork of Jack Kirby, who went on to create, with Lee, the basic stable of Marvel Comics heroes. Kirby's were heroic figures of mythic proportions (and origins) such as



PPPP!
CLIK!

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BLOOD & IRON

by HOWARD CHAYKIN



with STEVE OLIFF and KEN BRUZENAK

Thor and Hercules, who battled against mural-like backdrops of the cosmos; the Kirby universe exploded with concepts and characters that appeared to leap off the page. By the time he left Marvel in 1970, he had created a house style that endures to this day.

If Kirby's approach to anatomy is the ultimate in larger-than-life, dynamic exaggeration, Neal Adams's style is the opposite. Adams came to DC Comics in 1967 after honing his talents on *Ben Casey*, a comic strip based on the television show. His prior experience in magazine illustration and creating comics for advertising also helped develop realistic rendering techniques; his pen-and-brush inking style made Adams the true successor to Milton Caniff, who had set the previous model for inking in his comic strip *Terry and the Pirates*. When applied to the fantasy world of superheroes, Adams's techniques served to make them visually believable in ways that comic-book characters had never been before. He endowed his characters with a full range of facial expressions and emotions; his command of perspective and foreshortening, combined with a respect for accurate anatomy, allowed his heroes to leap and fly in smooth, flowing movements. Adams once remarked that if superheroes really existed, they would have to look like the ones he drew.

Adams applied his style to a range of DC heroes, but his crowning achievement was in single-handedly rescuing Batman from the fallout of the campy TV version of the strip (1966-68) and returning him to his original conception as a Shadow-like creature of the night.

By the early 1970s, Adams's style had become the model for younger artists seeking to break into the comics field; ironically, his style is responsible as

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22. Page from *The Shadow* No. 5 shows Bill Sienkiewicz's use of a Ralph Steadman pen-and-ink technique in a sequence detailing a firebomb explosion inside a church. © 1987 DC Comics, Inc.

23. Cover of *Shatter*, the first computer-produced comic book. Everything but the color, which artist Mike Saenz airbrushed, was done on an Apple Macintosh. © 1985 First Comics, Inc.

24. Page from *Crash*, the first computer-generated graphic novel. It shows a tighter dot matrix and more sophisticated typography than *Shatter* and also adds computer-generated color. Writer/artist: Mike Saenz; producer/programmer: William Bates; © 1988 Marvel Entertainment Group.

much for the bad as for the good in today's comic-book art. The new comic-book artists, in reaction to his model, are breaking free from the shackles of "realism" and creating new drawing and illustration styles.

Walt Simonson was one of the first artists to introduce an unorthodox drawing style to mainstream superhero comics in 1973 with *Manhunter*, a backup feature in Batman's *Detective Comics*. A graduate of Rhode Island School of Design with a degree in illustration, Simonson couldn't throw off his academic influences; his line was looser, sketchier, more graphic. His lettering of sound effects had a typographic feel and was carefully designed into his panel compositions, unlike the customary oversized, Pop-art pows and zaps. The influence his work in *Manhunter* had on the rest of the field was in inverse proportion to that feature's second-string status.

Their liberating effect was not lost on Bill Sienkiewicz, who shares with Chaykin a preference for distancing himself from comic-book influences and for digesting and regurgitating styles and techniques of illustrators past and present. Sienkiewicz launched his career ten years ago drawing *Moon Knight*, a Marvel-Comics version of *Batman*, in an uncanny line-for-line Neal Adams style that fit the character but trapped Sienkiewicz in Adams's shadow. He knew he had painted himself into a corner; years later, he observed, "In American comics, you're expected to develop a style at a very early age and you can't deviate from it. If you take from other sources, you're indicted for 'swiping.' But I wanted to try something different and go on learning."¹

Among those who drew inspiration



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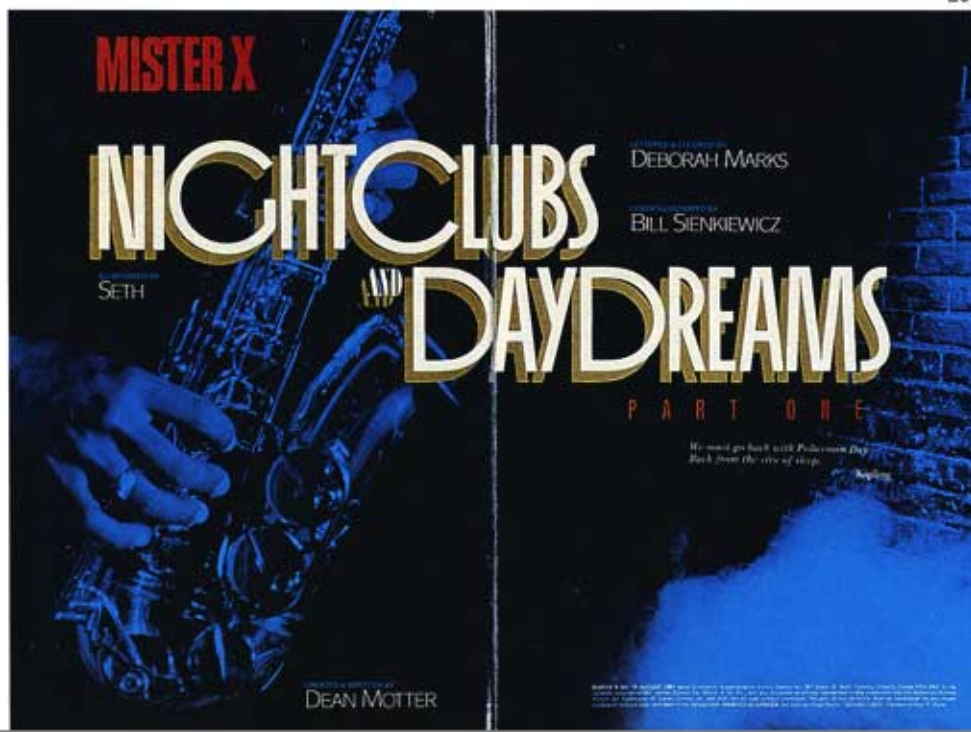
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25. Cover of premiere issue of *Mr. X*, which came to be known as the art director's comic. Designer: Dean Motter; © 1984 Vortex Comics.

26-28. Posters for *Mr. X*, designed by Dean Motter and series co-creator Paul Rivoche, combined elements of Le Corbusier's utopian "radiant city" with designs from Fritz Lang's 1925 film epic *Metropolis*. With other promotional items, such as a T-shirt produced a year before *Mr. X* was published, they helped create a mystique and build anticipation.

29. Dean Motter's title page for *Mr. X* No. 10 sets typography against a photographic background and gives well-deserved prominence to the creative credits. © 1987 Vortex Comics.

from Simonson's stylized line was Howard Chaykin, one of the young comic-book artists who followed in the wake of Neal Adams. His divergence from Adams's path led him, in the late '70s, to become among the first to experiment with the fully painted graphic-novel format. One of these projects was an adaptation of a novel by science-fiction writer Michael Moorcock, *The Swords of Heaven, The Flowers of Hell* (1979). Years later, in an introduction to a collection of Chaykin's other works, Moorcock recalled Chaykin's having "benefited from the discipline of the standard comic-book format the way some of us benefited from learning our trade as magazine or newspaper writers and others gained, like the Beatles, say, from the 'tyranny' of the old two-and-a-half minute single." Chaykin's works from this period displayed an enthusiasm for pushing pen-and-ink-based comic-book art into mixed-media.

He was clearly inspired not only by Golden-Age illustrators like Leyendecker and Robert Fawcett, but also by the painterly influences of such contemporary illustrators as Bob Peake. Chaykin's compositions spread across bindings, overlapped captions and panels with purely graphic, design-oriented backgrounds, and often used typeset type in lieu of hand-lettered word balloons. He eventually abandoned the medium to devote most of his time to advertising art and illustration (he returned to mainstream newsprint comics with fresh inspiration in 1983). But his trailblazing painted comics, *Empire* (1978) and an adaptation of Alfred Bester's *The Stars My Destination* (1979), had left their mark.

Following Simonson's lead, Sienkie-

