



Stan Lee
It's a Marvelous Life
 While toiling at Marvel Productions, "The Man" remembers some of his world's greatest heroes and plans New World projects to come.

Stan Lee gets a lift to Spidey's Shea Stadium wedding from some friends.

Photo: Jim McLernon

By **CLIFFORD METH & DANIEL DICKHOLTZ**



Jack Kirby's muscular, "glamorous" Spider-Man never made it past the web-slinger's first cover appearance.

To his family, friends and the industry he helped to launch, he is a hero. But to the millions of fans who read Marvel Comics, Stan Lee is better known as a hero maker. Most of Marvel's characters—The Fantastic Four, Spider-Man, Silver Surfer, The Avengers, Iron Man, Hulk, The X-Men—sprang from Lee's fertile imagination in collaboration with legendary artistic talents Jack Kirby and Steve Ditko.

Credited as the guy who "humanized" superheroes, Lee joined Marvel (then Timely Comics) as a 16-year-old writer in 1939. Throughout the '40s and '50s, he was like any other writer, cranking out scads of formula stories for titles like *Combat Kelly*, *Millie the Model* and *Ziggy Pig*. He finally bucked the system in 1960 and began writing comic books his own way. Developing scores of characters and breathing new life into old favorites—such as *Captain America* and the *Sub-Mariner*—Lee carefully wove stories and characters together soap-opera style into what is today known as "The Marvel Universe."

Rising to Marvel's helm as publisher in 1972, today, Lee heads Hollywood's

Marvel Productions, one of the nation's largest animated production facilities.

COMICS SCENE: Marvel presents an alternative universe where heroes really exist. Do you think that's an important contribution?

STAN LEE: Yes. Everybody needs heroes. Everybody should have somebody to look up to, somebody to aspire to be like. In my case, I read legends, Robin Hood, *The Odyssey*, Sherlock Holmes. I saw Errol Flynn movies, and I wanted to be Errol Flynn. Every time I left the theater, I had a crooked little smile on my face and I swashbuckled down the street. Until I was 10 years old, I wished I had a sword at my side. I would rather have been Errol Flynn or Sir Arthur Conan Doyle or Sherlock Holmes or Tarzan or Edgar Rice Burroughs or H.G. Wells. All of these people were my heroes. I assume that everybody's like that. We all have people we admire, actors we admire, fictional characters we admire, and if we didn't, what would we ever have to aim for? What goals would we have?

CS: Do you still have heroes?



Peter and Mary Jane have finally tied the knot. A match made in heaven? Nope, just a logical move by Lee.

LEE: Sure. Steven Spielberg, George Lucas, Woody Allen, Kurt Vonnegut, Gregory McDonald, who writes Fletch. I go through life having heroes.

CS: At their best, what do comic books accomplish?

LEE: Well, I've only thought about them from one point-of-view and that is entertainment. That's their primary function: to entertain.

CS: But certainly, when you were addressing such issues as the drug problem in the '60s, you were making at least an attempt at social commentary.

LEE: You're absolutely right. But, the first objective is to entertain. Then, what happens is when you're writing a story, you cannot—at least I cannot—divorce yourself from the world around you. You're writing a story to entertain, but while you're writing it, you're aware of the problems of terrorism, of poverty, of crime. While you write, you can't help putting your own philosophy into the stories.

Whatever I thought of, I used to write. I always thought what I was doing was good. I've always considered myself one of the good guys, one of the guys wearing a white hat. So, I never worried. I always tried not to use my own personal opinions to influence kids about things that were purely my own opinion. I never tried to discuss politics or religion.

CS: In *The X-Men*, there's an anti-mutant fear growing amongst the populace. It seems to be a brilliant way of depicting the world's prejudice.

LEE: This was the basis of the original book. One of my biggest problems, when I tried to create characters years ago, was trying to find an excuse for them to wear masks and have secret identities. I used to think, if I were a superhero, I would want everyone to know. Why would I want to conceal my identity? So, I had to come up with excuses. With *The X-Men*, the excuse I came up with was people fear things that are different. They distrust superior people. Certainly, the X-Men were so superior that they realized that the only way they could live safely in our society was to keep their powers and identities unknown. I believe I established that in the first story, and it worked. Chris

Even though they had to wear costumes, Lee made sure the Fantastic Four was a different sort of super-team.

Claremont has carried it many steps further, but it's still the same theory.

CS: Most Marvel heroes are people with problems. Was that just a sales angle?

LEE: Not at all! I had been writing dull stories for years because I was the ultimate company man. I did what my publisher wanted because I felt that's the way it should be—you work for somebody, you do what he says. For 20 years, I was grinding out the type of stories he wanted and I won't apologize for them. They were good for what they were. These were Westerns: Kid Colt, the

Rawhide Kid, the Texas Kid, the Ringo Kid, Apache Kid—he loved the name "kid." We did war stories: *Battle Grady*, *Combat Kelly*, *Battlefield*, *Battleground*, on and on. We did romance books: *My Love*, *Your Love*, *His Love*, *True Romance*, *Your Romance*, *My Romance*, anything. We were real mass producers. I wrote virtually all of them.

I always wanted to quit because, while I was making a living, I felt I wasn't getting anywhere. I told my wife, "Honey, I want to try writing other stuff. I'm going to give this up." She said, "Stan, you've been

12¢

THE **Fantastic**

3 MAR. **FOUR**

APPROVED BY THE COMICS CODE AUTHORITY

THE GREATEST COMIC MAGAZINE IN THE WORLD!!

IN THIS GREAT, COLLECTORS'-ITEM ISSUE, YOU WILL SEE, FOR THE FIRST TIME:

THE AMAZING **FANTASTI-CAR,**
THE COLORFUL NEW **FANTASTIC FOUR COSTUMES,**
AND OTHER STARTLING SURPRISES!

ALSO, LEARN THE SECRET OF THE FANTASTIC FOUR'S SKYSCRAPER HIDE-OUT!!

Fantastic Four Art: Jack Kirby



Spider-Man Art: Jack Kirby & Steve Ditko

Spider-Man, Fantastic Four, Avengers, X-Men & Silver Surfer Art: Trademark & Copyright 1987 Marvel Entertainment Group

Characters crossing over into each other's adventures lent reality to the young Marvel Universe.

described Spider-Man, and I said, "You know, Jack, what I want you to do for once—don't draw him the way you draw all these characters," because Jack drew the most handsome, heroic, glamorous heroes you'll ever find. I wanted Spider-Man to be just an ordinary guy—a little bit of a nebbish, no broad shoulders, glasses. And Jack brought in a page or two of Spider-Man and he sure as hell didn't hear me, because the character looked like Captain America in a Spider-Man suit. I said, "Look, Jack, forget it. You have enough work." Then, I asked Steve Ditko to do it. To this day, I don't know who made up the Spider-Man costume. It might have been Kirby who did those first few pages and Ditko might have copied Kirby's costume. Or Ditko might have just made up the costume and disregarded what Kirby did. I can't remember.

CS: You used to do a phenomenal amount of work with Jack Kirby [who was involved with Marvel in a dispute over the return of his original artwork].

LEE: We were partners on most everything.

CS: Friends, too?

LEE: I don't think we're as friendly, now. He isn't as friendly toward me as I wish he were. I'm not really 100% sure that I know what the reason is. Maybe he feels he's not as well known or he feels that I've achieved a little more something than he has. I don't know. He has never told me. Jack is certainly one of the most talented if not the most talented guy that the comic book industry has ever produc-

Positive fan reaction brought about the creation of the Avengers and the return of Captain America.

frustrated for years because you never really wrote the kind of stories you wanted. Before you leave, why don't you just take some books and write them your way? What's the big deal? You want to leave anyway, so what'll they do, fire you?"

I started with the *Fantastic Four*. We didn't have any superheroes then. We were doing monster stories. My publisher said to me, "You know, I've been looking at sales figures and DC Comics' *Justice League of America* is selling very well. We should do a few superheroes and put them together." I said, "Fine." But I wasn't going to do it the former way.

CS: Which was?

LEE: Bland. They all fight together, love each other. Typical group. I figured I would make one a monster, another the hero's fiancée, the third, her kid brother who's a little bit of an itch.

I tried to do it the way I thought superheroes should be in real life. I even tried to be different by not giving them costumes, but that was a mistake. The one thing superhero readers won't tolerate is a hero without a costume. I got a lot of mail after the first issue: "Love your book! It's wonderful! Best thing I ever read! Congratulations! But if you don't give them costumes, I'll never buy another issue." So, I don't have to be hit on the head. We put costumes on them. Everything else worked. I never thought it would sell well. I figured I'm getting it out of my system, and then I'm going to quit. Well, it was the bestselling book we had in years. So, we brought out *The Avengers*, *Spider-Man*, *The Hulk*.

CS: Jack Kirby did almost all of them with you, except for *Spider-Man*, which was Ditko's.

LEE: I gave Kirby *Spider-Man* first. I told Jack I had this character I wanted to do, I



Avengers #4 Art: Jack Kirby

ed. He is the most imaginative, the most creative guy I have ever known in this business. His mind is an endless source of stories, concepts and ideas. He was a fantastic artist with one of the most powerful, dramatic styles you could ever find. I've always said that, I've always felt that about him, and I still do.

CS: Other than Kirby and Ditko, who were some of the real-life heroes of Marvel's past?

LEE: One guy who I miss tremendously wasn't an official artist, Sol Brodsky. He was my assistant for years and the company's production head. He could write, he could draw, he could ink—he could do everything. But he worked in production. And boy, that was a loss for them. Of course, there was Carl Burgos who did the Human Torch and Bill Everett who did the Sub-Mariner. I admired them so much when I first got into the business.

CS: Who are your favorite Marvel characters?

LEE: Maybe Spider-Man and the Silver Surfer. I got more philosophy into the Silver Surfer than anything I ever wrote. He was always giving his opinions about life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. I liked him because he was so offbeat. I think those 17 issues of *The Silver Surfer* that I wrote and John Buscema drew are the best 17 comics that have ever been done. They're classics.

CS: You're still writing Spider-Man in his daily newspaper strip and it was your idea to marry him off. How did all that come about?

LEE: Well, I found out that in the comic books, Mary Jane Watson knew Spider-Man's real identity was Peter Parker. It was a surprise to me. So, I arranged to have Mary Jane learn Spider-Man's identity in the newspaper strip, so that the comic and the strip wouldn't be too different from each other. Then, I figured, now that she knows who he is and they're both in love, it would seem to me the logical thing is for him to propose. And I dreamed up what I thought was this funny reason for her not to accept; she said eventually they would want to have children and she couldn't bear the thought of a child who might crawl on walls. One thing led to another and Peter took a blood test to find out if his spider-power might be hereditary. Finally, she agreed to marry him. And I was at a convention with [then Marvel Editor-in-Chief] Jim Shooter, talking to the people in the audience, and I mentioned that I planned to have Peter and MJ get married. I turned to Jim and said, "Hey! Wouldn't it be something if you did the same in the comic books?" Jim said, "That's a great idea."

CS: What will happen in the comic strip after the honeymoon?

LEE: In the strip, there isn't even going to be a honeymoon! It's so impossible for us to do the same stories because, as you can imagine, the comic strip runs two or three panels a day, one day at a time. The

Wielding the Power Cosmic, the Silver Surfer soared through what Lee considers his best work.



comic book stories are about 20 pages monthly in each of three different books, there's no way we can work it out. So, I just go my way with my stories and Marvel Comics goes their way with theirs. I don't have Peter and Mary Jane take a honeymoon at all. They decide to live at Peter's apartment. And then Peter is concerned because Mary Jane's working and he isn't. The first plotline that I have is Peter deciding to become a professional wrestler, and that's what I'm writing at the moment. I'm not quite sure where I go from there. I never really know how the stories will end until I start writing them.

CS: In the strip's early continuity, Spider-Man was fighting Dr. Doom and Dr. Octopus, but as time went on, there seemed to be fewer super-villains on hand. Why?

LEE: That was intentional. It was a very carefully considered decision. I realized that the newspaper readership is quite different—mostly adults, many women—and I felt the best way to go with Spider-Man was to treat it like a soap opera, like *Mary Worth*. The only difference being it's a soap opera about a young grad student who has a superpower. Given the fact that he wears a costume occasionally, climbs on walls and swings on a web, I try to keep everything else as realistic as I can. For Spider-Man in the newspapers, I think that's the best formula.

CS: What exactly does your position at Marvel Productions entail?

LEE: I wish I knew (laughs). It is so open-ended. I do so many things. I guess I'm the head of development at the studio; I work with my assistant, Tony Pastor, in developing new ideas for shows and videocassettes. I'm also involved in trying to keep our live-action motion picture projects on track, in setting those projects up, and in making sure that they're being done the correct way. Similarly, I have the same function on our TV projects.

Since New World bought our company, I work very closely with their movie and TV executives on all Marvel projects.

CS: Cannon Films still seems to be trying to get the *Spider-Man* and *Captain America* movies going. What's their current status?

LEE: Well, Cannon is still trying to come up with the right scripts. New World would like to buy those back from Cannon and produce them themselves, and at the moment, I don't really know where they stand.

CS: What other characters is New World (continued on page 64)



The original X-Men gave Stan Lee a soapbox to sound off on bigotry.

Byrne

(continued from page 9)

water towers on the roof, I immediately started trying to do moody, *Dark Shadows* stuff. I quickly realized that isn't the way my head works, so it's difficult for me to mimic it. I can mimic the look but not the guts. Almost everybody I have ever seen has influenced me in one way or the other."

While continuing to chronicle the Man of Steel's adventures, Byrne is returning to Marvel. He'll write *Star Brand*. And he sees little difference in the creative atmospheres of Marvel and DC.

"Generally speaking—taking the biggest picture—the company I'm working for doesn't affect how I work," he answers. "The characters are what affects me. It doesn't really make that much difference whether it's a character for Marvel or for DC. I try to put myself inside the character's head—and ideally, the characters don't reflect anybody's particular corporate stance."

He admits, however, that the same character published by another company can come off quite differently. "If Superman had been published by Timely in 1938, he might be a different character now, but I don't think he would have been then," he speculates. "If you look back at those early Superman stories, they're every bit as gritty, grimy and nasty as anything that was ever done with Sub-Mariner or the Human Torch—Superman threw people out windows and what-not."

"He would have evolved very differently over the years; obviously, a Superman re-created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby in 1961 would have been very different. The first thing I can think of is that there would be no kryptonite—because Marvel has traditionally gone for internal, as opposed to external, weaknesses. As a whole, I think his beginnings would have been the same."

Byrne doubts that comic readers and historians will look back on his Superman work as they now do the work of his predecessors, including Curt Swan and Wayne Boring. "I would love to have people talk about the Byrne Superman as they do about Swan's or Boring's," he admits. "I don't think it will happen, simply because comics and their audience are very different now. Curt left a wonderful imprint upon the character—and Curt is doing a Superman graphic novel, which I'm really looking forward to seeing. Karl Kesel has said he would like to see us become the definitive Superman art team, of the Curt Swan-Murphy Anderson variety. I won't be all bent out of shape if that never happens, if only because of my vast respect for Curt Swan, Wayne Boring and all those who went before. I would feel a little out of place in their company. Now, people will say, 'There's John Byrne being falsely modest, again.'"

Lee

(continued from page 37)

interested in developing?

LEE: The X-Men, Dr. Strange, Power Man, the Sub-Mariner and a number of others which I don't think I should mention because they're still too new. We also have the Fantastic Four being done by Neue Constantin, the company which produced *Neverending Story* and *The Name of the Rose*, and *Nick Fury, Agent of S.H.I.E.L.D.* is at Paramount. I would think sooner or later all of our characters will hit the screen. It's only a matter of time before Iron Man and Daredevil do.

CS: Didn't you try your hand at a *Spider-Man* script?

LEE: Not a script. I wrote an outline on which the present movie is based, the one on which Cannon is working. They've given it to a number of different writers. Each new writer has made his own alterations on the outline, but it's based on my original story. In fact, I've also done another original story which New World will produce which isn't a Marvel character but we're going to do a comic book based on it as soon as it gets further along in production.

CS: Is it another superhero?

LEE: Not quite. It's more of a fantasy-adventure movie [*Decathalon 2000*], but it's in the superhero genre although it isn't a typical costumed character. It'll appeal to that type of audience. I hope [laughs].

CS: New World is also thinking about a Thor TV series. Do you know if that will be faithful to the comic book?

LEE: I'm trying to remember. We had a discussion about it. Let me put it this way: It won't violate anything in the comic book. In fact, it's a rather unique and amusing idea. I don't want to say more than that, but the people who like Thor will get a kick out of this project. Basically, virtually every one of our characters is in some stage of development.

CS: Do you ever get tired of Hollywood? Do you ever get an urge to go back to writing comic books again?

LEE: I must be honest and admit that I miss comics. I miss the excitement. Mainly, I miss the people; I loved the people with whom I worked. I also miss the fact that in the comic book business, you can get an idea for a book, get together with an artist, do it, and three or four months later, the book is on sale. In the movie business, you can spend years before a project reaches the screen, if it ever does. However, I'm not the least bit tired of Hollywood. I'll never retire. I love what I do. I love the movie and TV business, and I've never had more fun. The only thing that would make my professional life even better would be if Marvel Comics was in the same building and I was working on the comics and the movies and the television and the animation all at the same time. That would be heaven. ■

Quest

(continued from page 61)

Quest cast needed no updating. "They managed somehow to still look contemporary," he says. "I kept the same characters and updated the story."

After reintroducing his characters in the first issue's "Sands of Khasa Tahid," Wildey was prevailed upon by Comico to adapt three of his "favorite" original episodes for their recent *Jonny Quest Classics* series.

"They're not particularly favorites," he notes. "I selected the three stories—'Shadow of the Condor,' 'Calcutta Adventure' and 'Werewolf of the Timberland'—only because of the palettes used on three different locales."

Color choice is critical to these books because Wildey colors directly onto his original art, which is then laser-scanned.

Even though *Jonny Quest* is Doug Wildey's brainchild, he doesn't involve himself in the regular comic book series, which is being written by Journey's William Messner-Loebs.

"I've left him strictly alone," Wildey says. "I talked with Loebs once, but I never make any criticisms or contributions to the writing. Loebs' approach is heavily into plotting the series along the lines of science fiction. That's the only way you could go when you get down to it. The stories I'm doing are more direct in the sense of adventure and trying to keep the original show's flavor."

Similarly, Wildey keeps his distance from the new animated episodes. "I've seen one half of one of the new shows," he comments. "It wasn't a world-beater, by any means. It was just another product to be licensed out of a huge studio."

Wildey was approached to work on the new episodes, but never reached an agreement with Hanna-Barbera. Likewise, a few years ago, his idea for a *Young Dr. Quest* series, featuring 22-year-old archeologist Jonny Quest, in Wildey's words, "sank without a trace."

Having successfully relaunched his characters in comics, Wildey isn't planning any future *Jonny Quest* work. "Other than a movie, if I'm lucky enough to get consulted," he says, "this will probably be the end of my participation in *Jonny Quest*."

Is he surprised that *Jonny Quest* has come back so strongly?

"To be honest, no," he observes. "I don't believe since *Jonny Quest* aired in 1964 that a year has gone by without somebody talking about making a movie or another series."

But he is, slowly, reconsidering his opinion of the original *Jonny Quest* run.

"I thought this would be the first pioneer crude attempt at doing a show of this type," Doug Wildey explains. "But it never worked out that way. In retrospect, *Jonny Quest* looks great compared to other shows now on the air." ■